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WESTERN STORY ANNUAL 1944

STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN Story Annual

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"Never count your dead wolves till you've skun 'em," warned Preacher Devlin, and he meant to skin a few himself before he could say

FAREWELL TO TEXAS!

by L. L. Foreman

I.

This was a town that Texas beef built, and it had been named Cimarron City in respect thereof. The roaring Cimarron River lay two hundred miles farther north, up in the Indian Territory, but it epitomized to Texas trail drivers the contrary cussedness of the great cattle trails, and this town had from its birth inherited that same wild and ornery spirit. The Caldwell Trail ran right by its front doors, crossed the Red River, and coursed due north for the Kansas cattle markets. Longhorn herds and Texas riders had never been conducive to any growth of peace and quiet in Cimarron City.

Not so many herds were coming up the trail these days, but Cimarron City had gone into the business of raising and selling contract beef to the Indian agencies up in the Territory, so it retained its prosperity without appreciably altering its status as an attractively tough town. Here, just south of the Red, Texas law reigned, but generally with a broad-minded tolerance for frolic

For any dissatisfied soul seeking wider liberty, or refuge from the consequences of an erring past, there was always the Territory just across the river. He could wade the wide and shallow Red handily without so much as wetting his gun belts, if he wasn't in too splashing big a hurry.

The big and travel-tired stranger who stalked into Cimarron City under the noonday sun, leading a badly lamed black horse, hoped there wouldn't be any such need for him to cross the Red in that kind of hurry. But you couldn't tell about those cussed Texas Rangers. Maybe they had quit the chase, but more likely they hadn't. The way they stuck to a man's trail proved they took their job way too serious. Nice hombres, but no sense of humor. Could shoot like it was solemn business, and they never seemed to know when to call it a day's work and time for drinks. Unreasonable, that, to a man more accustomed to the short conclusions and swift finalities of the Arizona and New Mexico border country.

"This Texas," he mused, dourly disapproving, "must be gettin' sort of civilized. All right, horse, take it easy. I'll have the best vet in town doctor that hock for you."

He looked Cimarron City over as he passed along its Front Street, and saw a sizable town and interesting signs of ready money. As for those who scanned him, he gave them the benefit of the doubt, pending possible future hostilities. There was, of course, the chance that a stray dodger bill, bearing his description and price, might have found its way this far, but that gamble was always in the cards wherever he went.

The town in turn took note of him, and saw a tall, big-boned man of dominant presence, with glacial gray eyes set deep in a dark face hawkishly leaned by short rations and no sleep, wearing a long and austere black coat that seemed to call for a Gospel Book somewhere. His black and wide-brimmed hat, with a flat crown, his whole appearance, bespoke the clerical man—but his hard face and eyes were in flat contradiction. Cimarron City wondered, while its high sheriff watched and thoughtfully fiddled with a rifle, keeping his own counsel.

The traveler turned into the biggest livery and sent the stableman hustling out for a vet. A shabby and unshaven trail tramp with a saddled burro, who had been trying to haggle feed and corral for his long-eared mount at two bits a day, came over and silently admired the big black horse.

"Horse backed into a barb-wire fence," the black-garbed stranger told the vet when he came. "Got a gash over the hock, there."

The vet went to work. He pursed his lips. "Just missed hamstringin' him, mister. Mighty close."

The tramp, squatting on run-over heels, put in his say. "Looks more like a bullet nicked him, don't it?" he remarked, and the vet nodded.

The chill gray eyes pinned them both. "Barb wire, I said! Here's a twenty, doc. When'll he be able to ride?"

"If you say so, mister, it sure was barb wire!" conceded the tramp, and moved off to argue some more with the stableman.

The vet, a wise old hand, took the twenty and let the diagnosis ride. "He ought to lay up a day or two, anyway, or you'll ruin him," he stated definitely. "Fine animal. I guess you think a heap of him. I would, was he mine."

The big man thought of the persistent Rangers back somewhere along his trail and likely still burning it up after him. Those cussed law dogs would have to come with big smoke before he'd abandon his crippled horse. "Yeah, I do, kinda," he said shortly. "Who's got the best beds in this town?"

"Ma Barkley, up the street. If you leave her a call, she'll wake you up any time you—"

"Just so she's got one good bed an' no bugs," broke in the big man, "she don't need to bother me till Friday!"

Leaving, he reflected that a day or two could mean the difference between crossing the Red or not crossing the Red, considering that grim company coming up from the south. But if the black needed to lay up that long, that was all there was to it. He needed rest and sleep, anyway, as much as the horse. Do 'em both good—if those doggone Rangers didn't come dusting into town and wreck his sleeping.

The trail tramp followed him out, having finally worn down the stableman. He was medium-sized, lazily careless in his walk, and obviously disposed to strike up acquaintance with anybody who might have a dollar to spend. He had bright, intelligent blue eyes that were restless and enterprising, and he wore no gun.

"Fine weather for this time o' year," he opined amiably. "Dry, though."

"Glad you like it."

The big man turned away, in no mood to buy the drinks. He muttered an oath as a small, sprinting body barged into his long legs, nearly upsetting him. It tumbled at his feet, and he hauled it up with a powerful arm, scowling his annoyance. It was a boy—freckle faced, sharp and thin—and he squirmed like a bobcat in the grip of his captor, clutching a large pie to his chest.

Out of a bakery shot a flour-smeared man, shouting for the sheriff, who came on the run from across the way. Half the street had turned out to look.

"That blasted kid again!" hollered the baker.

"Lifted a pie right out under my nose! Burn his thievin' young hide, I'll see him jailed this time, cuss me if I don't!"

The kid's eyes were wide with a trapped look. The big man stared down into them, and a brief recollection of his own rough-scuffle boyhood stirred in him. Hunger was a hard driver, when one was very young. He shoved the angry baker off, and dug into a pocket. "How much for that pie?"

"Dollar. It's apple, an' apples are—"

"Uh-huh. I always was partial to apple, m'self. Here's your dollar."

"Now, hold on, here!" The sheriff pushed forward, lower lip stuck out. He was a large, heavy man in fine attire, gold watch chain, and it appeared to be his habit to carry a Winchester repeater under his arm. He took stance before the dusty, black-garbed stranger. "You can't buy that kid out for no dollar! Here, you young thief, gimme that pie!"

The big man shrugged. He couldn't afford the risk of trouble in this town, and he was ready to go to some lengths to avoid it. "Give him the pie, kid," he grunted, and hoped he was washing his hands of the affair. He wasn't prepared for what followed. Neither was the sheriff.

The kid gave up the pie, and his aim was accurate. The pie didn't make much of a sound as it squished all over the sheriff's red face, but the lawman let out a roar that should have reached the Territory. The kid whirled, dodged through the gathering crowd, and was gone like a streak.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" muttered the big man, and took off up the street at a brisk stride, before the bellowing lawman could dig his eyes clear.

Such a preface to a hoped-for peaceful lay-over in this town was slightly unfortunate, but he did not consider the incident as grave. On the comic side, rather, and it tended to put him in better humor. He had disliked the sheriff at first sight. Nor was he disturbed when a fair young giant in conservative broadcloth stopped him with a diffident grin.

"Excuse me. My name is Aston—Dr. Dain Aston. I saw how you tried to help that young scamp, Jerry Nimrow. It was very kind of you. You must have a feeling for boys."

"No," came the quiet voice of the trail tramp. "It's just that the *Preacher* has a feeling about sheriffs!"

The big man swung around sharply. His cold stare stabbed at the tramp, but the young doctor looked interested. "You are a preacher? Permit me to offer you a very warm welcome to Cimarron City. My house is that one over there with the picket fence. I shall be very glad to have you call, Mr.. . . . er . . . Reverend?"

"Jones," said the big man absently, his eyes still on the tramp. "Come along with me, you!"

They moved off together, leaving young Dr. Aston standing alone and looking slightly perplexed. The big man spoke again, softly, to the tramp.

"Who're you, hombre? Talk fast!"

"Just call me Rio. I just now got in from Tascosa way."

"An' you know me, huh?" The tone remained soft, like the mutter of approaching thunder.

The Rio drifter rolled a smoke, as good a reason as any for keeping his hands occupied in sight. "I can read big type," he claimed modestly. "Big—like the kind they use on reward dodgers!"

"You got too much education!"

"That," admitted Rio pensively, "is just what the pretty schoolmarm said, time she ran me out o' the fourth grade for tryin' to hold her hand. You lookin' for a saloon? There's one yonder. Sure dry weather, Preacher."

"Yeah—I'll buy a drink. Stay in front o' me, hombre, an' don't try to get out o' my sight!" growled Preacher Devlin, gambler and master gun fighter, man of many broad talents. His tall head carried many rewards, official and unofficial, placed upon it by Arizona, Old and New Mexico, and now Texas, but they had not disturbed him greatly until he ran afoul of the Rangers. The total accumulation of those cash rewards might tempt a busted range bum to spill his dangerous knowledge.

They entered the saloon, a large and empty place showing signs of going downhill. "If you so much as spill a whisper of who I am," murmured Devlin pleasantly, "I'll blast your Texas soul to boothill!"

The butt of a gun barely poked out from a built-in holster behind the fringe of Rio's shabby shotgun chaps as he sauntered lazily ahead, and Devlin narrowed his quick gaze at it. Range bums didn't generally have any need for hide-out holsters, placed conveniently close to hand. A professional bounty hunter might, though, for sudden work at the right time. Devlin played with several guesses, and liked none of them. This hombre was going to be a nuisance, whatever else he might be, and it wouldn't do to thrust a showdown on him. It would be simplest, but it would involve gunplay, and that high sheriff might object. High sheriffs and bounty hunters—they were an abomination. And Texas Rangers.

The Rangers had made it hot for him in the South. It had happened when he stopped off in El Paso for a quiet, congenial session of bucking the tiger. A band of New Mexican *orejanas*, brown and white, had trailed him in with a burning grudge. That wouldn't have been so serious in itself, but the Rangers had been tipped off to

watch him. The Ranger captain strongly advised him to respect the peace and dignity of El Paso while he dallied within its precincts. The notorious gun fighter had nodded careless assent, won sixty dollars from the captain in short order, and let the matter slide from his mind. Then the *orejanas* blew in—

After the town pulled itself together and took stock of the damages, the Rangers promptly decided that they had been personally insulted by the big, black-garbed gun master from beyond the White Sands. They slapped on saddles, gathered up their best homicidal hardware, and took out after the Preacher as a matter of stern principle. He didn't wait to talk it over.

II.

The bartender was disposed to be affable. After setting out glasses, bottle and cigar box, he hoisted his stout bulk up onto a high chair and joined his two customers in a drink.

"I get lonesome," he confided. "An' when I get lonesome I get drunk. An' when I get drunk, Rettig's doggoned town tamers come in an' steal my whiskey. Bayard done put me on his black list, on account a feller got killed in here a month ago, an' now nobody comes in 'cept strangers once in a while. Gents, it's a tough life when you get on Bayard's black list!"

"Who's Bayard?" asked Rio.

"You gents sure come from a long way off," observed the bartender. "Why, Bayard's the town mayor. Owns the big Bayard Cattle Co., too. He keeps this town in line. That is, Rettig does it for him. High Sheriff Rettig—feller Jerry hit with that pie. Him an' his town-tamin' deputies. I like to've died laughin', him with that pie all over his fat face! He'll skin the kid for that, he catch him. Would either you gents like to buy this place cheap? No? Oh, well, I didn't figger you would. They wouldn't let you run it right, anyway. You'll be on the black list, too, after what happened out there. You gotta toe the line if you want to stay in business in this town."

He wagged his head, pouring himself another drink. "Town ain't what it usta be," he said sadly. "Even talk o' buildin' a church. A church in Cimarron City—it's agin' nature! That yallerhaired young feller, Dr. Aston, he's a medical missionary, an' he's the one with the church idea. He works for Big Boss Bayard, as special inspector or somethin' for his beef comp'ny. The Bayard outfit sells contract beef to some o' the Injun agencies up in the Territory. Ain't makin' much money, though, I reckon. Too much rustlin' goin' on. Ain't hardly a night but what somebody loses cattle. It's a big steal. I guess you've heard about it."

He was going on to say more, but just then the urchin Jerry came easing in through the batwing doors. The boy disregarded the bartender's frown. "They're comin'!" he blurted.

"Who's comin'?"

"Some o' Rettig's dep'ties. Comin' here!"

The stout bartender seemed to shrivel. Devlin selected a long black stogie from the cigar box, and clamped it between his teeth. "Comin' for a drink, maybe. Kid, you scoot on home. I think you're bad luck to me!"

"Ain't got no home," retorted the boy. "My folks was boomers. Typhoid killed 'em 'fore they could locate a homestead. Ain't that right, Pudge?"

"He coyotes out along the river," the bartender corroborated. "Steals like an Injun, fights like a wild cat, an' he ain't got no respect for nothin'. Some day he'll run with the wild bunch an' end up in a noose, sure's shootin'!"

Rio, who had wandered to a front window, came back and picked up his drink. "Seven of 'em," he reported casually. "They've stopped across the street, watchin' this place. It looks like this High Sheriff Rettig takes it real serious when he gets bunged in the eye with an apple pie. Don't it, Mr. . . . er . . . Jones?"

"Gents," mumbled Pudge, "you better go. I sure don't want another killin' around here!"

"Who was it got killed here the last time?" Rio inquired. "And why?"

The bartender grew suddenly tight-lipped and reticent, as if he might know too much. "Just a feller. A stranger. Somebody knifed him in the dark as he stepped out o' here."

"An' they drug him away," Jerry added. "They found him dead next mornin', near the river, with his pockets turned out. They say some of Old Oke's Opata Injuns musta slipped 'cross the Red an' kilt him for his money. That don't stack right to me, though. He warn't no wet-cattle buyer, like they claim."

"How d'you know?" challenged Pudge. "You talk too much for your own good, kid!"

"Who's this Old Oke you spoke of?" Rio asked. He appeared more interested in the talk than in the seven watching men out front.

Devlin, for his part, kept one eye on the front doors and another on Rio, awaiting possible developments. It didn't seem reasonable that High Sheriff Rettig would send his town tamers into action just because of that pie. There was some deeper motive here. He wondered grimly if Rio hadn't already somehow spilled his dangerous knowledge. If those gun-slinging deputies got an inkling of how much cash bounty was circulating around their town, all on one head, they'd sure be temped to make a try for it.

"Old Oke," Pudge answered Rio, "he's Old Okla-

homa Torode. You can see his place from the street. It's just across the river in the Territory. Powerful big place, all walled in. They call it Fort Maverick. Lives there with a bunch of Opata Injuns. Got a granddaughter, too. He's the one does all the rustling, only they can't hang it on him."

He sent an anxious look at the front windows. "It's like this, gents. Old Oke gets the cows, see? He's got a beef contract with a coupla Injun agencies, too, an' he gets rid o' some that way. Others he sells to wet-cattle buyers. Most any prosperous-lookin' stranger who comes through, ever'body figgers he might be a wet-cattle buyer, an' they're right away after his hide. That's why the feller I told you about got killed, in my opinion. An' that's why Rettig's deputies are out there, watchin' you!"

Devlin felt somewhat relieved. This made sense. He had turned his hand to many things in the past, but never to buying wet cattle. Still, it was understandable that this cow town might suspect him, until he could clear himself or leave. He tossed a gold piece to Jerry, who nimbly caught it and opened his eyes wide.

"Beat it, kid!" Devlin ordered.

"Sure, mister—thanks." The coin disappeared somewhere into Jerry's thin rags. "But listen, mister. Pudge, he's wrong. That feller what got kilt, he warn't no wet-cattle buyer. I found him layin' dead near the river bank before Rettig did, an' I searched his clothes—"

"You young ghoul!" growled Devlin.

The hungry young eyes suddenly blazed. "Dang it, mister, you don't reckon I liked doin' it, do you? You don't reckon I like stealin' an' coyotin' out nights? My folks was decent. But a feller's gotta live an' eat, ain't he? Here, take your cussed money back!"

"Keep it, kid; I apologize," said Devlin gruffly. "Yeah, a feller's got to live. What did you find on that corpse?"

"This!" said the boy, and pressed something hard and sharp-edged into the gun fighter's hand.

A voice, low and soft, called into the barroom. It came from the side door that led into the alley. "Jerry, what are you doing in that saloon? Come out of there at once!"

She was young, the girl who had put her head in the doorway. Young and pretty, and even Devlin, sparing her a glance, thought she was sort of cute, so shocked and all at the boy in the barroom. Jerry, with surprising obedience, bolted out, and they both vanished.

"Who's she?" asked the inquisitive Rio.

"Tulsa Torode," the bartender answered. "Old Oke Torode's granddaughter. She tries to keep an eye on that young scamp. I guess she's the only one that can boss him. Heck of a life she has to lead, over there with that old bandit an' his bunch of Injun cow thieves. Old Oke dassen't step on Texas soil, so he sends her across when he wants anything. Pretty, ain't she?"

Rio allowed she was, and squinted his bright eyes reflectively. But Devlin was staring at the flat little piece of metal that Jerry had given him, thinking of the man who had owned it, that stranger who had been knifed to death in the dark by persons unknown.

It was the badge of a Texas Ranger!

"The town tamers are comin' a-callin', Mr. Jones!" Rio said suddenly, with a curious kind of faint grin.

For an instant Devlin stood bleak-eyed and somber, scanning the gunman deputies now slowly crossing toward the saloon. His gun-fighter inclinations leaped alive, urging, insistent. But he turned for the side door. For a day or two, anyway, until his big black horse was fit to travel, he desired nothing but personal peace and tranquillity in this town. After that—well, he'd give them a smoky farewell to Texas if they still craved trouble, and churn a fast course across the Red.

"C'mon, my burro-bum friend, we're leavin'!" Devlin said abruptly.

He herded Rio ahead of him to the side door, but they both abruptly stilled their boot heels when they reached it, and pulled up short. Down along the end of the alley, commanding full view of the door, another group waited. Hard hombres, these, tough and dangerous, with holsters tied down for business, and Devlin knew when he saw their eyes that this was no bluff to run him out of town. They had stopped the girl and the boy. One of them, the foremost, held Tulsa Torode by the shoulders, and over her head he crooked his mouth at Devlin and Rio. Two others had Jerry's arms twisted behind him. They, too, grinned that same humorless grin of taunting challenge.

The thing was a set-up, a baited dare to come on or back up. One of the men twisted Jerry's arm a little more, and the boy straightened his lips in pain, though he uttered no cry. A further twist, and he let out a small gasp. The challenging grins deepened, and again Devlin fought down his first impulse. He stepped backward into the doorway. A heavy, long-barreled gun flashed its wicked blue-steel sheen in his hand. He jabbed the muzzle into Rio's ribs and spoke gently, his deep-set eyes slaty and satanic.

"You spilled, blast your dollar soul!"

Rio dipped a look at the gun and another into the freezing eyes, and suddenly the lazy carelessness was gone from him. He shook his head briefly. "You're dead wrong there, Preacher. I'm

in this jackpot with you, up to my neck. I don't like the way these gents play!"

Down the alley, Jerry's gasp became an involuntary cry, and Tulsa Torode called out something. Devlin flung a glance toward the front, his dark face more hawklike than ever. The seven men in the street were converging upon the batwing doors and front windows. A jackpot for fair, this. Devlin silently cursed the boy and the pie that had first drawn the sheriff's attention to him. In a minute this town was going to blow up all around him.

Rio pulled away from the jabbing gun, and dropped his hand to the fringe of his chaps. "I never could stand seein' a kid hurt, an' when there's a gal—well, Preacher, it looks like we better show these gents some smoke!" He plucked out his gun and jumped for the alley.

Devlin, who had been trying to figure out some way to dampen the fuse before everything exploded, muttered an oath. Too late now to play the cards close to his chest. The game was thrown wide open. Two quick shots roared in the alley, and that set everything going off. Devlin whipped a shot at the batwing doors, and headed for the rear, while the despairing Pudge scrambled down behind his bar.

There was a cardroom in the rear, and an empty dance hall beyond that. Devlin gained the dance hall as the seven men in the street started reckless bombardment of the barroom, where bottles and glasses began flying apart. Out in the alley a duel raged, and Rio was still on his feet and getting in some work, judging from the racket. Devlin stepped fast along the dance-hall windows to the one at the end, and now he was level with the end of the alley. He could see, through the grime of the windowpane, some of Rettig's town tamers crouched close to the fence outside and shooting along the littered alley at a barrel. Rio was behind that barrel, trying to roll it ahead of himself as a shield while he sighted quick shots over it. The fact that some of the town tamers still held the girl and boy made it tough on Rio, since he had to shoot all around them, but he was making the best of a very bad bet.

The Preacher picked up the nearest chair handy. He slammed it through the grimy window, raising a nerve-shattering yell along with it. Before the chair hit the alley he had both his long-barreled guns out, roaring point-blank at the crouched men. Startled faces snapped around, and Rio grabbed his chance and came leaping up over the badly leaking beer barrel, swinging his gun like a club. When he burst into the group it seemed as if he was all arms and legs, each doing triple duty. He bounced his gun butt on one man's head, kicked the feet from under another, and knocked Jerry down getting at the boy's torturers.

Devlin piled out through the smashed window, slinging an underhand shot at an ambitious shorty who seemed disposed to go the limit. That loosened up the fight. Two men ducked out, one limping, but from Front Street the seven others appeared, leading a mob. All Cimarron City was coming on the lope, from the sounds, and if every man with a gun out was a deputy, it seemed as though the sheriff had altogether too many for any reasonable purpose. Devlin took to the alley fence, and made a big hole out of a little one, getting through.

A bullet splintered through the fence and knocked his hat askew, and the oath he muttered was for all Cimarron City. He had come into this devil-spawned town with nothing more on his mind than a definite intention to cross the Red before the Rangers came rampsing in on his trail. And now, for no good reason, the place bristled with homicidal lawmen, and he stood in a fair way to cancel his farewell to Texas. Decidedly, this Texas was getting too cluttered up with law and suchlike civilized trappings. He cursed the sharpshooting Ranger back in El Paso, who had nicked his horse with that bullet.

Young Jerry had fled, but Rio and Tulsa Torode followed fast behind Devlin. They were on his heels when he crossed a few backyards and shoved open the rear door of somebody's stone cabin. There wasn't much chance of breaking out of the town, particularly without horses, and the best thing left was to duck for cover. It was a small cabin and not too well built at that, but Devlin was looking for solidity rather than architecture.

Tulsa hung back. "This is Dr. Aston's—"

"*Bueno.* He invited me to call!" growled Devlin, and led the way inside, reloading his guns. He hoped they hadn't been seen entering. There might be a chance to lie low in here, while those triggery deputies searched the town, and break out after nightfall.

Somebody came through from the front of the cabin, and it turned out to be Dr. Dain Aston, himself. His open, candid face and somewhat trusting eyes reminded Devlin of a good-natured bear with responsibilities. The doctor gazed at his back-door visitors, and flushed unaccountably when he saw Tulsa.

"What on earth is the matter?" he asked. "I heard shooting, and—"

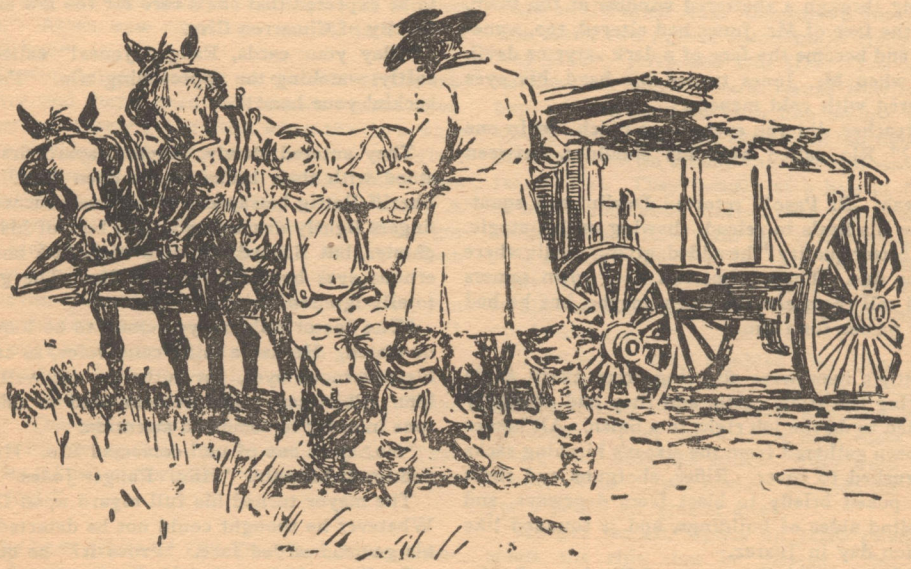
"So did we," said Devlin blandly. "Er . . . my friend and I have taken advantage of your invitation to call on you, doctor. Came as soon as convenient. We brought the young lady along, because the shooting out there made her nervous. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. Very happy," the young medico

gave hasty assurance, and fumbled around getting a chair for Tulsa.

Devlin quietly went and barred the front door, while Rio did the same for the rear. They exchanged glances, and their eyes raked over the doctor and the girl. Dr. Dain Aston, for all his size, acted as awkward and shy as a small boy. Tulsa, on the other hand, looked as if she urgently to do here. I wish to build a church—not only a church, but a free medical clinic for the poor." The doctor's eyes gleamed, and he lost his diffidence, talking of his pet amibtion. It was obvious enough that he was devoting everything to it, time and money, with a complete disregard for his own poverty-style of living.

The doctor was still talking of his need for



"Where'd you lift this outfit, son?" Devlin demanded. "They hang folks for horse stealing, and green cowhides don't help."

yearned to warn a trusting sheep of the presence of two sinister wolves inside the fold.

III.

"I'm very glad you called," said Dr. Aston, and looked more like a boy than ever when he smiled at Devlin. "You see, I need help badly, Mr.—Or should I say 'Reverend'?"

"'Mr.' is good enough," Devlin allowed modestly, watching the windows and listening to the shouts of the searchers.

"Very well, Mr. Jones. I think you are the kind of man who will be interested in what I am trying help, and how hard it was to get it, when a bullet shivered a window behind him and he broke off. "Well, really!" he murmured, and blinked at Devlin, who was suddenly crouched by the broken window, a gun in each hand. Rio flattened against a wall, and Tulsa didn't have to be told to drop promptly to the floor.

"Belly down, doc, an' take it easy!" Devlin counseled crisply. "Looks like we got to stand off the town, an' you're elected host to the besieged!"

"It'll be real handy," put in Rio, "havin' a sawbones. Preacher, you sure used your head; we'll need him!" He slapped out a window with his

gun, fired, and somebody yelled in the street. "Get down or be blowed down, friend; that's the way this game's played!"

Tulsa reached out and tugged at the doctor's leg. "Get down!" she ordered.

Aston dropped beside her, rather self-consciously, as if he thought it a somewhat foolish and undignified action. Smoke, drifting backward from Devlin's thudding guns, tickled the medico's nostrils and he sneezed. Everything had changed so suddenly, he couldn't believe it was real. There crouched Mr. Jones, a man whom he had hoped to enlist in helping to build a church, blazing through a shattered window at the town. And the face of Mr. Jones had altered, too, somehow, and become the face of a dark satyr or devil. And when Mr. Jones turned his head, his eyes glittered with cold menace.

"Preacher, did you ever see so much law in one town?" Rio called over his shoulder, between shots.

"Yeah. El Paso!" retorted Devlin, and squatted on his heels to reload, chewing on his stogie. "An' better quality!" he added, giving credit where it was due. These Cimarron City town tamers could call themselves lawmen, maybe, but he had other names for them.

Rettig's men were shooting from every angle covering the stone cabin, and they had evidently decided to do the job right to a finish. All horses had been gathered from the street's hitching racks and rushed to cover. Rifles, shotguns and short guns poked briefly to blast from doorways, and the blind sides of buildings, and it sounded like election day in Juarez.

"This is terrible!" announced Dr. Aston firmly. "I'm going out to tell them they must stop!"

"Yeah, you do that," Devlin grunted, picking a chip of stone out of his cheek. "Tell 'em my Rangers'll be sore at 'em, when they get here in a day or two!"

"Rangers?" echoed the doctor. "Texas Rangers? Coming here? Thank Heaven!"

"Thank me," said Devlin. "Heaven had nothin' to do with it!" He narrowed his eyes and turned to peer at the young doctor. "Yeah," he said slowly, "go out an' tell 'em. Tell 'em they got a Ranger holed up in here—an' a bunch more comin' up from El Paso!"

He caught Rio staring queerly at him, and he added: "This is my play, hombre. Don't put any chips in, *sabe?*"

Rio grinned faintly. "Nary a chip. She's all yours—Ranger Jones!"

Dr. Dain Aston was either a fool or a brave man. He got up and unbarred the front door. Flinging open the door, he waved a white handkerchief, and walked out into the empty, shot-swept street. Somebody, somewhere, shouted a quick command, and the firing ceased, trailing an unnatural hush behind it. A hand beckoned the medico into a doorway across the street.

In five minutes Dr. Aston reappeared with High Sheriff Rettig, and with them strode a bearded man, tall and stooping, who wore the high-winged white collar and conservatively dark clothes of a man of business.

"Mayor Bayard," said Tulsa, and her voice had a hard little inflection. But she was the granddaughter of Old Oke Torode, outlaw baron of Fort Maverick, just across the Red, and it wasn't to be expected that she'd care for the law and authority of Cimarron City.

"Play your cards, Ranger Jones!" called Rio softly, watching the approaching trio. "I'm sure backin' your hand!"

They entered slowly, Mayor Bayard first, and stood with their backs to the open door. High Sheriff Rettig betrayed a certain nervousness, his fingers lightly drumming on the butt of his Winchester, but Bayard regarded with dark and cavernous eyes both Devlin and Rio. The girl he totally ignored.

"The doctor tells me you claim to be Rangers," he stated. He had a mild, calm voice, as calm as his cavernous eyes, yet authority sat well upon him. This man would seldom need to raise his tone in order to command attention.

"No. Just one of us," corrected Rio. He nodded toward Devlin. "Him. Ranger Jones."

The mayor turned his full regard upon Devlin. Whatever he thought could not be detected from his gaunt, bearded face. "Prove it?" he queried.

Devlin could be as laconic in speech and action as any man. He pulled out the badge Jerry had given him. Holding it in his palm, he grimly stared until the mayor's glance broke. High Sheriff Rettig peered closely at the badge, grunted, and stepped back. But he made no comment. He seemed to be waiting for Bayard to speak.

"Dr. Aston says other Rangers are coming," Bayard remarked in his toneless way. "True?"

Devlin nodded. "True."

"To investigate rustling, or—"

"Depends on what they find," said Devlin noncommittally. Rangers, he knew, did not always get a welcome from jealous township lawmen.

Bayard folded his arms and looked at nothing. "There seems to have been a mistake," he stated. "Very unfortunate. Better be more careful in future, Rettig. Don't want to kill a Ranger—a Ranger sent here to investigate rustling. Should welcome his help."

He shortened his faraway gaze to Devlin's face, frankly studying it. "Your fellow Rangers, I suppose, are coming to back you up when you start

making your arrests. In a day or two, you said? That doesn't give you much time for your investigations."

"Rangers work fast," said Devlin, with truth.

Bayard nodded thoughtfully. "We shall be glad to give you full help and co-operation, Ranger —Jones, did you say?"

"Right."

A short silence fell. Then Mayor Bayard said quietly, deliberately: "A man was killed recently, coming out of a saloon in this town. Killed and robbed, but we found a few papers on his body. His name was Jones!"

Devlin caught a thought by the tail and hauled it in for inspection. Jones. The murdered man. Had a Texas Ranger badge on him. Ranger Jones. It was almost funny. Well, it was a common name, and the first that had occurred to his mind. Still, it was funny—Preacher Devlin taking the identity and name of a murdered Texas Ranger.

"Common enough name," he said casually. "No relation to me, I reckon. He live here?"

The mayor shook his head. "I think he came from El Paso. Have you planned your investigation yet, Ranger? Let me suggest a short cut. Tonight, slip over and investigate Fort Maverick. Torode is your man. John Torode, known as Old Oke. I know you Texas Rangers have no authority in the Territory, but after you get your evidence you could very quickly apply to be deputized as a special United States marshal, or whatever authority you need to make an arrest in the Territory."

"My horse is lamed," said Devlin.

"I'll be glad to loan you one of mine," offered Rettig. "Hey, there, where you going?"

He barked his question at Rio, who was pushing by him. "Me, I'm slidin' out o' trouble," answered Rio. "Stringin' along with Rangers an' the like, it ain't my idea of a healthy life! It just ain't worth the drinks. Anyway, after what happened this fine bright day, some o' your boys might not like me, sheriff, so me an' my burro, we're driftin' along."

Rettig slapped him on the shoulder, all joviality: "Forget it. The boys' call it all a joke." He shoved Rio affably on his way, and raised a shout. "Buy him a drink, boys. Everything's all right!"

To Devlin it wasn't all right, not by a wagonload, but this didn't seem the right time to say so. That doggoned tramp, or bounty chaser, or whatever he was, could go and spill all he knew, once he got out of sight. Nothing to stop him, unless he had something deeper up his sleeve. A muffled creak caused Devlin to wheel around, and he saw the rear door closing. Tulsa Torode had taken it out on the high lope, too.

Neither Bayard nor Rettig appeared to notice the quiet departure of the girl. But Dr. Dain Aston gazed rather worriedly at the back door, Devlin noticed.

That night Devlin crossed the Red, with several things on his mind to think about. He rode a borrowed horse, a pretty good buckskin, but it wasn't his big black, and that made a lot of difference. Being primarily a lone wolf, he had all the lone wolf's deep regard for his mount. That big ebony brute was more than just an animal to him. It was his partner. It had saved him many times from disaster. He would not abandon it.

He was playing a dangerous game, dangerous from more than one angle, but he thought maybe he could get by for twenty-four hours. The black would be able to travel then, with care and short jaunts, the vet said. Rio had not yet chosen to kick the lid off, though he was now fraternizing with Rettig's town tamers. There was something very queer about that burro bum.

But the queerest thing had been the way Bayard had talked, the things he had said, and other things that he had left unsaid. Mayor Bayard had a pretty fine office, located within sight of his cattle company corrals, a little way down river from town, and there he took Devlin for a private conference.

They had talked of this and that, and Bayard let it be known that he was helping Dr. Aston in his struggle for a church. "Indirectly, of course," he explained briefly. "The young man's mighty proud about money matters. I made a position for him in my cattle company. He lives on next to nothing, saves his pay to build that church. Fine young man."

Abruptly, Bayard had stalked to his office window and pointed across the river. From here the high stockade and flat roofs of Fort Maverick could be seen clearly, with a tall yellow bluff rising behind it, and the whole place hemmed in by the thick brush.

"We've got to smash that, Ranger, before we have real law here!" Bayard stated. "Got to smash that old bandit Torode and his night-riding Indians, and make sure nobody else settles over there. Trouble is, Torode's got a legal title to that property. Bought it years ago from the Arapahoes. Ranger, would a reward interest you?"

"As long," said Devlin gravely, "as it didn't conflict with my duty."

Bayard shot him a quick glance. "You're a practical man. I would pay five thousand dollars for the title to that Fort Maverick property, transferred to me and signed by John Torode! Interested, Ranger?"

Devlin rolled his chewed stogie to the other side of his mouth, and nodded. "Interested!"

But before he rode down to the river, Devlin had stopped off at Pudge's saloon. The place was as empty as ever, but Pudge didn't appear particularly happy to see him. He shook his head when Devlin mentioned the Jones man who had been murdered.

"I don't know nothin' more'n I've told you," he claimed uneasily. "No, I don't know what his business was, 'cept they say he was a wet-cattle buyer on his way to—"

"You're a liar, Pudge!" Devlin cut in calmly. "He was a lawman. You know it, an' you must've let it out you knew it. That's why you're on the black list. Be a surprise to me if you don't get knifed yourself some dark night! Maybe they did think he was a Torode man when they killed him, but they've learned different since. That's how she seems to stack up to me, Pudge. If you see that saddle tramp, tell him I've gone over to Fort Maverick on business."

He was leaving when the bartender spoke again. "If I wanted a man killed," he said in a hoarse whisper, "I'd get him to go callin' on Fort Maverick after dark!"

IV.

The buckskin climbed the bank on the Territory side and began to follow the main trail as if it knew where it was going. But Devlin reined off and drew the horse to a halt. Across the moon-silvered spread of the broad river, Devlin looked back at Cimarron City. Down river, he could make out the black outlines of the Bayard Cattle Co. buildings, and hear the restless noises of the cattle in the great pens. The company owned little range of its own and maintained no breeding herds. It bought feeders, leased what range it needed, and sold its output through the slaughtering pens—beef for the Indian agencies.

The river was empty of any following riders, and Devlin nudged the buckskin on. When he came to a faint, weed-grown branch of the trail, he paused again, this time under the shadow of an oak. This fork led to Fort Maverick, if one chose to follow it through the thick brush. The Preacher didn't elect to follow it right away. Instead, he composed himself in the saddle and dozed, catching up with some of his lost sleep. When his ears registered a faint splashing in the river, he yawned awake, stretched his long arms, and settled again to wait.

He hadn't long to wait. Soon a murky figure loomed up, walking carefully in boots that squished wetly, and paused at the branch trail. Devlin, motionless and black as the shadow in which he waited, spoke quietly.

"River's kinda damp, ain't it?"

"Some," allowed the man on foot. It was Rio, and he didn't make the mistake of trying any sudden moves.

"Come here," said Devlin. The gun in his hand backed up his command. "I'm gettin' a little tired o' you, hombre. Maybe you better talk, huh?"

"Maybe I better."

Rio squatted comfortably down on his heels. He tipped his disreputable sombrero back and gazed up at the coldly glimmering eyes of the gun master.

"I'm Jones," he announced casually. "Rio Jones. Texas Ranger!"

Devlin said nothing, but he bit clean through his unlighted stogie.

"That man who got knifed—Torb Jones, my brother—he was a Ranger, too," Rio went on. "He came up to investigate rustling. I'm here to find his killers, but I came in by the back door, kind of—an' got myself sworn in first as a United States special deputy marshal. I got plenty law behind me, but I haven't been wavin' it around. Ain't healthy, sometimes, on a job like this. But it seems everybody around here expected me. That is, they expected somebody to come lookin' into the killin' of Torb Jones, though they sure tried to hush up that killin'."

He grinned faintly, though his face was hard now, with no lax laziness in it. "That's one reason they believed you so quick, when you announced yourself as 'Ranger Jones.' An' that's why I backed you up on it. This thing runs deep, a lot deeper than it looks. Certain hombres don't stop at killin' one Ranger. They'd kill another, first chance, soon's they found him out. I didn't aim to be found out yet!"

Devlin trimmed his mangled stogie with his teeth. "So you used me for a front, huh? Y'know, Texas Rangers ain't popular with me, an' gettin' less so all the time! Damn your hide, Ranger Jones, I got a notion to march you over there into town an' blow the lid off!"

Rio glanced at the gun, but his faint grin remained. "Bless you, Ranger Jones, you better not!" he drawled. "You spill on me, I spill on you!"

Devlin eyed him bleakly. "Or," he amended, "I could settle it here and now!"

Rio shook his head. "I've heard a lot about Preacher Devlin, but I never heard he killed any man who didn't draw on him. An' I'm sure not goin' to draw on you, Preacher! Let's make a deal. You stay 'Ranger Jones' till I've done what I came to do, an' I'll keep my mouth shut. What d'you say?"

As between the two, Ranger or outlaw, it didn't appear to Devlin that there was much to choose

in the way of personal safety around Cimarron City. He nodded, his speculations ranging afield into the near future.

"It's a deal," he agreed.

"Good." Rio rose to his feet. "I picked up a few hints here and there, drinkin' with Rettig's crowd. Pudge gave me your message. I ain't sure yet how this whole thing lays, but I'm goin' to take a prowl around that so-called Fort Maverick."

"Want this horse?" Devlin offered.

"No, thanks," said Rio. "I saw it in the dark when I came along just now. That color don't hide good."

"That," said Devlin, "occurred to me when Rettig gave me the loan of it."

They exchanged a long glance, each probing the other's thoughts and suspicions. Rio, starting on his quiet-footed way to Fort Maverick, paused to make a last remark.

"Rettig's crowd 'spected one of us was a Ranger, I'm pretty sure. They just didn't know which one. I figure it was a good stroke, you sayin' there was more Rangers comin' in a day or two. They're worried."

"So'm I. 'Cause that was no lie!" grunted Devlin, and watched Rio vanish along the brush-choked path. A smart Ranger, that Rio Jones, but not so smart he couldn't be tripped. Devlin recalled the way Tulsa Torode had slipped out of Dr. Aston's cabin. She must have heard Bayard denounce Old Oke, and she wouldn't fail to warn her old outlaw grandfather that a Texas Ranger was on his trail.

Thoughtfully, Devlin dismounted, left the buckskin tied under the oak, and noiselessly followed Rio. Minutes later, silently making his way along the path, and with the saw-toothed edge of Fort Maverick's wall looming closer, he stopped. A sharp sound had drifted back to him from ahead. That sound had been a man's quick exclamation. Now it was followed by grunts and hard breathing. Somebody was struggling, but it didn't last long. A knot of figures moved murkily, carrying something. A gate in the stockade creaked open and shut again, and that was all.

Devlin turned back, with a grim shrug. Rio Jones, Texas Ranger, had run into disaster in the shape of Old Oke Torode's Opata Indians. Fort Maverick, it seemed, had a swift, fatally efficient way of dealing with spies and intruders. A good place to send a man if you wanted him out of the way, as Pudge had whispered. Good prowlers, those Indians, with keen ears, strong arms and silent feet. Well, that smart Ranger had it coming to him, and tomorrow morning they'd likely find his body along the river bank, the way they had found his brother.

Devlin went back to the buckskin, but he didn't mount at once. He stood scowling, chewing his stogie. Well, it was none of his grief. One danger less, in fact. That Rio Jones sure wouldn't be around any more to spill what he knew about a certain badly wanted long rider who was posing as a Texas Ranger. Still, he hadn't been such a bad sort of hombre—for a Ranger, anyway. A poor sort of finish for him. He'd gone down without much of a fight. No chance against those Opatas in the dark. Walked right into a trap that had been meant for— Then Devlin's thoughts broke off as a new sound reached him.

Something was moving along the river bank, coming this way. A wagon. Its wheels sucked in the soft sand, and rolled onto harder ground with more sound, but it came slowly, as if the driver wanted no more noise than he could help. Devlin prowled through the brush and stalked it. He cocked one dark eyebrow when he saw in the moonlight who it was that was leading the team. Jerry Nimrow. The boy peered about him as he walked, furtive and on the alert. He leaped like a startled deer when the tall, black, forbidding figure of the Preacher appeared silently beside him, and the horses shied.

Devlin grabbed the boy by his ragged shirt and held him back from bolting. "You take off too easy, son," he remarked. "Where'd you lift this outfit an' where you goin' with it? They hang folks for horse stealing, and an extra jerk for a wagon!"

The boy got his breath back, but he still looked badly scared. "Didn't lift it!" he blurted. "Tulsa asked me to fetch it over to the fort. I ain't done nothin'; lemme go!"

The team had halted, nervously shivering. Devlin let go of Jerry and took a look at the wagon's contents. "Cowhides," he muttered. "Where do these come from, Jerry?"

"I dunno." Hostility edged the boy's tone. "All I know is, Tulsa asked me to pick up this wagon near the Bayard ford an' bring it over to the fort. Ain't nothin' wrong with that, is there?"

There was nothing wrong with it, except that the cowhides were green—new hides only recently taken from butchered cattle. And there was only one reason why green hides should be moved secretly at night.

Devlin waved Jerry on up the trail. "Go ahead, son. Sorry I scared you."

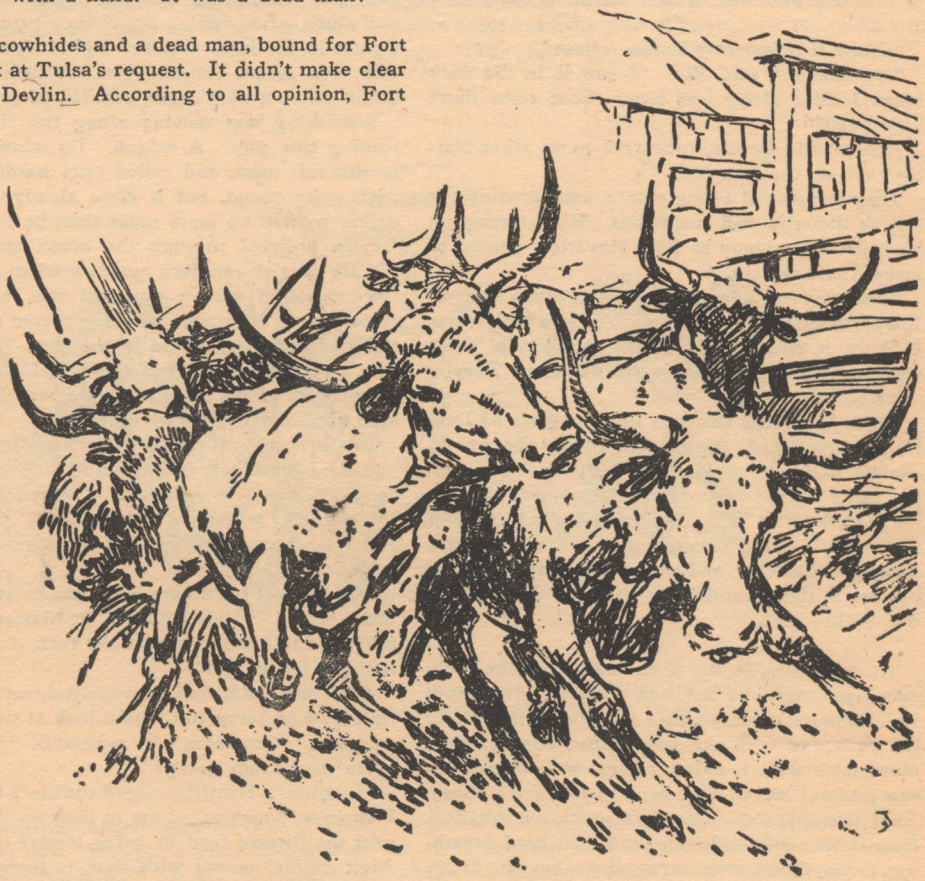
The Preacher cocked an ear toward the river, listening. It was a busy river tonight. Riders were crossing down toward the cattle company ford, and trying to be quiet about the business.

Devlin slipped back into the brush and caught up with the wagon. Jerry, leading the team, didn't see the gun master ease himself up into the wagon and get under the cowhides. The wagon rolled

slowly on toward Fort Maverick, and now it had a passenger.

There were some iron kegs underneath the cowhides, Devlin discovered, and they made a cavity big enough for him to crowd into. But there was something else there, too—well hidden by the cowhides. Devlin became aware of it when he tried to make more space for himself, and he explored it with a hand. It was a dead man!

Green cowhides and a dead man, bound for Fort Maverick at Tulsa's request. It didn't make clear sense to Devlin. According to all opinion, Fort



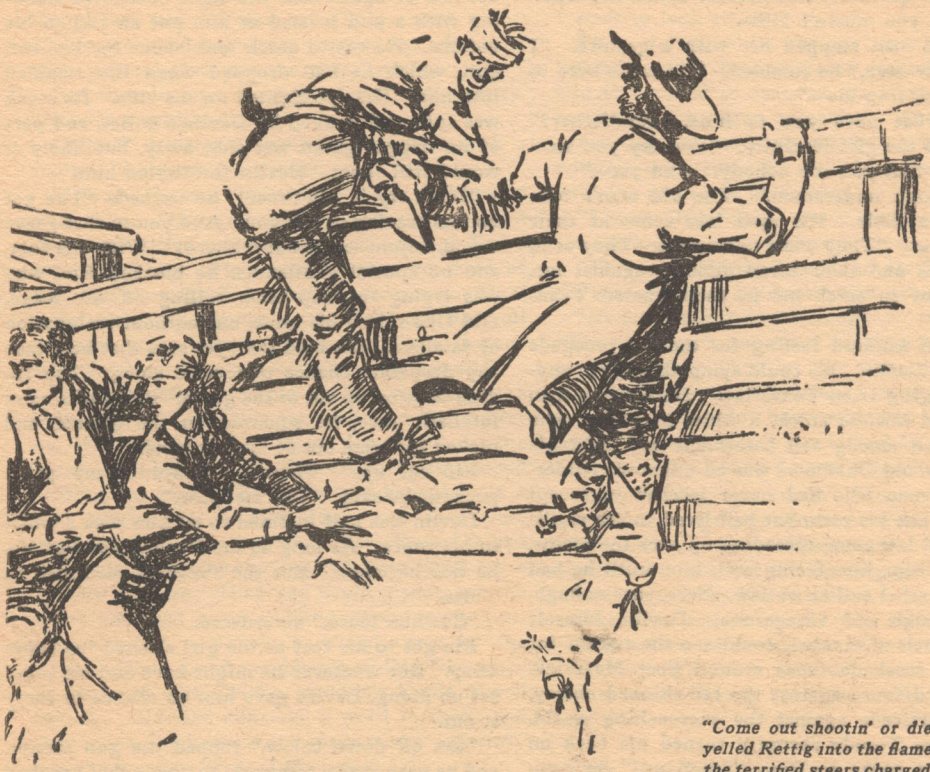
Maverick had no scarcity of telltale hides of stolen cattle butchered for beef, nor of dead men, if it came to that. It was sort of like carrying water to the well.

The wagon halted, voices murmured, and the stockade gate creaked open. Some of the Opata guards followed the wagon into Fort Maverick. Devlin, peering out from under the cowhides, saw them stalking in the rear, straight-backed and swarthy, carrying rifles. The wagon halted again, and the Indians passed on by. Jerry's voice sounded, clear and high, hailing the girl.

"Hey, Tulsa, where are you? That big Ranger, he stalked me, this side o' the river!"

Devlin slipped out of the wagon, and took a quick look about him. To the left stood the long, black buildings of the old fortified ranch, and to his right ran the stockade fence. He took a chance on the moonlight, made it to the shadow of the fence, and saw Tulsa come running from one of the buildings.

"Jerry, what are you saying?" she called. "Why, they've caught the Ranger. The cook just told me! Grandfather has taken him up on the bluff.'



"Come out shootin' or die there," yelled Rettig into the flames. Then the terrified steers charged blindly.

"Then he's got the wrong man!" said Jerry.

The girl said no more. She turned and ran in the direction of the sandy bluff that jutted out beyond the buildings like a great slanted shelf. Jerry made to follow her, but one of the Indians stopped him with a harsh bark. The rest of the Indians stolidly watched the girl go, then moved on to what appeared to be the bunkhouse.

Devlin followed the fence, keeping to its shadow. He angled away from it as soon as he could, circled around the buildings, and came upon the path that the girl had taken. The path rose abruptly, winding up the broken face of the bluff, and he caught a glimpse of Tulsa climbing above him. She vanished, and when Devlin reached the spot where he had seen her, the path gave out. He was on a ledge of loose rock and sand, and above it reared the blunt crest of the bluff. All was silent, except for a dry, metallic sound somewhere, as of someone using a spade. Then the voice of the girl cut suddenly through the night, urgent and frightened.

"Grandfather, stop. That's not the man I warned you about!"

A harsh rumbling voice broke in on the girl's cry. "Tulsa! I've told you never to come up here. Go down!"

"But, grandfather, I tell you—"

"Go down!" The striking of the spade went steadily on.

Devlin followed the sound to where the ledge bent around the face of the bluff, and came upon a weird scene in the moonlight. An Opata Indian, stripped to the waist, methodically worked at digging a grave. Tulsa's back was toward Devlin. She stood as though turned to stone, terrified by a glaring, hairy apparition advancing upon her. One look at that ferocious old ruffian, and Devlin knew it must be Old Oke Torode. He could understand, too, why Old Oke kept out of reach of the law. His face alone would convict him. He looked as if he had spent all his life wading through crime and sudden violence.

Rio sat on a rock, arms and legs tied, right where he could view the grave digger.

"Go down!" repeated Old Oke Torode.

The girl quivered, and numbly shook her head. "You . . . you mustn't kill—"

The old man stopped her with a gesture. "I am the law here," he rumbled. "He came here to spy on me, trap me—"

"But what have you to hide, grandfather?" whispered the girl fearfully. "You say you steal no cattle, that you rob nobody. And yet—"

"You don't understand." The old man's tone softened a little. His eyes lost some of their hard glitter. "They want to trap me. They send their spies and their hired gunmen against me. They want to catch me in their cursed Texas law!"

A jet of kindred feeling for the old renegade stirred in Devlin. He could sympathize with anybody dodging from Texas law. Here was a man of the old lawless stock, a white barbarian who had settled among red barbarians and held his own, when old Oklahoma was an unknown wilderness. A man who had never learned to accept any laws but his own, but had lived to see civilization and law come spreading up over the plains, crowding him, interfering with him, until he had become a rebel and an outlaw. Here, sure enough, was a tough old vinegaroon. Devlin, himself pretty much of a rebel, could see the reason for the high stockade fence around Fort Maverick. Once for defense against the red-skinned enemy, now a barricade against the encroaching world.

Old Oke Torode abruptly turned his back on Tulsa, and spoke to Rio. "Stand up!" he commanded, and drew his gun. To this lawless king of the wilderness, a necessary killing was not a crime, but a constructive execution.

Rio got to his feet, and Devlin gave him credit for facing his finish in good style. But these Texas Rangers were like that, he'd noticed. A cool, tough breed; game gamblers, win or lose.

Devlin spoke from where he stood, close against the wall of the bluff and in shadow. "There'll be two dead men, 'less you drop that gun, Torode!"

V.

Old Oke's reaction came fast. He whirled, lining up his gun. But Tulsa stood directly in his way, and he took a fast step to put her behind him. And then Rio acted.

The Ranger was all tied up, but he could jump and use his weight. He struck old Torode below the middle, and both went down, while the Opata grave digger dropped his spade and leaped for a rifle nearby. Quick as a monkey, the Opata snatched up the gun, and had its stock on the way to his shoulder, when Devlin fired. The rifle changed ends, and before it hit the ground, the Opata dived into the grave for cover.

Old Oke heaved Rio off his leg, and bounded up, full of fight. But the sight of Devlin standing with a gun leveled at him put an end to his notions. He cast a quick look about for his own gun, which he had dropped when Rio tumbled into him. His eye lighted on the rifle. Its stock was split and gouged by Devlin's bullet, and part of its trigger guard was shot away, but likely it would still shoot. Devlin forestalled him.

"Don't try it, old-timer!" he warned. "I've got no real craving to kill you. And you in that grave —you, Injun—come out o' there!" With one foot, and no special gentleness, he blocked Rio, who was trying to keep from rolling off the ledge. Old Oke raised his arms, but without resignation or fatalism. His bold old eyes said that he'd take any desperate chance that came along. The Indian came on up out of the grave. Being of a more fatalistic race, he squatted on the ground and picked splinters out of his left hand.

Rio sat up. "There's a knife in my pants pocket," he said. "Cut me loose."

Devlin was half inclined to let him soak a while in his ropes. As long as the Ranger was tied up, he was harmless. But the Preacher motioned to Tulsa.

"Cut him loose," he ordered.

Rio got to his feet as the girl slashed the ropes away. But whatever he might have had his mind set on doing, Devlin gave him no chance to carry it out.

"Get off down below," rapped the gun master, and he gave it as a command in a tone that brooked no argument. "You, too, girl, and take that Indian with you."

After they had gone, Devlin said mildly: "You can pick up your gun, Torode. You're among friends. Generally speaking, I've got no more use for spies and lawdogs than you have. But that fellow's a Texas Ranger. He's here on business. Yeah, he's the Ranger, not me. I'm on the other side o' the fence."

Old Oke's long white hair and beard blurred the outlines of his face, but his eyes were expressive. He was not a man who expected to get anything for nothing. "What d'you want?" he asked.

"You've got a title to this place," Devlin said. "I want to borrow it."

The fierce glitter leaped back into the old man's eyes. "So you're a Bayard man!" he rasped. "You're not the first he's sent. Well, you'll never get that title. This ain't the first grave I've dug for a Bayard man, here on Red Rain Bluff, and he knows it! I don't give a plugged peso what you are, Ranger or outlaw—nobody gets this place

away from me, not till I've done what I'm gonna do!"

"Just wanted to borrow the title, I said," Devlin corrected. "Bayard talked five thousand dollars today, and I'd like to call his hand on it. That's too good a jackpot to pass up. I'd split with you an' give you the title back."

But the old man shook his head with finality. "Not for a million!"

"Why?" demanded Devlin, irritated at such a foolish disregard for profits.

"I've got reasons," muttered Torode, and looked about him. "Bayard's tried to trap me over and over again, tried to catch me in his cussed Texas law, damn him! He'd give a lot to get hold of this Red Rain Bluff, but he'll never get it. He'll never come digging up here. He'll git what all the rest got. Gunmen, spies, Mexican Indians from devil knows where—I've handled 'em all!"

Devlin thought the old outlaw was maybe a little cracked. He shrugged, and let the matter go, and they both went down the bluff. In the broad, hard-baked yard, Old Oke's Opatas stood waiting for him. The moonlight brought out a dull puzzlement on their faces, and they were watching Rio. The master of Fort Maverick had taken his white prowler up Red Rain Bluff for a definite purpose. They had heard a shot, yet the white man had come walking down again, free, with the girl, and now he stood there by the wagon. They gazed inquiringly at Old Oke when he appeared with Devlin, and their hands moved swiftly. Old Oke muttered a word to them, and they stood obedient to the master who evidently was the first law of Fort Maverick.

Rio walked over to Old Oke. "I've just been looking into that wagon," he said. His voice was a little strained, but steady. "I arrest you for cattle stealing and complicity in murder!"

The Indians failed to understand, but young Jerry did not. He spun around, snatched a rifle from one of them, and sang out his challenge like a veteran. "Lift your hands, lawman! You ain't arrestin' nobody!"

Rio had no gun. He glanced at the kid, and spoke again to Old Oke. "Green hides and a dead man in that wagon," he said shortly. "There was a cattle raid last night, over toward Greengate. The brands on these hides tally with the stolen cattle. The dead man has got a bullet in him. That's good-enough evidence for me, and it'll be good enough for any judge and jury. Kid, put down that gun! It'll do no good. Plenty more lawman where I come from. Kill one, and a dozen others come along to look into it."

"There shouldn't be nothin' in that wagon 'cept five canisters o' blastin' powder an' a couple o' old cowhides coverin' 'em," Old Oke declared heavily. "Tulsa ordered that powder through the hardware man. He loaned his wagon, an' Jerry drove it over. I don't know nothin' 'bout your green hides an' dead man. Tulsa, bring a lamp. I want to look at 'em."

They waited while the girl went and got a lighted lantern, then gathered around the wagon. Old Oke called to some of his Opatas, and they came over and began unloading. The hides were green and new, and the old man examined them without comment. He examined the dead man with the same lack of feeling.

"I know that feller," Jerry piped up. "Works for Bayard. A company man."

"This is an old ranch wagon," Devlin observed. "Where did that hardware man get hold of it?"

"He bought it from the company," replied Jerry. "The company's got seven or eight of 'em down by the corral. They let him keep this 'n' there, and that's where it was when I went and brought it over. I sure didn't know what was in it! Didn't look. Tulsa told me it was loaded an' waitin there for me. All I had to do was drive it over."

"He's telling the truth," Tulsa said, "but I don't know anything about the dead man, or the hides, either. Grandfather told me not to let anybody know about the blasting powder. When I bought it from the hardware man, I gave him an extra ten dollars to load it on his wagon, cover it with a few old cowhides, and take it down near the company's ford. I didn't want to bring it across where Rettig could see and perhaps stop me."

The Preacher met Rio's puzzled stare. He knew that the Ranger didn't know what to think.

"It looks to me," Devlin said, "like those hides and the dead man could have been loaded into that wagon by mistake in the dark, while it was waiting there near the ford. Jerry, did you happen to notice any other wagon around there with a team hitched to it?"

Jerry nodded eagerly. "Sure! I passed it in the dark, right near the bank. Wasn't nobody with it."

Devlin nodded. "That adds up. Yeah. They dumped their load in, an' maybe went back for more. Then, while they were gone, Jerry came along an' drove the wagon away. What do you think, Rio?"

The Ranger shrugged. "You could be right," he admitted, "but I ain't the judge."

Old Oke looked up from his long inspection. "You sure ain't," he intoned, "but you're a United States lawman, huh? Jest so it ain't Cimarron City law, I'd mebbe stand a chance! Young feller, I ain't stole a cow in twenty years! I'll make a dicker with you. You let me take that blastin'

powder an' use it the way I want, an' I'll let you take me in right after."

"Sorry." Rio shook his head. "I can't—"

"Sure you can," broke in Devlin. "Can't he, Jerry?"

The boy raised his rifle. "Dang right he can!"

Devlin turned to Old Oke. "Awhile ago we talked about a certain paper," he remarked.

"We did," nodded Old Oke. "You help me do what I want to do, an' we'll talk it over ag'in." He threw a string of guttural syllables to his Indians, and they fell to work reloading the wagon, leaving out the five iron canisters and a small burlap-wrapped package. One of them went and got a rope and a horse.

"Jerry," ordered the old man, "if that lawman tries anything, you shoot, but shoot him in the legs. Understand? I never let anybody do my killin' for me!"

Climbing up the path to Red Rain Bluff with Old Oke Torode, with the horse dragging the canisters between them, Devlin felt disposed to ask questions.

"What you goin' to blow up?" he queried.

At first it didn't seem that the old outlaw would answer. He stopped to rest the horse and test the drag rope. Then, bent over the rope and tightening an extra hitch, he rumbled bluntly: "A graveyard!"

Devlin had seen blasting powder used for many purposes, but never for this. He had no great reverence for death, living always so close to it himself, but he was of the opinion that when a man was lowered to his final sleep he might decently be left undisturbed. So he squatted on one heel and took out a fresh stogie.

"A dirty job," he observed. "Don't know as I care to help you."

"I aim to bury that graveyard deeper," stated Old Oke. "So deep nobody'll ever dig down to it. Anyways, they was coyotes when they lived. They were men I killed for good, honest reasons. Some were Indians from Mexico. Devil knows why they came prowlin' up here. I used to think they was ghosts, till I shot the first one in the dark. I guess I've buried ten of 'em, in the last twenty-thirty years. But they don't worry me. It's the others—the white coyotes I buried there."

"Bayard men?"

"No," rumbled Old Oke. "My own men! They killed my son—Tulsa's father. It happened fourteen years ago. Texas was offerin' cash rewards for me an' my boy, on account of a fight we had with a politician cowhand an' his crowd. Some of our cows had drifted over the river. This cowman wouldn't turn 'em back, so we went over an' got 'em. They called it rustlin'. When the feud got bad, I hired a gang of brush jumpers as fightin' hands. They was scum, but the best I could get. They turned on my son one day, while they were out huntin' strays, an' carried him across to Texas for the reward. My boy was killed that night, tryin' to break jail. My brush jumpers came back, actin' innocent. They was out to get me, too, for my bounty—but I got them instead. I got 'em one by one, an' their bodies are buried up there on the ledge with those dead Mex Injuns for company, an' a few Bayard gunmen I've dropped since!"

He told it calmly, with less feeling than another man might have shown in telling of rattle snakes and varmints that he had killed. Devlin was anything but squeamish, but the thought of that private boothill up there on the lonely ledge sort of gave him the creeps.

"But why has Bayard got his knife out for you?" he asked.

"Because," came the answer, "one o' those brush jumpers was his brother! Bayard came here only lately to this country, just about three years ago. They say he used to be in cattle down in Old Mexico. He must've learned about his brother, 'cause he got after me right away. I thought first he wanted to gun it out with me, an' I was ready to meet him, but it ain't that. He wants to smash me, coop me up in a jail—hang me! An' mebbe take it out on Tulsa, too. I tell you, mister, when you got a kid gal dependin' on you, it changes things a lot. I'd like to see her respectable, like her mother was."

Privately, Devlin considered that the cards were stacked up pretty bad against Tulsa Torode. Daughter of a fighting outlaw who had died while trying to break out of jail—granddaughter of a ferocious old renegade who would likely wind up the same way. No, she didn't stand much chance. That kind of background went against a girl. Devlin recalled the way she had looked at young Dr. Aston, and the young doctor's obvious embarrassment. Poor kid, she had to go and fall in love with a medical missionary, of all men. Tragedy just naturally walked with that girl. It was her destiny.

The two men gained the ledge. With the spade, Old Oke fell to work digging five deep holes into the sheer face of the overhanging bluff, and Devlin comprehended his plan. Those five canisters of blasting powder, set off in those holes, would bring down the face of the bluff and bury this private boothill under an avalanche of loose rock and sand. The old man placed a canister in each of the holes. From the burlap wrapping he drew forth a long coil of fuse, and went to cutting and splicing.

Devlin sat and watched him, but pretty soon he got up, swearing under his breath and shaking

his coat. "What the devil!" he muttered. "I'm covered with ants."

"Yeah," said Old Oke. "That's one reason I buried my dead up here. This whole bluff is just one big ant hill. I figured they'd take care o' things. But," he added in a grumbling way, "they leave the bones, damn it!"

The cold-bloodedness of the man was a trifle appalling. Devlin brushed the ants off himself.

"They ought to call it Bug Hill," he growled. "Why's it called Red Rain Bluff, anyway?"

"The Injuns gave it that name," explained Old Oke, "because of the little red stones scattered all over it, like rain. Mebbe the Injuns thought it was blood—I dunno."

He was done. The canisters were buried, and so were the fuses, the ends of which stuck an inch or so out of the ground, ready to be lighted.

"Got a match?" the old man asked.

Devlin dug in his pocket for one. "Wait till I get out o' here with the horse, 'fore you touch off your blasted firecrackers!" he warned. "An' you better run like—" He didn't get it finished. Down below, shattering the quiet night, a sudden fury of gunfire crashed out, pierced by the whooping scream of an Opata Indian. Shouts and yells added to the confused uproar. Devlin sprang to the horse, but it was gone in a panic. He didn't bother to take the path down, but went over the rim of the ledge, with Old Oke hard behind him. Down the steep slope they slid and scrambled, boot heels digging, and rolled to the bottom in a smother of sand.

The uproar ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and all that was left was a drumming of hoofs and a clatter of wheels, bouncing fast over uneven ground. Devlin reached the yard first. The stockade gate hung wide open, and the wagon was gone. Rio lay face down on the hoof-scarred ground, and a scattered litter of other dark bodies told of the sudden disaster that had wiped out the little group of Opatas. The place reeked of death.

VI.

Devlin heard a throaty growl behind him, and found Old Oke standing there. For once the old renegade showed some signs of emotion.

"Tulsa!" Torode's cry was forced and strained, like the pained cry of an animal.

But the girl was already coming from the buildings, running, and the cold, emotionless calm again settled over Old Oke.

"Who were they?" he demanded.

"I don't know," gasped Tulsa. "The lantern went out, and I went to get another one. While I was gone, it happened. I got only a glimpse of them, and then they were gone again, with the wagon—and they've taken Jerry!"

"Bayard's scum!" rasped Old Oke, and he looked like a white savage with his shaggy hair and glaring eyes. "Killed my Injuns! They was outlaws, like me. What's that you say, girl—they took Jerry? *Took* him?" He walked to a fallen Opata, and wrenched the rifle from underneath him. "Which way did they go? That wagon sounded like it went up the trail."

Devlin bent over Rio. "Still breathing," he announced, and looked up to find Old Oke stalking on his way out. "Hey, old-timer!" he called. "Those hombres'll set a bear trap for you an' hang up your hide, you go trailin' 'em in the dark!"

Old Oke turned. "Mebbe that's what they figger," he agreed, and his voice was a snarl. "But that kid sided me tonight. I never forget a favor or a grudge, an' I always pay! It won't be the first time I've walked into a 'buscada an' smoked my way out!" He walked through the gateway unhurriedly, with the same old deliberation that marked all his actions, and passed into the darkness.

Devlin hoisted Rio onto his shoulder. "Got to get this fellow to a doctor," he told Tulsa. "I don't know how bad he's hurt." He carried Rio out of the fort and down the trail to the river bank. There he paused. To walk over into that town, burdened by a wounded and helpless man, didn't strike him as a bit healthy, the way things were shaping up around here.

The sound of horsemen, somewhere back in the brush, decided him. Hell was bubbling tonight, and the sooner he could pass this wounded Ranger into other hands, the better he would like it. He struck off down river.

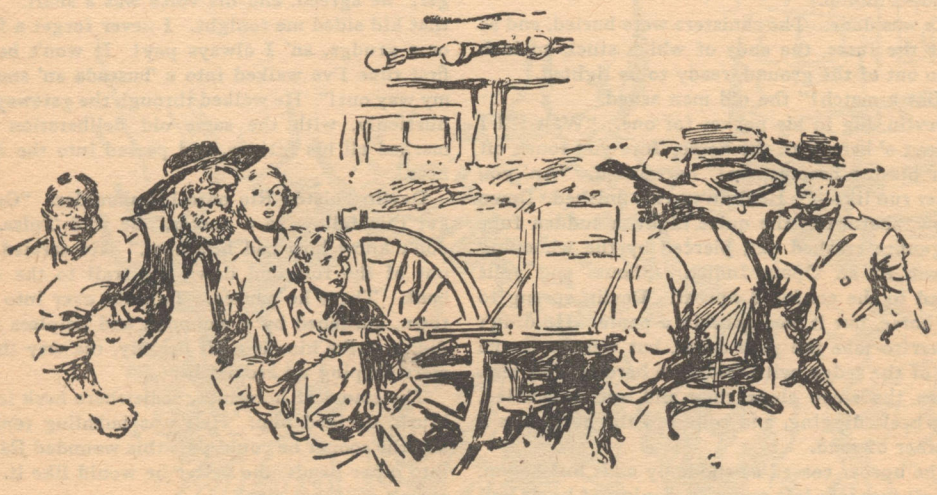
Tulsa, forced to trot to keep up with his long stride, whispered: "We could cross near the company ford, and hide in the corrals. Then I'll slip into town and get the doctor."

They crossed down river. There were few lights in the company buildings at this time of night. Tulsa, fairly familiar with the layout of the place, led the way between two corrals darkly cluttered with sleeping cattle, and carefully opened a gate. They entered a stone-paved pen, inclosed on three sides by the company's fodder stores, baled and loose. The girl hastily scraped together a dried alfalfa bed, and Devlin laid Rio down on it.

After Tulsa had gone, Devlin took stock of his surroundings, and decided this was the slaughtering pen. To use a slaughtering pen as an impromptu doctor's office struck him as slightly macabre. However, the place made a good temporary hide-out. Not much chance of anyone happening along this way tonight, and the piled fodder cut off possible view from the company buildings. By craning his neck, the gun master could just see the location of Bayard's office. A light sprang up there as he looked.

Tulsa returned, and she had Dr. Aston with her. It was queer to see that young giant turn from a diffident boy into a grave, efficient surgeon. He opened his black bag, knelt by Rio, and a minute later the Ranger groaned and dazedly tried to push him away. The doctor looked up at Devlin.

"He's coming out of it," he announced. "A bad scalp wound, but nothing serious, if I can stop the bleeding. There's another laceration on his forehead. Someone evidently knocked him down, and then—"



"Plenty more lawmen where I come from, kid," said Rio. "There's green hides and a dead man in that wagon!"

"I guess he'll live," interrupted Devlin. "Well, he's all yours, doc! I've got a piece of business to 'tend to. See you later." He left the slaughtering pen and worked his way over toward the company buildings.

A light still shone from Bayard's office, when the Preacher climbed the stairs to it. That he was half expected to call tonight, Devlin had no doubt, but for long moments he stood silent at the head of the stairs to make sure. When slight sounds reached him from below, they confirmed his guess. Bayard had his guards out, and they had their orders. The mayor was taking no chances.

Devlin gave the door a shove, and let it swing wide open before he entered. Bayard stood before a fireplace, legs apart, hands folded behind him under the tails of his coat, and his gaunt, bearded face bent as if in profound meditation. The Preacher kicked the door shut behind him, and stepped aside from it.

"I've known Indians who got rich from ants," Devlin said irrelevantly. "Mexican Indians, mostly. They'll travel a thousand miles an' do murder just to get in a few hours' harvest at the right kind of ant hills. The tribes never forget where those ant hills are. Y'know, ants are queer bugs. They dig way deep down, and they bring up to the surface everything that they don't want in their tunnels—such as those little red stones, when they happened to be there. That's what the Indians gather. Garnets, they're called, and they fetch a pretty good price. Happen a man stumbles on a big ant-hill bonanza, it's liable to make him rich—that is, if he knows what those little red stones are!"

Bayard said nothing, his eyes expressionless in their deep sockets.

Devlin chewed on his stogie awhile, giving his words time to sink in. "Tonight," he went on, "certain hombres loaded some green hides into the wrong wagon. Loaded a dead man, too. The fellow was killed in a cattle raid, an' these hombres had to get rid o' the body. But the wagon found its way into Fort Maverick, so they had to go an' get it. That Rio fellow—he was close enough

to see who they were, and they shot him down. If he lives an' talks, it'll be kind of awkward for those hombres, won't it?"

Seemingly undisturbed, Bayard still said nothing.

"There ought to be good money in the beef business," Devlin remarked, "the way you play it! But there's bigger money over there on Red Rain Bluff. I guess you must've got wind of it when you lived down in Old Mexico. Ran cattle down there, didn't you? Whose cattle?"

At last Bayard spoke. "Anybody's!" he said calmly, without cracking a smile. "Your . . . er . . . investigations appear to be bearing fruit. Congratulations. What do you want?"

"Five thousand dollars," said Devlin curtly. "And fifty thousand to old Torode, when he signs that title over to you. I've got the title in my pocket."

Outside, one of the stairs creaked softly. Devlin heard it, and shifted so that he could keep an eye on the door.

"You're a practical man, as I've said before," Bayard complimented him, with some mockery. "So I am to pay fifty-five thousand for Torode's property because you think you have the deadwood on me. You state your case very clearly. Now I'll state mine."

He paced over to his desk, near the window, and seated himself leisurely, carefully parting his coat tails. "I expect Torode to sign that deed over to me at the proper time, but not for fifty thousand dollars. As for my beef business—well, I knew it couldn't last forever. Naturally, I took certain precautions. I'll not be the man behind bars when the showdown comes. Our young friend, Dr. Aston, will be that man! Theoretically, he's responsible for all the beef shipped up to the agencies. I have a stack of inspection bills signed by him to prove it. I shall claim that he played crooked, and took advantage of me. He's no cattleman, and it was easy to fool him. Yes, when the blowoff comes, he's the boy it'll hit, and I think it's about due now, with your Ranger friends on the way here!" Unshaken confidence glowed in Bayard's sunken eyes.

Devlin, himself, betrayed no less of confidence, but he felt that he had lost an ace out of a pretty good poker hand.

"I still figure to collect on that title," he remarked.

Bayard actually smiled. "That reminds me," he murmured blandly. "I'm something of a collector myself." From an open drawer he took out a sheet of paper. "Here's a choice specimen that might interest you." He spread the paper on the desk, and Devlin found his own name staring up at him in bold black type:

PREACHER DEVLIN

Reward Will Be Paid To The Sum Of . . .

A floor board creaked again, this time directly behind the closed door. Devlin met Bayard's mocking stare, and he mentally reshuffled his cards. Seemed like he hadn't much of a hand left, now that he added it up, but he was a gambler, and he had staked high before on deuces and a bluff. And he had his guns.

"Do you figger to try collectin' that reward?" he asked gently.

Bayard shook his head. "No. No, Devlin, I wouldn't set all that law onto a friend. After all, we're on the same side of the fence, aren't we? So let's be sensible. I'll give you a check for five thousand for that title."

Devlin cocked a sardonic eye at him. "A check? No, I believe I'll take cash!"

But Bayard was already making out the check. "Sorry," he said briefly, "but I don't keep that much cash on hand." He blotted the check and slid it across the desk.

"In case you're curious," he murmured, "those sounds outside the door were made by a few of Rettig's town tamers—my men!"

Devlin picked up the check and shoved it into his pocket.

Bayard rose. "The title, please? And . . . oh yes, I forgot to mention it," he added as an afterthought. "A certain young lady was seen when she came to get our noble young doctor tonight. Rettig already has a warrant for the doctor's arrest, and he knows exactly where to find him! Thank you, Devlin, for placing those people so conveniently in the slaughtering pen!"

The man's assuredness, mocking and impregnable, grated on Devlin. He had come here tonight for a showdown with what he had thought was a strong hand. But Bayard's sleeve was full of aces. The check, Devlin knew, was only a gesture. If he tried to cash it tomorrow, there would be a gun committee waiting at the bank to indorse it for him.

He leaned forward, his hands on the desk, and grinned crookedly at Bayard over it.

"You're a smart hombre," he admitted. "You got me backed up in a corner. Still, there's one thing you ought to remember: never count your dead wolves till you've skun 'em!" He upended the desk with a heave, flung it over on Bayard, and whirled with his guns out as the door crashed open.

One gun roared, and as the Preacher chopped down with its mate, he wrecked the hanging lamp

with a slash of the long barrel. Twice he dodged and triggered, while flashes spat from the doorway, and the room boomed with the sudden discharge of exploding cartridges.

With a last shot at where he hoped Bayard would be, Devlin lunged for the window. It was closed, but that was a minor matter right now. With his arms over his face, Devlin went through pane and sash. It seemed a long time to him before he hit the ground, and he hit with his feet and hands, jarring every bone in his body. He got up with wrists and ankles tingling, and took off at once for the corrals, while up in the office it sounded as if men were falling all over the furniture.

Running by the corral, Devlin saw figures outlined and moving against the yellow piles of fodder ahead, and he sent a low call at them: "Get out o' here, quick! They're onto us!" He had barely got the words out when a rifle whanged viciously somewhere, followed by a sharp-pitched command:

"Aston, I got a warrant here for your arrest! In the name of the law, I call on you to surrender. Devlin, you're up a stump, an' all ringed around. You can come out shootin' or die right there. I got enough men to 'commodate you, either way!"

Devlin ducked into the slaughtering pen with the others. "Damn it, why did I come back here?" he growled. He couldn't tell just where Rettig and his town tamers were, out there in the dark, but he judged they were posted all around the corral. Rettig's rifle cracked again, and others joined in. The cattle in the surrounding corrals heaved to their feet, and began nervously pawing and milling, their eyes shining with fear.

Devlin moved over to Rio, who was sitting up. "Well, Ranger, it looks like they've got us on the hip!" he remarked. "Our game's done blowed up, right in our faces. Bayard knows all the answers. How's your head?"

"Terrible," muttered Rio. His head was swathed in bandages. "Yeah, I know Bayard's my man. It was Rettig and the town tamers who raided the fort and stomped all over me. It's our move, Preacher. How do we get out of here—or don't we get out? Hey, this is no time to light that stogie!"

"I don't aim to," grunted Devlin. "I figger to light this alfalfa an' see what happens! Say, doctor, flatten down. You show up like a moose against that fodder!"

He struck a match and tossed it over one mound of the dried alfalfa. Nothing seemed to happen, and he followed it up with others. The little flares described arcs in the darkness and fell out of sight on the other side of the piled alfalfa, at different points. Devlin was striking his seventh match, when he decided it wouldn't be necessary. There was a dry, crackling roar, and a sheet of flame leaped up.

With furious rapidity the flames spread over the piled fodder, and the noise of it drowned out the shouts of Rettig's town tamers. Then, with one mighty bellow, hundreds of steers rolled their tails and took off out of there. They were penned, and the corral fences had been built for permanent strength, but something had to happen when the terrified steers charged blindly into them, horns clacking and hoofs drumming like thunder. Dust rolled up in waves, and a terrific crash told of a shattered fence giving way before the pounding impact. Other fences went, to smash with noises like explosions, and if there was any shooting still going on, it couldn't be heard. In the glare of the flames, Dr. Aston looked as if he thought he had been cast into hell by mistake, and didn't expect to get out again.

VII.

Devlin sprang up, helping Rio to his feet. "Here's our move; let's go!" he said curtly. "Come on, doc, look after the girl!"

They broke out of the slaughtering pen, which by now was getting as hot as a barbecue pit. Horses squealed and stamped in terror somewhere over toward the company building. Devlin headed that way.

Rettig and his crew had scattered, fleeing before the mad rush of the stampeded steers. They could tame Cimarron City, but they couldn't do much against crazy-wild steers on a rampage. One belligerent steer was more than enough for a bunch of men on foot, and tonight there were hundreds charging around in the dark.

The Preacher, with his mind on horses, took a short cut between corrals. A mass of dark shapes came snorting and bawling up from somewhere, and Devlin took to the fence with Rio in a hurry. He lit on the other side, and turned to find Tulsa and Aston hadn't made it. The young doctor wasn't accustomed to quick decisions and rapid moves, his life having run along less violent lines. But the girl was fast and agile, and she managed to get over the fence. Devlin went back into the corral and picked up the young doctor. By some sort of miracle, Aston was still alive, but he had the appearance of having been kicked around over a rough terrain. He staggered to his feet and gasped: "Tulsa! Where is she?"

Devlin jerked his thumb in the general direction of Cimarron City. "Last I saw of her, it looked like she was tryin' to ride one o' them cows, an' headin' hell bent for town! Hey, Rio, give me a hand with him. He's passed out!"

Rio wasn't much help, being groggy on his feet, but somehow they reached the company

building. The horses were tied to a hitching rail. Caught up by the general pandemonium, they were earnestly fighting the rail and each other, and kicking in all directions. A few had broken away, as several snapped rein ends and wrecked bridles testified.

Rio dragged himself aboard a spooky horse, untied him and found the stirrups, and promptly had a fight on his hands that left him limp and clinging to the saddle. Devlin hoisted the doctor onto another horse, and chose a big dun for himself.

The three of them got their mounts straightened out, and Rio said feebly: "Let's go look for that gal." Aston, now conscious, was all in favor of that, too.

Devlin shrugged assent to the will of the majority, and they turned their horses toward town. They had barely got started, when the dark wave of a bobbing mob showed up against the glare of the burning fodder in the corrals. Men were shouting and running, searching as they came. A vioce yelled: "Hey, Rettig, is 'at you? They got the girl! She was all by herself. Where'd them three cusses go?"

Devlin spread his arms for a halt. "Listen, you sorry pair o' stomped-on wrecks!" he growled. "I got more sensible things to do than go—"

Somebody in the advancing mob cut loose with a gun, and sang out in high excitement: "I see 'em! There they are!"

Devlin swung his dun horse around. "That settles it," he said briefly. "Come on; let's hit for the Red!"

The boot prints of Old Oke Torode, superimposed upon the hoof scars of the night riders he had set out to track down, led a winding course northward through soft sand, sparsely carpeted with poverty weeds and scrub brush. The early morning sun slanted its warming rays upon the three horsemen who jogged slowly along the plain line of the trail.

Tired men, these three, with the unmistakable stamp of the hunted upon them, bleak, blood-smeared, hard-pressed. Riding tired horses all through the night after a dash across the Red into the Territory, they had circled and backtracked, using all the long-rider wiles at Devlin's command to rid themselves of their pursuers. Bayard's henchmen seemed to be everywhere, and they knew the country. But the fugitive trio had stayed together, and at dawn they had come upon Old Oke's tracks.

Devlin broke a long silence. First, he spat out the remains of a stogie, and searched for a fresh one. Finding none, he took his annoyance out on Rio.

"Hang onto that saddle an' tough it out, Ranger," he grunted bleakly. "You roll off once more an' you stay where you fall!"

Rio hadn't keeled over for the past three hours, but he let it pass. He looked blearily at Dain Aston to see how he was making out. But that blond young giant, for all his battering, had the solid strength of a buffalo bull. The medical missionary didn't know much about riding a horse, and the saddle had pounded him to white-faced agony, but he stuck, and would stick for a long time yet.

The trail led them over the long roll of a sand-dune, and they pulled up at the sight that greeted them on the other side. Coming up out of a shallow basin, two figures stumblingly dragged their way afoot. Jerry and Old Oke. The old man, hatless head sunk forward, leaned heavily on the boy, who strained to keep him on his feet and slowly moving, at the same time burdened with his rifle. Devlin kicked the dun and was first to reach them. They swayed to a halt at the thud of hoofs, and raised blurred eyes to his face when he drew up before them and dismounted.

"I reckon," said Devlin, "you found what you went lookin' for!" To offer gentler words to an old badlands warrior like Torode was futile and not looked for.

"I reckon I did," rumbled Old Oke, and the exhausted boy let him sink to the ground. He sat there, arms over his chest and bent forward. He added: "They got a cache back there a ways where they bury the hides. Bury dead men in it, too, mebbe. They made a 'buscado for me, but Jerry yelled an' give it away."

"He got 'em all," spoke up Jerry awedly, and shook the rifle that he carried. "He Injun-whacked 'em with Big Apache here!" The kid had three cartridge belts slung around him, guns in holsters, spoils of the bloody night.

Rio clambered out of the saddle and relieved Jerry of two of the belts. "That hide cache," he allowed, "is sure-fire evidence, if we could use it. It proves what happened to all those stolen cattle. But Bayard will use it as just one more proof against the doc, here. He's sure got us all up a stump!"

Dain Aston knelt by Old Oke, and parted his shirt to expose a hairy chest matted with blood. Nobody was surprised when the doctor said quietly: "You're bleeding to death, sir—internal bleeding. That bullet pierced your lungs. If you could ride—"

"I can ride," put in Old Oke. "Or I can walk, or crawl—if I have to. Just so I make my way to see Bayard!"

Dr. Aston rose to his feet, and led forward his own horse. "I'll go with you, sir," he said, still in that quiet tone. "Your granddaughter—"

Old Oke nodded. "I know."

They got the old man onto the horse. He got the reins into his left hand, and signaled to Jerry for his rifle. The boy handed it up to him and took his place by Aston, ready to start back for Cimarron City.

Devlin and Rio exchanged a glance. "I reckon I'll go back, too," Rio said. "Maybe those other Rangers'll be there to give a hand. If they're not . . . well, we can only die once!"

To Devlin it posed a nice problem. He was booked for a blazing-hot welcome if he went back to Cimarron City, no matter who was there, Texas Rangers or town tamers. But two things weighted his decision.

"I left my horse in Cimarron City," he mentioned. "And," he added dryly, with a spark of saturnine humor, "I've got a check to cash!"

They started back—back toward the Red, for Fort Maverick and Cimarron City.

The bright shine of sunny daylight robbed Fort Maverick of much of its gloomy aloofness. But now the place lay under a pall of silence and desertion. The big stockade gate hung ajar, and the bodies of the Opata outlaws rested in the yard where they had fallen, undisturbed and abandoned. The absence of buzzards raised a query in Devlin's mind, and he moved with measured care and deliberation into the yard, checking the slow progress of the others behind him. Where death reigned, death's attendants followed in natural course, and when that law of nature did not operate, one could look for interference of some sort. But the hushed peace of Fort Maverick remained unbroken, and no gun spoke its sullen greeting from the buildings.

Old Oke Torode, slumped like a dying man in the saddle these last four hours, seemed to regain some of his tough vitality as he entered his fortified ranch. He raised his drooping head, peered sharply about him, and dismounted without help, working his shaggy eyebrows and mumbling unintelligibly. But he stumbled, leading the way to the house, and would have fallen had Dain Aston not caught him. The old man allowed the young doctor to help him into the house, but he clung stubbornly to his rifle.

They laid him on a horsehide couch and cut away his caked and stiffened shirt. Jerry went hustling off for water and bandages. Rio staggered in last, and collapsed in a chair holding his bundled head in his hands.

"I barred the gates," he muttered. "We're safe enough here for a while, maybe. It don't look like the Rangers have come, Preacher. Better we hole up here till dark, and take a stab at the town tonight. I ain't much use to myself right now. I'm all done up, and I reckon none of you are in much better shape."

Dain Aston, in that new, quiet voice of his that held no hint of diffidence, said: "They have Tulsa! I am going over as soon as possible. Tonight is too long to wait!"

"Yeah," rumbled Old Oke from his couch. "Too long to wait. I'm goin' with you, son." He struggled to rise, and fell back again, his breathing deep and noisy.

Devlin spoke up from the doorway, where he stood leaning against the jamb. "No call for argument. Not much call for barrin' that gate, either, as long as our hell-bendin' friends are already inside, waitin' for us!"

"What makes you think they are?" exclaimed Rio.

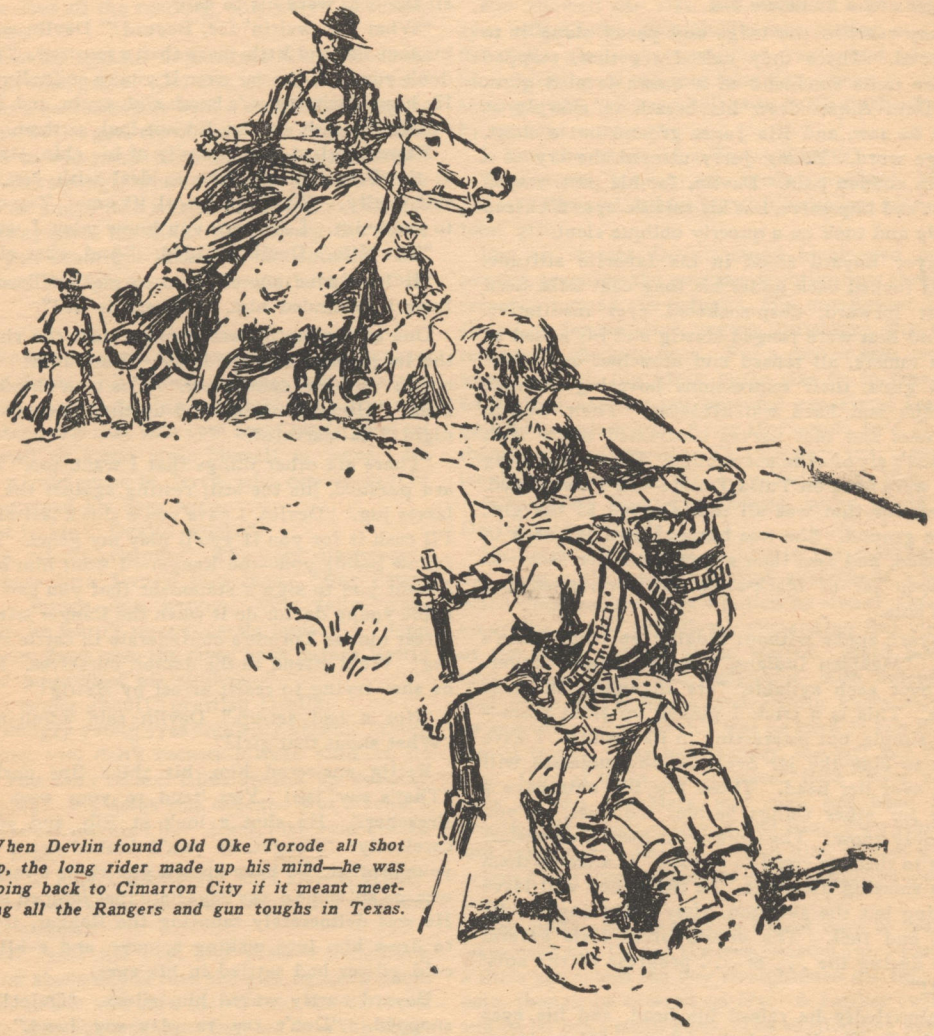
Devlin shifted his position, and from habit felt for a stogie, vainly. "I got eyes," he drawled almost pleasantly. "Couple hombres just went rampsin' off round the back of the bunkhouse."

Rio, for all his claim of being done up, got to his feet in a jump and joined the gun master at the doorway. But Jerry came in from the rear at that moment, slopping water from a bucket in his hurry.

"They're here!" the boy blurted, his eyes wide. "Two of 'em caught me near the well. They gimme a message. Bayard's up on the bluff, an' Tulsa's up there, too! He says if you're ready to talk things over, come on up, right away. Them two fellers says we ain't got a chance to fight out o' here again. The town tamers have got these buildings covered with rifles, an' the fence an' the gate, too. We better go up an' see Bayard, they said, or Tulsa is gonna be in a lot o' trouble!"

On the couch, Old Oke opened his eyes, but if he understood the import of the words, he gave no sign. He just lay there, staring up at the rafters, without moving. How close to death he had drifted, there was no telling, for the vital force in the ferocious old face remained undimmed.

Dain Aston, without a word, but with his face very white and set, laid his hand on the old man's shoulder for an instant, then turned away and headed for the door. He was not the first one out. Rio was first, his pair of borrowed guns around him, his head all swathed in a bloodstained turban, and his walk an unsteady shamble. Devlin, striding with Dain Aston, had a moment's speculation as to the magnet that drew these two widely differing men up there to the bluff. It was not alone revenge for his murdered brother that drew Rio Jones, nor even the call to duty, but something more. As for the young doctor—well, it took something more than a strong humane urge to put that look on his face.



When Devlin found Old Oke Torode all shot up, the long rider made up his mind—he was going back to Cimarron City if it meant meeting all the Rangers and gun toughs in Texas.

Jerry caught up with them, and he had a gun. He had, too, that same steady glow in his young eyes. Devlin sighed a little, and did not try to analyze his own urge. There were times when a man just had to fight, or make a stab at it—even a cynical and hard-bitten gun fighter and gambler who played his guns as he played his cards, with the same sardonic eye to gain. There were times when profit lost its significance and a man stepped out to do battle for the old gods of chivalry and elemental justice. Later, perhaps, he would flip a cynical grin at such sentiment, and excuse himself on the grounds that he had allowed himself the luxury of fighting for a profit-

less cause. He would do that if he lived. For the present, he stalked with Dr. Aston and Rio Jones, while young Jerry tagged along behind. So they walked that way up the bluff—a gunfighter outlaw, a medical missionary, a Texas Ranger and a homeless kid.

They reached the ledge and paced along it to its bend. There they halted together, stopped by the mute command of a dozen leveled guns. Dr. Dain Aston drew his breath in sharply at what he saw, and Rio Jones ground out a short, savage word. Young Jerry uttered the cry of a boy in sudden pain. Devlin, for his part, stayed silent and impassive, but his satanic eyes flickered briefly and took on a queerly oblique slant.

Mayor Bayard stood in his favorite attitude, hands tucked back under his long coat tails, head thrust forward, deep-socketed eyes meditative. Behind him were ranged Rettig and his squad of town tamers, all tensed and crouched over their lined guns, their expressions hovering between triumph and hard watchfulness. Their wolfish alertness and taut nerves contrasted oddly with Bayard's air of calm abstraction. Bayard's musing eyes were fixed on Tulsa Torode—on Tulsa's head, rather, for that was all that showed of the girl, above ground. She was buried up to her neck in the sand, and less than a foot from her face was an open jar of black-strap molasses, swarming with ants.

Bayard spoke without looking up from Tulsa's face. "Mexican Indians," he said slowly, lingering over each syllable, "are ingenious in some ways. This is a trick I picked up from them—very simple, but interesting in its results. I have only to kick the jar over and the molasses will spill over her head. Those fine big ants have a taste for other things besides molasses, as you probably know! The molasses is merely an enticement to them to come to a feast. It attracts them from amazing distances. In time, they will leave nothing but the skeleton, after beginning on the head and face. The victim often lasts several days during the . . . er . . . progress of the ants' feast!"

Unhurriedly he raised his head, and his eyes raked over Devlin and the others. "Very interesting, don't you think?" he murmured, and casually put one toe against the molasses jar to tip it over.

VIII.

Devlin took a look at all the guns and knew he was as far out on the limb as he could get. He could count on Rio Jones to back him up in any play he might make, but that wasn't enough—not nearly enough. He could almost regret the non-arrival of that Texas Ranger company, following his trail up from the south. Dain Aston could be discounted as any help in a tight. Young Jerry was a game kid, and he'd pitch in for sure, along with Rio, and get his head blown off in a wink. No, Bayard had the game laced down tight, and all the bets were his to call.

"What you waitin' for, Bayard?" Devlin asked, his tone flat and little more than a murmur. "Why don't you kick the jar over if you're so inclined?" He heard Dain Aston's harsh sigh again, and Rio's smothered oath, but he did not look at them.

Bayard pulled thoughtfully at his chin, staring at the Preacher. "I like to deal with you," he said finally. "You're practical, like me. You come to the point. I suppose you know what I want."

"The title," Devlin nodded. "And what else?"

"It has to be signed over to me by Torode," Bayard reminded him. "Where is he?"

One of the motionless gunmen near the rim of the ledge muttered suddenly: "I see him! He's comin' up here, damn slow." The man shook his head. "How he ever busted up that 'buscado last night!" he marveled.

"There are other things that I want, too," Bayard pursued, his toe still resting against the molasses jug. "Devlin, I gave you a check last night. I'll cash it for you if you'll play my game. That fellow beside you—the Ranger—I want him shot! I want you to sign a statement that you saw our noble young doctor do it when the Ranger tried to arrest him as Torode's confederate in cattle stealing! We'll attend to the doctor, ourselves. He'll be shot trying to resist arrest by Rettig!"

"Not a bad set-up," Devlin said admiringly. "What about that girl?"

Rettig answered him, his thick lips curling. "That's my job! You 'tend to your own end, Preacher." He shot a look at Rio, and added carelessly: "Ranger, if you'd looked more like your brother, I'd have known you right away. It was me an' some o' the boys here that jumped him." He was deliberately taunting the Ranger, trying to draw him into making a move, and a killer's cold glitter had settled in his eyes.

Bayard curtly waved him silent. "Quiet!" he snapped. "Don't try to play my hand." He stepped to the rim of the ledge, impatiently scanning the path for Old Oke Torode.

The old man climbed the steep path slowly, dragging one foot after the other, using his rifle to lean on whenever he paused for new strength. They all watched him, and the mintues were slow in passing. When the angle of the bluff hid Torode from their view, they still waited, until at last he appeared on the ledge, a tired, dying old man, barely able to keep to his feet. Yet still his hairy and leathered face held a trace of its fierce

vitality, when he paused among them, and even the eyes of Rettig's gunmen took on a grudging respect.

Old Oke looked at the head of his granddaughter, and he needed no explanation, nor did he change countenance. He laid his thrusting regard next on Bayard. With a calm lack of emotion that matched Bayard, he drew out a stubby brier pipe, and began stuffing it with black perique tobacco from a beaded Indian pouch. Now he was like an Indian engaged in powwow, imperturbable, unreadable, taking his own time and with no thought of urgency. And at last Bayard betrayed a strain in his patience. Rettig and his town tamers began shifting a little, easing their tensed muscles.

"Well, Torode," drawled Bayard, "are you ready to come to heel?"

Old Oke drew flint and steel from his vest pocket, but his hands were too weak and shaky to strike a spark, and he dropped the contraption while trying. He gazed down at it, evidently not trusting himself in his weakness to stoop and pick it up. The small mishap seemed to dismay him out of all proportion to its significance, and for the first time a break showed in his iron composure. "I'll do what I gotta do," he rumbled finally. "Your coyote brother is buried back of you, Bayard. Rettig's standing right on his grave."

Rettig moved away a step, but Bayard actually laughed. "The devil with it," he mocked lightly. "It's not on that account I've set my traps for you these last three years. Devlin knows why I want this property. Pull out that title, Devlin, and let's have him sign it. Rettig, give him that pen and ink."

Old Oke stood sucking at his unlighted pipe. He dropped his gaze again to Tulsa, and muttered a thought aloud: "There's worse could happen to her!"

Devlin took him by an arm, and led him over to a flat-topped rock. "Sit down," he commanded gruffly, and struck a match. "Here, light your pipe." He straightened up, thumbs hooked in his belt, and watched the perique tobacco curl under the sucked-in flame and give off pungent blue smoke.

Old Oke got his pipe going redly, and met Devlin's level stare. "I'll do what I gotta do," he said again, and there was thanks in his glance. Then, quietly, he keeled over and rolled off the rock, face down in the sand.

"Yeah," said Devlin, and made no attempt to pick him up. His deep-set eyes gathered in Bayard and the Rettig gunmen. Instinctively, they all crowded forward, and Bayard, frowning, reached down to drag the old man to his feet.

Devlin spoke three words, crisp as expletives. "Let him be!"

Their eyes whipped back to him, and now they saw his stance, recognizable and challenging. His hands were under his coat, back where his hidden brace of guns hung ready, and his eyes were blank.

"It just so happens I haven't got that title, Bayard," he said softly, "but I know where it is. Torode told me where he keeps it. He's out—dying. Soon he'll be dead, and your chance is gone forever. Hombres, you tilt one gun to me, an' I'll draw to your bet, an' then nobody'll ever know where that title's kept!"

He was using up time, running a bluff that he hoped would not be called. But Bayard, a man of swift reaction, made a prompt play. He whirled, one foot raised, and the sharp heel of his boot hung poised, inches from Tulsa's face.

"Back up, Devlin!" he snapped. "If it's this girl that's on your mind, I'll—"

"Hey! What the devil's that?" The yell came from Rettig. He pointed at a different kind of smoke that gathered lazily about Old Oke's head —smoke that did not come from perique tobacco. It came from a shallow hole in the ground, gouged out by Old Oke's stiffening fingers, and out of the sand stuck the short ends of five sputtering fuses, with the blackened brier pipe lying among them.

Old Oke tried to turn over, but he couldn't. He spoke with his mouth half buried in the sand, but his rusty, savage growl could be heard by all.

"Five canisters o' blastin' powder . . . fused an' lighted . . . I'll meet you cusses in hell, happen the devil gathers up the pieces!"

Bayard took one look at those sputtering, smoking fuses, and all his calm control vanished. And then Dr. Dain Aston, the tall young man of peace, the scorned cat's-paw, the ignored dupe, came out of his horror with a roar. He charged at Bayard, barehanded, and it was as if a great savage dog had suddenly broken its leash.

Bayard clawed under his armpit for a gun, but he hadn't time to get it out. A fist, hard as wood, crashed into his narrow face, and he catapulted backward, all spraddled out. Aston got to his knees, and his hands went to scooping like shovels, sending up dirt and sand in showers, as he worked furiously to free Tulsa. He ignored all else, his mind on that one objective. Devlin, a heavy gun in each fist, fastened on Rettig for his first blood, but Rio Jones got in ahead of him with a double discharge that brought the sheriff to a full stop. Jerry let out a shrill yelp and began blazing with his gun.

"Hurry it up, doc!" Devlin sang out to Aston, digging like a terrier after a bone, and chopped a spurting gun twice at a pair lining their sights

on the medico. "This damned ant hill is going sky high in about a minute!"

Some of the town tamers were looking for the quickest way out of there. Others, unconvinced, and choosing to make a fight of it, lost their doubts at Devlin's shout. They went piling over the edge, sliding down the steep slope in frantic haste, loosened rubble pouring among them. There was no mistaking the definitely earnest warning note in Devlin's voice. The gun fighter knew what he was talking about.

Through the shot-studded racket, Jerry, futilely clicking a gun, yipped: "Look out, doc! Bayard—"

Dain Aston, dragging Tulsa out of the ground with his powerful arms, jerked up his head and saw the danger. With his right hand he snatched up Old Oke's Big Apache rifle. The rifle was cocked, and he used it like a pistol. Big Apache boomed, and Bayard, backing for the ledge and glaring out of cut, bruised eyes while he tried to sight one good shot with his gun, went backward as if Aston had hit him with his fist again. The doctor dropped the rifle and hauled Tulsa up out of the sand. With the girl in his arms, he stood undecided, not knowing which way to run. Jerry jumped to the edge, and ducked back again when a bullet sang by his head. There was no escape via that route. Some of the escaping town tamers were taking time out to shoot back up the slope.

Devlin, not interested in the down route, caught hold of Aston, swung him around, and sent a call to Rio and Jerry. "Scoot, you jugheads! Up—not down! We got less than a minute to high-tail over this bluff!" He set the example by taking off at a long-legged lope along the ledge. He sort of expected to be buried when it came his time to die, but he didn't relish any premature burial while he was still alive. For Old Oke it didn't matter. He had finally got himself turned over. He lay looking up at the sky, but not seeing it.

Rio tried to give Aston a hand with Tulsa, but it wasn't necessary. With the girl in his arms, the fair young giant whisked past and quickly outdistanced him.

Devlin made it to the top of the bluff, but didn't stay there, though Aston paused for breath. An earth-shaking explosion knocked the doctor to his knees, and Tulsa uttered a scream. Devlin looked back. Almost immediately, a second muffled blast followed. A long crack appeared along the nose of the bluff, as if a great invisible knife were cutting off a slice of it. Aston and the girl staggered up, and it was Jerry who grabbed at the girl and flung her to safety. Rio, behind Aston, simply lowered his head and rammed into him.

They sprawled across the widening split in the earth and barely got across when three more detonations burst in quick succession. The whole face of the upper bluff toppled away, with a strange lack of noise at first, then with a gathering roar, tremendous and deafening. They could see nothing from where they stood, nothing but a thick, impenetrable pall of dust, flung up from below the sheared-off edge of the bluff. Old Oke had done his work well, and planted his canisters in the right places, bringing down a great section of the bluff. The roar of the avalanche continued for minutes, hundreds of tons of sand and boulders tumbling down the slant, at last dimming to a sullen rumble, and finally to the rattle of an occasional bouncing rock.

The wild fighting fury had drained out of Dain Aston, and reaction was pouring in upon him, flooding him with another kind of sick horror. He stood staring down at his own trembling hands, white to the lips and shuddering. "I . . . I killed a man!" he muttered hoarsely. "I—"

"Which man?" queried Devlin.

"Bayard. I killed him!"

"Don't flatter y'self," Devlin grunted. "You missed him a mile," he lied. "It was my bullet got him." He and Rio swapped glances, and they made their way with care to the new, broken edge of the bluff.

Through the thinning dust they could see nothing left of the ledge below, and the whole contour of the bluff's face was changed. The secret graveyard of Red Rain Bluff lay buried and hidden beneath thirty feet of rubble, and Old Oke Torode with it. The whole face of the bluff now presented only a sheer slope, with tumbled rocks piled at the foot. Down on the bottom, a few of the town tamers who had outdistanced the disaster wandered like men in a drunken daze across the level ranch yard, their senses shocked and numbed.

Devlin ceased his absent-minded searching for a stogie. "That old tarantula sure smoked a strong brand o' 'baccy!" he observed. "Ranger, looks like your job here is about done."

"Uh-huh." Rio Jones looked back over his shoulder at Dain Aston and Tulsa, and what he saw made him bring his eyes away quickly. The bitter disappointment of the moment pinched lines into his face, and sharpened his voice to a clipped edge. His eyes played over Devlin with hard professional regard.

"Maybe so, Preacher," he drawled. "Maybe so!"

Devlin recalled the reward dodger in Bayard's office. When a man got hurt, the way Rio Jones was hurt, he was apt to turn savagely upon the first object at hand. Needed to work off steam on something.

"I reckon," Devlin said gently, "you could sashay down there now an' round up the drag o' those hombres without much trouble, huh? Better make a start 'fore they get away."

That night, on the Texas side of the Red, with his black horse saddled beside him, the Preacher turned a corner and ran full into Ranger Rio Jones. The meeting, on Devlin's part, was unsought, but he thought perhaps Rio had been waiting there. The Ranger wore his gun in sight, but his arms were folded.

"Howdy," he said evenly. "Leavin' town?"

"Figger to," answered Devlin, and stepped casually away from his halted horse. "Seen Doc Aston lately? How's the girl?"

Rio looked away from him. "They're both all right," he answered. "Going to be married, they tell me."

Devlin nodded. "Glad to hear it. That girl deserves a break. I told 'em about the garnets on Red Rain Bluff. Told 'em where to find the title, too. Buried under the floor boards in Old Oke's house."

"Uh-huh," grunted Rio. "They told me. They aim to build a church and a free hospital, or something. They're adopting Jerry, too. Well, I guess that doctor's able to do more than I could've."

Devlin, with a fresh supply of stogies, drew one out and bit on the end. "Sure. Texas Rangers've got no business marryin', anyway. They generally don't last long enough to raise a family, an' this country ain't good for widows."

Sidelong, he eyed the Ranger, trying to predict possible plans. He didn't want to have to shoot it out with him. He thought of something that might bring out the Ranger's intentions.

"Say, there's something you can do for me, Jones," he said suddenly. "I got Bayard's check here for five thousand, and . . . er . . . the bank's closed."

"It'll be open tomorrow," Rio murmured dryly.

"Yeah, but I got a hankering to leave tonight," explained Devlin. "You take this check an' give it to Aston. He'll be able to cash it. Tell him to take out four thousand as my contribution toward that church an' hospital, an' send the other thousand to me, care o' Dodge City."

"Dodge City?"

"Dodge City," reiterated Devlin. "That's where I was headed for when—" He broke off, cocking an alert ear to a drumming of hoofbeats that came rolling up from the south on the night air. He and Rio said nothing more until the hoofbeats thundered into the main street, and Devlin took a quick look around the corner at the riders coming into town. One look was all he needed at those dusty, straight-sitting men, with eyes that scanned everything and everybody, and carbine butts poking up from their saddle boots to make up his mind.

"Dodge City!" he repeated with finality.

Rio Jones hadn't looked along the street, nor shown any visible sign that he had heard the riders. He took the check, slipped it into his shirt pocket, and folded his arms again.

"You know," he remarked, "I just happened to remember, I forgot to reload my guns. Now wouldn't it be the devil if I happened to need 'em in a hurry tonight?"

"It sure would," agreed Devlin, and swung up onto the black. "So long!"

"So long!"

On the Territory side of the Red, Devlin drew up and looked back at Cimarron City.

"That Texas," he murmured to himself, "is just gettin' too damn overrun with law an' civilization." And then it occurred to him that maybe he had pulled considerable weight in helping the advance of that same law and civilization into one part of Texas, after temporarily wrecking it to blazes in another part. But then, it was nothing new that a lobo gun fighter became the man to carry law at the point of a flaming gun into a spot badly in need of it.

Oh, well—considering that church and all, and the smashing of Bayard's cattle-stealing combine that had rodded Cimarron City too long, maybe Preacher Devlin had sort of squared the tall bill that he'd run up on the Rangers.

The gun master watched a group of stiff-backed horsemen ride down to the water's edge on the Texas bank and sit there, gazing across.

They wouldn't cross the Red. The wide and shallow Red marked the boundary of their bailiwick. Devlin spoke his horse onward. The silent band of grim horsemen, sighting his movement in the darkness, whipped out their carbines for a few last shots, all in the spirit of good honest farewell and don't come back.

Devlin flipped a hand back at them, at Cimarron City and all the land below it to the Rio Grande.

"*Adios*, Texas!" he grunted.

THE END.

by Harry Sinclair Drago

PAYOFF AT KICKING HORSE

"Porter could never outfight us, but he's always known how to outsmart us," Ethan Skene said, but the day came when a Skene brain and a Skene lass' rope was all that lay between death and the Porter girl

I.

Two men stepped out of the door of the new Iron Point schoolhouse and stood where the light from within did not strike them as Ethan Skene and part of the Seven Up crew rode into the yard. Ethan saw them. He looked away, trying to locate the rest of his outfit, and in the second that his eyes strayed the two men were joined by three more. He knew them well enough, and the careless attention with which they regarded him and his fellow late comers to the dedication exercises and dance here at Iron Point did not need any explaining.

"Wagon Wheel," little Dib Hines observed laconically at his side. Ethan nodded, fully aware of the sudden tenseness of his men.

"Seems like everybody is here," he said lightly. A burst of music came from within. "Appears we timed it just right to miss the speech-making," he ran on. "See anything of our boys?"

Half a dozen fires burned in the schoolyard, each indicating the headquarters of one outfit or another. Horses and little groups of men were gathered around them.

"Hi ya, Seven Up! Hi ya, Ethan!" fat, freckle-faced Pokey Malone called out from Cross T fire. "Yore bunch is over in the corner. Yuh better git slicked up in a hurry; dancin' has begun."

"Won't take us long to git our hair greased!" little Dib called back. Ethan grinned. Seven Up had friends as well as enemies here.

At the Seven Up fire they found Chalk Isbell and the rest of the crew busily washing up and getting into their finery. All had come in from the roundup wagon in Shoshone Meadows, forty miles away, to enjoy this dance. But Chalk's homely face was singularly sober for such an occasion.

"Ethan," he said at once, "old Jube and his daughter are here—and the whole Wagon Wheel crew. They're packin' their guns—"

Ethan nodded. "I'd expect them to. We'll do the same." All were listening by now. "Any words been passed?"

"No," Chalk told him. "Everythin's peaceful but kinda strained. I'd like to believe Jube Porter is just here to see that things go off without any trouble. He's got his fall shippin' on his hands in a few days now."

"What he does is his own affair," Ethan said sharply. "But we don't want any trouble here, and for the same reason; we're getting ready to ship, too."

It was all he had to say. Someone had fetched a bucket of water from the pump. He washed and got his warbag from his saddle. The others did the same. All had shaved before leaving the wagon. In a few minutes they were attired in their holiday best, and as presentable as they had any hope of ever being. Through a solid phalanx of Wagon Wheel men they entered the schoolhouse.

The building was new, but the scene was a familiar one to Ethan, the long room crowded with rangemen like himself, girls from ranches all the way from Owyhee headwaters to Kicking Horse, the county seat. Groups of oldsters ringed in the dancers.

Before he had taken ten steps, Ethan found himself face to face with Jube Porter, the owner of the Wagon Wheel, a Virginian, and looking it; a tall and robust man of commanding appearance, his hair now white and his strong nose grown a trifle sharp and hawklike with the passing years. In the moment that they confronted each other, Ethan Skene might not have been there for any sign that old Jube gave.

Ethan's eyes were equally blank. For almost half a century the Porters and the Skenes had been at each other's throats; fifty years of fighting that had taken the lives of a score of men. Water rights, range, drift fences, even rustling, had figured in their quarrel, but the original cause of the Skene-Porter war had long since been lost in the gun smoke and hate. It no longer mattered. What a Skene did, a Porter could not approve—and vice versa.

Ethan continued on around the schoolroom, his eyes hard and bright. He had been weaned on the principle that a Porter was never to be trusted; that they plotted night and day to wipe out the Skenes. He had never seriously questioned it. As a young boy, he had taken up arms against them. In his time, Jube Porter's two sons had been killed, his own brothers had been brought home dying with Porter bullets. Ethan was almost twenty-five now; and he was still a Skene. But a moment later, when Lana Porter whirled by him in the arms of Homer Rains, and he caught a glimpse of her fair young face and heard the warmth of her laughter, regret suddenly stabbed him that the gulf between them was so wide.

He had never spoken to Lana, but he knew her as well as he knew Anne Gallatin, and some folks said that he would be marrying Anne one of these days. He knew Lana had been away for a long time. In some way she had changed since he had seen her last. It was as though some inner quality had come to the surface in her. She held a man's eyes and filled him with a strange humbleness.

Homer Rains was just an ordinary run-of-the-mill puncher without any prospects, but he was grinning from ear to ear and fairly bursting with pride, the way a man will when a girl has put him at ease.

"She hasn't come back thinking she's too good for ordinary folks, as some of them do," Ethan mused. "These are still her people."

With a start, he recalled that this was treason, coming from a Skene. It failed to disturb him, however, as he stood there. Anne Gallatin, dancing by, called to him.

"I'd almost given you up," she said. "My card is about filled, Ethan. I couldn't keep on saying no."

"That's all right," Ethan insisted. Contrary to public opinion, there was nothing between him and Anne. "I'll cut in when I can."

At these dances he never lacked a partner. It was so tonight. Secretly, there were few girls present who would not have welcomed his atten-

tion. And on his own account, and not because the big Seven Up spread was destined to belong to him some day.

Four or five dances later Ethan found himself with Anne again. "You're very glum tonight," she protested. "You haven't anything to say, Ethan."

"Sorry," he murmured.

"I've seen your attention stray in a certain direction a dozen times," she persisted. A smile touched Ethan's strong mouth.

"It's been as noticeable as that, has it?"

"It has—to me."

"I won't let it happen again," he promised.

"I should think not," Anne declared with feminine emphasis. Through the years the Gallatins had always espoused the Skene cause. "After all, she *is* a Porter."

Ethan nodded. His gray eyes were far more sober than he suspected. Hands off! was the unwritten law where the Porters and the Skenes were concerned. He knew that included Lana. "There couldn't be any exception to that rule, I suppose—"

Anne stared at him, horrified.

"Ethan, there couldn't be!"

"Of course not," he agreed. His mood changed. "I hope there's a fried chicken in your basket and some of that famous Gallatin apple pie."

"Well, that sounds more like you," Anne declared with relief. "But we won't be eating for another hour."

"I'll be on hand when we do," he laughed.

The music ended and another partner carried Anne off. Lana Porter brushed past Ethan and their eyes met for a moment. Something ran between them in that brief glance that was not born of the hatred that existed between Skene and Porter.

Ethan turned away and told himself it was nothing worth thinking about. And yet in some intangible way the evening took on new zest for him and he was doubly glad he had ridden in to the dance. The minutes fled on wings, and when Hattie Simms struck a long chord on the piano and rotund Elon Hoffman, the chairman of the county commissioners, hoisted himself on the platform and announced there would be an intermission for refreshments, Ethan was surprised to find that it was already eleven o'clock.

Jube Porter left for home soon after the baskets had been emptied. Chalk Isbell found the old man's going momentous enough to send him around the room to acquaint Ethan with the fact.

"I know," Ethan said a little impatiently. "I saw him leave. No point in reading something into it that isn't there. Everybody seems to be having a good time."

Chalk was frankly surprised. "That don't sound like you," he complained. "Yuh know Wagon Wheel is spoilin' for trouble on account of the lawsuit. Now that the old man has left—"

"Stop it," Ethan said, and his tone was edged with annoyance. "You're as gloomy as an owl, Chalk. Can't a man enjoy himself for a few minutes without one of you popping up to remind him that he ought to be keeping his hand on his gun? Relax a little. If there's any trouble here tonight, we'll be the ones that start it."

Chalk was left standing there with a puzzled frown on his rocky face. Ethan had advised him to relax. The fact that he even suggested it was enough to produce the opposite effect in Isbell. Wary and alert as an Indian, he weighed the situation for what it was worth—the Wagon Wheel crew bunched together near the door; Seven Up riders sprinkled around the room; laughter and gaiety seemingly everywhere. The undercurrents of tension he looked for were there, but they had been there all evening, and he could not detect any change. It made him wonder if he was mistaken; if his feeling that something was about to happen was only a trick of his imagination.

The music had struck up again. No one was on the floor as yet, however. Out of the corner of his eye Chalk saw Ethan standing by himself, his attention focused on the far end of the room. Suddenly Ethan was crossing the floor with his long, free stride, and before he had taken a dozen steps Chalk Isbell's fears were realized. For Ethan was making directly for the cloakroom door where Lana Porter stood talking with Grandma Hoffman, the commissioner's mother. Chalk knew it wasn't because he had anything to say to Grandma Hoffman that Ethan Skene was making for the cloakroom door. A moment, and there wasn't anyone present but knew it, too. Chalk found little Dib Hines at his side.

"Has he gone crazy, goin' up to her like that?" Dib got out hurriedly. "We'll have the roof fallin' down on us in a minute!"

Chalk nodded and said nothing. His eyes were on the Wagon Wheel men. They had frozen in their tracks, and in back of their alertness there was something in every stiff line of them that said they were not only ready, but eager, to resent any slight or humiliation Ethan Skene might dare to put on Lana Porter.

In some incredible way the noise and laughter were gone so completely that they might have belonged to yesterday. The musicians continued to play; but the thin squealing of the fiddles seemed only to emphasize the stillness that suddenly swept the Iron Point school.

By now, every eye in the room was trained on

Ethan Skene; and as he stood before Lana he was a handsome figure of a man, tall and straight, his gray eyes alive and reckless in his young face. With a grace few suspected he possessed, he bowed to her.

"Miss Porter," he said, "might I have the honor of this dance with you?"

Men and women held their breath, stunned by his request and certain that Lana would say no and put him in his place. They were in no doubt as to what would follow. Guns would talk here tonight. They knew they should be thinking of their own safety. For the moment, however, they were helpless to do anything about it. A spell had been put on them, and they could only stare at Lana Porter and Ethan Skene.

They saw her regard him with a curious interest, the color coming and going in her cheeks. She seemed calm enough, with Ethan Skene's preposterous advance ringing in her ears and the eyes of everyone in the room on her. They knew she was alive to the significance of this moment as well as to its inevitable consequences; and they told themselves that if she was slow to answer, it was only because she wanted what she said to be adequate and final.

But to their surprise, something flowed into Lana's dark eyes that was warm and friendly. A smile parted her lips. "I'd be most pleased to dance with you, Mr. Skene," she said with calm self-possession.

The crowd gasped and the musicians struggled frantically to pick up their lost tempo. The Wagon Wheel crew had a stricken look. Jube Porter's daughter dancing with the son of Morgan Skene! It was as though their world had blown up in their faces. Exchanging a bewildered look, they shuffled outside, needing a breath of air if ever men did.

Chalk Isbell and Seven Up's riders were no less aghast. "I never expected to live to see this," Chalk groaned. "I got to git out where I can think." The others followed him back to the Seven Up fire.

The dancing went on without them, couples hurriedly returning to the floor as the excitement waned. Lana and Ethan appeared oblivious to the glances directed at them as they glided away.

"Don't look, but every eye in the room is on us," Lana said. "We've made history here tonight, it seems."

"I hope so," Ethan replied. "It took me a long time to get up courage to ask you to dance with me. I've been wanting to all evening."

Lana smiled. "I knew you would ask me," she murmured. "I made up my mind that I would say yes when you did."

It was a brave start. A couple bumped into them, and Ethan's arm tightened about Lana. He felt her yield to its pressure.

"You've changed, Ethan, since I saw you last," she said.

"And you. You're not at all like you were when you first came to school in Kicking Horse." He shook his head over that old memory. "I was eighteen, and you were just a . . . a—"

"A gawky kid?" she suggested, enjoying his sudden embarrassment.

But Ethan wasn't to be stopped. "You wore a green velvet dress," he said. "I remember it. You had your hair done up in pigtails. Jim Hoskins told me you were Lana Porter. I would have known it without being told. You resembled your brother Tyler, and I hated you for that, on top of hating you for being a Porter."

His tone was sober abruptly. Lana nodded with full understanding. Ty Porter had killed Grat Skene, Ethan's eldest brother.

"As I remember it, I returned your feeling with interest," she said. Those old memories had put a catch in her voice. "That was a long time ago. Things have changed, Ethan."

They had whirled past the door and were far down the room before Ethan spoke again. "You mean you and I have changed," he said thoughtfully. "Your father and mine haven't changed a bit. They've fought too hard—paid too high a price for their foolishness—for anything to change them."

"I wonder," Lana mused. "At least they've agreed to take this Crazy Woman Creek dispute to law. That's something." She shook her head reflectively. "What a time I had getting father to agree to it instead of resorting to the usual way of settling a Skene-Porter difficulty."

Ethan laughed. "What a time you had?" he echoed with amused surprise. "What about me? I thought I could take credit for trying this matter with lawyers instead of guns." A moment later —and he was no longer amused—he said: "I'm not convinced that what a judge and jury says is going to be final."

Lana's smile did not desert her as she glanced up at him. "I know," she murmured. "I've heard that very thing said here tonight. I refuse to let it worry me too much, though. If we stand together, they'll have to listen to us. Promise me I can count on you."

She was so near and so lovely that Ethan would have promised her the world had she asked for it at that moment.

The music stopped and the couples began applauding for an encore.

"I'm afraid I better let you go now," Lana said. "That Gallatin girl is looking daggers at me."

"That's meant for me as much as for you," Ethan said. "Anne just doesn't understand. The

hard looks and the tongue wagging are things we will have to get used to. Are you going to mind?"

"Not too much, Ethan."

It was all the invitation he needed to slip his arm around her waist and dance off with her. Across the room Anne Gallatin told her partner that she had never seen anything so brazen. "That Porter girl has got him bewitched," she insisted.

II.

Ethan and Chalk were working the willow brakes below Shoshone Meadows the following morning when Hoke Emmons rode in from the home ranch.

"Yore paw wants to see yuh right off," Hoke told Ethan. "He's chawin' dynamite this mornin', I'm warnin' yuh."

Hoke was the oldest of Seven Up's retainers, and a privileged person. Only on rare occasions was he out of old Morgan Skene's sight.

"All right, Hoke," Ethan answered, surmising what was up. "I'll be along; you needn't wait for me."

It was noon when Ethan rode into the Seven Up yard. He had never particularly noticed it before, but today for some reason he could not help remarking how bare and ugly the house looked, the uncurtained windows staring at a man like so many unseeing eyes, and not a flower or even a hop vine to cover the nakedness of the place. It was a man's house, and it had been ever since his mother had passed on.

"You could tell that with half a glance," Ethan said to himself.

His father sat on the porch in his wheel chair. Old Morgan had not walked in ten years, due to some mysterious spinal trouble that had withered his legs and left him a mere shell of the man he had been. It had sharpened a temper and disposition that had never needed honing, but he had refused to let his infirmity incapacitate him where his business was concerned. He owned a dozen wheel chairs and had them sprinkled around the county wherever he was likely to have need of one. If Hoke Emmons was not present to wheel him about, he managed by himself.

Morgan's old eyes were fairly smoking as Ethan came up the steps and stood before him. "So you were dancin' with that Porter gal last night!" he blazed, his frail body shaking with anger. "There's been a dozen people here this mornin' to tell me!" He paused long enough to look Ethan over from head to toes, as though he expected to find some sign of sudden insanity in him. "You don't appear cracked. But if you ain't, what excuse have you got for shamin' me and yourself like this?"

"I haven't any need of an excuse," Ethan declared calmly. Long experience with his father's fiery temper cushioned its effect on him. "If anyone has been shamed, it's the two-legged, tongue-wagging tomcats who have such a good time watching the Skenes and Porters tangle that they don't want the fun stopped."

Morgan Skeene stared at him aghast, his faded old eyes wide with outrage. "And you dare to call yourself a Skene!" he cried, his voice quavering with fury. "I would rather have seen you in your grave than have had you do this to me! But I should have known. By Tophet, I've had warnin' enough! For years you ain't seen eye to eye with me. And I've listened to you—let you git around me. If I had done as I wanted to do, I wouldn't have any lawsuit on my hands now. I'd have settled that business in a hurry, and I'd have settled it for keeps! What do I care about when that blasted Secessionist filed his water rights? He ain't got a leg to stand on. Usin' a female to pull the wool over my eyes—that's what this means!"

Hoke Emmons stepped out of the house and established himself in back of old Morgan's wheel chair. His presence caused them no concern, for they had no secrets from Hoke.

"Your dinner is on the table," the old cowboy said. Morgan glared at him.

"Let it stay there!" he snapped. "I'm talkin'!" He gave his chair a hitch toward Ethan. "With the Owyhee power dam shuttin' off any chance of our gettin' water from the north, we need that creek and every drop of water we can git. I don't propose to have it wangled away from me, lawsuit er wimmin er nothin'!"

"I know what the Owyhee dam is doing to this watershed," Ethan said patiently. "I was the first to point it out to you. I talked going to law to you only because I know our rights on Crazy Woman must be established—and that doesn't mean hogging it and trying to hold it with guns. The day for that is past. Down in your heart, you know it."

"I don't know anythin' of the sort!" old Morgan screeched. "If this country has changed, I ain't!"

"I know it. Jube Porter hasn't changed, either. The two of you are still living back in the smoky years when you couldn't settle an argument until it was drenched with Skene-Porter blood. As far as I am concerned, there won't be any more of it."

Ethan knew what he was inviting in declaring himself so frankly. He saw his father stiffen in his chair. Old Morgan's thin, excited face was bloodless.

"So this is what that Porter female sends you home with!" he burst out fiercely. "You not only defy me, but you mock me for what I've done to build up this outfit to what it is!" In moments of great stress, he had been known to lift himself

out of his chair and stand tottering until he fell or someone caught him. He would have got up now if Hoke had not held him down.

"Yuh want to tip yore chair over and go pitchin' down them steps on yore face?" Hoke scolded. Old Morgan pushed him away and sat there breathing heavily for a moment. He pointed an accusing finger at Ethan.

"You had brothers and they bred true! Sons a man could be proud of! But they're in their graves, and in my old age I'm left with you!" He shook his head as his cup of bitterness overflowed. "I can't understand it," he muttered. "It's a curse that's been put on me!"

Behind him Hoke Emmons shook his head. This was sheer nonsense that old Morgan was giving tongue to. Ethan was his favorite son and always had been. Both were hewn out of the same tough timber. Hoke had never known either to give an inch when they met head-on. He was not surprised to hear Ethan say:

"If they're in their graves, you know what put them and a dozen others there. As far as I can remember, I can't recall a time when a little common sense on either side would not have put an end to all the killing and hatred that's plagued this range ever since you and Jube Porter first locked horns. I can see things for what they are: I'm not a kid any more. Neither is Lana. If you brought me in to warn me not to have anything more to do with her, you can save your breath; and I'll tell Jube Porter the same if he tries to stop me from seeing her."

"Ethan, I'm warnin' you, don't have nothin'

"The Skene never lived that was good enough for my girl!" Jube Porter thundered. "I'll have to hear her say that," said Ethan.

more to do with that girl!" old Morgan cried. "If you do, I'll cut you off without a cent!" He was playing his last card, and there was something in his hooded eyes that said he realized it wasn't a very good card.

Ethan did not hesitate over his answer. Without anger, he said: "That's a stiff price, but I'm willing to pay it. There's that much of you in me, anyhow." He started to cross the porch. "Before I left, I gave orders to start making the cut this afternoon. I'm going to get a bite to eat and head back. I'm needed there."

He stepped into the house and old Morgan was left fuming to himself.

"Time yuh was thinkin' of eatin' sunthin' yoreself," Hoke told him. "Grub's gittin' cold."

"Git away from me!" the old man growled at him. "I'm sittin' right here. You see that he gits fed."

A few minutes later, in the act of setting a platterful of boiled beef and cabbage before Ethan, old Hoke flashed a glance through the uncurtained window and promptly dropped the platter with a bang.

"Look at that!" he managed to gasp. "It's Jube Porter! An' I ain't seein' things!"

Hoke blinked his eyes nevertheless; but there was nothing wrong with them. This was Jube Porter, all right; riding into Seven Up's yard for the second time in his life. His first visit—now a matter of more than twenty years ago—had been wreathed in gunfire. His wrath on that disastrous occasion had been no greater than it was today.

Ethan kicked his chair aside and started for the door. "They'll be popping away at each other in a minute," he exclaimed, thinking of the rifle old Morgan always kept standing against the wall on the porch.

Jube came on until his horse was only a few yards from the porch. There he sat; nothing could have impelled him to set foot to earth on Skene land. Old Morgan had sent his chair spinning backward to the rifle. Catching it up, he snapped a cartridge into the chamber and sat there, staring his hatred. Jube returned his scowling glare with interest.

Meeting face to face for the first time in years held both old men tongue-tied for a moment. Morgan was the first to speak.

"Well?" he snarled.

"Skene, yuh know why I'm here," was the blunt, razor-edged answer. "Yuh know the disgrace that was put on me last night. I'm warning yuh, don't let it happen again. Keep that son of yours away from my daughter!"

"That won't be no hardship on him," old Morgan flung back. "He's a way too good for her!"

"The Skene never lived that was good enough for my girl!" Jube boomed. It was like thunder over a canyon. "I didn't come here to waste words. Yuh keep him away! Let him dare to show her any further attention and I'll kill him on sight!"

Ethan stepped out on the porch. "I heard that," he said.

"Then it won't be necessary for me to repeat it," Jube retorted stonily.

"It wouldn't do any good to repeat it," Ethan said. "I propose to see Lana at the first opportunity, and I'm going to keep on seeing her until she tells me she wants it otherwise."

Jube Porter's face took on an apoplectic hue as he heard himself so calmly defied. "I'm here to assure yuh she does want it otherwise!" he said flatly.

Ethan shook his head ever so slightly. "I'll have to hear her say that," he said quietly. Turning on his heel, he walked to his horse.

Jube had never been so completely dismissed in his life. As he sat there, angrily puffing out his cheeks and mustache bristling, old Morgan's shrill cackling laugh reached him. The moment was almost too much for Jube. His hand started for his gun. Just as suddenly then, he wheeled his horse and dashed away at a slashing gallop, every line of him sharp with hostility.

"What you grinnin' at?" old Morgan barked as Ethan pulled up in front of him.

Ethan shook his head. "I was just thinking," he said, "how foolish two old men can be when they set their heads to it."

III.

Ethan arrived in Kicking Horse five days later with Seven Up's fall beef cut, to find Wagon Wheel in possession of the railroad corrals. The railroad agent was apologetic, but his rule was: first come, first served. There was nothing for Ethan to do but hold his steers on the bed ground above town. It meant extra work and extra expense.

This was the first time the two outfits had been in conflict over their shipping. Seven Up's crew put it down as a deliberate move on Jube Porter's part.

"If there's any doubt of it," Chalk Isbell grumbled, "look at the way they're stallin' along with the work. We'll be held up two days, and the trial opens tomorrow."

Ethan read the temper of his men and knew that it needed only a word from him to bring on a clash that would make the trial of secondary importance.

"It wasn't an accident," he admitted, "but we're not going to let it throw us off stride."

"You mean we're goin' to stand for this and do

nothin' about it?" Dib Hines demanded incredulously. "That never was old Morgan's way."

"It's my way," Ethan said.

He knew that holding his father in line would be quite another matter. Old Morgan reached town the following morning and let out a bellow of rage when he was apprised of the situation. By now he had a score of men in Kicking Horse.

"Get 'em down to the railroad pens and throw that bunch out!" he ordered. "Do as I say, and don't give me no excuses! To blazes with this trial! I never was for it nohow!"

"All right—if that's the way you want it," Ethan pretended to agree. "It's certainly what Porter wants—getting us to play right into his hands. He's never been able to outfight us, but he's always known how to outsmart us."

He started for the door of the hotel room his father always used on his visits to Kicking Horse. Old Morgan stopped him as his hand closed on the knob.

"Wait," he said, his tone less certain. "We can talk this over. If there's a trick in this, what is it? What do you figger Porter's game is?"

"To drag us into a fight that will prejudice everyone against us," Ethan answered. "While we're busy spilling a little blood and proving that Seven Up doesn't take the backwash of any man, Porter will be nailing down his claims to Crazy Woman Creek. It will be a bargain for him at twice the price."

"Huh!" old Morgan snorted. He brushed Hoke's hand off his chair and wheeled himself to the window where he sat glaring down at the street, his thin face furrowed with his thinking. "For once, you may be right," he said grudgingly. "You forgit what I said. We'll let Porter do his shippin'. Git word to Chalk that I don't want no trouble. If that devil-sired Secessionist thinks he can do me out of that water by such schemin', he's mistaken!"

Behind old Morgan's back Hoke flicked a glance at Ethan that said: "Get going before he changes his mind." He could not remember when Morgan Skene had ever backed down before.

Masking his satisfaction, Ethan stepped out of the room; but going down the stairs, a broad smile wreathed his face. He knew this was no minor victory he had won.

Riding out to the bed grounds, Ethan found Chalk at the Seven Up wagon. The news he brought was not what Isbell wanted to hear, but an order was an order.

"Stormin' up in the hills," Chalk pointed out. "Purty black up there. We'll git a good wettin' before the day's over."

"It won't be the first time you've been wet," Ethan answered, studying the sky to the north. "Raining up there all right."

Before returning to town, Ethan swung around by the loading pens. They were jammed with Wagon Wheel steers. Empty stock cars stood on the siding. The work should have been going on, engaging the services of a dozen men. He could discover only two, and they were obviously killing time. It was a studied invitation to trouble.

"And pretty crude for Jube Porter," Ethan said to himself. "Pulling his crew away is as good as asking us to do something about it. We'll sidestep this trap."

He was at the courthouse ten minutes later. Old Morgan and his attorneys had already entered. Over a dozen men, unable to find seats in the crowded courtroom, were gathered about the doors and on the steps. Kicking Horse and the surrounding country had turned out in force to witness the Skene-Porter factions tangling in their first legal encounter. Not only was it a novelty, but it was calculated to be reasonably safer for spectators than one of their usual clashes.

Ethan recognized two Wagon Wheel men among those gathered just outside the door. They returned his opaque look without a flicker of expression. He knew the others were inside. He was not particularly concerned; Seven Up was well represented, too.

Turning, he saw Jube Porter and Lana coming up the steps. Jube saw him, and would have hurried his daughter inside, but she refused to have it that way.

"Good morning, Ethan," she said.

Old Jube bristled and the two Wagon Wheel men were instantly tense and alert. The warning was wasted on Ethan. All the Porter guns could not have stopped him now. Raising his hat, he stood there for a moment, warming under Lana's smile.

"Good morning, Lana," he murmured.

Something electric touched the air. Jube was having his threat rammed down his throat. But he was not in command here this morning. Lana took his arm, and it was she who led the way into the courthouse. Jube went along meekly enough, aware of his impotence, and trying to close his eyes to it.

The court was declared in session a few minutes later. Ethan took his place beside his father. The case was not to be heard by a jury, nor was the district judge to sit on the bench. Both sides having previously agreed, Judge Coleman Bonnifield, who had been outstandingly successful in the adjudication of water rights in other parts of the State, had been called in to sit as master.

The introduction of old records and much of the argument by counsel was of such a complex, legal nature that before the morning was half gone the crowd, losing interest, began to thin out.

This was not what they had come for. Most of those who remained did so in the hope that old Morgan or Porter would be called to the stand. It began to appear, however, that what they had done in the dim past, and not what they had to say about it now, was important here, for twelve o'clock came, and the attorneys for both sides continued to put old records in evidence.

The judge called the noon recess, and men were getting to their feet when Sheriff Kize Lapeer dashed into the room, his long legs churning. His excitement was enough to halt the crowd.

"Judge—men—there's been a cloudburst up north!" Lapeer shouted. "Dan Tuler just phoned in! The Owyhee Dam has gone out! Tore herself wide open 'bout an hour ago. We're goin' to git a lot of water down here!"

If he expected his news to create a panic, he was disappointed. The big Owyhee Dam was sixty miles away, and roundly hated by most of those present. In the days before the dam had reduced the Kicking Horse to a trickle, the river had gone on an annual rampage. It had always done some damage; but men had not been impressed then, and they were not impressed now.

"I always said it would go out," old Morgan declared with his usual positiveness as Ethan walked along beside his chair on the way back to the hotel. "That dam may have helped folks livin' five hundred miles away, but it never meant anythin' to this country. I'm glad she's gone. They better not try to rebuild it. Same thing will happen ag'in."

Ethan knew what he was thinking. With the Owyhee Dam no longer impounding water, Crazy Woman Creek was not so important to Seven Up. Leaving his father at the hotel door, he crossed the street to the bank.

Lana's father walked in a few seconds later. He gave Ethan a glance that was packed with cold hostility. He properly supposed that his failure to bait Seven Up into a rash reprisal over the business at the shipping pens could be charged to Ethan. Coupled with the incident on the courthouse steps, he had double cause for his wrath. But he said nothing. Cashing a check, he started out, but the bank door had barely closed behind him before he was back, and his face was suddenly white.

"Quick!" he cried. "Upstairs! We'll be drowned in here like rats! There's a wall of water ten feet high roaring down the street!"

IV.

Men rushed in, knocking Porter aside as they sought safety. The two-story bank building was new, and the stanchest structure in town. Screaming, frightened horses tore free from the hitch racks and dashed down the street. Light rigs and heavy wagons locked wheels and overturned or crashed into the posts that held up the wooden awnings and porches of the older buildings. Posts snapped off and the overhanging roofs came thundering down.

Ethan took one look at the foaming brown torrent sweeping toward him faster than a man could run, and knew he could not get across the street to the hotel. In the bank, all was confusion. Tellers had left their cages and joined the mad stampede up the stairs to the directors' room on the second floor. Men were fighting one another to gain the advantage of an inch.

The flood reached the bank a second later. The windows crashed under its impact, and Ethan, halfway up the stairs, suddenly found himself standing in water up to his waist.

From the room above a trapdoor led to the roof. In the haste to get it open it was torn from its hinges. Men heaved a sigh of relief as they climbed through the opening. All of the lower part of Kicking Horse was already under water, and the murky torrent was still rising. At the railroad bridge south of town, the water was within four feet of the tracks.

Several hundred men and women and children had found refuge on the rise that led to the bed ground. Nearer at hand, almost every roof was dotted with human beings. Across the way, on the second-floor balcony of the hotel, Ethan saw his father and Hoke Emmons. Lana Porter stood beside them.

For the present they were safe enough there. The hotel was three stories high; but it was an old frame building, and how long it and others of its kind could withstand the crushing onslaught of the flood was a question.

Ethan glanced at Porter. The old man's face was very sober. He tried to shout an encouraging word to Lana, but he could not make himself heard above the roar of the river as it made the steep plunge into Singer Canyon, a mile away. The business street of Kicking Horse had become the main channel of the torrent. Horses and cattle swept past, some swimming frantically, others exhausted and helpless.

The battered roof of a small outbuilding floated by, a hen perched precariously on the ridge pole. The river, a swollen giant after having been tamed so long, seemed to revel in its strength, carrying along everything that its powerful fingers could rip loose. Debris of all sorts dotted its surface. Presently uprooted cottonwoods that had been carried along for miles began to appear, their wet trunks bobbing ominously and shooting off at a tangent without warning.

One brushed against an upright that supported

the hotel balcony, breaking it as easily as though it were a toothpick. Ethan saw the balcony sag a little. The water was almost level with it. A few seconds later a tree struck the building next to the hotel. It collapsed like a deck of cards, tossing the two men on its roof into the water. Luck was with them, and they managed to clutch at the balcony railing as they swept past. Hoke dragged them to safety. They were none too soon, for a spinning log shot toward them and struck the side of the hotel with force enough to tear a hole through it. The whole side of the building seemed to buckle. Ethan caught the groan that escaped old Jube's tightly pressed lips. Lana's father turned to him and the others.

"Gentlemen, we can't stand here like this!" he cried. "We must do something! The whole building is ready to cave in. Your father, Skene; my daughter—we've got to get a rope across to them and get them out or they'll be drowned before our eyes!"

There were Seven Up as well as Wagon Wheel men on the roof of the bank. They nodded in unison, their partisan quarrel forgotten for the present. They had no rope, however, and there was none in the building.

"There's plenty of rope next door, if we can bust in," said Ethan.

They got a plank and smashed the sash out of a second-floor window in Oscar Romeig's hardware store. A distance of five feet separated the

"It's this—or drowning," said Ethan, and flung the rope.

buildings. The plank became a bridge. A Wagon Wheel man crossed it. He was back a few minutes later with a coil of half-inch Manila rope.

Men who were good swimmers volunteered to try to reach the hotel. Three attempts were made, and all failed.

"We'll never do it that way," Ethan declared. "We'll have to go up this side of the street three or four buildings, so we'll have some chance of getting across before we're carried too far down. I'll try it now."

With one end of the rope tied around his waist, and the other end held on the roof of the bank, he succeeded in making his way some distance up the block, jumping from roof to roof. Waiting only to find a clear spot, he leaped into the water and struck out with all his strength.

Halfway across, he barely avoided a tangle of drifting barbed wire and fence posts. With shouted encouragement from the roof of the bank to help him, he kept on, and when he reached the opposite side of the street he was still some distance above the hotel. Hoke caught him as he touched the balcony railing and pulled him in.

"You used your head that time," old Morgan greeted his son. "I could have told those boys they would never git across the way they were goin' at it."

But it was to Lana that Ethan turned.

"It was brave of you, Ethan," the girl said. "But you shouldn't have risked it. We're all right here."

"I'm afraid not," he said. "The wall is buckling. I want to get you out as quickly as I can. We'll have to build a raft," he told Hoke and the others. "I'll start ferrying you across then."

The rope had to be fastened to something that was secure. Not trusting the rickety railing, Ethan passed the rope through a window and out of the door that let into the hotel parlor. In the loop it made, he had a solid two-foot section of the wall. A heavy writing table that was all of twelve feet long occupied the center of the parlor.

"That's just the thing," Ethan told Hoke. "We'll turn it upside down. It'll float and hold two or three of us."

With three men to help him, it was no trick to put the table on its back and carry it out on the balcony. Hoke shook his head as he eyed the swirling flood.

"Ethan, yuh'll never be able to hold on to that line," he warned. "It will be torn out of yore hands before yuh've gone five feet." He tested one of the ornately carved legs of the table with his full strength. It appeared solid enough. "Yuh better cut off a length of that rope and make a bridle. Loop it over the line and tie it to this leg. Yuh'll have some chance of workin' across then, unless a tree hits yuh."

Ethan examined the table leg and found it securely fastened. "All right," he agreed, "we'll do it your way, Hoke."

It took only a minute or two. The table was lowered into the water then. It was buoyant enough even when Ethan stepped on it. Hoke lifted old Morgan over the rail and Ethan placed his father on the makeshift raft, cautioning him to hold tight.

"I don't need to be told what to do," the old man snapped. Up to that time Ethan had not seen him so much as glance at Lana. Now, to his surprise, he heard his father address her. If old Morgan's tone was gruff, it was not unkind. "If you've got any idea of goin' across, step lively," he admonished.

"Thank you, Mr. Skene," Lana replied, quite as surprised as Ethan that his father recognized her existence.

Across the street, Jube Porter and the others on the bank, following every move, responded by drawing the rope taut and fastening it around the chimney. They could see that the wall of the hotel was buckling more and more, and they knew it was only a matter of minutes before the side of the building caved in. The ominous creaking of timbers cried a warning to Ethan and the three men left on the balcony.

"Don't wait out here for me to get back," he told them. "Run down the hall to the rear, and stay there. If the wall goes, you'll still have a chance."

The table was awash under the combined weight of Lana, his father, and himself, but he was convinced that it would serve to get them across. A last word to Hoke, and he shoved off. By pulling against the taut line until he had a little slack on the noose, he could gain about a foot at a time. By the time he had put a dozen feet between themselves and the hotel, however, the force of the current became so great that it took every ounce of strength he possessed to make any headway.

"If I could only help you, Ethan!" Lana exclaimed as he rested momentarily. Before he could tell her that she could help him most by sitting where she was, a noise like a clap of thunder shook the air.

Ethan glanced back at the hotel and saw a puff of dust rise from the buckling wall. The next moment, with a splintering of timbers and snapping of boards, the whole side and front of the building collapsed. Instantly the tight line went slack and began to race through the noose. He tried to grab it, but its searing touch burned his hand to the bone. A second or two, and the severed end of the rope whipped past him.

Even as Ethan braced himself, the foaming flood caught the table in its teeth, spun it around crazily, and bore it away in its greedy grasp. Jube Por-

ter's despairing cry came booming over the water. Ethan dropped to his knees. Catching a piece of driftwood, he began to paddle desperately, knowing that only a miracle could save them from being swept to their death on the rocks of Singer Canyon.

V.

Down the main street of Kicking Horse the raft careened, past the courthouse, past the school. Men on the roof tops shouted words of encouragement, but could do nothing to help them.

Suddenly the town was behind them. The mad roar of the flood as it plunged down the gorge of the old river bed was louder. Now, with nothing to dispute its rush, the torrent gathered speed. The bobbing table was being swept to destruction faster than a man could run.

Ethan's driftwood paddle was useless. He tossed it away and steeled himself to glance at his father and Lana. Old Morgan sat hunched over, his chin on his chest, his heavily lined face expressionless and unafraid. It was as though he knew this was the end and was prepared for it. Courage of a different sort burned in Lana's eyes, courage that mocked the whiteness of her face, for she still dared to hope that something would happen to save them.

Ethan winced as he read the unvoiced question in her eyes as she knelt before him, her wet clothes clinging to her, and the water running up her arms as she clutched the side of the table.

"No, Ethan!" she cried, raising her voice to make herself heard. "Don't give up! We've still got a chance! We—"

She stopped abruptly, realizing that he was not listening.

"The bridge!" he shouted. "The water is almost up to the tracks!"

He turned to the trailing rope and hurriedly dragged it in and tied a noose in one end.

"It's this or nothing!" he called out. "I'll try to drop the loop over the end of a tie!"

He got to his feet, the rope poised for the cast. The bridge seemed to be rushing toward him. His heart pounding, he waited. He knew he didn't dare to miss.

Suddenly he flung the rope. His aim was true, and he felt the noose draw tight. As it did, he flung his weight on the rope to ease the strain on the table leg. Even so, he felt it wrench loose.

"Quick, Lana!" he yelled. "Climb up over me! Grab the tracks!"

The girl got her hands on the rail and with a boost from him drew herself up. Between them, they quickly had old Morgan safe on the bridge. Ethan swung up then, and as his weight left the rope, the leg tore out of its fastenings and the table shot away toward the canyon.

Resting briefly, the wind carried to their ears a cheer from the crowd gathered on the slope, half a mile away. Ethan glanced back toward the bank. He could see the men waving.

"They know we're safe," Lana said. Something in her tone betrayed how tired and shaken she was, now that danger was passed. Ethan turned in time to see her sway wearily.

"Lana," he got out tensely. For a long moment they searched each other's eyes. Suddenly he caught her and swept her into his arms.

Old Morgan winced and looked away. But there was a look of resignation in his eyes. He knew a decision had been reached that neither he nor Jube Porter could alter.

Rain began to fall in sheets as they stood there. Ethan lifted his father and picked his way across the bridge and up the tracks for a hundred yards. The railroad siding and the shipping pens were off to the right, below the embankment. The water had backed in over them, and only the posts of the loading chutes could be seen. The Wagon Wheel steers had been trapped there. Many had drowned. The others were swimming frantically, unable to get out of the pens.

"Lookit that!" Morgan Skene screeched. "Sit me down and do somethin'. I don't care whose cows they are!"

"Ethan, you can't go down there," Lana protested. "You'll be drowned!"

Two men were hurrying toward them. It was Chalk and little Dib.

"Chalk, you and Dib take my father back to the wagon," Ethan ordered as they met. "I'm going to swim across there and open those pens." He turned to Lana. "Don't worry. There's no current in there. I'll make it all right. You go with Chalk."

Lana shook her head. "I'll wait here for you."

As he had expected, Ethan had no difficulty in getting the gates open. Soon the frenzied steers were streaming up the bank.

It was late afternoon before the water began to recede. It dropped rapidly then, leaving the battered, mud-covered town exposed. Seated around the rear of the Seven Up wagon, old Morgan, Lana and Ethan surveyed the scene. Save for the latter's rope-burned hands, they were no worse for their experience. As the water continued to drop, they saw a man leave the crowd on the slope and head toward them.

"It's the preacher," old Morgan declared as the man came on, sloshing through muck and water up to his waist.

A few minutes, and they saw that Morgan was right. It was the Rev. Willis. He was concerned about sending for help. There was a telegrapher at Valdosta, five miles east of Kicking Horse.

"Been attended to," old Morgan told him. "Ought to have a relief train here by dark. You better step over to the fire and git coffee and sunthin' to eat."

The minister mumbled his surprised thanks and crossed to the fire. Morgan Skene was not a churchgoer. Furthermore, his expressed opinion of the Rev. Willis had been far from flattering. It made his present affability a little hard to understand.

Having a clergyman present had touched off an idea in Morgan Skene's shrewd, embittered mind. Hugging his withered knees, he sat there exploring its possibilities. His hooded eyes began to burn with an unholy fire as he considered the measure of revenge it offered. Jube Porter would never get over it. It was a temptation he could not resist. He called Ethan and Lana closer.

"I'm a blunt man," he began. It was his only warning. "I know what the two of you have got in your minds, even though Ethan here may not have got around to poppin' the question. Well, I won't stand in the way. We've got a preacher here. If you're goin' to git married, let old Willis tie the knot. We can have it over with in five minutes."

"Well—" Lana exclaimed, frankly embarrassed by his bluntness. "Why . . . why, I—"

"Don't bother to answer him," Ethan told her. The glance he directed at his father was angry. "The man is mad. He isn't thinking of us. He knows your father will be here soon. He wants everything signed, sealed and delivered before Jube Porter gets here, so he can sit there and laugh at him."

Old Morgan glared his annoyance.

"Mad, am I?" he snapped. "Huh! You'll wish you had listened to me. Don't think that anythin' you've done today will make any difference to Jube Porter. I know him. He'll pack this girl off to a convent or sunthin'—"

Three riders had swung around the slope and were pressing hard toward the wagon. They were familiar figures to Lana.

"Suppose we let my father speak for himself," she suggested. "He's coming now."

A few minutes later Jube Porter, wet and mud-spattered, flung himself off his borrowed horse and strode up to them. He drew Lana into his arms.

"Thank the Lord yuh're safe," he said heavily. "I'll get yuh home directly. Ignoring old Morgan, he turned to Ethan. "Mistuh Skene, I thank yuh for so gallantly saving my daughter. It is not easy for me to stand here and acknowledge my indebtedness to you. But I do, suh. My steers were trapped in the pens. I don't know how many I've lost. We may not be too late to save some of them." He motioned for his men to ride on and reached for his saddlehorn. "I'll be back as quickly as I can and take yuh home, Lana."

"Father—Ethan opened the gates! Most of our steers got out—"

Porter's head went back and up as though he had been struck. With the color draining away from his usually florid face, he swung around and stared at Ethan. It was a bitter moment for the man's pride. He had humbled himself once, acknowledged his indebtedness to a hated Skene. To do it a second time was too much for him; the long years of strife and hatred were too sharp in his memory.

"I won't have it," he cried, shaking with exasperation. "I'm capable of looking after my beef cut without any help from you."

Ethan appreciated the predicament in which Jube found himself, and the old man's anger and seeming ingratitude did not fool him. That was why he said simply: "It was an order."

"An order?" Jube roared. "Whose order?"

Ethan jerked his head in old Morgan's direction. "My father's."

Bristling defiantly, Jube Porter whirled on his ancient enemy.

"It wasn't no favor to you, Porter," Morgan growled. "I don't like to see cattle drown thataway."

Hoke Emmons had trudged up the hill, limping painfully, and at this warlike talk hurried to old Morgan's side. But Jube only glared his contempt and swung up into his saddle.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, Lana," he told his daughter.

"No need to hurry," Ethan spoke up. "With your permission, I'll see that Lana gets back to the ranch—"

"No!" old Morgan burst out shrilly. "If you've got to git anyone's permission before you can take that girl home, you're stayin' right here!"

At this violent and unexpected interruption Jube swung his horse around on the proverbial dime. Shaking with anger, he glowered at old Morgan.

"So that's your game!" he cried. "You're going to keep these young people apart if you can manage it. Why, you old fool, I gave you credit for better sense! For forty years we've played our cards as we saw them, and we always saw them different, but this is something we're not going to have anything to say about!"

A strange, amused satisfaction dawned in old Morgan's eyes.

"That's the way I had it figured, Jube," he chuckled. "I jest wanted to hear you say it."

THE END.

THUNDER ON THE TRAILS

by C. K. Shaw

Murdered bullwhackers, poisoned mules, ruined outfits—with such weapons SNF was winning its freight war against Jordan & Keen, yet when Boon Jordan tried to warn his father, he himself was branded a spy and a renegade

I.

There was deceptive strength in the body of the young man who walked toward the barns of the Sierra Nevada Freight Co. His muscle-slatted shoulders squared unobtrusively above his slim waist. His broad forehead and wide-set gray eyes bore out the suggestion of force in his blocky jaw line. He walked with the gait of one who casts aside discretion when resentment boils. The anger in his eyes was deep-seated, something that had been living with him too long to be controlled. He entered the stable and walked toward one of the stalls where a commotion was raging.

Teamsters and stable hands gathered as though drawn by a magnet, all eager to see if young Boon Jordan would jump Rube Miller. Miller was the toughest man on the San Francisco grounds, and Jordan was known as the best of the way-station heads. Rube Miller kept in fighting trim, for it

was said of him that almost every morning on the SNF grounds, he tackled a man before he rolled any freight train off his yards. Boon Jordan did not handle men that way.

In the third stall, a pawing, wild-eyed gelding, held down by two tie ropes, was snorting defiance as blows fell on his head and neck. A folded black snake in his hand, a man stood in the manger before the horse, methodically chopping to a bloody mess the tossing black head. Miller, superintendent of the stables and yards, stood by, watching approvingly. Boon Jordan walked toward Miller. Their glances met and the flare of battle was instantaneous.

Jordan jerked a thumb toward the man standing in the manger. "Call that fellow off," he ordered.

Miller's lips moved back from long teeth. "Off your feeding ground, ain't you, Jordan? You belong in the sticks. Your orders don't amount to a whoop in hell around headquarters."

"That horse is still billed to my outfits at Pimento."

"Which don't mean a thing. I'm superintendent of the home grounds. When you're here, take orders the same as any skinner. Do you want to shut up or do you want trouble?"

"I want trouble!" Jordan made a lightning move as he made his answer. His right fist boomed against Miller's jaw like the thud of the black snake that had now ceased swinging.

The watchers pressed forward. They had heard of the speed of Boon Jordan, and now he had landed the first blow. Rube Miller, thirty pounds heavier than his opponent, stumbled halfway to his knees. He straightened with a killer light in his greenish eyes. His fame as a fighter was spread over hundreds of miles of roads and trails covered by the Sierra Nevada lines. He broke men and horses alike, and once he finished with them they didn't need a second handling.

But somehow Miller's fists only seemed to whistle by Boon's head. The more slender man kept to his lightning moves of feet, torso and fists. He was never where Miller figured he should be, and many terrific blows were wasted. Boon lifted him from each miss with a thudding uppercut. A gash opened over Miller's eye, and blood blurred his vision. His breath began to whistle from his set teeth.

Now men were ringed about three deep. Some cheered young Jordan, others cursed him for the sourness he was putting into Rube Miller's temper. Miller's blinded eye was giving Jordan advantages in the fight. He felt safe to pause now for the second necessary to rally his strength. Then he started pounding again. Rube Miller went down three times before he lay still.

A charged atmosphere filled the great stables. Men were still gathering, although the fight was over and Rube Miller carried to a harness room. A few still cursed, but grins were in the majority. An office boy touched Boon Jordan's arm.

"The big boss wants to see you in his office."

In the sudden quietness of the barn the message carried. Heads nodded meaningly.

"Tell him I'll be there soon as I trim one more man," Boon Jordan answered, and walked away from the pale-faced office boy.

Boon entered a stone building a block away from the freight yards and selected a door lettered "Avis Pitt, Sierra Nevada Freight Co." It was like the SNF to refrain from mentioning in what capacity Avis Pitt was retained. Boon Jordan walked in without knocking.

Pitt rose hastily. His pallid face showed that news of the fight had already reached him.

"Get up your dukes, Pitt," Boon ordered. "You manufactured evidence that got old Bullwhacking Mose Mason fired after he'd lost a leg snaking SNF outfits over mountain passes. Get your paws in front of that white face!"

Avis Pitt's flabby weight equaled the pounds distributed on the wiry frame of Boon Jordan, but there the equality ended. And Pitt knew it.

"I had to get old Mason fired," he protested, his hands lax at his sides. "He was making remarks that hurt the standing of SNF and—"

Boon dragged him from behind the desk and cuffed his head from side to side. He finished with a hard blow that skidded Pitt backward and folded him over the arm of his desk chair. Then he turned and walked from the office, heading down the hall toward the office of Patrick O'Hara, general manager of SNF.

The manager was standing at his desk when Boon entered. Patrick O'Hara's eyes were like frozen disks. They measured the young man who faced him.

"I'm quitting," Boon announced abruptly. "So don't bother to fire me. I just tapered the morning off with Avis Pitt. I guess I have some cash coming."

"How old are you?" O'Hara asked mildly. "How much do you weigh, and what's your family history?"

Boon's lashes fanned briefly. "Sorry I'm not able to supply any history. But I'm twenty-five and just thirty pounds lighter than Rube Miller, if that's what you mean."

"Jordan, you've handled some of the toughest spots in the SNF field," O'Hara said evenly. "Miller might have had a beating coming; at least I'm not championing a man that lets a lighter opponent make a mess of him. I'm not accepting your

resignation. I have a job in mind for you that will really test your mettle."

Boon Jordan looked into the manager's shrewd eyes. Patrick O'Hara was a man whose aim was to crush all life that rose up against him. He squeezed the breath from all small freight lines, ordered the beating of rival teamsters, the poisoning of mules, the destruction of freight. He kept men like Avis Pitt to put his schemes into play.

"I'm quitting, O'Hara," Boon said. "I'm finished with SNF and its methods."

Glinting flame played across the manager's eyes. "Finished with SNF, eh?"

"Yes. You lifted me to a division managership, but I earned the berth. Seeing we've both benefited, it is my privilege to quit, as it is yours to fire me. And SNF fires men regardless of what they've given to the firm."

"Harking back to Bull-whacking Mose Mason, of course. I heard you criticize that move. If Mason lost a leg from the frost, SNF can't be held for it." O'Hara waved a hand. "We both know the story."

"SNF was hell bent on making a last run through Death Pass," Boon reminded quietly, "and Mason was ordered to take the freight through or quit. You sent a man out under impossible conditions. Then he was fired because seeing him around on a wooden leg was a constant reminder of the mistake the company had made."

"And for so slight a grievance you sever connections with the most powerful company in the West?"

"There are fields where SNF doesn't hold sway."

O'Hara's lips tightened. "New fields have a way of being drab when you reach them," he said warningly. "I'll give you a few days to think this thing over. SNF has a place for a man of your caliber, Jordan."

The interview was finished. Patrick O'Hara sat down at his desk. Boon Jordan reached for the doorknob.

"I don't need time for thought," he said. "I'm quitting."

Back on the street, Boon headed for a small hotel near the water front. An old man was in the dingy lobby. He rose to greet Boon, his voice booming with unexpected power.

"'Lo, Bud."

"How're you, Mose. Get the stable job?"

"Nope, but since when did a squirt of a kid like you start worryin' over ol' Mose Mason? I've whacked bulls, horses and mules for fifty years. I'll get along."

"Mose," Boon said abruptly, "I'm heading for Portland, Oregon, tomorrow. Then up the Columbia to Walla Walla and the gold country. I've quit SNF."

Mose looked worried. "See here, Bud, did you let this fight of mine get you in bad? 'Tain't even a fight; I've allus been licked."

Boon grinned. "I knocked two of Rube Miller's teeth out and folded that pasty Avis Pitts around his desk chair."

The old man tried to frown, but a smile was trembling his gray beard. "Now we're both dustin' chairs with the seats of our pants. Did you say north, Bud, and maybe clean to the gold fields? Don't a jump like that take a pile of money?"

Boon took a long envelope from his pocket. "I have three thousand dollars here. Wages I've saved in the four years I've been with SNF, and a little velvet I collected through staking a desert rat in Arizona. I'm leaving you enough for the winter in case you don't make connections this fall. Now don't start backing away. Didn't you crawl through the sage on your belly to fight off five Injuns that had me tagged for a scalping? And didn't you crawl back to the fort with me a dead weight? If I get a job pronto up north, you can use this for a steamer ticket. I'll need you."

The old man hesitated as he was pushing away the money. "A job snakin' freight over them Injun trails? Blixen, Bud, that country is mighty tough."

"I said I'd need you."

Old Mose took the money and began to fold it. "Reckon you will, me and Mary." He glanced toward the tall rifle leaning against the chair he had just quit. "You'll need us, Bud, and we'll come a-snortin'. What company you gonna hit for a job—Leavenworth?"

"No, Jordan & Keen."

"J & K, huh? I've heard Rob Jordan is hard as nails, hard as Patrick O'Hara. Yep, many's the yarns about Rob Jordan. By thunder, same name as yours!"

"Yes, same name."

Old Mose glanced at Boon as though he detected an under feeling to the smooth words. He tucked the money away. "I'll keep this against the day you send for me and Mary. Take care o' yourself, Bud."

II.

Boon Jordan leaned on the rail of the *Maria*, gazing downward, his mind going back to a scene twelve years old. His father's face seemed reflected in the cool water, as it had been that morning long ago. Boon had been a scrawny kid of thirteen, awkward and shy, cavorting like a leggy hound pup when happy. But that day he had not been happy. The decision he had been called upon to make had been a serious one, even to a thirteen-year-old boy. He had been asked to choose between his dad and his mother.

Twelve years had not blurred his picture of that

day. His father, black brows above steely gray eyes, had simply nodded when Boon made his choice. His lips had been thinned like the blade of a jackknife. Boon choked so he had been scarcely able to speak. It had not been right, a mother and father putting a thing like that up to a boy. Rob Jordan had been against the plan, but his wife had chided him with being unfair, afraid to let the boy decide for himself. Boon could hear yet the sob that had been on his mother's voice. His dad's voice had been as smooth and cold as a sheet of ice.

Boon had grown up a little in awe of his dad. Often when his mother's patience was at low ebb she had pictured to him a man who loved a crawling string of freight wagons more than his family. On other days when her husband was with her and willing to place the spoils of those freight trains in her lap, she brushed back Boon's thick hair and told him to forget the things anger and hurt had made her say. But a boy does not forget. Because he was sure of his mother's undivided love, and because he knew she needed him, Boon had chosen to go with her.

Rob Jordan's face had been gray when he heard his son's decision. Now it rose before Boon as though it had been chipped from the surface of a boulder. After twelve years he was realizing what his dad had gone through that day. He had loved his wife, enough to let her go away from the life that made her unhappy, enough to surrender to her his son.

Boon looked into the waters with understanding. His mother had never believed in Rob Jordan's love because he would not leave the wild land and return to security. "He couldn't," Boon thought. "No more than I could."

His mother had been dead five years now, and he was returning to the scenes of his childhood. He didn't say, even to himself, that he was returning to his father. Rob Jordan was said to be a hard man; he had probably forgotten he had a son. Boon had money of his own, as much, perhaps, as Rob Jordan had had at twenty-five. He wasn't going home a beggar. He had fought his way up in his dad's own line. He could throw a big team into a neat turn and hiss a six-horse whip. He had gone from wagon master to division head. He could figure the gain on a big deal and keep his freight rolling. He was good enough for SNF to want to keep him; he should be good enough for J & K.

During these twelve years Rob Jordan had not written to his son. He had relinquished all claim to him that morning so long ago. There had been times when Boon had ached for the sound of his dad's voice. He had followed his career as closely as it had been possible to do so, and he had been proud when his father had received a big contract from the government. He was proud now that the three-year fight between Leavenworth and Jordan & Keen was won. There was talk that Leavenworth would sell to J & K.

Boon's blood warmed with excitement. This last had been a big fight, and such struggles drained a company, even the winner. J & K would welcome fresh blood, young muscles, active brains that were steeped in the knowledge of the business.

He was too absorbed in his thoughts to note the careful inspection to which he was being subjected by a fellow passenger. But when he lifted his lean body from the rail, his eyes dulled by twelve-year-old memories, he saw the hawkish face of Lyman Webster at his side.

Webster held out a hand. "Jordan, how are you?"

Boon shook hands with the official of SNF.

"I hear you're in line for big things with our company," Webster said. "Just keep your shoulder to the wheel, Jordan, and SNF will carry you up."

They spoke of the pleasant passage, and then Boon managed to escape. He wondered why Webster had paused beside him. He was not one to waste friendliness. He was a big man with SNF, chief counselor to Patrick O'Hara.

That evening Boon felt eyes following him from the gloom, and soon Webster joined him. It was natural that their talk should drift to the gold fields of Idaho and Montana. Webster remarked, too casually, that SNF might get that far north.

Boon reached lazily for a smoke. "A rich field," he conceded.

"And practically an open one. Jordan & Keen have won over Leavenworth, but it's been a tough fight. J & K will be seriously depleted." Webster paused a second, watching the young man beside him drawing on his cigarette. The quietness of the ocean seemed to posses him. "A coincidence that your name should also be Jordan," Webster continued. "You'll have to get a hump on yourself if you live up to what that name means to freighting."

Boon nodded. "I guess Rob Jordan is sure enough a curly wolf. I'd like to talk with him. It'd be interesting if we found we were somehow related."

Lyman Webster chuckled, as though relieved by the younger man's words, "Rob would think you were after his money and land you out on your ear. Jordan, we might as well get down to business. O'Hara told me you quit SNF."

"Hung up the job for keeps, Webster."

"That Arizona division was too small for a man of your scope, Jordan. I'm going to offer you a job that will make that one look sick. I'm going north to deal with Leavenworth, and shall stay

during the fall. I'll make you general superintendent of home grounds, give you authority over every division head from Walla Walla to Montana. With pack trains crawling over Indian trails, and cutthroats behind every tree, you'll have plenty to do."

Boon Jordan no longer puffed on his cigarette. "And bucking Rob Jordan on his home ground, I suppose."

"We're going to run J & K out! It'll be a big job, but it isn't impossible. Their fight with Leavenworth has been a blood-letting one. Jordan is a wicked enemy; but, my boy, he's getting old. He isn't going to stand forever against young muscles and young brains."

Boon felt the words travel up his spine. He figured rapidly, adding twelve years to thirty-eight. Funny, he had never thought of his father as a man of fifty.

"Not exactly a graybeard," Webster continued, "but too old to lope over the whole of hell as has always been his way. He's going to have to trust important positions to younger men."

"There are no roads from Walla Walla to Montana," Boon said bluntly. "To travel the Oregon Trail and then north would be too great a waste; you'd better haul from Kansas City west. A new cut-off has opened to the north."

"We cross the Bitter Roots directly to the gold fields, Jordan. Pack trains will be the answer. By land and water to Lewiston, and then pack trains! You made them pay big in the south, Jordan; you can do it here."

"Webster, I told O'Hara I was quitting SNF. I meant it. It isn't the fact that SNF wins their fights. I know this is a country where strength counts; it's their methods." He leaned close to Lyman Webster. "They don't even stop at murder."

Webster stiffened. "Which is empty talk to cover up your real motive for quitting. Perhaps Rob Jordan has sent for you. You're known as a fighter, and a man that understands pack trains." There was warning in his voice. "That would mean SNF would break you along with J & K."

"I don't scare easily," Boon replied. "But I will say this: Neither Rob Jordan nor any other man has sent for me."

The assurance seemed to ease Lyman Webster. He attempted to gain back the ground he had lost, but Boon cut him short and said good night. Finding a spot where he could be alone, Boon listened to the lap of the water. It seemed good that there could be such calmness and peace in the world. His own brain was a battleground. SNF, the ruthless freighting boss of the south, was coming north. They were going to buy Leavenworth, which would mean fresh gold and new blood would be poured into the tottering company. J & K, weak from the recent war, would be fighting with backs to the wall.

As the steamer crept up the Willamette River to dock at Portland, a gray rain was falling. Along the banks, willows sagged heavily. Portland was a commercial city, with little of the glamour of San Francisco, the metropolis of the mining frontier. The glint of the gold-mad prospector was absent from men's eyes. The cab driver at the dock had no Gold Bar Hotel or First Strike Restaurant to announce. Instead, a driver holding the bits of a pair of nervous blacks suggested to Boon Jordan that he take a cab to the Oregon Trail Hotel.

"Independence Restaurant," he continued. "Wagon Tire Bar."

Boon was stepping into the cab when Lyman Webster touched his arm. "If you change your mind, Jordan, see me this evening at the Oregon Hotel," he said, and walked toward another cab.

Boon spent his time until evening wandering about the city, marveling at the substantial way it was sinking its roots. The dark, tree-shrouded country was being turned back. Portland had grown from the village it had been when he had visited it as a child to a substantial city of homes.

In the evening, Boon dropped in at a gambling place near the river. He threw down a double eagle and watched it leap to twice twenty. He bet again. Three times straight he won. The chilly feeling he had had wandering around in the rain left him. Once he had had a feeling that he was being followed. He told himself now that it was his imagination.

He caught a glance flash from a man beside him to the fellow behind the table. He pocketed his winnings, for he had a hunch he would win no more in this house. The man at his side blocked him as he turned.

"I'd give a million for your run of luck," he said pleasantly. "Not throwing it to the dogs, are you?"

"Letting the wolves have it," Boon answered, and moved on. He forgot about the incident until he was stepping from the place by a side door. He noticed a pair of squatty shoulders hunching back into shadows. The man beside him at the gambling table had had such shoulders. Boon Jordon could have turned back to the front door, but he did not. He pulled his hat down against the light rain that still fell and stepped into the black side street. Nobody knew of his money belt, and the small amount he had won wouldn't lure any thief.

He stiffened as he felt the breath of a movement behind him, but was too late to avoid completely a descending club. He weaved from the heavy blow on his upper shoulder and neck, and

flashed a fist toward a dark head. The bone of the assailant's jaw popped under a blow, but another club was swinging on Boon from behind, and he thudded down in the mud of the dark street.

The mist, fine as a bride's veil, was damp on Boon's face when he awoke. He tried to rouse himself, and memory returned with thrusts of pain. He felt for his money belt. *It was gone!* Painfully, he sat up. The savings that had made it possible for him to return to his father were gone! He got to his feet, stumbling with weakness when he tried to walk.

Boon happened to meet a policeman, but there wasn't much the law could do. The robbery was perhaps thirty minutes old. Down along the water front, the officer pointed out, a fellow took his own chances. Boon said he knew that, and asked about a Columbia River boat on the morrow.

"The *Annie Laurie*," the policeman told him. "But have you money left for a ticket?"

"No," Boon answered quietly, "but I'm going on that boat. I have to get to Umatilla Landing."

"Cap Henry ain't one to haul on jawbone."

Boon smiled briefly. "If you hear a commotion on the dock in the morning at the hour of the *Annie's* sailing, don't bust a rib getting there. Give me time to arrange things."

The policeman shook his head. "I wish you luck, young feller, but I doubt you'll have it."

Boon walked slowly along the dark, wet street. He could hear the river, and occasionally a cab rattled past. Tomorrow Lyman Webster would continue his way to Walla Walla to put through his deal with Leavenworth. Rob Jordan, weakened by a long fight, would be faced with the most ruthless enemy of his life. Boone's shoulders lifted with determination. He must get to Rob Jordan before Webster closed the deal with Leavenworth; J & K must outbid Webster. Without owning equipment already on the ground, SNF would be slow getting a foothold. And they would not have the Leavenworth contracts with which to open business.

The pains in Boon's head shot up afresh. He was dead broke. A fine way to return to a dad on whom he had walked out twelve years ago. A dad as hard as Patrick O'Hara.

III.

The captain of the *Annie Laurie* did not want passengers who had to work their way and proclaimed the fact bluntly.

"I hire my work done," he growled at Boon Jordan.

"Then hire me," urged Boon. "Look at that freight yonder, moving at a snail's pace. How about putting a little ginger into things?"

"Loadin' freight ain't for ginger; it's for strong backs."

"I know the old saw—strong backs and weak heads. How do you know my head isn't weak?"

"I ain't doubtin' it. I'm only sayin' your back ain't strong."

Workers and loungers had been straining ears toward the stubborn young man who refused to accept Captain Henry's no. Now they burst into laughter. Boon joined with them, and even the captain smiled grudgingly.

"I asked for it," Boon admitted, grinning, "and I got it."

"And you chewed it up like a man," Captain Henry conceded. "Lay onto some of them boxes, and if you can hold up your end I'll take you along. We got two loadin's along the way. Maybe some ginger won't go bad."

Boon held up his end of the work without any difficulty. "Not so much different from loading a freight wagon," he said to his companions.

Lyman Webster came to the boat a few minutes before sailing time. He glanced at Boon standing a few feet away.

"You look as though you had struck rough going," he said. "Waiting to see me?"

"No, wrestling freight for my passage."

Webster stiffened, then unbent and laughed. "This is ridiculous, Jordan. You are as stubborn as a mule. How much do you want to borrow?"

Captain Henry was near enough to hear the exchange. He frowned. So this young fellow asking for a job had all been a joke.

"I'm not borrowing a thin dime, Webster, now or ever," Boon said quietly. "Remember that."

Lyman Webster walked stiffly onto the boat. Captain Henry passed by Boon and spoke around his pipe. "I was wrong about your head bein' weak. Workin' your way beats borrowin' it."

Boon understood what lay behind the words and gave the old captain a grin.

"I only borrow of my friends," he explained.

Boon quit the last boat at Umatilla. Captain Henry had made it easy for him to continue up the Columbia River even after the *Annie Laurie* had reached the end of her voyage. The gorge of the river had been left behind, and flat, sandy miles now stretched away. In a restaurant where passengers for the Walla Walla stage were drinking coffee, Boon again encountered Lyman Webster. The SNF official was no longer cordial. His eyes were lines of blue ice.

"You're a good man to be with sweaty mules, Jordan," he said sarcastically. "You belong with such company."

This time Boon had sought the interview with Webster, and he watched the man closely as he spoke. "I was robbed in Portland. The thieves

must have known I carried a money belt, otherwise they would have sought bigger game. Someone I know instigated that robbery."

Webster set down his coffee cup with great deliberation. He drew his brows together in thought. "Are you accusing me of having you robbed, Jordan?"

"It had to be you," Boon said quietly.

Webster lifted a corner of his mouth in a thin smile. "Jordan, if I didn't need you in this fight ahead, I'd say to hell with you for evermore. But I do need you. What could I gain by having you robbed? It would only drive you to other companies. I would have known that you'd suspect me. You're not a fool, or SNF wouldn't be wanting you. The robbery has been a misfortune for you—and for me, Jordan."

If he were lying, he was doing a magnificent job. Not a muscle of his face betrayed him; it was solid as a tombstone. Boon felt deeper in the mire than before.

"What power is driving you so stubbornly north?" Webster asked, his manner casual.

Boon slid off the stool he had taken beside the man. He felt this round had been Webster's. "Maybe it's the richness of the gold fields," he answered just as casually. "These strikes in Idaho and Montana are no shirt-tail affair; they're genuine."

Lyman lifted his coffee cup. "Yes, and there'll be need for lots of freight to roll."

Boon left the restaurant and walked toward wagons that were loading the freight that had arrived from Portland. Evidently the outfits were planning on leaving as soon as loaded, for the work was being rushed. Boon had heard that merchants all over the inland country were crying for rapid deliveries.

"How about a ride to Walla Walla?" he asked the first teamster. Without waiting for a reply, he set to work juggling freight. Once he leaped up the wheel to shift the mounting load to better balance.

"Didn't think you'd know much about loadin' a wagon," the skinner said. "Was mistaken. Reckon you can earn your ride. Ain't of these parts, are you?"

"No, southern lines. I see your load is billed through Jordan & Keen. Are those two outfits behind from the same company?"

"Yep, and Big Joe is bustin' a gut to get wheels rollin'. He might be touchy 'bout you ridin', young feller."

"He your Umatilla manager?"

"He's the whole cheese in wagon bosses, division heads and superintendents," the teamster said cryptically. "What he says goes. Here he comes. Keep your lip buttoned an' let me do the talkin'."

A big man galloped up on a tall gray gelding. He inspected the load with one swing around the three wagons, then jerked up beside Boon.

"Who's this?" he snapped at the skinner.

"A feller that give me a neat hand loadin'. He wants to ride to Walla Walla. Handy feller."

"Start this outfit rollin'!" was the crisp order.

The driver sprang up the wheel, and Boon leaped to the hub to follow.

"Get down!" bellowed Big Joe. "I'm not haulin' bums!"

Boon turned, still holding his position on the hub of the wheel. "I worked for my ride; any particular reason why I don't get it?"

"Stranger, ain't you?"

"Yes, from California."

Big Joe's topaz-yellow eyes spit fire. *"California! Another SNF man!* That's what I figured by the cut of your jib. The last spy they sent produced enough spiked whiskey to pile up every outfit in seven States. One team did go over a grade. Get down off that wheel!"

Boon stepped down slowly, his face graying. So SNF was already at work. Lyman Webster had lied when he said he was coming north to buy Leavenworth out. The deal was already made and the crooked work started. Big Joe saw the sudden pallor of Boon's face and took it for guilt and fear. He spurred his horse forward with a roar of anger, and his thick palm cracked Boon's cheek. The movement was so swift it took Boon unaware.

Instinctively Boon leaped toward the rider, his hand reaching upward for the black snake that hung about Big Joe's neck. Joe saw what he intended to do, but could not thwart it. The lash end of the whip hung past his waist in order to balance the heavier, loaded section, and was within reach to a man on the ground. Boon tossed the black snake in the air to gain a handle hold on it, while Big Joe pawed for the pistol at his waist. There was a rush of rawhide through the air, and the whip lash wound about Big Joe's wrist. His pistol exploded as it flew from his hand, and the bullet grazed Boon's cheek.

Big Joe hurled himself from the saddle, and as he landed he was an easy target. Boon knew these tough division heads that had come up the battling wagon-master route. He knew they were bad medicine, and he did not hesitate to take advantage of Big Joe's being off balance. He smashed a right to the rocky jaw; it was fight or take a beating. A crowd quickly gathered around them. Word sped that Big Joe Rolf was fighting against some slim Jim who didn't know he was taking his life in his hands.

Boon kept crashing in, never letting his burly opponent gain his balance. He battled him to his knees, and waited only for him to sway to his feet to rush in as fiercely as ever. Mercy would

be a weakness that would be his own undoing. Then, just when Boon was beginning to think he would never land a telling blow, the big man went down and lay still.

Boon swayed back to look over the crowd, a ring of unfriendly eyes weighing him. He was gulping for air, and his legs were none too steady. The J & K yard manager had not been easy to handle. He picked up the pistol that had been wrenched from Big Joe's hand and swept up the black snake, hitching it around his neck with a familiar move. Then he walked forward to break the hostile line.

"I'm not an SNF spy," he said. "Any of you fellows that jump me better be ready to fiddle a fast tune."

They let him pass, the unflinching directness of his gaze leaving them uncertain. He walked down the river to another wagon yard. Two outfits were making ready to pull out. One ten-mule string swung off the ground, the skinner riding the wheeler and expertly jerking a single line. He lifted a hand as Boon passed beside him.

"Crawl on if you're goin' to Walla Walla," he invited. "That was a neat trimmin' you give Big Joe."

Boon swung up the side of the lead wagon. He found a place to sit, letting his legs dangle over the edge. His body gave easily to the jolting, but it set his head to aching. His muscles were sore from the body-breaking blows he had taken. He stared into the thick clouds of dust gloomily. Fate was dealing from the bottom of the deck. He fingered a rent in his shirt that had come from hustling freight on the *Annie Laurie*. All in all, he was a sorry sight. The bruise Big Joe had given him on the cheek hadn't improved his looks.

Boon helped the driver water and feed his team that night. Then they ate a hot supper beside the campfire and settled down to smoke. The skinner was a veteran of many a mile of road and was glad to have company.

"Yeah, Leavenworth went belly up in the fight with J & K," he said in answer to Boon's questions. "Ol' Rob Jordan thought he had the world by the tail, until this rich company bulls in from Californey. Leavenworth sold to them 'fore Jordan knew what was afoot." He held his pipe off in speculation. "Can't see how Jordan expects to win, but I ain't predictin'. He's hard as nails and has plenty of tricks up his sleeve." He looked across the fire at Boon.

"Can't see how you laid that trimmin' onto Big Joe Rolf. How'd the row start?"

"He called me an SNF spy."

The freighter laughed. "Last trip a SNF feller slipped some doped whiskey to Rolf's men and one of his teams jackknifed over a hill. Guess J & K is findin' out they ain't the only ones that can deal crooked cards to win a freight war."

Boon ground out his cigarette. The freighter was a former Leavenworth man, so it was natural for him to be bitter against J & K. Of course, Rob Jordan hadn't won the long battle without some hard fighting. A freight war was an ugly thing; a man couldn't win and have much of a conscience left.

IV.

Walla Walla was a town that fairly hummed with activity and excitement. Men talked gold and paid in dust. New arrivals were still numerous, headed for the wilderness beyond the town of Lewiston. Many set their destination as Alder Gulch, the richest placer camp of the West.

Lacking even the price of a shave, Boon pounded the dust from his clothes and headed for the offices of Jordan & Keen. Even his shoes had become scuffed and shabby, and his hat was stained and shapeless from the mud of the alley where he had been robbed in Portland. If he had not felt the danger of delaying his warning to Rob Jordan, he would have gone to work to earn money to make himself presentable. But it was imperative that his father learn of the deadliness of Lyman Webster. SNF was only now squaring away to fight.

The building housing the Jordan & Keen offices was substantial but drab. The halls were dreary, and from what Boon could see of the individual offices, no money had been wasted on show. He came to a closed door at the end of the hall bearing Rob Jordan's name, nothing more. He asked a man hurrying by if visitors went in unannounced.

"If they got business, they do," was the brief reply.

Boon opened the door. A man sat at a desk in the corner of the large room. Boon recognized his father immediately, but the twelve years had wrought changes. Rob Jordan's face had gained in sternness with the passing years, and his black, curly hair was now silver. That visible evidence of aging caught Boon in the pit of the stomach. He had tried to figure what the changes would be, but somehow he had forgotten to allow for that thick mop of black hair turning gray.

As a silver dollar ages, its dates and carvings grow dim. When man ages, his years are etched more clearly. Rob Jordan looked up, his lips thinly set. His eyes were hard as Patrick O'Hara's, but with a different quality.

"What do you want?" The question was blunt, but not unpleasant.

Boon stood perfectly still, telling himself to take the grade easy. After all, Rob Jordan was hardly more than a stranger after all these years. He couldn't make the inner whisper stick. Rob

Jordan was his father! The same keen eyes were looking at him; twelve years hadn't dimmed them.

Jordan pushed his papers from him with a swift, impatient movement. "What brings you, young man?"

Boon's breath left in a rush. "It's a long story. I don't know where to start. Maybe with my name. I'm Boon Jordan."

The man started forward, but he did not rise. One hand reached to grip the corner of the desk as his eyes raced over the tall form of his visitor.

"So you are," he said huskily. "You've filled out better than I'd hoped. Sit down, Boon."

Boon pulled up a chair with his foot, but he didn't sit. Standing gave him more assurance.

"I'm sorry to present myself in this shape," he said, feeling the hot blood sting his cheek. He wanted to blurt out he had started with money and that he'd been robbed. He wanted to tell his dad that he'd made good with SNF, but pride made him hold his tongue.

Rob Jordan smiled a little at the torn shirt and bruised cheek. "Looks like you've struck rough going," he commented.

Boon's face turned a deeper red. He caught the undercurrent of amusement in his father's voice and felt his breath choking him. He did not realize that to the man sitting behind the desk he was just an enlargement of a gangling boy who used to come home regularly with black eyes and torn clothes.

"Big Joe looks worse than I do," Boon said curtly.

Rob Jordan rose, tall as his son. Surprise flickered in his eyes. "Are you the fellow that gave Joe that beating?"

"He called me a spy and cracked me in the face. I knocked some manners into him."

Jordan frowned. "I'm sorry you mixed with Joe. You should have sent word you were coming. Joe mistrusts all strangers these days—with good reason." He sat down slowly. If the earlier gleam in his eyes had been pleasure, it was dead now. "Do you plan to stay north?" he asked politely.

Boon, too, sat down, his lips close pressed. Was he planning to stay north? There had been small interest behind the query.

"For a while," he answered slowly.

Rob Jordan nodded. "I heard of that pack string you snaked through those southern mountains. I could use a man who knows that end of the business."

It gave Boon no pleasure to learn that his father had followed that much of his career. Perhaps he followed the activities of all promising young men in his line. Rob Jordan was thinking in terms of the big fight that was coming. Boon could see it meant little that the young man before him was his son.

"I wanted to warn you of Lyman Webster," Boon said. He had a sudden feeling that any warning or advice from him was unnecessary, but he gave it just the same. "He's the most dangerous man SNF has."

"I know," Rob Jordan said sharply. "I've met his stripe before."

"And defeated them," was echoed in Boon's mind. He had been presumptuous to think this man would need him.

Jordan came out of his absorption. "I am glad to have you home, Boon," he said. "I should have mentioned that immediately. Perhaps the first step should be an advance so you can get squared away for business."

"I won't need an advance," Boon said briefly. "Just a job."

The door opened and a girl entered. To Boon, her fresh loveliness was like a flower in the drab room. Tiny ruffles hugged her slender throat like snowy petals. There was character as well as beauty in her face. She flushed, however, at Rob Jordan's annoyed glance.

"Julia, I have asked you not to bother me when I'm busy," he said brusquely.

"I didn't know you were busy," the girl pointed out quietly. "You tell me not to bother you with knocking."

She turned to a cabinet. The rebuke had apparently made her nervous, for her hands were trembling as she opened a drawer, and it clattered to the floor with a bang. Boon was picking it up before she could stop him. Then her pencil rolled under the cabinet. She thanked Boon swiftly when he returned it to her. Rob Jordan's voice halted her as she was leaving.

"Julia, this is Boon Jordan." He spoke to Boon. "Miss Keen owns a third interest in J & K, left by her father."

Boon had heard of the death of Oliver Keen, but since the firm had remained Jordan & Keen, he had presumed there was a son. He came from these rapid thoughts to read a question in the girl's eyes. She acknowledged the introduction, repeating his name wonderingly. Suddenly Boon knew that Rob Jordan had never mentioned having a son. The girl turned her puzzled glance to Jordan, but Boon spoke hurriedly.

"I'm striking J & K for a job. I hope the firm won't object to my name."

Julia Keen smiled. "I hope not," she said pleasantly, and went back to her own office.

"I was going to tell her you were my son," Rob Jordan said when they were alone. "But I gathered that you didn't want it that way. Oliver Keen came into the firm these late years, and with

J & K would be hopelessly crippled if these freight wagons didn't reach Lewiston on time, yet Boon could sense trouble coming to a boil among the sullen bullwhackers.

changed headquarters, my earlier life faded out."

"We'll leave it faded," Boon said, his voice casual. "We were speaking of a job. Something around the yards would suit me."

"You might take over the Lewiston division for a time."

"I'd suggest a skinner's berth, a job that eats and sleeps me for a month."

Rob Jordan looked annoyed. "Boon, we seem to be getting off to a bad start—"

"I had tough luck on the way up from San Francisco," Boon said stiffly. "But I'm still standing on my own feet. If you'd rather I didn't pull a team out, I'll get something around town for a month."

"Sooner or later folks will learn you are my son."

"Then it will be later." Boon took a step toward the door. "I wouldn't have shown up busted like this, but I wanted to warn you of Lyman Webster. I'll be around again in a month or so."

His father came from behind his desk, the light from the window deepening the lines in his face to furrows. "I need you now," he said quietly. "There's a fortune for the firm that can put freight into the mountains to the Idaho and Montana gold fields. Pack trains are the only solution. Freight wagons and river boats from here to Lewiston, then by mule back."

In spite of his reserve, Boon could not help showing his quick interest.

"Buy up your mules—plenty of them. Don't stint," he advised. "It doesn't take much to push three or four mules over a cliff, and then there's always the danger of raids. I'll be ready to help by the time you get your train in order."

"I'm putting you on the J & K pay roll today," Jordan said with decision. "But if it's to be as skinner, I see trouble looming with Joe Rolf. It would be better to tell him you are my son."

Boon shook his head. For years his father had been letting folks forget about his earlier life and his son. He hadn't come back to fan dead coals to life.

"I'll only be around a short time," he said. "Let things ride as they are."

"Big Joe might not take you. I don't hire his men."

"You mean you have a field manager too small to hire a man that can whip him?"

"Don't be too sure you can whip Rolf; he made a careless start."

Rob Jordan walked to the door and called into the hall. "Send Rolf here."

Joe Rolf came, pausing in the doorway when he saw who was there. His eyes were swollen, his lips puffed. "You got away with a neat trick," he said to Boon, his hands clenching to fists. "While you was holdin' my attention, your pard cut up a hundred dollars' worth of harness."

"Still think I'm a spy, huh? I have no pard."

Rob Jordan stepped between the pair. "This man is not an SNF spy, Rolf. I'm hiring him to fight against Webster. He'll drive a team to Lewiston, and later help with the pack train. He's Boon Jordan, the young fellow who snaked that string of mules in the south."

Big Joe blinked. It was plain he had heard of Boon Jordan. "Why ain't he still workin' for SNF?" he growled. "He's too pale-blooded for a skinner. We don't have our wagons rollin' over level plains like down south. We jerk a string around hair-pin curves where you never see your leaders from the time you start down a grade till you hit bottom."

"Don't worry about the color of his blood," Rob Jordan said dryly. "And drop the idea that he's a spy."

Big Joe's eyes narrowed at his employer. "You seem mighty sure."

"I am."

Joe Rolf turned his gaze toward Boon Jordan. His hands unclenched and he moved his lips to lessen the tension of his jaws. "I need skinners mighty bad, what with SNF feedin' them rotten whiskey and beatin' them up. If Jordan can take a chance on you, so can I. Go over to the stables

and see about stringin' Barney Navelle's outfit off the grounds in the mornin'. Bein' short-handed, you might have to grease a few wagons and tack on some shoes."

"I recollect shoeing a dozen mules in three hours once," Boon said.

"Make it sixteen and sweeten the yarn," Big Joe growled.

"Navelle's twelve mules have jackknifed the last two trips," Rob Jordan put in quietly. "Rolf isn't handing you a picnic."

"Twelve mules aren't as bad as sixteen," Boon said mildly. "I recollect jerking sixteen around Bloody Point in the Sierras in a thunderstorm. It got dark so quick I'd never have made it but for the lightning playing down the backs of those mules. The rain came and the grade was like glass. A blind coyote ran in among my mules and—" He grinned. "Well, I did some tall skinning from then on."

"I've noticed mules don't like blind coyotes nor lightnin' scratchin' their backs," Big Joe observed sourly, but some of his hostility was disappearing. He looked Boon's lean form over with shrewd eyes. "Dang me if I see why SNF turned you loose, Jordan," he said.

"They didn't—I quit. I didn't like their methods of warfare."

Rolf's jaws corded. "Then maybe you won't like ours."

V.

Big Joe Rolf had spoken truthfully when he said he needed skinners. Realizing freight could not roll without teamsters, SNF had concentrated their efforts on short-handing him. Every trip in from Walla Walla or back from Lewiston brought stories of beatings and destroyed equipment. But J & K was striking back. Boon heard dark whispers of unexplainable accidents to SNF outfits.

"I've cinched the two biggest contracts into the mines," Rob Jordan told his son three weeks after his arrival. "It remains now for me to deliver safely and on schedule. Lyman Webster made a stiff fight for the business, but those inland merchants stand to make a fortune if they can get their freight on time, and they're standing by a company that has always delivered the goods." Jordan's face was gray with exhaustion, but there were dots of excited color beneath his eyes. "The showdown is at hand," he said quietly. "If J & K can keep a string of pack mules on the trails, SNF is beaten."

Boon admired the steady force of his father, but no warmth stirred him when he acknowledged the success of his shrewd plans. He was glad J & K were forging ahead in the freight war, he was willing to help them drive SNF from the field, but he had lost all personal feeling about it. He was fighting now as Robert Jordan did, watchfully and with deadly thrusts. He had steered his father into a good deal on mules under the very nose of SNF. He was training and organizing packers for long trips and large parties. Heretofore, twenty-mule strings were the longest that had delved into the real mountain wildernesses.

"You better take over as head of the train," Jordan said to his son. "I've spoken to Rolf, and he agreed that you're the man for the job." It was the first time advancement had been mentioned since the day Boon had come to his father's office.

"Fancy wages to skinners and loss of equipment has taken a lot of extra cash, coming as it did on top of the fight with Leavenworth," Jordan said gravely. "I need to make big profits on this first train trip." His voice lowered. "I'm arranging to bring back gold from the mines to the banks. I have a big contract signed that will put J & K on its feet."

"If the train makes the trip safely," Boon reminded dryly. "We have enough to do this first trip to fight SNF, without battling cutthroats for a gold shipment."

"Debts can't wait," Jordan pointed out. "I'm staking everything on this first trip. It establishes a precedent for freighting, and the gold accepted for the return trip will pour new blood into the firm."

Boon felt his breath tightening in his chest. He had not realized J & K was crippled so badly it must take such desperate chances. If thieves raided the train and took the gold, J & K would be responsible for the loss. The old firm that had hauled freight since the days of Indian raids would go into the hands of bondsmen. Rob Jordan was taking a big gamble.

"I'll take over the train at Lewiston," Boon said. "It will be time enough then to have our talk with Big Joe."

Jordan nodded. "By the way, SNF pulled out three outfits this morning. They have some good short-distance contracts into the Salmon River country."

"That means they'll be after our teams this trip, knowing we're loaded with a cargo for our pack train. It would be a poor time to turn my twelve mules over to a new skinner."

Rob Jordan chuckled, a rare sound. His suddenly relaxed features brought back to Boon the father who had boosted him up the wheel to a high seat when he was a youngster and taught him to crack a whip.

"Big Joe still contends those mules will jackknife with you," Jordan said, "but I notice his claims keep getting weaker."

Boon grinned. "Joe's not a bad fellow; he just dies hard."

The following morning there was noticeable uneasiness on the wagon yard. The curses of skinners mingled with jingling harness. Big Joe was taking two new men on the trip from Walla Walla to Lewiston, and he was watchful of every move they made. They had not hired out as experienced teamsters; just said they could handle horses.

Boon let some of the commotion die before he brought out his twelve mules. He still didn't trust his mouse-colored swinger, and the leaders were possessed of jumpy nerves. He rubbed a nose here and there as he moved among them, and slapped a sleek shoulder.

Big Joe galloped up, sat a few seconds watching Boon's sure swiftness and his deft way of instilling confidence and respect into his team. As Boon stepped to the saddle on his wheeler, Joe said:

"You've handled them batty leaders fair to well, Jordan."

Boon concealed his surprise and satisfaction at the compliment. "I favor a span of lively leaders," he remarked. "Like to have them get out of their own way when I whistle."

"I don't like leaders you got to keep bumpin', either," Big Joe agreed. "You better lead off the grounds. Set a lively clip. I don't like the storm clouds this mornin'."

Boon gave a quick jerk on his single line and snapped off his brake. "I'll fog right along," he said. He knew Big Joe was worried about more than storm clouds. This freight had to reach Lewiston on time if the big pack train left on schedule. Merchants were offering bonuses for prompt delivery. This was the first time Boon had led the wagon train, and he smiled a little as he threw his team into the turn at the foot of the bed grounds. It looked as though Big Joe was finally convinced he was not a spy.

The storm proved more of a hindrance than Boon had expected. Grades became heavy with mud and dangerously slippery. The two new teamsters were constantly in trouble. Mileage was cut down and Big Joe's wrath came to a boil. One washout pushed the wagons onto a hillside, but it was not particularly dangerous if skinners kept cool heads.

Boon broke out the trail. He gave his leaders time to inspect their footing, then eased them forward. The big team moved slowly under his quieting voice. The mules were smart, and under the steadying "Easy, there; easy, boys," of their driver, they planted their feet carefully on the slippery hillside and strained forward as a single unit. The wheelers responded in an attempt to grind the wheel wagons to a tracing of the lead. Slowly the outfit crawled back to the greater safety of the grade.

Big Joe waved the next outfit up. The driver was one of the new men. Joe had placed them between seasoned teamsters.

"Follow Jordan's tracks," Joe ordered. "Don't get nervous and try to cut back onto the grade in a sharp sweep. Give your mules time to get a foothold with each step."

One of the new drivers managed his six mules, but the other refused to try. Big Joe swung off his horse and climbed to the wagon seat. The teamster was driving with six lines. Joe wrapped one pair around the line peg in the rock box and jerked off the brakes. Carefully he guided the team around the washout back onto the grade.

The last night they made camp across the creek from the SNF wagons that had left Walla Walla a day ahead of them. Schedules had been shattered for both companies. It eased Big Joe's anger some when he saw that SNF was a day later than his outfit.

That night Joe called Boon to the low fire that the tired teamsters had deserted for their blankets. Joe was standing watch with the guard. He waited until Boon was close, then spoke in a low voice.

"Jordan seems dead certain you're on the level, an' I reckon that's good enough for me. Want to go across that crick tonight and fix a couple of them SNF outfits so's they'll mire down in the mornin'?"

"No," Boon said flatly.

"Don't like the job, or scared?"

"Don't like it. I quit SNF because they fought that way."

Big Joe leaned closer. "I ain't surprised. There's something not right about you. I feel it."

"I'm not a spy, if that's what's eating you."

"You just now refused a small extra job for J & K. A man that handles mules like you do never learnt it at Sunday school. You're just usin' your conscience as an excuse."

Their glances met with angry impact. "Rolf, you wouldn't understand that a man's conscience can be a real reason, not an excuse," Boon said. "Neither you nor Rob Jordan!" He was sorry for the last words as they left his lips, but there was no recalling them.

Big Joe's eyes squinted to thin lines. "Jordan built up this firm in this country and this is his field. SNF is in to hog his reward. Any way is fair that keeps them out!"

He spun and walked away, his boots making sucking sounds as he yanked them savagely from the mud. Rain was beginning to fall again, and the night was pitch black. Boon stood by the fire which was sputtering out dying gasps as the rain settled to business. Strangely, he was more upset by the memory of his outburst against his father

than over Rolf's proposition. He hadn't realized he felt that way about his dad, and the knowledge shook him. He was admitting that Rob Jordan was a heartless fighter like Lyman Webster and Patrick O'Hara. He hadn't wanted to admit it.

He was in his blankets when he heard a rider come into the camp. Big Joe answered the man's hail. It was Rob Jordan. He had planned on being in Lewiston for the last arrangements of the pack train.

The SNF wagons blocked the road in the canyon where the two outfits were camped. J & K men hooked up and pulled across the creek before the way was cleared. Boon knew from the profane complaints that were voiced that Big Joe had managed during the night to get at SNF equipment.

Rob Jordan rode up beside Boon. It was still not light enough to see his face clearly, but his voice was weary.

"A slow trip," he said, "but it's a satisfaction to know SNF is a whole day behind their expected time."

Boon made no reply. His attention had been snapped to a rumbling voice that was issuing from among the SNF teamsters. That voice belonged to old Mose Mason! He would know it in a thousand. Mose was straightening out his team, heading it for the sharp downward pitch of the narrow canyon grade. How did Mose come to be jerking an SNF string? Why was he in Idaho at all?

"Blast your skins, tighten up!" rumbled out through air cleansed by a night's rain. The twelve mules and three wagons rolled in ahead of Boon and up to the short, steep pitch. The creek swirled along between six-foot banks at the foot of the drop, and made a bad turn for big outfits. It was when Mose jerked for his breaks that Boon realized something was wrong.

The wagons shot ahead instead of cutting into the mud. Mose's voice rolled out on the instant, striking confidence to his mules. Boon leaped from his saddle.

"Watch my team!" he yelled to Rob Jordan.

He was leaping down the steep drop of the canyon bed, only one thing clear in his mind—old Mose was rolling into serious trouble! The old skinner would never desert his team; to the edge of hell he'd stick to his post, hoping to save his outfit. He might have leaped to safety, but he would not be thinking of himself. His voice was rolling forth in the same steadying volume as his trail wagons shot ahead and jammed the tongue of the lead wagon up between the pointers. One of the pointers went down, and then a wheeler.

Boon swung up on the second wagon and scrambled to set the brake by hand. Then he leaped onto the lead wagon. In the graying morning he caught a sight that chilled his blood. The second wheeler was going down and carrying Mose Mason with him. Boon jammed on the brake, and the pressure that would have soon ground the wheelers and the old man to death was held back. Leaping to the ground, he shouted to Mose. He cut at tugs with the short-bladed knife he carried for skinning coyotes. Old Mose pulled himself up from between the mules, and Boon helped him to safety.

"Jumpin' Jehosophat!" the old man breathed. "How'd you get here, Bud?"

"Don't give out you know me," Boon said sharply. "I'll see you in Lewiston. I've got to get back to my team."

He slid along the wagons and back to his team. Rob Jordan had ridden to their heads, and he did not turn loose the bits until Boon was in the saddle; then he rode over to him.

"You did a nice job of saving SNF an outfit and three loads of freight." He paused, his voice frigid. "Did you know those wagons were loaded with foodstuff that would have been a loss if it was slewed into the creek?"

"I only knew a man would have been injured, if not killed."

They had both spoken quietly. Boon felt the tough fiber of his father at this moment as never before. Big Joe was sitting silently on his horse. Suddenly he pushed his horse forward.

"Jordan, this man is a spy! He's proved it!"

"I don't think so," Rob Jordan replied. "He has an oversupply of something we haven't any of —conscience." He pulled his horse over so the big team could get started. Big Joe followed him sullenly back to the rest of the train. Old Mose was getting his repaired outfit ready to roll.

Boon put his mules down the steep pitch mechanically. That remark of his dad's proved Big Joe had repeated the conversation of the night before. He couldn't blame Joe; the big fellow was straining every nerve to make J & K win, and he was checking on every suspicious action or word. He didn't even blame Joe for calling him a spy, not after this morning. And that practice of cutting brake ropes had been started by SNF. Loss of three wagon loads of flour and sugar would have set SNF back a nice penny.

As the day wore along, Boon grew more mystified by Mose Mason's appearance in Idaho and his being in the employ of SNF. Had he not believed completely in the old man's honesty, he would have feared a plot of Webster's hatching. Boon had not written to Mose to come north, for he had not been ready to tell him that Rob Jordan was his father, and he knew he would not be able to fool the old fellow once he was on the grounds.

At noon, Boon felt the constraint his presence caused at the big grub box. Men ceased talking

as he approached. Big Joe walked away. Rob Jordan was eating with the men, but he did not speak to his son. When the short noon rest was over, Boon followed his father aside.

"That SNF skinner that was in trouble was a friend of mine," he explained. "The kind that crawls into a nest of Apaches and gets you when you have a couple of arrows sticking in your chest. He lost one leg because SNF sent him into a snow pass when the road was blocked, and then was fired because the company didn't want to see his wooden leg around. I wasn't saving SNF freight this morning, I was helping Bullwhacking Mose Mason."

"If SNF fired him," Jordan asked quietly, "why is he here?"

"That's what I'll find out in Lewiston. I left him in San Francisco. He'll make us a good man with the pack train."

Jordan's cold eyes gleamed. "Big Joe will never take him on."

"I understood I was head of the pack train."

Jordan's face was enigmatic. "You are, subject to my authority. To me it would be unwise to hire an old SNF man of whom the company thinks enough to bring north. Webster probably knows of your friendship for this skinner and figured you'd go to his assistance."

To Boon, his father's summing up of the situation was uncanny. "I think Lyman Webster may be at the bottom of it," he admitted. "But one thing is certain, Webster can't buy off old Mose."

"Nothing is certain in this business but death," Rob Jordan said quietly.

VI.

The town of Lewiston, Idaho, lay in the hills between the Clearwater and Snake Rivers. Water traffic of any importance ceased at this point, and the rich mining districts beyond must be supplied with freight by overland methods. The rag town that had sprung up in the first months of the rush was giving place to lumber and stone.

Boon looked about for old Mose and found him in a restaurant that had a canvas roof and green pine floor and sides. "I told Rob Jordan I knew you," he said in answer to Mose's quick look around. "It's all right for us to talk. What are you doing here?"

"SNF offered me passage money north," Mose said, "so I took it. I didn't hear from you, so I thought I better git up here and see what was wrong. They told me in the office you was in Lewiston, but hadn't hooked up with nobody."

"I'm with J & K."

"I figured that from seein' you," the old man said dryly. "How come a feller with your brains is skinnin' mules? That's work fer lame-brains like me. Ain't Rob Jordan smart enough to know where you belong? Who do I see about gettin' on?"

"I picked my own job," Boon said. "Don't get the idea Rob Jordan isn't smart." Briefly he sketched the happenings of the past weeks. "Rob Jordan is the only J & K man who doesn't think I'm a spy," he ended.

"Jumpin' gee whiz, and me blunderin' in makin' things tougher! Bud, SNF might've thought they played smart when they got me up here, but I ain't skinnin' mules for them at any price. I'll go along to help you with that pack train if I have to join in with some miners to git there."

"There's one thing I didn't tell you, Mose. Rob Jordan is my father."

The old man digested that thoughtfully. "So you come to help him with this fight," he said at last.

"I owe him that much. I walked out cold on him years ago. He kept me in school as long as I cared to stay. I'm seeing him through this fight."

The old man nodded. "What you say goes, Bud. Me and Mary lines up right 'long to side of you." He patted the rifle beside him.

Boon looked up as a young man dressed in town clothes approached them.

"Lyman Webster would like to see you at the SNF freight office, nine o'clock," the man announced. He turned and walked away.

"Eyes as shifty as a prairie dog's," Mose observed.

Boon had stiffened. He stared at his companion without seeing him. "I'll go," he said softly.

"Holy smoke, and you already under suspicion!"

"I'll play Webster's own game," Boon explained. "It would be worth a lot to me to have an inkling of how SNF intends to move against J & K in the next stage of the game."

The entrance to the SNF freight office was on a muddy street on the Clearwater side of the town. Boon followed a dark path toward the building, pausing now and then to see if anyone was about. It would be dangerous for him to be seen making this visit. A light burned on a hall table when he opened the street door, and brought him into relief before he could step inside. He was a little nettled; still, life was centered on Main Street and this section seemed deserted. He walked to a door labeled "General Office" and turned the knob. Lyman Webster looked up from behind a desk and nodded to him.

"Good evening," he said briskly. "Jordan, that was a nice piece of work you did in saving that freight outfit today. I want to thank you."

Boon's spine tingled as he heard the smooth words and saw Webster's suave smile. He had a

feeling that he had played into the man's hand by making this visit.

"Those wagons were loaded with food for the mines," Webster continued. "Their loss would have been substantial indeed. SNF appreciates your quick work, Jordan, and I am going to ask you to take this hundred-dollar bill."

He reached for a bill beneath a paper weight on his desk. Boon stood motionless. A trap was closing; he knew it now. SNF was not giving out rewards. Webster had not called Boon here to try and win him away from J & K; he had called him here to ruin him.

"Just keep your money!" Boon said, and jerked open the door to the hall. He half expected men to come at him, but the dimly lighted space was empty of life. He walked rapidly to the street door. If he worked swiftly enough, he might yet get out of this trap Webster had set.

He was on the street before he realized Webster had followed him. The SNF official put his hand on Boon's shoulder.

"You performed nobly in saving that freight, Jordan," he said. "I won't forget it!"

He drew back and closed the door before Boon could reply. Boon stood there, bewildered. The atmosphere seemed charged with menace. From the alley beside the building stepped two men. Big Joe Rolf and Rob Jordan.

"You seem on friendly terms with Webster," Jordan said. He reached to check Big Joe's forward rush. "I'll handle this man, Joe."

"Ain't it time he got the regular works that goes to spies?"

"I'll settle with him at the hotel. Come along—Jordan."

Big Joe walked with them as far as the door of the Luna House, his black scowl evidence that he disapproved of Rob Jordan's actions. To Joe Rolf there was only one treatment for a spy.

Inside the hotel room, Rob Jordan turned to Boon, waiting for him to speak.

"So you followed me," Boon said bitterly. "Saying you trusted me has only been a front. You've probably been watching me all along. Giving me rope, hoping I'd hang myself!"

Rob Jordan held out a note. "This was found beside one of your mules. It was brought to me."

The note was short. Boon read the few words with a sinking feeling of dismay.

Jordan: If you can manage to come to my office at nine o'clock, I'd appreciate it. Use caution.

L. Webster.

The plot in its completeness flashed to Boon. Webster, realizing SNF had no chance to secure the services of a man they considered valuable, had determined that their enemy should not have him, either. With their usual ruthless methods, they had proceeded to ruin him with J & K.

"Who found this note?" Boon asked slowly.

"Dee Woods, one of the new teamsters."

"Watch him, then; he's a spy. You won't believe me now, but remember what I say just the same. *He's the spy, not I!*"

"I thought of that," Jordan said evenly. "That was why I waited at the appointed place—to prove to Joe you wouldn't come."

"I thought Webster might spill some information. I thought—"

"Let's drop this pretense," Jordan said wearily. "For twelve years you've probably held resentment against me for the failure I made of my . . . home life. It threw you into the position of your mother's sole stay."

"You supplied us with money," Boon reminded.

"Money is a poor substitute to a boy. Boon, I can understand your harboring ill feeling, and perhaps I could have understood it if you'd come out in the open against me. But I can't understand this play you've made. It will be better for you to go before bitter words pass between us."

Rob Jordan's eyes were icy, his lips compressed. From nose to mouth, new lines seemed to have sprung up. They aged the man. Lyman Webster had said Jordan was getting old; he was. He stood yet with the same cold nerve, but time was touching him heavily. His skin seemed as gray as his hair as he waited for Boon to leave.

"Webster has outsmarted us both," Boon said slowly. "He knows J & K needs young blood; he's draining it away. He knows with a cool fighter like you holding down my hotheadedness, that SNF couldn't win, so he's separating us." Boon moved for the door. "One thing I want you to know: I haven't held resentment against you these last years, since I grew up. I've understood for a long time that there are some things a man can't give up—even for his wife."

Boon stepped into the hall, closing the door on the man standing motionless in the room. His stride down the hall was measured and unhurried. If Lyman Webster could have seen his set face and the icy gleam in his eyes, he might have had doubts of the wisdom of this last move. It would seem that Boon Jordan was just now starting to fight.

In the lobby, Boon saw Joe Rolf, and for a second he did not recognize the girl to whom he was speaking. Then he saw it was Julia Keen. The Walla Walla stage was just pulling away from the door. Boon could have avoided the couple by moving to the wall, but he bore straight ahead. He was not skulking in shadows.

When Rolf saw him, his eyes snapped with vengeance. "Get your traps off the wagon lot

'fore I get there or you won't be able to pack 'em," he warned.

Julia Keen looked at Boon silently. Evidently she had heard the whole story from Rolf.

"Good evening, Miss Keen," Boon said. Then he spoke to Rolf: "See that you don't show up at the grounds before I'm off or you might not be able to see your wagons going back to Walla Walla."

As Boon stepped from the hotel to the street, old Mose Mason hurried up to him.

"Crawlin' gee whiz, what's up?"

Boon answered the question with one of his own.

"Have you any money, Mose? I'd like a clean shirt and a haircut."

"Sure, Bud. I got most of what you give me in San Francisco. Yeah, take a swim in the river and get cleaned up 'fore you blow your cork."

"I'm not blowing my cork," Boon said with savage calm as he walked beside Mose toward the Snake River. "I'm finished with fighting like a blasted kid, tipping my hand every time I get mad. If Webster is figuring on my going off half cocked and giving him a chance to pitch me in jail on an assault-and-battery charge, he's wrong. This is his round. I'm waiting for mine."

"Sounds like you've growed up, Bud," the old bullwhacker said approvingly. "Me and Mary will be handy when your round comes up. Now tell me what Webster pulled on you."

Later, over cups of thick black coffee, Boon explained what had happened. Mose shook his head when everything was told.

"A month ago, Bud, you'd have went straight after Webster with blood in your eye. Now you're takin' back on yourself, holdin' your power fer the pitches. That'll set Webster's skin to crawlin'. Fighters that are good waiters are mighty rare, and mighty wearin' on their enemies. Webster will be jumpy as an ol' loco from just wonderin' where you'll strike." He took a gulp of hot coffee and set the cup down. "Things will work out, Bud. Rob Jordan's too smart to be fooled fer long."

Boon stared into space. "I didn't realize that anything but a freight war could hit Rob Jordan as deeply as this deal tonight. It took something out of him, Mose, something vital."

"Reckon so. I figure he's been waitin' a long time for you to come back."

Boon pulled his gaze from the rough wall of the restaurant. "I don't think so. He'd have written if he'd wanted me back."

"Nope, he figured he'd failed on a job, and he was lettin' you have a free rein to build up your own way. Failure is a hard dose to a man like Rob Jordan. Now here comes the wagon master that I come down with. I hope he don't start trouble, but if he does, I'll lick in and add some frills."

But the SNF wagon master stamped by Mose with set face. Evidently he was content to let well enough alone.

"I quit this evenin' while you was at Webster's," Mose explained, grinning. "He 'lowed I had no right takin' company money for expenses up and then quittin'. I 'lowed anybody that could get a nickel of SNF was a dern smart feller, and he come at me with a monkey wrench. I slid Mary up to a line with his pumpin' station and told him I knew I'd been fetched north because I was a crack shot and might come in handy. I curried him down clean to the fetlocks while I was at it."

"And you preach to me about shoving my hands in my pockets and counting to ten when I get mad!" Boon shook his head and got up from the table. "Mose, I'm taking a walk uptown to see if Miss Keen is still about the Luna House."

"I thought there was something in the breeze when you was so particular about that shirt you bought," the old man joshed him.

But Julia was not about the hotel lobby. It was the next day that Boon met her on the street. Her cheeks flushed when he lifted his hat, and she tried to hurry past him.

"I'm sorry you're accepting circumstantial evidence, Miss Keen," he said.

"Does it matter what I think?" she asked coldly.

"A great deal."

Sudden tears flooded her eyes. She blinked them away. "Don't think I'm sorry for you. It's Mr. Jordan I'm worried about. This has hit him hard." She drew her slender shoulders to squareness. "How could you plot against him?"

"I didn't plot against him. Webster wove a plot and it caught the fly. The man that delivered that note to Rob Jordan is the SNF spy."

"Why don't you tell Mr. Jordan that?"

"I have," Boon said bitterly. "He reasons the same as he uses gold scales."

"And you think my reasoning will not be so balanced?"

Boon nodded. "Women have intuition to guide them; I'm trusting to that. Can't you tell, Miss Keen, that I'm not a spy?"

"That isn't fair!"

He smiled at the catch in her voice. "Somehow I counted on your knowing. This is what I want to say—keep at Rob Jordan to get rid of Dee Woods. *He's Webster's spy!*"

"You mean he didn't find that note by your mules?"

"That's just what I mean. Get him fired if you can, and if not, have him shadowed. He's someone Webster trusts a lot. He knows enough about horses to get a job on that pack train going into

the mountains. Won't you have confidence in me, Miss Keen, and do your best to head him off?"

Her face had grown pale. "I . . . I trust you," she said breathlessly. "I'll try to do what you want."

"Good, and remember I'm still in this fight. I'll be in it to the end!"

VII.

The next evening Boon and Mose hurried toward a commotion on the Clearwater side of town. They overheard snatches of conversation that told them what was going on. An attempt had been made to poison J & K mules. Only the alertness of Big Joe Rolf had saved the animals. He had caught sight of a skulking figure and given chase. The man had dived into the SNF freight building just as Lyman Webster was emerging. Now Webster was the center of the crowd, and Rob Jordan was at his elbow. Poison had been found in the package the fleeing man had dropped.

"You would be able to recognize the man that just passed you in that hall," Jordan said. The words were not a question. They were a statement.

"Certainly I would," Lyman Webster acknowledged coolly. "I shall do my best to aid you. This poisoning of mules is as dangerous for me as you."

"Unless it was your man doing the job," Big Joe said bluntly. "He went into that door like a fox huntin' his hole."

"Any man would take that chance with pursuit closing in," Webster said, but he glanced around nervously.

Big Joe and Rob Jordan were well known to the gathering crowd of miners, but they had never heard of Lyman Webster until now, and they were watching him suspiciously.

"Like as not this white-collar feller had a hand in the deal!" somebody shouted.

Lyman Webster flattened his lips to his teeth. Some of the men were beginning to mutter threats. The SNF man raced a glance over the crowd and suddenly pointed a finger.

"There is the man!" he cried.

A Mexican youth cowered under the directing finger and tried to bury himself in the crowd. "No!" he cried when a rough hand pulled him forward. "You make thee meestake!"

The lad was recognized as Pancho Angeles, younger brother of Julio Angeles, a mule dealer. Business would boom for the Angeles, if anything happened to the freight companies' mules.

Events moved swiftly. Lyman Webster was coldly certain of this man. He said it was a smart move on Pancho's part to circle and mingle with the crowd, hoping, no doubt, to escape suspicion. In vain the youth, not more than seventeen, protested his innocence. He was badly frightened, and any courage he might have had deserted him. He cowered when two knives were drawn from beneath his vest and fresh mud splashes were seen on his boots.

"Sure, there ees mud!" the boy cried. "I come fast from the barn where Julio and me keep our mules. I come to see what make the trouble."

Big Joe towered over him, holding out the package of poison.

"Where'd you buy this?"

"I never have eet!"

A J & K stableman came panting from the darkness and crowded close to Big Joe. "Bob North was found stabbed and shoved under a manger! He must have met this feller 'fore you saw him!"

Bob North was another stableman. He had been a skinner for J & K in the earlier days, and had given his life in an attempt to save the mules. Pancho's protestations of innocence were swallowed up in a mutter of threats, and he was led away to jail quickly, with murder added to the crime of which he was accused.

Boon spoke tensely to Mose. "That kid isn't guilty!"

"He's shakin' a lot for an innocent man," Mose reasoned.

"He's young and weak on sand to boot," Boon insisted. "He'd never have come back to mingle with the crowd—not scared as he is. Webster was in a tight spot. He couldn't give the real culprit away because the fellow would turn on SNF. Besides, Webster had to manage without exciting the suspicion of the miners."

Mose gave a warning tug at Boon's sleeve. "Bud, nothin' you can do will help that kid, and you'll get yourself in plenty of trouble if you try. It's an even bet, anyway, that the Mex is guilty."

Boon gave in and walked away beside Mose. But the next morning he left Lewiston on a hired horse to hunt the cabin of Julio Angeles. He knew the reputation of the two brothers was unsavory, and anyone associating with them might find themselves smeared with the same tar, but he wasn't seeing Pancho Angeles hung if the youth were innocent. Julio, however, was gone from his cabin, and Boon was several hours locating him.

The Mexican came forward suspiciously when Boon hailed him. Julio Angeles was known to be swift with the knife and pistol, but still he was little feared in Lewiston. It was said his sand ran to his bootheels when a fight faced him. He went white at Boon's message.

"Pancho deed not do eet!" he cried. "He was

but to wait with the mules in Lewiston until I come with more."

"But Lyman Webster says he did. You better straddle leather if you want to save the kid."

Julio Angeles did not spare horseflesh in his race to Lewiston. His choppy remarks to Boon proved he realized to the full the seriousness of his brother's plight. Fear twitched his lips and again and again his long fingers wrapped about the butt of his gun.

"To go against the law means death," he said, white-lipped, as they neared Lewiston. "But for Pancho I weel die. Would you give Julio Angeles some help, señor?"

It was well past noon, and Boon knew Pancho's trial would be under way. A fight would be all that would save the kid, with Lyman Webster testifying against him.

"We'll spring the jail tonight," Boon said quietly. "Will your courage hold, Julio?"

"For Pancho she weel hold, amigo. *Gracias, mil gracias!*"

"It'll be slow, sad music for both of us if we're caught," Boon reminded. "My rep in this town is already shot."

"My rep, she ees no so good, either," Julio admitted sadly.

They galloped down the Clearwater into sight of Lewiston. The town seemed strangely quiet. Old Mose was waiting for them at the stable. His rifle was on his arm and his eyes were gloomy.

"You're too late," he said gruffly. "They've hanged the kid."

Julio Angeles stumbled in his swift stride. "You lie to make thee bad joke!" he whispered.

"Sorry it ain't a lie," old Mose said savagely. "Lyman Webster made a talk about how cutthroats like you and your kid brother was detriments to a peaceful community like this, and how your kind oughta be done away with. Everybody got to feelin' the weight of their duty, and so they led the kid up the canyon to a tree immediate follerin' the trial. I horned in to get the hangin' set for in the mornin', but all the good I done was to get Big Joe Rolf suspicious of me."

Julio stumbled over to lean against a manger. The courage he had summoned when he thought his brother needed him drained away, leaving him white and trembling. His fists were clenched, his eyes glassy. He muttered half incoherently of fate and men like Webster who lied and caused honest men to die.

"I cannot even have thee revenge," he whispered helplessly. "Julio Angeles cannot fight thee big man like Webster."

"Come on and have a cup of coffee," Boon urged him. "Load it with a shot of whiskey and maybe you'll get some grit in your craw. I'm sorry, Julio, but slumping like this isn't going to help. Maybe Mose and I can put you in the way of a little revenge."

Old Mose rolled his eyes. "Hod dang it, Boon!" he whispered. "That Mex ain't got the nerve of a pack rat, and you and me is already shavin' jail."

"He has courage of a kind, and he's got a hate that twists his soul into a knot."

Julio pulled himself together a little. "Amigo," he said stiffly, "we will find the whiskey."

The three of them headed for a nearby saloon. Miners glanced curiously at Julio when he entered, and some openly sneered at him. The Mexican stood erect to gulp down his whiskey. Boon made him take a second drink, then they left. On the street they came face to face with the sheriff and Lyman Webster.

Webster's brisk stride snapped off when he looked into the eyes of Boon Jordan. It was their first meeting since the night in the freight office. Alarm rose in the SNF official's eyes, and he moved nearer the sheriff.

"So you're afraid of me, eh, Webster?" Boon asked softly. "Maybe you're remembering that sooner or later I pay my debts. This man with me is Julio Angeles, the brother of the kid you lied into the grave."

Julio took a step forward, savage hatred in his face. The sheriff whipped a gun, and his snarl cut at all three men.

"Anybody that wants trouble here can get it fast enough."

"We don't want trouble—now, sheriff," Boon said. "Mr. Webster is unduly alarmed. Perhaps it's his conscience."

"Ain't you the gent J & K fired for bein' a spy?' the sheriff asked, eyes narrowing.

"Yes. You'd never guess from the pallor on Mr. Webster's face that we were working together, would you?"

"We're not working together, sheriff!" Webster cried. "I had to fire this man and he's after revenge. He's in with the same cutthroat band to which this Mexican belongs. He was spying against both SNF and J & K. Telling the thugs when gold was carried!"

"Want to have me arrested and try to work another hanging, Webster?" Boon asked quietly.

Webster's face was gray. "I have no proof to present to a jury," he told the sheriff stiffly.

"You had no proof against my brother but thee lie!" Julio cried. "Yet you hang heem!"

"Sheriff," Webster said coldly, "if my company is to continue to invest money in this town, you will have to get rid of such men as this."

"I'll see Angeles wings it." The lawman reached out and caught the front of Angeles' braided coat. "Get out of town," he ordered. "If you want to live to be an old man, you better get clean out

the country." He seemed surprised when Julio Angeles did not cower.

"I bury my brother first, sheriff."

"The town will see to that. Get gone. Don't count on any backin' from these friends with you. Rattle your hocks!"

"You have a right to get your brother's body, Julio," Boon told the Mexican. "If the sheriff crowds things, he'll find he was mistaken about your friends."

Old Mose shifted his rifle. "You're dag-nab right he will!"

"They are working together, sheriff," Webster said, but the agitation in his voice robbed the words of conviction. He was watching the long fingers of Julio Angeles hover over his gun and feeling the deadly challenge in Boon Jordan's eyes. "We'd best let things go for now."

The sheriff, too, saw Julio's hand, and possibly recalled that the Mexican was very swift with a knife. Then he glanced at old Mose's rifle, trained on his chest.

"Get your brother's body," he told Julio, "and then fade out of town." He turned squarely on Boon. "I ain't never seen a fellow any more spoilin' for trouble than you."

"You're right, sheriff," Boon said quietly.

Lyman Webster's lids flicked. He walked stiffly by the trio, and the sheriff followed him.

Old Mose's breath wheezed forth. "Croakin' bullfrogs! Me in my old age, with only one leg to stand on, a-buckin' the law!"

"Are you scared, Mose?" Boon asked.

"My wooden leg is tremblin' so I can scarce stand. But I'll bet Webster is wishin' he had wooden legs—they'd support him stronger. Bud, you sure laid it on."

"Webster weel not sleep well tonight," Angeles said softly.

VIII.

The J & K pack train that pulled out along the Clearwater was the largest ever to leave Lewiston. Seventy loaded mules were in the train, and some extras for emergencies. Big Joe had his men strung along at intervals, and a couple of herders for unburdened mules and saddle stuff. Every once in a while mules broke the line, and there were shouts and wild dashes by mounted men.

"They don't string out as purty as the outfits you usta angle over Injun trails," Mose observed to Boon.

"Big Joe has half-broken stuff," Boon explained. "Mose, did you notice the packer on the white-footed sorrel?"

"Yeah, I thought it was Dee Woods, too."

Boon's jaws corded. "Lyman Webster will get a kick out of that."

"The outfit's headed for double trouble," Mose observed. "SNF will be out to stop the delivery of that freight, and on top of that there's talk that Rob Jordan plans to fetch gold back with him."

Boon turned sharply. "Where did you hear that?"

"I don't like givin' off what's told to me secret over a bottle," Mose said, "but Angeles asked me last night how I'd like cuttin' in on big cash. He'd got his inklin' from the Henry gang. Julio thinks you got more morals than me, so he put the deal to me first. He figured since J & K had fired you as a spy, you'd be favorable. Hey, where we goin' in such a rush?"

"I'm going to Julio's cabin," Boon said, taking big strides. "You stick around and see what the talk is, now that the train has pulled out."

Boon hired a horse and rode to the Mexican's cabin. Julio was working in his small corral, where he had a dozen horses penned up. Boon looked them over as Julio approached.

"Not bad saddle stuff," he said in greeting. "They might furnish three men a way to the gold mines."

"They would make thee good way," Julio said quickly.

Boon swung down from the saddle. "Where did you learn that Rob Jordan was bringing gold back to the Walla Walla banks?"

"From my friend who rides with Henry's gang. They weel not take Julio, they say hee ees not brave."

"How did Henry find it out?"

The gold-laden J & K pack train was in a race for its life, for somewhere ahead a ruthless bandit crew waited to loot it.

"That my friend deed not know. Eet ees beeg secret. Henry is hired to rob thee train of gold sacks." Julio Angeles shook his head. "That any man be such fool to theenk Henry need hiring to steal gold!"

"Your friend told you this?"

"When he was drunk. We must not mention

heem or Henry keel him!"

"Julio," Boon said in a level voice, "Lyman Webster was the man that hired Henry to rob the J & K train. His company is beaten if J & K get that gold back to a bank. It wasn't Rob Jordan that rushed your brother to his death. I learned that he tried, after the sentence, to slow things up. But Webster made his talk about justice, and the sheriff fell for it. Webster's spy killed the J & K man, and was ready to poison the mules. That same spy rode out of town with the J & K pack train. Julio, it's time for us to put the brakes on this scheme."

The Mexican's brown eyes were pools of fire. "I see!" he cried. "We weel make Webster lose hees big fight, then he weel be thee small man —thee man Julio Angeles can keel without thee law taking Julio's life!"

Boon looked into the glowing eyes. "Every man takes revenge in his own way," he said grimly. "I'll take mine by defeating Webster in this fight. You— Well, that's how you feel inside you."

Julio placed a hand on his heart. "My heart, she weel tell me!"

"There'll be lots of gold carried in that pack train," Boon said slowly, watching the Mexican's face. "A fortune. Maybe you would rather have that gold than avenge Pancho's death."

Julio lifted his head proudly. "You do not need to fear that thee gleam of gold will dull my longing for revenge, amigo. But we weel have to go against Henry's gang. They are seven, we are three. And one of us ees an old man with a wooden leg."

"You don't have to have more than one leg to line up a rifle, Julio," Boon reminded. "Three men, planning wisely, will be enough. And don't forget the train will be armed to protect itself."

Julio's teeth showed slightly, but there was no mirth in his smile. "There ees more than thee one spy, amigo," he said. "Henry has planted men, also."

"We will handle them all," Boon said quietly.

Julio nodded. "We weel handle them all," he repeated with satisfaction. "Then I will keel Webster."

The J & K pack train wound its way back into the mountains for five days. The three men trailing it had no difficulty in keeping from being discovered. The long train had plenty of trouble with unbroken mules, inexperienced men, but no actual disasters overtook them. It was as Boon expected; SNF was waiting to strike when Rob Jordan would be hit the hardest. When he would lose a fortune in gold.

Monahan's Gulch was a beehive of activity.

A dozen camps were spread over the ground, one almost merging into the other. The hillsides swarmed with life. Merchants hailed the arrival of the pack train joyfully.

Boon, Mose and Julio sat hunched at their breakfast fire, a few miles in the mountains from the gulch. Boon and Mose planned to ride down to the mining center that day, and Julio was to scout at the fringe in an attempt to contact Henry's gang. The outlaws would be rounding up soon, for they could not count on the big train staying long in the mountains.

"We will come back to the three big pines every night to camp," Boon told Julio. "If you have news, get there fast."

"And I weel have news," the Mexican said confidently. "Henry's men do not fear to let Julio hear a little; that weel be enough."

They shook hands, and Mose and Boon rode for the mining camp of Faith. The steep hills kept the town to two thin lines, one on each side of Monahan Creek. A few log cabins had sprung up, and notices were tacked in restaurants and saloons to show that the law was struggling for a foothold.

"Wanted, dead or alive, Hack Stone," read one crudely printed notice. *"He'd be less trouble dead."*

A restaurant bore the warning that anyone starting a gunfight toward the canned-goods shelf would be shot from behind the counter.

"They don't give strangers no welcome at all," Mose complained.

"If Big Joe spots us, we might have too much welcome," Boon reminded him.

They learned that the J & K pack mules were at pasture in a meadow midway between Faith and Hope, and that each night the animals were taken to a corral. Toward evening they saw Big Joe ride into town. His frame was almost lanky, and his eyes had sunk into his head. There was a tenseness about him that told Boon the big fellow had not let down even though his train had reached a resting spot. No doubt he was thinking of the gold they would be carrying back to Lewiston and Walla Walla banks. He rode toward the barn where Boon and Mose had stabled their horses. The livery stable was a box structure with a brush roof and two green poles forming the partitions between stalls. Boon and Mose stepped close to their horses to avoid being seen.

"Seen any strangers hangin' around camp?" Big Joe called to the stableman as he slid from the saddle. "J & K lost twenty mules in broad daylight. I'm tryin' to get wind of a couple of fellers that aren't miners."

"Nope, ain't seen nobody suspicious," the stableman answered. "Two fellers done the job, huh?"

"Yeah, one ridin' a blaze-faced bay."

The stableman's hands froze on his pitchfork.

"There's two fellers in now," he said. "One ridin' a blaze-face, and he *ain't* a miner."

Boon stepped forward. "No, I'm not a miner, and I didn't steal your mules, Rolf."

Two men whom Boon recognized as trusted J & K employees rode up and dismounted before the stable. One reached to his saddle and pulled down a loaded whip when he saw who was facing his boss.

"I reckon we know what went with our mules," he said to Rolf.

Rolf's answering laugh was so loud it seemed to set up a whisper in the brush roof. He shrugged his shoulders to loosen the thick muscles and took a step toward Boon.

"You're a spy," he boomed, "and a thief. Rob Jordan ain't here today to save your life. I'd 've skinned you alive in Lewiston but for Jordan's put-in. *I'm doin' it now!"*

"Rolf, I didn't steal your mules." Boon spoke quietly into the gusts of the echoing charge.

"You followed this train here! You've been whittlin' at our strength on every side. *I'm comin' at you!"*

Big Joe lunged, but it was not a wild advance; he was remembering that despite his slim waist and hips, Boon Jordan was a hard man to handle. Boon moved to right of the intended blows and slashed in with a fist that smacked home. Then Big Joe got in a smash on the jaw. Boon dodged under three more blows and came up with a right on the tail of the three misses.

"You'll get poor reachin' and gettin' nothin', Rolf!" roared Mose Mason. "Stay with him, Bud, cut him to pieces!" Mose had swung his rifle on Joe Rolf's backers. "Don't you skinners try trippin' or usin' a bull whip," he rumbled.

One man let his hand fall away from the whip he had hitched about his neck. "Rolf won't need help, peg leg. Get the slim Jim, Joe!"

Big Joe tried to draw Boon to a clinch. "Come in and fight!" he ground out.

"From the looks of your face, you're gettin' fight enough," old Mose yelled. "Keep whittlin' at him, Bud!"

Boon had felt Rolf's strength in several blows, and knew his hope of victory lay in avoiding a straight give-and-take fight. He had to win or Rolf would tramp him to pulp; but he couldn't win by matching his strength against Rolf's power blows. Old Mose was giving sensible advice with his constant admonition to "Chop him to pieces, Bud!"

Boon kept flashing in blows, delivering them on the move. He didn't try to get settled for a sleeper. Big Joe bore in more desperately and Boon slid another fist to his eye. Rolf's vision was already greatly impaired, and each blow puffed the skin higher and loosened fresh blood. The big fellow's blows became wild, and he was swinging like a blinded elephant. He wasn't seriously injured, but he could scarcely see. The realization of the play that was being worked upon him maddened him. Infuriated, he lifted his great fists and charged.

Boon knew now the percentage of Rolf's sight, and began settling on his heels to bring up a blow. His lightning speed was no longer necessary. But though he knew he had won, he experienced no feeling of triumph.

"Tear him apart, Joe!" cried one of the old skinners. "Don't let him get you!"

The words penetrated Joe's mind. A reputation he had been ten years building was being dragged in the dirt by a puny stranger he believed to be a spy and a thief. He lunged in, and Boon set himself to try and finish the fight. His blow cracked on Rolf's chin and tipped him backward.

"Get up, Joe!" croaked one of the skinners, and reached for the whip about his neck.

"Stand back, dang you!" ordered Mose.

"You're whipped, Rolf," Boon panted as Big Joe struggled from knees to his feet. The big fellow weaved in with strength flowing back to his body. Boon's face set grimly as he side-stepped the charge. He sent every pound in his lean frame zooming along his muscles as he smashed out a last blow. This time Big Joe lay still.

Old Mose's rifle held the skinners and stableman motionless as Boon leaned against a partition and sopped blood from his face. He looked up to meet the level glance of Rob Jordan. His father's horse stood behind him. How long he had been at the stable, Boon did not know.

"You've done a thorough job," Rob Jordan said.

The sting in the tones was like a lash. "It was hard work," Boon replied, his heaving chest making the words jerky, "but neither you nor Rolf can call it a fluke."

"Let's get out o' camp 'fore somebody tries to arrest us," Mose suggested hastily, awed by Rob Jordan's icy glance.

Boon turned to get his horse. Mose wasn't so trustful. He backed away, keeping his rifle at a heart-high level.

As they jogged out of town, the old man shook his head. "That graveyard face of Rob Jordan's never let off a gleam. Bud, maybe we ain't got no more enemies than some, but I betcha they hate us worse. Big Joe will salivate you with a pistol shot on sight."

"I hope Julio comes to camp with news tonight," Boon said, worry tightening his voice. "Rob Jordan has evidently just arrived in Monahan Gulch, which means the train might start back any day."

"I heard they'd most cleaned up their stock,"

Mose agreed. "I didn't know the heads of a firm showed up at a fight. Thought they left the blood-lettin' end of it to others."

"Patrick O'Hara and Lyman Webster do, but my father always reversed that rule." There was pride in Boon's voice. "I can remember seeing him take down his rifle and strap on a pistol when word was brought him that a train was set for robbery."

"Rob Jordan won't put up his usual fight this trip, Bud," old Mose said. "While he watched you hammer Rolf down, he was standin' as straight as ever, and his face never moved a muscle. But his eyes showed he was hollow as a drum inside—an' a man fights on his insides."

IX.

That evening Julio Angeles came to the camp. He was breathless with the news he had garnered.

"The train she already gone!" he whispered, as though the trees and stones might echo his words. "Gone with thee darkness. Bull Derwent bring Henry word that Jordan come and train go. Henry curse because three of hees men are in town—drunk, maybe. My friend too 'fraid to talk to me, so I trail him like thee wolf to Henry's camp. I lay in bushes and see Henry go to town for hees gang."

The three of them got started immediately, but they failed to strike the trail of the train that night. The first miles out of Monahan's Gulch were well traveled, and even a big band of mules might pass without leaving much sign. The hills and timber held the darkness to the bottom of the gulch, and it was dangerous even to light a match. Henry's gang might be riding the same way.

Julio said the outlaws planned to strike after the train was in the wildest mountain country. He related a scheme of murder that chilled Boon's blood. Four spies were with the outfit. They were to begin the work at a certain signal. Rob Jordan and Big Joe were to be killed first. Nobody was to be left alive to carry word of the attack. This would give the outlaws several days' start. If they could wipe out all sign, probably two weeks might elapse before alarm became great enough for a check-up.

With the break of day, Mose, Julio and Boon rode off at angles to strike the trail of the train. All felt certain Rob Jordan would drive hard all day, hoping to hide away in the wilds when a rest stop was necessary. With a hard day's travel topping off the night's, the train would indeed be in rough country.

After two hours of scouting, the trio met at a certain knoll, hopelessness in every set of eyes. Julio mapped out another spreading ride, saying that would surely pick up the trail. But at noon they met at a lone pine beneath a bluff, and the Mexican shook his head. Rob Jordan had not taken the regular traveled route, he declared.

"He had to travel west to the mouth of Monahan's Gulch," Boon said. "Mules can't scale cliffs. We must find that trail before dark or Henry will be ahead of us." His face was gray. When the outlaws attacked that train, Rob Jordan would remember that he had shared with his son the knowledge that a consignment of gold was being carried.

Julio knew the mountains from several crossings, but he was beginning to look discouraged. He was willing to ride the territory laid out for him, however, and galloped north as Boon and Mose rode south.

"I hope that Mexican ain't sold out to Henry," the old man grumbled.

"He isn't lying," Boon answered tightly. "I'll take this middle course and you keep south of that lone mountain. If you don't strike the train till after dark, build a fire on a high spot as we planned."

"This keepin' on ridin' till we find the train sounds wrong to me, Bud. If we don't find it, come dark, we better head back to Monahan's Gulch and start trailin'."

"What good is a trail that leads to murdered men?"

The old man shook his head as he looked into the set face of Boon Jordan. "Reckon you're right at that. Watch fer my signal fire and I'll watch fer yours. This country is gettin' wild enough to suit Henry."

Through the afternoon, Boon rode back and forth across the brush flat and at last came to tall timber. Suddenly the mountains lifted in his face and a gully he had been following terminated in a sheer wall. He swung right toward a pass he had noted from a distance back. The going was rough, and evening shadows blued the narrow cut when he at last neared its mouth. If his central course was to yield information, it had to be here in this pass. It would seem the narrow way led through the high mountains, and Rob Jordan might have selected it, hoping to throw pursuit off his trail.

Boon's glance leaped ahead. There was still light enough to see sign. It was there! The pack train had passed!

He hauled his horse to a stop, the breath leaving him in a gulp of satisfaction. Then his glance leaped to his surroundings for a high spot where he might build a fire. Tall, thick timber shrouded him. It would be miles to a bare knoll on his back trail, and at night, Mose and Julio might not even find the pass from such a distance. He spurred his tired horse forward. He would locate the train, then build his fire.

The passing train had beaten down underbrush until Boon's progress was fairly rapid. The sign was fresh, showing Jordan had come long, careful miles around in order to reach this route. Darkness fell, and Boon knew only that his horse was laboring from a long gradual climb. Then the cut between the high mountains began to slope downward, as if a low hogback had been crossed. A valley seemed to be opening ahead and the pressure of sheer walls was removed. Boon let his horse pick its way, sure the animal would keep to the beaten trail of the train.

A band of mules cannot be hidden very carefully, and Boon was aware of the location of the train when yet some distance away. He circled around it, saw it was taking a rest stop, and noted how the mules were herded against a cliff for protection. He decided to climb a distance up the mountain behind camp and start his fire. Staking his horse to graze, he began the ascent. After an hour he heaped together branches and struck a match. A breeze fanned the blaze to life, and he waited to pile on larger stuff. Red flames leaped upward, and Boon knew even a single stream of light above the trees would be sufficient to draw Mose and Julio.

He speculated on the confusion that would burst in the quiet camp with sight of the blaze. Henry would also be alarmed if he were waiting in the darkness for the packers to sink to exhausted sleep. Boon returned to his horse. It would be best to move the animal farther from the pack train.

A stir came from the brush and Boon leaped backward. A bullet fanned his cheek. His gun leaped automatically to his hand, but he did not fire. The next second a club slashed out from the brush toward which he had leaped for shelter. He felt his knees folding, and still did not press trigger. These men were probably J & K night guards. A second blow followed the first and he went down heavily.

He was barely conscious when they jerked his gun from his hand. A blazing match was thrust in his face, and a pair of black eyes, devilish in their victory, searched his features.

"The feller that stole our mules and licked Rolf!" came a whisper.

They jerked Boon to his feet. More men were coming from camp to investigate the shot.

"We got the feller that lighted the signal fire!" one of Boon's captors cried as a big form came crashing through the brush.

"Good!" rumbled Big Joe Rolf. "Fetch him to camp!"

A charged atmosphere blanketed the dark camp, guns rattled and men were piling up breastworks. Rob Jordan's voice was like a steel band drawing activities to a single center. Curses studded Big Joe's words as he told Jordan of their prisoner.

"They got him as he was comin' back from lightin' the signal fire."

"He must be expectin' friends to help him," said a thick voice close at hand.

"Get back to your post with the mules, Derwent," ordered Rolf.

Rob Jordan still did not speak. Boon felt him there in the darkness, felt the clutch of his terrible silence.

"Tie him up," Jordan said at last.

"Tie him up?" Rolf's voice stabbed. "Leave a member of Henry's gang alive!"

"Tie him up."

Jordan's low order stilled Big Joe's rumbling protests.

"Rob Jordan," Boon said, "I did light that signal fire to call my friends. That man Derwent you just sent back to the mules is a member of Henry's band. Now he'll get word to Henry of the meaning of the blaze, and the outlaws will strike before my friends can get here."

Big Joe's anger seemed to be strangling him. "And you leave this man alive, Jordan!" he snarled. "In Lewiston he called Dee Woods a spy, now it's Bull Derwent."

"Woods is Webster's spy," Boon said. "Derwent is Henry's man."

Big Joe jerked the ropes savagely that he was tying on Boon's wrists.

"If this camp is attacked," he growled, "I'll see this gent ain't alive for Henry to cut loose."

"Joe," Rob Jordan said quietly, "this man is my son."

Big Joe Rolf's hands dropped to his side. "Your son! Jordan, that's a lie; it's got to be!"

"It's not a lie. Make those knots tight.

Rolf looked dazed, and his fingers fumbled as he continued his job.

Bound hand and foot, Boon was rolled against a pile of pack saddles. Rob Jordan directed his men as to positions if Henry should strike, charging them to listen constantly for his orders. The fire on the mountain was dying down, and quiet was again restored to the camp. Exhausted men slept in shifts.

Boon heaved himself to a sitting position as a swift, desperate struggle sprang up at a spot where Rob Jordan had been sitting. Life was in the balance, Boon was certain of that. When a gun spoke, its voice muted by its closeness to a human body, his pulse stood still. It wasn't for Rob Jordan, the steel-nerved J & K official, that he feared. It was for his father. Time turned back twelve years in that instant and the kid Boon had been at twelve, cried out.

"Dad!"

Rob Jordan stumbled to the clear, his first

thought to calm his men. "An attempt was just made to murder me," he said briefly. "He got me in the arm."

His coolness spread to the men. Shielding the single match they struck, two packers looked at the face of the man Jordan had shot.

"It's Dee Woods!"

Big Joe and Rob came toward Boon, after Jordan's knife wound had been hastily dressed. Boon was still sitting up. He was hoping his father had not heard his cry of alarm. His cheeks were hot now in the darkness to think Rob Jordan might consider it weakness.

"Keep Woods alive," were Boon's first words to them. "He'll talk enough to finish Lyman Webster in Idaho and Montana."

"I intend him to talk," his father replied. "Now about Bull Derwent, you named him with Woods?"

"A good way," Big Joe said savagely, "is to fetch Derwent in and show him Woods. If he's guilty, I'll get it out of him!"

Jordan's agreement sent Rolf on the run for the mules where Derwent was stationed. Silence settled between Boon and his father. Jordan cleared his throat twice as though to speak, but in the end remained quiet.

"Joe's gone a long time," Boon said at last.

Jordan started as though the words had jerked him from distant thoughts. He stirred, then sprang up from the pack saddle where he had been sitting. Once again he was the alert fighter.

"Too long!" he said sharply.

From the cliff beneath which the mules had been herded, a hoarse cry cut through the still night. Feet came at a crashing run for camp.

"Baker has been stabbed!" The running man threw the message into camp. Packers who had been dozing on blankets sprang to their feet.

"Where's the rest of the mule guard?" somebody asked. "It's awful quiet out there!"

They drew apart, each man rattling a rifle. There were seven men in camp and five had been stationed about the mules. Now at least one of the five was dead. There might be a hidden knife waiting now for another of them to step to shadow.

"Where's Big Joe?" a packer asked Jordan.

"Scouting the brush about camp," Jordan answered quietly.

He had lied. Boon knew it was because he dared not tell the packers that Big Joe was up at the cliff in that terrible silence. He ordered the men back to their posts.

A few moments later there came the dragging steps of a man approaching camp. A hoarse cry identified Big Joe, and two men went to assist him. Boon heard him gasp as he tried to talk to Jordan.

"Bull Derwent was layin' for me, but I fought him off," Big Joe got out. "Another man—Wheeler, I think—got me from behind. Then Derwent and Wheeler and two more run for the brush. That makes four, and with Woods, here, five. I reckon we got all the spies."

"Every man here walk by me and I'll search him for a knife," Rob Jordan ordered. "Shoot down any man beside you that tries to break away."

The nerves of the men were snapped to hair-trigger tenseness. The march before Rob Jordan began. One packer, stepping forward for his search, suddenly cried out:

"Jordan, here's one knife that's sure lost its owner!" He kicked something in the dark that rattled against the rocks. "Somebody tossed it and it hit my foot."

"At least we have the spy unarmed," Rob Jordan replied with a calmness that it seemed nothing could shake.

Big Joe had stumbled toward Boon and sank down weakly. "They got me twice," he said. "Jordan will be here and cut you loose soon."

Jordan came after sending the men back to their arranged stations. He slashed Boon's ropes without a word. Then he began working in the dark to stanch the flow of blood from Rolf's wounds.

"Henry will be startin' the fireworks any minute," Big Joe whispered. "His spies figure they got me, and maybe you. You better see about that crack young Jordan got on the head. I felt blood when I was tying him up."

"Just where the gun trigger dug into flesh," Boon said as his father turned toward him. "Get me my short gun and a rifle. Henry won't waste any time after his men get back to him."

X.

Henry's outlaws attacked from three sides, and Boon counted eight rifles in the charge. The packers were not experienced fighters like the attacking bandits, but they were stretched behind shelter and had rests for their guns. They fired steadily into the advancing men. Rob Jordan's cool voice traveled to them in encouragement as the outlaws fell back.

"Rex Fordham tried to bust away at the start of things," a packer said. "But if he gets to Henry, I'll bet he'll be packin' too much lead to do any fightin'."

This information lifted the morale of the men. The last spy, the man who had tossed away the knife, was no longer among them.

Henry launched his second attack with more caution. His men took stations behind trees and boulders and poured lead upon the camp. The packers were not accurate in firing at flashes in the darkness, but they fought grimly. Before the tide was turned back, two J & K men were wounded.

"You got one of them," Rob Jordan said to Boon

as the outlaws withdrew. "That was a death cry that answered your rifle."

"Yeah," Boon admitted apologetically. "Things seemed hot up to this end, and they'd slowed down where I was. I thought I might as well cut in from a new angle."

Somebody chuckled. "Near as I could tell, you was cuttin' in from every angle," a packer said.

The night wore away without further trouble from Henry.

"He's waitin' for daylight so's he can whittle at us from a rim," Big Joe told Boon and Rob Jordan. "We're off the beaten track, and he don't need to be afraid of bein' interrupted."

When daylight came, his prediction was proved correct. Rifles began to crack down from two rims upon the camp in the narrow cut. A packer fell with a shot through his throat, another dropped with a wound in the chest. Henry had scouted the camp and stationed his men where eventually they could wipe out the members of the pack train.

Rob Jordan rose from the protection of his breastworks to try for a shot at the rifleman on the rim. He sped two shots into the spot from which gray puffs had risen. Then the marksman on the rim answered, and Jordan slumped down beside his rifle.

Panic struck the remaining packers as they saw their leader go down. One man lifted at a packsaddle that he might have an opening to crawl for the brush. Wild yells were echoing through the gorge—the mules were galloping away. Henry's gang were building up the impression of number.

"Stay with your posts!" Boon ordered, and his ringing tones drew glances from the men.

"This is a death trap," a packer snarled. "Rob Jordan is done for, and we'll all get the same if we stay!"

Suddenly Boon whipped his rifle to his shoulder and pulled trigger. A man on one of the rims had become overconfident, perhaps from the lack of resistance in camp. Now the echoes of his death cry rose.

"I got one," Boon said quietly. "I'll get more."

"He got one!" a packer whispered.

Big Joe was crawling toward Boon, crouched to keep below firing line. "I'll get some, too, 'fore this fight finishes! Fellers, we got to stick with young Jordan!"

The packer that had removed the saddle shoved it back. "We're as well to die here as in the brush, I reckon." The others nodded.

Every minute of the hour that passed, Boon's ears were tuned for the voice of old Mose's rifle. His signal fire had leaped high into the sky the night before. Surely the old man would be reaching the spot any minute.

Rob Jordan was lying close to where he had fallen. He wasn't dead, for once he had roused and groaned. Boon could not take his eyes from the rim that looked directly down on the camp even long enough to care for his father's wound.

But at least Boon's brain could turn to other thoughts even as his eyes kept their vigil. His father might be dying, probably was, for he had received a chest wound. In thirty minutes every man of the J & K pack train might be dead. This pass through the mountains was known to few men, and it might be months or even years before the remains of the train would be found. Some day a traveler might pick up a bleached saddle and patch out the story.

From above the expert rifleman on the rim, three fast shots spit out with deadly venom. A wild yell between an Indian war cry and the wail of a moon-sick coyote rode over the narrow canyon. The rifleman who had menaced the camp for a terrible hour rose into the air and jackknifed down the cliff.

"It's old Mose!" Boon yelled.

The rifle on the hillside was now whipping lead at other outlaws, and the brush was popping as they ran to new shelter. From the opposite side of the canyon a cry of triumph mingled with another fresh gun. Julio Angeles had evidently been waiting for Mose Mason to whip in.

Boon's rifle was spraying lead recklessly, and the packers were shouting and firing with new energy. Henry's gang was on the run, not waiting to see the actual strength of their new enemies. The reason of their instant flight was explained by Mose as he hobbled down the hillside.

"That was Henry on the rim. I saw the squeeze he had on you, so I circled and got above him. When his gang saw him goin' over the bluff headfirst, they knew the jig was up." The old man grinned at Boon Jordan. "I knew that was your rifle down here, and I also knew you was cussin' me fer bein' so slow cuttin' in."

Julio Angeles was smiling. "I waited for Mose," he said. "I am good with the pistol, but the rifle not so sure."

Boon knelt beside his father. Rob Jordan's eyes were open, and there was a smile on his bloodless lips.

"You got what it takes to handle men," he said with surprising strength. Then: "When I was fighting with Woods, Boon, you called me dad. It seemed like old days. You've never been out of my mind, but I tried to forget you. It was easier not to hear your name. I should have gone East with your mother twelve years ago. Life has been hard, spirit-breaking out here."

"You couldn't have lived in a city," Boon said. "I tried it. I guess it was all fate, dad. Let me see your wound."

"Will you stay with me, son?" Jordan asked.

"Take hold of the business when I turn loose?" His eyes pleaded for a reply that would still an old pain.

Boon's face lost the weariness of the long night, and his eyes kindled. "I'm here for keeps," he said. "Just try an' get rid of me."

Being short-handed and having wounded men to care for made the progress of the pack train slow. Main trails were avoided whenever possible, but word carried ahead to Lewiston that the J & K train had been attacked in the mountains. It was said that both Rob Jordan and Big Joe Rolf had been killed, and that a young man was in charge.

The afternoon the train strung down the Clearwater into Lewiston, the population of the town lined the street as though a parade were expected. The sheriff rode at the head beside Boon Jordan, for he had gone to meet the train on hearing that it had encountered trouble. Lyman Webster stood back against a building waiting with the crowd as the long line of mules strung down the street. His face went a sickly green as he saw Boon Jordan conducting the train. Then, middle way, he saw the slim figure of Julio Angeles, and bringing up the rear, Bullwhacking Mose Mason. It was a picture that made his lips twitch with fear.

After the sheriff had heard Boon's story and jailed Dee Woods, he went in search of Webster. Woods had confessed to being an SNF spy. He said he had worked for Webster on other such assignments down south. He admitted the note he had taken to Rob Jordan, the one he claimed to have found near Boon's team, had been given him by Webster. He tried to lie about the mule-poisoning attempt, but broke down. He insisted that he hadn't believed Lyman Webster would go so far as to let an innocent man hang.

That evening the sheriff visited Rob Jordan in the Luna House, where he lay in bed.

"Webster got word that Woods confessed," he said briefly. "He's skipped." He was on his way, he said, to Walla Walla to head Webster off in his evident flight south.

Boon followed the sheriff from the room to the street where his horse stood.

"Maybe I better go along," he suggested.

"Won't need any help, Jordan," the sheriff said grimly. "I'll remember for a long time that innocent kid that Webster nailed to the cross with lies!" He swung to the saddle and galloped west.

"The sheriff won't need to strain himself," said old Mose, who had listened to the conversation. "Julio left on Webster's trail an hour ago, and that Mexican is fast with his gun."

The next morning the sheriff returned with Webster's body roped across a lead horse. "Ain't no tellin' who done it," he said to the crowd that gathered.

There were several men present who had seen Pancho Angeles hanged. They did not press for an investigation of Webster's death.

A month later Boon walked into his father's office in Walla Walla, tossed his hat on the desk and sat down. SNF had sold the old Leavenworth company to J & K and things had settled down to a normal routine. Freight wagons creaked, and strings of pack mules were on several trails.

Rob Jordan looked up, his eyes showing his pride in his son. "I like the new sign," he said, "Jordan, Keen & Jordan."

"I'm lucky, being taken into the firm," Boon declared.

His father shook his head. "It wasn't luck, Boon. You saved the firm the night you drove Henry's gang away from the gold shipment. If that gold had been lost, J & K would have failed. You seem to have something on your mind. Have Big Joe and Mose been wrangling again?"

Boon grinned. "Nope. It took a long time, but now quiet reigns on that front, too. I've made Mose inspector of all road equipment, and Big Joe says it's a relief to have him off the wagon yard. Still, I noticed he called Mose to oversee the breaking of a span of mules. That pair are good friends, only both of them would die before they'd admit it." Boon brushed business from his mind and leaned toward his father eagerly. "Dad, I've asked Julia to marry me, and she's said yes!"

Rob Jordan smiled. "I'm sorry to disappoint you by not showing any surprise. I was certain you'd be asking her, and I thought she'd say yes. I'm glad, Boon, and I'll take over some of your work so you can have a day off now and then."

"Now's no time for buggy riding, with all the new business we have," Boon grinned.

Jordan answered him in a serious voice. "Son. Julia likes ruffles and frills, just as all girls do. She'll want them occasionally in life, the same as on her dresses. You must provide them. Have Sunday dinner at home instead of dashing down to a way station to see why so much grain is being fed in so short a time. Always remember that, and don't make the mistake I did."

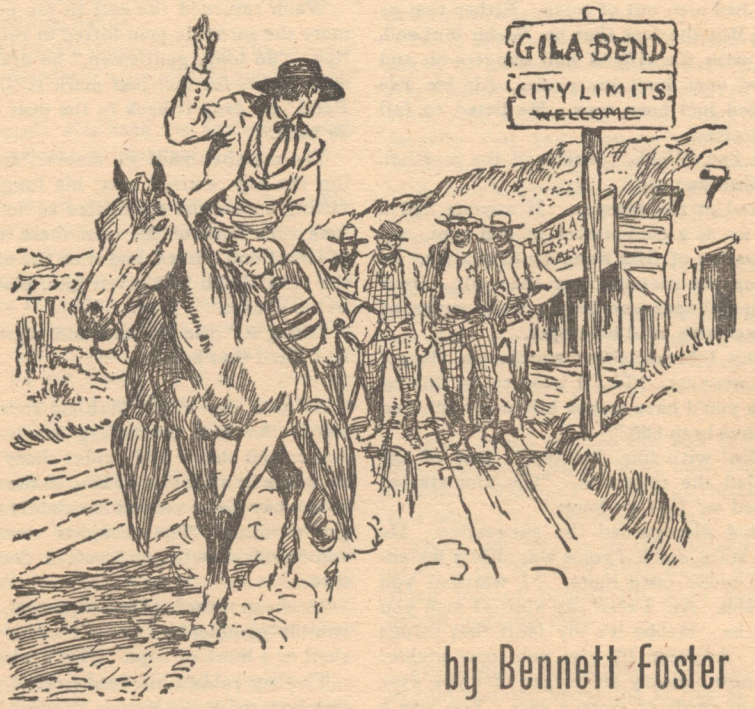
"We'll both remember it," Boon answered. "Your new daughter will be expecting to see you around often."

"She'll see a lot of me. It's good to have a family again."

Rob Jordan put his hand on his son's shoulder. "This is country to grow with, and thanks to you, the Jordans are going to be here to grow with it."

THE END.

THE GENTLEMAN FROM GILA BEND



by Bennett Foster

Just when Webb McLeod decided to try to sidestep gun trouble instead of walking right into it, a murder frame-up plummeted him into what had the makings of a seething range war.

I.

At the edge of town, Webb McLeod stopped his horse and, perforce, the citizens' committee which accompanied him also stopped. The committee was on foot, and Webb, looking down at them, had the advantage of height and a hard cynicism which touched the corners of his lips as he smiled.

"I won't trouble you gentlemen further," he announced, curbing the impatience of his bay horse. "Yore company has been pleasant, but not profitable. I'll bid you good day."

Two of the committee scowled, but the marshal and the justice of the peace—being men of law, and accustomed to sarcasm—did not betray their emotions.

"Gamblers," the marshal drawled, "ain't wanted in Gila Bend. Not even square gamblers. The town is cleanin' house, Webb. You know that. There's others that ain't goin' to be so lucky as you. We're just runnin' *you* out of town. Some of the rest ain't goin' to be able to *leave* town when we git done with 'em." For emphasis he spat into the dust.

Webb nodded. He knew, beyond doubt, that what the marshal said was true. He knew that Gila Bend was ready to clean house, ready to run the riffraff, the hangers-on, the pseudo bad men and the real bad men out of town. Either that or hang them. But the fact that he, Webb McLeod, was classed with the riffraff and hangers-on and would-be bad ones hurt his pride. All his life Webb McLeod had been tops. He hated to fall beneath that class.

"You ain't bad, Webb," continued the marshal. "You just think you are."

Webb stared at the lawman. If anyone had a right to set up as a connoisseur of bad men, certainly the marshal of Gila Bend could qualify. In his profession the marshal saw them all. Once more the marshal spat into the dust and surveyed Webb McLeod with mild blue eyes.

"That's why I brung these gennlemen along," the marshal went on. "If I'd tried to do this by my lonesome you'd have mebbe killed me an' then you *would* have been bad."

"Quit foolin' with him, Dudley." One of the escort growled the command. "Git him started down the road an' let's go home."

The marshal disregarded the suggestion. He continued to stare, and his voice was mildly melancholy as he spoke once more. "I watched you grow up, Webb. An' I seen the kind of man you was goin' to be. Mebbe it's my fault that things are like this. Anyhow, I'll give you some advice: You hunt a new country an' forget that you ever seen a deck of cards or wore a gun. You was a good hand once. You could be one again. You could be most any kind of man you tried to be."

The words sank through the anger that filled Webb McLeod. He stared at Dudley, for the moment forgetting the role in which he had cast himself. Gray eyes met blue eyes, and the lawman nodded as though to reaffirm the truth of his words. Then Webb's gray eyes darkened in recollection, and once again he resumed the protective mask of cynicism.

"Thanks," he drawled. "Are you sure enough the marshal or are you all draped over a pulpit?"

Now the marshal's blue eyes hardened and he made a short gesture. "Git gone!" he ordered.

But Webb McLeod was not done. He was tough, and so must brazen it out. "I cleaned out two boys playin' monte last night—Panchito an' Mournful Jones. They got drunk after that an' you put 'em in jail."

The marshal nodded.

"I want to pay their fines," Webb continued. "Here." Again he checked the restlessness of the bay, while, from his trousers pocket, he produced a roll of bills. Peeling two from the roll, he extended them to the officer. "I never cleaned a man that I didn't stake him," Webb announced. "This ought to give 'em eatin' money an' get 'em out of yore *juzgado*. O. K.?"

"O. K.," the marshal said stolidly, taking the money.

Webb returned the roll to his pocket and once more the sardonic grin flitted at the corners of his lips. "So long, gentlemen," he drawled. "If any mail comes for me, just mark it 'Gone from Gila Bend,' an' drop it back in the post office. I won't be back."

The marshal made no answer, and Webb, turning the bay, started east, his long black shadow falling across the committee as he moved. For a long time none of the men there at the outskirts of Gila Bend stirred, and then the marshal, folding the bills Webb had given him, placed the money in his pocket.

"Dang it!" the lawman said regretfully. "Dang it, I liked that boy!"

All that day Webb McLeod rode steadily eastward. At first conflicting emotions filled him. Anger and shame and pride: these had their turn to jangle in his mind. Then, as the day waned and as the bay horse slowed his saddle gait, Webb began to think. The thoughts were not pleasant, and Webb scowled and voiced them, deep in his throat.

"A cheap tinhorn!" he murmured. "Just a cheap two-bit gambler! I wasn't even worth a spent shell or a hunk of rope. That's where I stand."

The bay bobbed his head toward a persistent fly that hovered at his knees. "Yeah," Webb growled, "even you're wise to me, ain't you, Sucker?"

Again Sucker bobbed his head.

That night, with provisions purchased at a little crossroads store, Webb made his camp beside a windmill and tank. He sat smoking after his meal, staring up at the star-struck sky that would be his blanket. The next day he crossed the San Pedro, glancing off toward the south where lay the town of Tombstone. Momentarily Webb was tempted to turn and ride along the stream, enticed by the tales of Tombstone's wickedness. The temptation passed.

That night Webb camped with a freight outfit and, in the morning, rode on again, solitary, steady,

like a man with a fixed purpose. Across the broad reaches of the Sulfur Springs and San Simon valleys he took his way, the days hot and the nights lonely; then through the boulder maze of Steens Pass, and so, presently, to the dry lakes and brushy flats of another country. Dusk was falling as Webb rode into Rinconcito.

The town sprawled about a plaza. Flat adobe buildings were shaded by awnings of tin or wood, and in the center of the square cottonwoods grew pleasantly. Dismounting, Webb wrapped the reins about a post and stood beside Sucker, sizing up Rinconcito with weary, knowing eyes.

Across the street from where he stood was a brick building—the bank—and at an angle from the bank stood a wagon and team. There was a young woman on the wagon seat, and, beside her, a small boy turned to stare curiously at Webb. The boy spoke to the woman, and she also turned to look at Webb. Her face was young, a soft oval framed by the bonnet that hid her hair. After a deliberate inspection she looked away, speaking again to the boy.

Farther along to the right, men stood under an awning, their faces turned toward this newcomer. To Webb's left an alley entered the plaza, adobe buildings flanking either side, and from behind him came the pleasant clangor of a blacksmith shop. Webb pushed back his hat and, with the little breeze cooling his forehead, lifted his heavy cartridge belt and let it settle more comfortably. From a store beside the loafers, a man emerged, stopped on the sidewalk and, seeing Webb, came toward him, dust puffing up from beneath his boots.

"Howdy," the approaching man greeted, and having spoken, stopped and looked at Webb McLeod.

Webb returned the inspection. The speaker was pleasant, square-shouldered, neither old nor young. Boots and clothing said "cowman," and the steady eyes spoke of authority.

"Good evenin'," answered Webb.

The square-shouldered man, having made his inspection, nodded and smiled. "Just get in?" he asked.

"I just got in."

"Hm-m-m." There was consideration in the murmur. "My name's Thomas. Would you be lookin' for a ridin' job?"

Webb hesitated. Here, presented to him, was a problem, and in Webb's mind there was no certain decision. All across the country, all along the length of this journey, he had been thinking, trying to solve this problem, trying to make up his mind. Now, with Thomas' question came a crisis to his line of thought.

"I—" Webb began.

From the brick bank building a man came out, stood for an instant up on the step, and then called: "Thomas."

Thomas turned, glanced at the man, and then faced Webb once more. "I got to see what he wants," he said. "I'll be back in a minute." Seemingly he took it for granted that Webb would wait, for, having spoken, he turned and, joining the man on the steps, entered the building.

Webb, leaning back against the hitch rail, watched the bank door swing shut. Should he? Should he take a riding job? Should he go back five years? Should he forget Gila Bend? Forget the lights and the click of chips and the ruffle of shuffled cards, and the hot, bright eyes of men that courted Lady Fortune? Should he?

"Any kind of a man you tried to be," the marshal in Gila Bend had said. What kind of man did Webb McLeod want to be? Webb was still pondering the answer to that when Thomas came out of the bank and paused on the step to speak over his shoulder to a man inside.

From the alley at Webb's left there came a small flurry of sound. Then, blaring in the quiet of the plaza, shattering it, shots roared. On the step, struck by some giant, invisible fist, Thomas half whirled, and then crumpled, sliding down into a curiously small huddle of clothing. Horses pounded in the alley, and a man shouted, high and shrill.

Webb snatched Sucker's reins from the rack, found a stirrup and swung up. He had seen, fractionally, the horses in the alley. As Sucker, spurred, swung toward the alley's mouth, Webb's gun leaped into his hand. He reached the mouth of the alley, lifted the gun and fired. Two horses, their riders bent low, were clearing the other end of the alleyway. Webb pulled his horse up tight and then let the reins relax. For a moment Sucker was still, motionless, and in that moment Webb caught his sight along the barrel of his Colt and pulled trigger. One of the fleeing men reeled under the impact of the bullet. Webb saw him sway, saw his hat fall, and the white hair that the falling hat exposed; then the riders were gone.

Again Webb's spurs struck in, and Sucker, shod hoofs grinding, turned like the cutting horse he was and struck full stride along the alley. Behind Webb was confusion, shouts and cries uplifted. Beyond the adobe buildings, glancing sharply to his left, Webb saw his fleeing quarry. Once more, as he turned Sucker to follow, he raised his gun and shot.

The two horsemen were riding south. Now they dipped out of sight, and the brush that came up to the edge of town hid them, the long folded bank of an arroyo giving them shelter.

Sucker pounded toward the arroyo bank and Webb rode with gun upraised, ready for another

shot. Then, close by him, lead whined and sang, sinister and fearful. Webb turned his head. A man stood at the alley entrance, rifle at his shoulder, and as Webb looked, another man joined him. Again lead sang, and Webb, reining Sucker short, set the bay horse down and swung him around.

"Hey!" he called. "Hey, there!"

The rifleman was aiming again. The man beside him was shooting with a pistol, shooting at Webb McLeod. Webb ducked and the rifle bullet whined by overhead. And now horsemen came from the alley and as they emerged they, too, began to fire.

"Hey!" Webb called. "It ain't me! I didn't—" A bullet plucked sharply at his sleeve and another burned across his neck below the ear. Wheeling Sucker, Webb spurred again, and the bay, striking his stride, headed for the sheltering fold of the arroyo. A man does not stop to argue his innocence with those who are shooting at him. Webb McLeod bent low over the bay's neck and rode for his life.

On the edge of the arroyo Sucker faltered and then went on. Below the bank, Webb turned the horse south. Sucker was running doggedly, tired by the day's riding. Warm red blood ran down from the wound on Webb's neck, smearing shirt and shoulder. The arroyo forked, one fork running southeast, the other southwest.

Webb took the southeast fork and behind he could hear men shouting. The long evening dusk was almost at an end and the arroyo was shadowed, the brush along its banks dim clumps. Sucker staggered again, and Webb realized that the bay had been hit. With a wounded horse playing out on him, and men who would shoot first and ask questions later pushing along hard behind him, Webb McLeod grinned bitterly.

Again the arroyo curved, turning farther toward the east. There was a play to make here. Webb made it. He tied his reins so that they would not fall, looped them over the saddlehorn, and then watched his chance. A heavy clump of mesquite, growing down into the arroyo, afforded him the shelter he sought. Kicking loose from the stirrups, he gave Sucker a parting jab with spurred heels and quit the horse. He fell on his shoulder, striking the soft sand and rolling. Then, scrambling up while Sucker pounded on along the arroyo, Webb ran to the mesquite and, heedless of thorns that tore at him, dived under the growth. He lay there, trying to check the hard rasping of his breath, his heart pounding in his chest.

Within seconds the pursuit swept past. A stirrup, covered by a tapadero, swung through the brush in front of Webb's face. Sand spurted up almost upon him. Then the riders, driving hard, were gone. Webb lay quiet, listening. When the sounds of the pursuit had trailed away, he crawled out and stood, looking through the gloom toward those diminishing sounds. Then, with a grunt, he turned. So far he was clear and free, and the men that sought him were following his riderless horse. But how long would he stay free?

Doggedly, Webb plodded through the sand. The very looseness of the sand aided him, he knew. It would be difficult for a tracker to differentiate between a man's tracks and those of horses or cattle. Where a cow trail broke the arroyo bank Webb turned and climbed out of the dry stream, stopping on the bank's top to knock sand from his clothing, to free his Colt from its holster and blow sand from the action.

Turning toward the east, Webb strode along steadily, bitterness filling him, anger seething in his mind. On foot, hunted, in a strange country, and guiltless of the thing for which he was sought, for which men would shoot at him on sight, Webb McLeod knew that he must help himself. There was no one else to whom he could turn.

II.

Marching along across the flat country, stumbling into little arroyos and scrambling out of them, beset by brush, mesquite, cactus and greasewood that tugged at his clothing, Webb McLeod felt his bitterness grow. In Rinconcito he had made a decision.

For an instant there beside the hitch rail he had seen a future, and now it was torn from him. A job, a good honest job, had been offered him, and, putting all his past behind him, he had decided to take that job. Now, through circumstance, the decision was swept away, wiped out. A man could not be honest even if he wanted to be. A man could not come into a new country and forget the past. A man had no chance. Once branded, always branded.

Webb McLeod had been run out of Gila Bend as an undesirable. Here in this new country he was already marked as a murderer. Webb had no illusions. He knew that the men who had pursued him believed that it was his gun that had cut down Thomas there on the bank step. He was marked. And so what use to try to change things? What use to take the hard road of honesty and straight thinking? The very Fates themselves were against Webb McLeod. He smiled bitterly. He had the name; he might as well take the game. The outlaw trail was the only trail left.

Full dark had come. The wind whispered through the brush, singing a little sibilant song. Overhead the stars made a pallid light. Webb came down a slope and stumbled across the ruts of a wagon road. Turning, he took the road, walking now toward the south.

Webb planned as he walked, calculated, adding

up his situation and answering the problems presented to him. Afoot in a horseman's country, he must get a horse. He could not catch one in a pasture; he must acquire a mount that was already penned. He needed rest, he needed food, and he needed distance. The gun that weighed at his hip and his own cold courage must give him these things. Somewhere along these ruts was a ranch, a house, corrals, and a barn; a supply point for the things he needed. The world was against Webb McLeod. Very well, Webb McLeod was against the world!

For perhaps two hours he followed the road. At the end of that time, thoroughly lost, he stopped. There was no use going farther, no use in wearing himself out and wasting his strength. When light came he would go on. The night was cool, but not cold. Webb found a bank with sand at its base and, stretching out on the ground, he rested. His muscles relaxed, but his mind remained active, seething, bitter. And thirst burned in his throat.

The first faint light found Webb up and moving. In the light he examined the road and saw that it had been recently traveled by a wagon. Which direction the wagon had gone he could not say, but the sun was rising in the east, and to the north and west of him lay Rinconcito. So, setting out, he kept the rising sun to his left and walked along.

He was in a valley. Low hills stretched on either side. The faint pink of the east changed to salmon color, and then to gold. Beneath the gold, marked strongly against the hills, the bulk of buildings showed. Webb left the road and, circling cautiously, approached the buildings. A windmill creaked and water splashed from a pipe into a tank.

Webb made for the tank, keeping a wary eye on the lifeless house as he drank. Then, having refreshed himself, he sought a vantage point, watching the house, the corrals, the barn.

There were two horses in the corral—a work team—and there was a wagon in the yard. Presently the man or men who worked here would come from the house and set about their business. Horses would be run into the corral and smoke would come from the chimney of the house and, after a time, the inhabitants would leave, going about their daily work. When they were gone, Webb would make his raid.

A trickle of smoke from the chimney told Webb that someone in the house was awake. A saddle horse appeared at the barn door and walked out into the corral to consort with the work team. A milk cow walked slowly from the pasture and stood at the corral bars. Impatience filled Webb. He would wait no longer. Leaving his lookout, he came stealthily to the corral, the barn hiding the house from him now.

As he rounded the corner of the corral, he stopped short, and his hand darted to the gun at his hip, then fell away. A girl, carrying a milk bucket, had come around the corner of the barn. For a moment they confronted each other, the girl's eyes wide with fright. This was the girl who had been in the wagon on Rinconcito's plaza.

"Ma'am—" Webb McLeod began, all his plans struck aside.

The girl dropped the milk bucket. "You're hurt!" she exclaimed. "There's blood on your shirt! I told them you didn't do it. I told them you didn't!"

"Ma'am—" Webb began again, and leaned against the corral fence, the desperation that had held him up gone now, leaving him weak. "Ma'am, I—"

The girl took two swift steps and reached his side. "Come to the house!" she commanded. "I told them you didn't do it, but they wouldn't believe me. You're hurt!" Her hand was strong upon Webb's arm and, answering its urging, he moved, taking slow steps as the girl led him along toward the house.

The kitchen was warm and there was a coffeepot steaming on the stove. Seated in a chair, Webb watched the girl while she poured coffee and gave him a cup. He drank the hot beverage and was strengthened by it. The girl moved briskly. She did not ask questions; she acted. A pan of warm water and cloths were placed on the table and, at the girl's order, Webb sat still and allowed his wound to be cleaned and bandaged. He drank more coffee and ate hot biscuits warmed in the oven, and bacon that the girl fried and placed before him. The food gave him strength.

While Webb ate, the girl talked. She had seen it all, she said, all the swift action there in the plaza: the shooting, Webb's quick reaction, the men who had followed him.

"I told them you didn't do it," she said again. "I told Sheriff Pettigrew you didn't, but he wouldn't believe me. Len Howard was there at the store, and he said that it was you. Dan Pettigrew took his word for it. How did you get away?"

"I left my horse," Webb answered. "He'd been hit. I was in an arroyo. I hid when they came by, then I started walking."

The girl nodded. "And came here," she said. "I—" She stopped and turned her head, listening. Hoofs sounded on hard ground. Webb came up out of his chair, his hand resting on his gun butt. The girl turned to him, eyes wide with fright.

"They're coming here!" she exclaimed. "You—Here! Come in here!"

She ran across the room as she spoke, throwing

open a door. Webb did not move and, returning, the girl caught his arm and urged him to the door, thrusting him into a bedroom. The door banged shut in Webb's face, and he could hear hurried footsteps as the girl moved about the kitchen, hear the splash of water in the waste pail, and the clang of a stove lid. Then there was silence for a time, unbroken until boots sounded on wood and knuckles beat a tattoo on the door. Webb held his breath and listened. The door creaked gently as it opened, and the girl's voice said: "Hello, sheriff. Won't you come in?"

Again the boots sounded. More than one man entered the kitchen. Webb crouched behind the door, gun in his hand now, eyes slitted, his face set in harsh lines. A heavy voice said:

"We're lookin' for that murderer, Nancy."

"So you came here," the girl said. "This is a good place to look, sheriff."

A pause and then another voice, thinner, higher, spoke: "You said that stranger didn't kill Thomas. Who was it if it wasn't that feller in the plaza?"

"I told you that I didn't see who did it. The shots came from the alleyway." Nancy's voice was very steady. "But I did see that the man you chased didn't do it. I told you that."

"Howard says that he did." That was the heavy voice of the sheriff again.

Bending, Webb applied his eye to the keyhole. He could see, outlined by the hole, a heavy-bodied, black-bearded man wearing a star on his vest.

Nancy's voice came again, bitter, strained. "I suppose that I'd lie for a total stranger. I suppose that I'd lie to protect the murderer of the only friend I had in the valley. You know I wouldn't, Dan Pettigrew!"

The sheriff shifted uneasily. "Now, Nancy," he said placatingly.

"I'll talk, Pettigrew!" the thin voice interrupted. "Mebbe you were mistaken, Nancy. Mebbe you just didn't see what happened."

"I'm not mistaken, and I did see. You can't change my mind, Mr. Benedict!"

Webb had them placed now. Pettigrew was the sheriff and his companion was Benedict.

The thin voice spoke again. "I think you were mistaken. Len Howard saw it all. *He* says it was the stranger."

Skirts swished across Webb's line of vision as Nancy moved. "Len Howard's word ought to be good with you," she said bitterly.

Pettigrew cleared his throat. "You haven't seen anythin' of this fellow we're lookin' for?" he said heavily. "He ain't been here? You didn't see him when you come out last night?"

"I didn't see anyone last night." Nancy's voice was scornful.

A little pause and then Pettigrew said: "We'd better go on, Virgil."

"Just a minute," Benedict answered. "When's yore brother comin' back, Nancy?"

"I don't know. As soon as he can leave Grace, I suppose."

"You ain't heard from him?"

"I had a letter from him."

A pause again. Pettigrew said, "Come on, Virgil," once more, and moved out of Webb's line of vision. The door creaked. Evidently the sheriff had gone out of the kitchen. Benedict coughed and his voice was placating.

"I wish you'd let me send a man over to look after things for you," he said.

"You can send men to move your cattle and Howard's cattle off our range." Nancy's voice was frigid. "Aside from that I don't need any help, Mr. Benedict."

"I've got no cattle on your grass!" Anger sounded in the thin voice. "It's the other way around. You know—"

"I know what range usage is," Nancy interrupted. "And I know that the sheriff's waiting for you, Mr. Benedict. You'd better go now."

Again steps sounded in the kitchen. Webb shifted, trying unsuccesfully to get a view of the door. It closed with a bang, followed by a long silence. Presently, faint through the walls, came the sound of moving horses.

Sliding his gun into its holster, Webb stepped back from the door, waiting, watching it. After a time the knob turned and the door opened. The girl stood just beyond the threshold.

"You can come out now," she said. "They're gone."

Webb walked out into the kitchen. "Ma'am," he said haltingly. "I can't thank you. I can't. You hid me an' you—"

"And I lied for you." Nancy faced him squarely. "I'd do as much for any man that they were after. Any man!"

Webb could feel the tension of the girl, the tightness in the room.

"I'll go now," he said, breaking the quiet that followed her words. "I reckon I—"

He stopped short. Nancy had thrown herself into a chair beside the table and, dropping her head upon her arms, she began to sob, her shoulders shaking.

Webb took a swift step forward and stopped, half reaching out his hand toward the weeping girl. "Ma'am," he said awkwardly. "Ma'am—" He stopped. Here was a situation with which Webb McLeod could not cope.

After a time the sobbing ceased. Nancy lifted her head and dried her eyes with a diminutive handkerchief. She smiled wanly at Webb.

"I'm silly," she said, and her voice showed her chagrin at the brief display of weakness. "It's just that I— You've troubles enough without bothering with mine. You'll have to go. There's a horse in the barn and—"

Very carefully Webb sat down beside the kitchen table. "You'd better tell me about this," he said. "My name's Webb McLeod. I'm a stranger in the country, but mebbe I could help you some."

Nancy's eyes widened again. "But they're looking for you," she said. "They . . . they'll kill you if they find you. You're already wounded. You—"

"Ma'am," said Webb McLeod, and his voice was implacable, "I'm a stranger an' they got me picked for a murder I didn't do, an' I come to yore place to steal a horse and some grub, an' then get away. You hid me an' you looked after me an' you know I didn't do that killin'. Yo're in trouble an' so am I. Now tell me."

The girl brushed a hand across her eyes and stared defiantly at Webb. "There's nothing you can do," she said. "There's nothing anyone can do. Len Howard and Virgil Benedict are pushing their cattle in on our grass, and we haven't enough for our own stock. My brother's gone. His wife is ill and he took her to California. The rider he left here quit a week after Bob left. There's nothing that you can do. I'll give you a horse. You can get away. You can—" She stopped, for Webb was slowly shaking his head.

"Don't you believe me?" demanded the girl.

"Sure, I believe you," Webb drawled. "What's yore name?"

"Nancy Norris. What—"

From another door opening into the kitchen a boy thrust his tousled head. "Why didn't you call me, Nancy?" he complained. "I told you I'd milk this mornin'." He saw Webb and advanced a step into the kitchen, staring. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Webb grinned at the youngster, the smile coming slowly, crinkling the corners of his eyes. A freakish fancy had struck him. Here was a girl, a mighty pretty girl, a mighty brave girl, and one who had sided him, and she was in trouble. Here was Webb McLeod, a stranger in the country and accused of murder. Here was trouble and grief.

"I'm the feller yore daddy hired to come here an' look after things," Webb drawled. "That's who I am."

Astonishment came into Nancy's eyes. Webb could see it as he glanced slyly at the girl. The boy came on into the kitchen, his nightshirt flapping about his thin little legs. He surveyed Webb and then, with all the forthrightness of the ranch-raised youngster, spoke his mind.

"It's about time dad sent a hand," he announced. "What's your name?"

"Webb McLeod."

"My name's Jack."

A little silence fell between them, then: "Don't you reckon you'd better get dressed, Jack?" suggested Webb.

The boy glanced down at his nightshirt. "Yeah," he answered. "I'll get dressed. Then I'll show you around."

"You do that," Webb agreed.

Deciding suddenly that he liked this tall gray-eyed man, Jack wheeled and went to the bedroom. When he was gone, Nancy spoke, her voice low, almost fierce. "That's not true!"

"What ain't true?" Webb looked quizzically at the girl.

"That Bob sent you. You know it isn't. Why did you tell Jack that?"

Once more Webb grinned slowly. "Jack liked it all right," he said.

"But— You can't stay here. You know you can't. They say that you killed Carl Thomas. You've got to get away. You— Bob didn't send you, did he?" There was just a faint trace of hope in the last two words.

Webb looked steadily at the girl and asked: "He'd send a hand if he knew how things are, wouldn't he?"

Nancy nodded.

"Then," Webb drawled, "why don't you let it go at that?"

"But—"

Webb got up from his chair. "You started out to milk," he interrupted. "The bucket's down at the corral. I'll go down an' tend to it."

Nancy did not move and Webb went on out. At the bottom of the porch step he paused and looked back at the house. Now what business had he doing this—Webb asked himself. Of all the fool things! Right now he could walk down to the corral and take that night horse and a saddle, and leave. It was the sensible thing to do. It was what he ought to do. And he'd do it. He'd quit acting the fool. He'd not think about those tear-filled, troubled blue eyes. He'd not think about the thin-shanked kid in the nightshirt, or about how that girl had hidden him and lied for him and stuck up for him. He'd get that horse and go.

Webb walked toward the corral. At the corner of the barn the milk bucket winked brightly in the morning sun. At the pasture gate the milk cow lowed gently. Inside the corral the work team and the saddle horse turned their heads and surveyed the man who came toward them. Webb stopped. For a long minute he looked at the bucket, at the barn, at the cow and the horses. Then, stopping, he retrieved the bucket.

"All right," he said to the watching horses. "I'll tend to you in a minute. I got to milk first, ain't I?"

III.

A man can do a lot of thinking while he shoves his head into an old cow's flank and the streams of milk hiss into the bucket. When Webb went back to the house with the pail, he was all primed for an argument. That was fortunate, for he had one. Nancy Norris was waiting for him in the kitchen and while she strained the milk into a crock she told Webb just what he ought to do, and why.

Webb listened attentively, and when the girl was through, refuted all her ideas and suggestions. They would, he pointed out, be looking for him every place. The officers would be on the alert and the country was being scoured. Witness the fact that Sheriff Pettigrew had already come here to the Norris ranch. Item One: Webb should remain hidden. Item Two was simply this: A stranger, any stranger, would be under suspicion, but a man employed and with someone to vouch for him would not be scrutinized so closely. There had not been anyone close to Webb in Rinconcito's plaza. Only Carl Thomas, who was dead, and Nancy, who was here, could with certainty identify him. If he changed his clothes—and here Webb looked at his bloodstained shirt—and let his whiskers grow, no one would recognize him.

"You wouldn't chase me out for them to catch, would you?" he asked, clinching the argument.

Nancy could not answer that. She was relieved, Webb could see; relieved because his arguments made it impossible for her to turn him away. Webb took advantage of her weakening, shrewdly driving home his point.

"Look," he said. "You don't know a thing about me except that I didn't kill Thomas. I'll be square with you. I ain't much good, but if you'll give me some clothes an' let me stay here, I'll work. I'll make you a hand. Then, when yore brother comes home I'll pull out an' bother you no more. They won't be lookin' for me so hard by that time."

He waited then, watching the girl while she reached a decision. Suddenly her small round chin firmed and she nodded briefly. "You can stay in the granary," she said. "I'll hide you. And if anybody asks about you I'll tell them that you're a man Bob hired and sent here to look after things."

"An'," said Webb gravely, "I'll go right ahead just like I was hired, an' I won't trouble you, ma'am. I'm a heap obliged."

"I couldn't," said Nancy Norris, "turn you out, could I? They'd catch you, wouldn't they?"

"No, ma'am," Webb agreed gravely, "you couldn't turn me out. They'd sure catch me."

Nancy showed him the room in the barn that served for a granary, and brought down her brother's camp bed, tarp and all, for him to use. Webb swept out the room and made it clean, and Nancy came down from the house once more carrying a little mirror and with Jack, walking beside her, bearing a small stand. Webb brought a chair from the house and when the meager furnishings were set to rights, the granary looked clean and habitable. When Nancy returned to the house, Jack stayed with Webb, telling him all about things and asking questions. Jack, to be sure, received very little information, but Webb, for his part, gained a partial picture of the situation at the N Bar N.

Bob Norris had about five hundred head of cattle, a sick wife, and not much money. He had taken his wife to California and there she had undergone an operation. Jack did not know just how ill his mother was, but he knew that his father had to stay with her. He knew, too, that the rider Bob Norris had left at the place had quit.

"I guess they run him off," Jack said. And when Webb asked who "they" were the boy amplified. "Virgil Benedict an' Len Howard," he said. "They been pushin' cattle on our range. I was goin' to shove 'em back but Nancy won't let me."

Webb nodded at that statement. He knew just how the girl felt. She was responsible for Jack, for the ranch, for everything. Naturally she could not let her small nephew take chances bucking against other outfits.

"I guess Allen Carris would've shoved 'em off if Nancy had let him," Jack continued. "But she wouldn't."

"Who's Carris?" asked Webb.

"He lives up west of us," Jack answered. "He's got a ranch. He's sweet on Nancy but she don't like him. He's always hangin' around."

Again Webb nodded. From the back porch Nancy called her nephew. "Jack! Jack!"

"She wants me," Jack said and departed to answer the call. When he returned he was carrying clothing and a hat. "Nancy says to put these on an' come on up to dinner," he announced. "She says they're some of dad's clothes, but you can wear 'em."

Webb tentatively tried the battered hat and found it fitted. "You tell her I'll be right up, Jack," he ordered. "Just as soon as I change."

Dinner was a silent affair. It was not until the meal was done that there was any talk, and that was brief. Webb asked about Carl Thomas, the man who had been killed in Rinconcito and Nancy answered his questions. Because Jack was present and because he had not recognized Webb, they kept the talk impersonal. Thomas, Nancy explained, had had a small ranch down the valley

some twelve miles below the N Bar N. He had lived alone, employing only one rider and a cook. Thomas, too, had been invaded by foreign cattle.

"They want this valley," Nancy said briefly. "That's why Carl was killed."

"He was buckin' 'em?" Webb asked.

"He drove a bunch of Benedict's TU cows past here day before yesterday," Nancy answered. "He said that he would come up and help me. I couldn't hire a man."

"We'll go out this afternoon an' give some of 'em a shove, won't we, Webb?" Jack demanded from his place at the table.

Webb shook his head. "Got to look things over first, Jack," he answered. Nancy flashed him a grateful look, but the boy scowled.

"Then I'll go," he announced.

"No," Webb said firmly, "you won't go." Jack continued to scowl.

"Look here, old-timer"—Webb leaned forward earnestly—"you wouldn't pull out an' leave yore aunt here alone, would you?"

That put a new aspect on affairs. Jack looked up swiftly. "It wouldn't do, now would it?" Webb persisted. "You can see that."

After dinner, while Nancy washed the dishes, Webb went down to the corral with Jack. Bob Norris' saddle was there and Webb, putting it on the saddle horse, lengthened the stirrups while Jack stood by. Webb extracted the boy's promise to stay around the place, asked a few more questions and then, mounting, rode out. He did not intend to go very far but he did intend to look around.

East of the ranch Webb found cattle. There were some N Bar N's and there were a lot of cows branded TU and YO. Webb made a circle, its radius not three miles long, around the headquarters. When he turned toward the house he had a fairly clear picture of things. There was grass for the N Bar N's if nothing else used it; but there was not grass for all the cattle he had seen. Riding along toward the house, Webb scowled. Dirty bunch of hogs! They'd crowd in on a girl, they'd kill a man, they'd tack a killing on an innocent stranger!

Coming over a rise, Webb saw the valley and the road down below him. On the road were horsemen, two of them, and they led a saddled horse. Webb bent forward and peered down. It could not be—and yet it was true. That led horse was Sucker! Webb started down the slope, his disguise and the necessity for his hiding forgotten for the moment.

He remembered all too late. The men below had seen him and had halted, looking up the hill. To stop now would be to arouse suspicion. Webb must brazen it out. He rode on, coming closer and then as the faces of the riders became plain a great silent shout of relief welled up in him. He knew these riders, knew them even as he knew the horse. Webb reined in and for an instant the three men sat surveying each other. Then slow grins broke across the faces that confronted Webb.

"Howdy, Webb," one man drawled, and the other, grinning, also spoke.

"Como esta?"

"What in thunder are you doin' here?" Webb demanded. "Where'd you an' Mournful come from, Panchito?"

Panchito, swarthy face still split by his smile, made an eloquent gesture. "From Gila Bend," he answered. "You pay our fine, Webb, so we get out of thee *juzgado* an' thee marshal, hees sayeeng 'vamos?' So we come theese way. *Que no,* Mournful?"

Mournful Jones, tall, sad-faced, slouched in his saddle, nodded his head lugubriously. "You'd cleaned us playin' monte," he reminded. "When Dudley turned us out of jail we found out we wasn't wanted in Gila Bend. They'd already run you outen town, so we just lit a shuck follerin' you. How's it goin', Webb?"

"Where'd you get my horse?" Webb demanded, not answering the question.

"He mighty near run over us last night," answered Mournful. "We camped down in a draw an' was all peaceful an' here come the horse an' we caught him. There was some fellers follerin' the horse so we just natchully got out of there an' lost 'em. What happened, Webb?"

"Plenty," Webb answered, and detailed the happenings of the last two days. "So I'm holed up," he completed. "They're lookin' for me, but they won't be looking for me at this ranch."

"Smart," commented Mournful.

"Es verdad!" Panchito seconded.

"Where were you headed?" Webb asked.

Mournful nodded toward the south. "To the border," he said. "Ol' Javelino Paiz is Panchito's uncle. We thought we'd tie up with him for a while."

Javelino Paiz, Webb well knew, was a cattle rustler. All along the border men cursed the name of Javelino Paiz and guarded their herds against his depredations. Panchito and Mournful Jones were also cow thieves of parts, although, around Gila Bend, that had never been proved.

"An' takin' my horse along, I suppose," drawled Webb.

"Why not? You wasn't usin' him," Mournful reminded. "You wouldn't want us to let a horse run loose carryin' a saddle an' bridle, would you, now?"

To such a reasonable question Webb had to shake his head.

Webb waited with cocked gun as the possemen swept by in pursuit of his running horse.

"Well," Mournful stated, "you can have him if you want him. He's been shot across the neck but he ain't hurt bad. Here!" He held out Sucker's reins.

"W'y don't you come weeth us, Webb?" Panchito aswed. "*Mi tio,* Javelino, ees wan good hombre. We esteal some cattle an' mak' some monnee, then we tell theese Gila Ben' to vamos por hell, *que no?*"

"I—" Webb began and then stopped. Full born, a plan had sprung into his mind, an idea that needed only a few details to make it perfect.

"Yo're goin' to join up with Javelino?" he asked.

"Yeah." "Seguro." Mournful and Panchito spoke as one.

"Look," said Webb. "I know where we can get the cattle. I know where we can get a lot of cattle. You boys ride back with me and I'll tell you about it."

Panchito and Mournful exchanged quick glances. The Mexican nodded.

"I allus said," Mournful Jones commented, "that if you ever quit foolin' around with cards an' turned yore mind to business, you'd be hard to stop, Webb. What's on yore mind?"

"Now you listen to me," said Webb. "If we do this you'll make some money, we'll be helpin' out a mighty swell girl, an' maybe—" His voice trailed off an instant and then went on: "Maybe we'll find out who did a mighty dirty killin'."

Again Panchito and Mournful exchanged glances. Then: "Spill it," Mournful commanded.

"All right," Webb agreed. "I'll tell you while we ride."

IV.

Webb McLeod sat a grulla horse and looked at the cattle working along the water. There was not an N Bar N in the bunch and Webb grinned as he saw the brands. Every animal wore a YO on the hip. These were all Len Howard's stock. From above Webb, rocks began to slide and, turning, he saw Mournful Jones working down the slope. Mournful drew rein beside Webb and he also looked at the cattle.

"Pretty clean," he drawled. "We got all the TU's an' all the N Bar N's worked out of here. We'll be all set when Panchito gets back."

Webb nodded. "He ought to be back today," he drawled. "That is, if he found Javelino where he thought he would." (Panchito had been gone for four days, having ridden to the border the day after the three men met.)

"He'll find Javelino," Mournful said with confidence. "An' he'll be back. It ain't but thirty miles or so to the line, an' Panchito knowed about where Javelino was. Say, I seen a TU rider awhile ago."

Webb lifted his eyes from the cattle to look at Mournful and the latter's sad face broke into a melancholy grin.

"I was watchin' that YO man that makes a circle north of here," Mournful said. "Then I seen this TU feller comin' so I just gathered about ten head of YO cows an' throwed 'em into a draw right ahead of him. He rode down on 'em an' stopped, an' the YO man come paradin' down the hill an' seen the whole thing. It sure must've looked like that TU feller was drivin' 'em."

Webb's slow grin spread across his face. "Mebbe it'll give 'em ideas," he drawled.

Mournful bit off a chew, proffered the plug and, when it was refused, returned it to his pocket. "I ain't so sure about this stunt of yores," he said. "It's all right to get 'em suspectin' each other, but what's in it for us?"

"Gets 'em to fightin' each other," Webb answered succinctly. "One of them two outfits killed Thomas. Mebbe when they get to fightin' we'll learn who did it."

Mournful glanced at his companion. "What good is that goin' to do?" he asked. "It won't make us no money."

"I want to know," Webb persisted stubbornly. "Anyhow, if they fight each other they'll lay off the N Bar N."

Mournful worked on his tobacco, his jaws moving slowly. "Yo're sweet on that gal," he accused suddenly. "That's what's wrong with you, Webb."

Color flooded Webb's face. "You know better than that!" he said sharply. "I'm stealing cows, that's what I'm doin'. It's a good set-up an' these would-be grass hawgs are askin' for it."

Mournful shook his head. "Yo're sweet on Nancy," he repeated. "Stealin' cattle is just going to be a side line with you. The gal comes first. Now I'll tell you, Webb, this is business with Panchito an' me. We're after a profit an' not a fight. *I* don't give a hoot who killed Thomas."

"I do!" Webb's eyes narrowed. "They claim I done it. An' Nancy's hid me an' lied for me an' took care of me. You, too. How many girls would just take my word like she done about you an' Panchito? I told her that you was goin to nelp throw TU an' YO cattle off her grass; that I'd hired you. She never asked a single question, did she?"

Mournful nodded. "That's right," he agreed. "An' that's what I was goin' to tell you. She's sweet on you, too." His voice was matter-of-fact.

"Sweet on me!" Webb's voice was bitter. "Sweet on a no-account gambler like me? Yo're crazy, Mournful!"

Mournful paid no attention to the statement. "She's sweet on you an' yo're sweet on her," he repeated placidly. "This whole business of hookin' some of Benedict's cows is just a side line with you. But it ain't with me an' Panchito, Webb. We're after the dinero."

"An' you'll get it!" Webb said curtly. "You know me, Mournful."

Mournful nodded. "I know you," he agreed. "Yo're square, Webb. Only you ain't foolin' me none."

Webb's gray eyes were narrow as he looked at his companion. "I planned this deal," he warned. "I'm the boss. Don't go gettin' ideas, Mournful."

Mournful Jones grinned, and even his grin was sorrowful. "Me an' Panchito like you, kid," he drawled. "We'll help you out—takin' our profit, of course. Let's head for the house. It's gettin' late."

Webb cast a last glance at the cattle. "All right," he agreed. "We got things fixed here. We can pick up this bunch day or night an' take 'em along. They're all YO's." He turned the grulla horse and, with Mournful beside him, started up the hill. At the top of the slope Mournful looked back.

"It'd be a dang sight easier to rustle cattle if we didn't have to be so particular about the brands," he complained, and then, forestalling Webb's words: "It's all right with me, though. Whatever you say, goes, Webb."

Neither man spoke as they rode along toward the ranch. Webb looked straight ahead and Mournful, casting an occasional sidelong glance at his companion, smiled quietly. He had given Webb something to think about, Mournful had. The buildings of the N Bar N came in sight below them and they followed a trail down the slope, Mournful riding behind his companion. When they reached the bottom of the slope, the older man spoke once more.

"Somebody at the house," he said. "There's horses in the yard."

"I'll lope on ahead," Webb announced, and without waiting for Mournful's agreement, put spur to the grulla. The horse took an easy lope and distance widened between the two riders.

"He's sure enough sweet on her," Mournful commented, watching the grulla and his rider.

As he neared the ranch, Webb pulled down from lope to trot. Coming around the corner of the barn, he saw four horses standing by the corral. A swift glance toward the house showed him the riders of those horses. They stood close by the porch, two men at the step, two others lounging behind them. All four men turned as Webb came into the yard and watched him narrowly while, businesslike, he rode to the corral, dismounted, and put his horse into the pen. With that done, Webb gave his belt a hitch and walked toward the house. Passing the horses at the fence, he noted their brands. There were two marked TU, two others branded YO. The N Bar N was entertaining visitors from both its neighbors.

Nancy was on the porch above the men. Young Jack Norris, his face white with anger and defiance, stood in the kitchen door. The girl, too, appeared distraught. The corners of her mouth were white and her eyes blazed with suppressed fury. Beyond the four men Webb stopped, sizing up the situation.

"Come here, Webb," Nancy commanded.

Webb moved forward slowly. Skirting the men at the step, he lifted himself and stood at the corner post of the porch, leaning against it. "What's the matter?" he drawled.

Nancy made a gesture with her hand. "Mr. Howard and Mr. Benedict have come over to tell me to get my cattle off their grass!" she said hotly. "I've told them that it is their cattle that are using my grass, not mine on theirs."

"That's right," Webb drawled, looking at the men below.

"Who are you?" The small man below Webb—the man with a straggling wisp of goatee on his chin—asked the question. Instantly Webb identified him by his voice. This was Virgil Benedict, the man who had accompanied the sheriff to the N Bar N the morning of Webb's arrival. The other, big and black-bearded, with hard, black eyes, must be Len Howard, owner of the YO.

"My name's McLeod," Webb answered, watching Howard. "Mr. Norris hired me to come in an' look after things while he was gone."

Howard's face showed no sign of recognition, yet he was the man who claimed to have identified Webb as the killer of Carl Thomas. A liar, Len Howard, big black beard and all.

"Where did Norris hire you?" Benedict demanded brusquely.

Webb turned his gaze upon the smaller man. "If it's any of yore business," he drawled, "he hired me in California. But I don't think it's any of yore business." He stood there, lounging easily against the porch post, left shoulder resting against the wood, right arm and hand hanging free. Benedict's tan cheeks flushed with anger.

"You're mighty brash for a thirty-a-month hand!" he snapped. "I know what my business is."

"Then you ought to tend to it," Webb told him. "You invite these fellows for supper, Miss Norris?"

"Why, I—" Nancy began, not knowing exactly what was coming.

"If you didn't," Webb continued swiftly, "I reckon you an' Jack had better go into the house. I'll try to entertain 'em."

"I—" the girl began again.

"Go on now!" Webb's voice was imperative.

For a moment Nancy hesitated. Then she turned and went into the house, taking Jack from the door as she passed.

"You had somethin' to say," Webb reminded when Nancy was gone. He looked steadily at Benedict.

Behind the two ranchmen their companions were changing position, moving apart slightly. Hard-faced men these, armed, their eyes shifty. Webb knew the breed. He turned a trifle so that he could watch them all.

"I come over here to tell Nancy Norris that her cattle are usin' my grass an' water!" Benedict snapped. "I want 'em off of it."

There was movement in the barn beyond the men. Catching that movement, Webb glanced swiftly toward the barn door. Mournful Jones was in the barn. He had come up on the other side, left his horse, and now occupied a vantage point. A smile spread slowly across Webb's face. "An' *I* say," he drawled gently, "that you two grass hawgs have been shovin' yore stock down into our country. What do you think of that?"

"You—" Benedict began, and stopped short. In the barn, Mournful coughed suggestively.

Behind Benedict one of the two hard-faced men wheeled. "There's somebody in the barn!" he snapped.

"Mebbe it's a horse," Webb drawled. "An' then . . . mebbe it ain't a horse."

Benedict also turned toward the sound. In the barn Mournful Jones coughed again.

"That ain't no horse!" the rider snapped. "They got a man on both sides of us, boss!"

Benedict wheeled slowly so that he faced Webb once more. Webb still grinned. There was little humor in the smile.

"You said yore piece," Webb said pointedly. "I told you mine. I reckon you can go on. That is, unless you want to take a chance on that really bein' a horse in the barn."

"You can't get away with this!" growled Howard. "We came over here peaceful. We—"

"You can leave peaceful, too," Webb reminded. "An' when yo're gone you might keep it in mind that I'm over here lookin' after things. I ain't a

girl, all by herself lookin' after a kid. Any little bullyin' you got to do, you can do on me."

Once more the cough sounded in the barn. Webb's grin broadened. "Sounds like that horse is gettin' hungry," he completed. "He sure hates to be kept from supper. Are you-tough boys leavin'?"

Virgil Benedict turned decisively, like a man whose mind is made up. "Come on, Len," he snapped. "We'll come back when the deck ain't stacked."

"You mean when it's stacked yore way," Webb amended gently. "We'll be lookin' for you, gents. Me an' the horse."

Scowling, Len Howard turned and followed Benedict. The two riders, one from the TU the other from the YO, followed their employers. They went to the corral, untied their horses and, mounting, rode out of the yard. At the gate, Howard would have stopped, but a swift word and gesture from Benedict urged him on. Webb remained leaning against the porch post until horses and riders were gone. Then he straightened and walked to the kitchen door.

"They decided they wouldn't stay for supper," he announced cheerfully. "Jack, has the milk cow come in yet or do I have to rustle her?"

"Webb!" Nancy hurried toward the door. "You— They might have killed you. And I called you, too. If Len Howard had identified you, he—"

"Don't you worry, Nancy." Webb's voice was gentle. "Howard didn't know me from Adam. An' Mournful was in the barn with a rifle all the time. How about that cow, Jack? Did she come in?"

Jack shook his head. "I ain't seen her, Webb."

"Then I'll have to get her," Webb announced. "You go on an' fix supper, Nancy. Mournful an' me'll get the chores done." He turned from the door and his boots sounded as he crossed the porch.

Nancy, looking through the door, saw Webb swing off across the yard toward the corrals. Jack, beside the girl, put his hand in hers.

"Gee, he's swell, ain't he?" the boy breathed.

Nancy's hand closed on Jack's. "He's—" she began, and then: "You run on out and see if you can help, Jack."

Down at the barn, Mournful stepped from the doorway. "What'd you mean callin' me a horse?" he demanded. "I was standin' right there with a thutty-thutty in my hands, an' you know it!"

North of the N Bar N Virgil Benedict and Len Howard, riding side by side, their two hands following them, also commented upon the horse in the barn.

"There's two of them there," grated Benedict. "They had us flanked, Len."

Howard growled deep in his black beard. "There was four of us!"

"I know it!" Benedict's voice was bitter. "But I wouldn't take the chance. Carl Thomas was killed not ten days ago. You don't want to forget that, Len. Pettigrew's dumb, even for a sheriff, but he's not that dumb!"

"Pettigrew owes us plenty," rumbled Howard. "We elected him."

"Yeah," Benedict rasped, "but if I'd thought he was so hell bent for law an' order I'd never have got behind him. He's still rimmin' around on that Thomas thing an' he's not quite sure that the man you said, did the shootin'. He's askin' lots of questions."

"That's on account of that blasted Norris girl!" Howard growled.

"No matter why, he's doin' it," Benedict retorted.

A brief silence fell between the men. Behind them the ranchmen's two riders came along, some distance intervening between the couples.

"I shoved a bunch of cows down on Thomas' place yesterday," Howard said finally. "I had to take 'em back. You got yore cattle all over that grass, Virgil. There wasn't room for mine."

Benedict rode on in silence. Howard glanced sharply at his companion. "An' a mighty funny thing happened today," he continued. "One of my boys come in an' told me. He was makin' his ride an' he come right down on that fellow, Chalk, with a bunch of my cattle ahead of him. I'd like to know what Chalk was doin' with my cows!"

"He was just shovin' 'em back into the valley where you'd put 'em," Benedict snapped. "Chalk's a good boy. He's worked for me a long time."

"Yeah," Howard said significantly, "I know he's worked for you a long time. Look here, Virgil, I won't stand for any foolin' around. You an' me are in this together. The agreement was that we'd split the country when Norris an' Thomas got out of it."

"An' we will split it," agreed Benedict. "Quit bein' a fool, Len. You an' me got too much on each other to fight or to cheat."

Howard reined in his horse and Benedict likewise stopped. They were at the forks of the road. "Mebbe," Howard said meaningly, "we got too much on each other. Don't forget it, Virgil."

"An' don't you forget it!" Benedict snapped. "I'll leave you here, Len. So long."

He rode ahead, following the western fork of the road. His rider, spurring, came to catch up with him. Howard scowled after the two as he waited for his own man to come up.

"Blast him!" Howard growled. "He'd better not try to double-cross me!"

V.

After leaving Len Howard, Benedict and his rider traveled along for perhaps a quarter of a mile before the TU owner spoke. Then, turning to the man beside him, he said: "I'll leave you here, Jerry. You pull on home."

Jerry nodded and kept going. Benedict, stopping his horse, watched his rider's receding back. When Jerry was out of sight over a rise, the rancher left the road and struck out toward the southeast. He crossed the road that Howard and his man had taken and went on still in the same direction. The YO was to his left now, and the N Bar N, set in its low valley, to his right. For perhaps half an hour Benedict traveled, alternating trot with lope, so that in the main his pace was swift. Then, coming down a long slope he saw an old shack before him, and beside the shack a rock-walled stable dug into the slope.

Benedict slowed his horse and whistled twice, long clear notes that hung in the evening quiet. There was an answering whistle from the shack and, rounding in front of the barn, Benedict stopped and dismounted.

A man stood in the door of the shack. His left arm, supported by a sling, swung across his shirt front, and his hair was white above an oddly youthful face.

"I thought that was you," he said, sliding a gun back into its scabbard at his hip. "The whistle is all right for a signal, but any fool can whistle."

Benedict came up and stopped before the man in the doorway. "How's the shoulder, Yancy?" he asked.

"Pretty good." A scowl come over the face of the white-haired man. "Yo're payin' for it, you know."

Benedict nodded curtly and Yancy stepped aside to let his visitor enter the shack.

"Seen anybody along this way?" Benedict asked, sitting down on a box beside the rickety table.

Yancy shook his head. "I sleep daytimes mostly," he answered. "This business of havin' to cook nights don't sit so well. When are you goin' to give me the rest of what I got comin', Benedict?"

Benedict tapped the table top with his fingers. "I'll bring it just any time you say," he replied. "There's another job comin' up, Yancy."

The white-haired man crossed the room and sat down. "So?" he drawled. "It's got to be different from the last one. I'll not take chances like that again. Look what it got me." Lifting his right hand he touched his left shoulder.

"That's nothin' but a burn," Benedict said impatiently. "I thought you were tough, Yancy."

The other's blue eyes narrowed. "I'm tough enough," he answered. "If I don't suit you, pay me off."

Benedict held up his hand to restrain the man. "You suit me," he said. "Even if you did have to have me along when you downed Thomas. You suit me all right. This other job is different from the last one."

There was a small silence and then Yancy said gruffly: "Let's hear about it."

Benedict leaned forward. "There's a place close to here," he said. "The N Bar N. It's about five or six miles west an' south of here."

Yancy nodded wordlessly.

"There's a girl there—"

Yancy shook his head emphatically. "Not me! I'll have no truck with women," he said levelly. "If a woman's killed, the whole country gets up an' starts lookin'. I know!"

"I don't want this girl killed." Benedict shook his head. "She's just there. But there's a man there, too; maybe two men. I want you to watch that place and see how many men there are. Then I want you to take 'em."

For a moment Yancy appeared to consider the statement. Then, lifting his eyes, he looked at Benedict. "How much is in it?" he said.

"A hundred," the TU man answered promptly.

Yancy shook his head. "Not two men," he stated flatly. "That makes it twice as tough. I've got to get them both together an' I've got to watch two. Not two men for a hundred apiece."

"How much then?"

As calmly as a merchant considering the price of an article he has for sale, Yancy computed. Indeed, he was very like a merchant, sitting there on his box. But Yancy dealt in sudden death and lead, in place of such prosaic things as groceries or dry goods.

"Two fifty apiece," he announced finally, lifting his eyes to meet Benedict's. "That's the price. Take it or leave it."

Benedict, too, appeared to muse. "All right," he said decisively, having finally made up his mind. "I'll pay off when you get the job done."

"That will make six hundred you owe me," Yancy told him. "You owe a hundred for the other job."

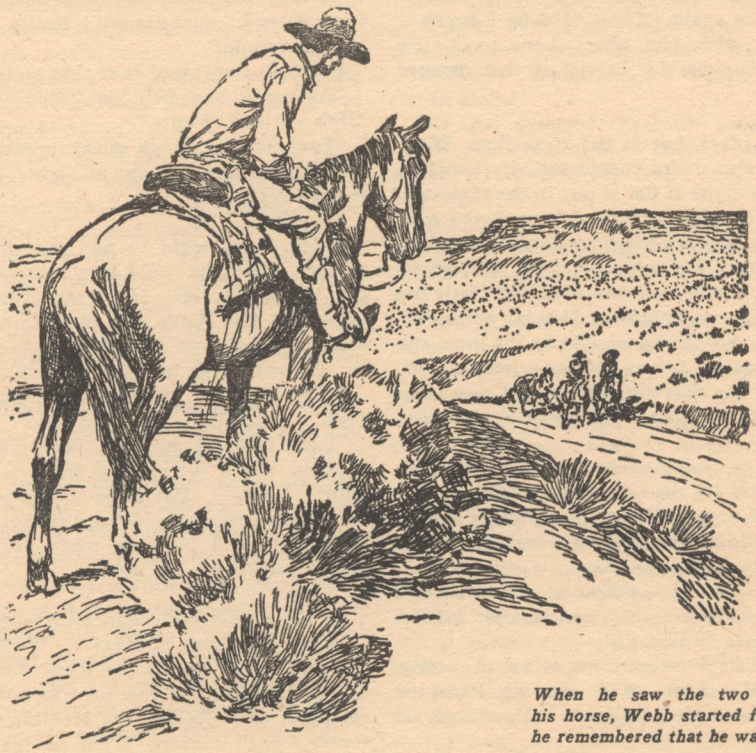
Benedict nodded agreement.

"It'll take some little time," drawled the killer. "I can't use a rifle good yet. This shoulder's healin' but it's stiff."

"Not too long a time," Benedict warned.

"Two or three days." Once more Yancy relapsed into his thoughts. He spoke suddenly. "You've been slow payin' for the other job," he said. "Don't be slow about this one, Benedict!"

"I'll finish payin' for the other now," Benedict stated, drawing a billfold from his hip pocket.



When he saw the two riders leading his horse, Webb started for them before he remembered that he was on the dodge.

"One hundred I owe you. Here it is. He counted bills into a little pile on the table top. Yancy took them, folding them through his long fingers.

Benedict got up. "Anythin' you need?" he asked.

Yancy looked about the little room and shook his head. "Nothin', I guess."

Benedict paused beside the door. "I'll pay you here or at the ranch," he said. "Whichever you say when you get the job done."

Yancy considered that. "The ranch, I guess," he answered. "I'll be ridin' out when it's finished. You better tell me what these men look like."

"I'm not sure of one," Benedict replied. "I never saw him and there might not be a second one, but I think there is. The man I saw is tall an' brown-haired. He wears an old brown hat an' blue shirt an' Levis. When I saw him he was usin' a grulla horse. You watch long enough to make sure who's stayin' there an' who just comes in an' out, visitin'."

Yancy nodded. "He got a name?" he asked.

"McLeod," Benedict snapped. "That's his name."

Again Yancy nodded. "McLeod, an' he rides a grulla. O. K.," he drawled.

Benedict pushed open the door.

"You have the cash ready," Yancy directed. He had not risen but simply turned a trifle on his box.

"I'll have it ready," the TU man answered. "So long."

Yancy made no answer and Benedict went on

out of the shack, closing the door behind him.

Dusk had come now and in the dusk Benedict mounted his horse and, skirting the sunken barn again, retraced his course, riding now toward the north and west. As he rode, his eyes puckered narrowly, and once he spoke aloud. "Maybe I'd ought to do that." He rode on for a little distance before he spoke again. Then, "Maybe I ought to make a deal with him about Len, too." He shrugged. "Anyhow I'll be rid of that damned McLeod!"

At another place, but at the same time, Webb McLeod was also under consideration. Panchito had come back to the N Bar N late in the afternoon and he and Mournful Jones had forgathered with Webb in the granary, their common dwelling place. Panchito had reported that his uncle, Javelino Paiz, would welcome whatever cattle his nephew and his companions could bring across the border to him, and that he would pay for them, the price being fixed at fifteen dollars a head. This, in view of the fact that the cattle would cost nothing but some hard riding and personal danger, was clear velvet.

Details having been discussed and decided upon, and the time set for the drive, Webb left the two and went to the house. He had to explain to Nancy that there would be an extra hand for supper and for three meals on the next day.

Left alone, Panchito rolled a cigarette and Mournful Jones took a chew and the two settled down to intimate discussion.

"Why wouldn't Javelino come across to receive this stuff?" Mournful asked, viewing Panchito along the sides of his long nose. "He scared, or somethin'?"

"My onkle," Panchito returned, preferring to use English, although Mournful's Spanish was as good as his own, "ees not escare bot hee's theenk-eng about theese mounted poleece in Nuevo Mejico. They look for heem five honerd dollars' wort'."

"Oooh," Mournful said. "I sabe."

"*Si*," Panchito stated flatly.

A contemplative and friendly silence fell. Mournful broke it. "Webb's sweet on that gal up to the house," he announced.

Panchito raised his eyebrows. "*Es verdad?*" he questioned.

"Yeah. She's sweet on him, too. You know, Panchito, this cattle stealin' ain't nothin' but a side line with Webb. What he wants to do is to find out about who done that killin'."

Panchito shrugged and drew on his brown cigarette.

"Webb," Mournful drawled, "ain't no real tough guy, not really."

Again Panchito's eyebrows shot up. "No?" he questioned. "Hee's planty tough. Hee's shoot that fellow een Gila Ben' an' hee's ron out of town. Hee's carry a gon an' hee's know how to use eet. W'at you mean hee's not tough?"

"Not like you an' me are," Mournful explained.

"Oh." Panchito nodded.

"Webb," Mournful said thoughtfully, "ought to settle down an' raise himself a family. That's what he ought to do."

Panchito ruminated over that statement.

"An' we ought to help him," Mournful amplified. "He's a friend of ours."

"You mean wee'll not esteal thees cows?"

"Oh, we'll take the cows all right. But we ought to help Webb out."

"'Ow?"

"Well, we'd ought to find out who done that murder. Then he could stay here an' marry that gal. Look, Panchito, if we got these two outfits to fightin', like Webb says, mebbe somethin' could come of it. One or the other of them two, either the TU or the YO, had that feller Thomas killed."

"'Ow weel we get them to fight?" Panchito asked practically.

"I got ideas of my own," answered Mournful. "Listen. First we steal a horse from this TU outfit. Then—" His voice droned on. Panchito listened, occasionally adding a thought of his own. They were still planning when Webb's call for supper came from the house.

At the supper table Panchito entertained them all with an account of Mexico. While the border was only thirty miles away, none of those present, saving Panchito, had ever pentrated into the sister republic; consequently the Mexican's recital was received with interest. After the meal, Mournful and Panchito repaired to the barn and Webb helped Nancy with the dishes. Jack was also a willing helper, taking the dishes as Webb dried them, and putting them away. Jack had something on his mind and, boylike, he chose the first lull in the conversation to unburden himself.

"You know the old Huyler place, Nancy?" he asked, putting plates in the cupboard. "That old shack east of us?"

Nancy nodded.

"There's somebody livin' there," the boy announced. "I was out yesterday an' I seen horse tracks goin' right to it."

"'I saw,' Jack. Not 'I seen.'"

"Well, anyhow, there was horse tracks."

Webb looked over his dish towel at the youngster. "What were you doin' out there that you could see horse tracks, Jack?" he asked sternly. "I thought you were goin' to stay around the place an' look after Nancy."

"Aw, I just went out a little," answered Jack. "I can't stay home all the time."

"You've got to stay home," Webb said impressively. "Somebody's got to be here all the time, Jack, an' you know I can't stay."

Jack grunted. He was nine years old and far from being a fool. "You didn't get this cup dry," he announced, holding out the moist china. "Look here."

Webb took the cup and redried it. Nancy repressed a smile. No more was said concerning Jack's wanderings.

When the dishes were dried the three went out to the porch. Nancy sat on the step, her arms locked around her knees, and Webb fashioned a cigarette. Jack, after pottering about for a time, went on down to the barn to visit with Panchito and Mournful. Silence descended upon the occupants of the porch.

Somehow, since Webb McLeod's advent, Nancy Norris had felt secure. Webb was broad-shouldered and his eyes were level and direct, and while always in the back of her mind Nancy knew that Webb was in danger, that he was hiding, that he was accused of murder, she did not dwell on those facts in her thoughts. She was curious about Panchito and Mournful, but she accepted them without question. Webb had told her that they were friends and explained their presence by saying that they were helping him, and Nancy believed him. Webb was so utterly competent, so assured, that the girl's fears were allayed.

For Webb's part, he was torn internally. Whenever he was with Nancy, whenever he saw the girl, he was happy. Yet always there was remembrance and recollection. And, too, there was his plan. Webb McLeod, if he could, would have taken the whole world and refashioned it for Nancy Norris. That being impossible he wanted to make the immediate world safe for her. Whenever he thought of Benedict and Howard, rage welled up in him. Not so much because of his own predicament, but because the two men were causing unhappiness for Nancy Norris. And there was another thing in Webb's mind: A time was coming, coming soon, when he must go. He knew it, but he tried not to think of it.

"Webb," Nancy said dreamily, resting her chin on her knees and staring off across the dusky yard, "what did you do before you came here?"

Webb was roused from his meditation with a jerk. "Nothin' much," he returned. "Why?"

"I just wondered." Nancy's voice was small. "It's odd," she continued after a little pause, "your coming here, isn't it? I know that you had nothing to do with killing Carl Thomas. I know that you chased the men that killed him. Some day they'll find out who really killed Carl. Then there won't be any danger for you, will there?"

Webb did not answer and the girl continued to muse aloud: "Then you could stay as long as you wanted to. You could stay until Bob came back. Jack went up to the mailbox today and brought down the mail. I had a letter from Bob. Grace is a lot better."

"That's good," Webb said. "When will Bob be home?"

"I don't know. As soon as he can come, I guess."

Again the silence while, companionably, they sat side by side on the step. "They were awfully happy," Nancy said wistfully. "Bob and Grace and Jack. It didn't seem to matter what happened. As long as they had each other they were happy."

Webb dared not speak. Nancy's voice went on, small in the quiet: "They love each other so. Sometimes I've seen Bob look at Grace and it was just as though . . . as though they shut out everything else."

"That's the way it ought to be," Webb said hoarsely. "Nancy—"

"Yes, Webb?"

"If I— If there wasn't all this trouble hangin' over me, would you—" He stopped short.

"Yes, Webb?"

Webb rose abruptly to his feet. "I got to go down an' talk to Mournful," he said, the words rasping in his throat. "I'll send Jack up. It's time for him to go to bed."

He strode off through the dusk toward the barn. From the porch step Nancy's eyes followed his tall figure through the darkness.

VI.

In the morning Webb was abstracted and curt at the table. Panchito and Mournful, noting his preoccupation, thought they knew its cause, and exchanged meaningful glances. Jack was filled with some secret business of his own, and Nancy, bustling about, was very impersonal and business-like.

After the meal the men retired to the corral and Webb, going out to run in the horses, left Panchito and Mournful alone.

"W'at's the matter weeth heem?" demanded Panchito, jerking his head toward the departing man.

"He's in love," Mournful answered. "Leave him alone."

Panchito grunted. "We feex that beesness today?" he queried.

"Might as well," said Mournful. "Got to git this boil to a head some way."

"Tonight mebbe?"

"That's as good a time as any."

Panchito grimaced.

When the horses were penned each man selected a mount and saddled. Panchito and Mournful, not explaining their plans, mounted and rode

away. They would, Webb supposed, look over the YO cattle they had bunched. When they were gone, Webb strode purposefully up to the house. He had something to do.

Nancy, the dishes finished, was sweeping the kitchen when Webb came in and stopped beside the door. She looked up and smiled brightly. Webb scowled.

"I came up to tell you somethin'," he blurted.

"Yes, Webb?" There was anxiety in Nancy's voice and the smile was gone.

"You asked what I did before I come here," he said doggedly. "I come to tell you. I was no good, Nancy."

He paused, collecting his thoughts. The girl, holding the broom, stared at him.

"I was run out of Gila Bend," Webb continued, speaking rapidly, his voice still hoarse. "I was a tinhorn gambler there. I grew up in that country an' everybody knew I wasn't any good. I shot a man over there. I didn't kill him, but I shot him. I run a game. It was square enough, but that's the way I made my livin': gamblin'. None of us are any good. Panchito an' Mournful are just cow thieves, an' I'm no better than they are. You write yore brother an' tell him to come home an' look after things. We got no business around here. Not one of us."

Having unburdened his mind, Webb stopped short. Nancy looked at him quizzically.

"Why did you tell me that, Webb?" she asked gently.

"Because I figured you'd ought to know," Webb answered.

A small smile hovered at the corners of Nancy's lips. "And why did you think I ought to know?" she persisted.

"Because—" Webb sought desperately for words. "Because you ought to know," he finished lamely and, wheeling, fled from the kitchen.

For some time Nancy stood unmoving, looking at the door through which he had disappeared. The smile, tender and happy, had settled on her lips and in her eyes. She watched Webb, mounted on Sucker, go past the door and then resumed her interrupted sweeping.

The morning wore along. Nancy began her dinner preparations. Webb had not come back. Neither had Mournful nor Panchito. Finished with her work, Nancy left the house and went down to the barn. Jack was saddling his pony and announced that he was going to ride up to the mailbox, which was two miles from the house, on the main road from Rinconcito, and get the mail. Nancy told him to get back before dinner, and went on into the granary.

There were three beds spread out on the floor. Webb had shared Bob Norris' camp bed with his friends. The room was in order and swept clean. Against the wall, hung from a nail, were the trousers and shirt that Webb had discarded when he assumed the disguise of Bob Norris' clothing.

Crossing the room, Nancy lifted down the garments. The shirt was bloody and there was a tear in the collar. The girl shivered when she touched the blood. Then, her eyes brightening, she took the garments and left the granary. Up at the house she produced a tub and washboard. She put the bloody shirt to soak in cold starch, while, with needle and thread, she repaired a rip in the trousers. As she worked she smiled happily.

The patch was done and Nancy had put the trousers aside when she heard a horse come into the yard. Going to the door, the welcoming smile on her lips was wiped away. Allen Carris, tall and blond and handsome, was dismounting beside the corral. Nancy stood in the door and watched him leave his horse and come toward her.

Carris spoke a greeting as he reached the porch. "Hello, Nancy."

"Hello, Allen." Nancy stepped back from the door allowing Carris to enter the kitchen. Webb's trousers lay on the table and his shirt was soaking in the tub. Carris' close-set blue eyes flashed around the kitchen and returned to the girl.

"I came over to see how you were getting along," he said. "You've got some riders here?"

"Bob hired a man," Nancy answered. "Won't you sit down, Allen?"

Carris seated himself on a chair. "It's too bad about Carl Thomas," he said. "You were there when it happened, weren't you, Nancy?"

Horror filled Nancy's eyes as she remembered the plaza in Rinconcito. "I was there," she said.

Carris squared around on his chair. "Pettigrew tells me that Len Howard says a stranger did the shooting." He looked at the girl.

"That's not true." Nancy spoke swiftly. "I saw the man that Carl talked with before he went to the bank. He didn't shoot Carl."

Carris toyed with his hat which he had placed on the top of the table. "Nancy," he said suddenly, "when are you going to quit this foolishness? You know I'm in love with you. Why won't you marry me and let me look after you? I know you're having trouble here. I could stop it."

"If you're Bob's friend, as you say you are, why don't you stop it anyhow?" Nancy stared at the blond man.

Carris waved that aside. "You won't answer me," he said angrily. "Nancy, I— What's that in the tub?"

"It's . . . it's a shirt!" Terror filled Nancy's eyes again. Carris got up and, crossing to the tub where Webb's shirt lay soaking, reached in and lifted the garment. "That's blood!" he exclaimed.

"Why, yes," Nancy said swiftly. "One of the

boys hurt himself. I was washing it for him."

Carris, eyes narrow, looked from the shirt to the girl. "You're hiding something!" he snapped. "What are you afraid of?"

"There's nothing to be afraid of. I—"

"That's not true!" Carris dropped the sodden shirt back in the tub. "Nancy, that fellow that killed Thomas came here! You're hiding him! That's his shirt!"

"No! It isn't, Allen—"

Allen Carris laughed. "And all the time I was wanting you to marry me," he snarled. "I thought you were the finest thing in the country. You common little—"

He moved now, coming around the table toward the girl, hands reaching out. Nancy retreated from those reaching hands.

"Come here!" Carris snarled. "Don't be so high-toned. If that murderin' scoundrel is good enough for you, I'm—"

Nancy screamed. Her back was against the wall and she could retreat no farther.

Up above the ranch, riding toward it, Webb McLeod heard that scream and, spurring Sucker, came down the slope. Webb had ridden a circle that morning. Distraught and upset, his mind in a turmoil, he was returning to the ranch. Still distracted, still without any definite formula to solve his dilemma, the scream pierced through his thoughts, and he put Sucker to a run. The bay slid to a halt in the yard and Webb, throwing himself from the saddle, ran to the house and burst through the door.

There in the kitchen Nancy Norris fought a big blond-haired man who held her close and laughed at her struggles. Two long steps brought Webb to them, his hand shot out, seized the big man and turned him. Webb's eyes were terrible and Carris recoiled from them, but the hand on his arm clenched and held him, and with his other hand Webb struck.

Carris was big and hard and filled with a furious strength, but against Webb McLeod's anger he was a child. Under the impact of that first blow, he reeled and would have fallen had not Webb's grip held him upright. Again and again and again Webb struck, battering the white face before him. Blood followed the blows and Carris cried out in pain and terror. Then Webb threw the man from him, casting him aside as though he were a discarded rag. Carris banged against the wall, slid down and lay prone.

Scarcely heeding what he had done, Webb turned and reached for Nancy. He took the sobbing girl in his arms, drawing her against his broad chest, and his hands, so fierce and terrible but a moment before, were gentle now.

"Did he hurt you?" Webb demanded. "Did he hurt you, Nancy?"

Nancy sobbed in his arms. Beside the wall Carris rose to hands and knees and, scuttling like some frightened animal, made for the door. Webb did not even turn as Carris made his escape.

"Did he hurt you, Nancy?" Webb demanded again.

In his arms the girl checked her sobbing. Gently Webb reached down and put his hand under her chin and lifted her face. There were tears in the girl's eyes and her lips were tremulous, and Webb McLeod, all his good resolutions forgotten, bent and kissed those lips.

Out by the corral, Allen Carris mounted his horse and, his face battered and bleeding, started at a run toward the north.

For a time there in the kitchen, there was no sound or movement. Webb held the girl close. Her sobbing done, she was content to be in Webb's arms, safe against his chest, content to feel the security that had come so suddenly. Then, as sanity returned, she put her hands against that hard chest and pushed gently, and Webb let her go. The girl stepped back and, full and straight, her eyes met Webb's.

"He— Oh, Webb!" she cried. "He came in. I was mending your clothes. I'd put your shirt to soak. I was going to wash it and get the blood out of it. He saw the blood and he said that I was hiding the murderer. He— Webb! He knows you're here. He's gone to get the sheriff! You'll have to go! Oh, Webb—"

Again Webb reached out and drew the girl to him. "Do you think I'll go now, Nancy?" he demanded. "Do you? I can't go, honey. Not now. Not when I've just found you!"

There was silence in the kitchen again. And north of the N Bar N Allen Carris drove his horse along toward Rinconcito, rage and fright and hatred pushing him.

There were others than Allen Carris who rode in that country about the N Bar N. East of the ranch, at the corner of the TU horse pasture, Mournful Jones and Panchito Paiz sat their horses, surveying the TU remuda gathered in the corner of the fence and drawling comments to each other.

"It ought to be the pinto," stated Mournful. "Nobody could miss him, Panchito. That there pinto stands out like a signboard."

"An' ees planty tough," Panchito added. "He bocks like hal, I bat you, Mournful."

"Mebbe he is a little salty," Mournful agreed, "but it's got to be him. Them YO boys have got to see a horse they know, an' that pinto's goin' to be it."

Panchito muttered Spanish expletives in his

throat, but began the process of taking down his rope. "*All* right," he agreed. "I catch heem. Bot you got to ride heem."

"An' I'll pick some nice soft sand to do it on," promised Mournful. "Dab it on him, Panchito."

The Mexican shook out a loop and circled it. The pinto, ears laid back and endowed with the intuition that tells a horse when a man wants to catch him, moved, seeking safety behind two other horses.

"Son of a gon!" Panchito muttered, and tossed his loop, fair and true, over the bobbing bay and white head. "Come here, you *caballo!*"

And again another rider moved close by the N Bar N. Young Jack Norris, endowed with curiosity and a plan and, supposedly going for the mail, rode southeast from the ranch. There was, Jack knew, somebody living in the old Hershey place. He was bound to investigate. Webb and Nancy were always telling him to stay at home and this was a forbidden expedition. That fact made it all the sweeter. Young Jack rode across the hills and hollows and, presently, an hour away from home, came down the slope toward a shack and a dugout barn.

At the barn Jack, stopping his pony, dismounted. There was a thrill to doing this forbidden thing and there was fright coupled with the fear. Standing in front of the rock barn, Jack debated with himself. Then with his boyish bravado pushing him on, he advanced toward the closed barn door and lifted the bar. The door swung open. Jack's pony, held by the reins, tossed up his head and nickered. In the darkness of the barn an answer sounded, shrill and high.

Jack recoiled from the door. He could not see into the barn—the gloom prevented that—but there was a horse in there and Jack had proved his point. He let the barn door go gently and turned to his pony, ready to mount and ride away.

"Lookin' for somethin', sonny?" a voice drawled.

Jack whirled from the pony. Standing beside the shack was a white-haired man, his left arm in a sling, a cigarette between his lips and a heavy gun filling his right hand.

"Don't run off, kiddo," the white-haired man drawled. "It ain't polite to run off when you come visitin'. Come here."

Jack cast a glance at the pony and shifted his stance. If he could just— The big gun came up.

"I said come here!" the man grated.

"Yes, sir," said young Jack Norris, and dropped the pony's reins.

The pony watched the boy as Jack, with lagging steps, went toward the man. The two went into the house together, then when the door closed, the wise little horse turned his head so that he would not step on the trailing reins, and moved. There was grain back at the N Bar N, and hay in the rack. Jack's pony, a spoiled pet if ever there was one, was going home.

VII.

In the N Bar N kitchen Webb McLeod and Nancy Norris conducted a spasmodic argument. Nancy, at once happy and frightened, insisted that Webb should leave. She knew Allen Carris, knew his vindictiveness, and was certain that Carris had gone to Rinconcito to tell Dan Pettigrew that the murderer of Carl Thomas was at the N Bar N. Webb, on the other hand, insisted that Carris was scared and that even if the sheriff did come, he, Webb, would not leave Nancy to face the music alone. So the noon hour came and passed. It was fully one o'clock when Jack's pony came in.

It was Webb who saw the little horse standing outside the corral gate. At first he thought that the boy had returned, but when Jack did not come to the house and when he failed to answer Nancy's call, the two began a search for the child. Jack was not at the ranch. The two, man and girl, stared at each other with wide eyes, and gradually Nancy's cheeks paled as she realized that all was not well with the boy.

"Something has happened to Jack!" she cried. "He's been hurt, Webb! He's fallen, or the horse fell with him. What shall we do?"

Webb examined the pony. There was nothing to show that the horse had fallen.

"Jack's just got off him an' he jerked loose," Webb reassured the girl. "Jack's walkin' in. I'll go an get him."

"He went for the mail," Nancy said. "Even if he had to walk, he ought to be home now."

Webb, moving across the hard-packed earth, saw that the horse had come in from the south. The pony was shod all around and there was no mistaking the tracks. With a start Webb recalled Jack's discussion of there being someone at the Hershey shack. He knew Jack. The boy had gone to investigate.

"He went to that old shack south of here," Webb declared. "Remember his talking about it? I told him not to go an' he just went anyhow. This pony came in from the south."

"Find him, Webb," Nancy pleaded. "You'll find him, won't you?"

Webb stepped up on Sucker. "Sure, I'll find him," he answered. "I'll go down to that shack an' if I don't locate him there, I'll make a circle an' come back by the mailbox. I'll find him, don't you worry. If Mournful an' Panchito come in while I'm gone, tell 'em, will you?"

"I'll tell them," Nancy promised.

It did not take Sucker long to cover the distance to the Hershey place. Webb kept to the high

ground, looking all about as he rode, searching for a small figure that might be walking or that might be lying huddled. Trailing the pony was impossible in that sandy, grass-strewn country, and yet in his ride Webb found the tracks of the little horse, both going out and returning. He knew that he was on the right trail.

As he came down the hill toward the apparently deserted shack, Sucker threw up his head and nickered. That was sign enough to Webb McLeod. There was a horse close by or Sucker would not have neighed. Webb was cautious and prepared as he came down to the shack, stopped his horse and dismounted so that Sucker's bay body was between himself and the shack door.

"Hello, the house!" Webb called, still keeping Sucker between himself and the shack. "Anybody home?"

There was momentary quiet and then a muffled sound from inside the shack. "Jack!" Webb called. "Are you there?"

The shack door opened and Jack stepped out. The boy looked frightened.

"What happened to you, Jack?" Webb demanded, watching the door. "I told you not to come over here."

"I—" Jack began.

A man appeared in the door. He was white-haired and carried his arm in a sling. With a shock Webb remembered the man who had swayed on a running horse, remembered the shock of white hair he had seen over his gun sights.

"The kid got lost," the white-haired man drawled. "He come ridin' in here, clear lost an' scared out of his head."

"I'm obliged to you for lookin' after him," Webb said, still narrow-eyed, still tight and watchful. "I'll take him along home."

The man nodded.

"We didn't know we had neighbors," Webb continued. "You ain't been here long, have you?"

"Not long," said the man.

"And you got a bum arm." Webb's eyes flashed to the sling and back to the youthful face beneath the white hair. "That's tough."

"It's gettin' well," said the white-haired man.

"It don't," Webb drawled, "take a bullet hole long to get well, does it?"

Jack had moved back until he was beside Sucker. Webb dropped his reins and stepped away from horse and boy.

The white-haired man's face was a mask, and his right hand hovered over the butt of the gun at his hip. "Bullet hole—" he began.

"Don't lie!" Webb said curtly. "I'm the man that gave it to you!"

Instantly action came. The hovering hand dropped to the gun and snatched it out. It came up and leveled. Webb, leaping to the left, away from Jack and Sucker, snatched at his own gun, brought it up in the short arc from holster to waist, thumbing the hammer as he drew. There, in front of the deserted shack the two guns barked their hatred. Webb, off balance from his leap, stumbled and went down, only to scramble up, but in the shack's door white-haired Yancy pitch-poled back and down so that only his boots showed beyond the threshold. Sucker threw his head high and ran a few short steps, and Jack Norris screamed. That was all. Very slowly, gun held ready, Webb stepped toward the door of the shack. The boots did not move.

"Webb!" Jack shrilled. "Webb!"

"Stay there, Jack," Webb ordered, and stepped over the boots.

For an instant, there inside the shack, Webb looked down at the quiet face of the man he had killed. Yancy lay on his back, his gun on the floor beside him. Beyond the door was a table, two boxes that served for chairs, and a bed rolled out on the floor. There was a saddle beside the door and Yancy's outflung arm touched the skirts.

Webb moved on into the single room, almost without volition. On the table there were groceries, a little pile of them as though they had been taken down from shelves to prepare a meal. A small sack of sugar stood there, the paper torn open but the string still around it. On the sack the grocer's bill still showed, under the string, the blue carbon writing plain. Webb McLeod touched the bill, pulled it out and looked at it. Across the top line were the words: "Acct. TU Ranch." Slowly Webb's fingers opened and the bill fluttered down.

"Webb!" Jack was outside the door, calling.

Webb stepped back, reached down and pulled the body into the room. Then, circling the body, he left the room, shutting the door after him.

"Is he—did you kill him, Webb?" Jack's voice was small and frightened.

"He's dead, Jack," Webb said heavily. "Don't cry, kid. Don't you! Now, take it easy, boy." He knelt as he spoke, and Jack, running to him, buried his frightened face in Webb's shoulder. Under Webb's hand the boy's shoulders shook.

"I'll take you home, Jack," Webb promised. "Nancy's waitin'. It's all right, kid. It's all right now."

After a time the small boy calmed somewhat and it was then that Webb stood up, holding the child in his arms, cradling him. "I'll take you home, son," he promised once more. "Steady now."

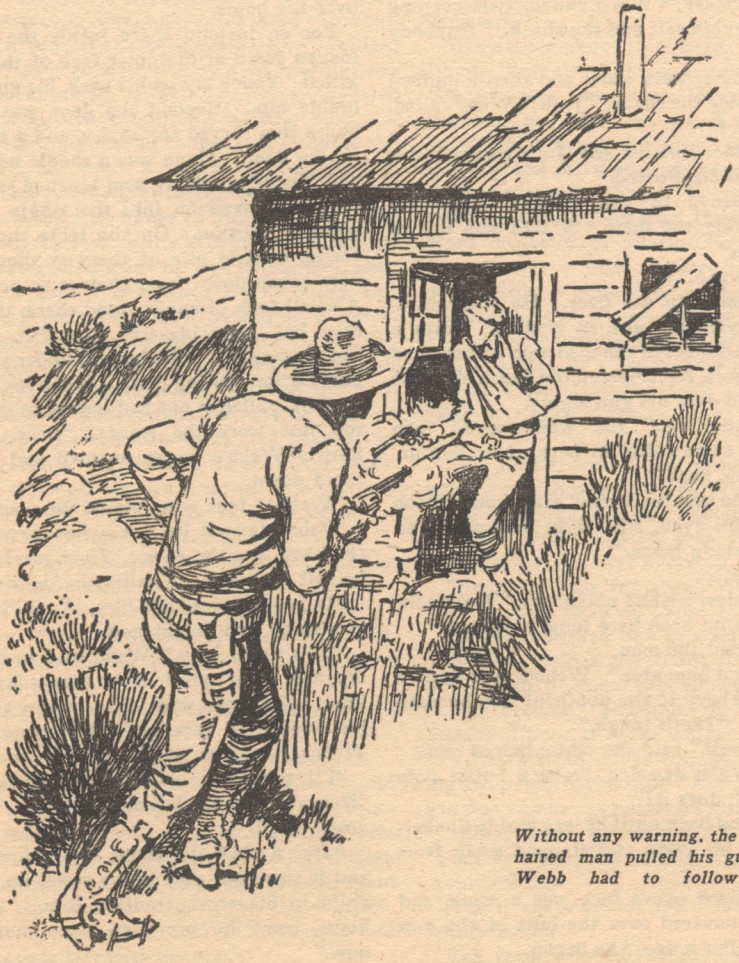
It was a task to catch Sucker while Webb carried the boy. Sucker was still nervous and would not stand. Finally Webb caught the trailing reins and he stood talking to the animal soothingly. With Webb's voice forbidding movement, Sucker

continued to stand while he allowed indignities to be heaped upon him. Webb put the reins over Sucker's neck and then, catching a stirrup, holding Jack with one strong arm, he mounted. Sucker looked back, eyes rolling and ears protestingly flat against his head.

"Sucker!" Webb warned, gathering the reins. "Don't you!"

Sucker forwent further protest. Carrying his double burden, he minced along away from the shack.

In a little while Jack had recovered sufficiently to tell his story. He told Webb how he had gone to investigate the shack, how he had found the horse in the stable, how the white-haired man had come out and ordered him into the shack. Jack was still frightened and almost inarticulate but Webb gathered that the white-haired man had not mistreated the boy. When they came into the yard at the N Bar N, Nancy ran to them, and Webb, bending from the saddle, put Jack in her arms.



Without any warning, the white-haired man pulled his gun and Webb had to follow suit.

"He's all right," he said, forestalling Nancy's questions. "But he's seen a bad thing, Nancy. Just kind of pet him, an' don't ask questions."

Holding the boy in her strong young arms, Nancy started toward the house, then stopped and turned, for Webb had not dismounted. "Aren't you coming?" she demanded. "Webb—"

Sucker was moving and Webb, looking down from the horse at the girl, shook his head. "I've got an errand," he said grimly.

"But, Webb!" Nancy almost forgot the child that she held in her arms. "Where are you going? What is it, Webb? What's happened?"

"I'm going to the TU," Webb answered. "I— So long, Nancy. Look after Jack." Sucker broke from walk to trot, and Nancy, standing there with Jack in her arms, her eyes wide and frightened, called to the lone rider:

"Webb! Webb!"

Webb McLeod did not look back. Sucker traveled steadily northeast, toward the TU.

There were others riding toward the TU at the same time. Len Howard, at the head of four YO hands, steadily covered the country between his own ranch and Benedict's. Like Webb McLeod, Len Howard had an errand. Late that afternoon one of his riders had come in on a spent horse to report. The rider found Howard at the house and, questioned as to what was wrong, blurted out his tale.

"It's the TU, Mr. Howard," he said. "I was south of here, r akin' my regular ride, when I seen a bunch o' our cows. There was that ol' curled-horn cow an' that ol' line-backed cow that had the big steer calf last year an'—"

"Git on with it!" Howard interrupted. "What's got you so upset?"

"I was tellin' you." The rider was aggrieved. "There was about fifty head of our cattle an' there was two men movin' 'em."

"Two men movin' 'em?" Howard straightened in the chair he occupied.

"Yes, sir. Two men. They was takin' 'em south. I started down toward 'em an' they seen me an' one of 'em pulled off his hat an' waved me around."

"What did you do?" Howard snapped.

"I kept ridin' toward them. Then one of 'em pulled out a Winchester an' took a couple of shots at me an' I come back here to tell you what was happenin'."

"Who were they?" Howard rasped. "Did you get to see?"

"I didn't get close enough to see their faces, but I know who they are, all right." The rider swelled portentously. "They was TU men. One of 'em was ridin' that TU pinto, the one they call Lookout because he bucks so hard. I think it was Chalk an' one of them other boys. I thought you'd want to know about it."

"Yo're damned right I want to know about it!" Howard swore. "You send Joe up here as soon as he comes in, an'—"

"Joe's in now. He's down to the corral."

"Send him up here then. An' you run in fresh horses an' saddle one for me. Go on!"

The rider bowlegged his way out of the room and Len Howard, awaiting the advent of his foreman, sat musing, tapping his fingers impatiently on the table top.

"Damn him!" he growled. "First he hogs that Thomas grass an' now this. We'll just go over an' see Mr. Benedict."

So it was that Joe, the YO foreman, coming on the run, found his boss pacing up and down the living room of the ranchhouse. Joe listened to the orders, mixed with the cursing, and perforce agreed.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Howard," Joe said. "We'll get ready right away. Shorty's already gone out for the horses."

Within forty minutes after the report, Howard and his men rode from the YO and on their saddles unaccustomed rifles rubbed against fender leather and on their hips guns rode, their butts projecting.

From a vantage point above the YO ranchhouse Panchito and Mournful Jones saw the little army depart. Panchito turned to Mournful, and the latter met the Mexican's grin with one of his own.

"It worked," said Mournful. "It sure worked."

"Es verdad!" Panchito seconded. "W'at we do now, Mournful?"

"Now we'll go get Webb an' tell him what's happened."

"An' those cows?" Panchito questioned.

"Let the cows go," Mournful said loftily. "Shucks, there's lots of cows. We're busy helpin' Webb git that gal. Who was that leetle feller that runs around naked, Panchito? Cupid? That's who we are."

Panchito looked doubtfully at his companion. "Mebbe," he said. "But me, I am not naked."

"We'll go tell Webb anyhow," Mournful decided. "Come on."

Panchito grunted as he turned his horse to follow his companion. "Me," he said, "I don't theenk eet was so damned smart to esteal that peento horse, or to move the cows or to shoot at theese man like we done. I theenk eet ees more better to esteal the cows by moonlight, like always, an' take them to *mi tio*, Javelino."

"Aw, quit growlin'," Mournful threw over his shoulder. "You had a good time an' you know it!"

So it was that while Len Howard and his men

rode toward Virgil Benedict's TU Ranch, Mournful and Panchito covered country toward the N Bar N, and perhaps an hour after Webb McLeod's departure from the place, they entered the yard.

Webb was not at the barn and his horse was not in the corral, so Mournful and Panchito went to the house. Nancy, with Jack in her arms, occupied a chair in the kitchen. Her face was white as she looked up to see the two men in the doorway.

Nancy had managed to quiet Jack. Also by gentle questioning she had learned his story. She put the boy down when she saw the two men, and came to her feet.

"Where's Webb?" Mournful began. "We got—"

"He's gone to the TU," Nancy blurted. "You've got to stop him, Mournful. You've got to!"

"Here's what is this?" Mournful demanded, unceremoniously entering the kitchen. "Webb's gone to the TU, you say?"

"Yes. He brought Jack home. Jack ran away and went over to the old Hershey shack. Webb found him there. There was a man there that had Jack, and Webb killed him. Now he's gone to the TU." She seized Mournful's arm. "You've got to stop him."

"Theese other fallows ees goeeng to the TU *tambien,*" Panchito said mildly. *"Que no,* Mournful?"

"By gosh, yes!" Mournful exclaimed, jerking free of Nancy's grasp. "Come on, Panchito. We got—" He stopped. There was the pound of hoofs in the yard. Voices sounded. Mournful and Panchito, with Nancy beside them, faced the kitchen door. Boots thumped on the porch and Dan Pettigrew, the sheriff, appeared in the opening. Behind Pettigrew, his bruised face malevolen, stood Allen Carris.

"Carris says yo're hidin' that murderer here, Nancy," Pettigrew rasped. "Where is he?"

Webb McLeod, stopping Sucker on the top of a rise, looked down the slope through the dusk and saw the lights below him. This was the TU, Virgil Benedict's headquarters. Webb had never visited the TU before, but from description, he knew the place. Most ranchhouses are set in valleys or at the foot of a slope for protection. The TU was no exception to that rule. Below Webb there were the compact buildings, the house, the barn, the corrals, the bunkhouse, and the stack yard of Virgil Benedict's ranch.

All along the way Webb McLeod had been torn by two ideas: His love for Nancy, and the thing that he had set for himself to do. He knew, there was no question in his mind, that the white-haired man back in that deserted shack had been the killer in Rinconcito. He knew, too, was sure and certain, that Virgil Benedict had hired that killer. And Benedict was one of the two who encroached upon the N Bar N, one of the two men who would, if left alone, force Nancy Norris and her brother from their home. Anger seethed in Webb McLeod and, being what he was—a product of the country and the time—he knew but one way to assuage that anger, but one way to set things right.

It did not occur to Webb that he could ride to Rinconcito and there present what he knew to the law officers. It did not occur to him that there were others than himself concerned in this matter. Nancy Norris, his whole world, was threatened. He himself, because of the plotting of these men was a hunted outlaw, accused of murder. To Webb McLeod there was only one answer to the problem. Sitting there on Sucker, he reached back and touched the answer, lifting it from his holster and spinning the cylinder.

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. A life for a life." Not that Webb knew the words or thought them. But such was his uncompromising code.

Satisfied, he replaced his weapon and rode slowly down the hill. Dusk was all about, thick and concealing, and Sucker, tired as he was, swung his head from side to side as he picked his path. Sucker had enough thoroughbred in his blood lines to go until he dropped.

At the foot of the hill Webb stopped the bay. The stack yard was immediately before him and beyond the stacks were the corrals. Through the dusk Webb could see the corral fence now and the black blotch of horses standing there. Something was happening at the TU. Angry as he was, Webb was not precipitous. The hate that filled him was cold, a clear-white coolness that was more deadly than hot wrath. Dismounting from his horse, Webb looped Sucker's reins around a post of the stack-yard fence and then, with a lift and hitch of his gun belt, walked forward.

In the living room of the TU, Virgil Benedict and Len Howard faced each other. The TU riders, caught at their bachelor meal, were still at the table and just inside the door the men that Howard had brought from the YO formed a little line. Len Howard's black eyes were hot as he confronted Benedict, and his voice was wrathful.

"I suppose you'll lie out of this," he rasped. "By Satan, I've caught you this time, Virgil."

"Len"—Benedict took a step toward the angry man—"what's got into you? What's wrong?"

"There's plenty wrong!" snapped Howard. "Shorty caught your men moving my cattle this afternoon. Now try to lie out of that!"

"Yo're crazy!" Benedict's anger flared up to meet Howard's own. "The man that told you that lied."

"I brought him along," Howard said, grim satisfaction in his voice. "Tell him what you saw, Shorty."

The YO rider took a step forward. "I seen it!" he announced. "I seen two of yore men movin' a bunch of our cows, takin' 'em south. One of them was ridin' that pinto horse of yores. I yelled at 'em an' they took a shot at me."

"What do you think of that, Benedict?" Howard demanded. "I suppose it ain't so?"

"Of course, it ain't so!" Benedict wheeled to his men for confirmation. "There wasn't a man here mixed up in that kind of a deal. Pick out the men you saw, Shorty. Pick 'em out!"

"I didn't see just who." Under Benedict's fire, Shorty weakened. "But they shot at me—an' one of them was ridin' that pinto horse—"

"I knew you'd lie," Howard thundered. "Benedict, you've double-crossed me all along in this deal! First, with the Thomas business, an' then—"

"Shut up, you fool!" Benedict rasped. "Do you want—"

He stopped short. The TU and YO men were watching each other. Len Howard, in front of the door was glaring at Benedict; but Benedict, staring at Howard, had seen motion behind the black-bearded man. Webb McLeod, tall and straight and icy cold, had stepped through the screenless doorway and stood, almost filling the opening. Howard, seeing Benedict's eyes staring past him, stepped quickly aside and turned, and in the big room utter quiet fell.

Into that quiet Webb McLeod threw his voice, low and clear, every word biting and succinct. "Go ahead an' tell it, Howard. Tell how you an' Benedict framed to kill Carl Thomas."

Howard was clear. Benedict, who confronted Webb, had removed his gun belt while he ate supper. Now it hung over his chair, the holstered gun convenient to his hand, the butt jutting up into his palm. Benedict snatched the weapon, jerking it free, and as he moved, so, too, did Webb McLeod and Len Howard. Webb matched Benedict, beat him fractionally, for Benedict's gun hung in the loose holster for the fraction of a second. But Webb did not beat Len Howard.

The YO owner's gun came up and, as Webb fired at Benedict, so, simultaneously Howard shot at Webb. Benedict bent forward as the slug struck him in the middle, and Webb, recoiling from the shock of Howard's shot, swung his weapon and pulled trigger at the black-bearded man.

At the table a TU rider came up from his bench, his knees striking the table, upsetting the lamp. Against the wall a YO man pulled his gun and fired, and, hit a second time, Webb McLeod went back through the door, falling, his head striking against the knob as he went down.

For just an instant longer light remained in the big room of the TU and then as the fallen lamp went out, all hell broke loose. The men there, YO and TU riders, not comprehending what had happened, caught by the swiftness of events, sought escape and, as they tried to get free, fought with guns and chairs and fists and any weapon upon which they could place their hands.

All this Webb McLeod did not see or hear. Hit twice, once by a slug that tore through the big muscle of his thigh, again by a bullet that sliced into his side, he lay unconscious on the porch, unmoving, not even stirring when a panic-stricken man, fleeing from the house, stepped squarely on his face. The shock of the lead and the fall against the doorknob had done their work for Webb McLeod.

VIII.

Fire burned Webb McLeod's leg and his side and something cold and soft rested on his forehead. He opened his eyes to see the long, sad face of Mournful Jones peering down at him. Webb blinked his eyes again and yet again. The face remained.

"Mournful," he murmured. His voice roared in his ears, but Mournful bent closer as though the word was hard to hear.

"Mournful," Webb said again.

Mournful's face disappeared, and when Webb tried to turn his head it rang like a gong. He relinquished the idea. Then Mournful's voice sounded.

"Hey!" he called. "He's come to!"

Following that announcement there was a good deal of confusion around Webb McLeod. Hands moved his head and his leg was shifted, aching like fire in the process, and then Nancy was beside him, close to him, and Nancy's lips were very soft as they kissed his. Webb did not care how much his leg pained, or his side or his head, just so long as Nancy was near. He closed his eyes again, assured that she had not left him.

Somewhere behind Nancy, very far away, a voice said: "It's loss of blood. He'll be all right." Nancy's hand was warm and firm as it gripped Webb's own. He tried to grip back, but somehow it didn't work and he drifted off, still trying.

The next time he opened his eyes he felt a great deal better. Nancy was still there, and when Webb would have spoken to her she put her finger against her lips and said: "Shhh." So Webb did not speak, being content simply to lie there and stare at Nancy. The girl stood for a moment and then called: "Doctor." There was movement and a bewhiskered face looked down at Webb.

"Feeling pretty weak, young fellow?" the face said.

"I . . . feel all right," Webb managed.

The bearded face grinned. "There are things that will make you feel better," he said. "Could you eat a little soup?"

The soup seemed very undesirable and Webb would have shaken his head had it not ached so much, but apparently the bearded man did not realize that. He gave orders and presently sponged Webb's face with a soft cloth. Then, putting a strong hand under Webb's back, he lifted him while other hands propped pillows in place.

Nancy came with a white napkin and a steaming bowl and seated herself beside Webb on the bed and put a spoon to his mouth. Webb drank obediently at her command. He would do anything that Nancy said. He always would do anything that she said. And the soup was hot and surprisingly good.

Looking over the spoon, Webb could see Mournful and grinning Panchito and small Jack and big Dan Pettigrew, still with a star on his open vest; and another man that he did not know but who evidently was the doctor.

"Drink your soup, Webb," Nancy crooned, and Webb obeyed.

When the bowl was empty Webb felt much better. The doctor took his pulse and Nancy sat beside him and they told Webb what had happened, at least part of it. Dan Pettigrew was the narrator. There was much that needed explaining in Pettigrew's tale, but from what he said, Webb was all clear of the charge of killing Carl Thomas. Pettigrew was profuse in his apologies for ever thinking that Webb had committed that murder. It seemed, from what Pettigrew said, that someone had told him all about it.

"It was Benedict an' this feller Yancy," Pettigrew explained. "They framed it. Benedict and Howard hired Yancy."

Then Nancy Norris announced that Webb was tired and that he had to rest. The pillows were removed from behind him and he lay back on the bed and closed his eyes, listening to the whispers and the people tiptoeing about him. He was very tired and very content because, somehow, he knew everything was all right. And just as he was ready to drift off to sleep someone whispered: "Webb."

Webb opened his eyes and Mournful was beside the bed, bending over him.

"Me an' Panchito got to go," Mournful whispered. "We're all O. K. now, but I don't trust that sheriff. We're pullin' out. So long, Webb."

Somehow Mournful's presence roused Webb. He shifted his head and stared steadily at his friend "Tell me," he demanded.

Mournful glanced toward the door and then, reaching out, drew a chair up beside the bed and sat down. "I ain't got much time," he whispered.

"Tell me," Webb said again.

Mournful hunched his shoulders. "All right," he whispered. "I'll tell you."

Sitting there beside the bed, Mournful whispered his tale. He told of his riding the appropriated TU pinto as he and Panchito shifted the gathered YO cows. "You wanted them to git to fightin'," Mournful defended his actions. "Me an' Panchito was just helpin' out."

He continued then, telling of the warning shot he had given the YO rider when the man disregarded their wave around; then of the return to the ranch, the arrival of Pettigrew and Allen Carris with a posse, of Jack's tale of the fight at the shack, and of how Pettigrew and the posse, with Mournful and Panchito accompanying them, had ridden to the TU to arrest Webb.

"It was all over when we got there," Mournful completed. "You was layin' outside the door, out cold, an' a whole puddle of blood around you. Somebody'd stepped on yore face. Benedict was inside, dead, an' Howard was layin' over in a corner. He wasn't dead. Pettigrew got to him and Howard told all about it, how him an' Benedict hired this feller Yancy to kill Thomas. Howard spilled all his guts. He thought he was goin' to die an', by gosh, he was right! There wasn't none of the rest of 'em left. They must've gone clear loco an' got to fightin' each other. Just what did happen there, Webb? We couldn't quite figger it out. We made a guess that you'd come in an' jumped them when they was all together, but we didn't know for certain."

"I shot Benedict," Webb said weakly. "I told him what I knew an' he went for his gun. Howard pulled on me an' hit me. Then the light went out I don't know what happened after that."

"They must've had hell," Mournful declared, with interest in his voice. "I'd kind of liked to been there a-watchin'. I'll bet—" He stopped. "Shh!" he warned. "Here she comes. Close yore eyes, Webb."

Obediently Webb closed his eyes. Nancy's voice, low and severe, came from the door. "What are you doing here, Mournful?"

"Just watchin' him," Mournful said apologetically.

"I'll watch him now," Nancy announced.

Mournful's hand pressed Webb's. That was good-by. Then the chair creaked and Mournful's boots sounded as he tiptoed across the room, and the door closed gently. When Webb opened his eyes Nancy occupied the chair, her face toward the door.

"Nancy," Webb whispered. Nancy answered

that word, turning swiftly, and then seeing that Webb's eyes were open, she dropped to her knees beside the bed and her lips were soft against Webb's bruised cheek, and her arm across his shoulders was strong and reassuring.

Outside the bedroom door Mournful Jones spoke to the doctor. "Where'd Pettigrew go?" he demanded.

"He said that he was going over to that shack," the doctor answered. "A wagon was supposed to come out from town to get Yancy's body, and the sheriff was going to meet it over there."

Mournful nodded and glanced at Panchito. "We'll go help," he said. "Come on, Panchito. You tell Nancy so long for us, will you, doc?"

"Can I go along?" demanded Jack.

"Not this trip," Mournful answered, striding to the door.

Down at the corral, while they saddled, both Mournful and Panchito were silent. Not until the horses were in motion did either of the men speak.

"I don't theenk," Panchito said rebelliously, "that we need to help the sheriff, Mournful. I theenk he can help heemself."

"We ain't goin' to help the sheriff," Mournful assured his friend. "We're goin' to get them cows."

"Een the daylight?" Panchito was incredulous.

"An' why not? There's nobody lookin', is there?" Mournful glanced around to make sure.

"Bot w'at about Webb?" Panchito protested.

"Webb's looked after," Mournful returned briefly. "He's goin' to marry Nancy. He'll stay right here an' raise a family. There's goin' to be plenty of room in this country now—for a family an' a ranch both."

Panchito, his question answered, was satisfied for the moment. Mournful, as they crowned the rise above the N Bar N, stopped his horse and looked back. Panchito drew rein beside him.

"You got a chew?" Mournful asked.

Panchito supplied the desired plug and looked sadly at the remnant that Mournful handed back.

"You know," Mournful said philosophically, "I told you one time that Webb wasn't tough like us, Panchito. He wasn't cut out for this cattle-stealin' business. Now you take you an' me, we don't let nothin' interfere with business."

"No?" asked Panchito.

"No," Mournful answered firmly. "The trouble with Webb is, he's a gentleman. Come on, let's go."

Again the horses started and the two men rode in silence. "W'at ees gentleman, Mournful?" Panchito asked suddenly.

Mournful thought that over. "A gentleman," he said out of the depth of his wisdom, "is a feller that goes around doin' good. A gentleman is the kind of feller that when somebody else is in a tight, he pitches in an' helps him out. He's kind of—Well, shucks! He's gentle!"

"An' Webb, he's gentleman?"

"Yeah."

"An' we ain't?"

"Hell, no! You ain't gentle, are you?"

Side by side, the two rode on across the grass land toward the little bunch of YO cows; headed for the job of driving those cows south to where Javelino Paiz waited.

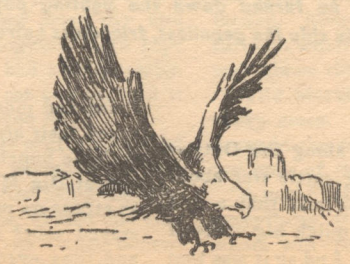
Panchito sighed deeply. Mournful looked keenly at his companion. The Mexican's face showed his utter depression. Then suddenly it brightened.

"Bot anyhow we mak' some money," Panchito declared.

Mournful glanced scornfully at his companion. Always thinking about the cash, Panchito was. The Mexican disregarded that scornful look. Panchito felt all right. Business was business and Panchito could be trusted to attend to it.

Back at the N Bar N, Webb McLeod, gentleman by definition, smiled up at his girl and, south of the ranch, the other two, gentlemen also if Mournful Jones was right, rode on toward those YO cows.

THE END.



GUN BOSS OF POWDER RIVER

by Walt Coburn

Men called Lige Poe a hired killer, yet when a range war flamed in Wyoming, he turned down the fighting pay of a powerful cattle baron to side the penniless, friendless Laird of Powder River

I.

The "rustling of the leaves" along the Outlaw Trail said that there was a big cattle war about to bust wide open in Wyoming and that a fast man with a gun could make a quick big stake if he hired out to the right outfit. And so it was that some hard-looking strangers were riding into Wolf Point and most of them packed saddle guns and timed their arrival after dark. They rode in pairs or little bunches of three or four and when they met at Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon they met as strangers might meet. For the most part they stayed sober enough to shoot fast and straight, and they eyed one another with a cold wariness and distrust; there was no friendship or trust

given or taken among these renegades who rode the Outlaw Trail with a bounty on their hides. They came from such places as the Hole in the Wall in Wyoming, from the Hide-away across the Montana line, from Brown's Park in the Colorado Mountains, and Robber's Roost in Utah. Some were tough and had a clean sort of courage. Others were out to make a hard reputation for themselves as killers. These, lacking real courage, were far more dangerous than the outlaws whose ways they aped because they would do their killing from the brush and afterward cover their murders with whiskey lies.

Lige Poe had come from as far south along the Outlaw Trail as the Animas Valley in New Mexico and he rode alone. He reached Wolf Point about midnight and when he had put up his horse he hid his saddle gun where he could get it in a tight. Having taken off his brush and cactus-scarred bullhide chaps, he tied his six-shooter holster low on his right thigh with a buckskin string. Then he walked slowly up the street to Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon.

Lige Poe was somewhere in his early thirties. He was tall, and his long muscles were as hard and pliable as braided rawhide. His hair was thick and as coarse and black as an Indian's. He had lean, flat jaws and a hawk-beaked nose. His heavy black brows met above the bridge of his nose and a drooping black mustache hid the square corners of his tight-lipped mouth. His eyes were as gray and bleak as a winter sky.

Lige Poe seldom smiled and never laughed. When he was sober he was soft-spoken and quiet-mannered but whiskey turned him into an ugly-tempered braggart who told tall tales about his ability as a bronc rider and fast roper and his prowess as a gun fighter. And when he was getting over one of his periodical drunks he brooded and sulked as his memory taunted him with this loud-mouthed bragging that was so alien to his customary modesty and almost boyish shyness in a crowd. And so Lige Poe drifted along dim trails to cross new horizons where no man knew him and it was as if he were forever driven by some black haunting shadow that he tried to shake off but could never lose.

Men called Lige Poe a killer. Even outlaw campfires in places like Robber's Roost or the Hole in the Wall held no welcome, no warmth for this lone rider of the dim trails. Even the toughest outlaw gangs stood in awe of the man who could outride, outrope, outshoot all of them but never spoke of his ability as a cowhand or gun fighter unless he was drunk.

Lige Poe saw the saddled horses at the hitch racks along the street that was dark save for the patches of light coming from the windows and doorways of Wolf Point's half-dozen saloons. He heard men shouting and singing and he heard the squeak of fiddles, the wheezy melody of accordions and the discordant pounding of tinny pianos out of tune. Wolf Point was a boom cattle town and it was crowded with all sorts of men. Cowpunchers, gun fighters, tinhorn gamblers, drifters, bums, dance-hall percentage girls.

Texas had sent up many trail herds and the Wyoming range was overstocked with longhorn cattle. Wolf Point was wide open and tough and because of this invasion of men from the outlaw hangouts there was no law tonight in the little cow town. There was a range war brewing and the men behind it were men with political power and unlimited money behind them, so the rustling of the leaves had told it as far south as the Animas Valley in New Mexico where Lige Poe had heard its whisper.

Big Mike's Last Chance was crowded. Lige Poe's bleak eyes took it all in as he stood at the end of the bar with his right hand near his ivory-handled six-shooter. His quick scrutiny found the faces of men he knew and many others he had never before laid eyes on. A few of them nodded covert recognition but their eyes slid away from his cold scrutiny. And before Big Mike had slid an empty glass and the bar bottle toward him the dread name of Lige Poe had swept over the crowd like a chill wind. Voices dropped to lower tones. The shrill tipsy laughter of percentage girls faded. Men who knew him feigned interest in their cards or dancing or drinking. Strangers who had never seen Lige Poe stared at him.

Big Mike was a quart-a-day man but he had the ears of a fox and the sharp eye of an eagle. He was the contact man for the big shots who had sent out word that renegade guns were for hire at Wolf Point. He wiped a big hand on his soiled bar apron and shoved it across the bar. The wide grin on his whiskey-red face went no further than his mouth and cunning glinted in his blood-shot green eyes.

"The boss will be in town tomorrow," he told the newcomer. "Drink hearty. It's on the house."

Lige Poe poured his drink with his left hand. He did not seem to see Big Mike's offered hand and the saloon man's grin faded a little as he pulled his hand slowly back.

There was a battered-looking piano on a raised platform. On it a lantern-jawed, pasty-faced "professor," a glass of whiskey within reach, a sodden, half-smoked cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, was playing "Auld Lang Syne." A black-haired girl in a red dress who was standing beside the piano singing the song looked too fresh and young and clean to be in Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon.

Equally out of place here was the big clean-

shaven, red-faced young pilgrim in the corduroy hunting coat and the boots, breeches and hat of a Canadian Northwest Mounty. He was a little tipsy and his blue eyes were bloodshot. He stood on the other side of the piano, a wad of money in his hand, staring at the girl, listening to her song, giving her his rapt attention. The song or the girl or both was making the big dude forget that he was being watched by the crowd whose attention was now divided by the whispered news that Lige Poe was in the saloon and had come to sell his quick-triggered gun to the highest bidder.

The girl, however, sensed that something was happening. Her eyes, black-gray under heavy lashes, swept the crowd as she sang. Then she looked across the room and straight at Lige Poe.

Her face paled and her voice faltered. She gripped the top of the piano as if she needed it to brace her. Then her red lips smiled stiffly and she went on singing and her eyes and smile went back to the big young man who was as British as if he stood there waving the Union Jack.

"That's His Nibs," Big Mike's whiskey voice informed Poe. "The Laird of Powder River. Thinks he's the cattle king of Wyoming. The danged remittance man hasn't sense enough to know that Pina's makin' a sucker outa him. His Nibs is in the way. A couple of boys from the Hole in the Wall is takin' care of him. That's them now—"

Two hard-looking cowpunchers had shouldered through the crowd. They picked up the girl in the red dress and swung her up on top of their shoulders. She clawed and fought like a wild cat. The big young Britisher started for them. They tossed the girl to the top of the piano and jerked their guns. The Laird of Powder River charged them with his bare fists and the girl in the red dress screamed at him:

"Don't! Cowan! They'll kill you! Don't!"

Half a dozen men rushed the big Britisher, their gun barrels swinging. The Laird of Powder River stood on widespread legs and his big arms were flailing. But the hard-faced gunhands were clubbing him down with their six-shooters. One man, one unarmed man, against half a dozen hired killers.

The girl in the red dress was so white now that the paint on her cheeks stood out like red lumps. Her voice, shrill, frantic, shouted across the crowd. *"Lige!"*

Lige Poe went in fighting, the bottle of whiskey gripped in his left hand, his six-shooter in his right. He moved fast and hit hard. He smashed the bottle across one man's head and his gun barrel cracked another behind the ears. His white teeth were bared in a thin-lipped snarl and he fought with the cold fury that carried him through the crowd and to the side of the big Britisher.

The Laird of Powder River was battling with stubborn, gallant coolness. His hat had been knocked off and his tawny head was reddening with blood that poured from a scalp wound and down across his face. Out of that mask of blood his eyes showed blue and bright and without fear.

A gun roared and a bullet nicked the Britisher's cheek. The gun in Lige Poe's hand spat fire and the man who tried to kill the Laird of Powder River clawed at a bullet-smashed shoulder. Lige Poe's gun roared twice and two more renegades with guns in their hands went down. Then Lige yanked the girl from the top of the piano and flung her at the big Britisher.

"Take her out the back door, you big blockhead! Git 'im outa here pronto, Pina, you danged little trouble maker. Git!"

Lige Poe's six-shooter belched fire. His two bullets smashed the two swinging lamps that hung from the ceiling and the saloon was plunged in sudden darkness. Guns blazed at close quarters as some of the renegades took advantage of the blackness to settle old scores. Lige had hold of the girl with one hand and his other hand gripped the neck of the Britisher's corduroy coat and the three of them went out the back door of the saloon.

The girl led the way and they kept to the shadows. The Britisher tried to say something but Lige Poe shut him up with a snarl.

"Git your horse and hit the trail. Buy a gun and learn to use it and if you've got the sense of a half-wit you'll stay clear of these honkatonk gals. Like as not she's got your roll in her stockin' right now. She'll split it with Big Mike. She works thataway."

The Laird of Powder River had one arm around the girl's shoulders and was wiping the blood from his eyes with his free hand. Lige Poe left them standing there and walked away. He stopped in the shadow of a building and reloaded his six-shooter. A moment later he saw the big Britisher ride off into the night and watched the girl run down the alley and vanish in the black shadows.

II.

When the lights went on again in Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon Lige Poe strode out into the street and went back into the saloon by way of the front door.

Big Mike was restoring order in a thorough manner, a six-shooter in one hand and a heavy wooden mallet known among the barroom fraternity as a bung-starter gripped in his other hand. His two bouncers were wielding double-barreled sawed-off shotguns.

There were several men with cracked heads and gunshot wounds. A grizzled doctor who acted half drunk and needed a shave and haircut was getting to them as best he could. Three men had been killed and their dead bodies were being carried into a back room.

Lige Poe stepped through the swinging half doors and stood there with his back to the wall and his six-shooter in his hand. There was a faint smile twisting his mouth and his bleak eyes were narrowed. His voice broke across an uneasy silence as men stared at him.

"Half a dozen men jumped a big pilgrim that didn't have a gun and I took his part. I had to kill two men and I know 'em both and know their records. Now if those two snakes left ary friends behind to take it up for 'em, here I am. Fill your hands and I'll accommodate you!"

Those nearest Poe began to edge away. They shook their heads and grinned uneasily.

"You kin deal me out, Poe," said one of the men who came from Robber's Roost. "All I want's a drink."

Others voiced a similar opinion. There was a leering grin on Big Mike's whiskey-bloated face as he stepped around behind the bar.

"Belly up to the mahogany, you sons!" he bellowed, his whiskey-husked voice trying to sound hearty. "This round is on the house. Boys will be boys and the damages is counted up to profit and loss."

Lige Poe wasn't drinking. He stood at the end of the bar with his back against the side wall and men shunned him as if he had the plague. He watched the men who had carried away the dead gunnies as they came in from the back room. They were from the Hole in the Wall and the only dangerous hombre among them was a short, swarthy man who walked with a limp and looked as though he might be part Indian. Lige Poe motioned to him.

"Anything stickin' in your craw, Choctaw?" he inquired mildly.

"I was playin' stud hoss poker when the play come up, Poe. Had an ace in the hole and I'd just paired it. You mebbeso lost me a pot or the chances are the tinhorn bankin' the game would have beat me." A grin spread across the short man's swarthy face as he pulled a handful of poker chips from his pocket and stacked them on the bar.

"Cash these, Mike, and don't start cryin' about it. And the next time you hire my men to do a job come to me to make the deal. I never gave no orders to start this ruckus."

Big Mike shoved some money across the bar and raked in the poker chips. He was grinning but his bloodshot green eyes were full of menace.

"If His Nibs had been tromped to death accidental in that ruckus, Choctaw, you'd have come around tomorrow for a big cut of the payoff."

His left hand took the bottle that the swarthy Choctaw was reaching for, and at almost the same instant his right hand palmed a small double-barreled derringer pistol. The heavy-calibered little gun was pointed at Choctaw's chest.

"Do the rest of your drinkin' somewheres else," Big Mike ordered. It's agin' the law to serve likker to Injuns. Git out!"

The half-breed looked at the derringer, then at the big saloon man. Then at one of the bouncers who stood a few feet behind him with a sawed-off shotgun. He grinned at Lige Poe, his black eyes glittering.

"I've heard it said, Poe, that you was an eighth or quarter-breed Cherokee. First thing you know Big Mike will put you on his Injun list. If you're stayin' around this part of the country I'll be cuttin' your trail before long. Me'n my men has hired out to Wade McQueen, the man that sent for you, mebbe."

"Nobody sent for me, Choctaw," Lige Poe said flatly. "And I'll try to take care that I sight you first when our trails cross."

Choctaw grinned. He motioned with a jerk of his head to several men from the Hole in the Wall. Then he looked across the bar at Big Mike.

"I'll drop around to see you when the sign's right, Mike."

He limped out the door, a six-shooter swinging from each thigh and his dusty black hat slanted across his black eyes. Four or five tough-looking gun-toters followed him.

Big Mike glared after him, the derringer in his hand. The two bouncers kept Choctaw and his men covered with their shotguns until they had left the place. The saloon man shrugged his heavy shoulders and grinned at Lige Poe.

"I never liked that breed. I cleaned the house for you, Poe. They'd have ganged you before the night was over."

"I never asked you to take up anything for me, mister."

"The boss left orders to treat you right. You're makin' it tough on me, Poe. Sidin' that doggone remittance man helped nobody. The Laird of Powder River is a trouble maker. He done a hitch with the Mounties and never got over it. Thinks he's the big boss around here, and he ain't got the guts to pack a gun. I've told him to keep outa here but he's stuck on that black-headed gal. Won't let her look at another man. He's bad for the business. And the boss don't like him. All I wanted was for them boys to toss him out on his thick head. If I'd wanted him killed I'd have had the bouncers do the job. Hang it, how was I to know you'd wade in and side the beef eater?

"'Lige Poe is on his way,' the boss tells me. 'When he gets here, treat him right. He's worth a corral full of these two-bit badmen. Poe's writin' his own ticket. He'll spit in that Mounty's eye and scare him so bad he won't quit runnin' till he's acrost the Canadian line. His Nibs will swim the ocean to git back to England, he'll be that boogered when Lige Poe shows up.'

"That's what the boss tells me. Cowan Campbell's had a chance to sell his ranch and git. But he's bullheaded and won't do it. He ain't got a snowball's chance in hell against the boss when this war busts. Wade McQueen gits what he goes after. String your bets with him and you'll wear diamonds, Poe. Cross him up and the coyotes will howl on your grave. I'm tellin' you this for your own good. I know you didn't savvy when you went in to side His Nibs. So I'm puttin' you onto the ropes."

Big Mike was leaning across the bar and his voice was a whiskey whisper. Others at the bar had backed away out of earshot to give the saloon man his chance to feed Lige Poe a confidential talk.

"Where is this big feller's ranch?" asked Poe.

"Twenty miles north of here where Powder River and Crazy Woman branches. It's the old Pitchfork Ranch. Cowan Campbell bought in with Jim Pickett two years ago. Then Pickett got killed and Campbell turned down the boss' offer to buy him out at a fair price. Have a drink and we'll fergit the ruckus. Here's a bottle of Wade McQueen's private likker. It's—"

Lige Poe turned and walked away. Big Mike scowled at him, muttering under his breath as the tall cowpuncher from the Animas country in New Mexico strode out through the swinging doors.

"Why, the surly son!" Big Mike put the special bottle on the back bar and poured himself a drink.

"That's a horse on you, Mike," chuckled a big, sandy-haired renegade from Robber's Roost. "What was you tryin' to sell Lige Poe?"

"I was wisin' him up to a few things, Sandy. Puttin' him onto the ropes. And he walked away from me like I was a bait of wolf poison."

Sandy Sanders' blue-gray eyes crinkled. "Lige Poe don't thank any man for advice. He travels his own trail. You can't bluff him. You can't scare him. And you can't buy him."

Sanders took a roll of bills from his pocket. There was a wide grin on his square-jawed, blunt-nosed face.

"I got about a thousand dollars here, Mike. Any part of it says that Lige Poe ain't throwin' in with Wade McQueen and McQueen's politico friends."

"What do you mean, Sanders?"

"I mean that from what I seen a little while ago when your hired hands from the Hole in the Wall tried to tromp the Laird of Powder River to death and didn't, Lige Poe has done bought chips in the game. And he'll bet his hands like he's holdin' all the aces in the deck." Sanders commenced counting the roll of bills. "A thousand dollars bets that Lige Poe stands at Cowan Campbell's back till his belly caves in. Want it?"

"It's a bet," Big Mike said. "Not even Lige Poe kin buck Wade McQueen and McQueen's friends."

III.

"Which is Wade McQueen's private horse?" Lige Poe asked the sleepy, half-drunken barn man.

"That big bay geldin' in the box stall. Best horse in Wyoming or any man's country."

Poe shoved a twenty-dollar bill into the man's hand. "Go on back to sleep."

He had his bridle in his hand as he walked into the box stall. The barn man blinked his eyes. Then he growled something and reached for his gun. Poe swung a long, hard looping left that caught the man on the jaw and dropped him on the dirt floor of the barn where he lay like a dead man. Poe dragged him out of the way and stuffed the twenty-dollar bill in the sweatband of his hat, then dropped the hat over his face. Then Poe saddled the big bay and shoved his carbine in the saddle scabbard.

The sleek, grain-fed bay was what the cow country calls a one-man horse. Lige pulled his hat down tight and swung into the saddle. The horse stood still for a second or two, then Poe felt him stiffen between his legs. Suddenly the big bay quit the ground pitching and squealing, and headed straight down the street past the lights of half a dozen saloons, past Big Mike's Last Chance.

Big Mike's two tough bouncers came out, six-shooters in their hands. The saloon man was behind them, his face almost purple with fury, his whiskey voice bellowing orders:

"Don't hit the horse. Don't hit McQueen's horse! Git that double-crossin'—"

But a man riding a pitching horse is no easy target. They had to shoot high for fear of hitting Wade McQueen's top horse.

The ivory-handled six-shooter in Lige Poe's hand was spewing flame. The big bay had too much thoroughbred blood and not enough range bronc in him to buck hard. He was pitching straight ahead and Poe was riding easy. He would thumb back the hammer of his gun and pull the trigger every time the big bay's four feet hit the ground. Big Mike and his two burly bouncers were not hard targets. A .45 slug hit one of the bouncers in the shoulder and spun him sideways. A second bullet hit the other bouncer in the thigh and he went down cursing. Big Mike jumped back

inside and a couple of slugs crashed through the big saloon windows.

Poe pulled the big bay's head up and the horse broke into a run. In no time the night swallowed horse and rider. Poe let the horse run for a mile before he pulled him down to an easy lope and reloaded his empty six-shooter. He headed north along the trail that would take him to the Pitchfork Ranch at the forks of Powder River and Crazy Woman.

The big bay steadied down to a long trot that ate up the miles. Poe had a good head start on anybody who might be following him. But he doubted if any of that crowd at the saloon would try to overtake him. The Hole in the Wall bunch and Choctaw had already left town. So he'd have to keep an eye open for any ambush. The country was open. Flats and low ridges, coulees and benchlands.

The only real tough man in that crowd at Big Mike's Last Chance was Sandy Sanders, Poe told himself. But Sandy wouldn't be trailing him. Sandy might meet him in some kind of a big ruckus where they were fighting on opposite sides and they'd do their shooting clean and fair. That was Sandy's way. They had worked for the same outfits in Texas and Arizona and New Mexico and Lige Poe had saved Sandy's life once in a nasty gun scrap across the Mexican border when they were making a few easy dollars fetching wet cattle out of Chihuahua when the moon was right. A man could trust Sandy Sanders as far as he could trust any renegade outlaw. And none of the others Lige Poe had recognized in the saloon had the guts to close-trail a man.

Poe discounted them and the risks of being overtaken. He was riding the best horse he had ever forked in his life. This big bay was a ridge runner and he was covering fast miles in the moonlight.

He wondered what had fetched Pina to Wyoming. The last time he had seen her she was singing songs like "Annie Laurie" and "My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean" at the Bird Cage Opera House in Tombstone and was billed as "Pina from Carolina." And the high-rolling spenders of that turbulent wild and woolly Tombstone were tossing gold pieces from the boxes and onto the stage at her feet until it looked like a shower of gold.

Lige Poe's black brows knitted and his bleak eyes clouded with brooding memory. He was remembering that first and last night they had met. Pina had worn a white silk dress and a red rose in her hair. Later they had walked together, Lige Poe and Pina, out across the hills and there had been a round white moon and the stars had come down low. Lige had picked her up in his arms and carried her over the sharp rocks and cactus because she was wearing high-heeled slippers and silk stockings. It was Christmas night and for once in his life when the whiskey was setting his brain afire Lige Poe had forgotten to brag and boast and instead they had sat there on a hill beyond the edge of town and he had put his coat around her shoulders and they had talked of little things that belonged back in their childhood. Of Pina's first doll and Lige Poe's first pair of red-topped boots, and of when they both believed in Santa Claus. And then they had watched the sunrise above the broken Arizona skyline and he had held her in his arms. They had made promises to one another. Then he had carried her back over the rocks and she had caught the stagecoach just about to pull out of Tombstone.

That had been five years ago. Pina had broken the promise she had made to meet him a week later at Santa Fe. Lige had been three days late because he had stopped at Tucson and had to shoot his way out of some trouble there. But Pina hadn't waited and he had lost her trail there and never been able to pick it up again until now. Until tonight in Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon at Wolf Point, Wyoming, where he had found her singing songs to a drunken mob of renegade gun fighters and a big, red-faced remittance man who had served a hitch in the Mounties and called himself the Laird of Powder River.

Lige Poe didn't realize it was getting daylight. The sound of shooting somewhere ahead jerked him out of his brooding. He pulled up and looked down from the high ridge. He saw the forks of the two rivers. Cottonwood trees. Log buildings and corrals. Tiny puffs of powder smoke from behind patches of brush.

That was the Pitchfork Ranch below and somebody was smoking it up. And Lige Poe was skylighted there in the dawn. He realized it when a bullet whined past his head. He whirled the big bay and yanked at his saddle gun. He saw the puff of powder smoke from a patch of brush out on the ridge about a hundred yards away where a lookout man had been left on guard. The man was too drunk or too rattled to shoot straight, and Poe rode straight at the brush patch, shooting as he spurred the big bay to a run. There was a yelp of pain and the wounded bushwhacker threshed around behind the brush. Poe's carbine cracked again and the man rolled out into the open, grabbing at his middle with both hands. Poe's third shot stiffened him and he lay over on his back with his jaw slacked and blood spilling from his mouth and his glazing eyes staring up at the sky.

The guns a few hundred yards below were cracking and bullets whined all around Poe and the bay horse as he rode in behind the shelter of

the brush. He swung from his saddle and dropped to one knee. His carbine spat and cracked as he raised his sights to the five-hundred-yard notch. The range was long and he had no hope of doing much damage. But he had the advantage of looking down on his enemies and spotting their shelters where they were bushed up in a wide circle surrounding the ranch buildings. He counted half a dozen different brush patches where gun smoke betrayed the hiding places of the men who were giving Cowan Campbell an early-morning surprise. And he began smoking them out of the brush one at a time. He heard yelling and recognized the Indian war whoop of the half-breed Choctaw and so identified the men below.

Choctaw had left this man on guard up here on the ridge, but the fellow had dozed off. There was a half-emptied quart of whiskey near his dead body. Liquor can make a coward into a brave man, but it's tricky stuff. The renegade on guard had taken on too much and had gone to sleep and so failed to warn Choctaw and the others below in time to give them a chance for a clean getaway. And he had been too muddle-brained to shoot straight when he had a chance to knock his target out of the saddle.

Now Lige Poe squatted behind the shelter of the brush on a sort of sandstone rimrock and with a cold-blooded, deadly, businesslike precision he raised his rear sight to the right notch and his bullets began to drive Choctaw and his Hole in the Wall renegades from their buckbrush ambush spots. One at a time. The killer from the Animas range in New Mexico paused to shove fresh cartridges into the box magazine of his .30-40 Winchester and, judging from his complete lack of animation or excitement, he might have been shooting at some set wooden target.

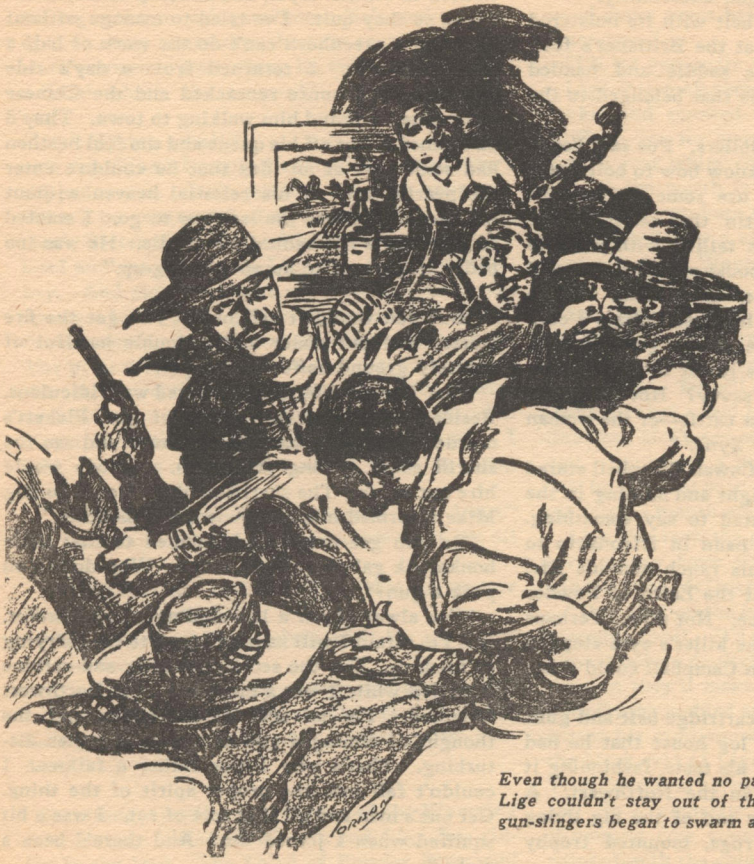
Lige Poe was using one of the cavalry-type carbines and it was a gun that had been selected by proven tests on an army-post rifle range as the most accurate gun out of a hundred of the same type. The visibility in the early dawn was fair. He asked for no better light. When he smoked the first man out from behind his buckbrush shelter he let him ride away without trying to kill him and watched him ride off. Then Poe opened up on the second brush patch, not shooting to kill. He was letting them get away. Smoking them out one at a time. Driving them out into the open and letting them ride away. Then sending half a dozen bullets into the next brush patch.

There was a streak of crimson in the sky where the sun was starting to climb above the ragged skyline. Lige Poe was waiting until he smoked Choctaw from his bushwhacker shelter. Bullets whined and ricocheted as they hit the sandstone and angled off into the air above his head. They

couldn't hit him. He was too well protected and only a part of his head and his gun barrel edged above the protecting rimrock.

Poe reckoned he'd know Choctaw by the way the half-breed rode. He counted four men as he drove them out into the open and watched them ride hard to get out of range. He lay flat on his stomach now with his carbine barrel laid along the rimrock ledge and fired five quick shots at a patch of buckbrush. His white teeth bared in a mirthless grin as he recognized the man who broke from the brush with his horse spurred to a dead run. Quirting over and under and lying low along the neck of his horse. That was his man. No other man rode like the half-breed called Choctaw.

Lige Poe lined his sights but he didn't squeeze the trigger. He didn't kill Choctaw. He jumped to his feet and waved his hat and lifted his voice in a loud shout.



Even though he wanted no part of that saloon fracas, Lige couldn't stay out of the fight when a crew of gun-slingers began to swarm all over Cowan Campbell.

"Head for your hole, you yellow-bellied coyote! Run for your hole, Choctaw! Tell your men what a brave hombre you are in a tight! Tell 'em that Lige Poe give you back your life!

Lige Poe stood there on the rimrock on wide-spread legs and emptied his carbine at the fleeing rider. Each bullet that came from his smoking gun barrel kicked up a little puff of dust ten feet behind the running horse.

Then Poe got on the big bay horse that wore the Q brand of Wade McQueen and rode down the trail to the Pitchfork Ranch. He took with him the cartridge belt and six-shooter and carbine of the dead man on the rimrock ridge. He had turned the dead man's horse loose. He had pillowed the dead renegade's head on his saddle and covered his face with a sweaty saddle blanket. Last of all, he had put a white poker chip on the dead man's forehead.

If there had been a man left there behind the brush, he could easily have shot Lige Poe from his saddle as he rode down the slanting trail to the Pitchfork Ranch. But no gun crash broke and Lige Poe's bleak eyes clouded as he heard the silence of the sunrise. A meadow lark sang the song.

He had no smile, no word of greeting for Cowan Campbell who opened the door of his log house and came out into the open.

IV.

The Laird of Powder River was wearing his tight-fitting black breeches with the wide yellow stripe down the outer seam, his English boots and a clean white shirt. There was a white bandage spotted with dried blood tied around his head and in the dawn his clean-jawed face looked a little

gray. He wore no gun and his lips had lost their color when he tried to grin.

"I say, old man—" he began uncertainly.

Poe threw the cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter on the ground at the Britisher's feet. Then he leaned from his saddle and handed Cowan Campbell the carbine that belonged to the dead man on the hill.

"You owe me a hundred dollars," Poe said flatly. "No more, no less. If you know how to boil water without burnin' it, I kin use some coffee with whiskers on it. And plantin' that feller on the rimrock is your job. He's tallied with a white chip. Save it to keep your books straight. There'll be more from time to time. Dead men. White chips. I cash 'em in for a hundred dollars a chip and you pay cash. I hope you've got the cash, mister, because I can't take it out in trade. You haven't got a thing I want, savvy? Not even your ranch or your horses or your cattle—or the woman that sings you 'Auld Lang Syne.'"

He rode on to the barn. Cowan Campbell stared after him, his blue eyes bright and shining in the crimson sunrise. He wanted to say something. Ask questions. Offer his hand in friendship to the man who had saved his ranch and his life. But there was nothing that the Laird of Powder River could say to Lige Poe. Not now. Perhaps never. The bleakness of the killer's eyes stopped any word a man like Cowan Campbell could think of now.

Campbell picked up the cartridge belt and guns and carried them into the log house that he had built and furnished to suit his taste, fashioning it after the hunting lodges in the Northwest. A huge stone fireplace at one end of the big living room, log walls, Indian rugs, mounted trophy heads and an old English hunting print.

The ashes in the fireplace were cold. The stove in the kitchen held no warmth. Dust had gathered on the hand-hewn, leather-cushioned furniture and the pots and pans and china dishes in the kitchen were crusted with the leavings of badly cooked food.

The Laird of Powder River was alone here, deserted by the men he had hired to ride after his cattle and lastly by the Chinaman who had tended to his house. He was trying to get a fire started in the kitchen stove when Lige Poe came in.

"Doggone it, you can't even build a fire. Didn't *anybody* have the guts to stay with you?"

Lige Poe laughed. The sound matched the bleakness of his eyes. Cowan Campbell's red face flushed even redder and he forced a smile.

"McQueen scared them off," he explained. "You can't blame the poor beggars for not sticking. McQueen's hoodlums have rather brutal ways of terrorizing chaps. My men knew that my partner Jim Pickett had been murdered. Whenever they rode away from the ranch they were shot at. They wanted to remain loyal, but sticking to me meant death, so they quit. I've tried to manage without them but a greenhorn can't do the work of half a dozen cowboys. I returned from a day's ride and found the house ransacked and the Chinese cook gone. I found him walking to town. They'd threatened to cut off his queue and the fool heathen had some sort of an idea that he couldn't enter the pearly gates of his celestial heaven without his queue. He was the last one to go. I wanted to give him a lift behind my saddle. He was too badly frightened to accept the leg-up."

"But you wouldn't sell out." Poe got the fire started and put water and a double handful of coarsely ground coffee in the pot.

"No. The price McQueen offered was ridiculous. Besides, there was the matter of Jim Pickett's murder. I rode to town to hire men and see the sheriff about getting protection. Nobody would hire out to me. The sheriff of Wolf Point, so Big Mike informed me, had gone duck shooting."

"So you got drunk and listened to that little honkatonk gal sing sweet songs. Why don't you pack a gun?"

"I've always been a law-abiding sort of duffer. But I'm afraid I will have to resort to the carrying of firearms. I've the service revolver and carbine I carried while I was a member of the Northwest Mounted. I'm no sort of marksman and the thought of aiming a gun at a man is rather disturbing. That's why I was rather a failure. I couldn't fall into the proper spirit of the thing. Get one's man and all that sort of rot. I was a bit squiffed when I joined 'em. And there'd been a girl—"

"Do you always talk like this?" Lige Poe was almost grinning. He was slicing bacon and starting breakfast.

"I've tried to pick up your Western vernacular. Jim Pickett finally advised me to give it up." Cowan Campbell's smile was boyish, a little wistful. "Jim Pickett was a great chap," he added.

"Yeah. Got any fresh beef?"

"In the meat cooler."

Lige Poe got a pan and butcher knife and followed the big Englishman outside.

"It was decent of you, old man, to come," Campbell said quietly. "Though she said you would."

Lige Poe stiffened. "What? Who said I'd come?"

"Pina. She said she'd send you and some other chaps. But that she'd have to have the money to lay upon the line. I give her what I had and rode home as she advised—"

"I didn't see Pina," Poe cut in flatly. "I don't

expect to see her again. Neither will you if you gave her enough money to git out of Wyoming. She's just another one of the ladies who—"

Lige Poe had carried his carbine when they started for the meat house. He handed the butcher knife and pan to Cowan Campbell and levered a cartridge into the breech.

"Duck inside!" he ordered. "We got company comin'!"

A lone rider was coming down the trail from the top of the ridge, riding hard. For a moment Poe's gun covered the rider. Then he lowered the gun and eased down the hammer to half-cock.

The girl Pina pulled her sweat-wet, blowing horse to a halt. She had changed her red dress for a flannel blouse and leather divided skirt and boots. Her heavy black hair was tucked up under the high crown of her hat.

"Saddle your horses and get away from here as fast as you can ride!" Her voice was tense, her face white. Fright darkened her eyes. "They're coming to kill you both!"

"You set a horse like you belonged there," said Lige Poe. "I thought all you knew how to do was to sing *muy dulce* songs to drunks so they'd buy drinks." He turned to Cowan Campbell.

"You got a couple of fresh horses in the barn. You and the little lady fork 'em and keep on ridin' till you reach the town of Buffalo. Did Jim Pickett leave you any money in the bank when he unloaded a half interest in this Pitchfork outfit on you? I hired out to you on my own terms and I don't want to be left holdin' the sack for my bounty money. My services come high but I'll git the job done."

He took a handful of white poker chips from his pocket. His white teeth showed in a wolfish grin.

"Each chip will mark a dead man. That bushwhacker I left on the hill ain't worth more than a hundred dollars. Choctaw's breed scalp will cost you five hundred. A real tough un like Sandy Sanders is worth a thousand dollars dead. Big Mike costs you two thousand. I'll figure out Wade McQueen's bounty after I git 'im. Think your bankroll kin stand that much nickin'? Like as not you'll be gittin' plenty of good range and it'll be well stocked. McQueen's Q outfit is a big un. All told, unless I stop a bullet with my name on it, I'll be costin' you about ten thousand dollars. I'll want it in cash when I meet you at Buffalo."

"I say, old chap, you must be spoofing," protested Campbell. "Pulling a duffer's leg. Nobody does that sort of thing—"

"Here," said Pina, holding a bulky buckskin sack toward Poe, "is five thousand dollars. It's all we have between us. Cowan had a lot more until Jim Pickett sold him this white elephant. We can't get away from here without your help. Here's our money. Take it!"

Her black-gray eyes were hard with the contempt that sounded in the tone of her voice. Still looking at Poe, she spoke to the Laird of Powder River.

"Lige Poe is a killer who sells his guns to the highest bidder. You wouldn't understand even if I knew how to explain it, Cowan. We need this man's help to get out of the country and this is the only way to get it."

Pina tossed the filled buckskin sack at Lige Poe's feet. His face had whitened a little like a man who has been slapped and can't fight back. He grinned mirthlessly and picked up the sack.

"But I'm not running away," said the Laird of Powder River quietly. His blue eyes were as hard and cold as ice and his jaw was jutted stubbornly. "I can't believe that Jim Pickett swindled me. And I've made up my mind to stay here. The Pitchfork Ranch is mine. I rather like it here. I'd be no end of a mucker, you know, Pina, if I were to run away like a coward. A chap has to face his music and all that sort of thing. I'd be ashamed to look anyone in the eye if I turned tail in the face of the enemy. A chap can't lose face, you know. You couldn't marry a rotter, my dear."

Lige Poe was grinning faintly as he looked at the girl. Her face flushed. Poe handed her back the sack of money.

"If you know how to fry steak and spuds and stir up a batch of biscuits, git busy. I'm hungry. I'll put your horse up. When grub's ready, holler. I'll be up on the ridge yonder. His Nibs had better git his Mounty guns oiled and loaded. Bullets is the only kind of argument McQueen's hired hands savvy."

He lifted Pina from her saddle and set her on her feet beside the big Britisher. Then he led her horse to the barn. A few minutes later he rode back up on the ridge. He had a short-handled shovel slanted over his shoulder.

He rode past a new grave marked with a wooden slab and he read the carved lettering on it without halting.

JIM PICKETT
Murdered in Defense of his friend
Cowan Campbell

V.

Lige Poe dug a shallow grave and buried the unknown renegade, piling rocks on the grave to keep the coyotes from digging there. He kept watching the skyline for riders but nobody showed in sight and he figured that Wade McQueen had not yet gotten to Wolf Point or if he had, he was

getting his fighting outfit organized before he went after the Laird of Powder River and Lige Poe. McQueen had money behind him and the backing of political power, but even so, he was not sending out hired killers in broad daylight to do their murdering.

Wade McQueen was crafty and cunning as a timber wolf. He hoped to be governor of Wyoming one day or go to Washington as United States senator and he was going to cover his back trail so that political enemies could not prove anything like murder against him. And the killing of Cowan Campbell might kick up a bad mess at Washington. The Laird of Powder River was an English remittance man, the younger son of some old British family that had a title and a castle somewhere across the ocean. McQueen might kill a hundred such men as Lige Poe and be praised for ridding the country of unwanted and dangerous criminals. But Cowan Campbell had committed no crime. His only mistake, and that was an innocent one, had been buying a half-interest in the Pitchfork Ranch with Jim Pickett. And Jim Pickett's reputation had been none too good. Pickett had gotten the Pitchfork Ranch with six-shooter and saddle gun and had built up his herds with a catch rope and running iron.

Down at the ranch a big bell called Lige Poe to breakfast. He rode down the trail, tossed his shovel on the ground and cared for the Pitchfork horse he had been riding. Then he washed at the creek and carried his carbine in the crook of his arm as he went into the house by way of the kitchen door.

Pina had cooked a breakfast that was gaining the grinning, red-faced approval of the Laird of Powder River.

"Jim Pickett used to like a nip before breakfast, Poe," Campbell said. "I've some decent whiskey—"

"One drink," said Poe, "one drink. Nothin' less than a keg of the stuff would do me any good. I'll work on coffee."

Pina had dusted and done some sweeping and dish washing. The place looked clean and orderly.

"You'd make some man a good wife, lady," Poe remarked.

"We're getting married," explained the Laird of Powder River, beaming, "as soon as this range war is over."

Only two places were set at the table. Campbell made a rather awkward explanation.

"Pina insisted on eating before she called you. She's determined to get the place put in some sort of order."

"No lady ever eats with the hired gunhands, Campbell," Poe said dryly. "But if she wants to be actually useful she'll ride up on the ridge and stand guard. If she sees ary riders comin', she's to ride down here without wastin' time. She'd better take a gun along."

He handed Pina the six-shooter that had belonged to the dead renegade from the Hole in the Wall.

"The last owner of this smoke pole forgot to take it with him," he told her. "If you sight riders, shoot in the air, then git down here fast."

He tossed a bloodstained poker chip on the table. "Keep that for a tally marker, boss. That's a hundred bucks you owe me."

Then he sat down to eat. Cowan Campbell let his breakfast grow cold as he went to the barn with Pina. Lige Poe wolfed his meat and fried potatoes and biscuits alone and drank several cups of black coffee. He saw the girl ride to the top of the ridge and there was a worried look on the Laird's face when he came back to the house.

"I say, Poe, the situation's a bit awkward. I wish you and Pina could hit it off better. She's set on leaving and is determined I go with her. She insists I give you this money."

Lige Poe looked at the buckskin sack that Campbell put on the table. He undid the string, opened the sack and counted a hundred dollars into his pocket.

"The chip's your receipt, boss. It's not an ordinary poker chip. Hand carved from ivory. I make 'em myself in my spare time. Don't let the little lady worry you. You can't blame a lady like her for not warmin' up to the hired man. She knows her place. I know mine. Some day if you live long enough won't you be one of these earls or dukes or knights, or somethin'?"

"I've two older brothers," Campbell explained. "The older is Sir Hubert. There's an old castle and a sort of threadbare title and all that sort of thing. Dick's in the Army in India. Major in the Lancers. Neither of them old and both enjoying excellent health. The chance of my having to return to England is very, very remote. I like it here in the West. Not so much of the redskin Indian atmosphere as I'd expected. War whoops and all that. But the McQueen chap is offering quite a touch of the wild and woolly." He patted the revolver in its polished holster and flap and the white cord looped around his neck and knotted to the pistol butt.

"I'm wearing the Webley. Though it does make me feel a bit foolish."

"You'll feel a lot more foolish without it," Lige Poe smiled faintly, "if there's a ruckus."

From up on the ridge came the sound of a shot. Then Pina came down the trail at a lope. Lige Poe met her a little ways from the cabin.

"A bunch of riders coming!" the girl cried. "Fifteen or twenty. What'll we do?"

"You and His Nibs git in the house and stay there. You've got guns and cartridges and it's time you learned to use 'em. Don't come out of that house for anything. It's got log walls and thick doors and heavy shutters on the windows. You'll have water and grub to work on. I'll make my stand at the barn. And while I'm givin' McQueen's renegades a gun argument talk the Laird of Powder River into quittin' the country after the gun smoke clears away. He don't belong here. Sooner or later they'll kill him. And keep that sack of money because you'll need it to buy another new dress. And McQueen will double-cross you on the payoff."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, lady, that I'm onto your game even if His Nibs isn't. McQueen can't run the mule-headed Laird of Powder River off his Pitchfork Ranch so he hires you to work a woman's tricks on the big chump and one of these fine mornin's His Nibs will wake up in Cheyenne or somewhere with a hang-over and you'll be gone and so will his bank roll. And Wade McQueen will own the Pitchfork outfit."

"That's what you think? You're a two-bit killer with a warped brain. You can't recognize decency when you see it—"

"I know a percentage girl when I see one. And Campbell's an easy mark for you and your songs. You work for McQueen. You can't marry His Nibs. He's goin' to be an earl or a duke or somethin' some day. He's got to go back to England when his family calls him back. You'd make a fine duchess even if you did flimflam the poor chump into marryin' you. You and your Boss McQueen are out to skin the Laird of Powder River and hang his hide on the fence. Now go on to the house. I'll see what kind of a stand I kin make. Mebbeso you're double-crossin' your boss—the way you left me holdin' the sack like a snipe hunter at Santa Fe. Git goin'!"

"If I were a man I'd give you the worst whipping a man ever got," Pina flared. "When this is over I'm going to have Cowan thrash you for everything you just said. I'll—"

"Yonder they come. Git into the house!"

The Laird of Powder River was calling to her, too. Pina turned and ran to the log house. Lige Poe rode her horse into the barn and swung the heavy doors shut.

A dozen or more riders sat their horses on the ridge. One of them tied a white silk handkerchief to his carbine barrel and holding it like a flag he came riding slowly down the trail.

Lige Poe climbed to the hayloft and hailed him from the window.

"Stand your hand, Sanders. What's your game?"

VI.

Sandy Sanders laid his carbine with its white flag of truce across the front of his saddle. He grinned and rolled a cigarette.

"I don't know why you're takin' up this fight like you done, Poe," he began. "The big Britisher ain't heeled with enough money to pay you anything like McQueen is offerin' yuh. You can't side the Laird of Powder River and cut yourself in on the Pitchfork Ranch and hope to hold it because McQueen will hand you what he handed Jim Pickett. And if you're doin' it to make a big play for the Pina girl you're plain locoed. She's cottoned to His Nibs and she's playin' for high stakes and she's usin' you for a bone-headed sucker."

"Talk turkey, Sanders. What's your proposition?"

"I knowed you'd see sense, Poe. We don't want to hurt that fool Britisher. Let him take his girl and quit the country. You kin write your own ticket with McQueen. He's aimin' to own this section of the cow country and he's makin' you ramrod of the whole smear. Us boys will take your orders. Say the word and we'll rub out Choctaw and his Hole in the Wall outfit just to git the target practice. I told Big Mike last night and I told Wade McQueen this mornin' at Wolf Point that you was the one man we'd foller. You're the one and only man who kin do the job McQueen has cut out for us. You'll have the backin' of the governor hisself and McQueen kin pay you bigger money than me'n you ever saw in one wad. I'm fetchin' you the proposition straight from Wade McQueen hisself."

"And what if I tell you and Big Mike and McQueen to go plumb to hell with your game?"

"In that case, Poe, I got orders to rub you out. And I don't like the job worth a damn."

"Neither do I, Sanders. But that's it. She goes as she lays. And one of these days I'll take my proposition to Wade McQueen. I'll have my hand filled with a gun when I see him. Now take your men and git off the Pitchfork range. When you come back, come a-shootin'. So long, Sanders. You're a square shooter. I'd like to wish you luck. But your good fortune would be my bad luck. And git this straight: Watch Wade McQueen or he'll double-cross you just as shore as you're a white man and he's a snake. Git yonderly. Take your hired hands. I've hired out to the Laird of Powder River. Take a look at what's carved on Jim Pickett's head board. It may be carved on mine some day. But that's more than Wade McQueen will do for you when you stop the bullet with your name on it. Git yonderly, Sanders. My trigger finger is itchin'. Lope on back to Wolf

Point and tell Wade McQueen that he ain't got enough money to buy Lige Poe. Adios!"

It was war talk and Lige Poe knew that he was shouting his own death warrant when he made it. But his challenge rang with sincerity and it held a note of arrogance that wiped the grin from the sunburned face of Sandy Sanders. The towheaded outlaw from Robbers' Roost made a last desperate effort to dicker.

"I got orders to rub you out, Poe. You and the Laird of Powder River. And the orders says to fetch the Pina girl back to Wolf Point because Wade McQueen wants her to sing for him. I'm ramroddin' a fightin' outfit, Poe. We got you outnumbered. We got you licked before you start. You done me a good turn once and I'm tryin' to return the favor. I'll swear to help you git the girl and His Nibs out o' Wyoming. Me 'n' my men will take your orders. McQueen will still pay His Nibs eight thousand dollars cash for his Pitchfork outfit. Use your skull, Poe! I don't want to go through with this!"

"Take a look at that head board, Sanders," Poe said again. "Jim Pickett is buried there. McQueen's hired hands murdered Pickett. I'm killin' the men that done that bushwhackin' and I'm smashin' the big son that hired them to do it. And when I shove a gun in Wade McQueen's middle and take everything he's got away from him, then pull the trigger, I'll tell him the reason. I told you to git yonderly, Sanders. My patience is tirin'. Hit the trail. Take that white rag and git. And ride hard when you top the ridge because your white flag won't do you no good from then on. When you top the rimrock keep a-ridin' or we start shootin'. Git goin', Sanders! Take my worst regards to Wade McQueen!"

Sanders rode back up the trail. When he reached the rimrock he yanked the white silk neckerchief from the barrel of his carbine. Standing in his stirrups he took a shot at the loft window of the big log barn. Lige Poe grinned mirthlessly as the .30-30 bullet thudded into the log wall a few inches from his head. He lined his sights and his bleak eyes squinted. His bullet kicked dust into Sanders' face.

Then Poe shifted his position and his carbine kept blasting and the outlaws from Robbers' Roost returned the gunfire. Rifle slugs thudded into the log walls of the barn. Bullets struck the walls and heavy slab shutters of the log house. And from the house two guns spat jets of flame. Above the rattle of gunfire the voice of the girl Pina shouted to Lige Poe, sharp and shrill:

"You had a chance to save us and you threw it away! And I know why, now! Jim Pickett was your pardner! It was Pickett, not McQueen, who sent for you. You came here to steal the Pitchfork outfit! You and Jim Pickett wanted this layout! You're not Cowan Campbell's friend! You're after the Pitchfork Ranch!"

"It takes a thief," Lige Poe called out, his voice harsh and cold-toned, "to smell out another thief, don't it? Either raise your sights to the five-hundred-yard notch or quit shootin'. You and His Nibs are just wastin' good ammunition!"

Lige Poe wondered if Pina's voice had carried as far as the rimrock ledge. He wondered if Sandy Sanders heard and understood. And he wondered just what affect it would have on the towheaded outlaw from Robbers' Roost. Because he was not sure just what had fetched Sandy Sanders to Wyoming. Whether it was McQueen's money or the same wild and almost impossible idea that Jim Pickett had outlined in a brief note that had come down the outlaw trail by way of blind post offices and the mysterious rustling of the leaves.

Jim Pickett's summons had been cunningly worded. And now it seemed that before the message had reached Lige Poe in the Animas country of New Mexico somebody had gotten wise to Jim Pickett's game and had stopped it by the one and only way that men used when they planned and schemed and fought to gain possession of a huge and productive cattle empire.

A few days ago Lige Poe had reached the Pitchfork Ranch at the forks of Powder River and Crazy Woman. He had expected to meet Jim Pickett there.

Instead he had found the ranch deserted and a wooden slab with Jim Pickett's name carved on it. And so he had ridden on to Wolf Point to learn what there was to be learned.

At various way stations along the outlaw trail Lige Poe had been recognized. Men had dropped thinly veiled hints of the big range war that was about to break out like a prairie fire backed by a heavy wind. But no man had told him that Jim Pickett was dead. Lige had heard the name of Wade McQueen. He had heard of the stubborn Britisher who called himself the Laird of Powder River. But nowhere had he heard of Jim Pickett's murder. And now Poe began to understand that the men who had given out those bits of half-information were men hired by Wade McQueen.

Jim Pickett had sent no written summons. There had been some sort of penciled note to begin with, but wary men had destroyed that note and the whispering of the leaves along the outlaw trail had altered its wording. McQueen's hired hands had passed on another sort of message. And so Lige Poe had come alone and his every instinct had told him that he was riding into a cleverly baited wolf trap. He had been on guard. He had seen the half-breed Choctaw and remembered that

Choctaw and Jim Pickett had been enemies. He had sighted Sandy Sanders and men from Robbers' Roost in Utah. And he knew that Sanders always played for high stakes. Once he and Sanders had camped together south of the Rio Grande and they had talked of making a big South America stake.

Then Lige Poe had seen Pina and the big Britisher and all his careful plans and calculations and outlaw guesses had been scrambled and thrown aside like a deck of marked cards. He had called for a new pack of cards, new chips in a game he didn't savvy. And he still could not tell himself why he had risked his taw to save the hide of the big Britisher who was calf-eyed over Pina. Pina, who had broken her promise to meet Lige Poe in Santa Fe.

But Poe knew that nobody but the Laird of Powder River could have carved the lettering on the wooden slab that marked the grave of Jim Pickett and something soft away down inside his calloused heart had prompted him to make that fool play.

So he squinted along his carbine sights and pulled the trigger and shot to miss by a close margin because he was not yet ready to kill Sandy Sanders or any of those hired outlaws who came from Robbers' Roost.

The sun was slanting close now to the skyline. Lige Poe told time by the sun and figured that in half an hour it would be getting toward sundown and then twilight. And that if darkness came before he made a surprise move, he and the Laird of Powder River and the girl called Pina would be at the mercy of Sandy Sanders and Sandy's outlaws. Because they could slip down in the darkness and do their killing. Or if Sandy got big-hearted about it he would give Lige Poe and Pina and His Nibs a chance to get away in the darkness. But McQueen was laying cash money on the line in big chunks, and outlaws like Sanders didn't quit a job until it was finished. Sanders had his orders. He and his outlaws had ridden here to carry out those orders.

An hour, two hours at the most, and the fight would close in. Lige Poe counted the cartridges he had left and his lips thinned to a hard line. He'd better start shooting to kill. Better rub out Sanders the next time he got a fair shot at that tow-headed outlaw who had been showing his head and shoulders now and then in a mighty reckless manner.

Campbell and Pina were no longer shooting because they saw nothing up yonder to shoot at. The hayloft gave Lige Poe an elevation that they did not have at the house. Besides, the Britisher and the girl did not savvy anything about this bushwhacker warfare and Lige Poe figured they were holding hands and trusting to luck for their salvation.

Then Sandy Sanders shouted and waved his carbine with the white handkerchief tied to it.

"You still there, Poe?" he yelled down from the ridge.

"Still here, Sanders!"

"I'm takin' your message to Wolf Point. The boys is gettin' dry and hungry and it don't look like the Laird of Powder River is goin' to ask us to supper and a drink. So long. Hang on to your bushy tail!"

"The same to you, Sanders. If you ever decide to sell out McQueen, come back another day. I might buy you off with the Pitchfork calf crop and a jug of His Nibs' best likker."

"Why don't the three of you haul freight, Poe? We're leavin' the get-away wide open. I don't want your fool hide!"

"Don't git chicken-hearted, Sandy! You need the bounty money for that South America stake. You might go into the sheep business in the Argentine!"

Lige Poe let Sandy Sanders ride away. The outlaws from Robbers' Roost followed their leader. They rode away in plain sight and Lige Poe left the barn and headed for the big log house at a run.

He had just reached the house when a bunch of riders showed themselves. They came from the opposite side of the ridge and they rode boldly at a long trot.

The Laird of Powder River jerked open the door and Lige Poe went inside. Pina was cooking supper and Cowan Campbell had a grin on his red face. Neither of them had seen the riders in the distance.

"I say, old man," Campbell said, "Pina's quite convinced me that the wise thing to do is for us to take advantage of our chance to get away. She says we'll get paid for the ranch. Go to Canada. After all, Jim Pickett is dead and I have her to consider. We heard all that the Sanders chap offered. Pina says the thing to do is—"

"Bar the door and shutters," Poe cut in flatly. "It looks like we're about due to make our last stand. Let Pina sing her songs for McQueen. And you kin either side me now or high-tail it and take your runnin' chance. We got company comin' and I'm makin' a stand. Just git out from under foot and give me what cartridges you got left."

Poe slid back one of the shutters. His carbine barrel poked through the narrow opening and he sent a shot over the heads of the men who were riding toward the ranch.

"The next man that rides any fu'ther won't live to ride no more!" he called. "Stand your hands!"

"Who are you? Where's Cowan Campbell?"

"Don't shoot, Poe! Hold your fire, man!"

The Laird of Powder River jerked open the door and strode outside without a gun in his hand. He held his hands in the air, waving his arms.

Pina pulled Lige Poe back from the window and held his gun barrel down with both hands.

"Don't shoot!" The girl's voice was tense, pleading. "They've come. I'd given up hope. But they've come!"

"Who's come?" demanded Poe sharply.

"Cowan's neighbors! Men like Cowan Campbell who stand for decency and law and order! Can't you understand? Won't you understand that there are men in the world who believe in the things you sneer at and shoot at? Those are the men Wade McQueen is trying to run out of Wyoming, Lige, you gun-fighting idiot!"

Pina had thrown herself against him. Her arms were around his neck and her eyes were brimming with tears. Her voice, broken, husky, was in his ears, whispering, begging, pleading, taunting him for what he was and the things he stood for.

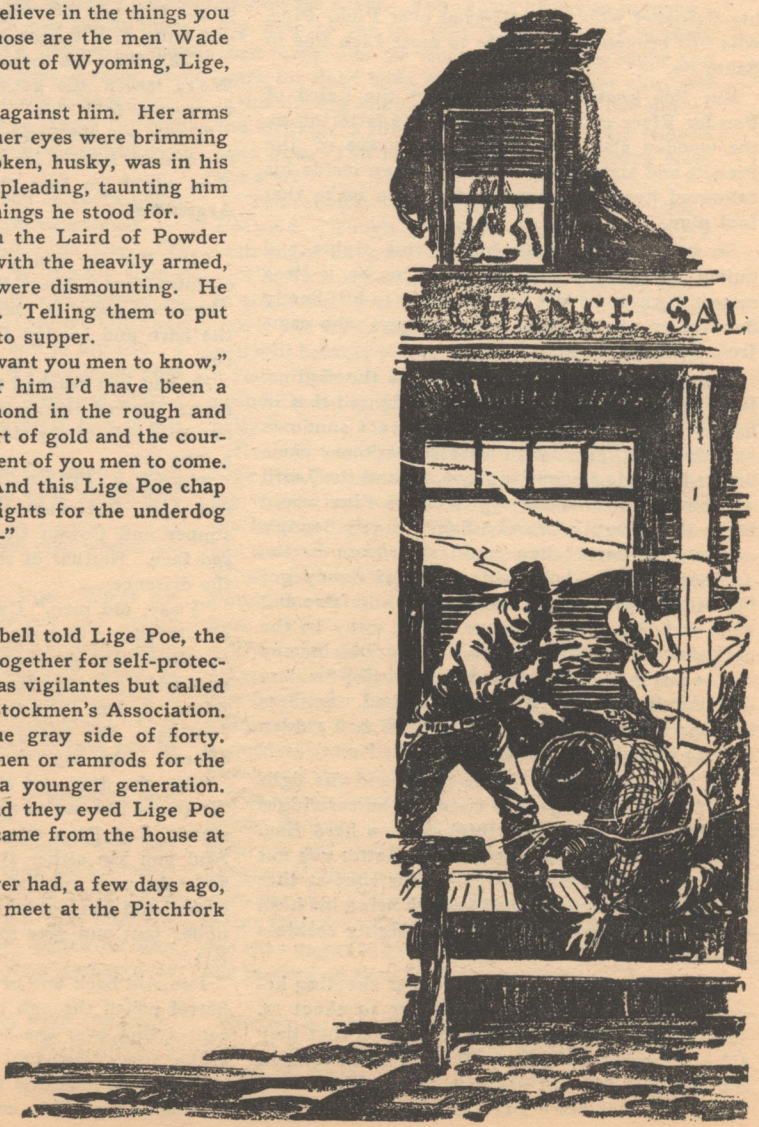
And outside in the open the Laird of Powder River was shaking hands with the heavily armed, grim-lipped cowmen who were dismounting. He was calling them by name. Telling them to put up their horses and come to supper.

"There's a chap inside I want you men to know," he was saying. "Only for him I'd have been a goner. Stout chap. Diamond in the rough and all that sort of thing. Heart of gold and the courage of a lion. I say, it's decent of you men to come. In the nick of time, too. And this Lige Poe chap is the salt of the earth. Fights for the underdog and all that sort of thing—"

VII.

They were, Cowan Campbell told Lige Poe, the cattlemen who had banded together for self-protection. They had organized as vigilantes but called themselves the Wyoming Stockmen's Association. Some of them were on the gray side of forty. Others, sons of the older men or ramrods for the different outfits, were of a younger generation. All packed saddle guns and they eyed Lige Poe with hard suspicion as he came from the house at Campbell's insistence.

The Laird of Powder River had, a few days ago, sent out word for them to meet at the Pitchfork



Ranch. They had come none too soon, he was telling them with almost boyish excitement.

"We'll organize and bring law to the country!" Campbell declared, waving his arms in wide gestures. His eyes were shining and his face flushed. "Put the fear of law into the ruffians who are coming into the country to terrorize honest citizens.

"I've just had a bit of a sample of their hoodlum nonsense, gentlemen. Only for this stout chap here I'd have been in no end of trouble. Gentlemen and neighbors, shake hands with Lige Poe."

"I reckon," said a large man with a spade beard and cold gray eyes, "that most of us have heard of Lige Poe. Keep him covered, men. If he moves the wrong way, shoot him. Reach high, Poe. We've got you!"

The odds were twenty to one and Lige Poe knew that he hadn't any kind of a fighting chance. He raised his hands slowly to the level of his shoulders. Pina, standing beside him, slid his white-handled six-shooter from its holster and kept it.

"So you play both ends against the middle," Poe said to her flatly.

"I couldn't stand here and have you make a gunplay and get shot down." Pina's voice was a whisper.

"But I say, men!" The Laird of Powder River was protesting in bewilderment. "You can't do this sort of thing, you know. Poe is my friend—"

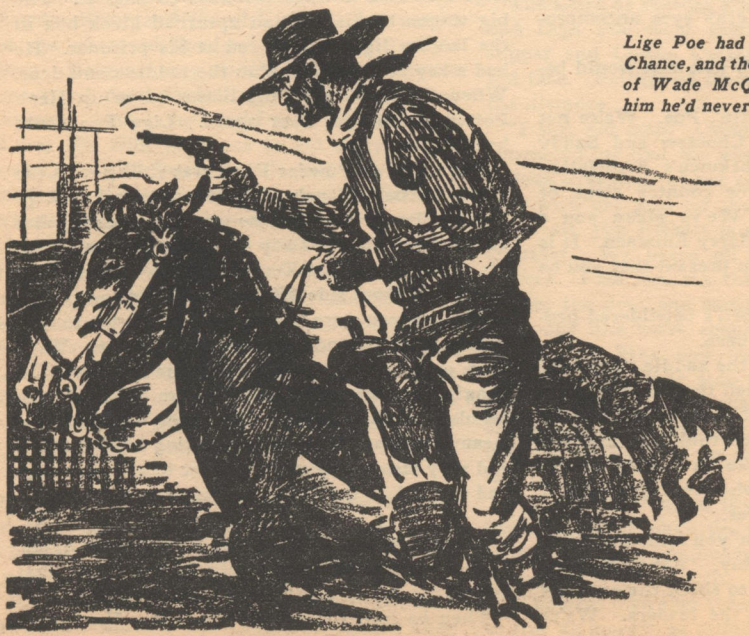
"Lige Poe," said the man with the spade beard, "is a curly wolf. He makes these other hired killers look like Sunday-school kids. Stand back, Campbell. We know what we're doin'. Rope 'im, boys!"

Saddle ropes bound Lige Poe's arms to his sides. The older men led Cowan Campbell into the house, talking to him in low tones.

Lige Poe grinned mirthlessly at Pina. The men sent her into the house and led their prisoner to the barn.

A little later the Laird of Powder River had to sit by in helpless, bewildered silence, Pina beside him, gripping his hand in both hers, while the newly arrived men tried Lige Poe for murder.

Some time before daylight a young cowboy on his way to the Pitchfork Ranch with a message for Cowan Campbell had been murdered. The



Lige Poe had to ride past the Last Chance, and the vicious, snarling guns of Wade McQueen's killers warned him he'd never get out of town alive.

cowboy was Harry Emerson, son of Tom Emerson, the big man with the spade beard. His dead body had been found along the trail to the Pitchfork Ranch. He lay face upward and on his forehead had been found a white poker chip.

"The trade-mark of the killer Lige Poe!" said Tom Emerson. He held the white poker chip in the palm of his hand for the Laird of Powder River and the girl Pina to see.

There was a stricken look on the big Britisher's face and in his blue eyes as he looked from the blood-stained poker chip and into Lige Poe's bleak eyes. Pina's face was chalk white.

"I say, Poe," said His Nibs, "you made a ghastly mistake. Young Harry Emerson was hardly more than a boy. He wouldn't have harmed a jack rabbit. You've made a gruesome sort of error, you know! Carried the poker-chip thing a bit too far."

"You know about how Lige Poe marks the men he kills?" Tom Emerson eyed the Englishman with hard, cold scrutiny.

The Laird of Powder River took an ivory poker chip from his pocket with reluctant fumbling.

"I gave it to His Nibs," said Lige Poe. "It marked one of the Hole in the Wall gang that I rubbed out. It's ivory. The one you showed us is just an ordinary poker chip. I didn't kill your son, Emerson. I never saw the boy in my life. I don't know who killed him but it's my guess that he met up with Choctaw and his renegades when I ran 'em off the Pitchfork Ranch early this mornin'."

"Can you prove it, Poe?" Tom Emerson's voice was cold, his lips grim, his gray eyes uncompromising.

"I can't prove anything so's you men would believe it."

"We're doin' our own fightin', Poe. We're not hirin' killers like you and Choctaw and Sandy Sanders. The Wyoming Stockmen's Association is wiping this Wyoming cow country clean of such gun-slingers as you. We've given you a fairer chance than you gave Harry Emerson. It is the unanimous vote of all men present that you be hanged at sunrise."

Pina hushed Cowan Campbell's bewildered protests and led him out of the barn.

They locked Lige Poe in the saddle room and put a puncher on guard. Then they held a meeting at the house that lasted an hour or more. The big cowpuncher guarding Poe told him that the cattlemen were going to make an attack on McQueen's hired gun fighters who were gathered at the Q Ranch on Powder River.

"Emerson figgers on fetchin' you some company, Poe," the man grinned wolfishly. "Sandy Sanders and Choctaw. The orders is to shoot the common two-bit renegades and hang the leaders. We're pullin' McQueen's fangs and if that son of a snake puts up a holler he'll git shot down. If you know ary prayers, say 'em. It's your last night on earth, mister. You've marked your last man with a poker chip."

"What do you want me to do?" Lige Poe's cold eyes bored through the guard, "beg or whine?"

"You'll weaken when you stretch rope. You'll beg like a yaller dog. You kin pull the wool over the Britisher's eyes, but you ain't foolin' Tom Emerson. You hired out to McQueen. Hell, you even rode Wade McQueen's top horse here. You fell out with Choctaw because he was about to collect the bounty McQueen offered on the Laird of Powder River. Your game here was to make a big play to git in right with Cowan Campbell, then bump him off when the sign was right and mark his dead body with a white poker chip and claim the big bounty Wade McQueen has put on the Britisher's hide. Everybody but His Nibs is onto you. The little lady seen your game from the start."

"You're wiser than a tree full of owls, mister," Poe said. "Tough hand from Bitter Crick and it's your night to howl. Who are you, anyhow?"

"I'm Tom Emerson's wagon boss and my name is Hank Potter and I've got orders to gut-shoot you if you try to make a break. Which I'm hopin' you will because young Harry Emerson was as fine a young feller as ever forked a cow pony. I'd be proud to empty this six-shooter into your yaller belly."

Hank Potter spat a stream of tobacco juice and Lige Poe had to duck his head to miss it. The big wagon boss sat on an upturned kiack box in the lantern light and glared at his prisoner. He had a key to the padlock on the saddle-room door. When the meeting at the house broke up Hank Potter locked the door again. Lige Poe could hear voices.

The Laird of Powder River was riding with the others to the Q Ranch. He wanted to talk to Lige Poe but Potter told him he wasn't unlocking that saddle-room door for any man, that he was taking his orders from Tom Emerson. After a time Lige Poe heard them ride off into the night.

The cowmen were riding to the Q Ranch to take Sandy Sanders and his men by surprise. Wipe them out and perhaps fetch Sanders back here for hanging if they could capture him alive. Those members of the Wyoming Sotckmen's Association meant business. They were striking hard and fast and they meant to give no quarter to any man they had marked on their books as an enemy.

Sitting on the floor of the dark saddle room Lige Poe worked desperately at the ropes that bound his hands behind his back.

Then he heard voices in the barn. Hank Pot-

ter's heavy voice. The throaty sound of Pina's voice. The sound of a cork pulled from a bottle. Soon Poe heard Hank Potter's gruff laugh and Pina singing.

Poe finally worked his arms free. Then he untied the ropes that bound his legs. He listened with his ear against the door. Pina's song broke off in the middle of a stanza.

"Don't! Please don't, Hank! No, no! Don't paw me like that!"

Potter's voice was thick with whiskey. He was half tipsy. There were the sounds of a struggle, then the dull thud of a gun barrel hitting bone and the fall of a heavy body against the door.

In a moment Lige Poe heard the rattle of a padlock and the door was swung open. Pina stood there in the lantern light. Her flannel blouse was torn and her heavy black hair was a tangled mass around her white face. Drops of blood oozed from her bruised mouth. She had Lige Poe's ivory-handled six-shooter gripped in her hand and her dark eyes were bright with excitement. Hank Potter lay in an unconscious heap on the barn floor.

Lige Poe's two hands gripped the girl's shoulders but she pulled away from him.

"Please don't, Lige. Get away from here before they get back! Quick!"

"You're givin' me this chance, Pina," Poe said hoarsely. "But it'll go hard with you when this big gent tells his story to Tom Emerson and the others. They'll make it tough on you. If I go, you go with me. No waitin' again like I did at Santa Fe—"

"Please, Lige!" the girl pleaded. "Can't you understand? It wasn't really love with us. We were both lonesome that night at Tombstone. Both a little desperate and terribly hungry for some kind of affection. But this is different. I do love Cowan Campbell. He can give me everything a girl dreams about. A home. Love. Security. He thinks I'm fine and sweet and he's made me remember that once I had a home and fine things in Virginia until the Yankees killed my father and brothers and the carpetbaggers stole the plantation, and I ran away in the night. I could sing and I managed to get along.

"I did love you, Lige," Pina cried, almost crying now. "I went to Santa Fe. I waited for you. Then I heard that you had gotten into trouble at Tucson and had killed some men and I realized what our life together would be. Always drifting. You with blood on your hands. I couldn't endure it long—"

Hank Potter's eyes blinked open. Lige Poe saw the man jerk his gun. He flung Pina aside and Potter's bullet grazed his shoulder. The gun Poe had taken from Pina spewed fire. Potter lay back like a drunken man going back to sleep. But there was a round hole in his forehead above the bridge of his big nose.

Lige Poe led Pina out of the barn and into the starlight. She was shivering and he held her close in his arms, talking to her in a low whisper.

"I'll have to tie you up at the house, Pina. Make it look right for Emerson. Hank Potter can't talk now. Tell 'em any kind of a story that sounds straight. His Nibs will believe you and that's all that matters. You want to get out of Wyoming. You want Cowan Campbell to get away from here. You've got a little money. I'll sell the Pitchfork Ranch for enough to satisfy the Laird's stubborn pride. McQueen is buyin' the Pitchfork outfit at the Laird of Powder River's own price. You take His Nibs and quit the country before somebody kills you both."

Lige Poe tied Pina up and put her on the big couch in the front room. She held her lips toward him and he bent and kissed her.

"I don't know when or how we'll meet again, Pina," he said huskily, "but it'll be soon. Take good care of His Nibs. Take him to Canada where there's folks that savvy his language. And good luck, lady. I was wrong. You're aces."

"You quit the country, Lige! Never mind us. We'll get along. Don't try to do anything more for us. They'll kill you if they find you. Promise!"

But Lige Poe did not promise. "My best regards to the Laird of Powder River," was all he said. Again he kissed her and blew out the lamp.

At the barn Poe saddled the big bay horse that wore Wade McQueen's Q brand. He shoved a saddle gun in the scabbard and took along Hank Potter's six-shooter and cartridge belt. Before he blew out the lantern light he placed a white ivory poker chip on the red-smeared bullet hole in the man's forehead.

Then he swung into the saddle and headed for Wolf Point. He rode hard, his eyes cold and bleak and his mouth pulled in a twisted bitter line. He wanted whiskey. All the whiskey there was in the world to wash away the sweetness of Pina's lips. He hated the Laird of Powder River right now and hoped they wouldn't meet. He didn't want to kill the big Britisher and ruin Pina's chances for happiness. That would spoil one of the few decent gestures he had ever made in his life.

He welcomed the lights of Wolf Point with a sardonic grin. He rode down the street at a swinging walk, with a six-shooter in each hand, his slitted, bleak eyes wary.

Saddled horses lined the hitch rack in front of Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon. Loud voices sounded inside the place. Choctaw's harsh, guttural voice was cursing Big Mike. Lige Poe

swung the big bay horse into the black shadows alongside the saloon and waited.

"Fill them sacks with what money you kin git from the till and from the pockets of these tin-horn dealers!" Choctaw was ordering. "Clean 'em down to their last dollar. I'll learn this big son how to treat a half-breed Choctaw Injun. Won't serve me a drink, eh? Set out a bottle of Wade McQueen's best likker, you big pot-bellied son of a snake!"

"I'll see you in hell first!" Big Mike's whiskey voice was like the roar of a bull. Guns crashed. Through the gunfire men yelled and cursed. Then Choctaw came running out the door with a partly filled gunny sack in his hand. He had three renegades from the Hole in the Wall with him. As they swung aboard their horses Lige Poe rode out into the street, a six-shooter in each hand.

"Drop everything, Injun!" he yelled. "I'm takin' up a collection for my old friend Jim Pickett!"

Choctaw's six-shooter spat flame. His three renegades began shooting. They were all a little drunk and this surprise meeting out here on the street was not helping their aim.

The two guns in Lige Poe's hands were spewing fire. His first bullet knocked Choctaw from the saddle. The half-filled gunny sack dropped in the street. One of the renegades tried to reach from his saddle to pick it up and a bullet from Poe finished him. The other two renegades from the Hole in the Wall spurred off into the night.

Lige Poe reached down and grabbed up the sack of money. Men were shooting at him from the saloon as he rode around the corner of the building and out of town.

Two men came riding into town from another direction. They avoided the main street and headed for a whitewashed log house at the edge of town. This was Wade McQueen's town home. Wolf Point called the place the White House. McQueen lived in it alone.

Lige Poe reckoned that the short, heavy-set man who rode squatted low in his saddle must be Wade McQueen. The man with him was Sandy Sanders. Their horses were blowing hard and they looked as though they had been riding hard.

"Get two fresh horses, Sandy!" Lige Poe heard McQueen call to his companion. "Fetch 'em here to the house. Don't let anybody but the barn man sight you. Keep away from Big Mike's. Sounds like a free-for-all ruckus going on there, maybe Tom Emerson's cowpunchers shooting up the place. Don't quit me in a tight, Sandy! So help me, I'll make it worth your while. Get me back safe to Buffalo and you can write your own ticket. What a mess! What a break to get! Hurry, man! We're followed. Fetch horses here to the house!"

"Don't lose your nerve, McQueen," Sanders called back across his shoulder as he rode toward the barn leading McQueen's horse.

Poe sat his horse back in the darkness and watched Sanders ride on to the barn. Then he rode up to the rear of Wade McQueen's White House and, leaving the gunny sack with its money tied to his saddle, he walked around front.

A light burned in the front room and the front door stood ajar. Lige Poe stood in the doorway, a gun in his hand, and watched Wade McQueen squat on his boot heels in front of a big steel safe.

VIII.

Wade McQueen swung the heavy door of the safe open. He took sheafs of bank notes and small canvas sacks of gold money from the safe and stuffed them into two leather saddlebags. He was breathing hard and working with feverish haste. A lighted lamp was on the floor beside him and next to the lamp lay a pearl-handled, silver-mounted six-shooter.

Lige Poe stood in the doorway, studying the man. Wade McQueen was short, bull-necked, with graying black hair and dyed mustache curled at the ends. He wore a canvas hunting coat with big-game pockets and canvas pants shoved into the tops of his high-heeled boots. His black hat was pulled down hard on his head and he looked like some town dude about to go on a hunting trip. McQueen was a city man and his manner of wearing his clothes showed it. He was chewing on an unlit black cigar that still had its red-and-gold band. His neck and thick jaws were clean-shaven and red as new brick. A huge diamond glittered on the middle finger of his left hand. Gambler, mining man, promoter, politician, he was said to be the most ruthless man in Wyoming. What he wanted he took. When men got in his way Wade McQueen had them removed and paid the damages to his henchmen who were gun-toters like Sanders.

Poe guessed that Tom Emerson and his men had sprung a big surprise on Wade McQueen, Sandy Sanders and Sandy's renegades from Brown's Park and Robbers' Roost. McQueen had gotten away. No doubt Sanders had acted as McQueen's bodyguard and shot a way through for them. Sandy's outlaws needed no orders. They knew how to fight and when to scatter and run and those who got away would again meet at some prearranged place along the Outlaw Trail.

"Don't claw for that purty gun or I'll bust your spine with a hunk of lead, McQueen," Poe warned flatly. "Don't knock over the lamp on purpose or accidental or I'll fill your back full of lead. Just stand up slow with those two saddlebags. And buckle 'em down. I don't want to spill any of my

plunder. Don't git rattled or I'll git spooked and shoot!"

Wade McQueen turned on his boot heels. Sweat beaded his face but he wasn't scared. Or if he was scared he hid it well behind a faint grin and a pair of yellow eyes. When he grinned he showed a double row of gold teeth. The chewed black cigar slid to the other side of his mouth.

"Don't let your trigger finger itch, Poe," he said calmly. "Killing me won't buy you anything but a walk up the gallows steps. It's about time you came around. Put away your gun and quit acting the fool. You can't bluff Wade McQueen. Even if I was fool enough to let you rob me you'd never get away with it. You're too smart a wolf to get trapped like that, Lige Poe. I've sure had a run of tough luck tonight. Choctaw killed young Harry Emerson and we got jumped on by a bunch of night-riding ranchers. Sanders stuck by me. You'll string your bets with me unless you're crazy."

"Then call me crazy, McQueen. Because you can't buy me. You take what you want. So do I. But the difference between you an' me is this, McQueen: I do my own killin'. I don't hire any man to do my dirty work. I'll dicker with you on my own terms or I'll give you a chance to fill your hand with that fancy gun. Make your choice and make it quick. If I'm crowded by Sanders I'll kill you both. I'm bankin' this game. I'm dealing my own hand and it's pat. All you've got is deuces tonight, McQueen. Your luck's run out. You haven't got enough money to buy me. And when I git this job done I'd just as soon die a-fightin' your gun-toters or the troops that your governor will set on my trail. But I'll never hang, mister. It ain't in the cards."

"What's your game, Poe?" Wade McQueen's yellow eyes blazed coldly and his grin was forced.

"How much money in them two saddlebags?"

"Better than a hundred thousand dollars."

"And there's a thousand mebbe in the gunny sack from Big Mike's. That'll do. You'll find a bill of sale to the Pitchfork outfit in the mail if you live long enough. Now who killed Jim Pickett?"

"Choctaw. Sanders told me you and Jim Pickett used to trail together. I'm sorry Choctaw made that mistake. Pickett got cocky but I didn't want that blasted half-breed to kill him. I could have used Pickett and you when you got here even if Pickett did have some fool notion of bucking my game. The Britisher got stubborn and Pickett took his part. He should have known better. I told Choctaw to bring Pickett to town but the breed got drunk and killed him instead. If you want Choctaw punished—"

"I've taken care of Choctaw," Lige Poe said dryly. "You just bought the Pitchfork outfit, mister, lock, stock and barrel. The Laird of Powder River is quittin' the country. You and Emerson and the others kin fight 'er out. Put them two saddlebags on the table and back away from 'em. Pronto, McQueen!"

"Even fifty thousand is a big price for the Pitchfork outfit, Poe."

"I'm namin' the price, McQueen. Whenever you don't like it, make a play for that fancy gun you're wearin'. Lay that dough on the line!"

Wade McQueen put the two filled saddlebags on the table. He heard the sound of hoofs outside and tried to cover it by beginning to talk in a loud tone.

"Quit runnin' off at the head!" Lige Poe shut him up. "I know that's Sanders a-comin'. I'm givin' Sandy his chance to buy chips in the game."

Poe picked up the two saddlebags and flung them across his left shoulder. Then he backed out the door with his gun in his hand just as Sandy Sanders swung off his horse out at the front gate.

"Keep your gun hand empty, Sandy!" Poe called. "Your boss just lost his taw. It ain't his lucky night. Come in with your hands up. Mebbeso you want to save McQueen's hide. That'll be up to you. Emerson will hang him if they ketch him here. Hang you to boot. To say nothin' about my own neck. Me' 'n' you kin save Wade McQueen if you want to bother with him. Otherwise we kin leave him here and ride yonderly. I got the money he kep' in his safe."

"You're the damnedest fool for luck, Poe!" Sanders exploded. "You ain't trickin' me?"

"Not if you kin keep your hands empty. By rights Wade McQueen should buy a drink."

"You win, Poe." McQueen stood with the lamp in his hand. There was a twisted grin on his square, heavy face. The look in his yellow eyes could have meant either admiration or hatred for Lige Poe. "Come in, Sandy. I'll buy you both all the champagne in Buffalo if you two renegades can get me there alive. Not that I'm afraid to hang, you understand, Poe—"

"Not that any of us are scared of hangin'," said Lige Poe flatly, "but if we don't hang together, as somebody in history said once, we'll all hang separately. You comin' in friendly, Sanders?"

"Friendly as a sheep dog, Poe."

Lige Poe was the only one of the three who had a gun in his hand. He told Wade McQueen to pick up his six-shooter and shove it in its holster.

"I'll make you two gents a proposition," Poe said. "It's this: That we'll pick up a pair of friends of mine on our way to Buffalo. Sanders and me will ride rear guard and escort. McQueen kin come back next week or next year and finish his fight for the Powder River cow country and

mebbeso if I'm broke and restless, I'll hire out to him.

"But tonight and from here on out of this part of Wyoming I'm workin' for the Laird of Powder River. For His Nibs and his bride-to-be. And I'll kill either one of you that feels like takin' it up."

"Don't cross the Texican, boss," advised Sandy Sanders, grinning. "And let's don't waste no more time. I got a bullet hole in my shoulder and I kin hear the comin' of men that don't like me. Whatever Lige Poe tells you is the straight goods, McQueen. If he says it's a horse on you and the drinks is on the house, he ain't lyin'. I'd rather have Lige Poe sidin' me than to have the rest of Wyoming at my back. Call it quittin' if you like, boss, but I'm stringin' along with Poe."

"Call it a deal," said McQueen. "Who are these friends of yours we pick up on our flight yonderly, Poe?"

"We're pickin' up the Laird of Powder River and Pina from Carolina." Lige Poe grinned faintly. "Fetch a bottle, McQueen. Fetch several bottles. And plenty of ammunition. But we don't do our drinkin' till we've kicked plenty of dust and distance in the eyes of Tom Emerson and the Wyoming Stockmen's Association. Business before pleasure. Them hombres had a rope around my neck once tonight and I didn't like the feel of it."

Poe kept his gun in his hand. His voice was flat-toned and his bleak eyes searched the face of Wade McQueen.

"You're a gambler, McQueen. Give me your word as such that you'll play the game square if I git you through alive?"

"My word as a gambler," said McQueen. "I never broke it, Lige Poe. Whatever your game is, I'll play along."

"And you, Sandy?"

"I'm with you all the way, Lige. I told the boss early tonight that I'd quit before I went after you again. You saved my life once. You done forgot but I haven't."

"Then let's git goin'."

Lige Poe motioned toward the front door with his gun. Sandy Sanders led the way out. McQueen, picking up a couple of bottles of whiskey from the well-stocked sideboard, followed. Lige Poe carried the filled saddlebags. He blew out the lamp and shut the door behind them.

"Where's your horse, Lige?" asked Sandy Sanders.

"Out back. I'm ridin' McQueen's big bay like I owned 'im."

Sanders grinned. "Whichaway?"

"The Pitchfork Ranch. Break trail, cowhand. If you bust open an ambush it's your hard luck. *Andale!* Let's go!"

IX.

Lige Poe told Sanders to ride straight down the main street and stop at Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon. "Just to blow the lights out and count the change," he explained.

There was enough moonlight to identify the dead body of Choctaw. Poe tossed a white chip into the dead half-breed's face. His bleak eyes looked at Wade McQueen and his teeth bared in a wolfish grin.

"Choctaw is worth five hundred of any man's money. I killed some of them Hole in the Wall renegades but the job was free. Take a look inside, gents."

Big Mike was dead. Sandy Sanders grinned at Lige Poe.

"The joint's sure cleaned out," he remarked. "But somebody is payin' me a thousand dollars that was in Big Mike's till. And the thousand he owes me. I bet Big Mike that Lige Poe was throwin' in with the Laird of Powder River."

"I got your thousand in this gunny sack, Sandy," said Poe. "But I ain't so certain you won your bet. It looks like I'm ridin' close herd on Wade McQueen all the way to Buffalo."

"But you're hired out to the Laird of Powder River," argued Sandy Sanders as they rode on out of town.

"Supposing you leave the bet to me," McQueen said dryly. "Neither of you is losing a thin dime so far. Let's keep riding. It's worth six-bits to me to get there alive and I never welshed a bet in my life."

They left Wolf Point behind them. Dimmed lights and furtive eyes watched them from the shadows. The town was hiding behind cover. Awed voices whispered the dread names of Wade McQueen and Lige Poe and Sandy Sanders but no gun flame broke the black shadows because no man left in Wolf Point had the temerity to shoot at the three who rode away.

"Good place to build a cow town some day, McQueen," remarked Lige Poe.

McQueen chuckled and pulled the cork on a quart bottle. Sanders drank with him. Lige Poe shook his head when McQueen offered him the bottle.

"Not till the job's done," he explained.

It was nearing daylight when they reached the Pitchfork Ranch. The Laird of Powder River had on his corduroy coat and his Mounty breeches and boots and hat. His carbine covered the three as they rode up. Pina was back in the shadows, a gun in her hand.

"Save your lead," said Poe. "We're leavin' Wyoming. Rattle your hocks, Campbell! Git 'im goin', Pina! The Laird of Powder River just sold the Pitchfork Ranch to Wade McQueen. I've

got the money. Make out a bill of sale and have His Nibs sign it. Then he gits a hundred thousand dollars and it's your job, Pina, to pack it. And tell the big ox not to ask questions. He's spoke out of turn so many times that the cow country has one stock answer to everything he ever asked."

"And what's the answer?" Pina's voice was taut.

"It's 'Quien sabe?'"

"I say, Pina," Campbell complained, "the chap's slipped a cob. He's talking a lot of nonsense. What's he getting at? I find you tied up and the Hank Potter chap dead with a poker chip on his head and you say I owe Lige Poe a spot of whiskey. And then he shows up with McQueen and spouts a lot of plain gibberish about a bill of sale for the ranch. I was about to pull stakes anyhow. The price was fifty thousand and that's more than the outfit's worth. I've had a rather nasty quarrel with Emerson on your account, Poe, old man. I'm afraid I'm between the devil and the deep sea. I told Emerson I wouldn't allow them to hang you—"

"And he knocked Tom Emerson's ears down," put in Pina. "Cowan wants to know what it's all about."

"Tell His Nibs," said Lige Poe, "that the answer is still 'Quien sabe?'"

"Who knows?" Pina translated it for the Laird of Powder River.

"Now make out the bill of sale and take these." Lige Poe handed her the saddlebags. "And we ain't got the rest of the week to lose gittin' yonderly."

No stranger cavalcade ever crossed the Wyoming cow country. Wade McQueen and Lige Poe riding in the lead. The Laird of Powder River and the girl called Pina from Carolina, with their horses so close together their stirrups touched. Holding hands. Sandy Sanders bringing up the rear.

Dawn broke and shadowy riders fell in with Sandy Sanders. The Hole in the Wall was a short ride for tough men forking stout horses, and there was no longer the half-breed Choctaw to dispute their right of way.

"Some day," said Wade McQueen, and his voice was that of a man who dreams of vast empires, "this whole country will be mine, Poe. I'd like to have you run it for me. Hire Sanders for straw boss. The biggest cow outfit in the West. I'll cut you both in on the calf crops and beef shipments. Look at it, man, spread out on all sides as far as a man can see. The governor will hand you and Sanders a blanket pardon that covers your back trail. Want it?"

"The purtiest cow country a man ever sighted," said Lige Poe. "But the grass that grows on murdered men's graves never fattened cattle. If I could make peace between you and men like Tom Emerson—"

"I'll let you write your own ticket, Poe."

Lige Poe took some ivory poker chips from his pocket and counted them over to McQueen.

"Keep 'em for souvenirs, McQueen. After all, they're just white chips. I'll ramrod your outfit and all I'm worth is regular wages. Sandy Sanders will straw-boss the spread. Give us and the boys with Sandy a clean slate and that's all we'll ever ask for. Wages and the right to ride the range like free men. We'll treat Emerson and the other cowmen right and when they send reps to the Q wagon those reps won't have to stay awake twenty-four hours to make sure we ain't stealin' their cattle. They'll all git a cowhand's break and that's all that a real hand ever asked for. Hire us like that, McQueen and we'll be proud to work for you. I'm worth a hundred a month and Sanders will be satisfied with seventy-five. The other boys git forty a month and like it."

Lige Poe took the gunny sack that held the robbery money from Big Mike's Last Chance. He handed it to McQueen.

"Toss that on the bar and let Sandy and his boys scramble for it. It's town money for 'em. They'll blow it before daylight the next mornin', and from then on they'll make good cowhands."

McQueen nodded and dropped the sack of money across his saddlehorn. His yellow eyes searched the bleak eyes of Lige Poe for a reason for all this. They found no answer. Not until Lige Poe rolled and lit a cigarette and looked out across the Wyoming cow country into a sunrise that was painted with the colors that belong to a cowhand's songs and humble prayers.

"We can't buy that, McQueen," Poe said. "We can't steal it. It's too big for men like you and me to handle. The Big Feller in the sky up yonder made it and he gives it to the men that kin handle the job."

Then Wade McQueen understood. Yellow, hard eyes and bleak, gray eyes met and their glances softened. McQueen held out his hand.

"I give up an empire. You give up the woman you love. It's a sunrise, Lige Poe."

"A sunrise, mister. It belongs to every man that's got the eyes to see it."

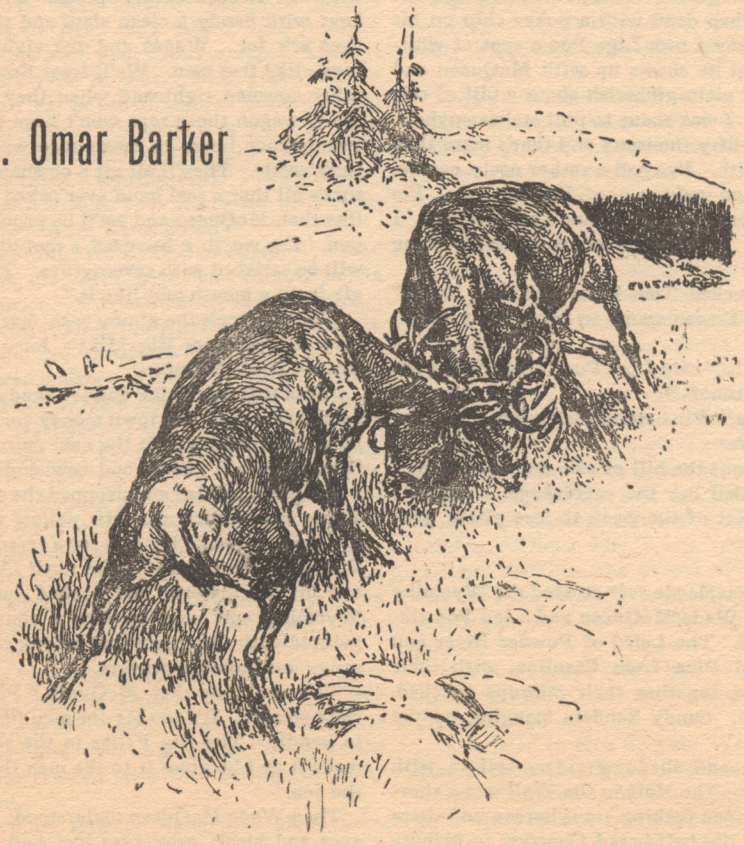
"And to every woman," whispered the girl Pina who caught the words with the breeze from a crimson dawn. "Thank you, Lige Poe. And may God bless you and give you all that I promised you when we watched another sunrise a thousand years ago."

THE END.

With that black invader on the prowl in Columbine Cove how long could Gotch Ear remain an unconquered

MONARCH OF THE WILDERNESS

by S. Omar Barker



The weathered butt of his .30-30 swung quick and snug to Zuke Spahr's shoulder. The hammer clicked back. With the sureness of long habit the squint of his right eye caught the sights in line. Yet, quick as he was, the jumped mule deer was quicker. One instant it stood there, fresh sprung from its startled bed, antlered head high, a narrow rift of sunlight glistening on the damp blackness of its nostrils; the next, in less than half the time space of a dawn breath, its graceful shape was only a swiftly vanishing patch of brownish gray shuttling across a lattice of dark tree trunks.

Time was when Zuke Spahr, catching that moving flash of color ever so briefly in his sights, would have fired. But such a running shot in timber is likely to wound without killing, and Zuke's aging legs no longer felt equal to the job of trailing down a wounded deer. Besides, the older he got the worse he hated to cause wild creatures needless suffering.

"A quick, clean kill or nothin'," was the way he expressed it to the ailing little old woman who

was his wife. "A sure bead on their vitals, or I jest don't shoot."

Badly as he wanted a buck after a dozen leg-weary days of unsuccessful hunting, with only one day more of the legal season left, Zuke thumbed the hammer down without firing. With a sigh that was part disappointment, part weariness, part the bone ache of age, he sat down on the dry hillside and got out his tobacco. This was the last season he'd be able to hunt, like as not.

"Knocked over many a buck in my day," he grumbled to his pipe. "But if I don't do better purty quick I won't never knock over another un —though I reckon it doesn't matter."

Just the same, the idea made him feel bad.

"Gittin' stumble footed sure 'nough when I can't even stalk a spike in a season's hunting!"

But this deer had been no little spike. Even in that brief flash of hide and horn Zuke had recognized the buck as old Gotch Ear, wise and wary king of Columbine Cove. He remembered the first time he had seen this buck with a mutilated ear, some years ago. He had seen him many times since, even shot at him a time or two. The three or four-mile circle of ridge, slope and draw, of which Columbine Cove was the center, was Gotch Ear's home range and he never went far from it.

Zuke remembered that first encounter with a chuckle. He was riding down Zigzag Ridge with the golden glory of October aspens all around him and two fresh-killed grouse in the slicker roll behind his saddle. Of course it had been wrong for him to shoot grouse out of season, but his wife, home from the hospital after a long illness, had craved grouse meat to tempt her ailing appetite. So, despite the law, Zuke had ridden far to an old burn on the Main Range to kill her one. The temptation to make it two had been too much for him.

He had just cut into the trail on Zigzag Ridge, homeward bound, when he saw the buck standing at the edge of a bunch-grass park at the crest of the ridge's next bend. Head high, his antlers ragged with half-shed velvet, one big round ear cocked forward, the young buck stood looking at the man across the curving dip of the ridge. The other ear, Zuke saw, was mutilated, a mere stump, from which hung a shapeless flap like a jingle bob. With no intention of shooting, Zuke was thinking what a dilly of a chance it would make, when suddenly the buck swung his head around to look the other way. He stamped a front hoof nervously. Zuke knew the signs. Something —or somebody—was coming westward up the ridge toward the buck.

As the deer's tail went up and he vanished with a long, swift jump into a thicket slanting steeply down the north slope of the ridge, Zuke quietly dismounted, took the gunny sack with the two grouse in it from inside his slicker roll and hid it behind a clump of snowberry bushes a few yards off the trail. He stepped carefully, so as to make neither noise nor tracks.

Remounted, slicker rolled behind the saddle once more, Zuke rode on. On the trail about where the young buck had stood he met Forest Ranger Logan. Logan was new—and he took his duties as a deputy game warden seriously.

"Mr. Spahr," he said, "a man could hide a grouse in his slicker roll and I'd never know it unless I took a look."

"Sure wouldn't," agreed Zuke. He unlaced the slicker and tossed it to the ranger. "So maybe you better."

The ranger shook it out, saw that it concealed nothing and handed it back with a grunt.

"Sorry," he said stiffly. "But I've been told some of you old settlers kill game out of season whenever you please. It's only fair to warn you it'll go hard with anybody I catch."

"Look me over any time you take a notion, mister," invited Zuke.

Nevertheless, that night Ma Spahr had the grouse meat she craved for supper. After giving the ranger plenty of time to get well out of sight and hearing, Zuke had staked his pony in a small grassy park, then circled back through the timber, out of sight of the trail, and picked up his illegal game.

"That gotch-eared buck shore done me a favor, warning me somebody was comin'," he chuckled to his wife as he fried tender white slices of young grouse breast to a crisp, golden brown. "I'd be in jail, like as not, if he hadn't!"

"You oughtn't ever to shoot that buck, pa," said his wife. "You'll always know him by his gotch ear, won't you, when you see him?"

"Maybe. But shucks, you can't figger on treatin' animals like people. If I don't shoot him some other hunter will."

"How you reckon he ever come to get his ear torn up thataway?" Ma Spahr's sympathy for the buck persisted.

"Coyotes, like as not. He must've been right smart of a fighter, though, ever to git loose of 'em once they got holt of him."

Thus, old Zuke Spahr had sworn off breaking the game laws, and thus Gotch Ear, the buck, had stepped from the anonymity of most wild things to the status of name and personality. Without knowing it, his mutilated ear had labeled him with character.

Zuke had been right in guessing that Gotch Ear was right smart of a fighter. He was only a four pointer when a lone, black-hackled mountain coyote had run him, tongue out and exhausted, all the

way over from Columbine Cove to the futile refuge of the shallow waters of Beaver Creek. He had, nevertheless, put up a battle when the bloodthirsty coyote finally caught up with him. According to every rule of tooth and fang, the coyote should have been able to wear his enemy down and kill him. But instead of dodging about among the willows, thus exposing his tender flanks to the attack of slashing fangs, the young buck had backed his rump deep into the thorny protection of a wild gooseberry bush, and faced his enemy with deadly hoof and horn.

As the coyote leaped to slash at the young buck's throat, the glancing strike of a hard, sharp hoof against his shoulder threw him far enough off balance that all his first vicious snap caught was a mouthful of hair. His next try fared a little better. This time the young buck met the assault with lowered horns. Agilely avoiding the thrust of those sharp points, the coyote's fangs managed to seize an ear.

At hamstring, flank or throat the killer would have slashed and leaped back, but with only an ear hold, he hung on. More than once he had dragged down a cornered doe by such a hold, so that his companions could get in closer for a death slash. But this time he was alone, and this time it was no hornless doe he had tackled. As he swung himself sideways to twist the deer's neck and force him down, a prong of almost needle-sharp antler somehow snagged into the soft belly skin between his own shaggy flanks. With a quick toss of his antlers the young buck flung the killer from him. When the coyote got up, some of his entrails were trailing out on the ground and he did not attack again.

Still winded from the long, hard run the coyote had given him, the young buck now staggered downstream to take refuge in the deeper water of a beaver pond half a mile away, spattering red on the alder branches with every shake of his head. But, though his whole head and neck seemed to be one bloody mess, the ear wound was not serious. In a couple of months it was completely healed, but a monstrosity in shape, a "gotch ear," marking him for life.

Though doubtless Gotch Ear did not know it, in the years that followed, his blemished ear several times saved him from a bullet, when hunters passed up shots at him because what they wanted was not mere venison, but an unblemished head to mount and hang on the wall. On the other hand, because Gotch Ear was now a deer with a name, other hunters made special efforts to bag him.

"Where you aimin' to hunt, Hank?"

"Well, old Zuke Spahr claims that ol' Gotch Ear buck's wearin' a twelve-point rockin' chair on his head this year, so I thought I might try the Columbine Cove country. I'd sure be mighty proud to bop that ol' booger."

There was some such talk in the hunting camps every season.

"Trouble is," another hunter would say, "ol' Zuke tells me it's Gotch Ear or nothin' when you hunt the Columbine, because he keeps every other buck bigger'n a spike plumb run out o' there—even two, three weeks before the rutting season begins. Must be quite an ol' boy, Gotch Ear."

"Yeah, I'd sure like to pack him in."

But season followed season, and nobody did. All that Gotch Ear knew about it, of course, was that whenever the hollowish slaps of rifle shots began to echo across the canyons early some chill, frosty morn in November, it was time to be wise and wary by sticking close to the cover of the thickets. Always it reminded him of the November when he had been a six-pointer and, from what he had then considered a safe distance of three hundred yards, an Enemy-with-the-thunder-voice had reached out and knocked him down with a grazing shot across the top of his neck. The lesson of that wound had never been forgotten: get out of sight—and get there quick!

Thus, living in a world of enemies, where the faintest unidentified scent or sound might mean lurking death—whether cougar, man or wolf—Gotch Ear managed by luck and sagacity to survive to a healthy old age. Though he lived in fear, like all wild creatures whose flesh is good to eat, there was a proud, arrogant magnificence in the way he carried his head, for among his own kind he was a master. Getting old or not, on the day Zuke Spahr jumped him so late in the season, Gotch Ear was still the King of Columbine Cove.

Slacking off on his run from the hunter, Gotch Ear had turned down a steep slant to the next bench below, aiming to use its dense fir thickets as cover for circling back into Columbine Cove, when the strong, musky scent of a strange buck assailed his nostrils. Abruptly he halted. With the season of the rut approaching, already his neck had begun to swell a little, tanging his blood with strange, yet familiar urgencies. Like hackles on a dog, the hair now rose a little on his neck. Militantly he stamped a front foot. Picking up the strange buck's track, he snuffed it audibly. Enemies—his world was full of them! But this was the scent of an enemy to be challenged and fought, not run away from.

Every year it happened: some big, black-brisketed buck from the high country turned up in his territory—sometimes two or three of them in succession—and every year Gotch Ear challenged them, fought them, whipped them and drove them off before they ever got a chance to take up with the does of Columbine Cove.

"Well, let 'em come!" the surly arrogance of

his manner seemed to say. "I've whipped 'em before and I can do it again! There's fight in the old boy yet!"

To prove it, he paused every now and then on his slow trailing of the intruder to thrash the devil out of a clump of jimbush or a balsam sapling. With every such encounter the old buck's wrath increased, yet never enough to relax his cautious lookout for hunters. Warily he kept to the thickest of the thickets. If an opening no more than twenty feet wide lay across his course, he detoured half a mile, if necessary, to avoid crossing it. Even when thrashing out a willow, he paused every second or two to listen for any sound that might mean lurking danger. Invisibility, he had learned, meant safety. So, regardless of where the intruding buck's track might lead, until the thick, black cover of night was upon the woods, Gotch Ear kept strictly under cover.

Thus, with the necessity of some time out for feeding, it was well on toward dawn the next morning when finally he overtook the buck whose intrusion had so stirred his wrath. It had clouded up about dusk the evening before, snowed a few inches in the night and now cleared again, with only starlight and a thin wedge of white moon to lighten the somberness of timbered mountains.

But mule deer's eyes are made to see with in such dim light. At Gotch Ear's stiff-legged approach, the intruder raised the broad spread of his ten-point antlers and stared at him. Unconcernedly at first, for the belligerence of the rutting season was not yet strong in him; but when Gotch Ear began circling with bowed neck and lowered head, the black-brisketed buck promptly accepted the challenge. The clack of horn against horn awoke a sleeping squirrel in a nearby spruce and sent him scolding to a higher limb.

Having maneuvered for the downhill push, Gotch Ear won out handily in that first abrupt clash, backing the intruder rapidly down the hill until, with a sudden windy snuff, he broke away, sprang free, dodged behind a willow clump, leaped high over a log fall and trotted nonchalantly off a few yards to resume feeding on the twigs of wild huckleberry lacing up through the shallow snow. He seemed, at the moment, much more interested in feeding than in fighting.

Gotch Ear's prompt leap over the log fall in pursuit was, so he thought, charged with all the old strength and vigor that had made him King of Columbine Cove all these years. But the age in his legs betrayed him. Failing to clear the last log of the fall, he almost took a tumble, neck outstretched, knees plowing the earth. It was the other buck's chance to get him while he was down, but buck's don't fight that way. Besides, Gotch Ear's crash was too much like the tumble of a shot buck which the Black Brisket had witnessed only a week ago up on Spring Mountain. Now he snorted spookily and pulled out.

When he had thrashed another bush or two to reassure himself that he was still full of the old spizzerinktum, Gotch Ear followed.

This time when they clashed, the invader began to get his dander up. It was Gotch Ear who gave ground. Finally, breaking free of the headlock, he leaped desperately sideways to avoid the thrust of the other buck's antlers in his flank as he turned. Yet plainly he did not consider himself defeated. It was broad daylight now, and the occasional echo of a distant shot reminded both bucks that their other enemies, the hunters, were still abroad.

Once out of the younger buck's reach, Gotch Ear stopped, head high, his good ear alert, sniffing and listening. The barest hint of man scent on the wind made him vaguely uneasy. On magically silent hoofs he circled the aspen glade and headed deep into one of Columbine Cove's tightest thickets.

There, in the midst of a log fall, he circled back where he could watch his own track and bedded down. From the spot he chose he could see a few yards down wind, but remained well hidden from the rear. From his "blind" direction, he counted on wind-borne scent for warning of any approaching danger. Thus warily placed, he should be fairly safe from the average hunter. It was from such a bed that old Zuke Spahr had jumped him the day before. But this time old Zuke had the advantage of fresh snow to muffle his footsteps—and for tracking. At the very moment when Gotch Ear heaved his windy bedding-down sigh and belched his first cud, old Zuke, half a mile away down wind, was studying tracks where the two bucks had sparred their first round.

Within five minutes Gotch Ear was up again, but it was neither scent nor sound of hunter that had disturbed him. From a similar day bed two or three hundred yards to the westward, the breeze brought a persistent buck-musk scent that told him the intruder was still in his domain—and making himself at home. It was more than the old king's pride could stand. Hunter danger half forgotten, he quit his bed and struck out westward to renew the battle. The black-brisketed big un from the high country, it appeared, was ready.

That was still fairly early in the morning. By noon the two bucks had almost completely circled Columbine Cove. Every quarter mile or so along their trail a patch of hoof-plowed snow slush, ripped tufts of hair and small spatters of blood showed where they had locked horns, fought a while, then moved on, soon to fight again.

By mid-afternoon it was no longer the tentative sparring of two bucks in whom the seasonal wrath of the rutting season was just coming to life. Now, the tracks showed plainly, the battle had become a grim and deadly one. The aging King of Columbine Cove was fighting desperately for the mastery of the domain he had so long considered his own; and the bold, full-muscled, younger intruder, gaining in arrogance with every clash, showed plainly that he had no intention of being choused away.

Once lithe muscles in Gotch Ear's body ached with tiredness. From shanky hips once broad and powerful, driblets of blood oozed from the gouge of antler points whose thrust he had not been quite agile enough to avoid. But never had he retreated far. Only far enough to maneuver for another clash. For his was a warrior's heart, and a proud one, born to win or to go down fighting.

Under the lengthening shadows of late afternoon on a ridge flank at the western rim of Columbine Cove, Gotch Ear maneuvered once more for the advantage of a downhill push. His blood-smeared neck was bowed, his tongue out, and something of the weariness of his body had at last reached his heart. Not fear, but a vague, aching dread, as if some ancient instinct told him that to lock horns with this tireless enemy again, meant that his day as a monarch was done.

With a clacking, almost metallic clash the hard antlers of the two circling bucks swung, clashed and locked together. Arrogantly, as if he no longer felt the need of any such advantage for himself, the black-brisketed buck let Gotch Ear have the uphill position. Then slowly the power of his younger muscles forced the old deer back, slowly but surely sidling him around the slant of the hill and losing him his original advantage.

Leg weary, "plumb wore out," from his long day of trailing the two fighting bucks, old Zuke Spahr heard their windy grunting as they strained against each other, even before he came in sight. Then, through a brief break in the tangle of timber that lay between him and the deer, he caught sight of one of them just going down to his knees. Most any other time Zuke would have wanted to watch the fight. But now this was almost the last hour of the last day of what might be his last season of deer hunting. Grimly he had kept on hunting, determined this last day, to bag a buck. Quickly, he raised his rifle and leveled down for a bead on the half-fallen buck.

But, like Gotch Ear, Zuke, too, was getting old, and old eyes, after a day of bright sun and new snow, will water. In the instant he paused to wipe his sighting eye with a gnarled knuckle, the half-fallen buck leaped free—and Zuke saw that it was Gotch Ear. The other buck lunged, then intervening brush hid them for a moment. The hunter heard a bleat of pain, then in a moment, through a rift in the brush, there was Gotch Ear, meeting the other buck's charge head-on again.

"Dang it, I better be gittin' me a buck," Zuke told himself, "while the gittin's good."

The weathered butt of his .30-30 swung snug to his shoulder. The hammer clicked back. The squint of his right eye lined the sights on a spot just back of the shoulder on the only one of the fighting bucks he could see plainly enough for a dead-sure shot.

At this moment, Gotch Ear, wholly unaware of the gun sights lined on his vitals, went down to one knee again, lost ground. This, he knew, was it—the end. The King of Columbine Cove was whipped. Yet, for just one more futile, desperate try, he gathered the strength of his failing muscles.

Even a hundred yards away, old Zuke Spahr, tuned to the feel of the wilderness, suddenly sensed the magnificence of the old buck's effort. At the risk of getting no shot at all, he abruptly lowered his rifle, shifted to a new position, raised the gun again, found dark deer hide in the sights and pulled the trigger.

To Gotch Ear's tremendous surprise the black-brisketed buck suddenly went down before his last desperate shove. Freeing his antlers with a triumphant yank, Gotch Ear stood for a brief instant staring down at the limp, kicking body of his strangely defeated enemy. Then, from across far canyons came back echoes to remind him of the shot whose sound he had heard but hardly realized in the tenseness of his final moment of battle.

"Wisht you could have seen the way he throwed up his head before he taken out," Zuke Spahr told his wife that night with a grin. "Yes, sir, bloody but unbowed! An' snort! Not a spooky snort like they sometimes make. No, sir. Sounded more like . . . like some ol' king's trumpet!"

"I'm glad you shot the other un," said Ma Spahr. "You sort o' owed Gotch Ear a favor—remember?"

"This un I killed will be tenderer meat anyway," said old Zuke—as if that were why he had done it. "I expect ol' Gotch Ear's purty tough."

But up in the night-shadowed solitude of Columbine Cove, Gotch Ear, stiff and sore, didn't try to figure it out. Enough for him that the black-brisketed invader from Spring Mountain no longer menaced the realm of an aging, but still undaunted, King of the Cove.

THE END.

FRONTIER HERITAGE

by Seth Ranger

Danger was a challenge to Dan Welch—but a challenge meant a chance to gain a victory

I.

Dan Welch leaned on the barrel of his long rifle and watched the wagon train slowly wend its way westward. "It's funny what keeps them drivin' on when Nature, Indians and even other white men do everything to beat them," he mused to his companion, Beaver Ely.

"Why'd you head west?" Ely queried.

"Didn't like the country I was livin' in," Dan answered. "Thought I saw greener fields to the west. I was like a sheep. I rode a hundred miles,

but the fields weren't any greener than the ones I'd just left. But they sure looked green beyond the Mississippi, 'specially the Oregon country and some place out that way they call Puget Sound."

The old fur trader nodded understandingly. "The quest for contentment. Man keeps goin' and goin' and then some day he sees a spot and says, 'This is the place I've been lookin' for. I'm goin' to take root.' But it ain't so easy as that. Maybe some other white man wants to take root in the same spot; you've got to fight him. Maybe the Indians don't want you there at all. You've got to fight them."

Dan Welch listened, his eyes on the disappearing wagon train.

"Those folks down there," Ely continued gravely, pointing to the train, "are leavin' a trail of graves. Maybe grandpa is in one grave, maybe the new baby is in another. Like as not the baby's ma died, too, and they're buried together. Maybe it's the husband, or brother in the next grave. Those that live may find contentment."

"You're a gloomy devil, Beaver," Dan said.

"Grave markers speak louder'n I can. And you've seen 'em," Beaver Ely answered. "Which brings me to this: Why don't you be smart and throw in with me. Forget the West. There's a good market for beaver pelts and I know where to find 'em. You've had a taste of Indian arrows and knives. The only reason they let you live was because you're big and strong and they wanted to torture you. You was lucky to escape."

Dan Welch shook his head. "No, Beaver, I'm going on. The Puget Sound country looks good to me. They claim pine trees out there grow six feet through and two hundred feet tall."

"Don't believe it," Beaver scoffed. "Like as not they're two-foot trees sixty foot tall."

"Then you've got lumber stock," Dan argued.

"I hear the northern Indians are bad. They come down in big canoes and lick hell out of the Sound Indians. They'd like a white man or two."

"I'm going anyway." Dan's voice was determined. "You see, there's a girl. Her name's Lassie McCall. She was with the train when the Indians attacked."

Beaver Ely nodded. He knew the details. Indians thought they had the train trapped because the waters of the river were rising. Volunteers agreed to hold back the redskins in a small pass while the train attempted the crossing.

There had been wagons and people, lost, but the little band of fighting men had held off a series of furious attacks while the greater number of wagons crossed the river. The rising river saved the train from further attack, but the Indians had wiped out or captured the little group of young men who had made this possible. Badly wounded, Dan Welch was among the captured. The Indians had nursed him back to good health to the end that his torture might be prolonged. But almost miraculously he had escaped.

"This Lassie McCall thinks you're dead by now," Beaver Ely said. "She's gone to a country full of young men looking for wives. She won't be able to hold out against *all* of 'em." He saw the pain of this very real fear on Dan's face and was sorry he had brought up that angle.

"Some of these wagon train romances are pretty businesslike affairs," Dan admitted. "A man needs someone to make a home for him. A girl needs a man to hunt food for her and to protect her. So they get married. It wasn't like that with Lassie and me. Our love growed slowly, like oak trees. I'm sure she'll wait. Anyway, I've got to find out —find that contentment, or misery, we've often talked about."

"I understand," Beaver Ely said. "It's lads like you that keep pushin' the frontier ahead, and when a nation no longer breeds 'em that nation is beginnin' to die."

And then Beaver Ely gave Dan Welch his best horse and finest saddle. He gave him a pack animal and loaded it with powder, bullets for the long rifle, salt, sugar, some flour and other items. But the bulk of the load was powder and lead, for a man must defend himself and live off the country.

In the days that followed, Dan Welch overtook and passed many an outfit headed westward. The nearer the goal the more the wear and tear on equipment and humans became evident.

Two weeks after he left Beaver Ely, Dan met a lone rider headed east. The man, young and reckless-appearing, greeted Dan cheerfully, but seemed anxious to go on.

"Wait!" Dan pleaded, "I've got to ask you some questions."

"They all want me to answer questions," the other replied, "and they've slowed me up a week now. I want to cross the Mississippi before snow flies."

"Then I'll go back with you a ways," Dan answered, "and you won't lose any time."

He left the pack horse tied to a small tree and rode along several miles with the eastbound rider.

"Have you heard of a girl named Lassie McCall," was Dan's first question.

"You aren't thinking of marrying her, too?" the rider demanded with a grin. "I've already met five young men who are determined they are going to marry her. The McCalls reached a point near the mouth of the Columbia River and turned northward. They plan to settle up there in a broad valley, with rolling hills, that leads to Puget Sound."

"What's the country like?" Dan asked.

"If I told you the truth of the fertile valleys and

the size of the timber from the Columbia River to Puget Sound you wouldn't believe me," the other man replied. "It rarely ever snows except in the mountains. And when snow falls on the lowlands a warm rain washes it off in a few hours or days. The lakes never freeze."

"And the Indians?"

"The Puget Sound Indians are fish-eaters. They won't give you much trouble. But the Northern Indians are as bad as those on the plains. To the Sound Indians all white men are either King George men or Boston men."

"I see," Dan said, grinning. "A Boston man is any American. The King George men are from England. Thanks!" He retraced his steps, excited by a vision of fertile lands, great trees and a fine climate and especially by the knowledge that Lassie had reached the Puget Sound country alive. His whole purpose now was to reach her before she married.

As he neared the headwaters of a stream emptying into the mighty Columbia River, Dan found a wagon train in the process of breaking up. Half wanted to settle in the country south of the Columbia River, the others intended to head over the mountains to Puget Sound.

"I'll make a deal with you," Dan said to one of the latter, a man named Ritchie. "If you'll take my pack horse with you, you can use him until you arrive, and I'll give you the saddle horse for your trouble."

"Why not throw in with us?" Ritchie proposed. "We're going to need young men. Winter will be crowding us before we get over the mountains."

"I'm going a shorter way," Dan answered. "Though in miles it's longer. There's a trading post at the mouth of the Columbia. I'm going to raft downstream and take passage on a sailboat for the Puget Sound country."

"A raft, did you say?" Ritchie inquired. "I've got to lighten my load if I'm to get over the mountains. Take my plow, heavy tools and farm equipment on your raft and I'll share it with you and pay half of the freight charges the packet captain demands."

"It's a deal," Dan agreed.

Later he fashioned a raft from pine trees. He selected dead trees because they were dry and would float. He lashed them together with rope and rawhide taken from elk he had killed nearby. He hewed out a great steering car and secured it at one end of the raft, then shoved off.

There was little to do but drift until he reached a waterfall. Then he unloaded, portaged the precious freight below the rapids, then using the rawhide lashings as a snubbing line, floated the raft through. He reloaded, while the sweat poured even from his toughened skin and filled his eyes. Drive! Drive! Drive! Thus it had been from the moment he had headed west. He wondered if there would ever be a time when he could relax, even briefly.

Days later he grounded his raft at Astoria. The thunder of the Columbia River bar was in his ears. And on all sides—even across the river—towered fir trees of unbelievable size. He was ready to believe the stories of fertile soil, of Indians in long canoes made of single logs and of greener fields where a man, after a struggle, might find contentment.

II.

There were others like himself in the vicinity of the trading post, rangy, dark men with deep chests and untrimmed beards. Some were dressed in sailor's clothing, but most of them wore greasy buckskin with fringed edges.

Their feet were covered with moccasins and their weapons were better kept than themselves, for, in this busy life, a man seldom found time for much primping.

Dan Welch learned that within two weeks a trading schooner would leave for New York Alki. Alki, he knew, was from the Chinook jargon, and meant by and by. A settlement that would be as large as New York by and by, had been established on Puget Sound. He heard there were some who doubted the settlement would ever be as large as New York, and wanted to name the coming city, Seattle, after an Indian chief in the region.

Dan loaded his outfit aboard the schooner, paid his freight and passage money and relaxed for the first time in days. From the moment the schooner entered the straits leading to the Sound, Dan studied the shore through a telescope. There were so many favorable places a man could stake a claim that he was bewildered.

Then one day the schooner dropped anchor in a small bay. There was no breeze and the captain explained they would remain at anchor until the tide turned.

Dan borrowed a boat and rowed around the bay. A small river emptied into it and he could see grass growing in the rich bottom land. Several deer were feeding and salmon were jumping off the river mouth. He saw an exposed bar and landed. Everywhere clams were squirting water through small holes in the sand. He saw a bench well above tidewater and climbed to it.

Wild blackberry vines covered down logs and rocky areas. A spring spilled icy water from a break in the rocks. The bench commanded a view not only of the bay, but of the Sound as well.

"A man," Dan thought, "could raise pretty nearly everything he needed to eat. He could build a wharf and sawmill and load lumber aboard the ships of the world. This is the place!"

He returned to the schooner and informed the captain of his plans. "It's a fine harbor," the skipper agreed, "and some day ships will load lumber there. But it isn't protected from the Indians. You'll be a lone white man—"

"Yes, I know," said Dan, "but there must always be the *first* white man in any new country. He takes the risk and skims the cream."

"If he lives," the skipper added dryly.

He helped Dan land his possessions and carry them to the bench before the tide turned.

"Good luck," he said as he shook Dan's hand. "Maybe my ship will tie up to your wharf some day."

"If you see Lassie McCall," said Dan, "please tell her Dan Welch is building her a home here and that he will find her as soon as he is established."

"Aye," the skipper answered, "if I see her I'll tell her. In any event I'll tell other whites you are here, to the end they'll be keeping an eye open for you."

That night Dan found several large crabs in a shallow pond left by the receding tide. He boiled them and ate their meat. In the morning he caught a mess of trout and fried them. Then he laid out the site of his cabin and set about cutting down trees and sawing them into the proper lengths.

He fitted a hook to a long pole, stood in the shallows of the river and gaffed salmon by the dozen. Some he salted down in a big barrel, others he dried. He killed two bucks and smoked the meat. He worked from the first streak of dawn until it was too dark to see. Drive! Drive! Drive!

He could have used another man in building his cabin, but none appeared until the walls were up and he was splitting cedar shingles from blocks of sound, dry wood. Then, without warning, a dozen canoes rounded the point and entered his small bay.

Bucks, squaws and even children paddled. They landed and the men approached. From their faces Dan surmised they resented his intrusion. He knew they weren't northern Indians. The fierce slave hunters from Alaska traveled in larger canoes. And of course they would not bring women and children along.

"Klahowya!" the leader said. "King George man? Boston man?"

"Boston man!" Dan answered.

"Cumtux, Chinook wa-wa?"

"Tenas," Dan answered, indicating that he understood a little of the Chinook jargon.

"Clatawa!" the native ordered, scowling and waving his hand from the partly finished cabin to the Sound.

"No," Dan said, his jargon failing him. "I won't get out. I'm here to stay. I build cabin. I bring woman. Maybe trading post sometime."

The native didn't understand all Dan said, but the import of the white man's words was clear. He intended to remain. They took due note of his cabin. The logs were thick enough to stop bullets. They discussed this and the man himself in guttural tones.

They hauled their canoes out on the beach, built campfires and settled down for the night. Dan kept pretty close to his rifle, but not close enough so they would think he was afraid of them. They gathered around the following morning and watched him work. He was worried, but his face did not betray it. Any moment he expected them to rush in, but he was ready to take a few with him if he crossed the Great Divide.

The natives returned to the beach shortly before noon and a great argument followed. The tribe spellbinders delivered orations, directing frequent scowls at the lone white man and his half-built cabin.

When Dan awakened the following morning, the natives were gone. "They'll be back," he muttered, "and ready for trouble." He worked a thirty-six-hour stretch finishing the roof and carrying all of his equipment inside of the cabin. There was some mighty fine spar timber near the cabin. It stood exactly where he planned to put in a vegetable garden in the spring.

Dan dropped two of the trees—and dropped them neatly without cracking the wood. He cut out two rough spars and blocked them up to weather. He would be ready should a vessel needing spars put in the harbor. Then he went to work whip-sawing boards for the cabin floor, the shelves, door and bunks.

He felt he should locate Lassie McCall and let her know what he was doing. And yet that might take weeks—time he needed badly if he expected to build and stock his cabin before winter.

The floor was finished and the door hung when a storm blew a canoe into his bay. He realized now his deep-water harbor was a natural shelter for any craft caught with wind or tide against them. Boats could row up the river, fill water casks and return with little effort. If necessary a ship could be beached on the clean, hard sand and repairs made when the tide went out.

Dan watched the canoe curiously. It carried sails and ballast. Several men were scattered from bow to stern to distribute the weight evenly. They seemed to be white men. Dan waited. The canoe started to land on the opposite side of the point where the river entered the bay, then seeing the cabin, the crew put about and beached the craft below Dan's clearing.

Five men scrambled up the bank and one of them yelled, "Hello, the cabin. Anybody home?"

"Hello!" Dan shouted, assured they were white men and friendly ones at that.

They all shook hands and introduced themselves. "You've plenty of courage building a cabin here," one of them said. "Why don't you locate near a settlement? These local Indians don't think much of us whites and the northern Indians are bad medicine."

"I think I'll see the day when ships anchor here and take my lumber aboard," Dan answered. "Where're you headed for?"

"The wedding!" the leader, a man named Field, answered.

"I hadn't heard. Who's gettin' married?" Dan asked.

"Somebody down at McCalls'," Field answered. He did not notice Dan's recoil under the blow. "None of us has ever seen the McCalls and don't know what they look like, but a travelin' parson passed my place last week and said he'd been sent for. Well, a weddin' is a weddin'. We ain't seen a white girl in a year and we're travelin' by canoe a hundred miles to kiss the bride. Better come along."

"Where're the McCalls located?" Dan managed to ask.

"We asked a fellow about that," Field said, "and he says, 'You can't miss their cabin. All trails in the country lead to it. They've got a girl there that's started the whole Puget Sound country travelin'!'" Field laughed loudly at the other man's words and slapped his thigh as he roared, "All trails lead to McCalls."

"I think I'll go along," Dan said. "Yes, I'll go along if there's room for me."

"What we need," Field said jokingly, "is a public-spirited citizen who'll bring a shipload of girls from the East. This country is an old-maid's paradise."

They set sail early the following morning. Field handled the canoe skillfully. Long, light, slender, the craft made fast time. And when the wind was right it could make progress even against the swift tides.

They sailed close to the shore, studying each cove for signs of a settlement. Here and there they saw a cluster of cabins, but the McCall cabin wasn't among them.

They rounded a headland near Olympia and saw a beach lined with canoes and small boats. "That must be it," Field said.

"I know it is," Dan answered. "The McCalls were in my train until the Indians caught me. I've seen those window curtains before. Lassie and Mrs. McCall were working on them as we drove over the plains."

For once in his life, Dan felt uncertain about what course to take. He hadn't wavered when Beaver Ely had advised against his going on. He hadn't hesitated to raft down the river instead of staying with the train and attempting to pass over the mountains. But now he didn't know what to do. Maybe he shouldn't spoil Lassie's wedding day by his unexpected appearance. Yet, to back out now would cause comment among his companions, particularly as he had mentioned coming West in the same wagon train with the McCalls.

He was conscious of a dull, aching pain when he thought of watching Lassie marry another man. He should have begun the search for her as soon as he reached the Sound. Yet a man had to be practical on the frontier, or he would be lost.

III.

Someone had opened a keg of rum and cups were pressed into their hands almost before Dan and the others had hauled the canoe above the high-water mark. Freddy Wyckoff, a flushed, sweating individual who looked as if he had been hogtied, then poured into a Sunday suit of clothing, was introduced as the groom.

His friends kept insisting on forcing another drink down the groom and fortifying him for the coming ordeal. Instead, they were merely draining the strength from legs already weakened by the prospect of the wedding ceremony.

Dan groaned. It seemed to him that almost any man on the beach would have been a better husband for Lassie. At that moment Field joined him.

"After seein' the groom," Field said, "I need another drink. With good men cryin' for wives, she picks that scarecrow. Women are funny. Well, bottoms up, Welch."

Dan tilted his cup upward, drained the fiery liquor, blew like a spouting whale and felt worse than ever. He made his way to the cabin. The door was open, and people milled around inside. Suddenly Lassie came out of a back room. Her hands dropped to her side for a moment. The color drained from her face.

"Dan!" she breathed. "Oh! They told me you were dead!"

Then she was in his arms, while a half dozen young fellows stared in astonishment.

"Didn't they get word to you that I had arrived on the Sound?" Dan asked.

"I haven't heard a thing," Lassie answered. "When did you arrive? Where have you been? Tell me everything."

Briefly, he told what he had been doing since they saw each other last. "I suppose I should have stayed away," he concluded, "instead of coming over here to your wedding, but I couldn't stay away."

Dan was proud of the new home he had built for Lassie, but he couldn't forget the ever-lurking danger of Indian raids.

"My wedding?" Lassie exclaimed. "I'm not getting married. Ellen Fremont, who joined our train after we escaped from the Indians, is the bride-to-be. I guess I'm a one-man girl, Dan. When I heard you were dead, I . . . I—" She couldn't continue for a minute, then she smiled happily. "Now I must run along and help the bride."

Dan caught her as she started through the door. "Wait, Lassie," he pleaded. "Listen! The cabin's ready, stocked with grub, and waiting for you. Let's make it a double wedding. Can't we?"

Lassie gasped. "Why, Dan, we, I . . . we couldn't. I'm not ready. Why—"

"Your hope chest is full to the top," Dan insisted. "All you have to do is to dress and . . . and love me enough."

"You know I love you enough but—"

"Listen," Dan pleaded, "it will be the first double wedding on Puget Sound. Besides, the parson may not come this way for months. And—" He broke off and dashed into the kitchen where Mr. and Mrs. McCall were preparing food for the wedding guests. "We're making a double wedding of it. While Freddie Wyckoff is marrying Ellen Fremont, I'm going to marry Lassie."

"Land sakes alive!" Mrs. McCall exclaimed. "I never heard of such a thing. Have you built a home?"

"Yes."

"Is it safe from Indians?" the mother inquired anxiously.

"It's safe," Dan insisted. "The northern Indians have too much sense to mix with the whites."

"They haven't been taught their lesson yet," Mrs. McCall argued. "They've never known defeat. They'll have to burn their fingers before they realize that fire is dangerous. And I don't want them burning them at my Lassie's expense."

"They won't be venturing down this winter," Dan insisted. "And by next spring I hope to have a settlement large enough to fight off any Indians."

Lassie took Dan's side when it looked as if things might go against him. "Dan has made everything

ready," she said, "and now I'm ready to do my share. We'll make it a double wedding."

As the information reached those outside there was a rush for the rum keg. "A double wedding!" Field exclaimed. "We brung a bridegroom and didn't know it." He stood Freddie Wyckoff on his rubbery legs. "Have one more on the other bridegroom."

Ellen Fremont appeared at that moment, her lips set in a grim line. "If he takes any more, I'll not marry him," she said determinedly.

In a land where there were twenty men for every girl this sentiment was greeted with approval. "Marry me," Field bellowed, "and give him the go-by."

"I'll marry you, Mr. Field," Ellen said icily, "when you're the last man on earth." She shook Freddie. "Now go down to the spring and soak your head in cold water."

"Let's everybody drink to the one who'll wear the pants in the Wyckoff family," Field roared, "Mrs. Ellen Wyckoff."

The bride-to-be returned to the cabin, thoroughly angered, while the men drank to her.

Quiet settled down a few minutes later as the parson performed the ceremony under a spreading fir tree. Ritchie and his wife rode in on Dan's pack horse as the ceremony ended.

"We heard Lassie was gettin' married," Ritchie said, "and we knowed Dan Welch must've got through. Here's your horse, Dan. How about my tools?"

"Safe in my cabin," Dan answered. "Better make your way along the beach at low tide until you find my place. I'm borrowin' a canoe to take Lassie's things home, and you can paddle it back with yours."

"We'll do it," Ritchie agreed. Then he hurried off to help drain the rum keg.

An hour later Dan carried his bride to the canoe and placed her in the bow. Her hope chest and other things occupied the center of the boat, while Dan took his position in the stern.

They paddled around the point, and hoisted sail as soon as they encountered a favorable breeze. There was so much to be said that they were at a loss for words, but they found full measure of happiness in smiling into each other's eyes.

"This is the end of our troubles, Dan," Lassie said. "The beginning of long years of contentment."

"Yes," he answered slowly, as if trying to convince himself. "Yes, we've long years of contentment ahead of us."

But he knew that was not the truth. Contentment could not come until the conflict of races was settled and the white man had gained mastery.

There were seventeen canoes on the beach near the river mouth when Dan and Lassie arrived home. "I don't like it," Dan said. "They've never lived here before, though I found plenty of signs of temporary camps. Well, we're home anyway."

He shouldered Lassie's hope chest and staggered steadily up the path to the cabin. The ground about the windows was packed solid from the tread of many feet.

"Wait, don't go in," he called to the bride. He swung the chest to the ground, picked up Lassie and carried her into the cabin.

"Had you forgotten the groom carries the bride across the threshold?" he asked, grinning.

"My only thought was to open the door before you broke your back under that chest," she answered. She looked around the cabin and impulsively threw her arms about his neck and kissed him. "Dan darling! You remembered all the little things I mentioned when we drove over the plains. It's wonderful and all ours."

Three weeks after they landed, a brig nosed her way into the bay. A sailor well forward heaved the lead and they could hear his voice in the clear air singing. "Six fathoms and a deep! Six fathoms! Six fathoms! Five fathoms and a deep!"

Then suddenly the anchor went down and the brig swung around with her broad bows to the current. The captain came ashore in a small boat.

"Looking for spars," he informed Dan. "I see you have some."

"I need flour," Dan said, remembering it was worth thirty dollars a barrel at some of the trading posts. "And pork. And my wife would like thread and cloth."

"Let's set down and come to an agreement," the skipper proposed. "You've spars and we've got what you need. I've been hoping someone would settle here. The northern Indians being what they are, I hadn't expected anyone so soon. Well, I can take all of the spars, square timbers and lumber you can produce—"

"Good!" exclaimed Dan. "Bring me a sawmill, boiler and engine on your next voyage. I haven't any money but I'll have enough spars for a down payment. You can retain title to the mill until it's paid for. Is it a deal?"

"I like a man who comes to the point," the skipper answered approvingly. "I'll bring the mill. Now you come aboard and see what I have."

Dan rose at once, but when he would have invited Lassie to go along the captain shook his head and indicated he wished to talk with him in private.

They had a drink of Scotch whiskey in the skipper's cabin. "I didn't want to frighten your young wife," the man explained, "but a white man on one of the islands to the north of us killed an Alaskan Indian a month ago. The killing should

have served notice on them that their days of raiding are done. But they've wiped out an Alaskan settlement or two in their time and they're insolent beggars. They'll be back and they've sworn to take three white heads for the man who was killed."

"What's the matter with organizing the Sound Indians and giving them a battle?" Dan suggested.

"Fish-eaters!" the skipper snorted. "There's no fight in them. They've been beaten so often by the northern tribes they're afraid. And it is a fearsome sight they are, too, in those canoes they have. They're larger than any canoes you'll see around here. Some of them will hold sixty men and they can drive them ten miles an hour."

He opened a chest and brought out a pistol with six barrels. "Something new," he explained, "you load the barrels and place a cap on each. The hammer rises, falls and explodes the cap which, in turn, fires the load. You can fire six shots without reloading. And take these two rifles. You may need them when those beggars come down to collect their three heads."

"Thanks," Dan answered. "And I hope I'll never have occasion to use them. My wife and I love this spot. We can prosper here, without harm to anyone, particularly northern head hunters. We intend to take root."

The skipper paced the length of his cabin twice before answering. "If you've got any sense, you'll take that sweet little wife of yours and go down to Olympia or some other settlement. Come back when there are enough of you to hold off those red men."

"Lassie wouldn't go," Dan answered. "She says the whites are few amid many, and when even one of those few retreat in the face of danger, all others are in peril."

"Then put your trust in God, sir, and dry powder," the skipper answered. "Now I'll send your supplies ashore and land a crew of men to get the spars into the water. In the late spring we'll land your mill, and I'll add anything else I can think of."

Two days later Ritchie and his wife appeared with the pack horse.

"I had about given you up," Dan told him.

"That horse is worth his weight in gold," Ritchie declared. "We've had a terrible time following the shore line. There are so many inlets and bays. We had to make rafts again and again. We paddled the rafts while he swam rivers and bays."

They harnessed the horse to the plow and turned over the sod between stumps. At times both men helped pull, while the women clung to the plow handles. It was back-breaking work, but once broken, Dan could work on his garden patch during the winter and get it in shape for the spring planting.

"If all goes well," Dan said to Ritchie, "you had better settle here. I'm going to start a sawmill and I'll need men in the spring."

"I'll think it over," Ritchie promised. He loaded his belongings into the canoe Dan had borrowed from the McCalls several weeks before and shoved off.

Dan kept stumps burning in the clearing constantly. It was slow work and the only way was to keep constantly at it. On rainy days he worked in the cabin or in the clearing. The fair days found him felling trees. He moved slowly along the river bank, felling his trees in positions that made it easy to roll the logs into the stream.

Later on, when his mill was running and he had a gang of men, he could cut the timber away from the bank. Now it was up to him to produce a maximum of timber with a minimum of effort. Trees that seemed ideal for spars, he floated down to the cabin and hauled above high-water mark with the aid of block and tackle.

As the months passed he grew leaner, harder. It was drive! Drive! Drive! And when Lassie suggested he ease up, he shook his head and grinned.

"The skipper won't land that sawmill machinery unless I've made a showing," he said.

The local Indians observed his actions with indifference. Except when they came to the cabin looking for a handout, which they accepted without any too much appreciation, they remained in their own camps.

A white man named Packard appeared in the early spring. He wanted work, and was willing to wait for his money. "I'm hongry," he drawled, "and a hongry man can't keep hisself warm when it's wet and rainy."

Dan found Packard was a handicap rather than a help in his logging operations. Packard believed in a much slower pace and there always was a tomorrow as far as he was concerned. Dan left him at home to burn stumps and plant potatoes and vegetables in the garden plot.

Dan's operations now extended two miles up the river, for it was necessary to select only the best trees. He wanted to establish a reputation in the south that would bring business in the future. The days were much longer now and he had more than twelve hours of daylight in which to work.

IV.

One morning Dan's day ended almost before it started. The hoarse cries of frightened, primitive people filled the air. Dan dropped his ax and listened. Suddenly a canoe filled with desperately

paddling natives rounded a bend in the river. They were mostly squaws and children.

Dan ran to the water's edge. "What's the trouble?" he yelled.

One of the squaws understood his query. She shouted and pointed to the north. And then he knew—the northern Indians were coming. Even as he realized the trouble, a canoe filled with men appeared. Paddles lifted and fell with a fury that churned the water and sent the canoe moving swiftly against the current.

"You yellow fools!" Dan yelled. "Go back there and fight 'em!" He waded into the stream, caught the high bow and turned the craft about by main strength. Then he hauled himself aboard. Shouts of protest greeted his action and one native drew a knife. Two others lifted their paddles threateningly.

Dan drew his pepperpot, the little six-barreled weapon the captain had given him. They had seen him shoot blue grouse off a limb with it, and were impressed, as he intended they should be when he did the shooting.

"Northern Indians say Boston man no fight," Dan yelled at them. "Boston man always fight. Boston man fight for his squaw. He fight for you and your squaw. Paddle!"

He saw they had no relish for the job, but were afraid of his gun. Twice on the way downstream he stopped other canoes and removed the younger, stronger men and included them in his own party. His heart was pounding wildly when they came in sight of the cabin.

It was standing, exactly as he had left it several hours earlier. Smoke drifted lazily from the chimney. The Northern invaders hadn't arrived yet. Then he saw a big canoe, with at least fifty paddlers crossing the bay.

It was the largest canoe he had ever seen. The paddlers' feet could not reach the bottom, and foot rests were placed on the sides. The chief, or perhaps it was the *Shaman*, dressed in a strange costume, sat above the others.

Dan ordered his own canoe to land. He drove the crew ahead of him, lest they desert.

"Lassie!" he shouted. "Lassie!"

A native pointed and shuddered. Packard's body lay on the ground near the cabin. It was headless.

Dan entered the cabin and looked wildly about. In the back of his mind was the fear that Lassie had been murdered. But he knew the invaders had taken good care to capture Lassie alive and unharmed if possible. They were making their first raid on a white settlement and were taking the greatest prize of all—a young white woman.

He lifted a loose floor board and picked up two of the rifles the skipper had given him. They were well oiled and had been kept for an emergency. He filled his pockets with powder and ball, caught up an ax, then chased the natives back to their canoe.

Dan wondered if his crew would fight if cornered. Perhaps in sheer desperation they might develop into something. He realized they held a very definite fear of the weapon he held in his hand. The six barrels meant six separate deaths.

Ahead, the Northern canoe suddenly turned and headed outward. As Dan puzzled over this unusual bit of action he saw a small canoe paddled by a young native and his squaw suddenly turn back toward the land. Both were paddling desperately. The war canoe's crew fairly churned the water with their paddles. The great craft leaped ahead. As the smaller craft neared the beach, the young couple jumped overboard and raced madly for the brush.

Halfway up the beach the man threw his hands into the air, stumbled, fell. A rifle report echoed against the neighboring bluffs. Two men jumped from the war canoe, caught the fleeing woman and dragged her through the water and dumped her aboard.

With fine scorn for Dan's canoe, the big craft headed north, the paddlers taking things easy enough, knowing they could outpaddle the pursuing craft or turn and engage it whenever they desired.

"They *Hydahs* or *Chimsieyans*, bad," one of Dan's natives said.

"We'll get 'em!" Dan answered. He knew something of the tides running along the shore, but he doubted if the Northern natives had concerned themselves with it. He hoisted sail, sent the canoe where the tide ran strongest and awaited results. The Northern canoe speeded up, held briefly, then began to lose distance.

Dan sensed their amazement. He saw a change. Figures moved and presently a native rested a rifle on the canoe's stern and fired. The bullet kicked up a jet of water six feet to starboard. Dan made his way forward. It was possible his own men would overpower him the instant his back was turned, but he had to chance it. He rested the rifle on the high bow and fired. He deliberately missed with the first shot, to throw them off guard, and to get the range himself. He reloaded, confident he had the range. He saw the rifleman in the other canoe lift head and shoulders to get a better aim. Dan fired.

The other's rifle plunged into the water as the man gave a convulsive movement and slid back into the canoe. The Northern canoe suddenly turned, convinced attack would be the best move. The Puget Sound canoe faltered, the crew obeying the instincts of generations of fish-eaters.

Dan turned on them with blazing eyes and roared commands that made them jump. There were fifty in the war canoe, thirty in the smaller one. As the smaller craft closed in, Dan could see surprise on some of the enemy faces, but mostly it was contempt—contempt for the Puget Sounders, contempt for the Boston man in command.

Dan looked over his shoulder. "Beat them!" he bellowed. "Send them home whipped and they'll never come back again!"

One who understood English explained what Dan had said. But no cheers greeted his words. Rather a fatalistic calm settled on the canoe. Dan stood up and caught a glimpse of Lassie for the first time. She was lying in the bottom of the war canoe. Forward, on the prow, he saw Packard's head, a grim trophy of the raid. And the last trophy, if Dan had his way.

A native lifted a shotgun, but Dan dropped him with a rifle shot just as he pressed the trigger. The shotgun belched its lead into the air, kicking the native overboard. Dan emptied the other rifle and dropped it. It clattered against the bottom of the canoe. A harpoon whistled past his head and struck a native behind him with a sickening thud.

He kept his pistol in a side pocket, ready to draw at a critical period. He gripped an ax in both hands. His fear was that the Northern Indians might defeat his own crew and escape. As the two canoes struck, Dan drove the ax into the cedar hull of the war canoe. Chips flew under the impact. He drove again from the opposite angle and opened a hole at the water line.

As the water gushed into the canoe, a native thrust his leg into the opening. One of Dan's crew crashed an ax downward, severing the protruding portion of the leg at a point above the knee.

Two of Dan's men hesitated to board the enemy craft, but he knocked them aboard. Spears and harpoons sliced through the air and thudded to abrupt stops. Men screamed out in pain and fell overboard. A crimson stream began trickling along the bottom of the invading canoe.

Lassie pulled herself clear of the fighting men, and worked her way slowly aft. She crouched in the stern, holding a cedar chest cover as a shield.

"Watch out for knives!" Dan yelled warningly.

Even as he spoke, a huge native clambered over the thwarts, caught up Lassie and advanced, sensing that the white man would not risk killing her. Dan pulled out his pistol and aimed. He aimed so high in order to miss Lassie that he only creased the giant native's head. The man dropped the girl and collapsed. Two of his companions turned to pick her up, but a pair of Dan's men hurled spears halfway through their bodies.

The craft swung around, beam to beam. A half dozen Northern Indians prepared to board the smaller craft and attack its crew from the rear.

Dan smashed his way through the struggling men, almost upsetting the canoe in his hurry. He couldn't miss now. He aimed at their breasts and fired the five remaining loads. A sort of horror and despair swept through the invaders. They had never seen a gun fire more than once without reloading.

This Boston man fired six times and for all they knew he might go on firing indefinitely. As a native squared away to drive a spear through him, Dan pointed the empty gun menacingly. The spear dropped from the man's hand and he jumped overboard before the dreaded blast could overtake him.

Sensing that the invaders were beaten, the Puget Sounders increased the fury of their attack until Dan took a hand to stop them. Long overdue accounts were being paid off when the Boston man finally made himself heard.

"Don't kill them all!" he bellowed. "Send some of them back as an example of what happens to those who attack a Boston woman. Let them tell the story. Let them know you are as brave and fierce as they are."

The chief repeated Dan's advice. Reluctantly the victors ceased the attack. They filled the smaller canoe with the injured, the dead and the uninjured, and pointed it North. They could think of no greater disgrace than to send the proud invaders back in one of the fish-eaters' canoes. Every native who saw the passing craft would know they had lost their own proud war craft in battle.

Dan lifted the native whose leg blocked the hole in the war canoe and dropped him overboard. The man had died almost instantly. Dan stuffed the hole with clothing and set two natives to bailing out the big craft. The uninjured picked up enemy paddles and headed homeward.

"Are you hurt, Lassie?" Dan asked anxiously. Many things old Beaver Ely had mentioned were returning again to haunt him.

"I'm all right, Dan," Lassie answered. "I was so relieved when I saw you coming with the natives. I was afraid you would come alone. That's what they wanted."

Dan understood they had wanted three whites, or their heads, for the one native a white man had killed. Packard was one, Lassie two, and he would have been the third.

"They couldn't understand why you made such good time, even with the sails," the girl continued. "It was the fast tide, of course. They didn't notice the trick until too late. Well, it's all over now.

And you'll promise not to work so hard in the future, won't you?"

He grinned. He had no thought of coasting with his work for thirty or forty years yet.

Canoe loads of natives came down the creek as soon as a watcher saw that Dan and his companions were in possession of the huge war craft. Men and women shouted and cheered the first victory they could recall, then as they passed the dead ashore the old cronies began chanting and wailing.

"Even in victory," Dan remarked somberly. "There's grief and wailing. We're in for a hideous night."

"For which, thank God!" Lassie added reverently.

V.

While Lassie put the cabin in order again, Dan made a coffin of whip-sawed lumber and prepared to bury Packard. He placed the coffin on a stone-boat and hauled it to a hill overlooking the Sound. If he was founding a city, then that city must have a cemetery, and this would be the best site.

He dug the grave alone and lowered the coffin with the aid of a rope snubbed around a tree. Lassie asked if he needed help, but Dan made her stay in the cabin. She had been through enough without adding another depressing experience.

Long after they had gone to bed the wailing continued down on the beach. At midnight they pulled on their boots and walked over to the edge of the bluff and looked down. Campfires burned brightly and the peculiar odor of burning, salt-water-soaked driftwood filled the air. Several aged squaws were beating a log with a stick and chanting weird death songs.

"It makes me think of moonlight nights, hairy men, wolves and caves," Lassie said. "Will it ever end?"

When they awakened in the morning the lamenting was over and the beach deserted, except for the war canoe. The campfires were mostly gray ashes, fringed by the ends of charred wood.

"There's an Indian cemetery down the Sound a ways," Dan said. "They've gone there."

He decided to remain close to the cabin until the natives returned and he was certain of their attitude. He had brought them victory, but his methods might have been too high-handed.

When they returned he sensed a new respect. There was work to be done around the place and he explained weeding and gardening to two of the most willing young natives. He asked a girl to help Lassie in the cabin and then went upriver to finish getting out piling.

"I've almost got a payroll to take care of now," Dan reflected. "And let's see, where was I a year ago? With the wagon train, dreaming of something like this."

He drove his ax deep into a tree and watched the clean, white chips fly. When the tree fell and he had topped it and removed the limbs he saw a native boy running along the river bank. The boy pointed back toward the sound and chattered so excitedly that Dan could not make out what he was trying to say.

Dan drove the ax deep into the piling and left it there with the handle vibrating from the stress of his emotion. He brushed the boy aside and ran down the river bank, smashing through impeding brush and splashing through shallows. The only thought that occurred to him was that the Northern Indians must have returned.

When he got to the beach, he stopped short with a gasp of relief. The brig was rounding the point. She sailed beautifully to her anchorage and he noticed she rode low from the weight of her cargo and that there was a steam boiler lashed to the deck.

Lassie ran down the beach and stood at his side, waving.

"Look!" Dan exclaimed joyfully. "The mill's come! As soon as the cargo's unloaded, I'll see if I can get the skipper to go down Sound and pick up your folks and anyone else who wants to work."

He hopped into a canoe and paddled out to the vessel.

The skipper was there to greet him as he came over the side.

"I've got a cargo of spars and piling," Dan cried excitedly. "And, say, you didn't forget the pile-driver hammer?"

"I never forget anything," the skipper chuckled. "I even think of things a man's going to need. I haven't been supplying settlements for years for nothing. Your mill is aboard, complete. Pile-driver hammer, cable, everything. Some cloth for Mrs. Welch and furniture for the cabin. Everything you'll need in the way of food. Also a contract to cover everything. I'll credit you with your piling and spars as soon as you bring 'em within reach of my tackle."

Momentarily Dan Welch relaxed. Contentment was right around the corner, the contentment of those who, blazing trails into the wilderness, lay the foundation for new towns, new States.

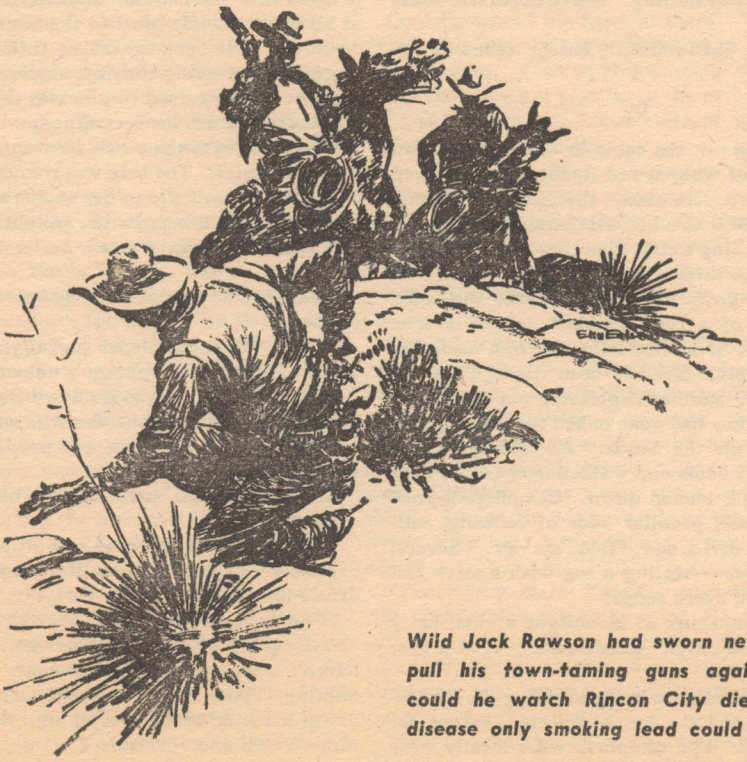
"Thanks, captain," he said gratefully. "You certainly remembered everything I asked for, and I appreciate it."

The skipper nodded and grinned. "Yes, sir," he chuckled. "And I'm even ahead of you— Mr. Sheedy," he bellowed to the mate, "open the second hatch and bring up that cradle!"

THE END.

A MARSHAL SHEDS HIS GUNS

by Harry F. Olmsted



Wild Jack Rawson had sworn never to pull his town-taming guns again but could he watch Rincon City die of a disease only smoking lead could cure?

I.

Two things of great import to Rincon City happened almost simultaneously that crisp spring evening. The train rolled in from the East with a deadhead riding the blind baggage. And Cato Goolsby, gambler, promoter and dreamer of brave dreams, came whirling into town on a spirited horse, with three trusted gunmen at his back and a determination to give Rincon City, his lately selected center of activity, a practical demonstration of the foolhardiness of bucking him.

The deadhead on the blind baggage had no intention of quitting the train at Rincon City. Indeed, he didn't even know such a place existed. But no sooner had the train shuddered to a stop than a waiting railroad detective popped around the corner of the car, stuck a gun in his face, and took him off. He was marched around the station and into the baggage room, where the town marshal, a weasel-eyed man with pinched and parsimonious features, waited to take him over.

"What's he worth on the hoof, sight unseen?" asked the red-necked detective.

"Half what he's got on him," the marshal answered cautiously.

"No time," said the detective. He jerked his head as the engine whistled a warning. "I'm leavin' when that train does. Make a deal or he goes with me to the next town."

"Two dollars."

"Too cheap, but times are hard. Gimme the money."

The bills changed hands and the detective ducked out, taking the train on the fly. Marshal Pratt Ebaugh looked over his buy. He saw a tall, gaunt man, with several days' stubble on his cheeks, grimy with roadbed dust and patently down on his luck. He felt a sudden qualm, thinking back to failure in these gambles of his.

"How much you got on you, feller?" he demanded sharply.

"How much what?"

"Money! Mazuma! Kale, cush, spondulix or dinero—dependin' on where you come from."

"Does that make any difference?" There was a hint of revolt in the hobo's tone.

The marshal's laugh grated. "It makes the difference between goin' free or goin' to jail. An' if you appear before Judge McMinn, he'll fine you all you got anyway. Come on; pungle up." He snapped his fingers.

"Sorry, marshal. I'm broke. Haven't a red cent on me."

"What's in the bundle? Open it up!"

"Take me to jail," countered the hobo. "At least I can have a cot there to starve on."

"You asked for it, brother," gritted the lawman, and herded his prisoner to the street and along the walk toward the heavy-walled adobe jail house.

Halting his horse before the Poker Chip Saloon, Cato Goolsby swung out of the saddle and handed the rein to one of his followers.

"Take the horses down to the barn and have them grained," he ordered. "Ty, you and Tod come along with me. If I've timed this right, I'll catch a certain party in the Poker Chip, enjoying a before-supper glass. Let me handle this."

He led the way into the barroom and a hush fell. For already Cato Goolsby and his Bonanza Placer Mining Co. were the causes of much speculation in Rincon City. Every eye in the place was on the promoter as he moved straight for the end of the long bar, where a slight, studious-looking man set down his glass and faced front, his lips drawn tight, the blood draining away from his face.

Goolsby paused before him, smiling with a tight cheerfulness. "You're Calkins, ain't you? Well, I'm that black-hearted skunk you spread over your funny little sheet." He jerked a paper from his pocket, slapped it against his palm. "This is your paper, isn't it? You did write this?"

"I wrote it," admitted Miron Calkins. "The *Advocate* prints the truth, without fear or favor. The truth is bound to hurt somebody."

Goolsby's barrel chest heaved outward. His lips folded back from his teeth, to make a savage mask of his face. But what he had on his mind just then was not spoken. Behind him the door burst open and the man he had sent with the horses came rushing in. His eyes were wide and news burned his tongue.

"Cato! Wild Jack Rawson's in town!"

If he had loosed a bombshell, it couldn't have pulled Cato Goolsby around faster. The gambler hurled the paper to the floor and his face squeezed into a hard and desperate knot.

"Wild Jack Rawson? You're seein' things, you fool! He can't be out here in California. You're crazy. Don't rib me with pap like that or—"

"But it's true; I'll bet all I got on it. He's out there with the marshal, right now. Go take a look if you doubt it."

"I think you're lying," said Goolsby in a flat, chill voice. "If you are, you got a lesson in manners coming." He reached under his broadcloth coat, loosened the gun in its holster. "If you're telling the truth, so what? If Wild Jack Rawson comes out here to see me, well—" He shrugged and turned back to Miron Calkins. But the publisher was gone, having slipped out unnoticed during the interruption.

It wasn't fear, however, that had sent Calkins out the rear door. Nor was it Goolsby he ran from as he hurried down to the marshal's office. To himself, at least, he made honest admission that the gambler terrified him. Cornered in the Poker Chip Saloon, he would have faced Goolsby's abuse, knowing that the man might even pass a death sentence on him. But mention of the name "Wild Jack Rawson" had revived news stories he had written of that prairie marshal he had always admired, but never seen, and had given him the idea that drew him from the saloon hardly ten seconds prior to Goolsby's roared:

"That rat of a newspaperman sneaked out on me. Go round him up, Luke. Drag him in here by the scruff of the neck if you have to. I've got things to say to that gentleman with the poison pen. Don't stand there! Go get him!"

That spurred Calkins. Diving between buildings, he hit the street, just in time to see Marshal Ebaugh usher a prisoner into the jail house, at pistol point. That rather jarred the publisher. Then, on second thought, it pleased him. He knew the racket being run by the minions of the law in this new California town, and had refrained from mentioning it in his paper only in the interest of civic peace. Ebaugh had another victim to be sheared, but could that lank, disreputable prisoner be Rawson?

The publisher had his answer when he burst into the jail office, where Ebaugh was booking the hobo under the name of John Doe. Long used to looking beneath the veneer of what seemed to be, Calkins saw in those gray eyes, in the square jaw,

in the tall, loose-coupled body that was like a coiled spring, the lawman whose exploits he had followed with zest. In the dirt and stubble and sunken cheeks, he read only what life could do to such a man.

"What's the charge against this man, marshal?" he asked abruptly.

"Vagrancy," answered the lawman. "An' there ain't no story except one that's old as the hills—a man travelin', goin' nowheres, lookin' for something soft to fall into."

"If the man's got five dollars you can't convict him of vagrancy."

"Don't quote the law to me, Calkins. This gent was hookin' a ride on the Limited, which makes him a vagrant even if he had five dollars, which he says he hasn't. I 'low he's got vallybles in that pack, but he won't let me touch it. The judge will look after that, come mornin'."

"How much to let him off, marshal?"

The lawman started, looked the editor over, and pulled his chin. "Waal, now, if we didn't have to go through no trial, wasn't put to the expense of feedin' the prisoner an'—"

"And didn't have to split with the judge," Calkins added cynically.

"That's contempt of court, Calkins. Bridle your tongue on that kind of talk. You know, well as me, that the judge can't be touched with a ten-foot pole. But as I was sayin', without no expense to figger, the fine'll be five dollars."

Miron Calkins laid the sum on the desk and the marshal palmed it with greedy alacrity.

"You shouldn't have done that, neighbor," the hobo told the editor.

"Why not?"

"Because I can't repay you. I'm flat broke. Haven't even eaten but once in the last two days. I was heading for the coast."

"Prospects out there? A job?"

The man shook his head. "Nothing. Just trying to climb out of a rut."

"We'll fix that." Calkins linked his arm through that of the man he had bailed out of jail. "Come with me."

Matching steps, they passed out into the evening cool, Calkins suddenly alert to Cato Goolsby's henchman, the one who had orders to bring him in; and the stranger pursuing a bent of curiosity and looking the town over. It had a newness that was all too familiar to this man who had followed boom camps since boyhood, yet about it was a solidness the prairie towns couldn't match. Maybe it was the wideness of the streets, the evidence of building for the future. Maybe it was the rising vista of orchards beyond the town, row on row of trees in full bloom, reaching to the sinuous toe of the foothills, behind which towered purple, pine-clad mountains with their snowcaps.

"A right pretty place," was the stranger's judgment. "Busy-looking. Might be a chance here for a man willing to work. And this time it won't be for folks afraid to pull their own chestnuts out of the fire. Farming mebbe. Or cow work in yonder hills. Anything but gun work."

Wild Jack's thoughts cut off as he felt his benefactor come to a halt. The man's fingers sank into his arm with an urgent pressure. The walk gave back the echo of a heavy tread and a voice challenged through the dusk:

"Hey, you Calkins! You walked out of your talk with Cato Goolsby an' he don't like it. He says for you to get back inside the Poker Chip an' don't let no grass grow under your hoofs."

An interval of silence, with the newspaperman still clinging to the stranger's arm and his breath tempo quickening. Then: "You go tell Goolsby that my office is in the print shop. If he wants to see me that bad, let him come there."

Wild Jack Rawson saw rage darken the face of the messenger and braced himself for an explosion. The man was strangely familiar and Jack knew he had seen him before. One would not be apt to forget so misshapen a man. Atop a frog-built frame perched a round, bullet head. The nose was flat and prominent, the eyes bulging as if in continual surprise. He had almost no neck and his arms hung long and relaxed, like an ape's. He laughed now, a repressed bark that came out of thick, ugly lips.

"Listen, brother. I guess you don't understand. Cato sent me to fetch you back. An' back you go, if I have to tote you."

He moved forward, light and easy as a cat. His stubby fingers reached for Miron Calkins, but his eyes were on Jack Rawson, who knew by the naming of Cato Goolsby that his prairie past had caught up with him. The fellow's grip wrung a low cry from Calkins, and Wild Jack flamed again with the temper he had so lately sworn to put behind him. He struck, and Goolsby's man went down. He bounced, loosed a tirade of blistering oaths, and snatched out his gun. As the weapon came free, Wild Jack swung his small, canvas-wrapped bundle. It caught the other alongside the head, bowling him over and knocking him cold. The effort, brief as it was, left Rawson spent, leaning against the jail front fighting for wind. His eyes found Calkins'.

"I've no business even lookin' at a fight till I've put some food under my belt," he said ruefully. "Lost my head, too. Never should have horned in on your personal business anyway."

"You haven't, Rawson," Calkins said, and Wild Jack started as if stung with a lash as his name was spoken. "Don't let me down now, because I need someone to stand with me. Here comes

Cato Goolsby to trample me under foot. Just your being here will make him watch his step. You have a gun?"

"No gun," said Wild Jack. "I've put guns behind me, along with a lot of bitter memories."

"Then pick up Luke Buckbee's gun, Rawson. If you're holding it, you won't have to use it."

"You got it all backward," said the one-time town tamer. "When you go for an iron, you better figure on using it. Let the gun lie where it is. You know Cato Goolsby?"

The newspaperman lifted his eyes to the three figures approaching with arrogant deliberateness. He gulped and his voice assumed an unnecessarily brusque and taunting lift as he answered.

"Cato Goolsby? I'll say I know him. He left his shadow and his mark on the Mother Lode country, abusing his trust as president of the miners' court to feather his own nest and settle private grudges. Only a fast horse saved him on Bonanza Creek. And later, when opponents in the Sagebrush War compared notes, they found Cato Goolsby had played both sides from the middle, betraying everybody. That time he escaped on snowshoes, in a raging blizzard. Yes, I know Cato Goolsby, as you'll learn if you read the last number of the *Advocate*."

Wild Jack could sense the fierce emotion throbbing through the publisher. And knew that, like many another who has taken a step into deep water, the man was prey to a hysteria which caused him to do and say the wrong thing. His loud answer had been meant for Goolsby's ears, as if by his very pugnacity he might lessen the shock of the lightning bolt. But Calkins didn't know the cat cruelty of Cato Goolsby.

II.

There was nothing new or particularly terrifying to Wild Jack in the spectacle of the three men coming toward them. It fitted into an ancient pattern, brought his own history back to him in fragments, in swift flashing scenes, in hopes, omens and achievements. In it somewhere was the making of glory, but somehow glory had gotten lost in the shuffle, leaving only sordidness and revulsion.

It added up small. After cleaning up a dozen iniquitous towns along the Chisholm Trail, after ten years of fighting for the peace of others, Wild Jack Rawson had nothing to show for his trouble but bullet scars and old fractures that ached when it rained. The brawling trail towns were ghost towns now, or farmer towns policed by sod-buster sheriffs. The trail itself was closed with barbed wire. Trail herds were no more, now that three railroads spanned the nation, with hundreds of branch lines and lesser feeders. In ten all-too-short years, Wild Jack's day had died. A new conception of law had swept aside the once-celebrated town tamer, upon whom men called when milder methods failed. With a sort of detached fascination, Wild Jack watched the three men come striding slowly through the dusk. They walked in funny formation—Cato Goolsby a half step in the lead, a man at each flank. Rawson noticed as they approached that the street was unduly silent, that men had pressed back against the fronts and were watching with held breath. He knew all three, and seeing them here like this took him back to that day in Dodge City.

Goolsby, ace gambler for the Monte Cristo Bar, had killed a man across his own poker table, locked himself in the saloon office and defied the law. Marshal Tod Howser had appeared very reluctant to take action, drawing publicly voiced scorn from Wild Jack Rawson, a visitor in the town. The mayor, calling Rawson's hand, took the badge from Howser and pinned it on the town tamer's coat.

Under pressure of counter-ridicule, Rawson had entered that den of death, only to find the bird flown. Tod Howser and Tyler Forgay, owner of the Monte Cristo, went with Goolsby, which explained a lot of things. And now here they were, those three restless, ambitious and conscienceless men. And they were all looking squarely at Wild Jack, although they could not but have heard the taunt of Miron Calkins.

Cato Goolsby plowed to a stop. His men halted also, fanning out a little. Their faces were wooden masks and their eyes went over Rawson like exploring fingers. He noticed that they had buckled their guns on outside their coats.

A grin cracked Goolsby's wide face.

"Well, I'm hanged! Wild Jack Rawson of the plains country! Or could I be mistaken?"

"Hello, Cato," Wild Jack said calmly.

"What you doing in our town, Jack?"

"Can't say, Cato." And that was the truth, for the one-time gun marshal was just a little bewildered by the pull of this whirlpool which had jerked him off the train.

Annoyance touched Cato's full-blooded features. "Not talking, eh? Maybe it's the publicity you don't like, though you sure ate it up once." His eyes ran up and down Wild Jack's dusty, soot-grimed clothes and took in his disreputable appearance. "You look down on your luck, Jack. That's tough, too, for a man who's known better things. Maybe you need a boost. If so, don't forget your friends. Come and see me."

Then his glance shifted and his voice thickened with the cruelty that was his on occasion. "Calkins, I wanted no trouble when I sent Luke to see you. But I do crave to iron out a few things that breed trouble. That story you ran last Friday, Calkins, was black slander. I'm a patient man,

but I can't stand for that. You struck at my integrity and credit in this town, and I demand a retraction."

"The truth hurts," said the editor softly. "I never print anything else and of course cannot retract the truth without making a liar of myself. I was at Bonanza Creek, Goolsby. And I was at Sagebrush City. Your flight from both places convicted you, if nothing else."

Goolsby colored angrily and seemed to hold himself in check with an effort. "I was up against mob law and a five-minute jury in both towns," he explained. "I would have been worse than a fool to gamble on that. All right, you won't retract. Then, at least, run my side of the story. Is that unfair?"

"Not at all." The newspaper publisher was gaining courage. "My rates are ten cents a line. Write your story and bring it to the office if you want it printed."

Goolsby glared at him, his eyes filled with fire. But for all the wrath that poured through his stocky body, wrath no pose could have masked, he still smiled a bleak, brittle smile. Almost at his feet, Luke Buckbee moaned, sat up. There was a dazed look in his eyes as he pouched his fallen gun, and he rubbed his jaw gingerly. Cato Goolsby gave him a hand, jerked him erect, and steadied him. Then he bowed to Calkins.

"Very well, my friend. You take this out of the class of a gentleman's game. I come here to invest money and help develop this valley. Though I'm engaged in taking honest gold out of the earth, you insist upon slinging mud at me. Let it be so. I can play that kind of poker, too."

With a righteously indignant air, he turned, nodded to his companions, and commenced the return trip to the Poker Chip Saloon. Behind him he flung a crisp, "Come see me, Jack," and then he was gone. Only Luke Buckbee paused for another word.

"What you got in that pack?" he asked Rawson. "Rocks?"

"Guns," said the ex-town tamer, his lips loosening in a faintly ironic play. "I pack them around to remind me never to use them again. You couldn't understand that, could you?"

"No," Buckbee said promptly. "You got 'em an' you better hang 'em on, mister. There'll be another time for you and me."

Wild Jack shrugged, watched the man hurry after his fellows. A muscle-bound ape with a subterranean mind and a new grudge itching in him. Rawson's face was bleak as he listened to a new and fainter voice of this town—a voice daring him to stay and face this menace. He contemplated this challenge with a coldness that concealed his struggle against the sudden leap and boil of his emotions. Calkins touched his arm.

"Thanks a lot for everything," the editor murmured. "Just to have the great Jack Rawson beside me was all that was necessary to make Goolsby sing low. If I'd been alone, he'd have slugged me —or worse. If I didn't know so much about him, I wouldn't be afraid of him. But he never lets up on a man he gets it in for. Knowing that, I still had to warn these folks who they were dealing with. Come on, let's get some supper."

There were things Wild Jack needed worse than food, hungry as he was. Thanks to the generosity of the newspaperman, he spent a half hour in a barber shop, came out bathed, barbered and brushed, his self-respect bolstered immeasurably. He left the bundle containing his guns with the barber temporarily. And as he walked to the restaurant with Calkins, he carried himself straighter. His features were set in sterner lines.

With the first rush of his hunger curbed, Wild Jack studied the publisher, who toyed with his food as though he had no appetite.

"Goolsby's got you pretty badly worried," Rawson observed.

"Why not?" There was a gleam of desperation in Calkins' eyes. "He packs too many guns for a pilgrim like me. And he hasn't any qualms against using them, no sense of fairness, no sporting instinct. Why, they had twenty-five murders laid to him up in the Sierra Nevadas—"

"That sort of a rep is like a snowball rolling down a snowy slope. No man is as bad as he's painted."

Calkins nodded. "I know. They couldn't prove it, but where there's so much smoke, there's hot fire. Anyway, Goolsby's always stronger than those who fight him. Take you, for instance. He can pay big, and naturally you'll be interested."

Wild Jack's tone was edged with contempt. "Don't bet money on it. I know that man better than you do. The people of this town would do well to notice that Cato is hiring gunmen. Why? What's he doing?"

"Mining, supposedly. Calls himself the Bonanza Placer Mining Co., same name he operated under in the North. He bought out Old Job Crowe, in Buckeye Canyon. A log shanty and three-four no-good placer claims. And I understand he's dickering for the Spanish Ranch, on the east fork of Biggar Creek. Place is owned by Ben Killigew, an old bachelor living in a pretty good house in Meadow Valley. He runs cattle and is a mighty hard-shelled old rawhider. I imagine he'll be quite a nut for Goolsby to crack."

"If Goolsby buys Killigew out, what's he got?" queried Wild Jack. "Goolsby ain't one to waste time on petty larceny."

"He's got four miles of gravel banks—bed of an old river, with a hundred and twenty-five feet

showing. It all carries values—forty cents to a dollar and a quarter a ton. The stuff's got to be hauled to water and washed, and it don't begin to pay. Placer men have been sluicing away up there for thirty-five years. Goolsby will be belly up inside of another month."

"No, he won't," said Wild Jack. "I rate him too smart for that. He's using the mining deal to cover up his real business in these parts. What could that be?"

Calkins looked at the one-time peace officer, his eyes wide, sudden eagerness breaking the strain of his face muscles. He reached in a pocket for pencil and pad and began to write.

"By Jupiter, Rawson, you give me an idea!" he declared. "This valley depends entirely upon its water rights. I don't know how much mining law you know, but the principle of mining activity taking precedence over agriculture is pretty well established. Do you suppose Goolsby can be figuring to gain control of our water rights and stand us up?"

Wild Jack didn't answer. If it could be done, he wouldn't put it past the gambler. He finished his meal and lit a cigarette, smoking while the newspaperman wrote his story. When Calkins finished, he seemed to have regained his full poise.

"There may be nothing to it," he grinned, "but I'll set them to thinking without mentioning names. Only way anybody can down Goolsby is to beat him to the punch." Then his face sobered again. "Maybe I shouldn't have told you this, if you're throwing in with the Goolsby crowd. Are you?"

"A man has to eat," said Wild Jack. "At least I know what I could expect from Goolsby."

The publisher nodded. "Of course, and I can't hope to match it. Incidentally, I don't think I introduced myself. I'm Miron Calkins, owner of the Rincon Foothill *Advocate*. I've run many a story about you, Rawson, and when I heard Luke Buckbee come into the Poker Chip Saloon with news that you were in town, I hurried out to find you. If you could only see your way open to standing with me in this, until Goolsby shows his hand, no pay would be too high. But I don't make a whole lot on my little sheet, and can't pay what your services are worth. I'll give you a cot in the office, your meals at the restaurant, and a dollar a day till we can do better."

He looked so eager, Wild Jack felt a pang. "You're figuring me in terms of guns, Calkins," he said a little sourly. "That's a mistake. I've put them behind me forever. But I'll take your offer if you'll help me get into something else. I'll work hard to learn—"

He didn't finish, for Calkins was on his feet, beaming with pleasure, shaking his hand. "I know just how you feel, Rawson, for we've been cursed with guns in California, too. We must profit by our mistakes and forge ahead, mustn't we? I'll use you around the shop for a spell, until I can get you properly placed around here. Come on."

He paid for their meal and led the way to the street. And Wild Jack shook his head as he followed. Too clearly he could see what Calkins was thinking. Why couldn't they take a man at his word? What was wrong with letting sleeping guns lie?

III.

For several days, Wild Jack Rawson lived in the musty plant of the Foothill *Advocate*. Miron Calkins had little or no idea as to what his new employee's duties should be, and seemingly was content just to have the ex-marshal near him as a protection against the wrath of the Goolsby crowd. Jack improved the time by mucking out the littered print shop and by trying to find a place for everything, much to the disgust of Scarehead McCarney, the ancient tramp printer.

At odd times Jack explored the town, finding particular interest in the fenced yard of the Bonanza Placer Mining Co., down near the tracks. Within that inclosure was a number of spare wagons, big mules in a corral and equipment for servicing both. On the freight-loading platform was big machinery and all manner of boxed provisions. Each morning a loaded wagon and trailer, drawn by twelve heavy mules, set out for Goolsby's placer properties in the mountains. Men, shipped out from city centers, were daily taken into the high country. It really looked as though Cato Goolsby had gone in for honest industry. Maybe he knew something about those meager values that had escaped his predecessors.

On Friday, Wild Jack helped get out the weekly edition, smiling to himself at the lead story spread across the first sheet of the *Advocate*. Calkins, with reckless defiance of Goolsby, whose name he didn't mention, made much of the great amount of supplies and equipment going daily to the placers. He recalled the history of those diggings, recited data on the proven small values and expressed surprise that so large an investment should go into so unpromising a venture. He summed up with a warning:

> It will be well for the farmers of Rincon Valley to watch our precious water supply. Mining activity takes precedence over the rights of agriculture in certain cases. Can this be one of them? By a brave show of development, can the Bonanza Placer Mining Co. acquire title to our water? Get busy on this, Mr. County Attorney, and if necessary take steps to prevent a ruinous steal.

With the issue not yet ready for distribution, Wild Jack went out for his midday meal. He

noticed that Goolsby and his usual retinue of gun-toting retainers had come down from the hills. No doubt to learn first hand the effect of the gambler's warning to the newspaperman. Goolsby would be fit to tie when he read the inference behind Calkins' article. Wild Jack ate quickly. Later, on his way back to the *Advocate,* he was halted by Cato Goolsby, who stepped from the Poker Chip, directly in his path.

"Hullo there, Jack Rawson. How's tricks?"

"So-so, Goolsby. Nothing new."

"I've been expecting a call from you, Jack. And today I learn you're working for that bird Calkins. He couldn't pay more than just bird seed, now could he? I'll be hanged if I can make you out, Rawson."

"Maybe it's just lack of good sense, Goolsby."

The gambler's eyes had lowered to the walk, but now they crept back along Wild Jack's height, stealthy and prying. "A man like you," he said meaningly, "can be as down and out as he looks, or he can be putting on an act—playing a part."

Silent laughter creased Wild Jack's lips as he divined the other man's fear. "I happen to be really down and out, Goolsby. You might even say I'm living on charity."

Cato Goolsby's glance suddenly chilled, warning Wild Jack again of something unforgiving and merciless. "It don't wash, Rawson. A man doesn't willingly live on charity when he's summoned by someone who pays lesser men—far smaller men—a hundred and fifty dollars a month and found."

"For what?" Wild Jack asked curtly.

Goolsby's voice was smooth. "For protection. I'm going to be handling big sums of flour gold. Buzzards have a way of gathering for the feast, and I must have guns to keep them off."

"My guns are in moth balls." Wild Jack's voice was neither low nor deceptive now. "I tell you that. I tell the world that. Is that a crime?"

"Not a crime—no." Goolsby's contempt was grating in the stillness. "Just a joke, Rawson. Don't give me that. What's your real game here?"

"Tell me yours," said Wild Jack, and rage heated his nerves. "And I'll tell you mine. Fair enough?"

"My offer to you," said Goolsby, and his eyes were round and wicked as the twin bores of a scatter gun, "expires at sundown tonight. A man doesn't weigh my offers, Rawson. He takes them right now or he lets them alone. He goes all out for me, or against me. You understand that?"

"You make it plain enough. Sundown it is."

Goolsby turned back into the barroom, and Wild Jack walked down to the paper office, all humor erased from his face. Miron Calkins was just starting the press for the last of the run, but what he saw in the ex-marshal's eyes gave him pause.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked sharply.

"What's the matter with the world?" countered Jack. "Am I all wrong because I see the emptiness of gun toting and want to live without it? Is everybody else right in insisting that a man can't forget his past?"

"Who was it, Rawson, that said a man couldn't take human life just the once? That when he killed they would force him to go on—and on."

"Whoever it was," said Wild Jack angrily, "was just one man talking about his own experience. Must I bow my neck to the same narrow pattern just because a fool said it was some sort of a law."

"Goolsby?" Miron Calkins lifted his brows.

"That's right. I've got till sunset to join him—or else."

"Money, power, cruelty, greed." Calkins turned back to his work. "How can one man fight it—alone." The press began to click out the fresh-inked sheets.

Wild Jack helped distribute the papers in the mid-afternoon. They created some sensation. About the first repercussion came as Jack reached the print shop again. He stood aside to allow the entry of a half dozen solemn-faced men. There was the mayor of the town, the president of the Water Users' Association, the justice of the peace, the town marshal—noticeably nervous when Wild Jack's eyes touched him—the county attorney and the county tax collector. They lit into Miron Calkins without preliminaries.

"Whatever in the world induced you to print a rabble-rousing yarn like that?" demanded the county attorney. "There isn't one iota of truth in it, not one single true basis of fact in law. The water belongs to the district by right of usage. I defy you to show me one case where established riparian rights were set aside by a challenge from any angle."

"Forewarned is forearmed, gentlemen," said the editor. "I know Cato Goolsby better than you do."

"You got a grudge against him, Calkins." The bewhiskered justice waggled a long finger in the editor's face. "It ain't right to use your paper to air it."

"You're kicking legitimate development and taxable wealth right out of the county," declared the long-faced tax collector severely, "right when we can't stand it."

"Look at it this way, Mr. Calkins," suggested the mayor. "The way this mining company spends money, we stand to experience a little boom hereabouts. That is, unless you and other short-sighted meddlers spoil it. How about taking some new tack? We'll make some news if need be.

Forget about Goolsby and his business until we actually see some evidence of wrong. If not"—he looked at Calkins sternly over his pince-nez glasses—"we may have to test the value of a boycott. Come, gentlemen."

The men filed out, pictures of outraged civic pride. And Wild Jack felt a twinge of pity for a timid man trying desperately to be brave in the face of down-bearing pressure. Miron Calkins was having now to balance principle against the survival of his little paper. He'd have to pull in his horns or go under.

Sympathy for the editor, more than anything else, held Wild Jack close to him until the sun had set and Cato Goolsby's deadline was gone. In the dusk, when they left the office for the restaurant, Wild Jack found himself regretting that he must put this man to even such small expense as buying food for him. Calkins must have read his thought.

"I'll be hanged if I'll play good dog for them," he said tartly. "Not where Cato Goolsby is concerned. And if I don't, they'll close me up. I never looked at it just that way before. If I had, I'd never have let you pass up Goolsby's offer."

Wild Jack shrugged. "What could you have done? I do as I want to do. And I don't want to wear guns again. If you go under, I can go out of here as I came in—on blind baggage."

IV.

Cato Goolsby didn't call upon the Foothill *Advocate*, to protest the implication in Calkins' article. But the action he took was no less direct and much more fateful for the editor. The following day rumor was rife on the street that there would be a new paper for Rincon City. In a little more than a week printing equipment was received along with the usual heavy shipment for the placer camp, moved into an empty store building and set up. Two men came on the train to run the press, a garish sign was hung and a public reception was held, with banks of flowers, coffee and doughnuts for everybody, and speeches of good will by the politicians. Thus was the Rincon City *Express-Telegram* born.

There was a quick rush to get on the new bandwagon, and Miron Calkins soon lost his advertisers. It was his cue to fold up, but a big contract to print almanacs for a medical house saved him.

"It will be close pickings," the editor told Wild Jack, "but I'm hanging on because I'm sure the day isn't far off when Goolsby will show the valley what he really is. When that time comes, I want you with me. Will you stick?"

"I'd be a fool to stay here and buck Goolsby," Wild Jack Rawson said soberly. "The best I could hope from it would be the worst. Thing for me to do is to cut string, bid this town a fond good-by, and leave it to them that have a stake in it. Shouldn't be anything sad about a parting of the ways, like this. I can't do you any good and you can't help me none. Our try is done and so are we."

He stuck out his hand and Miron Calkins gripped it, his emotions stirred.

"One reason I like you, Rawson," the editor said, "is because you come right out and say what you think, straight from the shoulder. That's my motto, spread across the top of my sheet, but I lack the heft to make it good. Good-by, thanks and best of luck. I hope you never have to put on those guns."

They were still shaking hands when two horsemen came pelting down the street, veered sharply to the walk before the office of the *Advocate*, and hurled a rolled newspaper through the door. Then the riders were gone in a cloud of dust, their scornful laughter floating back.

"First copy of the *Express-Telegram!*" Calkins said, and dove for it. Scareheads glared at them:

FOOTHILL *ADVOCATE* DEFUNCT
ADVERTISERS ANSWER CALKINS
Boycott Publisher Who Threatens Mining Co.
with Notorious Killer

Side by side, never speaking, Wild Jack Rawson and Miron Calkins read that lurid series of lies, exaggerations and misstatements. When he had finished it, Wild Jack was white around the lips, and his eyes seemed to burn a trail toward the door.

"Guess I spoke out of turn, Calkins," he said tightly. "I never did learn to run from trouble, and if I quit you now they'd be sure to make big copy out of how low the great Jack Rawson has fallen. Well, maybe I'm not what I once was, but I'm not that low. I'll tough it out with you. And I have an idea you're going to get that business back one of these days."

Calkins was at once depressed and pleased. They sat down for a few minutes to talk the situation over. While they had their talk, the Limited whistled, came to a stop with drivers banging, then pulled out again. Minutes later there was a soft tread on the *Advocate* steps. A girl's voice said, "Hello," in an easy, arresting tone, and the two men came up, whipping off their hats.

The girl was a slender little thing, with proud bearing and crisp, alertly responsive features. She wore a traveling suit, the jacket loose against the heat of the evening, the ruffles of her blouse setting off the well-modeled column of her throat. She carried a small grip and an unopened parasol,

and her manner was one of repressed eagerness.

"Excuse me," she said, and Wild Jack liked her low-pitched voice. "Which of you gentlemen is Mr. Miron Calkins?"

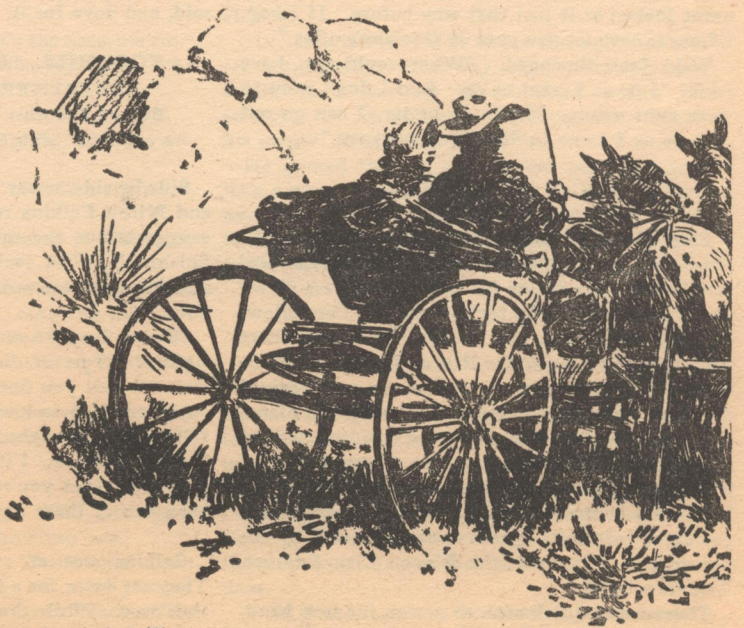
"That's me, ma'am." The newspaperman bowed.

With a friendly smile, she extended her hand. "Mr. Calkins, I am Nan Killigew, niece of Ben Killigew of Spanish Ranch."

"Oh, yes." The editor shook her hand, introduced her to Wild Jack. "How did you happen to look me up, Miss Killigew?"

A cloud passed over her face, dimming her smile and seeming to fill her eyes with the purple haze settling over the valley. "Uncle Ben," she explained, "wrote to his brother Will, my father, telling him to come out here and to look you up. He said you were the one honest man in town he could refer dad to."

Calkins flushed. "Thank you, ma'am. That was nice of him. Your father is with you?"



She shook her head. "Dad was in his last illness when the letter came. He . . . he passed away. I don't know what good, if any, I can do Uncle Ben, but here I am and I'm anxious to learn how I can get out to Spanish Ranch. Can you direct me?"

"Certainly, Miss Killigew." Puzzlement grew in Calkins' eyes. "But I don't know if you'll find your uncle there. If the sale has gone through—"

"Sale?"

"You didn't know he was selling out?"

"Why . . . no. What can that mean?" She turned a little pale. "He said nothing about any sale. He said he was in some trouble, and that dad could help him a lot if he'd come right out here. Uncle Ben always leaned heavily on dad for advice. You . . . you mean Spanish Ranch has been sold?"

Calkins blinked. "I shouldn't say so, Miss Killigew. It's hearsay on my part."

The girl's expression grew grave and deeply thoughtful. "I want to go out to the ranch now. Tonight. Can you take me, Mr. Calkins?"

It hit the newspaperman hard. Wild Jack, watching closely, saw him flinch, and read his thoughts. A long road obscured in the blackness of a moonless night. The eerie canyon stretch. And worse, the fact that he would be entirely at the mercy of Goolsby's plug-uglies, who would like nothing better than to put him on the rack. Calkins was gulping, stammering, when Wild Jack said: "I'll run you up there, miss."

"Thank you," she said, and turned to the door, color rising in her cheeks.

Calkins caught Wild Jack's arm. "Thanks, friend. You . . . you'll put them on for this trip, won't you? You may need them."

The ex-marshal's lips pressed tight and he shook his head. "No. They're off and they stay off. See you in the morning."

He went out and moved along the walk, adjusting his stride to the girl's. Silently they walked to the stable with numbers of curious stares following them. Wild Jack ordered the buggy and Nan insisted upon paying in advance. Once out of town, the two spanking duns were eager to travel, and the thin tires sang in the gravel road as they whirled northward through the fragrant dusk.

When the last of the afterglow had faded in the western sky, and the first weird howling chant of coyotes trembled across the silence of the enfolding hills, the girl shivered, drew closer to Rawson. But her voice was resolute.

"Why wear one?" he countered carelessly. "Guns are for danger."

"You're not fooling me, Mr. Rawson," the girl said reprovingly. "There is danger here and I know it. Uncle Ben was in some bad trouble. He was calling on his brother for help, as he never called before. I don't believe he would ever have sold Spanish Ranch. And if someone else owns it, what has become of Ben Killigew?"

"Steady," cautioned Wild Jack. "I wouldn't cross any bridges around here till I got to 'em. Your uncle is probably out at the ranch. If there's been any trouble up here, we haven't heard about it."

She relapsed to silence, but Wild Jack could tell by the stiffness of her body and the tempo of her breathing that she was worried. Presently the hill crests drew in and the canyon draft whipped at them, heady and strong with the pungency of water and brush and pine. And then, out of the inky blackness of the road ahead, emerged the definite rhythm of horses traveling at reckless speed.

"We're taking the girl," the leader of the holdup gang announced, "and you'd better burn the breeze out of this scope of range, Rawson!"

"What's that?" the girl asked nervously.

"Mr. Calkins was trying to get you to wear a gun up here," she said, showing him that little escaped her. "And you refused. Why?"

"Can't say, miss," answered Jack, and he was straining his ears for a repetition of the sound. An owlhoot challenged the ears of night, and then the sound of horses came with a swelling rush. A shod hoof struck fire from a road pebble; leather squealed, and the rasp of hard-breathing ponies sounded. Wild Jack had just time to rein off the road when dim, swaying shadows seemed to leap out of the gloom. "Hey-ho—a rig!" a hard, brittle voice bawled. "Pull up, you. Who is it?"

Four riders plunged their mounts to a stop, ranging abreast like troopers. Wild Jack's nerves were prodding him, but he kept his voice level, impersonal. "Miss Killigew in a livery rig, on her way to see her uncle, Ben Killigew."

He expected them to question his identity, but they didn't. Either they didn't think of it, or didn't care. After a momentary silence, a short drawling voice said:

"She's in the wrong pew for Ben Killigew. He sold out."

"Where did he go?" asked the girl.

"Where did Ben go?" asked one of the quartet, and a low laugh followed.

"Reckon if anybody knows, it's the boss, ma'am."

"And where is he?" asked Nan Killigew. "At the ranch?"

"Yes—at the ranch."

"We'll go there," she said tightly, and the answer came like a gun burst.

"If you do, you'll ride with us. The rig turns back."

"No. I'll drive to Spanish Ranch if I have to bring in the sheriff."

"She says she'll bring the sheriff, boys," came that tantalizing drawl. "Pike, take the lady out of the buggy, gentle, an' put her before you on your saddle. I think the boss will be right pleased to see Miss Killigew, don't you?"

The one called Pike swung down and the girl shrank back. She put her hand on Rawson's. "Don't let them—" she began.

A swift, hot fire ran through Wild Jack as a callous laugh came from the drawling one.

"Oh, Wild Jack Rawson, eh? That's rich. Boss would be pleased to see him, too, but more pleased I'm thinking to have him show up in Rincon City without the gal."

At mention of Wild Jack's name, the three on horseback had drawn their guns. The clicking of three eared-back hammers rang through the night. Wild Jack sat very still, making no move as Pike took the struggling girl from the seat of the buggy. Any move he could make now would be suicidal, Jack knew, effectually removing any future chance of help for Nan. But he expressed his indignation in no uncertain terms.

"Do you skunk-smellin' buzzards think you can get away with this? When Miss Killigew is missed you'll have every decent man in Rincon Valley beggin' for a shot at you."

"At you, I'd guess," laughed the man with the drawl. "You left town with her, didn't you? An' you'll come back without her. She was known to be carrying important money, and we never even seen her or you at the ranch; don't forget that. I wouldn't say anything about this if I was you, Rawson. In fact, I'd burn the breeze out of this scope of range. Good luck, feller."

He spoke the word and they sank the spurs. Wild Jack sat there gripping the lines, his mind slow to grasp all the implications of this situation. However he chose to turn now, the cards were stacked against him. He couldn't leave this country, menaced as it was by Goolsby's shadow. If he did, he stood automatically convicted of whatever fate befell Nan Killigew. If he stayed he would be called to account for the girl's disappearance, his case aggravated by judiciously dropped hints by Goolsby and his cohorts. But dark as the outlook seemed, Wild Jack could still think clearly.

"It's clouded too thick to see through," he muttered miserably. "But way back in the fog somewhere Cato Goolsby is crouchin', pullin' the strings. An' he ain't playin' for pennies. What's his game? What's his game?"

He turned the rig around and put the horses into a run. It wouldn't do to let those coyotes have that fine girl too long. Yet whatever he did to free her must be planned and executed carefully. One slip would be fatal.

V.

Wild Jack Rawson entered Rincon City by the alley that led to the rear of the feed barn. He turned the rig over to the sleepy hostler and went to the street, convinced his arrival had gone unnoticed. Aside from the usual clatter from the Poker Chip and a couple of other places, it was a quiet night. The walks were almost deserted as Rawson crossed the street and tried the door of the *Advocate*. It was locked, and so was the rear door.

Wild Jack rapped on the window, beneath which his cot and Miron Calkins' stood, end to end. After a time the knocking roused the publisher, who got up and unlocked the door. Jack made a light, never looking at the sleepy newspaperman as he unrolled his pack.

"Find Ben Killigew, Rawson?" Calkins asked.

"Ben Killigew ain't at Spanish Ranch." Wild Jack unrolled his gun belts and pulled the two matched, pearl-gripped Peacemakers. "He's sold out."

"No!" Calkins was amazed. "I hadn't heard

anything about that, Rawson. I must be slipping."

"Must be." Wild Jack wrapped his slim fingers around the butts, the indices twining through the trigger guards. With no show of effort, he spun the weapons blurringly. The clicking or rising and falling hammers became almost a pur, and the newspaperman's eyes widened and grim satisfaction registered on his face. "Or mebbe Killigew didn't really sell out at all. Any way to find out?"

"Plenty. I'll look it up first thing in the morning. I think I see what you're figuring, Rawson. While I'm looking, I'll look up the transfer of Old Job Crowe's outfit, in Buckeye Canyon. Goolsby was said to have bought that some time ago. You don't suppose—"

"I don't suppose anything," said Wild Jack, rising and whipping the two heavy cartridge belts around his lean middle. "All I can think about now is that somebody is always at a man to do something he doesn't want to do. I'd rather handle a mad rattler than these guns again, but there's no help for it now, and no hope of avoiding old and hated tricks. It's disgusting."

But his eyes were cast high as he whipped out the two guns, spun them and rammed them back into their leathers again. And there was the old wild light burning in his glance.

"What . . . what are you going to do, Rawson?" stammered Calkins.

"I won't know till a few cards are played," Wild Jack said stiffly. "And mebbe then the pips will be too mutilated to read properly. You go on to bed. I'm going to look around."

Worry twisted the publisher's face. "It occurs to me, Rawson, that we should keep a pretty close watch on that Killigew girl. If anything has happened to Ben, she might be in some danger, especially if she raises a holler. She at the hotel, is she?"

"They took her away from me," said Wild Jack bleakly. "Just above the mouth of the canyon. If I'd had sense enough to take your advice and hang on a gun, I could have killed the four of them and prevented it. Now I'll have to go up there and take her away from them. See you in the morning."

He walked out, leaving the newspaperman gasping.

Wild Jack Rawson was not surprised to find Cato Goolsby in the Poker Chip, sitting in a four-handed game with a vast stack of counters—both chips and money—before him. He was winning and he maintained a heavy, close-lidded joviality. Losing a small pot on an ill-conceived bluff, he laughed contentedly, tossed down a shredded cigar and jabbed another between his heavy lips.

"Bad luck always calls for another drink," he cried. "Bartender!" Then his eyes lifted and he saw Wild Jack's face over the shoulders of other watchers. His nose wrinkled and he bent an inquisitive glance upon each of his gaming partners. "Do you boys smell something bad? Hey, bartender, fetch another bottle so we can wash the bad taste out of our mouths."

He flung Wild Jack another look, thereby directing the attention of other patrons to Rawson's presence. The ex-marshal's jaws tightened and he thought of a rattlesnake he had once seen, a desperate creature trapped in a barrel and being teased by boys with sticks, just to see where it would strike. His scorn of them all was on his face as he turned toward the door. But before he reached it, Luke Buckbee came smashing through the swing doors, a quirt in his hand, his spurs red from roweling, his apelike face twisted with excitement. If he saw Wild Jack, he gave no sign, darting at once to the poker table and placing his lips at once to Cato Goolsby's ear. The gambler rose abruptly, a light of fierce satisfaction on his face.

"Is that right?" he drawled. "Gentlemen, I am called from the game. Sorry. You'll have to wait for the chance to get even. Luke, you and Tod get my horse from the stable. Fetch it around to the office. I'll cash in, put the money in the safe, and meet you there."

He was gathering up his chips when Wild Jack left by the front door and walked unhurriedly toward the office of the Bonanza Placer Mining Co. Reaching the corner of the building, he stepped off the walk, losing himself in the shadows between two walls. A few moments later Cato Goolsby passed within two yards of him and he heard the man unlock the darkened office. Stepping light and easy, Wild Jack followed him, moving across the threshold and closing the door. Goolsby was on his knees before the big iron safe, turning the dial, holding a match for light.

"Just a second," he muttered, evidently believing it was one of his men with the horses.

"Get up, Goolsby," Wild Jack said. "That money ain't going in the safe."

Goolsby bounced up, wheeling and raising his hands. He looked into Wild Jack's pistol muzzle. "What is this?" he demanded. "A holdup?"

"Shut up," said Rawson, dropping a bar to lock the door. "Pick up that money and go out the back way. You're welcome to raise a holler or make a play any time you want. If you do, I'll kill you. March!"

Goolsby stood still as death, a film of sweat forming on his forehead. The hard hand of fear was on him until the match burned his fingers and darkness came to the office. Turning about, he led the way back, unlocking a rear door and passing through. He had looked in the devil's face and had gleaned an inkling of hell, for not one squeak

did he make, even though the sound of Luke Buckbee and Tod Howser coming with the horses was plain to hear. "One redeeming feature of a gun rep," Wild Jack thought. He took the money from Goolsby's hand and prodded him in the back with the gun muzzle.

Down the alley they went, cutting across a vacant lot near the edge of town, and dropping into a shallow ravine. Up this Wild Jack marched his prisoner until they were beyond earshot of the town. There he halted him. The gambler was seething with rage.

"I don't know what your game is, Rawson," he said angrily, "but you've gone too far. I've left word with Rincon folks that if anything happens to me, it'll be at your hands. They know you for a killer, an outlaw who has hidden behind a law badge for years."

"Such lies should make sure of you getting what you fear most, Goolsby. You must have lost a lot of sleep, worrying about when things were going to catch up with you."

"What . . . what you figuring to do, Rawson? You wouldn't murder a man in cold blood."

"Not even if I hated you that bad, Goolsby, which mebbe I do. No, I brought you out here to offer you a trade."

"Trade?"

"I don't know what you're up to around here, Goolsby, but I'll turn you loose and take my chances on finding out—for a price."

"You've got me all wrong, Rawson," complained the gambler. "My business is open and aboveboard. Placer mining."

"I give you credit for more sense than to cast your seed in ground where so many others have failed. The promise of big profits brings crooks together. I'll wait till I see who you hurt before I judge you, Goolsby. But right now you're hurting Nan Killigew. I want her returned to Rincon City, unharmed."

"Nan Killigew?" If Goolsby knew the girl, he did a good job of simulating innocence. "Don't believe I know her, Rawson."

"I suppose Luke Buckbee didn't ride down to tell you they had her at Spanish Ranch, eh? Can you deny that was what he whispered when he came to the poker table?"

"I most certainly can, Rawson. He brought good news of the trial cleanup of our first run on Biggar Creek."

"You're lying!"

"Am I?" Goolsby reached in his pocket, came out with a whiskey flask. "Take a look at this. Luke slipped it into my pocket, there at the poker spread."

Wild Jack almost dropped the container; it was that heavy. He thumbed a match, noting that the bottle was two thirds full of fine flour gold. He whistled softly, and Goolsby said: "Two hours' sustained run, Rawson. And there's over two thousand dollars in that flask. I should care that other men failed to get it out. What about this Killigew girl?"

Rawson told him, and Goolsby shook his head. "I know nothing about her. But I sure will look into it. You've got my promise on that."

"That's not enough," said Wild Jack. "Then there's the matter of Miron Calkins."

"What about him?"

"You used your influence to ruin him. You brought in that new press and set it up in business. You—"

"The man who says I did lies through his teeth! What about it?"

"This money you won at poker tonight you're giving to Calkins to tide him over a bad spell. You took his advertisers; you should be willing to pay for them."

"I'm damned if I will!"

"Two refusals out of three," said Wild Jack stiffly. "Third and last, you close up the *Express-Telegram* and guarantee not to interfere further with Calkins."

"I've got nothing to do with the *Express*," muttered Goolsby. "And all I'll guarantee for Calkins is to bust his square head if he don't lay off of me. Anything else?"

"Get up!" ordered Wild Jack curtly. "Now head back toward town. And remember, one yip out of you and I'll blow you apart."

Goolsby was stubborn, but he was afraid of Rawson's guns and made no protest. Wild Jack walked him up the bank of the wash, cut across the brushland and came in behind the office of the *Advocate*. The town already throbbed with the mystery of Goolsby's disappearance, a mystery the gambler could easily have erased with a single shout if Rawson's guns hadn't been in his back.

Within the newspaper office, Miron Calkins was not asleep. Summoned by a tap on the window, he let Wild Jack and his prisoner in.

"What's the matter, Rawson?" he asked. "Who's this with you?"

"Cato Goolsby."

"Goolsby. What—"

"Open the door to that darkroom of yours, below the floor," ordered the one-time lawman. "And bring me a lamp and a roll of that heavy cord."

Moments later the three of them were in the damp basement, Goolsby lying on a cot, securely bound. His eyes blazed and he cursed them bitterly, threatening them with dire consequences. Miron Calkins' volatile courage evaporated.

"I don't like this, Rawson," he said nervously.

"If his men find him here, I'm done. This isn't legal and—"

"Listen, Calkins." Wild Jack spoke pityingly. "If you wait for the law to take care of you in this case, you're more than done; you're cooked. I don't aim to hurt this gent, but a few days here won't do him any harm, and while his men are disorganized without a leader, I aim to find that girl and punish the skunks that took her. Don't know how long I'll be gone. Look after Goolsby." Then, when the gambler lifted his voice in a fresh stream of abuse, Wild Jack gagged him. "Take this out only when you bring him food," he ordered Calkins. "And if the marshal comes looking for me, tell him I've flown the coop."

Miron Calkins followed him up into the dark newspaper office, frightened and inarticulate. And for a long time after Wild Jack had vanished in the night, he stood in the doorway, staring after him.

"Judas," he kept muttering over and over. "Judas. Things were getting too hot for me before this. Now I'm roasting in the devil's fires. Why did Rawson have to do this? Maybe he really is what they say about him."

VI.

Wild Jack took his pony out from under the snores of the sleeping hostler and rode purposefully northward. There was in him now neither anger nor fear, but rather a cynical attitude toward a previously sincere determination gone wrong. It was the old, old story. Men refused to forget the side of him he had come to detest, the more deadly side, and were always weighing him in terms of the thing he was trying to put behind him. Years back he had quarreled with a bad man. Out of that quarrel had sprung the legend that he was unbeatable with guns. Also out of that quarrel had come his privilege of standing on the side of the law.

The shadow of that first gun fight had never ceased to shut out the sun for him. Others had challenged his reputation and they had not succeeded. "Wild Jack" they came to call him, despite the fact he had hated the wildness and the killing with a fierce passion. He hated to be looked upon, talked about, avoided and challenged as a killer. Yet he could escape none of these things. And worse, in order to survive, he must perforce train, live and walk as the killers did, keeping his fingers supple, his nerves steady and his brain always clear. Well, he had lived, but alone at night he saw his victims as they faltered, fallen and died. Until at times he wondered if they were not the lucky ones, he the one who was damned. They would be laughing, those ghosts, that here he was at it again.

Spanish Ranch, dark and silent under the stars, sprawled below him as he eased along the overlying ridge. There was the ranchhouse of rock and mortar—Ben Killigew's. Flanking it were a number of long, unpainted bunkhouses and a cook shack, their newness stark in the night. A corral crawled with mules and horses, and the yard was littered with wagons and miscellaneous grading equipment. No lights burned down there, but before one of the bunkhouses the quick winking of cigarette coals caught Jack's eye. Men were still abroad down there, nervous perhaps because of the sinister things that hung darkly over the ranch, or maybe waiting for Cato Goolsby to show up. One look was enough to tell Wild Jack it would be dangerous to be caught messing around Spanish Ranch.

He held northward along the ridge-back trail, hardly knowing why unless it was with the hope of learning what Goolsby was up to on Biggar Creek. And the knowledge was not long withheld from him. He paused in the roadway which swung up the mountain, a well-traveled road leading to Goolsby's Buckeye Canyon property, Wild Jack thought. And from here he could see the star light glinting off a body of water.

There it lay, like a gem in a setting of peaks. A widening of the canyon walls had afforded a natural storage area. A constriction had offered a perfect dam site. And Rawson recalled then that there had been no rushing, brawling torrent down the canyon, something which should certainly have been, this early in the season.

He moved down the road to where a gap in the pines showed him the dam. Lanterns bobbed along its top and to Jack's ears came the clanging of shovels. At the far end a small fire burned, the light revealing two guards sitting with rifles across their laps. That light showed also a stream of muddy water plunging off the hillside to deposit its load of detritus to the height and bulk of the earth-filled dam. So Calkins had been right. This was a water steal. It would take a long time to fill that fat-bellied reservoir; longer yet if they kept raising the height of the dam. There were works below the dam too, but the gloom defeated Rawson's attempt to identify them. He determined to camp out, pick some brushy vantage and observe this development by daylight. And maybe tomorrow night he could do something about getting Nan Killigew away from the ranch.

In a thicket of tall manzanita, Wild Jack and his horse were hidden from all eyes, but by parting the branches an unobstructed view of a mile of canyon could be had. It had been threatening a hot spell for several days, and the balminess of the night portended a blistering sun on the morrow, and an added demand for water among the farmers below—water which would not be avail-

able. Wild Jack was thinking of that and the trouble it could make when he fell asleep.

Shortly after daylight he was awakened by the shouts of men. They came swarming up from the camp, dozens of them, driving teams which were hooked to plows and slip scrapers. With loud cursing at mules, snatches of song and loud talk, they attacked the scarred hill across the breast of which a sizable ditch of water tumbled. Shovelmen threw up earth dikes to hold the detritus on the dam.

All this was interesting to Wild Jack, but what lay below the dam was more so. Long lines of flume paralleled the almost dry river bed. Fat pipes were laid, terminating in what looked like small cannons, on tripods. Even as he looked, a wild ribald yell beat high and a hissing roar struck up at him. One of the "cannons" spat a thick stream of water, directed at a gravel bank towering sixty or seventy feet above the streamway. Roily streams were directed into the flumes by men with busy shovels.

"Hydraulic giants!" Wild Jack spoke a name he had read in articles about working low-grade gravel deposits lying above the Sacramento Valley. In fact, some years ago he had been approached by the owners of such an outfit on the Yuba River to stand gun guard against the bitter forays of outraged farmers, who were being ruined by the slime. He had turned it down cold, revolted by the thought of shooting sodbusters who were probably in the right. He thought now of the Rincon Valley orchardists and truck farmers. They would get their water all right, but it would be thick with ooze and slime. And then trouble would break. History had only repeated itself when Goolsby had offered him a place in his organization. Now, for all that he was one against a mob, hungry, wanted by the law perhaps, terribly dubious of an uncertain future, he was glad he had refused.

Wild Jack lay there all day, watching the work. He saw Luke Buckbee in conference with Tyler Forgay and Tod Howser; chuckled at their angry waving of arms and stamping of feet. He could well understand their feelings. Crooks distrusting crooks. Each thinking the others knew what secret project was keeping Cato Goolsby away from the work; each fearing that he alone was being frozen out of some rich jackpot.

The giant hydraulic monitor wasn't operated long, the cutting being more in the nature of a test, Wild Jack thought. Wagons rumbled to the camp from the valley to unload their heavy freight. Horsemen dashed back and forth along the road to Buckeye Canyon and hard-boiled foremen kept the workers at a feverish pace. On the ridges and below the ranch, guards maintained watch, to turn back unwanted visitors. It was a scene of vigilance, a beehive of activity. But how long would it function without Goolsby?

The sun wheeled across the sky, seemed to hang suspended throughout the long, hot afternoon. Wild Jack almost envied the workers as they quit in the evening and filed down to eat. And while they were in the cook shack and Wild Jack waited for the dusk, he saw Tod Howser and Tyler Forgay emerge from the main house and cross the yard. A girl walked between them and, though the distance was great, Rawson would have sworn it was Nan Killigew. She seemed to accompany them willingly, and that hit Wild Jack hard. Until now he had known only fear for Nan. But he wondered if he hadn't been a fool in supposing he could speak for a girl he had never seen before. And suddenly he felt lonelier than ever before in his life, like a man abandoned.

When he saw the first star, Wild Jack rose, tightened his horse's saddle cinch, and took out along the road toward Buckeye Canyon. He rode as any hunted man must ride, leaving the road to follow a timbered ridge southward. It was nothing but a game trail, but he had no fear of getting lost. All ridges and all canyons pointed down into Rincon Valley.

Leaving his pony in the creek bottom, Wild Jack came into Rincon City in the late evening and went at once to the office of the *Advocate*. It was dark and Wild Jack found himself vaguely excited as he tried the front door. It gave to his hand and as he stepped across the threshold, he heard a shuddery moan. It came from one of the cots in the print shop, and even before he thumbed a match and touched it to the lamp wick, he knew something had gone wrong in his absence.

Miron Calkins lay on a cot, holding his head with both hands. He didn't seem to know there was anybody in the place until the light came on, then he sat up, still clutching his head. He was a mess. One eye was black. His lip was puffed ludicrously. Blood trickled from one nostril and dripped off his chin. He looked dazed. Wild Jack looked at him, then at the cellar door, which stood open. He knew then. He let a long breath sough out of him, then sat beside the editor and threw an arm about his shoulder.

"Looks like I asked just a little too much of you, eh, Calkins? No disgrace with a man like Cato Goolsby. You can't take chances with him."

Calkins' voice was husky and strained.

"Better get out of here," he said. "You won't do me any good and I wouldn't want them to mess you up in here. There are two posses after you right now."

Wild Jack stared at him, rolling a cigarette. "Murder, mebbe?"

"Kidnaping, and suspicion of murder."

"Uh-huh." Rawson sat slumped, a somber, moody figure. "But you don't believe that, do you? That ain't what's wrong. What happened? Did you get to feeling sorry for Goolsby and ease off his ropes mebbe?"

Calkins rose, standing still as death, and as bleak. "Blast you, Rawson, why can't you let me alone? You see it won't work, your being here. Get out of Rincon and give me a chance. I told you I didn't want Goolsby here. Now look what's happened."

The ex-marshal had never seen a man so shaken. "That isn't you talking," he said. "That's Old Man Fear—Cato's best disciple. I should have told you not to hang around down there. Goolsby scared you to death and you let him loose. That's bad, though I doubt if it makes much difference—not in the long run. Did you look up those records?"

"The Buckeye Canyon property is still in Job Crowe's name. The Spanish Ranch is still recorded in Ben Killigew's. If Goolsby owns them, he's never filed the papers."

"Hm-m-m." Wild Jack pulled his chin. "Then there's that much more chance Crowe an' Killigew are still alive. Well, you can get out an extra, Calkins. Goolsby wasn't lying when he said he was in placer mining up to his neck. He's built a big dam and has three big monitors ready to let loose on those great gravel banks above Spanish Ranch."

The newspaperman's eyes went tragic. It never occurred to him to question the statement. Indeed, it made a perfectly fitting answer to a lot of puzzling things. He sat down weakly and groaned. "And I should have been the first to have guessed it, after going through that fight in the Sierras. Twice it's been tried. Twice the bought courts have found for the hydraulickers. This valley's doomed. First the ditches will fill with slickens. Then it will roll down over the orchards and on down to the town. I've looked at farms in the Sacramento Valley where houses were buried to the ridge pole."

"There's your story," said Wild Jack, moving toward the door. "If Cato will let you print it, Calkins. Right now he holds this valley in the hollow of his hand. Your water users will walk out of here or pay him his price. Sure, that's his game. He waits for folks to pay through the nose and riffles out strong gold values while he waits. That's the man you knuckled to, even though you knew what he was, better than most."

Calkins shook his head. "Pour it on, Rawson. I—" He paused, his body freezing. "Somebody coming. You've got to get out of here—the back way."

Wild Jack stepped to the rear and eased out the door. And then he heard them coming—a lot of men, their boots pounding the walk, their voices one deep, sullen mutter. He knew he should get out of town—fast. But he left the door ajar and flattened against the wall.

Boot echoes halting. A heavy pounding on the front door. Then men were swarming into the newspaper office. They were farmers from the upper district, and the story they told bore out what Wild Jack had said—and more. With hot weather bringing a demand for water at the head gates, a farmer, Asa Creed, had gone up to see why so little water was getting down. First he came upon the nasty, tumbling slickens—the slime carried downward by hydraulicking operations. Going farther, he had sighted a big dam above Spanish Ranch, and was moving toward it when a shot dropped his pony. Unharmed, he had collapsed behind some boulders and crawled like a snake. Twice they had sighted him, and once sifted lead into him. But as he said:

"I run like a scairt deer, climbed over a million acres of brush and rocks, an' finally give 'em the slip. I've had a time, gents, an' won't be much good to ye. But you better do something an' do it quick, else you'll have your ditches to dig all over again—an' with hot weather right on top of us to."

"What we gonna do, Calkins?" asked John Marty, superintendent of the Water Users' Association. "I just called the sheriff, down at San Juan. He said he couldn't take a hand in private quarrels until a crime was committed. I told him they almost murdered a man, and he said almost wasn't a crime unless I wanted to swear out warrants. Of course, I don't know who—"

"I told you who," said Calkins bitterly, "in the pages of the *Advocate*. You wouldn't have it. You came here and abused me, and now you're asking me what to do."

Wild Jack Rawson threw open the door and stepped inside. And although most of the men were wearing guns now, their fear of him was apparent in the way they jerked their hands free of their holsters. He paused, well beyond the glare of the lamp.

"All it will take to ruin this valley," he said softly, "is for you to start quarreling among yourselves. As I understand it, the courts have ruled the hydraulicking legal. So anything you do to stop Goolsby must be outside the law. That isn't where his hair's short. It's my belief we can get him and stay within the law."

"How?" The question burst from a dozen throats.

"It's a matter of his title to Spanish Ranch, and the Job Crowe place. There has been no transfer recorded, yet Goolsby claims both men sold out and moved away. He may be right, but Ben Killi-

gew's niece told me her uncle was in some deep trouble and had written to his brother for help. There's a taint to this, boys, mebbe a mark of blood."

They stared at him, each held by the same unspoken thought. John Marty was first to find voice and blurt it out. "They're claiming you did away with that girl, Rawson. They're out looking for you now—two posses of 'em. Open talk, too, that they'll never put the law to no expense trying you. How about that?"

"And the flames are fueled by Goolsby's hirelings," said Wild Jack, his voice rough-edged. "I'd be wasting my breath to deny it. I'm one of these fools who won't believe what he sees with his eyes. So I'm going up to Spanish Ranch, hoping to learn something that will hang the deadwood on Cato Goolsby and maybe put his gunnies on the run. How many men can you raise, armed and ready to fight ruin?"

They looked at one another, grim eyes flashing. John Marty said: "Two dozen, I judge. Mebbe thirty."

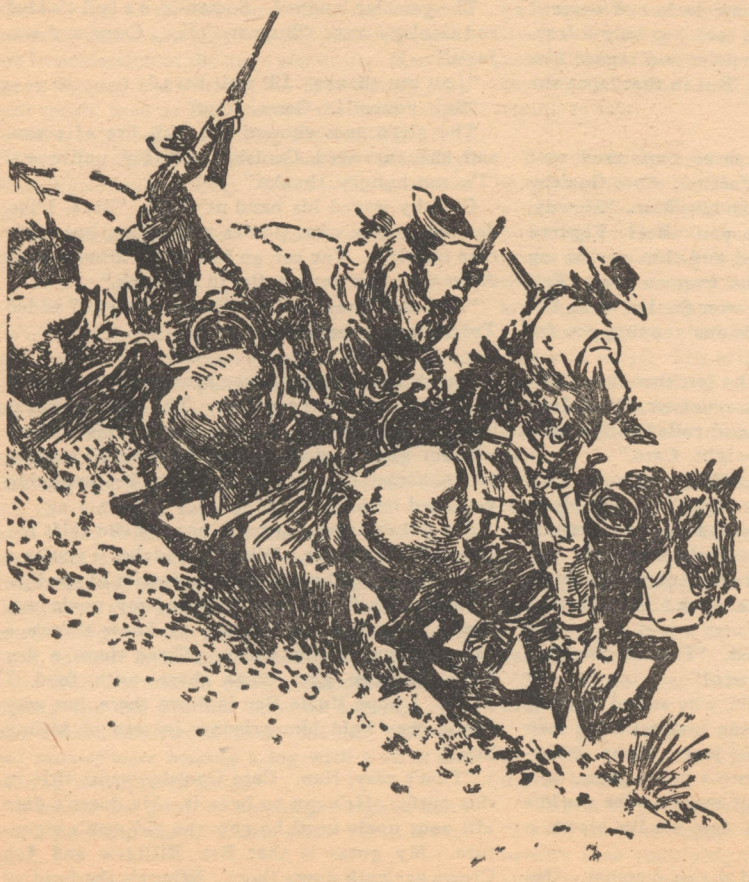
"Have 'em ready. If I'm not back here by tomorrow, at dark, you'll know I'm not comin' back. Hit Goolsby fast and hard, and you'll likely find all you need to put him away. But if you expect any tea party, you better stay down here and wait for the slime to roll over you. I'll try to be here to save you the ride."

He turned, stepped through the door and was gone. A few minutes later he entered the rear door of a Chinese restaurant, got himself a meal in the kitchen, and departed. A posse clattered into the town as he left hugging the shadows. The wind was fresh and cool in his face as he galloped up the valley for another go at Cato Goolsby.

VII.

Wild Jack Rawson had been in many a tight place. But in his book, this bade fair to top them all. He had not waited for the promise of the farmers, for they could be swayed and Miron Calkins might be the one to sway them. The man had been a friend for a time, then something had happened to change him. Under the whip of Goolsby's hard threats, in this land overborne by the gambler's darkening shadow, it would have taken a strong man to resist the pressure and not weaken. That's where Wild Jack had miscalculated. Otherwise he would now have had Goolsby in a squeeze. That kind was quick to snap when the pressure got bad.

No, this thing now was between Rawson and the full power of Goolsby's organization. He would need a lot of luck, thought the ex-marshal as he halted his horse on the ridge and looked down upon the roofs of Spanish Ranch. As was the case yesterday, there were no lights. But men lurked by the buildings and sounds of the curtailed night work came drifting down from the dam. In the starlight, the old ranchhouse, with its wide wings and roofed arcade all around,



Aroused at last, the Rincon City army of fighting men swept forward to battle it out with Cato Goolsby's renegades.

looked like some repulsive, squatting toad. It repelled Wild Jack, yet his first business was there —with Nan Killigew. He must find out her status and what she had learned about the fate of her uncle.

Having decided upon his best route of approach, he tied his pony, hung his spurs on the saddle, and moved clear of the trees. As he paused, where the hill fell away steeply, hoofbeats rapped the ground behind him and a voice said: "That'll be Rawson! Pinch him in."

Wild Jack flung about, reaching for his gun. Two horsemen, menacing shadows in the gloom, were lancing toward him. Changing his mind, the ex-marshal hurled himself down that slant. A muzzle burst flame in the night and a ball sang over him as he rolled and came up. Echoes beat thunderously, and there was an instant response from the bunkhouses below. Jack tried to gouge along the hillside, sprinting. But the footing betrayed him; he slid, fell and rolled, gathering momentum. He wound up at the toe of the hill, too dazed by the battering he had taken to put up any kind of a battle against the horde that lit on him. Lanterns materialized and as Wild Jack came out of the haze it was to find himself looking into the contorted face of Luke Buckbee.

"The great Rawson," he gloated, and threw a painful hammerlock on Wild Jack. "To think you'd march right into our paws, an' with all them possemen looking for you. Sift along, feller."

He pushed Wild Jack before him, into the house, down a dark corridor, and into a room that gave no light outside its heavily blinded and recessed windows. "Company for you, boss," he cackled, and closed the door, leaving the ex-marshal facing

Cato Goolsby, Tyler Forgay, Tod Howser—and Nan Killigew. It was a calmly domestic scene—all sitting in easy-chairs, reading. But there was nothing domestic about their reactions. Nan lifted her eyes, gasped when she saw Jack, and covered her face with her hands. It took her only a fractional second to recover her poise and regard him with a dead, impersonal air. But in that lapse she had told him much.

The faces of the other three registered vast surprise, then immense satisfaction. Cato Goolsby laughed aloud, tipping back in his chair. "Howdy, Jack Rawson. Glad to see you. Set! Figured you'd come snooping around and that one of my watchdogs would spring the trap on you. Fall of the cards, Rawson. You won the last deal, but it was a small pot. I win this one, tapping you for all you got."

And because of the relief he felt that Nan Killigew was not broken by this cruelster, Wild Jack could smile as he sat down and rolled a cigarette. "Your guards are awake tonight, Cato."

The gambler shrugged. "They were worried about my disappearance last night," he said pleasantly. "But they picked up your sign this morning, found where you lay while overseein' my work, and followed your tracks out of the hills. You always were unsociable, Jack. What brings you here?"

Wild Jack's eyes narrowed. "Foolish question, Cato. You know why I'm here?"

Goolsby glanced at the girl, who stared into the coals of the fireplace. "I can understand a man making a try at my sluices, Jack. I can understand ringing a cold deck into a poker game, or a man putting on a mask. But women—the world's full of them. Cute tricks, but hardly worth a man's blood."

"You forget pride," stated the ex-marshal. "No man likes to have something rammed down his throat. You went too far when you took Nan Killigew. You crossed the line."

"Leave me out of it," said Nan, flaring. "You don't hear me complaining, do you?"

Wild Jack winced and Goolsby laughed delightedly. "See, Rawson? They like the way I treat 'em. And the valley will like the treatment it gets from me, unless it decides to buck me." His scowl grew black as he regarded Rawson. "I've got a lot of respect for your intelligence, my friend. You're too smart to place your neck in a split stick for a girl you hardly know. I hope you ain't decoying the farmers up here. If you are, Biggar Creek will run blood instead of slickens. I muster a young army here, and they'll fight for me. Fools if they don't, with the showing we've already made and the way I cut them in. If it comes to a fight, I can't lose, Rawson."

"When a man begins to think that way, he's on the way out, Cato. Act by act, word by word, you build up the score. No man is good enough to get away with that."

The gambler laughed. Somewhere a bell tinkled and Goolsby rose. "Supper, folks. Come and eat, Jack."

"Just ate, thanks. I'll wait here."

"Suit yourself. Come, Nan."

The girl's eyes showed the dull fire of scorn, and she answered Goolsby with icy politeness. "I'm not hungry, thanks."

Goolsby waved his hand at them. "Sure, I understand. Say what you've got to say, but don't take liberties. You can go just so far around here. After that, you get a bullet in the neck."

"And safe lines are drawn close, at night," added Tyler Forgay, beaming.

The three men passed into another room, leaving Wild Jack and Nan together. The sense of being watched was strong in them both. "Here I am without guns again," he said by way of making talk. "Great help I turned out to be—assuming you need help."

She didn't answer at once, nor did she shift her glance from the fire. When she spoke, it was in a soft whisper, without visible movement of the lips.

"After the first day, I believed my uncle was dead. Now I'm not so sure. I know there's a basement under this house. Three times a day Luke Buckbee goes down there—with food, I think. I hope Uncle Ben is down there, but why would they hold him prisoner instead of killing him?"

"That's easy, Nan. Cato Goolsby wants title to this outfit. He's got to have it. He doesn't dare kill your uncle until he gets the old man's signature. My guess is that Ben Killigew and Job Crowe are both down there. Where's the head of the stairs leading down?"

"Just beyond that door they went through. To the right. I tried it once; it's locked. Goolsby didn't lie. Somebody is watching everything, at all times."

"Any way to get into the basement from outside?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. They haven't allowed me much freedom, except with Howser or Forgay with me—or Buckbee." Her lips tightened and her eyes flashed as she spoke the name of the apelike bodyguard.

Wild Jack was thoughtful. "Think I'll step outside," he murmured. "I need a breath of air anyway, and a look around."

A passing look of terror touched her face, giving way to a look of dogged courage. He smiled at her and as he turned away, the low music of her voice struck him.

"Be careful—Jack."

The weight of her warning didn't hit him fully until he reached the door. There he paused to look back at her. She stood erect and proud, beautiful he thought, with twin spots of color in her cheeks. Their eyes clung and Wild Jack felt the lift of his heartbeat and forgot the experience that had made him older than his years. Man and woman looked at one another across the distance and Rawson knew his primary reason for being here was justified.

He stepped outside, deeply stirred, and took a measured pace around the house. Looking for some entryway leading under the house, but not unmindful of the vague and alien sounds in the night. Somewhere there was the low mutter of repressed man talk. A cigarette coal winked at him from down near the river bank. A murmur of tumbling water came from the dam. A horse, one of a half dozen tied to the house rack, pawed restlessly and snorted its discontent. Moving just outside the porch pillars, Wild Jack had more than half circled the great adobe building when a voice struck from the shadow of a clump of Chinaberry trees.

"Who's that?"

"Rawson!"

"Rawson—by Satan!" A form stirred in those shadows and a gun cocked. "What you doin' out here? Get inside where you belong. Get in, you hear me, before I pop a slug into your guts."

Wild Jack said, "My mistake," and continued his circuit of the house. He came to the entryway again with a sense of defeat. Apparently there was but the one way into the basement.

Quietly Jack opened the door, to witness a scene that turned him cold. He saw Nan Killigew standing in the short hallway giving on to the dining room, the basement and into some unguessed chamber. Her back was to Wild Jack, and she was held in some man's tight embrace. Even as Rawson looked, the repulsive face of Luke Buckbee lifted over the girl's shoulder, and his great hand came up to smooth her coppery hair. He saw the man in the front doorway then, released the girl. His teeth bared in a cruel smile, then he was whirling as the door behind him crashed open and Cato Goolsby stood there, glaring.

"You dog," he said, and Buckbee squeaked like a rat as he stabbed for his gun. But there was no gun, and for one brief instant Buckbee stood frozen, braced. Then Goolsby's bullet doubled him over, dropped him there in the corridor.

"You black dog! I told you what would happen if I ever caught you messing with my trinkets again."

"I'm not your trinket, Goolsby," the girl flared, her voice ringing with defiance.

Rage made a battleground of the gambler's face. "You're whatever I want to make of you, savvy? Get to your room, you red-headed minx, before I teach you a lesson, too."

She backed before him, turned as she gained the front room and hurried to a door giving off the main room. Before she vanished through it, she sent Wild Jack a look he couldn't interpret. Certainly there was no look of shame, no guilt, but rather an air of high confidence about her. She seemed to be flashing him a message of encouragement.

With Goolsby's rage turning on him, Wild Jack said: "You're holding the cards and cutting a dash, Goolsby. But no hand is so good it can't be overplayed. You just can't stand being bucked, can you?"

"Few have tried it," said the gambler, his temper shading to an ugly grin. "None have lived to boast about it. I'm getting tired of your gay tune, Rawson. I offered you the world with a fence around it; now you'll take my swill. I can't make up my mind about you. The boys want to cut your throat, but I still call it a shame that so good a gunhand must rot in the ground."

"If a hand plays the gun game long enough, Cato, it's shore to rot in the earth. You know that." His gray eyes bored Cato Goolsby hard and searching, seeking a clue to whatever sinister impulses moved the man. And, as if he read that probing and feared it, Cato snarled:

"To hell with your lip. Drag this carrion out on the porch, then get into your room. Second door on the left."

Wild Jack had good reason now for not refusing the grisly chore. Shrugging, he moved to the dead man, caught him by one leg and dragged him across the floor, leaving a trail of blood. Once outside, however, his boredom fled. He pounced on Luke Buckbee and went hurriedly through his pockets. The keys he found went down his shirt front and he turned inside, dusting off his hands. Goolsby stood there watching his prisoner's every move as Jack walked to the room assigned him.

VIII.

Without making a light, Wild Jack lifted a lid from the heating stove and dropped the keys into the ashes. Then he pulled off his boots and coat, and lay down on the bed. A man less used to probing beneath the surface of trouble would have felt only scorn for any girl who would willingly tolerate the embrace of a brute like Luke Buckbee. Not that the sight hadn't disturbed Jack, but he could smile as he conjured up the picture of the gunman reaching for the gun which wasn't there.

An hour passed. Two hours. A half moon shot its pale rays into the room and sleep defied Wild

Jack. The adobe house cracked as it paid out the day's heat. Somewhere a mouse gnawed wood. Outside a man cried out, but whether in pain or in his sleep was not clear. The light at Wild Jack's threshold was suddenly gone and the house became very quiet. After a long time, he tapped on the wall with his knuckles, hardly daring to expect the almost instant response. Excited, he rose and moved silently to the door. He wanted to talk with Nan. But he hadn't time to more than half open the door when she was through it, pressing close to him.

"You didn't . . . you don't think I . . . Buckbee—" Her fear of his reaction was warming. Jack pulled her inside and closed the door.

"You were after the gun," he whispered.

"The keys," she corrected. "He was just what Goolsby said—a dog. I . . . I encouraged him, but I couldn't get the keys. I took the gun as he broke away. Here—"

She pressed the weapon into his hands. And, without being able to see it, he knew the piece to be one of the pair he had lost after that untimely spill down the hillside. "Good girl." He gave her a hug. "I begin to feel now as though we've got a chance, Nan, to learn what's downstairs. I've got the keys."

Her fingers took the slack in his shirt sleeve and he thought she had caught some furtive movement in the great living room. But it was just to put her lips closer to his ear. "We make the try now, Jack?"

"No, Nan, not now. Cato's had time to think and he knows it wasn't natural for Buckbee to be without a gun. He'll decide you took it, and that I got the keys from the body. If I know him, he'll move heaven and earth to recover both. Go back to your room. He may expect us to make the try tonight, but we'll fool him. Good night."

She was gone then, leaving in Wild Jack's ears the rhythm of her barefoot step. He lay down and presently sleep came to him.

Next morning the quicksilver note of a bell rang through the ranchhouse, waking Wild Jack. He rose, pulled on his boots, splashed water on his face, and was combing his hair when Cato Goolsby's voice bawled from the main room. "Breakfast, you two. Snap out of it. We don't hold a meal for anybody."

A moment later, the gambler broke into Wild Jack's room, and his restless eyes were busy. Rawson went cold as the man eyed the stove, where the gun, wrapped in a bandanna, reposed in the ashes. But if Goolsby suspected anything, he gave no sign.

"Well, Rawson," he grinned. "This is the big day—the first to see a monitor working full time. Not enough water yet to work three, but we should build up to two in a matter of a week or so. Watch them hoe heads holler when the slickens starts rollin' over their trees. Let 'em howl."

"When a man underrates a foe," said the ex-marshal, "he's greasing the skids for himself. Human nature's like a spring, Cato. Harder you crowd it, the harder it kicks back when you tire of holdin' it down. Your luck is about up, Cato."

"A fool talking," said the gambler. "I've got the weight of the law with me. The sheriff is my man; likewise the marshal of Rincon. A couple of court cases back my play. I haven't overlooked a thing. I'll be worth millions, Rawson. And you could have had your cut. Come on to breakfast."

It was a grim and somber meal, something to be endured. Nan Killigew sat across from Wild Jack, her eyes showing sleeplessness and worry. She gave Rawson a long, appraising look, and thereafter kept her eyes on her plate. Tod Howser and Tyler Forgay were taciturn and patently nervous, and with reason enough. Buckbee was dead, shot down by Goolsby in a momentary flaring of temper. The gambler had relied on Luke more than he did on them, so what were they to expect the first time they displeased him? Daily, the man was growing more arrogant, more intolerant and domineering. They were seeing Cato Goolsby come into his power for the first time, and it wasn't a pretty sight.

The meal was soon over, and Wild Jack was first to rise, clawing at his tobacco sack. Goolsby lifted his head, his attitude of listening forced. The roar of the big monitor struck through the thick walls, and the ground seemed to tremble as a great hunk of the gravel bank caved and came pitching sixty feet into the bottoms.

"They're at it," said Cato, with a vast satisfaction. "You can see it from the porch, without leaving the house. The guards have orders to shoot anybody moving aimlessly about. Tod, you'll stay with Miss Killigew and Rawson, just to see they don't get into any mischief."

Wild Jack and Nan exchanged a quick look. Each knew what was in Goolsby's mind. They moved out into the living room, Howser following with a bored attitude.

"You see how it is, folks," he said and pointed to the bloodstains on the floor. "Poor Luke crossed him and he got it. If I cross him, I'll get the same. Just don't pay no attention to me."

Wild Jack grunted, staring out the window at the searing, tearing stream of water pounding away at the towering gravel bank. Not until he saw Forgay and Goolsby far up toward the dam did the ex-marshal make his move.

"Look at that bank come down," he cried suddenly. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! Get back, Goolsby!" He covered his face with his hands.

Tod Howser came up out of his chair, his face

working. In three bounds he gained the window, peered out. Wild Jack hit him with everything he had, high on the back of his neck. Howser dropped like a shot beef.

"Stand at that door to the dining room," rapped Rawson to the girl. "I'll be right back." He ducked into his room, got the gun and keys, and came racing back. With the weapon in his pocket, he lifted Howser, packed him into the short hallway. There was a moment's delay while Nan tried several keys. Then she found one that threw the tumblers and the door swung open. A musty, dampish odor came filtering up the rough staircase that led downward into absolute gloom. Wild Jack hesitated only long enough to tell Nan:

"Let me have the keys. I'll lock myself in. When Cato inquires after me, lie to him. Tell him I went out with Howser, right after he left . . . or is that a lie? I'll be up around nightfall with the answer to what's in our minds, and all set for the big showdown. Stay steady, Nan."

"Bless you," she murmured, the virus of fear touching her eyes. "Here comes somebody."

The door was closed. Wild Jack locked it and then slowly descended into a musty pit as black as the inside of a black boot at midnight. The air was bad and the suggestion of a bad odor filled the place. Reaching the foot of the stairs, Wild Jack lowered his burden. His voice reached out cautiously.

"Killigew!" he called. "Ben Killigew!"

IX.

"Hello!" The hail, weak and muffled, sounded like a voice from the grave. It seemed to come, not from this cellar, but from some point outside, and at great distance. It was hollow, sepulchral, ghostly, stirring the flesh along Wild Jack's spine. "Who's there?"

Wild Jack lit a match, holding it high. The faint beam illuminated a chamber cut down into the alluvium and lined with loose rubble reaching to the floor above. The place had been floored with flat rocks, and was furnished only with a rough table, on which sat a lamp. Rawson made a light, then gave his attention to the voice. There was no one in the cellar, that was plain. Nor was there any place where a man could hide.

"Where are you, Killigew?"

"Here—here!" The voice broke into violent sobbing. "It ain't them, Job, you hear me? It's help, I tell yuh. Wake up, Job, wake up. Somebody's come to take us out o' here."

Like following a dream voice, Wild Jack moved toward a corner of the gloomy cellar. And then he saw the pully hanging from the floor joists, with the rope depending from it. The sobbing came filtering up from below, and Wild Jack saw the break between the flagstones. He lifted a stone and a stench beat upward at him. The rays of the lamp touched a silent form reclining in the deep pit, and a gaunt, bearded, terribly drawn face lifted, blinking up at the light. Tears rolled down his wrinkled cheeks and the trembling lips gave out pitiful whimperings, such as a dog would make.

"You Ben Killigew?"

"Yes. I'm almost done in. You're—"

"What does it matter, so long as I'm not with Goolsby? That Job Crowe?"

"Yes. He's pretty far gone, but if we can get him out of this cesspool—"

Wild Jack set down the lamp and lowered the rope. "Take a turn around his armpits and I'll snake him up," he ordered, and felt a lump constrict his throat as he watched the struggles of the weakened old man to make the knot. But it was done finally, and Wild Jack drew up the wasted body, dragging it to the wall by the foot of the staircase. Job Crowe was still alive, and it might not be too late, with care. A few moments later he had Ben Killigew up and was helping him to a place not visible from the stairs. The old rancher was so weak Wild Jack had to support him. He alternately laughed and wept as the ex-marshal told him of the recent happenings.

"My, this air's good," he said, dragging down great lungsful of air so musty it gagged Rawson. "Few hours of this an' I'll be able to take a hand in cleanin' out this polecat."

Wild Jack encouraged him, knowing it would take long nursing to bring the broken oldster back to anywhere near fighting state. Presently he lugged Howser over and dropped him into the pit, replacing the stone. He had hardly returned to his charges when the door was unlocked and a man descended the stairs with a tray of food and a pail of water in his hands. He muttered: "Hang Buckbee anyway; he left the lamp burning last night." And then he was looking into Wild Jack's gun barrel.

"I'll take those," said the ex-marshal. "Set them down by Killigew. And dally down your tongue if you don't want it shot off."

The man gulped, said nothing. He set down the food, tried to kick Rawson's feet out from under him and went for his pistol. Wild Jack grunted as he brought his weapon down on the other's head. The man sagged silently to the flagstones, and a moment later was dumped unceremoniously into the pit.

"Everyone we trap down here," he told Killigew, "is a man out of the big fight. I'd like to fill that pit with the dogs."

'With Cato Goolsby on the bottom," cackled the oldster, caressing the gun he had taken from

the last victim. "Why, if I could kill that dirty skunk, I'd be content to die, right now. You know something; he sent word yesterday that this would be our last day to sign over our places to him. Tomorrow he was gonna burn us till we'd be glad to sign. Glad, nothin'! Neither me nor Old Job would have signed anything over to him nohow."

There was nothing new in the tale Killigew told. It was the age-old hallmark of greedy men from time immemorial, serving only to make Wild Jack impatient for the test. He had two guns again and Killigew had one to cover his back when he went out. All day he expected another visit from above, expected someone to descend to learn what had become of the food messenger. But no one came, and at seven o'clock he made ready to leave. Killigew, with hot food in him, seemed stronger. Crowe still lay unconscious. The men in the pit were clamoring to be released, their voices washed out before they ever struck into the house, through the floor.

"This is it," said Wild Jack grimly. "If I go down, old-timer, it might just be you'd get a crack at Goolsby when he comes to the cellar."

Killigew nodded. "That's enough to hold me here, stranger," he said. "Luck to you."

The door was unlocked and the little hall was empty when Wild Jack stepped out. The rattle of dishes came from the dining room, together with the low mutter of voices. The ex-marshal was tempted to go in and have it out with Goolsby now. But thoughts of Nan being at table in there made him veto the idea. He turned out into the living room. At first he thought it empty, then Nan rose from a corner of a deep settee. Her eyes were wide, her face pale.

"Jack," she said softly. "How is it . . . down there?"

"I found your uncle, Nan," he told her. "Weak but all right. He's got a gun and he'll be laying for Goolsby, Forgay or anybody who goes down. Job Crowe is there too, in bad shape. Anything new?"

"Goolsby's had men out scouring the hills for you. He thinks you bought Howser off and has offered a thousand dollars to the one who brings you both in—alive. Says he'll burn you both till you're dead. I . . . I think he's crazy."

"Something more to be chalked up on the score-board, Nan. You better go downstairs with your uncle. There'll be shooting here, and I don't want you hurt."

"Would it matter so much, Jack?"

"More than I had believed possible, girl. Now go."

She smiled, touched his sleeve. Then they were both freezing. From outside, faint and splitting into many echoes, came the sound of a rifle shot, and a wild, ribald yell beating high. Then the reverberating roar of many guns and bedlam let loose in the new darkness.

"Out of sight," said Wild Jack, and ran out the front door. An instant later he was aboard one of the fast, saddled horses that always stood racked before the house. The others he cut loose, thinking more of them than of the men who might escape on them. Down the canyon the night gave back purple buds of muzzle flame, striking down from Goolsby's guards, licking upward from the advancing farmers. The sustained slashing of the hydraulic monitor eased off and quit, giving way to the shrill note of aroused men pouring in a tide from the dam and the bunkhouses, and to some mad, unintelligible exhortation from Cato Goolsby in the house. The battle lines were forming, and much hung upon the outcome of Wild Jack's try to contact the invaders and lead them.

As he galloped down the narrowing canyon, Wild Jack knew the guards were dead or retiring under the wicked, sledging fire of the valley men. That firing died away and Rawson, putting his horse over the cut bank of the river, hugged the bank until he could hear the quick thunder of the charging horses. He lifted his voice in a shrill ululation—the high yell of the plains Indians—and there was a quick reining in.

"What in tarnation was that?" someone hollered.

"Listen to me, you plowmen!" Wild Jack sang out. "Pull down here in the wash and we'll make talk before we go in. Who's leading you?"

"John Marty. Who are you?"

"Jack Rawson."

"May be a trick," warned someone. "Better watch out."

"Trick, nothing!" That was Miron Calkins exploding. "I'd know that voice anywhere. Come on."

The editor led the way over the bank. And, even in the darkness, Wild Jack sensed the change in him—a resoluteness that hadn't been there before.

"Rawson," Calkins cried and his hand brushed the ex-marshal as he reined in. "Marty says he's in charge. Well, he'll have to prove it. I've had no guts to tackle this fight against Goolsby until yesterday. Word came from the north, Rawson, grand word. The third time is the charm. Federal judge at Yuba City has just given a decision in favor of those who are menaced or harmed by placer operations. Goolsby and all the other hydraulickers haven't a leg to stand on. What have you found up here?"

"Plenty." The valley riders were crowding close as he told them briefly of the two imprisoned men and what they might expect. They growled their eagerness to attack, but it was Miron Calkins who shot his horse ahead, shrilling a challenge:

"Rincon Valley, going to war!"

"Wait!" Wild Jack roared after him. "Come back here, you fool!" But the rest of the farmers and orchardists were spurring after him, and it was a charge, full and lusty. Aside from the echoes they woke, the little valley of the Biggar was strangely silent. Cato Goolsby was stripping for the finish fight he had never doubted he would win, juggling his pawns, bracing for the attack. That silence was harder to attack than the red discharge of guns. But it helped Wild Jack to get over his orders.

"Fan out and circle the buildings. Blast 'em out of the bunkhouses and then close in on the ranchhouse. Every man watch his own back."

They answered with a vast yell, swelling from thirty-odd throats. They took the bank leaping and roared down on the buildings. Still there was no signal of resistance—only a silence, dismal as a graveyard. At the head of the widening column a gunshot struck through the vale, which seemed suddenly to fill and spill over with fury.

A fierce and lustful cry of battle sheered at the house, and from every aperture guns woke and hammered lead at the valley men. One rider, almost close enough for Wild Jack to touch, hurled his gun aloft and spilled over the tail of his plunging mount, and all the ex-marshal's scruples vanished. It was kill or be killed now, and his only regret was that Nan and her uncle were not out of that ranchhouse, and that he hadn't been given more time to plan this attack.

Wild Jack Rawson was never to remember the first hectic moments of that fury. Nor was it until the attackers had quit their ponies and were blasting the defenders from the board shacks by streams of lead, that Rawson came out of the fog.

When rage gave way to reason, Wild Jack found individual fights swirling all over the flat. And like a general, he paused to watch the renegade forces giving way toward the brushy hillsides. A burst of words came from Cato Goolsby at the house, lashing his fighters to a wipe-out without showing his skin. Wild Jack rallied farmers to his side and, with Miron Calkins matching his every step, led the weaving charge at the door.

Pistol fire lashed from the windows, but weaving targets in the starlight make for easy missing. The door resisted their efforts to open it, so that left the windows.

"Go through, and shooting!" Wild Jack roared to them. "Dive through the panes if you have to!"

There was a quick sprinting along the gloomy circle arcade, each man taking an aperture. Glass crashed down; pistol play swelled fiercely, and then subsided. Wild Jack launched himself into a recess, a muzzle belching in his face. He hit the floor, unharmed, was tangled in threshing arms and legs. Somebody stepped on his neck, gouging his face into the floor. He struck at a shin with a swinging gun barrel, felt a bone crunch sickeningly, and heard a man go down, cursing. Wild Jack leaped after him, knocked him cold, and then raced to the door, hurling it open.

Calls rocketed back and forth, Rawson bidding his men walk carefully as they mucked up. The battle was drawing away and becoming sporadic outside. And Wild Jack found himself careless of how the tide went. He was thinking of Nan as he hurried to the door leading down, and he called her name. No answer. Gun palmed, he almost fell down those stairs, pausing at their foot. The light still burned. Job Crowe still lay where Rawson had dragged him. And there also lay Ben Killigew, his arms outspread, a bloodstain widening from underneath him. Nan was not in the cellar.

"Goolsby," said Wild Jack. "He came down and the old man wasn't up to it. He's gone with Nan, and I post the last chalk mark against him."

He turned, took the steps three at a time. As he popped into the hall, the faint echo of a scream touched his ear. It led him through the dining room, with its half-emptied plates still on the table, and back through a swinging door into the kitchen. There, at the back door where he had been waiting for a chance to duck into the night, Goolsby struggled with a fiercely battling girl. He had her by the wrist, and was cuffing her with his free hand as she scratched and kicked and slapped at him. As Wild Jack came crashing in, the gambler struck the girl, knocking her down.

"When I turn back this fool stroke of the valley sodbusters," he growled, "I'm taking a blacksnake to you. I'll teach you manners, sister."

And then he was silent, staring at Wild Jack with eyes smoldering and unafraid. He must have known that there was a chance the battle had gone against him, that his fine plan was crumbling. He saw the full holsters at the ex-marshal's thighs and Wild Jack's past and the legend of him must have been living poignantly in the gambler's mind at that moment. There was something almost admirable in the way he grinned and planted himself for the showdown.

"Well," he crowed. "Where the devil did you come from?"

"Nan!" ordered Wild Jack. "Go down to your uncle and do what you can." She said nothing, letting her hand touch him comfortingly as she passed. Then she was gone, and the two men were alone. "This is what you've been asking for, Goolsby. Draw!"

The gambler's shoulders settled and his eyes grew bleak. "Too bad, Rawson," he mourned. "We could have gone far on the same side of the fence.

But it wasn't to be. We're too much alike to have ever got along. Even now if you could see eye to eye with me, you could cart away a half million in three years. And as for the girl, you're welcome to her. What do you say?"

"Not even if you could deliver, Cato, which you can't. The court found against the hydraulickers yesterday. Even if you get over me, you're licked. Pull whenever you're ready."

Gun shots swelled outside and died away. Somewhere a man's screams lifted and subsided. Cruelty glittered in Goolsby's eyes.

"You're a killer, Rawson, with a killer's reputation. My rep is for gambling, but few people know that I too am a killer. In those years along the trail, I was ready for you whenever you felt lucky. I'm ready now and more than a match for you."

The voices of men came from the front and the gambler appeared to listen. His grin deepened and deadliness seemed to spread outward from his nostrils. One long moment of suspense, with Goolsby getting nearer to the snatch, with Wild Jack as nerveless as a graven image. But inside he was eager, tormented with that hated fever.

Death hovered there, then struck. Goolsby swayed and ducked, stabbing at his gun. Two pistols flashed from their sheaths, blared. Two men stood poised, glaring, awaiting the final reaction. It came swiftly. The gun dropped from Cato Goolsby's fingers. He failed in a last desperate attempt to keep his chin up, and his eyes on Wild Jack Rawson. A last, fiery, vindictive flare lit his eyes and went out.

"Seat for another gambler," he muttered, and crashed down, dead.

A shot roared behind Rawson, and Tyler Forgay stumbled into the kitchen, dead on his feet. Some valley men came tearing in to peer through the smoke. "Goolsby!" howled one, and knelt. "Dead as his gunnies that ain't surrendered or fogged it."

An arm went around Wild Jack, to steady him. And there was Miron Calkins holstering a smoking pistol and whipping a bandanna around the ex-marshal's bullet-drilled left arm. Cato's bullet had missed Wild Jack's heart by five inches.

"I knew you'd be the man to down him," cried Calkins. "And even though I got scared and backslid—something I'm ashamed of now—I really never doubted you. Look at him lying there, Rawson. The great Goolsby! Don't look so great now, does he?"

"Wonder how things are downstairs," Wild Jack said, and turned at once to find out. In the little hall he came face to face with Marshal Pratt Ebaugh, from Rincon. The man gulped, dropped his eyes. Then, like any political opportunist: "A good bit of work you done here, Mr. Rawson. I reckon this county owes you more'n it can ever pay."

"Don't forget," said Wild Jack, grinning, "that you bought me for two dollars and threw me into the middle of this mess for five. A three-dollar cleanup."

He turned down the stairs, pausing midway. Ben Killigew was sitting up, grunting while a valley man whipped a bandage around his middle. He spotted Wild Jack and flashed him a wry smile.

"Couple o' smashed ribs an' sore as the devil," he croaked. "I got off lucky. When Goolsby beat me to the shot, I figgered I was better off dead, because we was all due to lose anyway. But when my brother's gal showed up an' told me who was fightin' on our side, I perked up sudden an' miraculous. You get Cato?"

"He's finished," said Wild Jack, the inevitable heaviness settling over him at the thought of having shed blood again. He pulled his weapons, dropped them into the dark void beneath the stairs. And then he was looking at Nan, who stood with her face full in the lamplight, her eyes proud and starry and full of understanding. She seemed to be offering herself in that moment, and he was accepting, in every fiber of him. From the flagstone, Ben Killigew was saying:

"I'm too old to guard this outfit proper, Rawson. I need young blood—somebody who can wrangle a mean gun. Well, a . . . a feller like you."

Wild Jack scowled. "Sorry, old-timer, but I've shed my guns for good. And this time I'll stick to it."

"You mean you're turnin' down my offer? Ain't there nothin' could induce you to stay on at Spanish Ranch?"

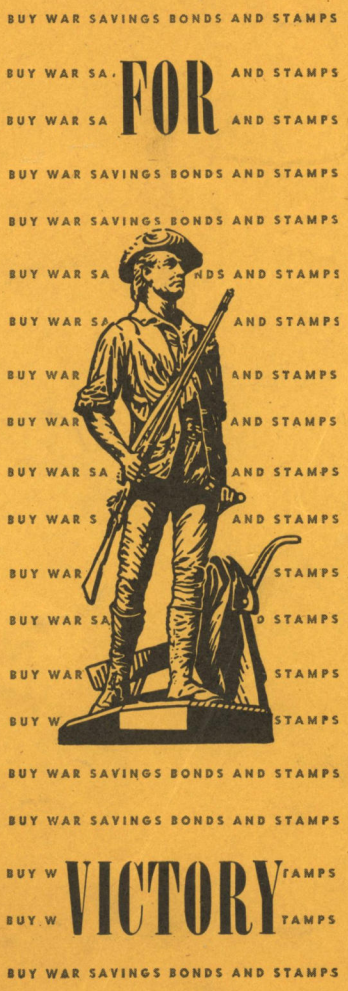
"With empty holsters—sure I'll stay. This valley and this ranch have treated me well. I'd be a fool as well as an ingrate to run from its promise. Sure, I'll stay, if Nan stays."

The oldster cackled. "A home. A woman to tend the fire an' keep a light in the window of nights." His face grew bleak. "I dreamed of them things, like all youngsters do. I've reached an age now when it's plain a man's only half a man without it. So why should the great Jack Rawson shy? That's settled."

And Miron Calkins, who had slipped down the stairs unnoticed, said: "Wild Jack Rawson hangs up his guns, steps out of the news. Another fairy tale. Brother, you've made news for the Foothill *Advocate* for the next five years. I'll never live to see the day I can do justice to the writing of it."

"I hope not," murmured Wild Jack Rawson. "I sure hope not."

THE END.



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