15 BIG FAST-ACTION THRILLERS

WESTERN SHORT STORIES

25¢

JUNE

19TH YEAR

TOUGH, HE SAID HE WAS

THERE WASN'T A MAN WHOSE HACKLES DIDN'T RISE AROUND THE NEW KID. YES THERE WAS ONE MAN. BIG JOHN MCLEOD.

FEATURE-LENGTH THRILLER

BY CLAYTON FOX

BIG BONUS EXTRA: 5 ALL-TIME GREAT WESTERN CLASSICS

MAR 2 8 E

THE TEXAS KIND

LARRIBEE HAD RIDDEN ALL THE WAY FROM WYOMING TO FORGET AN UNTAMABLE TWO-LEGGED FILLY. NOW HERE WAS ANOTHER ONE, TWICE AS CANTANKEROUS.

BY WM. RANSOM

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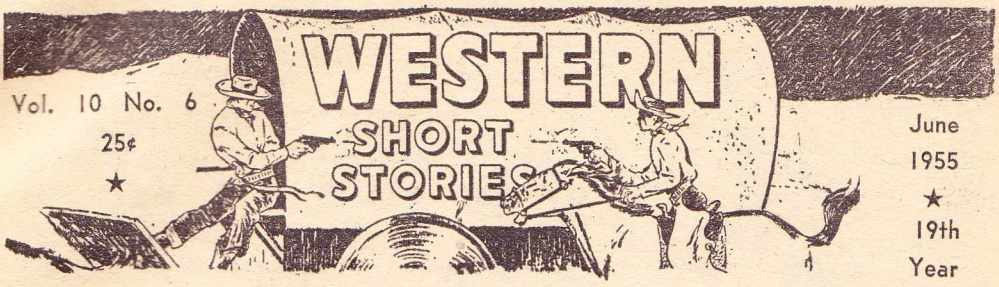

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TOUGH, HE SAID HE WAS

THERE WASN'T A MAN WHOSE HACKLES DIDN'T RISE AROUND THE NEW KID. YES, THERE WAS. ONE MAN. BIG JOHN McLEOD.

"Looking for something, sonny?" a voice drawled. Bob, speechless, looked up to find Luke and Pete sitting motionless.

THEY MET at noon at the spring on Wishbone Butte—big John McLeod and the tough youngster who'd said his name was Bob Smith when picked off the westbound freight two years before.

Yes, a very hard kid, Bob, on the threshhold of becoming a wicked man. Cold blue eyes with a red tinge of fear in the corners, blond hair matted thick on his neck, pinched-in Stetson cocked at a go-to-hell angle. Even a grown and handy man felt a tightening of his scalp when he saw Bob, the kind of feeling you'd get watching a captive wolf on a thin chain.

Not Big John McLeod, though; under the sky he feared only God. When the railroad detective had walked Bob out of the railroad yard at gun point two years before, John McLeod had been there.

"I need a hand," he'd said. "Poor food, hard work, and maybe not any pay. It takes a tough man and it's better than reform school."

Bob Smith had had no choice, not with the detective's gun in his back.

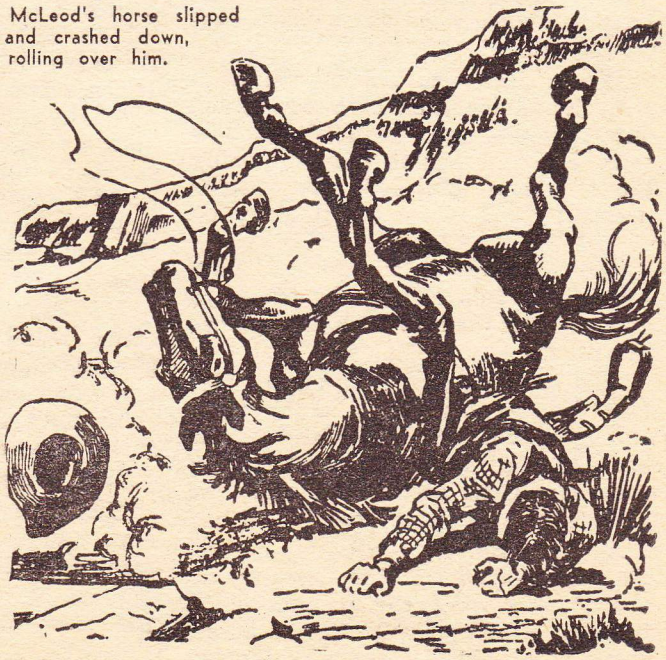
You don't like a man you're forced on with a gun. You work with him a couple of years; listen to what he tells you. You lose your own name, if it was Smith. Everybody in the country calls you "McLeod's boy" or "Bob McLeod." McLeod calls you "son" sometimes, and even talks about the McLeod and Son Cattle Company as a kind of joke, but you don't think much of the joke. Even if you're free to go, free to go back to dodging railroad bulls, you don't like McLeod. A man like McLeod had never had to run from anything in his life, and for that, most of all, you don't like him...

Well, this was the end. When they got these cows down to the home ranch of their summer range, Bob Smith was through being Bob McLeod. He had it figured out. He'd close the gate behind them—pull the wire loop down over the post, and that would be the last thing he'd do for John McLeod.

Bringing in seven cows and six calves, Bob could see big John hunkered down by a fire. His shoulders were slack and Bob counted the gather beyond the spring. Only twelve cows with nine calves. Not enough to pay off the bank loan and have left a start for next year. Somewhere on the high summer range they had lost three cows and calves, and that thin margin was too much. Which went to show what kind of a haywire outfit it was, when three cows made the difference between paying-out and going broke.

John McLeod looked up and

Big John McLeod feared no man, and for that most of all the hard-faced young hellion hated him....



McLeod's horse slipped and crashed down, rolling over him.

FEATURE-LENGTH THRILLER

by CLAYTON FOX

★

grinned as Bob rode up. Bob knew he had counted the gather as they quartered down the slope and knew of his defeat, but none of it showed in his eyes. Bob permitted a cold grin to touch his face.

"I waited dinner for you like one hog waits for another; wasn't sure how soon you'd be in," John said. He handed a steaming plate of beans and mug of coffee to Bob.

"I looked everywhere," Bob said. "Every draw and bosque. That's all there is."

"It was a gamble," McLeod said. "Sometimes you lose. Lots of things happen up here. Rattlesnakes, cougars, wolves, maybe the Glidden brothers. Stock-raising is the biggest gamble in the world. Well, we can settle with Tom Washburn at the bank and line ourselves up some riding jobs. All we've lost is the cattle. McLeod and Son ain't licked yet."

"Maybe Mr. Washburn would extend your loan. You came awful close to having enough to pay out."

"Tom Washburn is a friend of mine and he's running a business. I won't embarrass him by asking for favors. I knew the risk I was taking."

"Yeah."

"You never want to get yourself in a place where you can't tell any man, friend or enemy, to go to blazes, remember that."

"Yeah." He was fed to the neck with the advice John McLeod handed out. If it was such good advice, how come McLeod was so close to going broke? John McLeod was always preaching and where did it get you?

BOB PUT down his plate. "That old Durham thinks she wants to go back over the hill. I'd better chouse her back."

"Eat your beans. I'm through." McLeod jerked his saddle cinch tight and mounted. "It's a day and a half back to the ranch. I'll start hazing them down the creek. You catch me after you've had some rest."

As he mounted, the mossy-horned Durham started running, heading up the slope toward the pasture she'd been on all summer. McLeod's horse, cattle-wise, laid his ears back and began to cut a circle around her. When he had pulled up even, the Durham bawled in disgust and abruptly turned back toward the other cattle. McLeod's pony wheeled also.

The horse slipped on the turn, recovered its footing, then stumbled and crashed down, rolling completely over McLeod.

To Bob, watching from the fire, it seemed a nightmare; the lunge of the horse, the scrabbling of hooves on the rocky soil, and then McLeod lying crumpled, with the horse stopping, ground-hitched, a dozen steps away, trembling violently.

Then he was running without seeming to go anywhere until he knelt by McLeod, his breath tearing at his throat.

McLeod's face was gray and still, and for an instant Bob thought he was dead. A feeling of helplessness swept him, and then McLeod's eyes were open, and he put out a hand. Bob gasped with relief.

McLeod's face twisted with an effort to say something, then went shapeless, and his skin grew whiter still. Bob opened his shirt and put his hand on his chest. There was a faint flutter of heartbeat, but the breathing was shallow and irregular.

Bob remembered the way they had doctored sick calves, wrapping them in blankets and bringing them near the stove. It was all he could do now. It was a two-day ride to a doctor, and he could not leave McLeod alone. He built a fire and set a can of water on the rocks to heat. He spread McLeod's bedroll and cautiously pulled him on it, sickening at the grating sound and the froth that appeared on McLeod's lips.

Just after sundown, with the first star glowing and a winter-edged wind blowing from the peaks, John McLeod again opened his eyes.

"I don't see how I'll get out of this," he said clearly.

"You'll make it," Bob said.

"I'm smashed inside." He was silent, and Bob brought a drink and propped up his head so he could sip it.

McLeod had trouble drinking, and Bob took the cup away.

"You've never liked me much?" McLeod asked.

Bob wondered if he ought to lie. "No."

"Makes no difference. I'm not leaving you much. Outside of that I've no regrets." His voice trailed away, and then came back stronger. "I didn't figure on this. Time goes by. One day you're a kid learning how to live and the next you're on your way out, with nothing much to show you've ever lived. I wanted to give you a good start."

"I'll go for the doctor and wagon," Bob said, his throat suddenly aching.

"No use. Take me in across my horse... And Bob. Take care of the business—with Washburn, I mean. Only debt I owe."

"This is loco talk. You'll make it."

"Don't ever duck facing a fact, son," McLeod said clearly. He drifted off to sleep, muttering.

IN THE EARLY hours of the morning, with the keen wind shrilling and thin moon lighting the peaks, he awoke again.

"It hurts!" he said thickly. Then, "Get those cows to Washburn, Bob. Start square with the world."

"All right. Don't talk."

"There'll be a McLeod and Son. Work for—" John McLeod half-turned and cried out. When Bob felt his chest his breathing had stopped.

Bob sat dully by the fire until the thin moon faded and the peaks of the Bitterroots were tinged with dawn. Then he rose stiffly. He had a job to do.

Moving slowly, he wrapped McLeod's body in his blankets and a tarp. It was heavy and it took him a long time to lash it on the nervous horse. He gathered his own blanket roll and was ready to move.

As he was finishing, the old Durham cow came drifting up from the creek below the spring, still stubbornly trying to get back to her summer range.

Rage flared in Bob. If it hadn't been for that old idiot... He pulled his rifle from the saddle boot and drew a bead on her. She'd caused trouble for the last time.

Regretfully he lowered the hammer to safety. Worthless as she was, the old Durham would help pay McLeod's debt. Leading McLeod's horse, he circled her and started the cattle toward the ranch.

Three miles down the creek, at the mouth of a long draw winding down from Wishbone, he found the tracks of two unshod horses heading into the hills. They were fresher than the ones left when he and McLeod had ridden up three days before. He halted his horse, speculating. The Wishbone was a remote range, not frequented by anyone in the country, and seldom penetrated by stray riders. Occasionally the Glidden brothers hunted back in here.

Bob thought of the missing cattle. McLeod had said, "Rattlesnakes, maybe, or the Glidden brothers." Luke and Pete Glidden had done time for a post office holdup, and they weren't above helping themselves to someone else's stock. The mines to the north were always short of fresh meat and they didn't inquire thoroughly into the ownership.

Bob had been with McLeod when some horses had disappeared near the Gliddens' place eighteen months before. There was nothing definite to link the disappearance to Luke and Pete, but John McLeod had strapped on a gun, an article he seldom wore, and they had ridden to the Gliddens' grimy cabin. McLeod had been very polite, but he'd kept his hand near his gun.

"Five of my horses have strayed, boys," he said affably. "They've come over toward your range. I'd appreciate it if you'd head them back if you see them."

Luke Glidden had sat on the porch, lean jaws steadily working his tobacco. "I'm not drawing pay for herding McLeod stock," he said.

"That's right," McLeod said. "I'm glad I don't have to remind you." He leaned forward in his saddle, watching the Gliddens and the guns within their reach.

To Bob, sitting behind him, there was no visible change, but in the act of leaning forward McLeod had changed from a big, easy-going rancher who preached too much into a man of menace, big hand close to his gun, shoulder muscles tense. There was a different feeling in the air.

THE GLIDDENS had sat perfectly still, the shallow black eyes unflickering. Then Luke had grinned. "Anything to oblige a neighbor," he said. "If we see your horses we'll chouse them down."

Two days later the horses had come out of the hills. Bob, backtracking them one morning before sunup, had discovered a corral thrown up in a small canyon.

Bob wondered at that again. There hadn't been anything in what was said. McLeod hadn't offered a fight, but the feeling was strong he was ready for one.

He'd asked McLeod about it one time. Big John had grinned. "The Gliddens know me; they know the kind of man I am, they weren't ready for trouble with me. Besides, you were sitting right behind me, and I hear you're a pretty rough boy. This don't mean they won't try again."

From the looks of the tracks now, perhaps the Gliddens had made their second try. And this time John McLeod wasn't around to bluff them. Bob shook his head, shying away from his suspicion. The cattle had been on the range untended all summer; if the Gliddens had intended to pick them off they'd have done so before now. If the tracks were Luke's and Pete's, they were probably on a hunting trip.

At nightfall he drove the cattle into a side canyon, tying his lariat across the entrance to hold them, then camped just outside, along a gravelly bar.

For the first time he felt a sense of loss, of loneliness, like the first nights at the reform school. McLeod had been all the time trying to teach him something, but outside of that, life with him hadn't been too bad.

He wondered where his next stop would be. After he sold the cattle and paid off the banker, Washburn, he was all through around here. McLeod had been the only one in the whole country who hadn't looked at him as if he'd had a rattlesnake in each pocket. Except Gretchen Mueller, maybe, and it was her natural disposition not to be mean to anybody.

He'd been heading for Portland when the railroad bull had picked him off the freight. Maybe he could go to sea from there.

He wondered what would happen to the McLeod ranch. Gretchen's father, old Henry, had had his eye on it for a long time. Well, it wouldn't make any difference to him.

He felt a vague regret at leaving. Being on the McLeod ranch was the next thing to being in jail, and maybe that was why he hated to leave; he'd seen old convicts pull some petty job to get back into jail. He remembered the times of his bitter resentment against McLeod; the times he'd wanted to slam away the tools of his chores and slope over the hill. That was it, he was fresh out of jail now, and in a day or two, after he'd cleared up McLeod's debt, he'd be on his way.

An idea tugged at the corner of his thinking. Why go to all the bother of paying McLeod's debt? If the Gliddens could take cattle north to the mines to be beeved, he could do it, too.

It sounded good. By the time Washburn got wise, he could have the cattle north and out of the country. He'd never got any payment from McLeod for all the work he'd done. He could call the cattle his wages.

First he'd have to take McLeod's body in and see that it was buried, then he could start the cattle toward town in case old Henry Mueller was suspicious. Once around the hill out of sight he could swing north and keep going.

HE ROLLED into his blankets, so excited with the idea that he thought he could not go to sleep, but he dozed and awoke startled in full daylight.

He hurried through breakfast and started the cattle down the creek toward the McLeod ranch. A mile down he crossed the tracks of two horses again. This time they were stepping in the tracks of three cows and two calves. The tracks came down a faint game trail from one shoulder of the Wishbone and crossed over to a low saddle on a ridge. Beyond that ridge lay the Glidden ranch. There wasn't any doubt about it. The Gliddens had picked off some beef for the mines.

The day before he'd seen it as a possibility, then it hadn't worried him

much. It had been Washburn's cattle they had stolen. Now it was money out of his own pocket.

He recalled the way McLeod had faced the Gliddens down, and tried to imagine himself doing the same thing. A cold weight of fear settled in his stomach at the thought. Maybe he could sneak in at night and run the cattle out. But there would be no way of telling, Luke or Pete might be hiding out in the brush with a rifle.

He'd be better off to keep the cattle he had and let the Gliddens get away with the others. But it went against the grain.

It was after noon when he drove the cattle into the pasture below the main ranch house. He unlashed McLeod's body and carried it in to the bed. The clock was stopped and the house cold and still. He went from room to room in the silence, then carried his own blankets to the barn and put them in the haymow. He was through with McLeod's house. There was too much of the big man still in it, even to a paper scroll framed on one wall. It was a speech from a play, some guy handing out advice. "These few precepts" it began and then went on for a long time. McLeod had been like that guy, full of wise sayings. Bob was glad to be rid of the house. He cooked his supper over an open fire by the springhouse and rolled into his blankets early to think about the trail north.

He was up again at daybreak and digging in the orchard near the spot where a stone marked the place where McLeod's wife and the baby son were buried. After he finished he went to the workshop and began to fashion a coffin. He'd learned how to handle tools at the reform school and McLeod had been a good workman, teaching him the easiest ways.

The nearest preacher was at the Bear Creek mine, eighty miles to the north, so one of the neighbors would have to say the funeral words. He could get Henry Mueller, though McLeod hadn't liked him much. It was a powerful lonesome country when a man had to be buried by people who hadn't cared for him. He ought to go to town to get Washburn, but the banker might get interested in when the cattle would be sold and McLeod's debt paid.

Gretchen Mueller was hanging out clothes when he dismounted at the front gate. She put down her basket and waited as he came up through the yard. "Hello, Bob, how did the round-up go?"

"No good," Bob said.

"Something is wrong?"

HE TOLD her, in a rush of words that astonished him. He had had no words except to his horse since McLeod's death, and now they burst from him in a flow which embarrassed him but which he could not stop. He told her everything, everything except his plan to ride out with the cattle.

Her eyes filled with tears. "Poor McLeod," she said. And then, "It must have been awful, Bob." Her touch was soft on his arm. It was this way when Henry Mueller came stamping around the corner of the house. His sour scowl settled and grew dark.

"Go in the house, Gretchen. What do you want, boy?"

"McLeod's dead. I want you to help bury him," Bob said, forcing down his anger at the sharp tone Henry had used on Gretchen.

"Dead! You kill him?"

"His horse fell on him!" Bob blazed. "You can look for yourself."

Henry chewed at his lip for a moment. "All right, we go," he said. He left Bob standing in the yard while he went into the house to dress in the black he felt was necessary. When he and Mrs. Mueller came out with Gretchen to get in the spring wagon, Bob, his resentment growing throughout the wait, thought Mrs. Mueller looked at him with suspicion as she went by. He got on his horse and rode behind the wagon without a word.

It was hot in the orchard. Mrs. Mueller sang some songs in German because she had never learned the English and Henry talked about what a fine man McLeod was and how they would miss him. As he talked Bob looked at the coffin. It was hard to imagine Big John being really gone, no more advice in that big booming voice. He remembered the way McLeod had called him "son" and for a

moment wavered on the rim of sadness. He wondered, for the first time, how McLeod would have taken it when he left. McLeod had never really believed he was going to leave. Well, it made no difference now. Big John was gone, leaving nothing but a hardscrabble ranch and a few sorry cows.

Henry had stopped talking and was looking at him.

He stepped forward, knowing the Muellers expected him to say something but not knowing what there was to say. He thought of the parts of the Bible about the days of man being short and full of troubles and the part about many mansions. They were fine but they didn't suit John McLeod.

"Father in Heaven," he said. "We are burying John McLeod's body. He always trusted You and we hope You make him welcome. He was a good man—and always tried to teach others the right way." Bob stopped. There was nothing more to say.

They repeated the Lord's Prayer, then picked up the ropes and lowered the box. Bob wondered if he had done enough. But he'd done what McLeod would do for others. Mrs. Mueller and Gretchen sobbed steadily as they filled the grave.

After it was over he walked to the wagon with them. Henry stood with one foot on the hub, his eyes sharply speculative as he looked over the place.

"McLeod have any relatives?'" he asked.

"I don't know, I never heard of any."

"You leaving now?"

"I don't know yet."

"What about those cattle?" Henry pointed to the pasture.

"McLeod owed Mr. Washburn at the bank. I guess they'll go to pay the debt," Bob said curtly. He hated to admit the cows were not rightfully his.

HENRY POINTED a stubby finger. "There should be more."

"Maybe some are in the creek bottom," Bob said. He counted, "No, that's all I brought down."

"I know how many McLeod put to summer range," Henry said stubbornly. "There should be more."

Why, Bob thought in a blaze of anger, Henry figures on grabbing the ranch, and he's not satisfied with that, he wants some cattle to go with it.

"We lost some up there," he said, having a hard time controlling his voice.

"It would be easy to hide some out in the brush and then ride out with them when you left," Henry said.

"I guess it would at that," Bob said. "Too bad I didn't think of it."

"McLeod trusted you," Henry said. "I don't. There's some cattle missing and I think you know where they are."

"Papa," Gretchen protested.

"Maybe I do," Bob said. "Is it any skin off your nose?"

"I make it skin off my nose. Once a no-good always a no-good. I told McLeod, but he laughed."

"Get off the place," Bob said viciously. "Get off!" He started toward Mueller.

"Bob," Gretchen said. "Please don't!"

Henry jumped to the wagon seat and snapped the reins at his team.

"I talk to Washburn," he said. "You stay here."

Knees shaking from the burst of anger, Bob watched the spring wagon jouncing down the road. He was lucky Gretchen had been there to shout at him.

His heart action slowed and he began to think more calmly. Maybe he was mad because Henry had figured out his moves. The only thing he hadn't guessed was that he planned to take all the cattle, not just two or three. If he were going to get out now he'd have to move fast. Washburn would be out tomorrow at the latest.

Bob started to laugh, and then the sting of Henry's words came back to him, and his laugh broke in the middle with a howl of rage. He stalked to the house and got a rifle and pistol, stuffing his pockets with cartridges. He was in the saddle before he had a clear idea he was going to the Gliddens after the missing cattle.

He hated this country. The Glid-

dens sneaked and stole cattle, and no one dared call them thieves to their face. Henry Mueller would steal McLeod's ranch, and no one would call him a thief, either. He couldn't do anything about Henry, but he could sure get back his own from the Gliddens.

On the ridge overlooking the valley where the Gliddens had their cabin he paused to consider. The rage had burned out, he was shaky and sick-feeling now. He was remembering the flat, expressionless eyes of the Gliddens. If they spotted him snooping around, they might shoot before asking questions, and nobody would be the smarter for it, everybody would think he'd ridden out of the country.

Maybe Luke and Pete weren't there, they might have started to the mines by now. He wondered why they didn't go directly, and decided they were afraid McLeod would catch them from behind when they were driving the cattle. It occurred to him Luke and Pete must be pretty simple-minded; they'd tried once before to get away with McLeod's stock, and now they were trying again, but leaving tracks all over the place. But being simple-minded wouldn't keep them from being dangerous.

THERE WAS no sign of life from the cabin, and no stock at all in the valley. They must have the cattle in their hidden corral in the side canyon.

He cut into the timber below the crest of the hill, his spine stiffened against the imagined shock of a bullet. He kept telling himself that the Gliddens were human, they wouldn't cut him out of the saddle without warning, and sometimes he believed it for a few seconds. The scuffling of his horses' hooves through the pine needles seemed to echo from the opposite canyon wall.

When he reached the rim of the draw where the Gliddens had their hidden corral, he dismounted and, rifle in hand, went forward Indian-fashion, dodging from tree to tree. Finally he dropped and crawled to a spot where he could see down into the corral. The cattle were there all right. Three cows and one calf. The carcass of another calf was hung from the limb of a pine. The Gliddens had done a little butchering for themselves.

"Looking for something, Sonny?" a voice drawled. Bob, shocked speechless, twisted to look over his shoulder. Luke and Pete, their jaws rhythmically working tobacco, were sitting their horses up-slope, thirty paces away. Each had a rifle across his saddle-bow.

Bob scrambled to his feet, leaving his rifle. He was so scared he could feel sweat break cold along his shoulder-blades. He was cold turkey, no matter what he said or did, the Gliddens had the play their way. He wondered if McLeod would have crawfished here.

His throat was dry and his voice squeaked. "I was looking for McLeod cattle. Seems like I found them. In that corral down there."

Luke grinned and looked sidewise at Pete. "Pete, where did you get those cattle?"

"Why, Luke, you know doggone well we raised them from calves. Durned near broke my heart when we had to butcher the spotted one."

Luke shook his head at Bob. "Seems like you got the wrong idea."

"All I know is," Bob said stubbornly, "I trailed these cows off the Wishbone. They're the same cattle I helped put up there last spring."

Luke looked sorrowfully at Pete. "See here, Pete, the boy thinks we're rustlers. Are you a cow-thief, Pete?" He turned suddenly toward Bob, his rifle barrel arcing forward. "Where's McLeod?"

"Why—McLeod was busy. He sent me instead."

"That so. Well, you go back and tell Mister Big John McLeod that there ain't any cattle over here except the ones that belong to us."

Here was his out. He could get on his horse and ride, forgetting about the cattle. It was a lot better than being dumped here for the coyotes.

He took a step to one side. "Maybe I'm mistaken," he said. "But those look like my cows to me." He whirled and jumped down the slope, hit and

slid on the pine needles, fell and rolled behind a tree, hearing the crack of Luke's rifle echoing from the canyon walls.

Spitting needles, he pulled the big forty-five from holster and sighted it along the tree trunk. He couldn't see the Gliddens, but the rifle cracked again, and dust flew from a limb far above him.

HE HAD SHOT a pistol only a few times. He squeezed off at nothing in particular up the slope. The big gun jumped and belched smoke back in his face. He heard the slug strike heavily into a tree. One of the Gliddens yelled. He looked around cautiously, but could see nothing of them. Picking a tree a few yards to his left, he fired around the right side of his tree. Almost in the same motion he rolled and scuttled to his left.

Bullets gouged the pine needles above him as he scrabbled to shelter. Either the angle of firing downhill had the Gliddens fooled, or they didn't really want to hit him, which was more likely. Well, he didn't want to kill any Gliddens, either. All he wanted was the cattle back.

He raised his head and looked around the side of the tree. Almost instantly a bullet struck almost in his face, filling his eyes with bark dust. He clawed at his eyes, helpless, until tears washed out the stinging particles. The Gliddens weren't fooling.

When his eyes cleared he saw that he was in luck. Below him the ground dropped steeply away into a gully filled with buckbrush. He could keep the tree between himself and the Gliddens, back into the gully, and escape under cover of the brush.

Then he saw the down tree. It had been blown over so that the roots extended into the air, leaving a gaping socket in the ground. The trunk extended on an angle up the hill for nearly two hundred feet, lying flat to the slope all the way. It would give him cover nearly all the way back to his starting point.

Without thinking it over, he rose and dived across into the root cavity. He waited until he thought the Gliddens hadn't spotted the move, then crawled out and edged his way uphill under cover of the trunk. He could hear nothing of Luke and Pete, and it gave him an eerie feeling, they might be standing on the log watching him. The dry forest duff started sticking to his hands and he discovered they were as wet with sweat as if they had been dipped in water. After what seemed an afternoon of crawling he reached a point where the tree tapered to a point too small to protect him.

He rolled on one elbow, gun ahead of him, and peered over the log. Luke and Pete were both in plain sight, nearly a hundred yards away, looking down into the brush-filled gully.

"Must have crawled in there," Pete said.

"Yeah, he won't bother us again."

"How about McLeod?"

"That's somethin' else. We were crazy to ever fool with his cattle, anyway."

Lying behind the log, Bob sighted the gun on the crossed suspenders on Luke's back. He had to make sure his first shot; one of the Gliddens he might handle, but not two of them. He kept the sight steady on the leather patch, easing the hammer back to full cock.

As it started to fall, he desperately jerked the barrel up. Luke's hat kicked away, and as he fell forward, Bob was afraid he hadn't pulled his aim in time. But Luke lurched to his feet, and in a dozen zigzagging strides, reached the gully rim. Thereafter there was the loud crackling of branches.

Bob twisted the gun, trying for a glimpse of Pete, afraid that gunsmoke had betrayed his position. He saw a patch of blue extending from a tree trunk. He pulled down on the tree and fired, missing by a dozen feet. As the slug knocked a limb from a tree, Pete broke and ran. All Bob could see was the rapid flicker of blue through the brown trunks of the trees, heading downhill, away from the horses. He fired again to speed him on his way.

HE RAN TO the Gliddens' horses, stripped them of their bridles, and slapped them into a run. Then he retrieved his rifle and got his horse.

He barely had strength to climb into the saddle.

Riding down to the corral, he started to laugh, but the laugh rang in his ears like the nervous cackle of an old hen past the age for laying eggs. He kept a spur of timber between himself and the gully where the Gliddens had disappeared until he had the cattle out of the corral and up on the hill.

When he reached a spot where he could see the Gliddens' cabin he dismounted, took careful aim, and emptied the magazine through the windows and door. He reloaded again and again, shooting methodically until the rifle barrel was too hot to touch. Then he remounted and turned the cattle toward home.

He had half expected to see either Washburn or Henry Mueller about the place, but the only signs of life were the cattle in the pasture and the chickens clucking around the barn. He could make his start north to the mines without trouble.

He went into the house and cleaned out the pantry for grub for his trip. His bed roll was still in the barn. The chickens came at him, singing hungrily. He went to the granary and scattered a sack of oats for them. Down near the creek, a windmill was howling mournfully from lack of grease. He could kick it out of gear as he rode out. No use wearing out good machinery.

As he started to ride to the pasture gate he saw the raw earth of McLeod's grave heaped in the orchard. He wished Big John could have seen him and the Gliddens on the hill that afternoon. Big John would have got a good laugh out of it.

At the pasture gate he again stopped before he reached down to unhook the wire loop from the post. Hooking that gate behind the cattle was going to be his last act on McLeod's place.

The place looked nice in the afternoon sunshine. Still a haywire place, but if McLeod had had a few more years, it would have been a good small ranch. It was too bad that all McLeod had put into it would go to waste. He bent over and grabbed the wire loop.

And then he straightened again. He wasn't going to do it. Taking the cattle had been like his dream of shutting the gate and riding out if McLeod had lived. Somewhere along the line he had changed, and maybe he hadn't ever really intended to take the cattle....

It was late evening when Washburn's buckboard came up the lane. "I was going to wait until tomorrow," he said. "But Henry Mueller was offering to bet real money you wouldn't be here."

Bob felt surly and short-tempered under Washburn's sharp gaze. "Your cattle are in the pasture," Bob said. "You want me to drive them to the buyer and pay you cash, or just turn them over to you?"

Washburn rolled a cigar between his fingers. "Cattle are down in price, a drug on the market. They wouldn't any more than cover McLeod's debt."

"I guess not," Bob said.

"Why don't you winter them and try again next spring? The money John owed me was a personal loan, not bank business."

Bob looked at him in surprise.

"John never knew the difference," Washburn said. "To him, his word was the same or better than signing a paper."

"You mean you'd do the same for me?"

"Why not? All McLeod had he left to you."

"I guess he did, at that," Bob said. And then he realized that Washburn was talking about the ranch, not about the things that had turned him away from the trip to the mines, and carried him through the fight with the Gliddens. ● END

GOLD BULLETS

by JOE CHADWICK, JR.

OLD MATT WEBB took off the mackinaw and hung it on the peg beside his rifle. The cabin was cold and he reached to a pocket and took out a match. He lit the candle that stood on the table, then before the match could burn out, he touched it to the dried leaves in the fireplace. He watched the flames lick up and attack the kindling.

It had been another wasted day. He'd been grubbing with pan and rocker since the first light of dawn. It had been all in vain and he'd come back to the shack empty-handed as usual.

The day had been like all the rest, except for the visitor he'd had around noon. He'd just sat down to rest and eat the last of his jerky when Sheriff Collins rode up. This was the first man he'd seen in two weeks. The lawman had been looking for a murderer just escaped from jail while being held for trial—Jake Durango, a notorious dry gulcher. Matt Webb had never run into him, but he'd heard plenty about him.

"If he should show up, you keep out of his way," Collins said, talking in the way folks did to kids—or to oldtimers. "He'd kill for no reason at all. He's unarmed and afoot, but still more than a match for most men. If he comes into these hills, you let me know. There's a bounty on him. Two hundred and fifty dollars. It'll be yours if you turn him in."

The sheriff rode off. Matt had laughed to himself. The sheriff had been carrying a rifle and two revolvers. If the convict were unarmed, the sheriff was certainly seeing to it that he had the advantage.

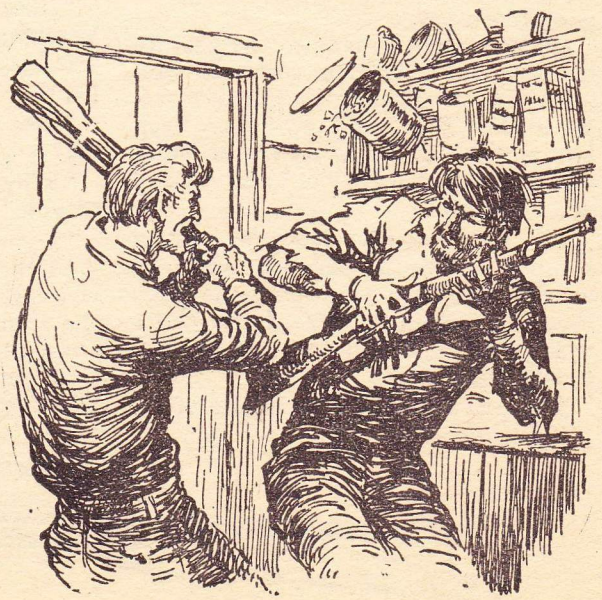
During the afternoon, sweating at his diggings, Matt forgot the incident. The man, if afoot and unarmed, was really loco if he headed for this rough country, he'd told himself. There was very little likelihood of seeing him around here.

Matt went to the shelf where he kept his provisions. There wasn't much there to choose from. His stock of food was getting low. In a few days he would have to make the trip down to the town and try to replenish it somehow—get a grubstake, he hoped.

The prospector put some beans in a pot, added water and hung it over the fire. He made coffee and then saw that the fire was beginning to go out. He poked at it with the toe of his boot. The fire flared up for a brief second, then died down again. It would take more wood.

He went out and around the side of the cabin. It was beginning to grow dark. He loaded his arms with enough logs to last the night and turned around.

The man was dangerous, all right. But he thought old Matt had a good claim...



The wood cracked against Durango's face, stunning him!

A man stood in the clearing in front of the cabin. A dark figure was watching him. Immediately a panicky feeling swept through old Matt.

This was the murderer; the man Collins was after and had warned him about.

"Well, what do you want?" the prospector asked. It was a foolish question, but it was the only thing he could think to say.

"How about staking a hungry man to some grub?"

"Come inside," Matt said. Nothing was to be gained by telling the man he had no grub to spare. Doing that might provoke him. It didn't take much to provoke such a hardcase. Anyway, the killer might stay peaceful and clear out once he was fed.

He entered the shack, went to the fireplace and laid his burden down on the hearth. He set about arranging the logs so the fire would start burning bright again. He heard the man enter behind him and close the door. Don't act suspicious, he told himself, take it easy and don't let on that you know what he is.

MATT STOOD up and turned around to find the man looking at the rifle hanging over the fireplace. There was a chill, speculative gleam in the man's eyes. A week's growth of beard covered the lower part of his face. He looked like he hadn't eaten in that time. It was a tough, gaunt face. The prospector knew that the man wouldn't pull anything until he'd got some grub into him. He looked wolf-hungry.

As he fixed the beans on a plate and poured coffee into his tin cup, Matt tried to think of something to say to the man. He knew he couldn't ask the likely questions—where he came from, or where he was heading, why he was out here afoot. The man would get ideas if he pried.

"Turning cold early this year."

"Yeah."

"Soon time to hole up for the winter."

Durango merely grunted.

Matt pushed the plate and cup across the table, and put a spoon down. The man sat down on the stool, placing himself at the table so that he was between the rifle and Matt Webb. He grabbed up the spoon, wolfing the beans. Every second or two he would throw a speculative glance at old Matt.

"Guess you got a good claim here, eh?" Jake Durango said slyly.

"Ain't found no color yet."

"You miners always talk poor."

"It's the truth. I'll have to try to get me a grubstake to see me through the winter."

"You wouldn't be wasting your time here, old man, if you weren't panning some paydirt."

The prospector stood patiently, not daring to make a move. He wondered what the criminal was thinking, what would be his next move. The man was dangerous, just like Sheriff Collins had said. He should have taken the lawman's warning seriously. He should have loaded the rifle as soon as he had come in and kept it at the ready. Now it hung on the wall, empty, doing him no good.

The killer was scraping the bottom of the plate, the spoon against tin making a loud sound in the silent room. Finally he gulped down the coffee.

"That all you got to offer?"

"That's all the beans. More coffee in the pot."

Durango reached for the pot, refilled the cup with the hot, black liquid. "What's back on that shelf?"

"Want some hardtack?"

"That'll do. Fetch some."

Matt Webb turned and went to the shelf. He reached for the tin can the biscuits were in. He spotted the small leather sack next to the can. His back was to Durango. He reached for the biscuit can with his right hand and, hoping the man wasn't watching, got the sack off the shelf with his left. This was the answer—he must hide the sack so Durango wouldn't find it.

"What you got there?" Durango's voice barked.

Matt Webb spun around. Now it was for keeps. The man knew he was suspected. He'd got the rifle from its place. This one had killed before and there was nothing to stop him from killing again—except the rifle was empty. He held the gun pointed at

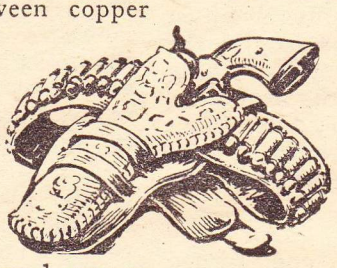
(*please turn to page* 54)

THE QUIET KID

by HOWARD OZMON

IN MANY stories of the West, the main action takes place with a bartender cringing in the corner or hiding behind the counter, while his saloon is being demolished by the battling hero and villain. Sam Gentry would have laughed at these stories. Because Sam Gentry was the toughest galoot this side of the Pecos, and widely known as the fighting bartender of Tucson.

Sam was born in Tucson, and he had lived there all his life without venturing further than a hundred miles in any one direction from it. His father had owned a small ranch, and Sam helped his father with every part of the ranching business. He was big, and like his father he had flaming hair that bordered between copper and gold. Sam had lots of ribbons in the house that he had won at the annual rodeo. Nobody in Tucson could ride as well, or pin a steer as quick as could Sam Gentry. But for all his strength, Sam was a quiet boy who never harmed anyone unless he was provoked.



Sam had never seen his mother, who died right after he was born, and his father died when he was twenty-one. Sam took over the ranch then, and ran it until a drought killed off all the cattle and he had to sell out. He could have gone to work as a foreman for a dozen more prosperous ranches in that vicinity, but Sam got a better offer from Eli Sudney who owned the SILVER STAR, which was the best bar in Tucson. Eli had been a friend of Sam's father, and with the large number of drifters, gold-miners and renegades that were pouring into Tucson, he needed someone like Sam to act as bartender and bouncer.

Sam had never taken more than a couple of drinks in his life, so that being around all the liquor didn't affect him any. He was punctual and he was thorough. When a man had too much to drink, it didn't take more than a glance at Sam's steel-blue eyes to tell he wasn't having any more and that he had better take off for other places. In a week's time, Sam had brought more law and order to the SILVER STAR than there was in the whole of Tucson. The oldtimers knew that Sam meant what he said, but there were always some fiery young newcomers looking for trouble, and when they ran into Sam, they found it.

One such newcomer was a young kid by the name of Jack Durranger. It was rumored that he was wanted in Abeline for murder, and he had worked his way to Tucson, leaving a wake of rustling and theft behind him.

It was evening when Durranger entered the SILVER STAR. His clothes and boots were dusty from traveling, and the holster which housed his six-shooter was hung low and tied down. A wisp of smoke-black hair protruded from underneath a large five-gallon hat, and he had a small scar, which looked as though it had been made with a whip, on his right cheek. When he came up to the bar, Sam was in his apron, wiping glasses. Durranger ordered seven drinks in a row and with a snarl said, "I'll shoot it out with any man in the house."

There wasn't a man who stood more for the Old West ideal of unselfish courage than Sam Gentry.....

Everyone heard him, but no one moved.

"I'll make ya shoot it out, ya lily-bellied cowards," he roared, and he drew his six-gun and shot at a tumbler on one of the far tables. It exploded into a million flashing pieces. But that was the last shot Jack ever got in the SILVER STAR. One huge arm reached over the counter and around his neck, while another shook

(*cont'd on page* 23)

A PLACE OF HIS OWN

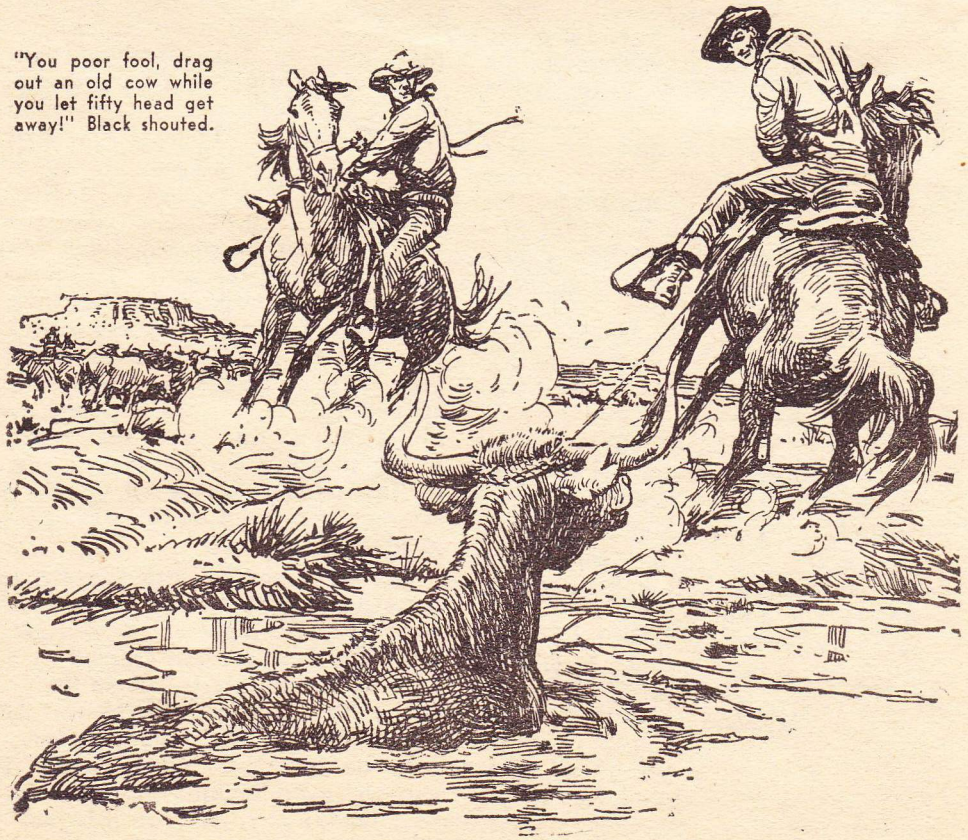
by K. CLAYTON

The cow would die, even if he got her out. And Old Man Lawton would *know* he didn't savvy cattle ranching then...

WALKING over to the horse herd, Jeff Weaver decided it was the weather, rather than the veiled hostility of the Cienega cowboys, that was making him cold and uncomfortable. May, in northern Arizona, can be a chilly month. He hadn't needed Wiggins' nudge, as foreman Tim Black led out the big gray horse. Tim's smile said plainly to Jeff, "Okay, boy. You've asked for it and you'll get it."

Jeff's stolid, brown face didn't change, and his trace of Cherokee blood kept his flat, black eyes unreadable, but he was doing a lot of figuring and getting nowhere. He knew the horse was bad, but he needed that month's work with the Lazy H wagon.

Most important of all, Jeff needed Old Man Lawton's good opinion. He had finally nerved himself to ask Lawton for the Cedar Springs place and all his plans hinged upon his getting it. Black, as the Old Man's foreman, naturally had the say-so where horses were concerned. If he took advantage of it, to pay off a grudge, everybody around Cienega would hold him to be within his rights.



"You poor fool, drag out an old cow while you let fifty head get away!" Black shouted.

There were fifteen punchers with the Cienega wagon, and, outside of Wiggins, whom Jeff knew, and liked, not one of them would waste any sympathy on him. Jeff, lanky and slouching, in his old bib overalls and brogan shoes, looked alien, and out of place. A hay-pitching farmer, tackling a job he knew nothing about.

Tim Black held the stage a moment longer. Then he said, almost charitably, "This old pony may be a little snuffy, Jeff, but he's big and stout—he'll pack you anywhere."

Jeff had no answer ready. He didn't have much to say, anytime, and now he only nodded dumbly. The horse looked harmless enough, in the chilly, morning sunshine, but his humped back and the curve of his arrogant neck spelled trouble. Wiggins held him while Jeff saddled and Jeff was silently grateful for the help. After Black had gone back to the remuda, to rope out mounts for the rest of the men, Wiggins looked at Jeff, and his freckled face showed concern.

"Jeff, I ain't trying to tell you your business, but if I was you, I'd go to the Old Man. He knows you're no bronc stomper. He ain't unreasonable—"

"That's just what I can't do—" Jeff jerked the latigo tight. "Tim's got me between a rock and a hard place." He told Wiggins about his hopes for getting Cedar Springs, and how necessary it was for him to get along with the minimum of friction.

"So you're going to ride him anyway, huh? Jeff, I begin to figure you need a keeper." Wiggins looked disgusted. "That horse is apt to hurt you. He's spoiled, and he'll watch for a chance to come undone—if you give him one, that's what she wrote."

"Well, it's a plain case of 'have to' with me," Jeff said, "but much obliged, anyhow. It'll help, knowing what to watch out for."

Jeff wasn't trying to be a hero. He was merely a farmhand who'd worked hard for wages for most of his thirty-two years. It was because he was sick of being just a farmhand that he'd hit the Old Man for a job. If he could hold down a job with the rest of the men on the spring work, he thought it would incline Lawton to consider letting him have Cedar Springs. This was desperately important, for it meant economic security for Dot, and young Sam, and it meant that Jeff could hold his head up and maybe amount to something.

He remembered the notes coming due. Then, in the fall, young Sam would start to high school and there'd be clothes and stuff to buy. Sam was a good button. Not many thirteen-year-olds you could depend on, to stay home and look after things like a grown man.

EVERYONE had finished saddling by now. Men were getting on their horses. Jeff led the gray horse a few feet, then cautiously stuck his foot in the stirrup. The gray laid back his ears, but did no more than show his big, yellow teeth in a sort of grim humor and Jeff went up on him. He expected an instant explosion but none came. He gave the gray a little slack and the horse moved out, carrying Jeff with springy effortlessness. Jeff had ridden plenty of old farm horses but he had never experienced quite as exhilarating a feeling as this. It was like riding on a tame thunder bolt. The feeling of tremendous, leashed power. Then Tim Black spoiled everything. He gigged his horse into a fast lope, and of course Jeff had to keep up.

The instant he loosened his reins he felt the difference. The horse humped up in mid-air, his head went down, and Jeff, realizing his mistake, jerked back hard on the reins. The gray came up on his hind legs. Higher, and still higher. Jeff looked over his shoulder and saw the ground, where it had no business being, and he instinctively loosened up in the saddle. From then on, he was just as good as bucked off.

The gray soared into the air and came down with a spine-twisting impact. Jeff heard somebody yell "Stay with him!" The earth seemed to gyrate about him, dizzily. Then the gray really hit his best lick and Jeff quit him, colliding with the dirt with a jolt that nearly broke his neck. He saw the gray looming mightily above him, looking, from that perspective, like a fabulous beast from another

planet, steelshod hooves flailing the air. Then somebody's rope tightened, and the horse came down, but not on Jeff.

Jeff limped over to where Tim Black held the gray horse, snubbed to the saddle horn, and doggedly remounted. He choked the saddle horn from then on, but in spite of all precautions, he had been thrown twice more before they reached the Mogollon Rim, where the day's work would start. Jeff looked by then like a man who had been petting a wildcat, and he was plenty mad.

He knew why Black had given him the gray horse, of course. That way, without saying a word, Tim would be telling the Old Man, "See what I mean? Weaver's as useless as teats on a boar hog. He can't cut the buck!" Since Jeff had outbidden the Lazy H foreman on fifteen head of yearlings a few months before, Black had had it in for him, and the foreman was a hasty tempered man who nursed a grudge.

Arriving at the Rim, the Old Man and Black divided the cowboys and Jeff found himself in Tim's bunch. He wondered if Black had asked for him. The men didn't talk much. Black gave his instructions quietly and efficiently, when he dropped off men to work back to the wagon, and even though Jeff was new to the business, he could appreciate the way Black took advantage of the rough country, keeping his men on the ridges, so any cattle they spooked would hit for the draws, to be picked up on the return trip. Black saw, and pointed out, cattle so far distant that Jeff could find them only with difficulty, even after he knew where to look. As they worked on, Jeff found himself being forced into a sort of reluctant admiration for the big foreman. Black had the disposition of a sidewinder, but he knew his job, and could handle men.

FINALLY Wiggins and Jeff were detached, to hold a bunch of cattle in a clearing near the edge of the canyon, to wait until other men brought stuff out from below the Rim, to throw in with them. It was warm, there in the cedars, and the warmth brought out swarms of gnats to buzz around Jeff's face. On the other side of the herd, he could see Wiggins slapping at them also. It seemed to Jeff that he had been fighting gnats for a week when the sound of rolling rocks directed his attention to the mesa above him, and he saw the first of the wild cattle come out of the cedars, in a long, swinging trot. He heard Wiggins yell at him to head the cattle, where the trail forked.

Jeff cautiously let the gray horse have slack, and headed for the trail fork. He had the right idea, but he hadn't known that anything so clumsy as a cow could move with such speed. The cattle came with a rush. They came with a whoosh, and a clatter of spurned gravel, and they beat Jeff to the fork by fifty yards and were long gone. Jeff was still staring after them when Tim Black rode out of the cedars on his lathered sorrel. Black's face was lumpy, and his jaw stuck out. Jeff braced himself for a bawling out, but when the foreman started talking in his ordinary everyday voice, Jeff felt guilty and deflated and he didn't know for sure whether Black was being sarcastic or not.

"Next time, stay on the downhill side of wild cattle, Jeff. Then they can't get around you. You've got to keep your eyes open, around these cattle. And you can make that gray horse move faster, by jerking down your rope and working on him. You'll never do any good by easing him around."

Black's horse showed plainly that the foreman was a man who could take his own advice. The sorrel's sides were heaving, and his wet, dusty hide showed deep spur tracks. Jeff supposed that it was necessary, but he hated to see it. He'd always had a soft spot in his heart for animals and he didn't like to see them abused. Black had the reputation of being a top-notch cowboy, but mighty hard on horses.

Jeff said, "Well, it's my fault, and I guess I'll have to admit it. I'll try not to let it happen again."

"That's all a man could ask. Just keep your eyes open—you'll ketch on to it. Fact is, I wouldn't have said anything about it, only the Old Man seen the whole thing." Tim flirted a

hand at the clearing. Jeff, following the motion, saw Lawton and four men ride up to the herd. The foreman's voice had been warm, and hearty, and Jeff might have been fooled if he hadn't chanced to glance back at that precise moment and seen the barely concealed triumph in the red, beefy face.

Suddenly Jeff remembered something. Tim Black, from his higher position on the side of the mesa, would have seen the approach of Lawton, while Jeff and Wiggins could not. And Jeff knew instantly that Black could have put that bunch into the herd, had he really wanted to. Just how much was chance and how much was design, Jeff couldn't say, but he was convinced that Tim had deliberately maneuvered him into a spot where his ignorance and ineptness would stick out like a sore thumb. He couldn't prove it. Neither could he resent it, without appearing to the Old Man like a sulky kid, smarting under a deserved rebuke.

When the cattle were put in motion, Jeff was assigned a place in the rear of the herd, helping shove along the drags. He rode in dejection. He'd hoped for a chance to talk to the Old Man but none came. Lawton left the herd in Black's charge and rode on, ahead. Probably wouldn't do any good anyway, Jeff thought, after the poor showing he'd made. The cattle bawled, and kicked up a thick, choking dust and the gnats buzzed in maddening circles and the return trip was endlessly long.

THE NEXT morning things looked better. Jeff was sore in every joint and muscle, but the gold-and-azure promise of a new day glowed in the east, above the dark rim of mountains. The appetizing smell of woodsmoke and boiling coffee did much to hearten Jeff. After breakfast, he dropped his tin plate into the out-size dishpan with the feeling that he could face anything.

As on the preceding day, the foreman and the Old Man split up the men into two bunches for the day's circle, but this time Jeff was in Lawton's crew. The Old Man led them at a reckless gallop down into the broken country below the timbered Rim, and Jeff had his hands full dodging tough, spiky brush that seemed determined to drag him bodily from his horse.

He was sure glad he had a gentle horse today, for it was all he could do to stay aboard and keep up as they slid and floundered off of some of the steep bluffs. Men dropped off at designated points, to shove cattle back up on top, and at the end of the second hour luck was good to Jeff.

He found himself alone with the Old Man, waiting at the mouth of Sycamore for cattle to be started up the canyon. It was as good a chance as Jeff would ever have and he took it. Old Man Lawton listened patiently enough, but if he was enthusiastic about Jeff's plan, he hid it mighty well. He peered at Jeff aimiably, but Jeff had the sinking feeling that the Old Man was remembering the sorry showing he'd made on the gray horse, and the cattle he'd let get away.

"Why, I'd have to study about that, Jeff. Fact, I don't know that I want to let it go. We've always used Cedar Springs for a winter camp, you know."

"Yes sir, I know you have. But I've been figuring—I could make us both money down there. I could raise enough alfalfa to feed out a right smart little batch of steers for you, in the fall—"

"What would you do for water?"

"Well sir, I've looked it over—I believe I can run me a flume from the creek that would carry easy enough water for four cuttings of alfalfa, and have enough left over for a good garden. A garden would cut my living expenses anyhow half."

"That's an idea, about the flume; it might work," Lawton admitted. "But you've got a wife, and a boy, Jeff. How'll they take to living in that old tumble-down winter cabin? It's good enough for cowpunchers but it's no place for a woman."

"Dot wouldn't say a word. They'd think it was fine. Besides, I'd fix up the cabin, between times. We'd make out." Jeff wished desperately that he had the words to make the Old Man see just how important it was that he get the place. And it was true, what he'd said about Dot. She had never

complained, although she'd had no more than a hand-to-mouth existence, with plenty of hard work, since she'd married Jeff. He thought of the way her eyes would shine if he just walked in and casually announced that they had a place of their own.

Lawton stirred restively. "Well, I'll think it over, Jeff, and let you know. Don't get too set on it, though, because I think there's one thing you've overlooked. I'd be keeping maybe a couple hundred cattle down there. Be lots of riding to do, branding long-ears, and doctoring and such. I couldn't afford to send a man from the ranch every few days."

"I don't expect you could," Jeff said. "I was scared you'd bring that up. I ain't a cowboy, and naturally you'd doubt that I could handle that part of it. Well, I can. All I ask is a chance to show you. Give me a year, and if I don't show a profit for you, you can always run me off."

THE OLD MAN stood up in his stirrups and stared down the canyon. "Cattle coming yonder," he told Jeff. "Now, I'm going to cut off from you here. Follow these cattle up on top. You'll see a big butte off to your right—that's the Tanks. Take your stuff there and hold them up. We'll throw in with you. Don't lose any, if you can help it. If you do, they'll double back under the Rim again and we'll have another day's work digging them out."

Trailing the bunch out of the canyon, Jeff felt better. At least he'd put his case up to the Old Man. Lawton was a hard trader, but fair, and if he could be convinced that Jeff could handle the cattle part of it, that ought to clinch the deal. The flume and the feeding angle were high cards in Jeff's hand. If Lawton would give him a year's trial, Jeff just knew he could make the grade.

The cattle moved steadily ahead of Jeff, up the canyon. He didn't anticipate any trouble, getting to the Tanks with them, because he knew they'd be getting dry by the time they topped out, and would want to go to the handiest water, and they did, arriving at the water about two o'clock, as near as Jeff could tell from the sun. His bunch was the first in, although there were twenty or thirty head already there, lying around the salt ground.

Jeff knew that all he had to do now was to keep an eye on them, to prevent their leaving. He rode down to the lower end of the tank, to get a drink of water, and that was how he came to find the bogged cow. She was about fifteen feet from the earthen dam, bogged in the gooey, black mud so that only her head and the upper part of her back showed. Jeff thought she had probably been in the bog two or three days. She was too deep for him to see the brand, but her ear-mark was a swallow fork and under bit, with an under-slope in the left. That made her one of Lawton's.

She rolled her eyes at Jeff in mute appeal when he rode up, and he knew that he had to get her out somehow. He couldn't ever stand to see an animal suffer. Any cowboy could have told Jeff that his work would be wasted. The cow would die, even if he got her out, because she'd be too weak to make a living. But even if Jeff had known this, it probably wouldn't have made any difference to him. He looked at his cattle. Most of them were lying down now. It looked to him as though they'd stay around the tank with little or no supervision. Anyway, he could keep his eye on them while he worked on the bogged cow.

Bog-pulling was an unpleasant but necessary part of every cowboy's work, but naturally Jeff hadn't done any. However, he had a rope, and a stout horse. It looked like the only other equipment necessary was a strong back. And a weak mind; and Jeff told himself he sure had that. He waded out toward the cow, rope in hand. There was no bottom to the clinging stuff and he found that he had to move along pretty steadily to keep from getting bogged, himself.

He finally got out to the cow, and looked her over. It was obvious that he couldn't pull her out by the head. Somehow, he'd have to get his rope worked down, alongside her, until he got it under her front quarters. He tried digging with his hands, but the stinking muck oozed back as quickly

as he dug it out. He decided that what he needed was a long, stout stick, to use in shoving the rope under the cow's body, so he worked back to dry land and cut himself one from a cedar. Before he stepped back into the bog, he threw a glance at the resting cattle. The bunch looked smaller, and Jeff had a momentary fright. Still, he couldn't see any straying off, and finally he decided that it was because so many of them were lying down under the trees.

THE STICK idea was a good one. Jeff got his rope worked down alongside the cow at last, then fished around for it until he snagged it on the other side and drew it up where he could get his hands on it. By this time Jeff was so wrapped up in the job of extricating the cow that he forgot to even look at his charges. He waded through the muck, to the bank, paying out the rope behind him. He tied the rope to the saddle horn because he knew nothing about taking dallies, as a cowboy would have done. Then he forced his horse to put weight on the rope.

After a few trials he began to get the knack of it, and, looking back, he was able to see that they were making definite progress, but it was mighty slow work. Jeff lost track of the times his awkward hitch came loose, making it necessary for him to get down and wade back out to the cow, but the time came when she lay, mudcaked and inert, at the edge of the bog. He took off the rope and tried to get her to her feet, but her dead weight was more than he could handle and she was too weak to help herself.

Then Jeff became aware of two things. His cattle were nowhere in sight, and Tim Black was riding over the rise toward the tank. Black rode up in a quick gallop. In silence he looked at Jeff, mud from head to foot. He looked at the prostrate cow, all ribs and horns and white eyeballs. The foreman's face settled into harsh lines and Jeff saw that a showdown was at hand.

"Cattle got away, huh?"

"I saved this one." Excuses were useless so Jeff's tone was as curt as Black's.

Tim Black's face turned a dark, unhealthy red. He got off his horse. "Why, you poor fool! If I had a ten-year-old kid as sorry as you, I'd drowned him—you gopher around in that mud two hours, dragging out an old cow that's going to die anyway—look at her. And while you're doing it, you let fifty, sixty head get away."

A slow, suffocating pressure was building up inside Jeff. He was muddy and tired. He realized now, with a sort of shame, that he had counted on his rescuing the cow to help him out with Lawton. But the cow would die. Black's words, and his disgusted look, showed Jeff that he had merely been an incompetent fool, as the foreman had said. Then almost as though she knew the trouble Jeff was in, and wanted to help him, the old cow put forth a mighty effort, and, at the second try, stood, weak and shaky, but undeniably on her own four legs. Suddenly Jeff felt better. He grinned at the burly foreman.

"Maybe they ain't gone far. Why don't you and me go after them, instead of chewing the rag this way?"

It was as though Jeff's words had released a spring in the other man. Black flung his reins down.

"Weaver—you're fired."

Jeff said, "Lawton hired me."

"And I'm firing you. As of right now. Can you get that through your thick head, or will I have to work you over first?"

A SMALL voice inside Jeff counseled caution, but for once Jeff disregarded it. For once he was going to have the luxury of standing up, looking a boss in the eye and telling him how the hog ate the cabbage. He had nothing to lose now.

"Black, I ain't a man that likes to fight. I've tried to get along with you, and you've took every chance to make me look bad with Lawton. If you're thinking of working me over, don't let anything stand in your way—personally, I don't think you've got the tools."

Then Black ran at Jeff, head down, and the air was full of hard fists. Most of them found a mark, for Jeff had no science. He fought by instinct, lashing out with his big-knuckled fists, and

occasionally he slammed a clumsy punch that smashed through the foreman's guard, and when they hit, they hurt. The two men grunted and slugged, and Black swore, in a hoarse, panting monotone, Then, without feeling anything, or knowing how it happened, Jeff was down. He saw the foreman's boot coming, and knew that Black meant to stomp him. He rolled, and grabbed the foot and twisted, and now both struggling fighters were on the ground. Jeff was the first to scramble to his feet. He reached down long arms and grabbed Tim Black like he would a heavy bale of hay, and, grunting with the effort, heaved the foreman out into the bog.

Jeff, breathing hard, watched warily while Black floundered his way to shore, but he needn't have worried. The fight was out of Tim. He glared at Jeff and got on his horse and rode out to turn the cattle now coming down to the tank in front of Lawton and his men. Jeff was waiting when the Old Man rode up.

"You might as well get the bad news," he told the Old Man, recklessly, "I found that cow bogged down, and while I was getting her out, I lost the others. Black didn't like it, and we had a fuss."

The Old Man studied Jeff as though he were seeing him for the first time. He saw the muck on Jeff, and the slimy rope. He looked thoughtfully after the dripping figure of the foreman, and he looked, finally, at the muddy old cow.

"You whip Black?"

"I don't guess so," Jeff admitted, "It wasn't much of a fight, nohow. More of a draw—we tore up the ground some, and Black knocked me down. I throwed him in the tank. He fired me."

The Old Man looked sternly at Jeff, but, incredibly, it seemed to Jeff that there was a twinkle in the frosty eyes beneath the bushy white brows. But when Lawton spoke, his voice was dry and business-like.

"I pay Tim a salary to run my outfit, and he's a good foreman. If he says you're fired, then you're fired." The Old Man's gaze returned as if fascinated to the ribby old cow. "I'm not saying you did the wisest thing, understand, but I reckon a man who'd go to that much work and trouble to try to save a wore-out old cow might be worth money to me, down at the Springs."

"I'll make a dicker with you. You've got your year. But don't go throwing my foreman in any more bog holes, hear?"

"No sir, I won't." Jeff promised, but he hadn't really heard anything except the wonderful words "make a dicker," and his head was already whirling with glittering new plans...

●END

THE QUIET KID

(*cont'd from page* 16)

the gun out of his hand in one twist. A moment later, the trouble-maker found himself supported embarassingly above Sam's head, as the bartender headed swiftly for the door. Jack Durranger was thrown some forty feet, where he landed in a heap in the middle of the dusty road. Sam never saw any more of Jack Durranger.

But a far more serious and dangerous menace presented itself sometime afterwards, when a group of four had been interrupted in their attempt to raid the Tucson City Bank. They couldn't get back to their horses, so they barricaded themselves in the SILVER STAR and began to shoot it out. They kept a gun on Sam, so he got himself a bottle and sat down, apparently to have a few drinks while he waited. He waited only until the gunman guarding him turned his head suddenly toward the door, then he threw the bottle with all his might, and it crashed against the gunman's head, knocking him sprawling. Sam was at him like a flash. He scooped up his gun and began shooting it out with the three other gunmen inside. The fight lasted almost an hour, and when the shooting stopped, they found Sam bleeding from three gun wounds but alive, and the three gunmen dead. The one Sam popped with the bottle, they locked in the city jail.

So the next time you read a Western story and the bartender is portrayed as a weak, cowardly creature, just remember that they weren't all that way. No man stood more for the Old West ideal of unselfish courage than bartender Sam Gentry. ●END

THE GIRL IN THE JAIL

by JOHNSTON McCULLEY

A red kitchen apron on the clothesline meant the sheriff had come. A blue tablecloth meant that Bess would do what she'd promised...

SHE HAD been expecting the posse. Now, looking through the dirt-streaked window of the sprawling, dilapidated ranch house, Bess Treddy saw the riders. They had come along the brow of the hill, screened half the time by thick brush and heaps of rocks.

She saw them stop and bunch for a conference. Even at that distance, she recognized Sheriff Sam Lucas, a giant of a man whose badge of office, touched by the morning sun, blazed on the left side of his shirt.

Bess spotted half a dozen others in the group. Clyde Roskin was one. She had expected to see him, or his brother Steve, or both of them. She was eager to face both or either of the Roskin brothers, search for the truth

Gunfire blasted the small confines of the cellroom.

in their countenances, see if they could meet her direct gaze without flinching.

Bess blamed them for her Uncle Mart being a declared outlaw on the run, every man's hand lifted against him. She blamed them for the fact that Frank Hepler, the man she'd loved and planned to marry, had been buried two days before, with two bullets still in his breast.

The riders on the brow of the hill moved, stretching out like a line of skirmishing cavalry. Sheriff Sam Lucas remained at the head of the trail which led down the slope to the cluster of ranch buildings. Those of the posse on either side of him began an advance. She knew they intended to surround the ranch buildings at a considerable distance, then gradually move forward and tighten the net.

But they would not find her uncle, Mart Treddy. They would find her alone, ready to face them and play the part she had decided to play. They would find a woman of twenty-four, half frozen by shock and sorrow, and at the same time half burning with rage and a thirst for vengeance, but revealing none of the latter in her face or manner.

When the riders on either side of Sheriff Sam Lucas had begun their enveloping movement, he started straight down the trail at an easy lope. Bess realized that the sheriff was giving his men time to get into position.

She went into the kitchen then and picked up the basket of wet wash and the bag of clothespins. She opened the door and carried the basket out, going to the clothesline at the side of the house, and began hanging wash on the line.

A red kitchen apron—that meant the sheriff. The number of sheets, pillowcases, or towels would indicate the number of possemen. A blue tablecloth was to mean "They have come, and I'll do as I promised."

Bess worked slowly, wiping her brow with the back of her hand at times, and looking frequently up at the hills. Her uncle might be watching from somewhere up there. Or he could be following a trail that ran over the hills toward a distant town—if he had found the trail.

THE SHERIFF finally loped his sorrel through the gap where a gate once had been, and Bess looked up as if surprised to find a visitor approaching. She noticed that the sheriff rested his right hand on his holster, and kept glancing at the house.

The possemen had reached their positions, and were commencing to close in and form their cordon. They moved slowly toward the barn, the extra stable, storage shed and the house itself, acting like men who expected to face a murderous gunfire at any instant.

The sheriff stopped his horse a few feet from her. "Good mornin', Bess," he greeted.

"Morning, Sheriff." Her voice was lifeless, little more than a murmur.

"I s'pose you know why I'm here with my men, Bess. We're lookin' for your Uncle Mart."

"Uncle Mart isn't here."

"When did you see him last, Bess?"

"Three days ago, about this time of day. He saddle up and rode off."

"Did he say where he was goin'?"

"He said he was going trailing." She stood erect, her fists against her hips, her sunbonnet hanging by the strings down her back, the stiff morning breeze whipping her worn calico dress around her legs.

"Who'd he be trailin'?" the sheriff asked her. "I s'pose you mean he was hittin' the trail away from this part of the country. Is that it? Because he shot and killed Frank Hepler."

"My uncle didn't kill Frank." Suppressed vehemence was in her voice. "He's trailing the man who did."

"Which direction did he travel?"

"I know where he meant to go and what he meant to do. But I'm not telling."

The sheriff glanced around, to see his men approaching the rambling outbuildings cautiously.

"Bess, if your uncle didn't kill Frank Hepler, why did he run away?"

"Because he knew if he didn't, men would lie him to the hanging gallows," she replied. "He went trailing to get evidence and catch the killer,

and fetch him back to jail alive, if he could."

"Evidence? We've got plenty of that, Bess. Frank Hepler and you were fixin' to get married. Your Uncle Mart didn't want that. He had a quarrel with Hepler in town the day before the killin'. Plenty of men heard it. He told Hepler 'Keep away from my niece, or I'll kill you!' "

"I heard tell about that," Bess confessed.

"The next day, Frank Hepler was found beside the trail, dead from a couple of gun slugs. Your uncle's gun was found not far from the body. Treddy dropped it in his haste to get away, I s'pose."

"One of my uncle's guns," Bess corrected. "His old .45. First good gun he ever owned. That's why he kept it, even if it was old and always getting out of order. The other day, he gave it to a man to fix."

"What man?" the sheriff snapped at her.

"I'm not saying. The man would only deny it. Uncle Mart will 'tend to it all. He'll get the evidence. Uncle Mart knows what happened, and so do I. But it's got to be proved, or Uncle Mart will be lied to the hanging gallows."

THE SHERIFF glanced at his men. They signalled they had searched the outbuildings without success. The sheriff motioned for them to join him, and they spurred forward.

"If you've got some real evidence, it's illegal for you to hold it back from the Law," the sheriff told Bess. "It's also a serious offense to harbor a fugitive. Tell me what you know, and I'll investigate."

She looked around at the six possemen. She knew them all; and Clyde Roskin was one. She stared at him as she replied to the sheriff:

"I'll tell you this much—I was in love with Frank Hepler, and he with me, and we planned to be married come September. There was another man—he didn't love me, but wanted me. I was afraid that might cause trouble, afraid for Frank—"

"What about your Uncle Mart?" the sheriff broke in.

"He didn't mind about me and Frank getting married."

"How can you expect us to believe that, Bess? If he was approvin' the match, why did he quarrel with Hepler and order him to keep away from you?"

"The quarrel was for another reason."

"Bess, we're goin' to search the house from cellar to garret. If your uncle is in it, he'll either surrender or there'll be some shootin'."

"You can search if that's your mind. I'm not stopping you." She bent to the basket and got another damp garment to pin on the clothesline.

The sheriff's face showed anger. He gestured to his men, and they dismounted and trailed their reins, got guns from their holsters and went toward the house.

Bess watched them. Clyde Roskin was the last to dismount, and he loitered behind the others.

"I'm right surprised, Clyde, that your brother Steve isn't riding with the posse, too," Bess said.

"Somebody had to do the work at our place. Steve said he'd 'tend to things while I went with the sheriff. You can blame yourself for this fuss, Bess. Frank Hepler wasn't any good. Just a drifter. Been around here four months doin' nothin'. I wouldn't blame your uncle for killin' him."

"Uncle Mart didn't kill Frank. He told me he didn't, and I believe him." She picked another garment out of the basket and turned to the clothesline again.

FIFTEEN minutes later, the sheriff and his men came out of the house. Lucas marched ahead of the others as they returned to the horses. He was still angry when he stopped beside Bess.

"We didn't find him," he reported. "You know where he went, and you've got to tell me. The talk you made 'bout evidence, and trailin', and some other man bein' mixed up in this thing —I want you to tell me all about it, and right now!"

"Uncle Mart is my kin," she replied. "I'm his brother's daughter. He gave me a home when my parents got killed in a runaway five years ago. I'm stick-

ing to my kin. So, I'm not telling you anything."

"Why not, if it'll clear your uncle from a murder charge?"

"If I told, maybe I'd be found shot dead, too. It wouldn't be safe for me to tell."

Clyde Roskin declared, "The girl's makin' a fool of you, Sheriff. Talkin' a lot of guff and keepin' us here while her murderin' uncle keeps on ridin'."

Sheriff Lucas turned to Bess again. "You're hidin' guilty knowledge from the Law. That's a criminal offense. Talk, and right now, or I'll take you to jail and hold you as an accessory to murder."

"All right," she said, quietly. "Give me time to take these clothes off the line and change to a better dress."

"I'm meanin' it!" Lucas warned. "Your uncle has been right mysterious since he came here three years ago and bought this tumbledown poverty outfit. Runnin' a few spindlin' cows, buildin's fallin' in, fences wrecked! How does he make a livin'? Always has money for grub and stuff. Folks have been suspicious of him. And you ain't makin' them have warm feelin's towards you by actin' like this."

"I'll have to lock the house, and leave feed for the chickens," Bess said. "I'll turn out the work team, and ride my pony in with you, and you can stable him in town. The other stock will be all right."

"So it's nothin' for you to be locked in a jail cell? Maybe you've been locked up before now," the sheriff raged. "Maybe you know more about your uncle's activities than you've been lettin' on. He's made several mysterious trips to the countyseat, it's known. But who he may meet and what he may do on the way there and back is somethin' we don't know."

"Uncle Mart hasn't done any wrong," she declared.

"So you'd rather be locked up than tell me all you know?"

"Yes. It's not safe for me to be here at the ranch alone. But I'll make a deal with you, Sheriff Lucas. If Uncle Mart doesn't show up with the evidence you need by tomorrow evening, I'll tell you all I know."...

CLYDE ROSKIN and another man rode ahead into the town to spread the news of Bess Treddy's arrest. The other four possemen went with the sheriff and Bess. She rode on the sheriff's left, looking straight ahead, refusing to make conversation.

Bess knew well that her uncle had been secretive about his personal affairs, and this incensed the prying gossips. When she loped into the end of the street with the others now, Bess knew she would face an ordeal. She saw most of the townspeople grouped in front of the few business establishments. The women waited to see how she acted while riding to the jail. Children pointed her out to each other. She overheard remarks: "...kin to a murderer...won't tell where he's hidin'...always did think there was somethin' wrong with them Treddys..."

The cavalcade stopped in front of the little stone jail, and the townspeople strolled toward it. Bess got out of her saddle and tied her pony to the hitch rail, where the sheriff was tethering his own mount; and the possemen remained in their saddles. Bess supposed that as soon as she was safely jailed they would gallop up to the saloon. She would be the topic of conversation there.

"You'll take good care of my pony?" she asked the sheriff.

"I'll do that. Come on."

He unlocked the front door of the jail and led her into a small, dusty, sparsely-furnished office room. He took her on into the rear room, which held two cells, each containing a cot, a chair and a slop jar.

"I hate to do this, Bess, but you're forcin' me," Lucas told her. "I never put a woman in jail before."

"It's your duty, I suppose."

"I'll bring your meals on a tray. My wife will cook 'em. You want anything special?"

"No." She sat on the rickety chair and removed her sunbonnet and brushed back her hair with her hands.

Metal clanged as the sheriff closed the door and turned the big key in the lock.

"You didn't search me," she reminded him. "Maybe I've got a gun, or

some dynamite to blow up your jail with, or a saw to cut my way out."

"I don't aim to search any woman. I judge you ain't dangerous, only stubborn and silly." The sheriff hurried into the office and closed the door between it and the cell room.

Bess could hear the voices of men and women in front of the jail. Some children came to the rear of the building and began throwing stones against it.

"Woman jailbird!" one yelled. The others took up the cry and chanted it with childish cruelty.

THE CHILDREN went away finally. It was past midday now, and the blazing rays of the sun came through the window and made the cell an oven. Bess sweltered, moved around some and fanned herself with her sunbonnet, but always returned to either the chair and cot to sit again, and think.

Before her uncle had hit his saddle to ride, he had made a plan with Bess. She went over the plan again in her mind now. Everything had gone right so far. But the plan might fail, and that was her great fear. Failure of the plan would mean more to her than any peril in which she might find herself.

The sheriff returned with a tray of food, and put a small table into the cell and placed the tray on it. Bess drank some coffee first.

"Remember your promise to me... if your uncle doesn't show up by tomorrow evenin', you'll tell me what you know," Lucas reminded her.

"That talk was only for the others to hear."

His face blazed. "Are you tryin' tricks on me? 'Only for the others to hear'...what'd you mean by that?"

"I wanted your men to spread around that I'd promised to tell something if Uncle Mart didn't show up. If a certain man heard of it, he might try to kill me between now and tomorrow evening so I couldn't tell. Then you'd learn who killed Frank Hepler."

The sheriff's jaw sagged in an expression of astonishment, and his eyes became mere slits between the lids. "Bess, are you tryin' to tell me you're makin' a sort of decoy of yourself? You're willin' to risk your life to bring a killer out into the open?"

"I'm willing to risk it for Uncle Mart. He's my kin, my only living kin."

"Tell me now, Bess, whatever it is you know or think you know. If your uncle didn't kill Hepler, I want to get the man who did."

She looked straight at him. "I wish I knew whether I can trust you. They're some things Uncle Mart wouldn't want to get out."

"As long as you make straight talk, you can trust me to the limit," he assured her. "It's my sworn duty to get the man who killed Hepler, whoever he is. While I'm wearin' this badge, I walk a straight line, no matter if I step on folks' toes. And I don't side anybody for any reason."

"Let me think about it," she suggested. "When you bring my supper this evening I'll have my mind made up, one way or the other. Maybe it's right I should tell you without waiting for tomorrow night. In case anything bad happened to me, you'd know what to do."

SHERIFF LUCAS left the cell, locked it and went on to the office in front. Bess ate the food he had brought, ate slowly, her face almost expressionless. Later, as the sun began sinking, she stood at the window and looked out at the hills streaked with the sunset's hues, at the dark lines she knew were canyons.

Her Uncle Mart could be out there somewhere, a hunted animal, legal quarry for any hunter. Perhaps even now a hunter was trailing him. Perhaps he was stalking the man who thought he was the hunter.

She thought of Frank Hepler, the man she had loved. She had hoped to be his wife. That was over now. She never would belong to any other man, she promised herself. He was the only man who had ever offered her genuine love and a wedding ring.

She wondered whether she and her Uncle Mart had guessed the truth about Frank's murder. Perhaps before the night was over she would know, as would the sheriff, and everyone else.

The sun disappeared. The purple dusk came. Over the hills peered a

new moon that brought a modicum of misty bluish light to the earth. Bess could hear the voices of men, and guessed the town's saloon was crowded with those talking about her, and that the tongues of the women in the small town's few habitations were busy with her name and that of her Uncle Mart.

She heard someone in the office. The door opened, and the sheriff came in, carrying a lantern which he fixed in a bracket outside the cell door. He went back to the office without speaking to her, and brought a tray bearing her supper.

"Eat first, then we'll talk," he said. He took away the old tray, not troubling to lock the cell door.

Bess ate, then sat on the side of the cot and waited. Sheriff Lucas was back within a reasonable time. He sat on the chair in the cell, opposite her.

"Now," he said.

"There seems to be a crowd up at the saloon," she remarked. "Is Clyde Roskin there?"

"He was a short time ago when I went to the store. Why?"

"Was his younger brother, Steve, there?"

"Don't remember seein' him. Since Clyde was with the posse, Steve was prob'ly out at their ranch 'tendin' to the chores. Why?"

She evaded his question. Instead, she asked, "Have you a couple of deputies you can trust?"

"I've sworn in a couple of men I can trust. They're town men, not range men. They don't take sides."

"Go out and get them," Bess said. "Have one hang around in front of the jail, and the other at the back, while we talk. I don't want to be overheard. I don't want anybody to think I've told you already. I want them to think they'll have to kill me sometime tonight, to stop my mouth."

"I'll do it, Bess. I'll take away the tray and pretend to lock the jail, then slip back when there's nobody lookin'. Maybe I'd better put out that lantern."

"That might make them suspicious," she pointed out. "Only a little light comes into this cell. I'll keep in the dark by the wall. If anyone tries to shoot me, they won't do it until late tonight, after most of the men in the saloon have gone home."

THE SHERIFF left, and she sat in the dark corner listening to sounds, scarcely moving. In time, the sheriff came in again.

"My men are watchin'," he reported. "Nobody can slip up and overhear us while we talk. You can begin now."

"I'll tell about Frank first," she said.

Her voice was low, almost a monotone, as she made her recital.

Frank Hepler had ridden up to the ranch house one afternoon about four months before. He wasn't an independent cattle buyer, as he told folks in town, loafing between seasons and looking over new territory. That was just his blind. He was a prospector looking for gold.

"More than that, Sheriff Lucas, he was an educated man, not just an ordinary pick and pan prospector. He knew all about rocks and minerals. Called himself a gee...something or other."

"Geologist?"

"That's it. And a—a mineralogist, too. I remember that word. He had been looking for a lode. And he had found it, on our ranch."

"What?" The sheriff sat up straight.

"That's one thing you mustn't tell. Uncle Mart won't want it known yet."

She explained how Frank Hepler had told her uncle, and how they had made a deal. They were to keep it quiet until everything was ready. Hepler had plenty of money, and it was his money her uncle used to buy supplies in town.

Those trips her uncle had made to the countyseat...they were for the purpose of making sure his title to the ranch was perfect, and that the mineral rights on the land were secure. And he took samples of ore Frank Hepler got on the hill behind the ranch buildings, and had them assayed. Everything had been going well.

Before Hepler had come to the district, Steve Roskin had been pestering her, she explained. He made excuses to come to the ranch when her uncle was away from the house. After

Hepler came, and Bess and he fell in love, Steve Roskin developed a hatred for Hepler, belittling him to her and her uncle. Then there came a day when Bess told Steve Roskin to stop bothering her. She wanted none of him, she said. She was going to marry Frank Hepler.

"That gun you found, Uncle Mart's .45," she explained to Lucas, "was broken again...something about a spring. Steve Roskin said he would fix it, and Uncle Mart gave it to him. He fixed it...and killed Frank Hepler with it. Don't you understand, Sheriff Lucas? With Frank dead, and Uncle Mart blamed for his murder because of that quarrel here in town, I'd be alone in the world, with no protection from menfolks..."

"Tell me about that quarrel 'tween your uncle and Hepler," the sheriff interrupted. "That needs some explainin'. It makes it look bad for your Uncle Mart. Him warnin' Hepler to keep away from you and all."

It had nothing to do with her uncle not favoring her marriage with Hepler, she explained. He had favored it all along, had seemed glad she had found a man who loved her and would marry her and make her a home.

THE QUARREL was about the gold strike. Hepler had explained to her uncle that they should make a deal with a big syndicate, and wanted to write for experts to come and examine the property. The gold was there, but a fortune would be needed to mine it properly. Only a syndicate could supply machinery, mining engineers.

Her uncle hadn't understood. He thought it would be better to retain complete ownership and control. Hepler had tried to explain how they might be duped, how a hundred things would delay their progress.

So they had quarreled about it, Bess said. She admitted that her uncle had a bad temper. And he had told her about the quarrel, was ashamed of it, said he would apologize to Frank. But in the heat of the quarrel he had accused Frank of trying to make a deal with the syndicate to cheat him.

"And so, when they quarreled, he just said for Hepler to keep away from you...is that it?" the sheriff asked.

"He scarcely knew what he said, I guess. That's the way he was when he got mad."

The sheriff rose and went to the window and looked out while he thought it over. Bess remained sitting on the cot. Finally, Lucas turned back to her.

"Does Steve Roskin know about the gold?"

"I don't know, Sheriff Lucas. Uncle Mart thought he was followed and watched on a couple of his trips to the countyseat, but wasn't sure. I don't even know what made him think it. If Steve does know, maybe he figured he could marry me and get his hands on the gold, too, me being my uncle's only heir."

"So you think Steve Roskin might try to kill you then tonight to stop your mouth?"

"That's the way I figure, Sheriff Lucas. If he makes the try, you'll know."

"Wouldn't put it past Steve, to tell you the truth," the sheriff grunted. "And if Steve did it, I'm bettin' his brother Clyde knows all about it too."

"He probably does. They're thick," Bess said.

The lawman searched her eyes. "And you still want to take the risk?"

"That's why I'm here."

"All right then, Bess. I'm hopin' it works out 'thout you bein' hurt. I'll leave now, pretendin' I'm goin' for the night. I'll have the two men I trust stationed near. I'll be watchin' outside myself.

"You keep in a safe corner, Bess. If he slips up to that barred window and starts shootin', we'll get him. Roll up that blanket on the cot and make it look like you're sleepin' there. The light from the lantern will be faint, 'cause I'll turn it low."

SHE WATCHED the sheriff leave the cell and lock the door. She heard him whistling in the little office, then call out to somebody on the street, and heard his whistle dwindle as he evidently walked across the street and started for his home.

The window had a network of steel bars over it, but was open from the

bottom. Bess stood beside it and looked out for a moment, then rolled the blanket as the sheriff has suggested. She put the chair in a dark corner, out of a line of fire, and sat down.

Minutes seemed long hours as she waited. She heard the pounding hoofs as ranch men left the saloon to hit the trail for their homes. There was no more loud talk and raucous laughter. A breeze swept down from the hills and rustled the dry brush and litter behind the jail. Some dog bayed at the moon.

She was a little afraid, and her fear made her doubly alert. So, after a long time, after she had commenced thinking she and her uncle had guessed wrong, that Steve Roskin was not guilty, or, if guilty, was too wise to walk into a trap, she heard a slight sound that attracted her swift attention.

The sound came from the little office in front. She heard footsteps. She wondered if the sheriff was slipping in again with news of some happening. She got up from the chair and crouched in a dark corner of the cell as far as possible from the cot and the roll of blanket upon it.

She heard the slight creaking of the office door, soft furtive steps approaching the cell. The faint light from the lantern with its wick turned down cast a sudden shadow. She did not speak. If it was the sheriff outside the cell, he would speak to her first.

Then she heard a yell outside:

"He went in the front door...I saw him! Must have had a key! Watch the back! We'll go in the front!"

A sudden rush of feet outside the cell. A voice that snarled words:

"They may get me, Bess, but I'll get you first! Like I got your sweetheart..."

Gunfire blasted the small confines of the little cell room. Bullets screamed and ricochetted from the walls, from the cell bars. Streaks of amber flame dimmed the light of the lantern, and pungent smoke filled the room.

A wild cry, a gasp, the sound of a body falling. Then a man was shouting at the window, and other men were rushing in from the office.

Steve Roskin was sprawled on the floor of the cell room, his gun beside him. The sheriff and one of his deputies bent over him, turned him over, heard his faint mutterings.

"What in blazes happened?" Lucas said. "We didn't get here in time to use our guns. Did he shoot himself?"

Bess answered calmly as she went to the cell door. "I shot him while he was shooting at the cot. It's a good thing you didn't search me when you put me into your jail, Sheriff. I had one of Uncle Mart's guns hidden under my dress. Got it when I changed clothes at the ranch before riding to town. Did you hear what Steve Roskin said? 'I'll get you...like I got your sweetheart!'"

"We heard it," Lucas told her. "We'll get you out of there, Bess, and I'll take you home for my wife to care for. Then we'll ride out and pick up Clyde Roskin. He'll have a little explainin' to do himself, as to his part in these shenanigans."

"Gosh all hemlock," one of the deputies said, "wait'll the town hears about this."

"Then it's safe for Uncle Mart to come home now?"

"That's right."

"I want to ride home at daylight, then. I'll signal him it's all over. He'll be watching for my signal...a white-and-red checked tablecloth stretched on the clothesline."

Bess Treddy picked up her sunbonnet from the floor, and stood waiting for the sheriff to unlock the door of the cell. ●END

WAY OF DYING

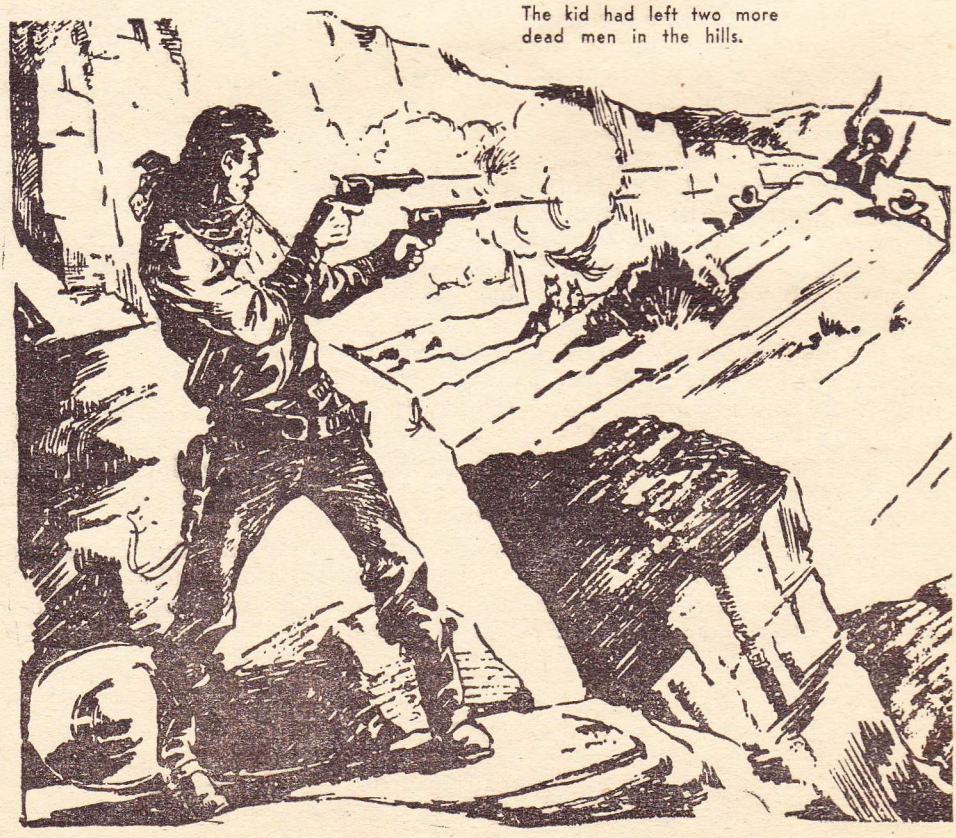
by MARK LISH

He came helling finally as they'd expected, a Colt in each hand spitting fire and lead and death. Such a one could never have had a soft spot in his heart....

HEY! YOU fellers out there!" Nobody answered, though the hail brought sharper alertness to eleven men scattered in rough circle all round the sloping knoll on which the old cabin stood. It checked too the desultory conversation of five grouped more closely than most here on the door side, at the base of a sheltering four-foot cutbank.

Four of these were casualties, three slight—a creased shoulder and a grazed hipbone and a chipped elbow—and Sheriff Taney with his bone-shattered instep on which it seemed unlikely he ever would walk again. The Sheepfaced Kid was in that thick-logged fortress yonder, and what the Kid saw, he shot at; and what he shot at, he hit.

It had been stalemate all the hot weary day. If the posse was pinned down, dared not show so much as a boot toe outside the meager shelters they had found along the knoll's skirts, neither had the Sheepfaced Kid any hope of breaking through the ring they made. So they'd waited in the sweltering heat, waited now, the long-pull advantage theirs, having access to



The kid had left two more dead men in the hills.

a cool spring while the Kid had no water and, to their sure knowledge, had not had for at least 24 hours.

"Well, we was lucky we jumped him off Apache Tanks 'fore he could fill his canteens anyway," the sheriff grumbled, calm-willed despite the pain of small bones splintered into flesh. "He must be dry to the bone by now—can't last much longer."

"Nor his horse, inside that bakeoven with him," Jess Hardy murmured, sympathy in his tone. For the horse. Nobody wasted sympathy on the Sheepfaced Kid, thief and many times murderer, his back trail black with things done that could make decent men go pale at hearing.

"Horse must be in bad shape too," the sheriff agreed. "Good thing fer us, maybe—come dark when the Kid makes his break."

"Dunno which'd be worst," sighed a posseman, he of the grazed hipbone. "The Kid thunderin' out of there a-horseback with a six-shooter in each hand, or the Kid comin' afoot like a ghost in the dark. Me, wisht I was home under the bed."

The words came through a wry grin like ten others, would not have traded his place here for any other spot across the wide world—for all their sure knowledge that more than one of eleven would stop a bullet of the Kid's before he was finally downed.

To be in on the stomping-out of the Sheepfaced Kid! That would be something to remember, with a quiet pride, all of a man's life; a thing to become part of each family history, passed down through the generations. Besides, it meant that a man might leave his wife and family safely home while he went to roundup.

It came again, the Kid's shout. "You fellers out there! Will you *lissen* a minnit?"

A TOUCH of desperation in the rasping tones, Jess Hardy thought. Could it be the Kid was cracking a little? Showing yellow now he was cornered? Jess doubted that. The Sheepfaced Kid's courage, if his only redeeming trait, was legendary. Times before the Kid had maneuvered himself out of situations seemingly as that told of their falsity. Joe Carlin, hopeless as this; had shot his way through tighter rings of men. No, the Kid wasn't cracking. A trick, maybe—

"Lissen. *I* kin stand it. Ain't seen yet what *I* can't stand! But my horse—he ain't had water since yestiday at Apache Tanks, and then only a few swallers. If I turn him out the door, will you let him git to the spring? And one of you kind of regulate his drinkin'? I promise not to shoot, if the feller gits in sight doin' that."

Surprise rippled all around the knoll. The Sheepfaced Kid, cornered and worrying about his *horse!* That was a good one! That would be one to tell around the bunkhouses, the saloons. To regale their grandchildren with many years from now.... A ruse, though, of course. One of the Kid's half-magic tricks that nobody ever saw through till it had worked, and the Kid thumbed his nose from safety.

"*Look.*" Something like appeal was in the voice now, a wheedling; utterly foreign to the Kid's defiant surly nature as these men knew it. "Ain't asking nothing fer myself—won't ask, neither. If you kin git me, you're welcome—them as'll be left of you. But it can't hurt you none to let my horse drink—lockjaw's a tough way to die—"

These men knew lockjaw, and how it struck a horse too long deprived of water. Jess had seen it; so had most of the posse. A pitiful thing, and not much you could do once jaws were tightlocked.

Jess got suddenly to his feet, his torso above the low bank back of the spring, in plain view from the cabin. Men cried at him in urgent horror. "Get *down,* you fool! You know what the kid's say-so is worth!" Others held their breath, weapons tensely ready. But no bullet came from the cabin's chinks.

"Send him out, Kid," Jess called levelly. "I'll look after him."

Heads, gun muzzles lifted recklessly. If the Kid was on that horse or behind it, coming out—

But the horse came alone, reins wrapped to the horn, walking fast, then trotting straight downslope toward the smell of water, stumbling a little, uncertain on its feet. Jess Hardy caught the bridle, was hauled

along to the spring; pulled the reluctant head away after a few great thirsty gulps. Men who twisted to look, incredulously, at the open target his tall figure made, twisted quickly back again, almost to a man at the same instant; making sure *this* wasn't the Kid's trick, to draw their attention momentarily from himself.

"I will be damned," one man solemnly declared to the next along the knoll's skirt. "The Sheepfaced Kid settin' himself afoot for fear his mount might lockjaw! Funny things in this old world, hunh?"

"Yeh—funny things!" the second agreed, never taking his gaze from a certain chink in the cabin's wall, seen through the dense leaves of a sagebush. "And Jess Hardy, riskin' his hide on the Kid's say-so. Horse-lover, Jess; but that's carryin' it a little far. And here's another funny one for your catalog: Jess a horse-lover, when his dad was a plumb brute with 'em."

"Reg'lar Balaam, Old Jeb was," another voice joined in from the next shelter, relieving tension with this small talk. "I've knowed Jeb to carry a stay chain fer a quirt. Never seen him on a horse, or drivin' one in harness, that wasn't afraid of him."

"THERE'S a story he knocked the eye outen a horse fer this same Sheepfaced Kid, one time. 'Fore the Kid went bad."

"Yeh. I was there, that day. Half accident—the horse got into a grain sack, and old Jeb throwed a stick end over end."

"And wasn't a month till the Kid killed Jeb in the hills, and robbed him—and from there, went plumb bad," the other summed up. "Spite, I reckon—mebby the Kid does have one decent soft spot. Fer a horse. Not fer a human, though. That girl at the old Jarvis ranch—"

Jess Hardy was remembering that old story, too, while he picketed the horse near their own, its worst thirst quenched. It had been Jess who found his father's wagon that day almost two years ago, the team gone and a one-eyed horse grazing nearby, Jeb Hardy's body a stiff angle over the dashboard. Jess had trailed the Kid, spreading the word when he passed a wood camp; a hastily formed posse helped chase the Kid into the hills, corner him only to have him leave two more men dead shooting his way out. From that day the Sheepfaced Kid had been a fearful phantom of the mountain and desert country across three states, his broad long nose and sloping chin, hair-thatched animal brow and washblue eyes a visage of terror to the denizens of many a lonely ranch or small hamlet.

It had been dark an hour when the Kid made his break. Not black dark; stars twinkled to pick out for sharp eyes movement, major objects. But there would be full moon presently, and the Kid chanced it while he might.

He came like a ghost, as one man had predicted; crawling flatly, halfway down the naked slope before a posseman glimpsed shadowy movement along the ground and yelled and fired—and staggered three steps then with the Kid's bullet in his heart, and fell. The Kid came to his feet in a tight crouch then, a Colt in each hand spitting fire and lead and death; ringed in by ten weapons worked at frantic speed.

He broke Clem Henley's shoulder with a bullet from his righthand gun, and almost in the same instant with his left one knocked the aimed rifle from the hands of Harvy Johnston. Then he was down, the posse searching for him with a hail of bullets but only endangering each other because the Kid was flat on the ground, inert.

The sheriff's yell stopped that, in time, and there was a long wary moment of suspense, suspicion. Then someone hung his jacket on the end of a rifle, "walked" it in the ghostly light. The Kid stayed quiet, a bundle of rags and bones on the ground. Jess Hardy and Joe Carlin pounced and plucked away his weapons and felt his clothes for hidden ones; and finding life still in the scrawny body held him fast while Sheriff Taney's two pairs of handcuffs were brought, snapping a pair on bony wrists, the other on ankles from which the boots were dragged off over dirty sox. They made fire for light then, and Sheriff Taney hobbled on his makeshift

crutch to explore with expert fingers.

"Just creased," he announced. "All them bullets!—and just one failed by 'steenth of an inch to miss him; the Kid's luck. Well, he'll cause no more trouble."

"You bet he won't," a posseman predicted. "I noticed the ridgepole on that cabin sticks out a yard or so—"

"Be none of that," the sheriff snapped. "I deputized you gents to help me *arrest* the Kid. Lawful and legal. Any jury'll see he hangs fast enough—but there'll be no lynching."

THERE WAS muttering. The brother of Hi Tully, dead with the Kid's bullet in his heart, let off steam with lurid cursing, till he ran out of breath. But these men were fagged from long hard riding and tense vigil. Six of them besides Taney bore wounds that ached, nagged at weary bodies. None found spirit to quite out-and-out defy the sheriff. The Kid stirred, came suddenly and instantly to full awareness, like any wild creature. He tried his bindings first, and then sat up silent, defiant, hating them all out of his washblue eyes.

Sheriff Taney drew Jess aside.

"I reckon I can trust *you,* Jess—about this lynching business? Well, then. If let, the rest of them 'll sleep straight through. So you and me, we'll guard the Kid. I'll take the first trick—say, three hours."

How the sheriff kept himself awake and alert for those three hours he never said, but the moon was high when he shook Jess Hardy.

"F'r gawd's sake don't catnap—that Kid 'ld be dangerous if he was in a straitjacket," he muttered admonishment, and was almost instantly snoring on the spot of warmed earth where Jess had lain. Not a man of the posse stirred under the light disturbance.

Yet the Sheepfaced Kid, with a right to be weariest of all, was awake when Jess approached; lying on his side with 'cuffed wrists behind, shivering a little in the chill of desert night, washblue eyes alert and hating. Moonlight showed the animal-like thick lips parched and cracked, yet the Kid did not ask for that simplest, most elemental of favors—a drink of water.

Jess considered that, reflected that Sheriff Taney was not likely to have risked hobbling painfully to the spring to bring water here. He said tonelessly, "Stay quiet, Kid—I'll be watching," and walked swiftly to the spring and dipped a canteen and drank himself, and returned with the filled canteen. A scant ninety seconds spent, his gaze turned from the Kid for less than half that—yet something in the Kid's pose, a tenseness, perhaps a glint of triumph behind the hate in washblue eyes, nagged at Jess as he returned with the water. He leaned to look; the 'cuffs still held bony wrists behind the Kid's arched, skinny back, apparently secure.

I'm just keyed up, he thought, and held the canteen toward thirsty, reaching lips. But even now the Sheepfaced Kid held back long enough to mutter:

"Won't make no difference, feller—not if I git me a chance. I hate your guts, same as them others."

"Sure, Kid." Jess did not withdraw the proffered canteen.

The Kid's lips met the mouthpiece and he drank, "chewing" the water as most desert men learn to do. Drank and rested, drank and rested, slowly, carefully.

"Thanks, feller," the harsh voice grudged. "Thanks fer the horse too, 'safternoon. But—I'll still kill you if I can. To keep from...bein' hung."

THERE WAS a desperation about those last words, not lost on Jess Hardy. Jess said, carefully: "Scared of hangin', eh?"

The Kid shook his shaggy head. "Not scared. But—hangin' on a rope—a bunch of yaller dogs a-watchin'. glad—"

Jess thought he understood. A sort of defiant pride, the Kid had. A will that dreaded, above all things, being helpless in the hands of his enemies; to die publicly and ineptly, swinging at the end of a rope. Jess said, carefully again:

"Kid. A thing I'd like to know. That day three years ago—you hadn't got into any other trouble then. Weren't—desperate. Why'd you shoot my dad?"

"Fer the hell of it—like you'd step

on a bug," The Kid flared. But he glanced then at the canteen, and back to Jess Hardy. He began tonelessly:

"I had come across The Flats that day. 'Pache Tanks was dry and my horse and me had had no water. I was leadin' him when we met...Jeb Hardy. Both of us nigh all in and still ten mile from water. The old...yer dad had two barrels in that wagon—remember?—haulin' it to his timber camp. Never ast fer none fer myself—he had knocked an eye outen that same horse a couple weeks before and I hated him. But the horse—he was in bad shape and I knowed he'd never make it them ten miles. So I ast, and the old...he said go to hell. He wasn't haulin' water fer the mounts of no saddle bums. Started his team up..."

The Kid's voice died rustily. Jeff said with a soft insistence:

"You robbed him too though, Kid. Killed him and robbed him. What money he had, and the shotgun and box of shells he had in the wagon—you killed two more with those, next day when we cornered you. You took his team. What about *that?*"

The Kid's voice fired, defensively for the first time.

"Sure, I robbed him! I knowed well enough, from that minnit on everbody'd be agin me. My horse was all in; I took his team to ride, git away on. Same with his money—I had to have that, on the run, and the shotgun he reached fer when I tolt him my horse was gonna drink regardless." His voice lowered, found a taunting note. "I stoled *your* horses, too, that next morning. Yourn and the rest of that posse's, and left the bunch of you afoot tryin' to chase me. Remember?"

Jess Hardy remembered, grimly. But there was no heat, no anger in Jess now. He might have been a robbed Judge, weighing pros and cons, dispassionately, unemotionally. He offered the canteen again; this time the thatched head jerked in curt, hateful refusal. He moved a couple of yards from the Kid, to sit with his back pushed into a sturdy sage, pulled his gunbelt round till the big weapon in its holster pointed between his knees at the scrawny body that lay facing him.

Sitting there, stirring now and then to shake the drowsiness out of his tired body, gradually the suspicion he had felt on his return from the spring renewed itself. At first it was intangible, vague: the Kid's slim body was tense and not lying restfully; washblue eyes were too alert, too watchful of himself; Jess remembered the sheriff's "—dangerous if he was in a straitjacket." There was tiny movement, too stealthy for a mere shift in search of comfort; the Kid's eyes alternately gleamed keen in the moonlight, then hid behind colorless veiling lashes. Any other man of the posse—Jess Hardy a few minutes ago—would have investigated at once.

BUT THOUGH Jess Hardy's outer mind was soon tense as a ready bowstring, an inner corner still dwelt on things abstract. A man's dread of being hanged—"—yaller dogs a-watchin'—"—two barrels of water, a thirsty horse. He saw the change in position of the Kid's upper arm where it crossed his thin body to the rear, and gave no sign; he watched calmly the Kid's muscles bunching as if for some mighty effort, and still Jess Hardy did not move. Had the sheriff—or any posseman—awakened, he would have been amazed and furious at Jess' carelessness.

Then suddenly the Kid's skinny torso arched between shoulder and hip and his right hand slid swiftly into Jess' view—though the arm numbed from long pressure between earth and bodyweight moved with less than the Kid's normal snake-strike speed. Jess' right hand had moved minutes ago to the gunhandle in his lap, thumb on hammer; even so, only that slight slowing of cramped muscles tipped the balance against the Sheep-faced Kid. Shock of the .45 bullet rolled the scrawny body, the shift lifting a little the muzzle of the deringer as smallboned fingers squeezed both its triggers. Twin bullets tore rough holes in Jess Hardy's hat crown, tipped it back on his head.

The sheriff came awake sitting up gun in hand, others of the posse only a groping instant behind. Jess got to his feet and stood over the Sheep-

(cont'd on pg. 38)

HIGH NOON IN FURNACE CITY

by DICK BAIRD

YELLOW dust devils spurted in the smothering air that sheathed the main street of Furnace City. The tired clopping of Bunk Tressler's bay caused a stir on the porch of Dutch Holland's saloon, and the tense current carried through the batwing doors. Dutch's blond head, the size of a bear's, wing collar wilted around a thick neck, was thrust toward the gaping loungers. Turk Harms leaned forward in his chair and threw his hoarse voice at the saloon keeper.

"Bunk Tressler's back!" Dutch repeated Turk's words and shook his head as if to deny what his ears told him.

"Yep, he's back, Dutch, and looks like he's headin' straight for here." The skinny, grizzled prospector spat over the rail, and the dust jumped in the dead-dry street. "Better tell the boys we're li'ble to have a little Satiddy entertainment."

Dutch's head disappeared into the saloon.

Bunk Tressler rode up before Holland's bar, swung down, and tied the bay to the rail. He slapped his flat-crowned Stetson against his leg and wet desert-dry lips with the tip of his tongue. Brown hair sweat-curled on his forehead; gray eyes were expressionless holes set deep in the hickory leather of his face. Tressler moved with the easy grace of a gaunt cat, and his long legs seemed to split him almost to his shoulders. He wore a Colt strapped down, the holster cut low around the trigger guard.

The skinny grubber nodded as Bunk halted in front of him, and raised his hand in greeting. "Howdy, Bunk. We heard you was comin' in from Seeping Wells, but we figgered not for a week or so. You look a mite done in. I'll buy one."

A crooked grin split Bunk's face. The inch-long scar at the corner of his mouth shot upward toward the cheekbone. "I'll let you buy one, Turk, then I'll return the favor. How's the missus and the kids?"

Turk started to answer, but Bunk pushed his way inside and went straight to the bar. He held up two fingers, and Dutch Holland poured a couple shots of whiskey.

"Reckon you're lookin' for Luke Caster," the blond bear said. "He's about due—usually stops in around noon on Saturday." He looked at the gold turnip-shaped watch he carried in his vest pocket. "Quarter 'til twelve now."

The bar was lined up two deep. Bunk pushed a whisky over to Turk and downed the other one. He nodded at Dutch, and the sweating barkeep poured two more. The line at the bar watched every movement in the long mirror behind the tier of bottles. A spur clicked loudly against the brass foot rail.

Everyone in the room knew that the showdown between Bunk Tressler and Luke Caster was long overdue. Both had struck gold in the hills; both had gone after the same girl (before she married the banker); and both had touchy tempers. They'd once been close friends, but that was obviously all changed now. The tension between them had built steadily in recent weeks. Silent men, neither would talk about it.

Showdown between Bunk Tressler and Luke Caster was long overdue. Everybody knew that but nothing more. Silent men, neither Bunk nor Luke would talk about it...

When Bunk had left for Seeping Wells a month before, he stood at this bar and said: "Look, Luke, this thing has been draggin' along for a blame long time. When I get back from Seeping Wells we're going to settle it once and for all."

"Suits me." Luke never wasted words...

AND NOW, suddenly, Luke Caster was in the saloon too. He stood just inside the swinging doors for a half-minute, then walked straight toward Bunk. He was big, with heavy, grim features, and the thick black hair around the temples accented the width of his face. His eyes were level with Tressler's.

"I see you made it back, Bunk." The words were not unfriendly, but spoken in a flat tone, like a statistic, or a remark about the weather. "I killed a rattler while you were gone. Guess we might as well get this over with."

Tressler eased his gunbelt. "Anytime, Luke. No hard feelings, you understand, just something that has to be settled between us."

"Sure, Bunk." Luke waved his hand in agreement and headed outside.

Holland's saloon emptied quickly. Even the striped alley cat stayed close to Turk's heels. The two men walked directly to the center of the dusty street. The sun blazed down perpendicularly. It was high noon. At night the streets of Furnace City would be crowded, but now the heat was too much to fight.

Then, as if at a signal, the street was lined with town folk. Bunk Tressler and Luke Caster stood back to back, shirts dark with sweat, in direct line with Dutch Holland's batwing doors.

Both men drew their Colts and cocked them.

"Ready?" asked Bunk.

"Ready," replied Luke.

They stepped off together and started to count. The numbers came simultaneously with each step: "One ...two...three..."

The sun scorched the town. Sweat ran freely. The spectators held their breath. Turk Harms finally exploded: "What the devil is goin' on? They're already up to thirty. This blasted heat has knocked 'em both plumb loco!"

Then it happened. Bunk Tressler turned and fired. His .44 belched blue smoke. The shot echoed down the street. Luke jumped, but didn't turn around for three or four seconds. Then he whirled, and his sixgun spewed a sheet of flame. Both men were still on their feet. They holstered their guns and headed back toward the center of town. Luke's face held a look of complete disbelief.

Bunk was the first to speak. "See what I've been telling you for six months, Luke? It's a blame sight farther from Holland's saloon to your livery stable than it is to my feed store. If we're going to be partners in this new freight line and assay office, it's only common sense that we use the place closest to the center of town."

Luke still looked surprised. "Reckon you're right, Bunk, but I'd have sworn your feed store was farther. Come on inside, boys. The drinks are on me."

Bunk took Luke's arm and led his partner into Holland's saloon, just as the red ball of the midday sun was starting its downward path. ●END

WAY OF DYING

(*cont'd from page* 36)

faced Kid and plucked the empty derringer away.

"Had it taped atween my legs, close up where you fellers missed it—got it out through a busted seam in the crotch of my pants," the Kid boasted. Then slower, short-breathed: "No hard feelin's, Hardy. I even got a fool notion I orter thank you. 'Cause I... sure like it better...this way..."

The Sheepfaced Kid was dead with the trailing off of his voice. A posseman muttered, beside Jess Hardy in the moonlight:

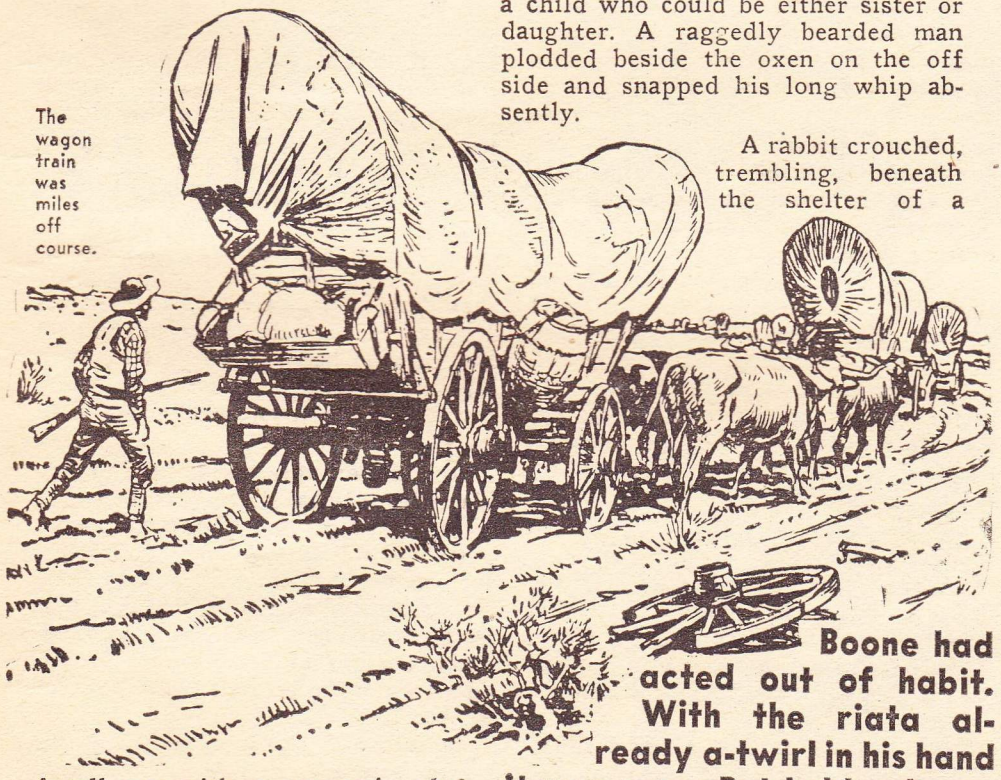
"Y'know, I feel just like after we dug out that den of rattlers above my place, last year.... At that, he came near getting you, hey Jess?"

Jess Hardy ignored that. He was thinking: *I reckon the Hardys owed him that much choice. To die with a gun in his hand.* ●END

IT WAS A LASS-ROPE ALL RIGHT

by ARCHIE JOSCELYN

BOONE'S intention, when he saw the long dust of the wagon train, was merely to ride across for a brief Howdy, and maybe a glimpse of a pretty girl. It had been so long since he'd seen one he could scarcely remember that all women didn't wear blankets.



The wagon train was miles off course.

A tall man with an easy grin, clad in a shirt red as a fair-weather sunset, he topped the hill and the wagons were spread below, passing in a long string. His restless hands toyed with his lass-rope as he swung closer, noting the weathered canvas of a long trail, hearing the wheels creak in tempo to the dull snort of plodding oxen.

His glance brightened. Right below, a wagon was passing, the canvas tied back front and rear to let the air temper the sun. It revealed a girl, seated in the rear of the box who was everything he'd hoped to see, pretty and bright-eyed. She glanced upward just then and saw him, sitting easy in the saddle, and her eyes rounded while red lips formed an O. The sun had tangled in her hair, giving it a cobwebby look to snare a man's heart easy as his loop would snag the foot of a running steer. Beside her played a child who could be either sister or daughter. A raggedly bearded man plodded beside the oxen on the off side and snapped his long whip absently.

A rabbit crouched, trembling, beneath the shelter of a clump of sage, black mule ears folded close to its back. The crack of the whip sent it spinning out in a wild leap, almost under the noses of the plodding team. Like the rabbit, they were transformed instantly; that was the way with oxen when they took a notion. The near one, an ornery-looking steer with a loppy horn, let out a bawl, the sound squeezing past his tongue as if he'd been under the branding iron. He humped to a run,

Boone had acted out of habit. With the riata already a-twirl in his hand it was easy. But he'd only expected to rescue a child....

and his mate wasn't far behind, the heavy yoke jerking. They left the plodding man with mouth agape, the long whip swinging useless in his hand.

Such a run wouldn't ordinarily matter, only now it seemed as if every critter in the long train was suddenly possessed to run with them, and a hind wheel of the wagon jounced over a rock twice as high as the humped rabbit had been. The next wagon, with its team catching the contagion, came plunging right behind.

The girl had been braiding on a rug, slender fingers weaving a pattern like an Indian talking sign. She dropped it and clutched, too late, at the child playing beside her. The sudden bounce as the wheel jerked over the stone lifted and tossed the little girl, and she was like a ballooning ball of fluttery skirts, then she came to earth behind the wagon.

Such a bump would be jarring but probably not too bad. What made it so was the team following behind, coming at a wild run. Boone saw and acted out of instinct. There was no time to reach the child and snatch her to safety, either for him or the man on the far side. The sharp pounding hoofs of the following team were too close, the heavy wheels of the wagon clanging behind.

Boone acted out of habit. With the lasso a-twirl in his hand it was easy. The loop dabbed around the child and jerked tight, and he snatched her out of the way with scant time to spare.

A SCREAM cut the air and raked Boone's heart. It came from the girl, who'd thought she was witnessing death, expecting to see a mangled form. The child shook with sobs, which was not to be wondered at, for it had been pretty rough for her even so.

Another man, up ahead, acted fast to halt what might be a bad run of all the teams. He stood his ground and cut the oxen across the noses with his bull-whip, and they stopped. The girl was out of the wagon and running back as Boone jumped off his horse, and they reached the child and dropped to their knees together.

That did it. Boone got a look into a pair of eyes so deep you could get lost in them, and he reckoned he did. Annabelle stopped crying, and Jean Marie, who it turned out right and proper was her sister, smiled wet-eyed and tremulous. The father and mother both came hurrying, the latter from somewhere inside the wagon, but that was anti-climax.

"Shucks, don't thank me," Boone protested. "It was just luck—luck that I was in the right place at the right time. I hadn't even planned it that way."

But it was pleasant to have such luck. Annabelle reached and set her arms around his neck and kissed him, and Boone went red as the shirt he wore; that was because he was thinking how nice it would be if Jean Marie would reward him the same way. She didn't, but he was invited to stop to supper, which turned out to be as mouth-watering a meal as he'd ever sluiced past his teeth. The fact that Jean Marie was responsible for most of the eatables wasn't lost on Boone, who had a good pair of eyes. No reasonable man could blame him for using them where she was concerned.

One feller did seem inclined to blame him. Dabney Prescott, he called himself, and he walked and rode arrogant, and talked the same. Boone had seen plenty such men, and gave them no never-mind as a rule. The fact that Prescott was acting as guide and wagon boss didn't impress him. He'd guided a train or so himself, when it came to that.

By morning, Boone made up his mind. Shucks, it was time for a change of scenery anyhow; he'd been around here longer than he usually stayed at any one place. Besides, he'd always had a hankering to see the ocean. It had never occurred to him that he particularly wanted to see Oregon, but now he hankered to look the place over. For that matter, he might make a good farmer; he'd eat shucks if he couldn't do as well as some others—Dabney Prescott, for example.

It was the patent fact of the latter's hostility that helped to decide him; Boone never liked to be pushed around. Prescott looked at him out of

eyes as cold and unwavering as the bullets in a gun cylinder and made his attitude plain. Maybe it was partly his red shirt, Boone reflected. He was likely the only man in the country who wore that color, and it occasioned comment. But with the others it was friendly.

So he found himself riding along, happy for the change. Maybe that was because he was in love. There was no getting around it, this time he'd fallen and hard, and it was sure enough worth it. Jean Marie improved on acquaintance, which was hard to believe, she was so scrumptious to start with.

The only fly in his ointment was the wagon boss, and something about him nagged increasingly, though at first Boone didn't take him seriously. Let the man pester. Seemed like Prescott had figured Jean Marie for his girl, but Boone had never been afraid of competition. The way Jean Marie smiled, it didn't look like he'd need be now.

Apparently Prescott was of the same notion; it made him edgy as a steer in fly time. On the fourth night out, after Boone had tagged along, he came up to the camp fire, and scowled as Annabelle gave Boone a moist good-night kiss. Jean Marie saw the look and moved to avoid trouble.

"Bring me that bucket of water, will you, please, Dabney?" she called. "The red bucket."

There were two buckets, side by side. One had plain creek water, the other was filled with spring water which was some colder and fresher to taste. Prescott's attention was for Jean Marie instead of the bucket. He picked up the wrong one, and so Boone brought the other. Water sloshed and spilled across Prescott's foot as he set it down, and the wagon boss scowled on him.

"Since you've cut yourself in to go along with the train, Boone, even without an invite, you might as well pull your part of the load," he growled. "That's a rule—everybody does their share."

"Seems fair enough," Boone conceded absently. He was studying the buckets of water, in which Jean Marie seemed to have lost interest.

"I'm glad you think so. You can take your turn tonight standing watch. You should have been long enough in this country to know its dangers."

"I've been studyin' about those," Boone nodded, and Prescott eyed him suspiciously, but Boone did not amplify his remark. There was a time for talk, but till it came a man did better to keep his jaws tight; also to make sure that he knew when to speak up.

HE TOOK his turn, out beyond the circled wagons, for the second watch. The moon was a pretty sight. The night air was warm, with a hint of pine fragrance from the hills they were coming close up against.

A session on watch ought to be enjoyable, for Boone discredited the dark hints that Dabney Prescott had kept dropping about the risk of Indians. Dabney himself had scoffed at the notion right up till supper time. And Boone had seen no sign.

But it gave time to think matters through. He disliked Prescott, both personally and on general principles, but he couldn't rightly blame a man for being attracted by Jean Marie. Thinking of her, it wasn't easy to be fair, and this was a time for being sure.

When the arrow came whining out of nowhere, it came close to taking him by surprise. The moon was dipping out of sight, leaving a purple dark. He hadn't heard a suspicious sound, up to the twang of the bow. It was pure instinct that made him jump, for he'd been in scrimmages with Indians half a dozen times, and a man developed a feeling.

Even at that, it was close. He felt the bite of the arrow like a knife alongside his neck. Whoever had loosed that shaft was a marksman, and he'd aimed to bury the point in Boone's throat.

Boone whirled and fired a quick shot. He had to guess, but he had hopes of scoring. In any case, it was time to rouse the camp, even if it did mean scaring folks. If Indians were that close, he'd sure been caught napping.

It was disconcerting. There was no flopping in the brush, nor any wild

burst of yelling; no quick attack on the camp. There was confusion, as he'd expected, people scared with waking sudden, but that was all. Everybody got organized to repel attack, and none came. Nothing but daylight, and no sign of a savage anywhere.

Boone could have figured that he'd acted like a tenderfoot, being scared of a shadow, except for that arrow and his neck. He picked the arrow up, and there was a red burn along his throat where it had scraped.

Prescott was suspicious and supercilious till he saw the exhibits. He acknowledged, grudgingly, that the arrow was real.

"Must have been a lone Pawnee, hoping to steal," he said. "He snuck up, then couldn't resist the temptation."

"Sounds reasonable, except that it wasn't no Pawnee," Boone contradicted. "And a lone brave wouldn't be so big a fool."

"What do you mean, it wasn't a Pawnee? This is Pawnee country."

"Right enough. But it's not a Pawnee arrow. Every tribe has its own customs. Comanches shoe their horses with buckskin, baked hard in the sun. Cheyennes ride ponies that ain't shod. Kiowas make rattles of deer toes. Same with arrows. Every tribe follows a pattern, all different, if you know how to read the sign. Some stain part of the arrow red, or maybe blue. Others have a special way of notchin', and so on. Little things, but distinctive. This is no Pawnee arrow."

Prescott was unbelieving.

"It looks like a Pawnee arrow to me. If it ain't, how can you be sure?"

"Because it comes from near a thousand miles east of here," Boone said quietly. "Fact is, it's a Kanza arrow. I've seen plenty to know."

EVERYBODY had gathered, listening, watching. Boone understood their strained attention. He'd learned a lot of history in the last few days, by letting others do the talking.

"For one thing," he added, "this is stained red at the tip. Which is what the Kanzas do with their arrows."

Prescott shrugged.

"Just dirty," he said. "It couldn't be a Kanza arrow. How would it come here?"

"Now that's an interesting question," Boone agreed. "Mighty interesting—since there are no Kanzas in this country, and an arrow don't travel that far by itself."

That was in the nature of challenge, close to accusation. Everybody knew how Prescott had traded with the Kanzas when they were in Kanza country. He'd obtained a bow and several arrows from them—the only one in the wagon train to do so. The others had found the Indians not much to their liking; too dirty, and inclined to thievery. Prescott got on well with Indians.

His face reddened. Maybe it was guilty conscience, maybe he was anxious for showdown.

"Are you accusing me of shooting that arrow?" he demanded. "Of trying to kill you?"

"I wasn't. But as my pa used to say, if the boot fits, wear it!"

Prescott looked dazed. Men had a way of backing down when he crowded them, but Boone wasn't bluffed. The others eyed them uncertainly. Boone had made a good impression, first by saving Annabelle, then by his friendly manner. It was easy to tell that he had experience of the country, a know-how that made the difference to a man of wearing his own hair or having it adorn the trophy stick of an Indian.

On the other hand, Prescott was guide, and he'd proved competent, even if his ways did grate. This was serious.

Jean Marie listened, then moved closer to Boone. That showed her trust. Prescott was the color of a turkey all set to gobble.

"You're a liar!" he said thickly. "I say that's a Pawnee arrow! You're just lookin' for trouble."

"I'm wonderin' how soon we'll be findin' it, with you for guide," Boone retorted boldly. "As I hear it, we're supposed to be heading for Oregon. I've been wondering, ever since I met up with the train, what in tarnation you mean by leadin' the wagons way off the trail, into country where oxen will starve and wagons can't travel? Are you a fool or a skunk?"

It was out, and time for it. Men exchanged looks, unvoiced unease in every face. Too many were giving serious consideration to Boone's words. Prescott lunged, aiming to take Boone unprepared, but though he whirled sudden as a striking rattler and kicked out like a mule, that didn't work. Boone just stepped aside and chopped hard to the jaw with a left. He was sure of his ground now. When a man couldn't answer, except by blows, you had him dead to rights.

PRESCOTT was big, quick as a scared rabbit, hard as the rocks the wagons jounced across, and as bare of scruples. But a man learned the tricks of survival in this country. It was a case of learn if you were to live, a case of all-out fight.

Boone didn't resort to some of the things which Prescott tried—with Jean Marie watching, he didn't care to, nor was it necessary.

It took a spell to chop Prescott down to size. The early sun came splashing across the horizon before it was finished. Prescott wasn't a pretty sight, his eyes blazing out of a bloody face. He came unsteadily to his feet, and weaved to where his horse was picketed. He got a saddle on, and rode out of camp. No one tried to stop him.

"We're well shut of him!" That was Annabelle's father, and he voiced a popular opinion. "You take over to guide us, Boone." His voice took on a tinge of anxiety. "Has he got us in a bad spot?"

"Not so bad as it would have been, another two-three days," Boone said. "By then it would have been tough."

"But what could be his purpose?" one woman wailed. "Why should he deliberately lead us to—to our destruction?"

"Might be that's the answer. A train like this is big booty to Indians, and there are white renegades, well as red."

"You mean there's a chance they'll try to wipe us out?" Jean Marie asked.

"I don't reckon *you'd* have been in any danger—of that sort," Boone said soberly. "But I'll feel better when we're ten days away from here. And the sooner we breakfast and get going, the better."

Boone didn't show much mark of the fracas he'd been through. His red shirt had a tear in the sleeve, which Jean Marie insisted on mending with needle and thread. Boone demurred, but he didn't require much persuading. Doing it brought her close, and it was a task to keep his mind on problems which must be faced.

"I'm glad you're our guide, Boone," she said, and skipped back to the wagon. Boone took a cup of coffee as it was offered him and half-strangled on the hotness.

He was wakeful the next night, and on watch along with other sentries as morning came close. The night was too silent, with nothing to see. Boone made use of an Indian trick. He shucked his red shirt and thrust a feather in his hair, crawled away from camp and had his look.

It was a handy precaution. He brushed so close to several half-nude warriors that they saw him and would have been suspicious but for his bare back. With knowledge that they were there, he wormed back; with a sure sense of timing, he knew he didn't dare wait till he was safe in his own lines to sound the alarm.

He'd arranged with Annabelle's and Jean Marie's pa what the signal should be, the squall of a bobcat, and he gave it an angry sound, and heard stir of preparation. Apparently the Pawnees heard also, for all hell broke loose, but everyone was awake and ready, and guns made red lances on the dark. Boone emptied his gun, and reached the wagon where he'd left his shirt, draped across the tongue. It wasn't there.

Not that it mattered too much, for he was plenty busy. Daylight was coming, making good targets, which helped. The surprise attack hadn't worked, and after that it didn't last long. All at once it was over, the Pawnees scurrying for cover.

Some were past all that. Boone found his red shirt, since it was bright and made a fine target. It had six arrows stuck through it, ruining it past any skill Jean Marie's needle might possess. The arrows were embedded deep in Prescott, but despite the

(cont'd on pg. 54)

THE SUN was like the baleful eye of a Satan in vengeful mood. It shone over the landscape with heat that fried a man's temper along with whatever bacon might be in his saddlebags.

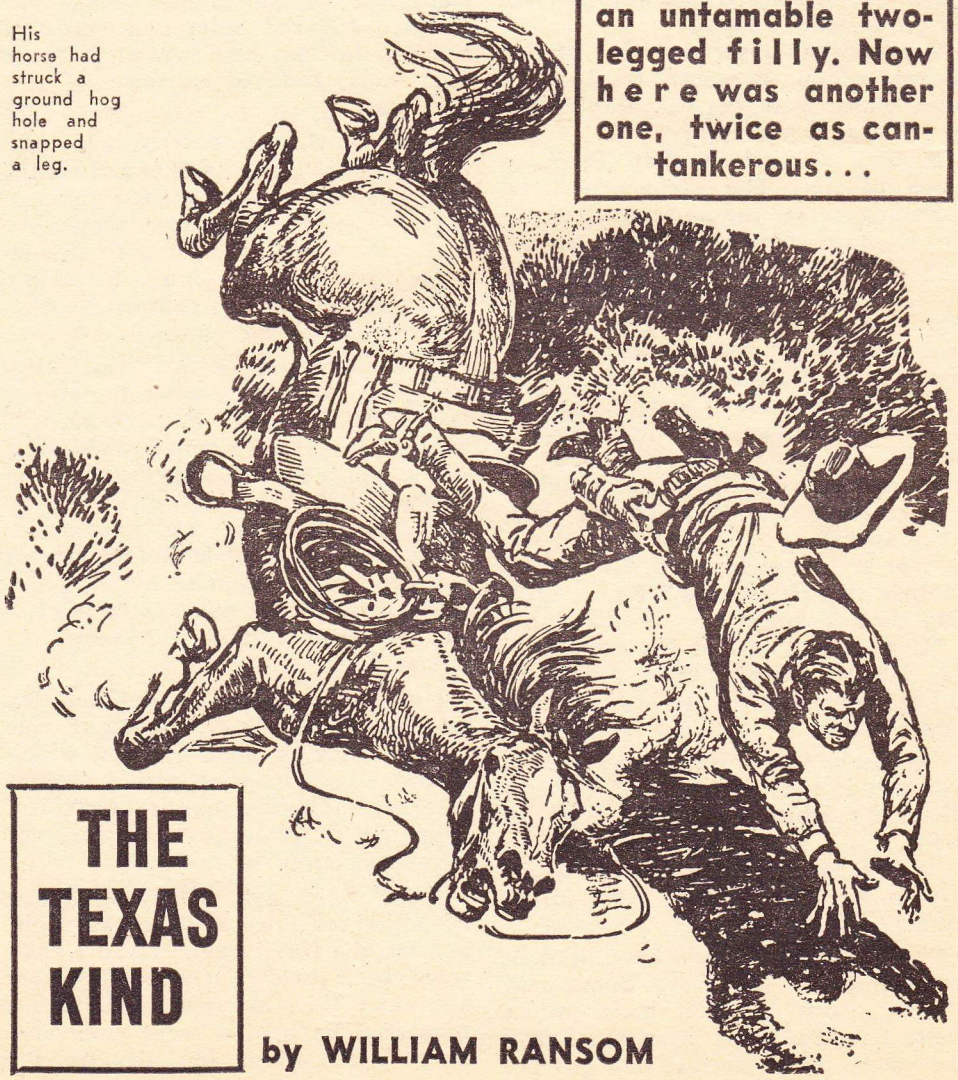
Larribee had no need of the sun to rasp his temper, and there was very little bacon in his saddlebags. He tilted his black hat down over one eye, sat on a rock in the partial shade of a mangy mesquite...and viewed the dry brown terrain with the calm anger of a man who'd been taught to be stoical in times of stress, to be a philosopher. Patience is a great virtue for those who can afford it—and when you're down on your luck, it's about the only thing you can afford.

So you wanted to come to Texas to get away from that two-legged filly name of Millie. Try to run away from your troubles and maybe you find some new troubles that make you yearn for the old ones.

Distance, the killer of bad memories. It was a long way from here to there in Wyoming always. But this Texas beat anything a man ever saw. It went on forever. All the ranches

Larribee had ridden all the way from Wyoming to forget an untamable two-legged filly. Now here was another one, twice as cantankerous...

His horse had struck a ground hog hole and snapped a leg.



THE TEXAS KIND

by WILLIAM RANSOM

contained at least five million acres ...and if a wrangler or a fence-rider wanted to get home in time for supper he had to start Tuesday to make it on Friday. *So here I am—a down-trail drifter without even a horse.*

His horse lay dead nearby. Larribee had risen a couple of hours before sunrise, intending to travel ten miles or so in the dark and beat the heat at least *that* much. The result was that his black gelding had stuck a foreleg into a groundhog hole and snapped the leg and he'd gone over the side.

Worse than having his own leg sawed off, to shoot that black. A good horse and they'd been together four years. There wasn't anything else to do. He couldn't let it lie there and suffer, unable to stand up or go anywhere—and perhaps 40 or 50 miles to the nearest ranchhouse. All those jokes he'd heard about Texas weren't jokes. They were the truth.

Larribee sat there in the skimpy shade of the mesquite, his medium-young ascetic face reflective. His dark eyes narrowed and he contemplated a groundhog sitting up and pawing at him sassily from several rods away. He decided to blow the groundhog's head off. An eye for an eye and a tooth for an ear. Or a horse for a groundhog. His affection for the varmints, as for the holes they dug for dwellings, was distinctly modified at this point.

There was a slight interruption as Larribee was sighting down the barrel of his .45 deliberately at the rodent's head.

Around a bend in the trail from the south there came a heavyset man on a horse. The man was wearing a dirty white six-gallon hat. And he was leading four other horses, all four naked and probably fresh off the range. Larribee sat there and slowly put the .45 back into its holster, and let the Texas groundhog keep its head temporarily. *Any* kind of horse was better than walking on high heels in this country.

Presently the rider came to a halt in the trail abreast of Larribee. He eyed Larribee for a time and drawled:

"Looks as if you got a problem."

"An accurate guess," said Larribee.

"Broke its leg, like?"

"A dead horse eats no oats, and every shroud has a silver linin', sometimes."

"It's a long way to town."

"I can guess that without seein' it," said Larribee.

"It's a real long way." The heavy man calmly rolled a wheatstraw cigarette without offering Larribee the makin's.

"I bet it is," said Larribee. "*Real* long." He had plenty of makin's. What he needed was a horse.

"Well now. Happens I got four of my strays I just picked up off the range."

"I can see that," Larribee said. He was 29, with a fairly handsome impassive face, including a nose that had been busted twice during actively philosophic misunderstandings of several Saturday nights in Cheyenne. He hadn't shot either opponent, because they were friendly about it. Besides, he'd won both fights. "You talk interestingly, Tex."

"Happens to be my nickname." His chest swelled in pride.

LARRIBEE'S gunhand itched a little. "How much would you want for one of those broomtails?"

"Well now," the heavy man murmured, and scratched his chin. He looked around slyly to his right, at the three better horses. "Well, these here bays and this chestnut're kind o' favorites of mine. Reckon I couldn't part with one for less'n a hundred and thirty."

"Feel tender toward 'em, do you?"

"Mighty tender, stranger."

"There're few things I like better'n a man who's fond of animals," said Larribee. After a pause he added: "And don't call me stranger. I feel like a native by now."

"What part of Texas you from?" The man with the horses gazed at Larribee's black hat curiously.

"Not far enough from any part," said Larribee, and stood up. He was philosophically vexed by this time, and his right hand hovered around his belt sort of casually. He asked: "How much for the sorrel?"

The heavy man scratched his chin again and looked at Larribee with thoughtfully squinted eyes. "Well, he

ain't quite as much horse as the other two. Suppose we say eighty."

Larribee's hand moved smoothly and with great speed to the .45 and it came out. Without seeming to aim, he looked sidewise and pulled the trigger—and the upper segment of the insolent groundhog disappeared. Larribee calmly blew the smoke away from the end of the gun barrel and holstered the weapon.

"Suppose," said Larribee, "we say *forty* for the sorrel crowbait...and suppose you get to hellangone up the trail."

The heavyset man would have looked pretty near natural guzzling swill at a hog-trough. He blinked, turned his head and stared at the remains of the groundhog. The varmint hadn't even looked surprised, because by the time it should have looked surprised it didn't have anything left to look surprised *with*. The groundhog was now a perfect philosopher, incapable of contemplating either good or evil. The man gulped several times, turned his countenance back to Larribee and said:

"Well now. Forty sounds about right, mister. Anyway, the critter'd just eat hay. Hay's short this year. So forty's about right." He looked hopeful. "Cash money?"

"Cash money," Larribee stated. "Twenty bucks'd be too much...but walkin' in high heels upsets a man's calm thoughts." He took the currency from the left pocket of his tan shirt, keeping his right hand free.

Putting the saddle onto the jughead sorrel wasn't easy. The heavy man snaffled the skittery sorrel close, and presently Larribee swung aboard after tying his effects and chattels. He inquired: "By the way—what's your name?"

"Dave Upton," he said, without hesitation. "Why?"

"Just wondered." Well, hell, it fitted the DU brand on the left hip of each horse. "See you in jail sometime."

"Adios." The horse peddler headed up the trail hastily.

Larribee gazed after him for awhile. Under the face of anything dwell the facts—and the facts may not look like the face.

THIS WAS the first ringtail native he'd come across. All the others had been generous with everything except a job. It was a dry, bad summer. They were firin', not hirin'. Larribee wasn't exactly worried, being a philosopher, but he had less than a hundred dollars left. That was what came of getting mushy about a rancher's daughter and buying her expensive presents off and on for two years ...and having her decide it'd be smarter to marry the town banker's son.

Now, a day later and deep in foothill country, Larribee in modified stoicism cursed his mount and cursed himself for buying the mount. This roman-nosed, white-eyed jughead of a sorrel had less brains than a jackrabbit. It shied like a sidewinder every time its eyes, the windows of its feeble mind, detected any movement on either side of the trail. And every time it shied, its motion jarred Larribee's teeth together—whereupon a jagged flash of pain would shoot through the lower molar which had begun to act up last night. That tooth ached worse than his sagebrush-Romeo heart had ached when he left Wyoming two weeks ago.

I lost my girl and my black horse. The sun bakes me dry and what I've handy to eat wouldn't fill a chipmunk. And now my tooth aches. Steady, man, he decided. No matter how rough things get they can always get rougher...and when they get rougher, pretend that you're tougher. If it fools yourself maybe it'll fool an evil destiny too.

The trail went up an incline and dipped suddenly into a fairly broad valley—and the valley was *green!*

Larribee blinked. Grandpa was wrong. The grass didn't just *look* greener over the hill—it *was* greener. "I told you, man," Larribee murmured. "Happiness ahead." After all the days of brownness, suddenly this. It meant water. It meant a big spring, or, more likely, an artesian well. Even more than that, it meant habitation. It meant food. Maybe it meant someone who could yank that blamed tooth.

He prodded the sorrel into a slow lope. Somewhere down among those trees there had to be a house and hu-

mans. There were cattle and horses grazing in lush pastures far to the right.

Larribee was a furlong or so down into the valley, and hope ricocheted around in his head above the throbbing tooth.

Suddenly something whined past his black north-country hat with a vicious hornety sound. He heard the crack of the gun from those trees to his right, at the same moment.

"Hold it, you horse thief!" a voice ordered from cover of the trees. It was a female voice. "Freeze!"

LARRIBEE started to reach for his .45—but swiftly restrained the impulse. She had the drop on him. And besides, it's more manly to return kindness for rancor; especially if the female's good-lookin'. Larribee pulled the sorrel to a rearing halt, faced the animal toward the female ambusher, and lifted his hands ear-high.

"What was it you said, ma'am?" Larribee inquired.

"You heard it, you horse thief!" She stepped out of the woods, focusing her light rifle at his brisket.

"Harsh words spoken without true knowledge are like a tough pie crust with no fillin'," Larribee stated.

"Harsh bullet holes knock the lies out of a liar!"

"It happens I *bought* this knotheaded hunk of nothin' yesterday—a long piece up the trail."

She snorted in disbelief. Most eye-catching young female she was, too. She said: "You were just walking along and decided you needed a horse. So you dropped in at a nearby store and bought one of *our* horses! Likely story!"

"Likely enough if you'd listen to the facts," Larribee stated. "Under the face of appearance dwell the facts—and the facts may not resemble the face." He started to explain about his own horse's breaking its leg and the horse peddler's appearing—and she interrupted him:

"Where's your bill of sale? Where's your receipt?"

"Never thought to get one."

"Very convenient." Even with a sneer on her baby face she was mighty cute. Twenty or so. Buckskin skirt and skimpy white blouse. White hat was perched far back on honey-colored hair. High-spirited. A filly with the spunk of a quarter-horse.

"Never been this far south in my life," said Larribee. "Nobody but a fool greenhorn'd wear a black hat in Texas in the summertime. Black soaks up heat. In Wyomin' that's fine. It's high country and never gets very hot. First chance I have, I buy me a big white sombrero to reflect the heat off my skull."

"First chance you have, you're gonna reflect yourself off our horse!" Her blue eyes flashed. "Pronto!"

"I bought this gnat-brained crowbait from a galoot name of Dave Upton." Larribee reined the sorrel to the right and pointed to the DU brand on the left hip. "See his initials?"

"Hah!" She snorted again. "Those initials happen to stand for Daniel Underwood. I never heard of any Dave Upton. Get down off there!"

"Next to bein' rich, patience is the greatest virtue there is," Larribee said. "Help yourself to some."

"Anyone patient with a horse thief is a fool!"

Although a philosopher, Larribee now mixed two clashing factors within him: he was both riled and attracted. "You've got an awful temper for such a good-lookin' heifer." He eyed her figure candidly. "Kind of a pert shape, too."

"Never mind about that!" a deep strong male voice bellowed from the woods on the other side of the road.

Larribee turned around and looked. The man's body matched his voice. Powerful. He wasn't very old, middling forties, and his eyes and nose and mouth resembled those of the girl. In his hand was an oldfashioned but kind of deadly-looking .44 six-gun.

"So you're not a horse thief, huh?" Underwood said.

"Nope. I'd have to be stupider'n this broomtail to ride right back into the ranch where I stole the horse. I'm not *that* stupid, though I admit I've won no prizes for deep thinkin' lately."

Daniel Underwood squinted and scratched his head with his left hand. He, also, wore a white sombrero. "That adds up to a *little* sense." Then

he became tough and wary again. "But you can't prove you're not a horse thief, even if we can't exactly prove you *are*. Unbuckle your gunbelt easy-like and drop it on the ground. Audrey, get your horse."

"I get the pleasure of walkin' after all, do I?" Larribee murmured.

"You can ride as far as the house. From there you hoof it. I'd take you in to the sheriff—but it's forty-two miles and I've got other things to do. Besides, stealin' *that* cayuse ain't the worst crime in the world. I feel kind of sympathetic to any man stuck aboard *that* critter. Aimed to saw him up for coyote bait. Just haven't got around to it."

Larribee dropped the belt, with attached holster and .45, to the road. Underwood strode over and picked them up.

DAUGHTER Audrey came out of the woods astride a little pinto as spunky and pert as herself, and the split skirt revealed legs enchanting enough to sidetrack any philosophical system, including the Wyoming variety. She cocked her pretty head to one side, squinted meanly and kept Larribee covered while her father went into the woods and swung onto his gray and came out.

"Vamoose—and no tricks." Audrey gestured south.

The ranchhouse was neat and white-painted, in a pleasant grove of cottonwoods a half mile down the road. The three dismounted and Underwood patted a telescope which was slung to his belt. "We saw you comin'. Have to keep an eye on things these times. Blamed nesters around. Man can't trust one as far as he can sling a mule by the tail."

Larribee looked at them silently and thought: *Patience is...*

Underwood brusquely jerked Larribee's canvas waterbag off the horn, took the bag over to a pump at a nearby horse-trough and filled the bag. Larribee meanwhile removed the saddle and detached the saddlebags and sleeping blankets.

The rancher came back with the waterbag. "Couldn't rightly turn even a horse thief loose in this climate clean dry. Here." He thrust the bag into Larribee's hands. Then Underwood frowned and reached into his pocket. He leafed through a roll of currency and handed some to Larribee. "Here's fifty for the saddle and bridle—just in case you're *not* a horse thief."

"Where's the water from?"

"Artesian well." Underwood pointed to a U dip between two much higher mesa-type hills to the east and slightly south. "Gambled everything I had I'd strike water with plenty pressure. I won. Irrigates my valley right nice."

"Light out now!" Audrey gestured southward, squinting one bright blue eye at him toughly.

"I'm keepin' your gun and belt for free—just in case you *are* a horse thief," Underwood said gruffly.

"Nice to've met you," Larribee stated with grave sarcasm. He slung his blankets on his back, shouldered his saddlebags and headed down the road on his high-heeled boots. *Texas!*

ALTHOUGH he was heading south, the trail inclined gradually upward. Larribee was out of sight of the ranchhouse shortly.

He was little more than a quarter of a mile from the house when he heard the patter of pinto feet loping up behind him. He turned and looked.

It was Audrey, rifle in right hand, gun and belt in the other. She narrowed her eyes at him dangerously and tossed him the .45 with belt. "Here. Just in case the facts *are* different from the face of appearances. Made us feel a little like horse thieves, just in case you're not one. But we *are* keeping the bullets."

"Takes more courage to admit a mistake, sometimes, than it does to do a thing right in the first place." He strapped the belt around his midriff.

"Here. Can't let even a polecat starve." From her saddlebag she produced a paper-wrapped parcel and tossed it to him. "Sandwiches. It's a long walk to town...unless you decide to steal a horse from those no-good nesters over the hill." She gestured contemptuously to the southeast.

"Put that rifle down for a couple minutes and I'll turn you over my

knee, Audrey," said Larribee with great calmness.

She glared at his lean-looking 192 pounds and snapped: "You wouldn't be man enough!"

"You're a *mighty* fetchin' girl, Audrey. A blame sight better'n Millie on the whole, come to think of it."

"Who's Millie? The devil with Millie!" There was a trace of peculiar expression on her face for a moment. "Vamoose! And don't come back."

He turned and headed up the trail south. He could feel her sitting there watching him balefully and maybe a trace confused. Presently he heard the pinto heading back to the house.

After a time Larribee reached the top of the valley trail's incline. As far as he could see south there was nothing but dry brown foothills and scrubby valleys, which tapered off into rolling plains at the horizon. Not a sign of a house anywhere.

He took the trail to the left, eastward. She'd mentioned that there were some nesters over the hills. The nesters might have a horse to sell.

This easterly trail was little used. It ran along a cleft in the hill to the south of the artesian well and its sizable storage lake. The well's big pipe, sticking up out of the ground, was capped. Underwood didn't want to waste its water or its natural pressure in a dry year. The lake was 50 or 60 feet above the level of the valley. A big flume carried the clear water down for irrigation purposes.

Larribee's feet ached almost as much as his tooth when he reached the lake. But, he decided, as long as you ache you're sure you're alive. He removed his boots and socks, soaked his feet and looped down the slope to the east. There was a cluster of unpainted rickety buildings, parts of two haystacks brown as the taste in a drunkard's mouth, and a few thin animals grazing dispiritedly on the juiceless grass. Evidently Daniel Underwood didn't feel very neighborly to these neighbors. A wistful-looking and ancient drywash ran down the east slope toward the nesters' buildings.

A BEEFY nester with a heavy face was sitting on the front porch in the shade. He was whittling and he looked up, spat tobacco juice at an enervated grasshopper and said: "Howdy."

"Nice day," said Larribee. "I'm lookin' for a horse and a job. Especially a horse."

The nester squinted at him shrewdly. "Come far?"

"Quite a piece."

"Like walkin'?"

"Nope. Horse busted its leg upcountry."

"Oh." He glanced at the empty loops in the gunbelt.

"Rancher over the hill there took my bullets. Got the drop on me. He wasn't a very trustful Texan."

"Underwood, huh?" The nester's face was mean and crafty for a moment. Presently he looked up. "It so happens I got both a horse an' a job. Job won't start till near daybreak. Tell you about it then. Do the job and I'll give you a horse."

"That sounds fair enough." Larribee gazed at the face. He could almost swear he'd seen it before—and yet he knew he hadn't. He'd seen quite a few men in his time, and they couldn't all look absolutely different. That must be it.

"What kind of dentist are you?" Larribee asked.

"Dentist?"

Larribee pointed at his molar. "Aches like the tines of the devil's pitchfork. Got a cup of whiskey and some thin wire?"

"Why, sure. No need for a man to suffer. Come on in. My name's Smathers, by the way. Hank Smathers."

"Mine's Joe Larribee, includin' the tooth."

They went inside. Smathers poured a tincup full of whiskey. Larribee put a silver dollar on the table to pay for it and drank the whiskey. Smathers found some thin wire and looped it around the tooth, and fixed the other end of the wire to a doorknob. By some simple law of physics, this gives added poundage to the pull. He pushed the door toward Larribee to make slack in the wire and yelled "Ready?" And Larribee yelled "Take it away!" Smathers jerked on the other doorknob with all his 227 pounds.

It nearly tore Larribee's head off,

but it took the tooth. He went out onto the porch and spat blood for a time and came back and said: "You got a place where a man could nap for a couple hours? I'm beat-up from all the walkin'."

"Why, sure. Got a hay mattress out in the woodshed for stray hands."

"Fine. ...You also got a few forty-five shells you could sell me?"

Smathers hesitated and looked at Larribee shrewdly. "You don't feel partial to that selfish ornery Underwood?"

"I wouldn't exactly say I love him like a son."

Smathers grinned, went over to a shelf and came back with a handful of .45 cartridges.

"Much obliged." Larribee tossed another silver dollar onto the table. He put five cartridges into his six-gun and gently lowered the point of the hammer into the empty sixth hole, because such six-guns are only five-guns, actually. The other four he put into the forward loops of the belt. "Just in case a sidewinder tries to bite my ear while I'm asleep."

The woodshed lean-to was alongside the rear of the house. Larribee spread his blankets on the hay and remembered the sandwiches she'd given him. He took them out of a saddlebag and ate them. Tasty, despite the sore gap in his crockery.

He stretched out and briefly thought of Millie and of love, the emotional jail which is walled-in by delusions. He'd been a tophand two years for her rancher father, with a sort of understanding he'd be promoted to foreman if he married Millie. But Millie had gone to college in the East and the banker's son had gone to one nearby—and Millie had come to her senses in time.

Larribee dozed off, thinking of patience and the face of things. Presently Millie became a wraith pushed into the background by another female, a Miss Underwood.

ABOUT SIX o'clock Smathers came out and awakened him. Larribee went in and partook lightly of a supper consisting of tough beef, soured boiled beans, fried potatoes soggy with grease, and biscuits hard enough to knock a bull unconscious from ten paces. For this he offered no payment. A sullen and shifty-eyed cowhand named Jacoby shared this repast. Evidently he'd been working out there in the brownness somewhere this afternoon.

Larribee felt sleepy still. He said: "Much obliged for the chuck. I need some more shuteye."

"Good idea," said Smathers, eyeing him thoughtfully. "We start the job along about sunup."

Larribee quite literally hit the hay again. He wondered about the mysterious job. For it he had neither the face of things nor the facts. For a horse, however, the kingdom of anything reasonable!...

It was perhaps half an hour before sunrise that Larribee awakened. Heavy voice, toned down, were talking across the wall in the combination kitchen and dining-room.

Hank Smathers was saying: "Pete got back from his—hrrumph!—business trip about an hour ago. Here's your money. ...You sure your surveyin' papers look all legal?"

"They don't only *look* legal—they *are* legal," a primmer voice snapped. "I'm the county surveyor—re*mem*ber? If I say a legal resurvey proves that well and that lake are on your property, then it's a fact. The sheriff couldn't prove any different, even if the drunken idiot wanted to try." There was a significant pause and the voice added: "You and your brother kindly remember *I'm* the one who's getting you that water. One third of the profits are mine for the next twenty years—and those profits should be big."

A Larribee ear was against a crack and he was making gently disarming snoring sounds through this exchange of slightly mistrustful reminders.

"Since Underwood hit that well three and a half years ago," the surveyor continued, "he's made a hundred thousand bucks net off his fat cattle—while other ranchers in this section were losing money or going broke. Water weighs heavy as gold."

Hank Smathers coughed. "That's what Pete an' I figured when we bought this spread from those no-ac-

count nesters. If we could get hold of that water, we'd be made."

"We'll all be made," the surveyor stated testily. He paused again. "And just in case you and Pete have some notion of putting a slug through my back to increase your profits...I've got a full statement signed, sealed and salted. Anything happens to me, a friend'll find the paper where it's hidden—and there'll be a vigilante posse to straighten you out. *I* may be broke and dead...but so'll you and Pete be."

Hank seemed to be biting off a chew of tobacco. Presently he said: "Don't trust us, huh?"

"Hell no!" said the surveyor. "Why would I trust a couple of do-gooders like you? ...Where's Pete?"

"He went up to plant the dynamite."

"Dynamite?"

"Yes. Those Underwoods're tough. The younguns take after the old man. Even the girl's sort of a she-buffalo. Me'n Pete went over to pay a social call when we came here couple months ago. Pete was kinda took by the girl's shape—and damn' if she didn't run us both off with a shotgun."

"So?"

"Well, Pete plants the dynamite... and if they happen to be trespassin' on *our* property and don't get out of the way..."

Larribee listened. Presently he had control of both the facts and the face of appearances. One of the facts was that the Underwoods had no friends in the county. They remained aloof even when they went to town for groceries. And they had no use for the drunken sheriff or his deputy. Underwood had asked them to come out to investigate some stock losses, but they hadn't done it.

The surveyor inquired: "Who's that snoring?"

Hank said: "Saddle tramp. Drifted in afoot yesterday. He's got no use for Underwood. I hired his gun and him...."

Larribee was still snoring noisily when Hank Smathers came to awaken him a few minutes later. The sun was rising.

"Time to start. Larribee. Come in an' have some coffee."

Larribee "awoke" woozily, with elaborate yawns, looked stupid, rubbed his eyes. "No night's ever long enough."

"Har. Come swaller some coffee and we get goin'."

The sullen Jacoby and the surveyor were already drinking rancid coffee. The surveyor was thin and prim-looking and dressed in a town-type suit of medium gray. Smathers introduced Larribee briefly and poured a tincup full of the stuff.

"What's the job?" Larribee asked. "A roundup?"

"Kind of." Smathers looked at him for a time. "Underwood's been stealin' our water. We aim to change that. All you got to do is look tough and say nothin'. Don't shoot unless it looks as if you're goin' to be shot *at*. Ain't that a simple way to earn a horse?"

"Seldom heard of a simpler one."

They finished the coffee. Hank said: "We'll walk up."

IT WAS NOT a long walk. A quarter of a mile or so across a dried-up pasture and then a two-minute climb up the hill to the lake. Most of the east wall of the lake was manmade of stone and earth. The wall was about six feet wide and flat on top. The water was up to within a foot of the top.

As the four approached lake level, Larribee scrutinized the face of the wall. Sure enough, a niche had been gouged into the face of the wall four feet from the top. Six sticks of dynamite were in that niche. A long fuse led to a thick clump of bushes toward the north and slightly east of the wall. Anyone standing on the wall would be unable to see the fuse.

Hank Smathers bellowed: "Pete! You there? All set?"

From the thickly concealing clump of bushes: "All set!"

"Stay hid," Hank ordered. "Remember Underwood's got a telescope. We won't have long to wait."

"I got the drop on 'em double when they get here!"

Pete Smathers' voice sounded quite familiar to Larribee, somehow. But there was nothing positive about the recognition.

"All right." Hank gestured to the surveyor. "Pin your legal notices on

some trees—on *their* side of the lake."

The surveyor moved to the southwest end of the lake, tacked a notice to a cottonwood. He walked along the west side of the lake to the northwest corner, tacked a similar notice—which stated that a resurvey now legally established that this lake, well, and property east of the two notices, and by extension for more than a mile, belonged to Henry and Peter Smathers.

This done, the surveyor rejoined Hank and Larribee and the sullen Jacoby atop the middle of the east wall. Larribee wondered what Pete Smathers was thinking about now... looking at him, Larribee, from concealment. Pete must be slightly confused—if Pete happened to be a recent acquaintance, that was.

They *hadn't* long to wait. Underwood could see them clearly through his telescope from the ranchhouse. A few minutes later three riders, prodding their mounts to top speed uphill, came out of the woods at the north end of the lake near the big artesian pipe. Underwood and son and daughter, eyes narrowed, came off their horses in a hurry. The son was about 20. Evidently he'd been at work far from the house yesterday. Audrey had the rifle in the crook of her arm. The two males kept their guns in the holsters at this point.

"What the devil's goin' on up here?" Underwood roared.

"My name's Meade. I'm the county surveyor." He pointed at the two notices. "My recent resurvey shows there was a big mistake in the original survey of this section. All the land east of the two notices is the rightful legal property of Henry and Peter Smathers. Such land includes the well and lake, sir."

Underwood beetled. "You swindlers!" he roared. The .44 came out of the hoslter into his hand. He crouched and pointed the weapon at Hank's big belly in particular.

"I'm willin' to be reasonable," Hank stated. "I'll give you enough water for your stock and even a little for irrigation when I can spare it. Nothin' tightfisted about me."

"Hightail it before I blow the whole lot of you to hellangone!" the fiercenatured Underwood shouted.

Hank shrugged. "Gonna be tough about it, huh? I hope you realize you're trespassin'."

AUDREY, with both pert eyes slitted, was glaring contemptuously at Larribee. "So you're one of 'em." Scathing.

"Looks that way, doesn't it, sugarplum?" Larribee said.

At that moment Pete Smathers stepped out of his concealing bushes, .45 in hand. He was at a slight angle behind the three Underwoods. Pete calmly squeezed the trigger and the slug nicked the crown of Underwood's big white hat.

"Drop all three guns!" Pete ordered.

Underwood started to whirl, thought better of it—and dropped the .44 at his feet on the top of the wall. Audrey and the youth jerked their heads around for a quick look, and dropped their own weapons. Each Underwood was obviously afraid of getting one of the others shot needlessly.

"Move out to the middle of the wall!" Pete commanded.

Larribee's eyes started narrowing at the sight of Pete.

Yesterday Pete Smathers' name, for convenience, had been Dave Upton. All the facts fell into place for Larribee suddenly: Pete had stolen those horses from Underwood the night before and headed north to sell them... to get some money to make a down payment to this surveyor...so the surveyor would swindle the Underwoods out of their water legally. Neat!

Hank and Jacoby and Larribee backed to the south end of the wall. The Underwood trio moved slowly from the north end to the middle, looking enraged but bewildered too.

Larribee's range-trained ears heard a faint hissing sound to the northeast. He looked toward the shrubbery where Pete had lain in wait. Sure enough. Pete had lighted the fuse. It was about 30 feet long. Larribee estimated it would take maybe two minutes for the fuse to burn to the sticks. When those sticks exploded beneath the trio, perhaps the explosion wouldn't kill them outright. But it

certainly would knock them cold. And when the water rushed through the gap, the three of them would drown.

Neat. No bullet holes. Some trespassers drowned when they didn't get out of the way of a blast in time. Neat enough for a no-good sheriff and deputy. Especially when these Underwoods had no friends hereabouts.

Larribee backed to the end of the wall, dropped suddenly down onto the hillside so there were no Underwoods between him and Pete. Then Larribee yelled:

"Pete! You horse thief Try *me!*"

Pete blinked in surprise. He'd recognized Larribee earlier...but he didn't know what all had happened to Larribee since the drifter from Wyoming had bought that sorrel. Pete had been uneasy about it these past few minutes—but then Larribee had appeared to be solidly on the Smathers team....

Now, as Pete swung his gun hand around toward Larribee, the man from Wyoming brought the .45 out of its holster faster than ever before. The .45 roared. Pete Smathers clutched at his bloody right shoulder and dropped his gun. Pete's shakily aimed bullet plowed into the foliage behind Larribee.

Larribee swung his weapon smoothly to the left—just as the surveyor dived flat onto the ground and Hank and Jacoby brought their guns out of the holsters. Right now, Larribee decided, speed was the upper half of philosophy.

He got Hank through the bulky forearm and Jacoby through the shoulder. Their guns went off in erratic reflex, but the slugs were far from the target. The surveyor made no try for Larribee at all, having no stomach for gunfighting.

BY THAT time the three Underwoods had dived for their weapons, and come up with them.

Pete was bringing his gun off the ground with his left hand. Underwood shot him through the left shoulder with the .44.

Larribee yelled at the trio: "Get off that wall, quick! And don't ask questions!" He glanced down at the fuse. It had less than a minute to go.

Now Larribee gestured to the surveyor and Hank and Jacoby with his gun. "All right, you brave groundhogs—get out to the middle of that wall and see how it feels to be blowed to hell!"

Hank's eyes bulged and he gulped. Jacoby went pale and the surveyor, now standing up with his hands raised, went paler.

"That's murder!" Hank blubbered.

"It'd have been murder for them, too," Larribee said. "You have a choice—out to the center or get a slug through each of your bellies!"

Neither choice offered any great advantage. But they decided on the dynamite. They edged reluctantly toward the center of the wall. Meanwhile, Underwood was standing at the north end with one foot on Pete's neck, and they all were staring at the scene. By now they could hear the burning fuse.

Larribee talked fast: "You willing to sell your spread to Underwood lock, stock and brownness—if he writes you a good check and lets you cash it?"

"Hell yes! *Get us off here, Larribee!*" Hank was blubbering and wild-eyed with fear. The other two didn't look much happier.

"All right." Larribee turned eyes right, aimed calmly and shot the fuse in two about three feet short of the sticks. The severed section burned to its end and went dead.

The three men on the wall were sweating almost as heavily as they were bleeding.

Larribee looked at Underwood. "That's the only way to do it: *buy* their mangy spread. In wet years you'll have enough water to irrigate at least part of it. Write 'em a check for a reasonable amount. We herd 'em to town and they cash the check so it's all legal. Then we take 'em to the sheriff and file a charge of attempted murder. If it doesn't stick with the sheriff, we'll call in some Rangers... and it'll sure as hell stick with *them.* That's because we're gonna have written *proof* about this whole swindle." He looked at the surveyor.

The man's face went white as a trout's belly. "What?"

"That tidy little document you salted with a friend—in case these two

brothers decided to backshoot you later on. You're gonna dig that document up. It admits the whole deal. If you *don't* dig it up before we talk to the Rangers, then I'm gonna shoot your teeth right back through your tonsils." He gestured with the gun. "Move on down the hill, the whole lot of you. We'll leave the dynamite where it is, in case the Rangers want to see for themselves." He grinned wickedly at the surveyor. "I could hear right through my snores this mornin'."

They moved, bleeding all over the landscape even after Audrey applied crude bandages with their shirts.

Underwood smiled faintly and stuck out his hand. "Come to think of it, you didn't look quite like a horse thief."

"Come to think of it, I didn't feel like one." Larribee smiled philosophically at Audrey.

"How'd you like some strawberry shortcake, some evening. Can you imagine the fact of shortcake with ice cream?"

"Yes. And I can imagine the appearance of my face, too," said Larribee. "The fact is it'd look mighty contented."

They herded the others down the hill ahead of them. ●END

IT WAS A LASS-ROPE ALL RIGHT

(cont'd from pg. 43)

blood, the paint he'd daubed on bare skin showed plain. Jean Marie saw, and her face went white.

"But I—I don't understand," she whispered. "About his being a renegade, yes. But that they should kill him—"

"That was a mistake," Boone explained. "He evidently aimed to slip into camp and make sure there was plenty of confusion. And thought he could make himself look like one of us by wearing one of our shirts. He found mine—which was his bad luck."

Jean Marie frowned her puzzlement.

"I watched him take the wrong pail when you asked him to fetch that red one," Boone went on. "And he hadn't noticed the stain on that arrow. So I reckon he was color-blind. But he'd heard everybody talk about my red shirt."

Horror came with understanding. "And he told the Indians to be sure and kill the man with the red shirt," Jean Marie gasped.

Feeling so wrought up, she came as close to swooning as a pioneer woman could let herself go. That brought her into Boone's arms. His luck was running high. ●END

GOLD BULLETS

(cont'd from pg. 15)

Matt's middle, hate and vengeance and desperation in his manner.

"So you have gold, eh? Trying to hold out on me?" He moved toward the prospector, eyes staring and unblinking.

MATT TRIED putting the sack behind his back, out of reach.

"Give me!" the man commanded through clenched teeth. He reached out and took the sack. He quickly thrust it into a jacket pocket.

Durango grinned, "Know me, don't you? Well you ain't going to talk!"

He pulled the trigger. It clicked. He worked the lever, then pulled the trigger the second time. It still refused to fire. He realized that it was empty. He cursed. He was panicky.

He turned around again. Matt Webb was ready for him with a stick he'd picked up. The wood cracked against the man's face. It was a stunning blow. Old Matt used his left hand to knock the rifle from the killer's grip. He gave Durango a hard prod in the stomach. Durango doubled over in pain, then slowly sank to the floor.

Matt Webb bent over the groaning killer and reached in the jacket pocket. He took out the sack and picked up the fallen rifle. Quickly he untied the leather pouch and took out a handful of cartridges. "This what you were looking for?" he said. "It's my gold, all right."

Jake Durango couldn't say anything, just stared at him dazedly.

"Haven't found a bit of color yet, like I told you," Matt said, leveling the now loaded gun at the killer. "But I'll be two hundred and fifty dollars richer—when I collect the bounty on you!" ●END

HIS BLOOD IN IT

by L. V. PIDGEON

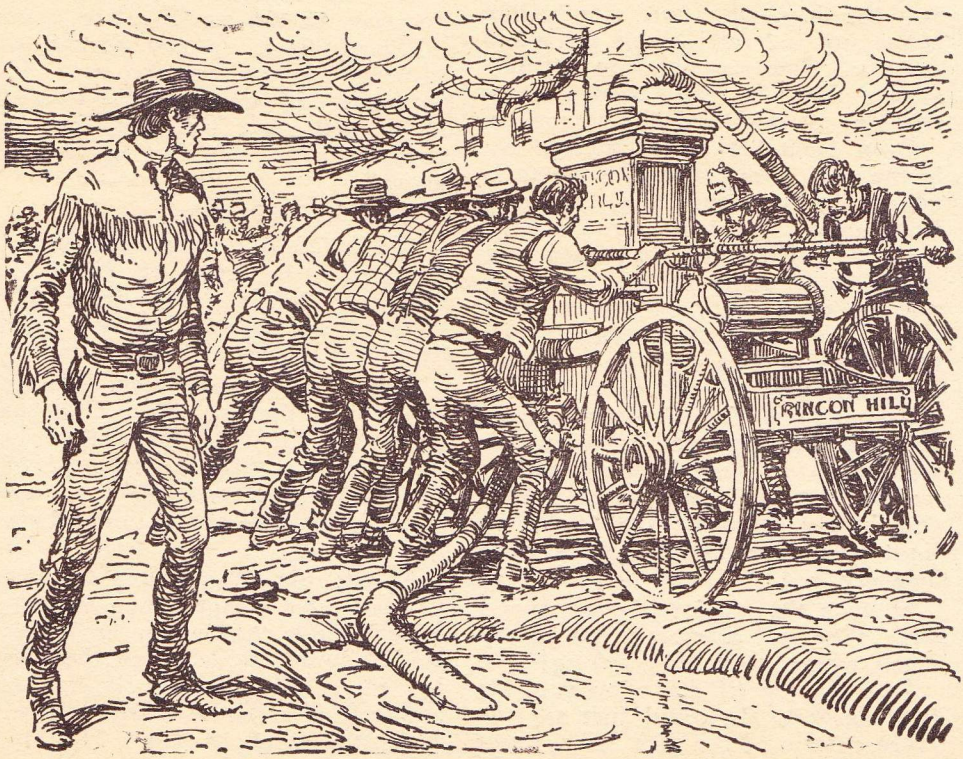
Riding free and wild, Sam Morrey hadn't paid much for his living. Maybe now, at last, he must settle the full account....

SAM MORREY was never too certain how he got himself mixed up with the Foxtail, nor how it changed his life from an easy, drifting adventure to one of some toil and dedication. In the ten years since he'd come West at sixteen, he had seen strange things happen to other men—trail-blazers turned into shopkeepers and farmers. He'd seen them married one by one to some great purpose, like digging gold or plowing earth for crops.

Sam had no heart for it. He'd kept store once—even tended school in St. Louis for a while till the fever near killed him. He'd come West then, free for the canoe and Kanakas and the sea otter along the Monterey coast and the channel islands to the south. He had his freedom and money from the pelt and, at intervals, he had the wild, free run of San Francisco while his want and money held out.

Still, at twenty-six, a seed of discontent was stirring. He was a purposeless man. And it was on a certain damp, wind-blown evening while he was standing feeling whisky-sad in front of Flood and O'Brien's saloon on Washington Street, that the change took place.

He saw the Foxtail, which in itself and at the time however, was not enough. It was a grand sight, though; flying as a proud trophy on the hand



engine of the fleetest and most expert volunteer fire crew in the city. It stood for many things that Sam Morrey was ignorant of on the evening he first beheld it.

The manner of his seeing it is important. There had been nothing in Flood and O'Brien's saloon during the course of an hour's time which had done more than slack his thirst tastefully. And it was pure coincidence that he should step outside at the precise moment when the great clang of the firebell sounded at the City Hall. He simply happened to be standing there innocently—in the way—when the torch boys came down the street on his like hideously screaming shadows.

Sam knew about the torch boys. When there was a night fire, they rushed to their favorite stations and grabbed torches and lighted the way so the men pulling engine could keep their feet and skirt the murderous chuckholes.

Sam Morrey knew, all right, but on this evening when the pack suddenly was upon him he was befuddled, tripped and sprawled ingloriously in the mud. He heard an angry howl and saw the boy who had struck him bounce up and retrieve his torch and speed on. Sam scrambled to the side of the street as the firemen came, straining at rope and engine tongue.

Even from his spread-eagled seat in the mud, Sam thrilled to the spectacle. He saw the long spanners flopping at the belts of the elite pipe men—the heavy-duty men who would battle other crews at the cistern to couple blunderbuss to hose and draw water first. There were that close to Sam they had to slow down and veer off and curse him.

And in all the foolish scramble Sam, being a hunting man, spotted the wondrous fur piece flopping wildly on the engine. It was there briefly and barely gone in the flickering light when Sam heard a girl's voice berating him.

"I wish they had run over you! I wish they had trampled you in the muck where your kind belong!"

Sam Morrey climbed slowly to his full six feet. He could just see the tense outline of the girl. "They most trampled me, all right," he said testily, "and you're talking like no proper lady."

"Wallowing in the mud in the path of the finest fire crew this city has!" She was small and fierce and her words fairly scorched him.

"I was not wallowing," retorted Sam with some dignity. "I was struck down by a young fiend waving a torch in my face."

"They'll lose it—for your drunken clumsiness! They'll lose the thing that's worth a dozen lives like yours!"

"And what might they lose?" said Sam, interested.

"The Foxtail!" The girl packed the power of sacred fury into the word. Sam felt it touch him like a mighty unseen finger. He still felt it after the girl vanished in the night and he was surrounded by her voice and tantalizing scent.

SAMUEL MORREY retraced his steps the next morning as cunningly as if he were tracking game. The night before had been a bewildering one. A word, spoken fiercely by a fierce young woman, still rang in his ears.

On Washington Street, Sam asked his way to the nearest fire house.

"Third block up and around the corner." The storekeeper eyed Sam shrewdly. "If you've got the strength to go with your size, they can use you. They lost it last night, you know."

"Lost it?" said Sam.

"The Foxtail. Some slob fell in their path in front of Flood and O'Brien's saloon. They were third crew at the cistern. It's enough to make a man cry and get drunk."

Sam Morrey walked on. The sun fumbled at the fog like a fisherman gathering his nets. The sight was weird and beautiful to him and tracking the Foxtail—symbol of the city's finest fire crew—stirred him strangely.

At the two-story frame firehouse a dozen sour-visaged men ringed a massive table. As Sam entered, Lucifer Halloran, foreman of the crew, looked up. His face had the bold cut and heft of cliff rock Sam had seen along the southern coast. His voice came like a command.

"Move on, mister, we're having a meeting."

"I'd like to join up," Sam said quietly.

Lucifer weighed him for size and sinew, eyed his mountain dress. "You don't join. You get elected. Know anything about fighting fires?"

"I know hunting and trapping."

The big man nodded abruptly. "Blood and buckskins tell as much. Go over to Empire One. They're fire-fighters of a sort, but mainly they shoot rifles at picnics. They'll take you in."

He turned his attention back to the table, dismissing the stranger.

"I hear you lost it," Sam said.

Lucifer Halloran jerked his chair around so that he could look directly at Sam. "We lost it," he fairly shouted. "What'll you make of it?"

The other men at the table stirred angrily and one stood up and moved around toward Sam.

"I'll work to get it back," said Sam.

"Fling him out the door, Pete," the foreman yelled.

The man approaching Sam was deliberate, a young, thickly-built man on cat feet. The black eyes in the broad, tense face were purely hostile. He reached for Sam's jacket front and caught thin air. Sam slid sideways and brought a knee crashing into the man's belly. His elbow collided murderously with the man's ear as he went down on his hands and knees. Sam raised a hard, flat hand for a chop across the back of the neck, when Halloran's roar stopped him.

"Hold up, you tree-fightin' wildcat, before I sic the pack on you!"

Sam obliged by stepping back. "Man fights like that belongs in a poor outfit," he said bluntly. "Really poor."

Pete's reaction was swift and dedicated. He came up off the foor with a spanner swinging and caught Sam soundly across the brow.

THE FACE—the girl's face—was close and disturbingly pretty to look at when Sam came to. Dark eyes studied him worriedly and a cool, moist rag was staunching the blood flow from his head.

Sam sat up gingerly and felt of the wound. The street swooned and faded, then righted itself and swooned again. The girl handed him the rag and settled back on the wooden box she had placed beside him.

They were plumb in the street in front of the firehouse. From time to time, the girl would blithely wave off passers-by who would stop to offer help. To Sam, who caught brief but clear glimpses of her, she appeared composed, matter-of-fact about the situation. When she looked at him, there was a hint of scorn mingled with the worry in her eyes.

"I'm grateful," said Sam thickly.

"You're lucky," the girl retorted.

"Regular alligators," said Sam. "Came near eating me up."

"For why?"

Sam shrugged. "Volunteered to join up. Told the big grizzly-face in charge I'd help them get the Foxtail back."

The girl stiffened. "The 'big grizzly-face' is my father, mister. I am Nora Halloran."

Sam focused on her clearly for the first time. He recollected the edge of fine temper in the voice. She was the same—same girl who was in front of Flood and O'Brien's the night before.

"What else did you do?" she said.

"Young horse named Pete came after me and I set him on the floor."

"Pete doesn't set on the floor easy," the girl said defiantly. "You must have tricked him."

"I set him on the floor fair," Sam said doggedly.

The girl's lips curved in bittersweet scorn for one Sam Morrey. "You couldn't have—not fair, mister."

Sam felt his temperature rise. No sense for her to sting like that. "I told them all the outfit was plumb poor," he said flatly.

"And you'd make it plumb rich, I suppose!"

"I'd help, maybe."

"No you wouldn't." The girl stood up and kicked the box aside. "I know your kind, mister. You're a wanderer—a buckskin man for the back country. Cities are too much for you!"

"Now you whoa," said Sam, struggling to his feet. "You'll get me riled. I come here to volunteer for the fire crew. I get insulted, banged with a spanner, tossed out in the street and

tongue-whipped by a young female. It's plumb infuriating."

The girls dark eyes were a challenge. A smile, ever so light, softened her lips. "We could be wrong." She nodded toward the firehouse. "Why don't you try again?"

SEVERAL days and two fire calls later Sam Morrey was still wondering why he did it. Pete Hurrell, crew boss under Halloran, was carrying a heavy load of grudge. He had talked loud and mean when Sam had walked back into the firehouse that first day, all bloodied up.

The big man had taken one look and roared with laughter. He told Sam to stay on, if he was so blamed determined. He said he'd even gamble on a crazy buckskin, if it would help to get the Foxtail back.

In the next few days, Pete Hurrell had grown quieter and some degrees deadlier. Sam knew why, for he'd taken to walking Nora Halloran home in the late afternoons from the general store she and Lucifer ran down the street. Sam came to know that the sweetness of these walks was matched ounce for ounce by a mounting bitterness in Pete Hurrell.

And Pete was no man to hide his feelings. He let the "bunkers"—the men who roomed at the firehouse, Sam included—know that the recapture of the Foxtail was important to him, personally.

More important—and more strictly a personal matter—was his passion for Nora. There was no man who could stand in the way of that passion and count on any glorious future.

But Sam, in his innocence, followed feverishly on the trail of disaster. Nora could look at him with her half amused smile and give him the true answer to his strange discontent.

What was the good of otter pelt, or gold dust, or store profits without a woman to share them with? And what was the good of a woman, if she were not the right one? And what woman in all his life held the sting and sweetness of Nora Halloran?

And Nora? She wanted neither profit nor pelt nor, seemingly, Sam himself—but a foxtail!

"A foxtail!" Sam said scornfully, one late afternoon while walking her home. "I can trap you a thousand foxes. I could festoon this street with foxtails. I—"

"Sam Morrey, maybe you could," the girl flared. "But they'd not be worth the one I want!"

So, at two small fires Sam pulled hysterically at the engine rope and won some respect from the crew for his speed and reckless daring. He built a hotter fire, however, than any he helped to quell.

Pete Hurrell made his move on an evening of the third week. After mealtime and several of the bunkers had drifted off and there were maybe half a dozen still around the table, Pete said, "Sam, what is it you want around this place?"

It was a question that came suddenly, as a surprise, and stopped all talk around the table. It was somehow hostile and like a trap, but too clever a trap for the men to fathom.

After a moment, Sam replied. "I'd want the pipe," he said evenly.

Pete nodded quickly, satisfied. He looked around at the others. "The pipe on my side of the engine tongue goes to the buckskin next time out."

That was all he said and it was decided. It meant Sam would hold the pipe—or blunderbuss—in the battle with other crews at the cistern. To hold the pipe was an honor, but this time the awarding of it to Sam came like a challenge.

Sam got up slowly from the table and wandered outside. The strange and rebellious young city around him, in its fold of sandhills, was stretching and coming awake for a gaudy night. Halloran's huge figure was seen approaching down the street. Sam folded his arms, leaned back against the building and waited in silence.

When Lucifer drew abreast he neither spoke nor nodded. He just stood there for several moments, large and poised, seeming to size up the night.

"Wind drifting from the northeast," he said finally. "Good to know if we catch a blaze."

"Pretty damp, though."

Lucifer g r u n t e d. "Fire'll run through this town in a rainstorm, if it gets started. Wood and canvas is made to burn."

"You take fires mighty serious," said Sam.

Lucifer's eyes were on him quick and hard. "Two years ago I came here with my wife Peggy and Nora, headed for the Mother Lode. Fire caught us on the second floor of a rooming house early one morning. I got Nora to the window when the wall gave. We landed bruised and scorched up some, but Peggy never got away."

"That's a powerful reason to hate fires," Sam said quietly.

Lucifer looked away. "We stayed on here—Nora and me. Opened a general store which has done well. Then we started this firehouse and I'm proud of it. I've got my blood in it. I'm paying a debt to Peggy. I'm fighting a devil that's growing and fixing to kill this town."

Lucifer took out a pipe and lit it with deliberation. "I don't generally talk so much," he said. He walked alone up the street toward home.

Sam watched and thought about a man who had his "blood" in something. Sam was a wandering man who hadn't paid much yet for his living.

SOME HOURS later a light wind was whipping fog when the spark caught in a shack on Rincon Hill.

The lick of flame ate slowly up a plank wall, drafted through a patched ceiling and moved to the shack next door. A man in a nightshirt came running out, uttered a single oath and sent his boy flying to town.

The flame gained body along the roof and leapt with wind-fanned vigor to a two-story frame warehouse. It spread greedily across the dry siding, edging toward a heavy barge rafter.

The man who had sent his boy flying through the night for help was suddenly overcome with fright. He knew, too well, the warehouse held oil and lards enough to explode deadly yellow fingers across the whole neighborhood. In the distance he heard the great bell sound its alarm.

In midtown torch boys skimmed down Montgomery Street toward Seventh District which encompassed Rincon Hill. Close behind, with its Foxtail jerking madly, Ten Engine settled down to the race of its life. On its heels was the crew and engine of Lucifer Halloran.

Pete Hurrell on the tongue of Halloran's engine that night, and Sam Morrey leading on the rope, pulled desperately, their heads filled with Lucifer's thunderous shouts. The big foreman sensed the Foxtail—if the crew mixed sweat and luck enough with his prayers.

Pete's frantic tugging on the wagon tongue was being matched by Sam's on the rope. Lucifer blessed and cursed them both as they drew abreast Ten Engine at the second block. And Lucifer, too, planned ahead to the crucial seconds that would come at the cistern. The pounding feet of his foe —the men of Ten Engine—drummed on mercilessly. Their screams and oaths mingled with his own.

The Hill came finally, with men of both crews down and exhausted along the way. As the white glare of the warehouse grew b r i g h t, Lucifer picked his moment and dropped behind. Grabbing suddenly and powerfully at the rear of his engine, he lifted, hurling it forward to the cistern.

The sudden forward heave sent men reeling and sprawling. But Lucifer gained his priceless seconds. He had his engine lodged first at the cistern and now he must be first to draw water. Ten Engeine men yelled and fought for space around him.

Lucifer glimpsed Sam Morrey in the melee. Sam was working deftly with his spanner, first on the skulls of Ten Engine men, parrying murderous blows, then finally coupling hose to blunderbuss. He jammed pipe into cistern at last, and caught the first wild surge of water.

Lucifer stayed just long enough to know he had the Foxtail won. Then he moved away to direct his hosemen and shingle-eaters in their attack on the warehouse.

Sam Morrey clung stubbornly to pipe. He suffered blows from the wild-swinging spanners of Ten Engine men. He absorbed the stamping and crush of bodies and lung-bursting gushers of water which struck him at intervals. His blunderbuss of leather and copper rivets sucked with almost overpowering force at the cistern water. Gradually it grew on him—a

mounting, almost savage joy in holding his pipe there against all-comers.

Heat came in blistering gusts from the warehouse. Between times Sam could make out the men around him. Just once Pete Hurrell's intense, sweaty face swam close and then faded off in the struggling mass.

Rooted there at the cistern with both hands gripped to the pipe, Sam experienced a sudden, oppressive sense of danger. He knew the pipe would lash high and away if he released his hold for a second. To hang on—anything might happen in a melee so wild that no man could know who was responsible.

Sam was well trapped. Lucifer—Nora—the crew—none would understand if he released the pipe. He had no reason to, except for the flash of naked hatred he'd seen in the eyes of Pete. And Pete was lurking now in the swelling crowd at the cistern.

THUNDER came first; a mighty clap of crumbling joists as the warehouse roof collapsed in an inferno of timber and merchandise.

Hosemen and shingle-eaters were driven far back and a wave of intense heat washed over the men at the cistern. Sam felt as if his face were bursting, peeling away. He caught a glimpse of the big Ten Engine blunderbuss breaking free from the cistern and hurling its pipe man into the retreating crowd.

Lucifer formed a new line, marshaled volunteers for another assault on the building. His "blood" was in the job at hand. His force carried strength and truth to men who were on the thin edge of panic: if they stood fast now, the holocaust couldn't spread.

Sam saw and understood and held the pipe with his last ounce of strength. His water coursed up through blunderbuss and hose to where Lucifer had made his stand.

He glimpsed Pete Hurrell only briefly before he heard his words. In the scorched and jamming crowd swirling once more around the cistern, Pete was suddenly beside him.

"This is for Nora, Mr. Buckskin," he said clearly.

There was a swift lick of steel as the knife darted. Sam sucked in his belly and twisted half away. Then Pete was gone. The blade caught layer flesh on Sam's thigh and held. Sam felt the pipe leap upward in his weakened grasp. He threw his weight against it once more and his cry brought Lucifer charging toward him, grabbing powerfully at the pipe....

WHEN SAM awoke at the firehouse he saw the Foxtail tied proudly to Halloran's hand engine. He also heard the celebration that others for blocks around were hearing. He was stretched out on a cot.

It was somehow a familiar and sweet awakening for Samuel Morrey. He knew before he saw the girl that she would be somewhere close. She always was.

And then she spoke. "It's past time to wake up, Sam. There's a party running."

Sam shifted to look at her and winced at the deep, sharp ache in his side. The girl moved around into his line of vision. She slipped a hand into his.

"You get into terrible troubles, mister," she said.

"Because I like it so fine when I wake up," Sam grinned.

Lucifer Halloran appeared over him. "The fire is out," he announced. "The Foxtail is where it rightly belongs and how is the scratch you got?"

"Dr. Haley said the scratch was inches from killing him," said Nora indignantly.

Lucifer's eyes had a merry gleam in them. "My daughter, the man would not dare to die, with you hanging on to him like that."

"Where is Pete?" Sam said quietly.

Lucifer sobered. "Nowhere about since the fire and it's not like him." But the flicker in his eye told Sam that he knew, and that he knew too that Pete would not be "about" any more.

After Lucifer had gone, Nora said, "They're taking you to the house after the celebration. Father ordered it, just till you get well."

"I'll likely languish," said Sam, "for some years."

"A man who takes the Foxtail has certain prerogatives," said Nora Halloran with a wide, warm smile.

RAW-RED LAW OF THE REBEL LEGION

TIME ★ HONORED WESTERN CLASSIC

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

A fighting man, was Dan Casey, whose range luck always ran good...

THE PHILOSOPHERS say that it is a thin line between love and hate. Maybe this is so. Dan Casey was in no mood to meditate on the subject. He only knew that a week before Rose O'Hearn had promised to marry him. Then, for no reason at all, she had disappeared from Central City. She had left without sending word to him, and that, to Dan Casey was proof enough that everything she'd told him had been lies.

Dismounting in the Elephant Corral, Casey lurched into the Denver House, bone-weary from the long ride and soul-sour. He didn't want to see Rose again. He didn't want to hear her name. He'd get drunk enough here in Denver to forget her, and then he'd light out for California.

A lanky man, this Dan Casey, long-boned and long-muscled, with a reputation in Central City as a fighting man whose luck always ran good. He'd sold his claim for the gold that was heavy now around his middle, but if anybody had called him Good Luck Casey, he'd have laid the man flat with a sledging right to his jaw. What good was it to be lucky if he lost the woman he loved?

Casey rammed his way to the bar, using a pair of hard-swinging elbows to clear his way. If any of the men in his path resented his belligerence, they took a look at his stubble-black face, his dark eyes as sharp as chipped obsidian, his big-knuckled fists, and the .41 stuck in his belt, and forthwith

Then Casey was thrown head-first through the door into the street.

lost their hostile intentions. Casey had one drink. That was as close as he came to getting drunk that night.

Big Red Masters shouldered his way to Casey and laid a hand on his arm. "You're the fellow I'm looking for, Dan. I was making the rounds to pick up a man who could handle a tough job, but I didn't figure I'd be lucky enough to run into you."

Casey shook Masters' hand off, re-

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senting his conclusion that he'd take any job that came along. According to Casey's opinion the big redhead was something of a fool. He'd come down from Central City to serve as an officer in one of Governor's Gilpin's newly-organized volunteer companies, and that, to Casey, made no sense at all.

Sure there'd be fighting back East. Maybe as far west as Missouri. Jeff Davis' boys had Fort Sumter, and it was Casey's guess they'd keep it, but there wasn't any war in the Territory. Gilpin, who hadn't been here long, was seeing a rebel behind every spruce tree in the Rockies, and a bunch of idiots, like Red Masters, had been crazy enough to volunteer.

"I ain't takin' no job," Casey muttered. "I'm heading for California."

Masters' hazel eyes darkened, but he held back the anger that Casey's words raised in him. "Listen, Dan. I didn't know what was going on when I was in Central City, and I reckon you don't know now. There's plenty of hell ready to boil over here in Denver. Just shut your big mouth and listen."

Casey did listen, and what he heard surprised him. A man at the bar was saying loudly, "All the South needs to do is to fire a few shots, and Lincoln's bank clerks will run plumb to Canada."

"Who the devil wants to hold the Union together," the first man snarled. "We'll have the Yankee rag down..."

The other man hit him. Within a few seconds the Confederate sympathizer had been battered to the floor.

MASTERS motioned toward the melee. "It goes on all the time. The town's split right down the middle. They had a rebel flag flying over a warehouse on Larimer street a few days ago. A secesh doesn't have a show here, but it'd be the same thing if a Unionist opened his mouth in the Alamo."

Casey ejaculated, "Golly, I didn't figger it'd get past talk."

"It's a long ways past that," Masters said grimly. "The secesh boys are armed and they're tough. They're in the minority, but most of the Unionists figure like you. That means a small organized outfit can handle the big bunch that thinks different but doesn't do anything but think."

That laid it squarely in Dan Casey's lap. He hadn't had any use for the Confederacy and he didn't now. It was just that the ruckus was a long ways from Colorado and it didn't seem to make much difference to anybody out here one way or the other. Now, looking squarely at Red Masters, he saw that the big man had never been more serious in his life, and Masters wasn't one to get excited without cause. This business of getting drunk to forget Rose O'Hearn could wait.

"All right, Red. What's the job?"

The loud-talking secesh man had been thrown into the street. The Unionists had trooped back to the bar and were celebrating their victory.

"That's all most of them are good for," Masters growled. He put his mouth close to Casey's ear. "The Alamo is the center of sedition. Captain John Tilton owns it. He's a Texan and the boss man of the secesh crowd. Zane Ricker is his trigger boy who does what Tilton schemes up."

Casey nodded. He knew the Alamo well. Zane Ricker was one of the smartest gamblers in Denver, and Casey had lost more money over the table to him than he liked to think about.

"It doesn't do any good to raid the place," Masters went on, "but we've got to know what they're planning. Last week we planted a spy under Tilton's nose. If he finds out why she's there, he'd cut her throat the same as he would a man's."

"You sent a woman there?" Casey demanded.

Masters nodded. "She runs the roulette wheel. She's supposed to find out what they're up to. I don't know whether she has or not. We can't get in to talk to her." Masters grinned ruefully. "I tried it yesterday and the minute Tilton saw me, he had his floormen throw me out. So I'm looking for somebody they won't figure is lined up with us."

"A woman," Casey growled. "Gad,

man, you don't have to fight a war with women."

"A woman makes a better spy for a job like this than a man. She isn't in any danger if you don't give the thing away. Go in like you were drunk. Make a bet or two and let the woman know why you're there. She'll find some way to pass her information along. We've got to know before morning, Dan. When they hit, they'll hit hard, and if we don't stall them, we're gone."

"Where'll you be?"

"I'll stay here," Masters said. "Get word back to me as soon as you can."

Casey nodded. "I've got a little matter to settle with Ricker."

"He's a crook and a killer," Masters said savagely. "Captain Tilton is honest. He believes in what he's doing, but I think Ricker would double-cross Tilton or anybody else if it paid him to go over to the other side."

CASEY SHOVED his way out of the barroom and moved with the crowd toward the Alamo. As always, Denver was aboil this time of night, the streets thronged with miners in from the camps, prospectors, freighters, gamblers, invalids from the East searching for health, and knife-and-gun men on the lookout for a greenhorn victim.

But tonight, more than other nights, it seemed to Casey, an unusual tensioned tightened men's nerve. An aftermath, he thought, from the news of Fort Sumter and the flying of the rebel flag over the warehouse on Larimer street.

Elbowing and battering his way, Casey reached the Alamo and went in, lurching a little as if he were drunk. He saw Captain Tilton standing at the bar, a slim gray-eyed man with a drooping mustache, a brace of guns on his hips and probably a pair of loaded cylinders in his pockets, dipped in beeswax and ready to insert. An honest man, Red Masters had said, and certainly a dangerous one.

Casey ran into a drunk, pawed him aside and lurched on toward the three-card monte game.

"Here you are, gentlemen," the expert was cajoling. "Ace of hearts is the winner. Keep your eyes on it while I shuffle. Gentlemen, I'm betting that my hand is quicker than your eye. Who is game enough to risk fifty?"

Casey made a bet and lost and lurched on to a faro layout. Zane Ricker was dealing, a slim-fingered handsome man with a killer's pale blue eyes. He saw Casey and flashed a grin, white teeth gleaming.

"You busting the bank tonight, bucko?" he asked.

"I ain't lucky," Casey said thickly, and reeled on.

Red Masters had been right. Neither Tilton nor Zane Ricker would suspect that Dan Casey was doing a job for Gilpin's volunteers. He was just another miner in from camp to buck the tiger. If he played his cards right, he'd get out of here before they guessed the truth.

The roulette wheel was in the back. Casey glimpsed the girl, but he could not see her clearly, nor could he hear her above the orchestra playing "Yellow Rose of Texas." He worked his way through the crowd until he was within a few feet of the wheel. He saw the girl clearly now, and even though her back was to him, he knew who she was, and the knowledge of her identity struck him like a slamming fist, blasting wind from him and paralyzing his belly muscles. *She was Rose O'Hearn!*

"Red on fourteen," Rose was calling. "Keep the ball rolling, gentlemen. Black on two."

For a moment Dan Casey was as drunk as he was pretending to be, but not from liquor. First it was relief that he had found Rose. He'd make her talk. Find out why she'd left Central City.

Then fury roared through him. What was the use of asking her anything? She'd pulled out, left him without saying a word, left him to come to Denver to run John Tilton's wheel. All right, darn her. She could go on running it. He'd finish the job Masters had sent him to do, get word back, and light out for California like he'd intended to.

Casey lurched up to the girl, mumbling through thick lips that he was going to beat the wheel. She saw him, and color blazed in her cheeks. Red

lips parted; blue eyes widening in the shock of surprise. And Dan Casey, close now to these lips he had kissed, knew that no matter what Rose O'Hearn had done, she was slim and lithe and lovely in her black velvet gown.

She recovered her equilibrium immediately. "Make your bet," she called. "Keep the ball rolling, gentlemen."

Casey was close to her now, close enough to whisper, "Masters sent me," and staggered away.

There was no sign on her face that she had heard. Casey couldn't tell if Tilton or Ricker was watching. Next time he pawed at her he had to catch her message. They wouldn't let him have another chance.

CASEY BET and lost. Bet again and lost. He cursed, lips slack, and clutched the table to keep from falling. He reeled back to Rose now, mumbling he wanted a kiss for luck.

Rose gripped him, a hand slipping into his coat pocket. "Back stairs. Room 10." She shoved him away then, and he sprawled loose-jointed on the floor.

"He's drunk," John Tilton said harshly, pushing his way through the milling crowd to the wheel. "He hurt you, Rose?"

"No. He's just drunk. Let him go."

"A drunk doesn't bother my girls." Tilton motioned to a floorman.

Casey gained his feet, muttering, "Crooked damned wheel," and took three uncertain steps. The floorman grabbed him by the seat of his pants and his coat collar and propelled him to the door. Casey tried to squirm free, tried to hit the man, and found he could do neither. He was through the doorway, then, plunging head over feet and scooting face down like a sled through the dust of the street.

"Stay out or I'll work you over," the floorman bawled.

Casey came to his feet and shook his fist at the floorman. "Damn you," he cried in cold rage. "You don't work me over. I'll..." His voice trailed off as he remembered he was supposed to be drunk.

The floorman jeered a laugh. "Sure. You'll play rough. Just stay out." Wheeling, he went back in.

Still swaying uncertainly, Casey gained the alley, and discarding his drunken pose, raced along the side of the Alamo. Room 10. She must be going off the wheel before long. But her room would be locked and he couldn't stay in the hall. Then remembering he'd felt her hand in his pocket, he searched it and found a key.

It was black dark behind the Alamo and the alley was cluttered with refuse. He moved slowly, feeling along the dark wall until he came to the stairs. He climbed them, reached the door at the head of the stairs and paused, eyes piercing the tunnel-like gloom of the hall. There was only the one lamp at the far end where the front stairs came from the saloon, but there was enough light for him to see that the hall was empty.

Noise flowed up the open stairway from the lower floor, a strange medley of screechy music, gamblers' calls, and clink of glasses, enough noise, Casey thought, to cover the sound of his footsteps. He catfooted along the hall wall until he reached Number 10. He slid the key into place and turned it. Then his luck soured.

The door across the hall opened and a girl screamed, a shrill sound stabbing the racket from the saloon. Wheeling, Casey shouted, "Shut up," and knew she wouldn't.

Casey shoved a gold piece at her. "Forget you saw me."

But the girl was too scared to take the money. Another scream broke out of her without mental direction. She ducked past him. He grabbed her and knowing immediately it was the wrong thing to do, let her go. She fled along the hall, still screaming, and disappeared down the stairs.

This was fine. There'd be a floorman up here now. Maybe Tilton himself. Casey took a look into the room the girl had left. A lamp on the bureau was burning. There was no place to hide, and he couldn't duck into Rose's room. That would be the first place they'd look. He ran back along the hall. He tried the knob of the end door. It turned and the door swung open. He slid into it just as the girl came back up the stairs with two of Tilton's men.

There was a good deal of loud talk and cursing. One of the men said, "Just a sneak thief prowling to see what he could find. That outside door is supposed to be kept locked."

"But he had a key for Rose's door," the girl said.

THEY WERE inside Rose's room, then. Casey palmed his gun, pulled the door open and pressed against the wall behind it. He heard the floorman come along the hall and look at the outside door. Casey had a bad moment then, when the girl said, "Look into all these rooms, Pete. He may be hiding up here."

"You yelled so loud you probably scared him so bad he jumped plumb across Cherry Creek."

The floorman stepped into the room, said, "Nobody here," and went back along the hall, opening doors and making a hasty search. Casey waited until their steps had died. Then he cautiously looked into the hall, and seeing no one, raced along the wall and ducked into Rose's room.

Casey spent a bad half hour until Rose came, impatience gnawing at him. Red Masters trusted her, or he wouldn't have planted her here as a spy. Casey told himself that maybe it wasn't time for her shift to be finished, that she couldn't afford to make Captain Tilton suspicious, but each minute brought its doubts. How could he trust a woman who couldn't be trusted with his love? Maybe she was double crossing Masters, setting up a gun trap now for Dan Casey.

But she came finally, walking unhurriedly along the hall, opening the door and stepping into the room. She closed the door and stood against it. For a time Casey heard no sound but her breathing. Then she called softly, "Dan."

"Here."

She came to where he stood beside the window. She was close to him; he could smell the fragrance of her hair, feel an uneasy tension that her presence brought.

"I'm glad that you took this job for Masters," she said, "but I'm surprised. You never seem to think of anything but your own problems."

She might as well have slapped him. A lot of right she had to talk—a woman who'd said she'd loved him, who had promised to marry him, walking out the way she had! But she'd done it. The fine dreams he'd dreamed would never be anything more than that, just dreams. Meanwhile, there was no knowing what Tilton and Zane Ricker were doing.

"All right," Casey said impatiently. "I've got a problem, now of getting out of here."

"But Dan...."

"What am I supposed to tell Masters?"

Her breath made a long sigh. "Tell him Captain Tilton has been buying up all the percussion caps that are in Denver. He has more than one hundred men he can trust. Masters will have to move quickly. The only thing Tilton fears is an order to disarm the civilian population. Unless he's stopped now before it's too late...."

The door was slammed open. "Stand where you are." It was Zane Ricker, voice trembling with rage. "There's only one way to treat spies, Rose."

But in his fury the gambler had forgotten that he stood with the hall light to his back, that Casey was invisible against the wall.

"Maybe you'd like to know how we treat traitors," Casey grated. "Put up your hands, Ricker."

The gun in the gambler's hand thundered his answer, the slug slapping into the wall a foot from Casey's head. Casey fired only once. Ricker gave with the impact of the bullet, grabbed at the door casing and held himself erect by the driving power of his will. The flame of life flickered once, giving him strength to drive another bullet. Then his grip loosened and Zane Ricker spilled to the floor.

"Go on." Rose pushed Casey to the door. "Find Masters. Tomorrow may be too late."

"You can't stay...."

"I'll be all right. Go on. You've got to get to Masters."

CASEY RAN out of the room and along the hall to the back door while steps thundered up the stairs. Casey unlocked the door, jerked it open, and plunged through it just as Tilton and half a dozen of his men reached the top of the stairs and

drove a hail of lead after him. Casey was in the alley then. He tripped over a pile of garbage, fell, and lunged on. The secesh men were on the back stairs, firing at the sounds of his pounding feet. Bullets sang a high song as they searched for him, but it was wild shooting, and Casey gained the street with nothing more than a gash along his ribs. A moment later he was panting his story to Red Masters in the Elephant Corral.

Masters nodded grimly. "Thanks, Dan. I'll see the Governor tonight. It is my guess we'll have an order to disarm the civilians like Tilton is afraid we'd do. It'd be a pretty thing for him to have all the precussion caps in the Territory, and his men running roughshod over us. We'd have the rebel flag up all over Colorado." Masters grinned. "What'd you think of finding Rose? I promised her I wouldn't tell..."

Anger roared through Casey. "Didn't I do enough? Do you have to rawhide me because I made a fool of myself over a woman?"

Masters cuffed back his hat. "What are you talking about? Any man including Dan Casey is luckier than he deserves when a woman like Rose O'Hearn loves him."

"Loves me!" Casey's big fist waved under Masters' nose. "Look, you red-haired son. She walked out on me. Didn't leave any word...."

"I made her do it, you muddle-headed idiot. I had to talk for half the night to get her to come here and take this job. She was the only woman I knew of that I could trust. I had to have somebody in the Alamo who was smart enough to find out what Tilton was up to and pretty enough so he'd hire her. She wanted to tell you, but there wasn't time, and I didn't want her telling anybody. Even a blamed fool Irishman named Dan Casey. She said you'd understand there was a good reason..."

So he had been the craziest, most bull-headed idiot who ever misunderstood a woman! He grabbed a handful of Masters' shirt front. "If you've got any fighting men in your soldier outfit, get 'em over there to the Alamo. You haven't got time to see the Governor."

"Now what's the matter with you?"

"I'm going after Rose."

"She's safe enough. Tilton won't know...."

"The devil he won't. I was in her room when Ricker jumped us. I had to kill him to get out."

"But I've got to have orders," Masters cried.

"Forget orders. I'll get her out alone," and Dan Casey headed back to the Alamo on the run.

He should have trusted her! He should have thought of what Tilton would do! He should have got her out when he left! Regret and self-condemnation ran like an acid through him. If Rose died because of his lack of forethought... But it was a prospect that Dan Casey's brain would not hold.

HE PLUNGED down the alley, stumbling through the litter and lunging on without thought of the noise he made, intent on only one thing. His own life wasn't important. Rose O'Hearn's was. He'd get her out of the Alamo if he had to kill every secesh son in the place. And then if she'd listen.... He had reached the back stairs then and took them two at a time. He tried the door. It was locked. He blasted it open with a single shot and spilled forward on his face as a man standing at Rose's door opened up with a raking fire.

Another time Dan Casey might have stopped. Or paused to estimate his chances. Now he did neither. Instead he rolled to the wall and lay hard against it. Pronging back the hammer, he coolly waited until the man fired again. He squeezed the trigger before the echoes of the shot had died, snuffing out the man's life with a single bullet. He was on his feet again, racing along the wall to Rose's room.

It had been only minutes before that Dan Casey had left. Tilton would not expect him back so soon nor in this manner. Therein lay his chance of success and he made his gamble that way, boldly and without caution.

He kicked the door of Number 10 open. A lighted lamp was on the bureau. Rose was sitting in a chair, head thrown proudly back. Tilton and an-

other man were standing in front of her, the Texan's eyes as hard and expressionless as two orbs of gray stone.

"Casey." The word was jolted out of Tilton as if Dan Casey's presence here wasn't possible. "I put a guard..."

Only then did Captain John Tilton's numbed brain grasp reality. His hand plummeted for gun butt, but he didn't draw it. Casey's first bullet smashed his right hand. The other man reached for his .41. Rose was out of her chair, clutching his arm in white-lipped determination. Casey came across the room in three long strides, gun barrel arcing down on the man's head. Tilton reached for his dropped pistol with his left hand. Casey stamped on his wrist. Tilton cursed as pain ran up his arm.

"You're taking us out of here," Casey rasped, gripping the man's shoulder and bringing him upright.

"You'll never get out of here alive," Tilton snarled.

"Then you won't either."

Casey pushed Tilton through the door. Bullets from half a dozen guns snapped along the hall.

"Go ahead," Tilton cried. "Cut 'em down."

Casey jerked Tilton back into the room, questioning eyes on Rose. "It won't work. Tilton's the kind who'll tell 'em to kill him before he'd tell 'em to let us out."

"Did you tell Masters?" Rose asked.

"Yes."

"Then he'll bring his volunteers in."

Tilton laughed, a dry grating sound. "A slim hope, Rose."

Men were coming along the hall, a lot of them. Casey motioned Rose into a corner of the room. He stood directly behind Tilton, gun in his back.

"Call your boys off, Cap," Casey said.

"To hell with you," Tilton said coolly.

THEY FANNED out in front of the door, a dozen of them, all armed. Gun muzzles lined on Tilton who stood slim and straight, smiling coolly at his men.

"If you have to kill me," he said, "do the job. Whatever happens, don't let the girl out of here alive until she tells why she's here and who sent her. Jasper," Tilton nodded at one of the men, "the boys will follow your orders."

"You're all fools," Casey cried. "No use of Tilton crashing in. Let us out of here and Tilton won't get hurt."

"This is more than a matter of a human life," Tilton said without turning his head. "If we take Colorado, New Mexico will be easy. Then California and Oregon will fall like ripe plums. Do your duty, Jasper."

The man called Jasper lifted his gun. "Don't move, John," he said tonelessly.

"I'll blow his backbone apart," Casey grated.

"Blow and be damned," Tilton said.

It was the finest exhibition of cold nerve Casey had ever seen. He felt his admiration for the man, for the loyalty to the cause for which he fought. Jasper's gun was up, hammer back. It was in that instant that the music stopped. No glasses clinked. No gamblers called. Instead was Red Masters' bellowing voice, "Where's Tilton?"

"It's Gilpin's volunteers," Jasper whispered. "John, there's no sense to this. Casey and the girl can't hurt us any more than they have."

For a moment Tilton hesitated, short quick breaths sawing into the quiet. "All right," he said then. "We will go down and talk to Masters."

A few minutes later Casey and Rose were out of the Alamo and on the street, her hand on his arm. Regret had no value, but there was a tomorrow, and Dan Casey had learned a great deal this night.

"What did you mean by saying I never thought of anything but my own problems?" he asked at last.

"We've never talked about anything but your claim and the house you were going to build for me and what a big man you'd be someday. That's all fine, Dan, but today men are held in bondage. Their problems are more important than ours, but I never knew until you came into the Alamo that you had ever thought about them."

He hadn't thought about them. It had been a distant thing, unimportant

(cont'd on pg. 76)

ONE AGAINST THE BLOOD - BOUNTY HUNTERS

by GUNNISON STEELE

TIME ★ HONORED WESTERN CLASSIC

LIKE a startled wolf, Powder Mace's lean young body snapped tense and he sat listening. Red light from the tiny campfire among the jackpines glinted on his tawny hair. It showed the hardness of his freckled features, the wariness and bitterness in his powder-blue eyes.

Powder Mace wasn't sure what it was that had startled him. His own pony tugged restlessly at its tether a short piece away. A chill wind rustled the thickets, and a night bird cried raucously nearby. But it wasn't any of these things. It was something he sensed rather than heard or saw—a queer feeling of tension and menace.

Powder Mace's smoky eyes turned briefly to the twin peaks that lifted darkly against the northern night sky. He had reason to be wary here. For over there, spreading fan-wise from the base of Twin Peaks, was Turk Brule's big Butcher Block outfit. Turk Brule's name in the Twin Peaks country stood for power, for greed and treachery and ruthless violence.

Between Powder Mace and Turk Brule there was bitter enmity. But Brule was too powerful for one man to fight, as others besides Powder

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It took a Texan to buck Turk Brule and his tough crew!...

His gun was pointing at Brule and Rayder as he stepped into the room.

Mace had discovered. A few had tried, and they'd died; others had simply packed their few belongings and left the basin when Brule started deviling them. But freckled, tawny-haired Powder Mace was a Texan; his wasn't the breed to accept defeat tamely.

A LITTLE over two years ago the Texas youngster had ridden into the basin with three thousand dollars burning his jeans. He'd found a good little outfit and bought it, from Turk Brule, paying two of the three thousand dollars down and using the other thousand to buy a few head of cattle. Quickly he'd found out his mistake. Immediately Turk Brule's tough riders had started in to run him out. They'd stolen his cattle, cut his fences, poisoned his water. And Powder Mace had fought back, fiercely.

But, single-handed, he was no match for Turk Brule. Brule, he discovered, had sold this same outfit half a dozen times, always with the same result. Powder Mace was just another sucker. For Turk Brule had ruined him, beaten him, had finally driven him from his little cow outfit and into outlawry with a cattle stealing charge framed against him.

But still Powder Mace hadn't admitted defeat. For the last year he'd prowled the rough hills rimming the basin, living like a hunted wolf, striking at Turk Brule when and in any way he could, awaiting his chance to kill the arrogant gun-lord of the Twin Peaks range. Turk Brule was afraid of the red-haired young Texan. It had got so he was afraid to ride the range alone, or step outside his doorway at night.

Finally, as time and again the traps he baited failed or backfired, Turk Brule had placed a $5,000 reward on Powder Mace's head....

Powder Mace jerked suddenly to his feet, as sounds of a running horse came to his ears. The horse had left the dim wagon trail, two hundred yards away, was coming toward the campfire.

With the silence of a big cat Powder faded back into the shadowy thicket. Gun in hand, he waited.

The horse came swiftly on, and plunged abruptly through the thicket and into the crimson fireglow. The rider jerked the sweat-drenched beast back on its haunches. Amazement slapped at Powder Mace.

For the rider was a girl—a slim, dark-haired girl who was dressed in denims and man's shirt and boots.

The girl's dark young eyes probed desperately about the clearing, and in their shadowy depths Powder Mace saw fear. He crouched there, a swift, fierce exultation lifting in his heart, his eyes drinking in the wild, unspoiled beauty of the girl. Memories flooded through him, and a deep longing.

Powder Mace stepped suddenly from the shadows. He said softly, "Nancy—Nancy Rolfe!"

"Powder!" The girl swung quickly, lithely to the ground. She started impulsively toward Powder Mace, then stopped. "I—I had no idea you were here, Powder. I saw your fire from the trail, and I thought it might be somebody who would help me."

Powder Mace asked tautly, "What's wrong?"

"It's Judd Rayder, my step-father. He's been hurt. A horse threw him, tromped on him. Both legs are broken. I—I was there alone with him, and I didn't know what to do. It's fifteen miles to the nearest doctor. If I had somebody to help me, I might—"

"I'll help you," Powder said. "Is he at the Triple X?"

Nancy Rolfe nodded, and that apprehension deepened in her dark eyes. "But you—it'd be dangerous for you. You shouldn't even be here. Turk Brule has got half the country looking for you, and he's raised the bounty....it'd be dangerous."

"I'll help you," Powder said again. He had no love for surly, whiskey-swilling Judd Rayder, but this, and a thousand times more, he'd do for Nancy Rolfe. "Wait till I get my bronc."

IT TOOK him but a moment to bring his roan into the clearing, to slap on saddle and bridle. As he tightened the cinch he studied Nancy from the tail of his eye. In the red fireglow she was like a dark flame of liveliness. The man's clothing couldn't hide her slim, wild beauty, the quick uplift of her rounded young breasts against the

shirt as her breath came swiftly. A year and a half ago all of Powder Mace's dreams for the future had been bound up with Nancy Rolfe....

"Let's hurry," she begged. "I'm afraid."

A blood-gold moon hung in the sky, spraying them with misty light, as they gained the dim wagon trail and rode swiftly to the west. Nancy Rolfe led the way, and as Powder Mace watched the lithe sway of her body in the saddle those memories crowded in closer. He'd met Nancy Rolfe soon after coming to the basin, and loved her. But with the danger from Turk Brule hanging over him he hadn't dared ask her to share his little outfit with him. To him, Nancy Rolfe had been something to fight for, to worship and dream of.

Nancy lived on the little Triple X outfit with her step-father, Judd Rayder. Rayder was a hard, sullen man who was forever quarreling with his neighbors. The Triple X really belonged to Nancy Rolfe, having belonged to Nancy's mother, now dead, before her marriage ten years before to Judd Rayder.

In the red hearts of a hundred campfires during the last year Powder Mace had seen Nancy Rolfe's lovely face. But this was the first time he'd seen her since Turk Brule had driven him into unjust outlawry....

They drew up before a low, fort-like old ranch house that was quiet and dark except for the dim glow of light in one window. They dismounted, and the girl led the way without speaking along a shadowy corridor to a lighted doorway. Powder Mace paused, his wary eyes probing from instinct into the dimly-lighted room. A smoky lamp set on a table beside a disordered bed. On the bed lay a man, his features almost concealed by the tumbled blankets.

Nancy had gone into the room. She looked back over her shoulder at Powder Mace, said, "I—he must have suffered awfully. Maybe we can do something."

Powder went into the room. He went to the bed, stooped over the half-concealed figure.

Like a blow, warning of menace hammered at Powder Mace, and he knew that Nancy Rolfe had led him into a trap. He twisted aside, tried to hurl himself backwards. But he was too late. He felt a pair of hands grip his ankles like steel cables. The hands heaved savagely, jerking Powder's feet from under him.

His head smashed against the floor, and the room seemed to explode in a roar of zooming lights before his eyes. But before losing consciousness he was aware of several things: Nancy Rolfe's sobbing scream, the flat, snarling face of the man who had been hiding under the bed to grasp his ankles, the gaunt, scare-crow figure of Judd Rayder as he reared up from the bed, a gun in his hand....

When Powder Mace regained consciousness his head throbbed with dull pain. He lay on the bed, bound hand and foot, beside the table that held the smoky lamp. As remembrance returned, bitterness flooded through him. He'd been tricked, betrayed by the one person in the world he would have trusted utterly.

Without moving, he looked about the room. Hunched in a chair at the foot of the bed was a squat, powerful, flat-faced man whose dark, stupid features were stamped with cruelty. This gent, Powder Mace knew, was Ike Torgin, who worked for Judd Rayder and was his slave. It had been Ike Torgin who was waiting under the bed.

NANCY ROLFE sat beside the table, her tanned face strained and set in the dim light. She was watching Ike Torgin, her dark head turned to one side as if she were listening. Ike Torgin looked suddenly at the girl, and grinned.

"They're comin'," he said.

The girl said nothing. Just sat there, almost like one in a trance.

There was a clatter of hoofs outside; then a quick thud of boots along the corridor, and two men came into the room. One of them was Judd Rayder. The other was big, with hard dark features that would have been handsome if they hadn't been so indelibly stamped with his cruel, ruthless nature. His flashy raiment, his expensive boots and ornamented gunbelt, gleamed in the lamplight.

Turk Brule strode across the room and stood over Powder Mace. There was fierce triumph in his inky eyes as he looked down at the bound Texan.

"So, Mace, I've got you at last," Brule said purringly. "Wasn't satisfied to just keep from goin' to jail, was you?"

Contemptuously, Powder Mace said, "I'll never be satisfied, Brule, until I've killed you."

Brule laughed, a low, harsh sound. "Then in just a little while, yuh're gonna be mighty restless in yore grave."

Nancy Rolfe was on her feet. She came and stood between Judd Rayder and Turk Brule. Surprise was stamped on her face.

"What does he mean by that?" she asked Rayder. "You said—"

"Ne'mind what I said," Judd Rayder growled. "You stay outa this, gal—you've done yore part." He grinned at Turk Brule, said, "The bounty on this jasper's six thousand dollars now, ain't it?"

"That's right," Brule nodded.

"Then I'm ready for my money."

"That wasn't what we agreed," Nancy said swiftly. "You promised me—"

"Don't matter a damn what I promised you," Rayder said harshly. "Go to yore room, girl, and stay there. From now on this is man's business. Git!"

Anger and defiance blazed in the girl's eyes. But before she could answer, a back-handed slap from Judd Rayder sent her reeling. She steadied herself, stared white-faced at Rayder.

"If I had a gun I'd kill you," she said fiercely.

Then she slowly left the room.

Turk Brule laughed, said, "She's still a reg'lar wildcat, Rayder. She'll be tamed before I've had her half as long as you have."

"Mebby you'll sing a different tune, when you get her," Rayder said sullenly. "Now about that bounty—"

"Ain't no hurry about the money," Brule said shortly. "I won't be in any hurry about the fun I'm gonna have with this hellion here. You hear that, Mace?"

Powder Mace stared silently up at Brule, contempt in his smoky eyes. He was sick to the soul. Quarreling like buzzards over the blood-bounty money he would bring—and Nancy Rolfe was one of them!

"Not talkin', huh?" Turk Brule snarled in a sudden fury. One of his shiny boots lifted, thudded brutally into Powder Mace's side. "You'll talk, all right, before I'm through with you. You'll talk—and beg for death!"

"What yuh aim to do with him, Turk?" Rayder asked whinningly.

"WHY, I HADN'T decided about that." Turk Brule grinned slowly, and Powder Mace thought of a big tomcat licking its lips in anticipation. "There're ways of havin' fun with a gent you hate worse'n hell itself. Sabe?"

Judd Rayder chuckled with grisly mirth. "You kin think of the dam'dest things to do, Turk! I reckon yuh're wonderin' how we trapped this hellion, huh?"

"I *had* wondered about that," Brule admitted.

"The girl did it," Rayder chuckled. "She tolled him here by tellin' him I was bad hurt. Ain't that a hell of a joke?"

"Havin' a purty step-daughter pays, after all."

"In more ways than one, mebby," Judd Rayder said. "Remember, Brule, you ain't got her yet."

"I'll have her, all right," Turk Brule said softly. "And I won't wait much longer. You dumb fool—you better take the thousand I offered for her, and be glad to get it!"

"Two thousand," Rayder insisted. "Remember, Brule, I'm her legal guardian. I'd be takin' a hell of a risk, sellin' her to you like that. Two thousand...."

Powder Mace lay there, his heart flooded with bitterness and disgust as he listened to their bickering. Nancy Rolfe had helped her step-father trap Powder Mace, so he could collect the bounty Turk Brule had offered for him. Still Judd Rayder wasn't satisfied—he was selling Nancy Rolfe to Brule, like he'd sell a cow or a horse!

Powder Mace thought, "Hell, what do I care about that? She's no better than the rest—she deserves what she gets!"

Stealthily, he tested the ropes he

was bound with. But they were unyielding. He was trapped, with no hope of escape.

"Better save your strength, yearlin'," Turk Brule said sneeringly. "You'll need it, in just a little while, just as soon as I come back. Ike, you stay here and watch this gent, and be damn sure nothin' don't happen to him. Rayder, you come with me—I got things to talk over with yuh!"

Turk Brule turned and swaggered from the room, followed by Judd Rayder. The squat, dull-eyed Ike Torgin again seated himself in the chair at the foot of the bed. Grinningly, hunched like a giant toad, he watched Mace.

Bitterly, Powder Mace contemplated his predicament. At first, as realization of Nancy Rolfe's treachery came to him, he'd felt sort of numb and bewildered. Now fierce resentment, against Nancy Rolfe and against himself for allowing himself to be so easily duped, roiled through him. Barring miracles, this was the end of his bitter fight with Turk Brule. And when a gent was bound hand and foot, surrounded by gold-greedy bounty hunters, miracles didn't happen.

Turk Brule, he knew, meant to kill him. He knew also that, before killing him, Brule's dark mind would devise numerous methods of torturing him. Powder Mace was the only man who had dared fight back at Brule, to dispute his ruthless march to the cattle empire he was carving by violence and murder here in the fertile Twin Peaks country. For that reason Turk Brule's hate was a savage, consuming thing.

HALF AN hour passed—an hour... and still Ike Torgin hunched there, watching Powder Mace. Occasionally Torgin would nod his head and grin slyly, like he was thinking of something pleasant. Once, when Powder Mace squirmed about, trying to break his bonds, the squat man growled like a big dog and stirred in his chair.

Occasionally, somewhere in the big old house, Powder heard footsteps. Once he heard Judd Rayder and Turk Brule quarreling. Still bickering over the price the Butcher Block owner should pay for the privilege of marrying Nancy Rolfe, Powder thought sardonically—and wondered at the harsh anger that boiled inside him at the thought.

Suddenly Powder Mace was aware of voices in the adjoining room. A man's voice—Turk Brule's—and Nancy Rolfe's. They were talking in low tones, and he could make out but few words. Once he heard his own name mentioned. Then they seemed to be arguing. Powder thought bitterly, "Over the bounty money!"

Then, a moment later, he knew he was mistaken. He heard Turk Brule say, "I'll have you, girl, one way or another—you know that. Marry me, and I—I'll do anything you say."

And Nancy's voice, soft, provocative, "Anything?"

Powder couldn't hear the words that followed. But after a moment he heard Nancy's low, teasing laughter....

Powder Mace lay there, heart-sick. Now he saw what a simple fool he'd been to fall for Nancy Rolfe, to think that she was the swellest, squarest, sweetest girl in the world. She'd just been playing him for a sucker. She'd betrayed him, and now she was jumping at the chance to marry Turk Brule, because he was a big man and had lots of money.

Powder heard Judd Rayder's hoarse, whining voice, now thick with whiskey: "Ike! Ike, you big ape, come in hyar!"

Ike Torgin got up, shook himself like a big dog, and shuffled from the room. After that, deep silence held the old house for perhaps ten minutes.

Then Ike Torgin came back into the room. Torgin came and stood over Powder Mace, shaking his shaggy head puzzledly, fumbling in a pocket. From his pocket he brought a knife, and the light gleamed on a slender, razor-sharp blade.

A chill washed over Powder Mace.

But Ike Torgin stooped, started methodically cutting the ropes that bound Powder Mace. Arms and legs free, Powder sat up on the bed, measuring Torgin with his eyes. But Ike

Torgin backed warily away, a gun in his hand now.

"You come with me," he growled.

"Where?"

Torgin gestured vaguely. "Out there. Rayder and Brule say untie you. They say for me to ride apiece with you, to see you don't start trouble."

Amazement hammered at Powder Mace. "You mean—they're turnin' me loose?"

"Ain't that what I said?" Torgin asked impatiently. "Sounds crazy as hell to me, but Brule said do it. He say tell you mebby he's been a little hard on you. But he say tell you to ride outa the country and never come back, or he'll kill you next time."

POWDER MACE got to his feet. He was bewildered by what was happening. It was crazy; it didn't make sense—Turk Brule and Rayder turning him loose. Then wariness seeped into his mind. It was some kind of a trick. They didn't aim to turn him loose.

But this was no time to hesitate. This way, he might have a chance; bound hand and foot, he had none. He walked in front of Ike Torgin out of the room, along the corridor, and outside. Two saddled horses stood there, one of them his own. Powder climbed into the saddle, watched as Torgin mounted the other horse.

Torgin was grinning again in the moonlight. He gestured with the gun in his hand.

"You go first," he said.

Powder Mace reined out onto the wagon trail. He could hear the clump of Torgin's horse behind him. He could feel the hot bore of Torgin's dull eyes into his back. He knew that the gun was still in the squat man's hand. His flesh crawled with the expectation of lead in his back, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Once, he looked back. The ranch house was without sign of life except for the glow of light in a window. Powder frowned puzzledly. Even if Ike Torgin did aim to gun him in the back, this still didn't make sense.

They rode in silence. Death was close. Powder Mace knew that. A mile fell away behind them—two miles.... They came to a spot where the trail wound along a narrow, steep-walled canyon. Here, Powder Mace reasoned, it would happen.

He darted a glance back over his shoulder. Torgin's heavy shoulders were hunched forward, the gun-muzzle outthrust. In the squat man's muddy eyes there was a triumphant, feral light.

Powder stopped his horse suddenly, and Torgin came alongside. Torgin grunted with surprise. "Why you stoppin'?" he growled.

Powder Mace braced his whipcord body in the saddle. "You got the makin's?" he asked.

Torgin laughed, a venomous, wolfish sound that whipped a chill along Powder's spine.

"You won't need the makin's," Torgin said. "Brule said to...."

Powder Mace saw the gun jab forward, saw Torgin's blunt finger tighten on the trigger. Like a catapult, the Texan shot from the saddle. He heard the blasting roar of Torgin's gun, felt the sear of powderflame on his neck. He saw the surprise on Torgin's flat, snarling face.

Then his shoulder smashed into the big killer's stomach and drove him from the saddle as if a battering ram had hit him. His fall to the ground cushioned by Torgin's body, Powder Mace rolled over, clawed to his feet and dove for the gun that Torgin had dropped; swooped it up, and whirled.

But Ike Torgin lay motionless on the ground. Torgin's head had smashed against a jagged boulder beside the trail, and blood was streaming down over his moon-splashed face. Torgin was unconscious, maybe dead. Powder Mace didn't wait to see.

Quickly, he stripped the cartridge-belt from about Torgin's waist, flung it about his own flat hips. Fierce triumph was singing through him. Now he was free and had a gun; now he wasn't helpless. The freedom and safety of the rugged hills, looming over there in the moonlight, beckoned. He went to his horse.

BUT FOOT in stirrup, he paused. Doubt was gouging at his mind. Something was whispering, as it had ever since Ike Torgin had cut his

bonds and told him that Brule and Rayder aimed to set him free, that all this was haywire as hell. They hadn't really meant to let him go—they'd meant for Torgin to kill him on the trail—but that just made things more confusing.

Powder Mace got back into the saddle. He started back along the trail, toward Judd Rayder's Triple X ranch. He thought about Nancy Rolfe, back there with Turk Brule, and grinned sardonically. It wasn't Nancy Rolfe that was taking him back to the Triple X, he told himself. A few hours ago he would have killed anybody who said that Nancy Rolfe wasn't the sweetest, squarest girl in the world. Now he knew different. Now he knew she was low and treacherous, as grasping and gold-greedy as Brule and Rayder.

Powder Mace, riding warily along, thought, "But Turk Brule won't get her. Now's my chance to even the score with Brule. They won't be expectin' me—they'll think Torgin has gunned me in the back before now. I'll kill Rayder, too. And Nancy...."

He knew he could never harm Nancy Rolfe. Anybody who would do what she had done must be bad all through. But Powder Mace grinned at the thought of hurting her....

He left his horse in a jackpine thicket a hundred yards from the ranch house and went forward on foot. He went toward a yellow rectangle of light from an open window. From within the room he could hear harsh, quarreling voices. The voices, he knew, belonged to Turk Brule and Judd Rayder.

Powder Mace crept up close, raised his eyes so he could peer into the room. Turk Brule and Rayder sat at the table that held the lamp, whiskey jug and glasses before them. Nancy Rolfe was nowhere in sight.

"I still say it was a crazy thing to do," Rayder whined. "What if Torgin bungles—what if he lets that Texan get away from him?"

"Torgin won't bungle," Brule grinned. "I told him what would happen if he did."

"But why in hell...? Thought yuh aimed to have some fun with him before you salted him."

"You're not supposed to think," Turk Brule purred. "Just do as you're told. But, if you gotta know, I had a damn good reason for doin' it that way."

"What kind of reason?"

"To start with, it'll save me two thousand dollars."

Suspicion leaped into Judd Rayder's whiskey-reddened eyes.

"How'll it do that?"

"Cain't you guess?" Brule asked sardonically. "Your lovely stepdaughter, of course. She's the only thing on God's green earth that would have made me turn Powder Mace over to a half-wit to be shot in the back."

Rayder banged the table with his fist. "Blast you, Brule, if you think—"

Brule's voice was like frosted steel. "Take it easy, Rayder. I told you you were a fool not to take the thousand I offered. Now I'll have her for nothing—except foregoing the pleasure of watching Powder Mace die."

"You mean—the girl talked you into lettin' Mace go?"

"She didn't talk me into it," Brule denied. "We made a bargain. She said that if I'd let Powder Mace go free, she'd marry me—willingly, no strings attached. It seemed like a fair trade, so I did it."

"But Mace won't go free. You told Torgin, when he got out in Mulejaw Canyon to kill Powder Mace and throw him over a cliff."

"So what?" Turk Brule sneered. "The girl need never know that. She'll think he sneaked outa the country. She'll marry me, like she agreed."

POWDER MACE crouched there under the window, shaken by the fierce emotions that were pounding at him. Now he saw, crystal-clear, why Brule had made a show of turning him loose. Nancy Rolfe had sold herself, to save him. She'd strung Brule along, maybe made Brule think she loved him, offered to marry him—just so Powder Mace might go free.

And he started to ride away, without suspecting the truth.

Slowly, gun in hand, Powder Mace got to his feet. He didn't stop to think that it was Nancy Rolfe who had lied to him in the first place, and tricked

him into Turk Brule's power. Unreasoning hate and rage were hammering at him. He wasn't paying any attention to what Brule and Rayder were saying now. He'd heard enough to fill him with an insane desire to kill them both.

Powder Mace reared up, thrust head and shoulders through the open window, the gun jutting before him.

He said harshly, "You damn' stinkin' buzzards! The longer you stay still, the longer you'll live. It makes no difference to me!"

He had them cold. Jaws slack with ludicrous surprise, Judd Rayder and Turk Brule stared at the hot-eyed youngster.

"Yella, huh?" Powder Mace sneered. He flung a leg over the low windowsill, and with a quick movement stepped into the room.

Judd Rayder stammered, "How—where's Torgin? Mace—you gotta listen—I didn't have nothin' to do—"

Powder Mace's smoky eyes were welded on Turk Brule. He said, very softly, "Brule, get on yore feet."

Turk Brule licked his lips nervously. "Don't be a fool, Mace. We can straighten this out. Torgin musta misunderstood me—"

"Torgin didn't misunderstand you," Powder intoned. "Get up, Brule!"

Braced on powerful legs, Turk Brule got slowly to his feet. He said, "All right, Mace—if you want it that way..."

Brule's words chopped off, and he whirled away from the table, grabbing for the pearl-handled gun he wore. Startled, Judd Rayder squalled out a curse and reared straight up, dragging at his holstered gun. Momentarily, that saved Brule's life. For the bullet that crashed from Powder Mace's gun smashed into Judd Rayder's chest as he reared up, driving him back against Brule.

Brule cursed hysterically, bringing up his gun with one hand, while with the other he clutched at Rayder's limp body. He swung Rayder's body in front of him, using it as a shield. His gun blasted, and Powder Mace felt the fiery sting of the bullet on his cheek.

He crouched, side-stepped, trying to get in a shot at Brule. But Brule turned with him. His gun snaked around Rayder's body again, and flame lashed out like a red snake at Powder.

Deliberately, Powder jerked trigger. Turk Brule cursed again, pain in his voice, and blood jetted out from the arm that held Rayder. Rayder wilted to the floor as Brule released him. Stripped of his shield, Brule stumbled back against the wall. Fear played over his dark face. The hysteria that was in Brule seemed to show in the erratic thunder of his gun.

POWDER fired—just once—and in the deep-throated bellow there was something final. Then Brule broke in the middle and wilted to the floor.

Powder Mace stood there, gray gunsmoke coiling about his lean figure, his fierce passions already ebbing away.

A voice screamed, "Look out, Powder—*behind you!*"

Powder Mace whirled, and from the tail of his eye he saw Nancy Rolfe in the open doorway. Nancy had a gun in her hand, and her dark eyes were wide with terror as she stared over Powder's shoulder.

Then, as his gaze found the window, an icy hand seemed to clutch Powder Mace's heart. Jutting through the opening were the head and shoulders of Ike Torgin. Torgin's bloody, grinning face was a gargoyle mask of hate and fury, and the gun in his hand was trained on Powder Mace.

Powder didn't have time to wonder how Torgin had regained consciousness and gotten back to the ranch so quickly, where he'd gotten the gun. He didn't have time for anything. He jerked his own gun-muzzle toward the window, knowing that before he could fire Torgin's lead would smash into him.

He heard a gun blast, saw flame spew across the room. He saw Ike Torgin fall back through the window and vanish. Unbelievingly, he looked at Nancy Rolfe. Smoke was curling from the muzzle of the gun in her hand, and her eyes were riveted on Powder.

Then she came quickly toward Powder Mace, and all at once she was in

his arms. She was sobbing softly, her head pillowed on his shoulder. But after a while she stopped sobbing, and lifted her tear-bright eyes.

"I—I know you won't ever forgive me," she said. "And I don't blame you—I was such a simple fool."

Powder asked softly, "Forgive you—for what? You just saved my life, didn't you?"

"Not that," she said swiftly. "It was my fault, you being here in the first place. I lied to you—you know that now. You think I helped to trap you, to collect the bounty Turk Brule had offered for you."

Powder Mace shook his head. "I don't think that, not now. I know you had a good reason for doin' everything you did."

"I—I thought I was doing the best thing," Nancy declared. "You see, a little while ago I found out that Turk Brule had framed you with that cattle-stealing charge. I didn't have positive proof—proof that I was sure would convince a jury—but I thought that could come later. I knew that, bitter as you were, you'd never agree to surrender to the sheriff and stand trial. So I told my—my step-father, and he promised to help me. I was sure I could prove your innocence—I still am—or I'd never have thought of doing such a thing. You believe that, don't you?"

Powder Mace nodded, said, "I sabe that. And I sabe that Judd Rayder lied to you, tricked you. Instead of riding for the sheriff, as he'd promised, he brought Turk Brule, aiming to collect the bounty Brule had offered for me. Is that right?"

"That's right," Nancy agreed. "I—I was sick, when I found out what I'd done; that, trying to help you, I'd tricked you into Brule's power. But now everything's fine. Now Turk Brule can't testify against you. And folks in the basin will be so glad Brule is dead that no jury would convict you, even without me telling what I know. You'll get your ranch back."

POWDER MACE looked about the room, at the still bodies of Brule and Rayder. "Mebby, when folks find out I killed these gents, there'll be a murder charge—"

Nancy Rolfe smiled, put a tanned finger on his lips.

"Maybe they won't find out about that," she said. "Maybe, in just a little while, I'll ride into town; maybe I'll tell folks that Turk Brule, Judd Rayder and Ike Torgin just got drunk and shot each other to pieces. Everybody'll be glad, and there'll be no reason for them to think you did it. It could happen that way, couldn't it?"

"But it might get you into trouble—"

"I'll take that chance," Nancy declared staunchly. "Then, in a few days you could ride into town. You could surrender to Sheriff Cody and say you wanted to stand trial. The jury would turn you loose, then we could get married and...I've got a hunch things will happen like that. They've *got* to!"

And, because of the staunch loyalty and courage of a slim, dark-eyed girl, they *did* happen that way.... ●END

RAW-RED LAW OF THE REBEL LEGION (*continued from page* 67)

because it didn't affect Dan Casey or the Territory of Colorado. But he knew now why Red Masters was an officer in the volunteers. Why Rose O'Hearn had risked her life as a spy in the Alamo. And he knew why Captain John Tilton had stood with a gun in his back. Set up alongside these three, Dan Casey saw himself as a small man.

They had reached the old Denver House at the Elephant Corral. Casey turned the girl so that she faced him. "I love you and I'm proud of you and tomorrow would be a good day to get married."

"Yes, Dan," she said, "but—what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to see if Gilpin's volunteers can use another good man."

●END

THE PRONTO KID COMES HOME

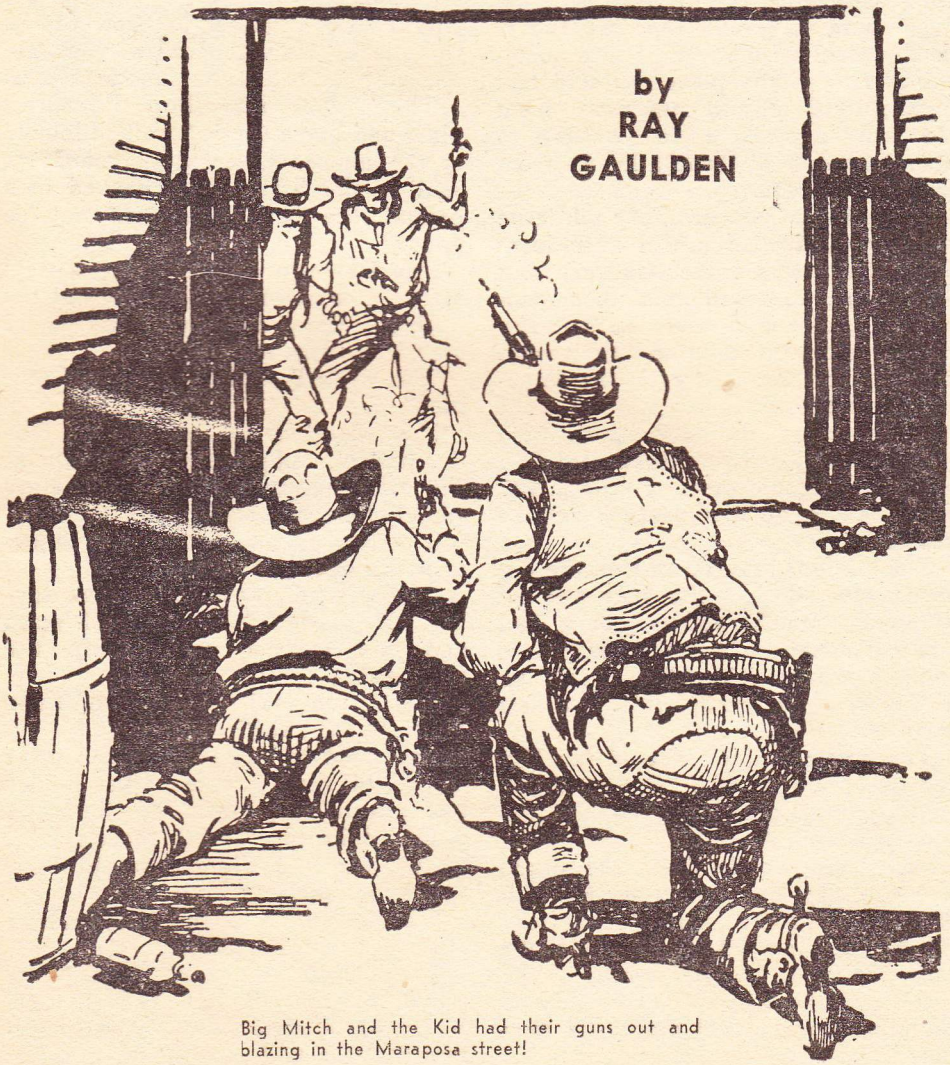
TIME ★ HONORED WESTERN CLASSIC

THEY topped a rise and the lights of a town blinked down there in the darkness below them. They stopped their jaded mounts and the Pronto Kid shoved his hat back, his slim, wiry body loose in the saddle. "That's Maraposa, Mitch," he said. "That's the old home town."

Big Mitch shifted his bulk in the saddle and a grin split his hairy face. "The prodigal son come back, eh, Kid?"

The Pronto Kid's eyes were somber. He said, "It don't mean a thing, Mitch. I had all I wanted of this burg when I was a button. We'll get some

by RAY GAULDEN



Big Mitch and the Kid had their guns out and blazing in the Maraposa street!

This wild one would never wipe out the blood on his backtrail simply by hanging up his guns....

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grub in our bellies and ride on. We ought to hit the Hole-in-the-Wall by morning."

Big Mitch threw a glance over his shoulder. "I figure that long-geared United States marshal is about six hours behind us. Damned if he ain't a hard man to shake."

The Pronto Kid spoke to his mount and they moved down the slope toward the town. The Kid's gaze shifted to the low, sage-dotted hills off to his left and for a moment his bleak eyes were soft. There was a ranch over there, a spread that his father had worked hard to build into something. It was the place the Kid had grown tired of and run away from ten years ago. He hadn't written to his folks and he hadn't heard from them since he left.

He had smelled gunsmoke while he was away. He had raised hell down along the border. He had met Big Mitch and they had held up a gambling joint back in Alamosa. The law was on their tail now and they were heading for the safety of the Wyoming badlands.

The sound of his saddlemate's voice snapped the Kid from his reverie. "So bein' back don't mean a thing, uh? Then how come that dreamy look in your eyes?"

The sardonic amusement on the big man's face nettled the Kid and he snapped, "Mitch, you've got a bad habit of runnin' off at the head!"

Mitch's face fell. "Now don't go gettin' your hump up, Kid. I didn't mean to rile you."

The anger drained out of the Kid and he smiled thinly. "It's all right, you big, dumb cluck. Quit lookin' like a whipped dog."

They rode slowly down the single street of the little town and the Kid thought the place seemed unusually quiet. They passed a man in range garb, standing on the porch of the hotel, and the Kid smiled bleakly as he noted the baleful stare the man gave them.

The Kid wasn't worried about anyone recognizing him, for those knife-slashes he had gotten in a border cantina had left scars that twisted his face into an ugly mask.

They headed for the lights of Pop Rayburn's Bar, and the Kid's eyes roved the paint-peeled false-fronts. Ten years and that town had changed but little. He saw Swede Jenson's blacksmith shop and old Abe Clossen's bakery. He remembered how old Abe used to chase him when he swiped those pies and cakes. A wide grin caused the scars to writhe across the Kid's face.

Big Mitch shook his head and spat into the dust. "A two-bit town," he growled, "if ever I saw one."

"Yeah," the Kid said. "You can see why I didn't hanker to grow old in this place." He wondered why he said one thing and thought something else.

They went into Pop Rayburn's place and had a drink. The Kid looked at the almost deserted barroom. He said to the little, pink-cheeked man behind the bar: "Business not so good?"

Pop Rayburn gave him a resentful stare. "I cater to the cowmen and the business men, mostly, and they're stayin' indoors tonight."

The Kid's eyebrows arched. "Trouble?"

Pop wiped at the bar. "Anse Belder and his tough crew are down at the Blue Mouse, gettin' themselves likkered up, and spoilin' for trouble."

The Kid frowned. "Belder? I never heard of him."

Pop refilled Big Mitch's glass, saying, "He moved in a couple of years ago and started gobblin' up the range."

Big Mitch said, "Oh, one of them kind of gents, eh?"

Pop nodded. "The little men can't afford to hire gunmen like Belder has workin' for him. The sheriff is doin' all he can, and I reckon if it wasn't for him, Belder would have the whole shebang by now."

"It's tough," said the Kid, and he flipped a coin on the bar.

They went out and crossed the street to the Wagon Wheel cafe. There was a little yellow-haired waitress that the Kid thought was mighty pretty, but he knew he was too damned ugly to have a woman look at him twice. He remembered that plastic surgeon he had heard of back East, and, briefly, he considered going there some day.

Big Mitch said, "We better kinda snap it up, Kid. That hard-ridin' marshal might not be as far behind us as we figured."

The Kid found it hard to take his eyes off the girl. Those blue eyes of hers did something to a man. He said, "You worry too much, Mitch."

They were on their second cup of coffee and waiting for the dessert when the door opened softly and the Kid heard a voice say flatly, "Just sit tight, gents, and mebbe you won't get hurt."

The Pronto Kid stiffened and shot a glance at Big Mitch. He shook his head when he saw that the big fellow was about to make a play.

Boots pounded the floor and a slender, gray-eyed young man wearing a deputy's badge came forward and lifted their guns. He said to the girl, "Don't be frightened, Rosie."

Rosie stood in the kitchen doorway, her hand at her throat, her face pale. "Who are they, Kale?" she asked in a small voice.

The deputy shook his head. "I don't know, but I reckon it ain't too hard to figure out what they're doin' here."

Big Mitch said meekly, "You got us all wrong, Mister. We're just a couple of tumbleweeds driftin' through."

The deputy's laugh was without mirth. "Don't give me that, big fellow. I've seen too many of your kind around here lately. You're two more gun-slicks, come to work for Anse Belder. But I'm takin' you down to see the sheriff."

The Pronto Kid shrugged and spread his hands. "Looks like, Mitch," he said, "we're goin' to get free lodgin' in the Maraposa jailhouse."

Big Mitch made a sour face and grumbled, "If this ain't a hell of a note."

The Kid put some money on the counter and looked at the girl. "You sure know how to cook, Miss. Sorry we haven't got time for the dessert."

They went out onto the street and the deputy marched them down to the little red-brick jail on the edge of town. They went into the office and the Kid stared at the little man behind the rolltop desk. He stared hard, his breath caught in his throat and a queer feeling in the pit of his stomach. That man was his father, Dave Pringle.

The Pronto Kid could see the bitter lines about Dave Pringle's mouth and the shadows beneath his faded eyes. The Kid thought, *He looks old and tired and his hair's turned white. He's carryin' a heavy load.*

The sheriff ran his eyes over the prisoners, listening to his deputy speak his piece. The Kid looked down at the floor, afraid that his father might recognize him. His heart stopped beating for a moment, then he remembered the scars and he knew there was little danger.

Dave Pringle sighed, looking at his deputy. "We ain't really got any right to hold these two, Kale."

The deputy said harshly, "To hell with what's legal. You're gettin' in Belder's hair and he's gone too far to ever turn back now. He's down at the Blue Mouse, gettin' himself primed. I've got a hunch there's goin' to be trouble tonight, and if we've got these two yahoos locked up, it will mean just two less to worry about."

The sheriff nodded slowly. "I reckon you're right, Kale."

The Pronto Kid turned and found Big Mitch staring intently at a piece of cardboard tacked to the wall. The Kid saw that it was an old election poster, carrying a picture of his father. Beneath the picture, in large black letters, were the words: DAVE PRINGLE FOR SHERIFF.

Big Mitch looked at the Kid, grinning faintly, and the Kid knew his saddlemate was wise.

When they had been locked in a cell, Mitch set into pacing the floor and the Kid flopped down on the hard cell cot, put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling.

Finally, Big Mitch stopped and looked at the Kid. "Damn it," he said. "We got to get out of here. That marshal is apt to hit town any time now."

The Kid said, without looking at his saddlemate, "How you goin' to manage it, Mitch?"

The big man came up close to the cot. "You told me your name was Pringle, and that your pa was a lawdog. So I reckon that makes the sher-

iff your pa. If he knew, I don't think he'd be holdin' his own kin in jail."

The Pronto Kid came up off the cot like a lean, angry cat. He said sharply, "Keep your lip buttoned, Mitch! He's not goin' to know!"

Mitch licked his lips and took a step back. "If you think I'm gonna stay locked up in this jug, you're crazy!"

Mitch took another step back and there was a wild look in his eyes. The Kid could tell what was in his mind. "You're not goin' to do it, Mitch," the Kid said softly.

There was sweat on Mitch's face and he sleeved some of it off. "Don't be a sucker, Kid; I'm goin' to get us out of here."

The Pronto Kid moved in fast, aiming at Mitch's jaw. But the big owlhooter side-stepped with a lot of speed for one so large. He hit the Kid in the mouth, knocked him back onto the cot.

There was a pained expression on Mitch's bearded face. He said with genuine regret, "I'm sorry, Kid. I didn't want to do that, but these places make me go kinda crazy."

The Pronto Kid sat there in a daze and watched Mitch move to the front of the cell, heard him call for the sheriff. Dave Pringle appeared presently and there was a sick feeling down inside the Pronto Kid.

Big Mitch said, "Pringle, it's sure a hell of a thing when a lawman locks up his own son."

Pringle frowned slightly, glancing briefly at the Kid. He gave Mitch a hard stare. "What are you gettin' at?" he demanded.

"Those knife scars kinda messed the Kid's face up," Mitch told him. "But he's your son, all right."

The lawman looked again at the Kid, sweat beginning to form on his brow. Then he swung on Mitch savagely. "That's not Danny. What's your game, fellow?"

Big Mitch turned to the Kid. "Come on, Kid. Tell him that story you told me—about that winter you was so hard up."

The Pronto Kid's face was stony. "Go on, Mitch," he muttered. "It's your show."

The sheriff's face was a little pale now. He said hoarsely, "What about that winter?"

The Kid saw Mitch press close to the bars, heard him say, "This winter you was so hard up, you butchered one of your neighbors' cows."

The Kid was watching his father and he thought Dave Pringle looked as if someone had slapped him hard in the face.

"I can't believe it," the sheriff muttered, "but I never told anybody about that, so I reckon you are Danny."

The Pronto Kid arose suddenly, his twisted features giving no hint of the tumult inside him. He said impatiently, "All right, so I am! We were just passin' through. I wasn't figurin' on stoppin' here long."

Dave Pringle looked older than he had a few minutes ago. There was a deep hurt in his eyes. He said dully, "A fellow passin' through here a couple of years ago said he knew you, said you was a big rancher down on the border. That made your ma and me feel pretty good. But it looks like that fellow was lyin' like hell."

Big Mitch looked a little uncomfortable. "Well," he said, "the Kid was in the cattle business—sort of."

The Kid swore softly and gave the big man a glance that caused him to remain quiet.

A drag to his steps, the sheriff went back to the office and got the keys. He returned in a moment and opened the cell door. He said bitterly, "I can't let your ma know you turned out this way. Get out of town—and don't never come back!"

They went into the office and the lawman gave them back their guns. Suddenly, the Pronto Kid's eyes were narrow and mean. He rammed the barrel of his piece into Dave Pringle's middle. "You soft-headed old fool!" he said harshly. "You fell for our little play, hook, line and sinker! Now we're goin' to lock you up and finish what we started out to do—gut the bank!"

There was a baffled look on Dave Pringle's face, as if he didn't quite savvy what was going on. And Big Mitch was staring at the Kid, not too certain what was taking place himself.

The sheriff stammered, "You—you mean this—it was all an act?"

The Pronto Kid laughed mockingly. "Sure it was an act. We worked for that son of yours once and it was his favorite yarn—how him and his old man butchered that beef."

He marched the sheriff back to one of the cells and locked him in. The lawman said, as if to himself, "I oughta known my boy wasn't any damn' gunman."

There was a foolish grin on Mitch's face and he said, "So long, sucker!"

They went out onto the street and the Kid's lips were tight and thin across his scarred face. They headed for their horses and Mitch said, "I'm sorry I shot off my mouth, but I can't stand the air in them places."

"Forget it, Mitch."

"Kid, you're a funny one. I never could figure you. Mebbe it's because I'm just too dumb."

The Kid kept looking straight ahead. "Mitch," he said, "will you keep your damn' mouth closed?"

"Sure, Kid, only I wish you wouldn't be sore at me."

They were near Pop Rayburn's place when a gunshot suddenly blasted the night. They drew up and the Kid's eyes went to the Blue Mouse Saloon, farther down the street. He saw the doors open and a man came staggering out, clutching at his side.

"It kinda looks like that deputy," Mitch muttered.

The Kid watched the man turn down toward them, come stumbling along the plank walk. He came close and he would have fallen, but the Kid ran forward and caught him. There was blood on the front of his shirt and the Kid could tell that he was in a bad way.

"Got to get to the sheriff," he whispered. "Got to tell him Anse Belder is comin' for a showdown."

The wounded deputy tried to get up, but the Kid held onto him, said gently, "Take it easy, fella. We'll help you. But tell me, how come Dave Pringle to give up ranchin' for a law badge?"

The deputy peered at him, but the Kid knew there was no recognition in those pain-fogged eyes. The man wet his lips and finally said, "The drought about broke him, and on top of that, his wife took bad sick. The doc says he can cure her, but the treatments cost money."

They carried the deputy over to the doc's office and when they were back on the street, Mitch said, "It's tough, Kid. But we better get outta here."

A lot of noise was coming from the Blue Mouse, and abruptly the swing-doors burst open and half a dozen gun-hung men poured out onto the street, turned and headed for the jail.

The Pronto Kid stood there a moment, watching them, his lips severe. Then he straightened and hitched at his gun-belt. He said, "Mitch, you better hit your saddle."

Big Mitch frowned. "What fool notion you got in your head now?"

"I'm goin' to stick around a while," the Kid said, and moved to the center of the dark street, started a slow walk toward that yelling pack. A minute later, he grinned crookedly as Mitch came pounding up beside him. The big gent growled, "You damn, fool, you wouldn't stand a chance against them alone."

The Kid kept the grin on his lips, but his eyes stayed on the advancing gunmen. He said out of the side of his mouth, "This ain't your show, Mitch."

Mitch shook his head. "I wish I was smart. I wish I could figure you."

The Kid put his eyes on the big, swaggering leader of the pack. That would be Anse Belder. He saw the silver belt buckle and he wondered if that wouldn't be a good target to shoot at. He wondered how a man got all mixed up like he had. Why did he keep following a crooked trail when he knew it was the wrong trail? Why, when he had gotten the itch out of his feet, hadn't he come back home like he had really wanted to? Too stubborn. Too proud.

He heard Mitch saying, "Kid, you see what I do? That long-geared marshal is ridin' into town."

Then Big Mitch had his gun out and red hell broke loose there in the street of Maraposa. Flame stabbed the darkness as hot guns blared their hell call and death screamed and shrieked between the false fronts. The

(cont'd on last page)

STARPACKER STAMPEDE

TIME ★ HONORED WESTERN CLASSIC

by KENNETH FOWLER

"I GOT A scheme—" begins Windy McCarthy.

I groans and says, "To land us in the Tanktown calaboose, I suppose." That sawed-off, addle-pated pardner of mine can think up schemes faster than I can say no to 'em. His latest, which is callin' on Marshal "Grumpy" Gordon to propose a matrimonial alliance between himself and the marshal's daughter, Luella, has just landed him on his ear in the middle of Main Street. Personally I can't see what a runt like Windy can see in a big husky female like Luella Gordon, except that my pardner, though small, has a very large appetite, and Luella's maple sugar biscuits....

Windy hooks his right boot heel into the well-worn brass rail of the Moosehead and takes a generous swallow of the amber Solly Weizenheimer has just slid across the bar to him.

"You're plumb right about this scheme landin' us in the hoosegow," he states authoritatively, "but it won't be as inmates. Piccolo"—he sticks out his chest and pushes back his Stetson from the rim of his forehead—"I'm gonna run for Marshal of Tanktown against old Gordon."

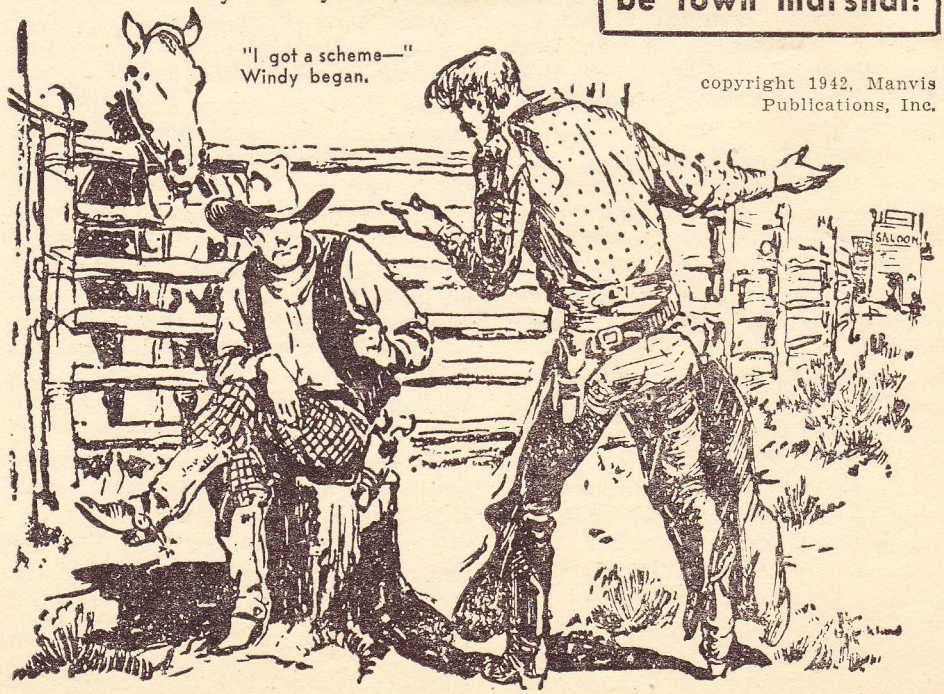
I lightens the shock of this announcement with a deep swig of Solly's throat oil.

"Just think," pleads my pardner, "a hundred a month—and we can sleep right in the jail!"

You can see now why he needs the protection of an older and more experienced man, like me.

"Sleepin' in calabooses," I says coldly, "ain't no privilege to me, and if I recollect, it ain't no novelty to you.

That sawed-off, addle-pated saddlepard of Piccolo's had a holsterful of hell for any salty son who might figure he maybe wasn't exactly the man to be town marshal!



"I got a scheme—" Windy began.

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Finish your beer and let's be driftin'. We're down to our last sawbuck, and if we don't hook onto a job soon—"

It's like talking to the wind.

McCarthy finds out from Solly Weizenheimer, who is almost as full of information as an encyclopedia, that all you need to do if you want to run for public office in Tanktown is get fifty bonafide voters to sign a petition and then file it with the county clerk in Longhorn City. By half-past ten the same mornin' my energetic pardner is back with forty-nine names—and he's only had one refusal. That's from Artemus Squidge, general manager and chief and only teller of the Tanktown Cattlemen's Bank. I ain't surprised, either. Grumpy Gordon is a stockholder in this bank, and besides, under Grumpy, there hasn't been a holdup in Tanktown in ages.

"Why don't *you* sign it?" suggests Windy, back at the Moosehead with his heel hooked into the identical same spot in the brass rail. "You're a citizen—you could do it."

"I could," I says firmly, "but I won't. And I hope you don't find anybody else that's loco enough to—"

He herds me impatiently through the batwing doors to the board walk. I goes, for his own safety and protection. There's no way of tellin' what fool thing he may do if left alone, and I had sorta promised his mother—

"Well," says Windy, "forty-nine signers ain't bad for a town of this size, considerin' I was only at it for about an hour."

"You got plenty signers all right," I admits. "But all them hombres done was sign their names, and what you're signin'—runnin' against old Grumpy Gordon—is your own danged death warrant! Anybody honin' to run *against* old Gordon—instead of *away* from him—must be plumb outa his head to start with."

"Say, look!" Windy grabs my arm, and points. "Here comes Gordon now!"

We stops at the hitch rack in front of the Cattle King Hotel and watches the grizzled old lawman come jouncin' up the street on his big bay geldin', Cricket. He pulls up in front of the hotel and creaks down outa the saddle. Pausin' a moment, he glares at McCarthy, then says, "harrrrrrump!" in kind of a warnin' voice and heads for his office and one-room jail in the little pine board buildin' next to the Cattle King.

"Come on," says Windy suddenly, "I got a scheme!"

Before I can stop him, he steps forward and lays a detainin' hand on the old man's shirtsleeve!

"Howdy, marshal," says my rattlebrained pardner. "Like to talk to yuh a minute."

I forgot to mention, I guess, that in spite of his runt size Windham B. McCarthy has one remarkable and outstandin' attribute. Nerve!

The marshal whirls as though McCarthy has prodded him in the back with a six-gun.

"If you aim to palaver with me," he barks, "come in my office. But git ready to high-tail if it's about Luella! I ain't got no time for saddle tramps."

WINDY FOLLOWS the marshal into the little office and waits for Gordon to drop himself into a battered swivel chair behind his roll-topped desk. I trails in behind 'em, figurin' maybe I could give the marshal some help afterwards about the disposition of the body.

Windy pulls the petition out of his pocket and begins: "Marshal Gordon, for four years you, as peace officer of Tanktown, have give us Tanktowners a good honest administration and we'd be mighty ungrateful if we wasn't—er—grateful."

Grumpy Gordon's eyebrows lift a bit when he is pleased. They pop up now and his weather-beaten jowls crease in a pretty fair imitation of a smile.

"Harrrrumph!" He picks up a desk pen, scratches his head with it, then tucks it behind his right ear.

"So," continues Windy, clearin' his throat importantly, "as your popularity ain't never been questioned, me and Piccolo here has got the voters to sign a unanimous petition for the continuation of justice, law and order, but"—he adds after an impressive pause—"on a even bigger and better scale than previous."

The marshal's bushy gray eyebrows bob up again and he strokes his strag-

gly mustache with a tolerant expression in his squinty blue eyes.

My pardner has no right ropin' me in on this crazy business, and right here is where I oughta paste him one on the kisser, but—

Windy lays the petition in front of the marshal.

"Marshal Gordon," he throbs, "it's no more'n right that your name should be added to the list of distinguished citizens signin' this paper, and here" —he points to the bottom of the petition—"we've reserved a special place for the signature of the most important and popular official in Poco Pisada County!"

The old goat falls for it. He says "harrrrumph," but then adds cautiously, "Well, it seems a mite unusual—"

"Why, dang it," cuts in Windy quickly, "this might even get to be a historic document like the Declaration of Independence and get hung some day down in the courthouse at Longhorn City."

"Right where you're gonna get hung," I mutters, givin' him a look that would curdle cream. The blasted fool winks at me.

"Now where's that danged pen o' mine?" worries the marshal, pokin' around in the papers on his desk. "Danged if I can keep track of a blasted—"

I see it was still behind his ear, but have sense enough to keep my lip buttoned because the old boy never likes to be reminded of his absent-mindedness. But that plumb pardner of mine busts right out with it.

"It's behind your ear, marshal—your right ear."

I figure the old walrus will start tearin' up the place then, but it looks as though that soft soap McCarthy has been handin' him has done its work. The marshal takes down the pen without a word and scrawls his name with a flourish!

"'Scuse me, marshal," says Windy apologetically, "but you writ that on your memorandum pad. This here's the petition."

"Don't I know it?" This time the old horned toad really does flare up. "Anybody'd know I allus sign my name once for practice afore puttin' it down permanent."

The marshal signs in the spot indicated by McCarthy's forefinger, then swings around in his swivel chair and faces us. "Well, now," he says in a pleased voice, "this is plumb civil o' you boys. Reckon I had you sized up wrong, McCarthy. But you and Piccolo here had oughta get yuh jobs, and then stick to 'em."

"We got a job in mind right now," says Windy, "and we're headin' for Longhorn City this afternoon to see about it." He tips me a wink. "Well, thanks marshal—and here's wishin' yuh all yuh deserve!"

The marshal could have put two meanin's on that, but bein' such a vain old goat, he naturally takes it as a bouquet.

I waits till I have that half-wit pardner of mine on the board walk, and then I lets him have it. "You oughta have your head examined," I states. "Any galoot that pulls what you just done oughta be makin' his arrangements with the undertaker right now."

"Nothin' ventured, nothin' gained," says McCarthy. "That's my motta!"

We seem to be walkin' towards the railroad depot, and it reminds me of what McCarthy has just told the marshal about Longhorn City.

"What's this talk about us goin' to Longhorn City?" I asks.

"It's more'n talk," says McCarthy. "That's sure where we're goin'. This petition has to be filed with the county clerk before tomorra noon, and I ain't takin' no chances."

I give him a dirty laugh.

"That," says I, "is what *you* think!"

THE FREIGHT engine whistles, spearin' a white plume of steam into the blue, and with a clankin' and grindin' of rusty couplin's jerks the short string of box cars towards Dogie Flats and the desert. My pardner and me vaults through the open door of the last car as the train rattles over a siding switch and slowly picks up speed.

"This ain't exactly the kind of exit befittin' the next marshal of Tanktown," Windy comments, cuffing the dust out of his pants, "but it'll save carfare and we can keep what *dinero* we got for campaign expenses."

"Yeah," I jeers, "and also for doctor

bills when Grumpy Gordon finds out what he signed awhile back. If you wasn't so danged stuck on yourself you'd see that them folks signed that petition o' yours as a joke. They all wanta see what Grumpy does when he finds out you intend runnin' agin him for marshal. Personally I'd rather not be around to see, you bein' a friend o' mine, kinda."

McCarthy ignores this turn of the conversation.

"Wish we could'a' waited to see what was the trouble around the bank just as we was leavin'," he says wistfully. "If it was a hold-up or somethin' I oughta been there. Maybe I could'a' got in some practice herdin' outlaws."

"What you're gonna catch ain't outlaws," I assures him. "And if I was you I'd—"

"All right," interrupts a harsh voice, "raise yer mittens!"

I swings around to see a tall, hard-jawed hombre steppin' out from behind a pile of packin' cases at the back of the car. He don't look like a very friendly party, even without that long-barreled .45 he is doin' calisthenics with.

Before we can say howdy to this bird, we have another visitor, a funny, hatchet-faced little fella who jumps out beside the first man and starts wavin' a gun.

"Save yer lead, Droopy," growls the tall one. "Wait till we find out what these hombres is doin' ridin' in our private coach."

The hatchet-faced man grumbles somethin' I couldn't get, but it seems to me as if he is gettin' anxious to get ahead with his target practice.

Just then, however, my pardner wakes up and introduces us.

"Gents," he says hearty-like, "I'm plumb happy to make your acquaintance! I'm Windy McCarthy, formerly with the Bar BQ outfit, but just now travelin' for my health, and this here is Piccolo Peters, my pardner."

Our two visitors look at each other, then lower their artillery.

"Reckon they're all right," says the tall one, tuckin' his .45 back in the leather. "I'm Bill Mabie and this is Droopy Dildock. We been placer minin' up in the Bear Tooth Range an' struck some dirt. Headin' fer Longhorn City to git a little recreation."

I looks at his red nose and decides there is only one kind of recreation he would be interested in, but that numbskull pardner of mine seems set on cultivatin' these two birds.

"Pleased to meetcha," McCarthy says again. "Me and my pardner here is makin' a business trip to Longhorn City ourselves. We might as well be sociable."

I give McCarthy a look that oughta have singed his eyebrows, but the danged fool just grins and the next thing I know we are squatted on the floor bein' sociable with a deck of dog-eared playin' cards which Droopy drags outa his greasy vest.

McCarthy shuffles and deals and then says: "Didn't I see you two fellas drift out from Salter's livery and roll your tails towards this freight just as me and Piccolo was crossin' Main Street?"

Bill Mabie scowls. "Couldn't'a' been us," he says shortly.

"I'd'a' swore—" begins Windy.

Droopy Dildock jerks to his feet and yanks out his gun again.

"Yuh hear that?" he squeals. "He's insinuatin' you're a dog-gone liar, Bill!"

Mabie gets to his feet and bats down the gun.

"Shut up!" he says harshly. He turns to Windy and me. "Don't mind Droopy, boys," he growls. "He gits as proddy sometimes as a old maid with spring fever."

I don't like the way these birds are actin', but that addle-brained peanut I'd taken for a pardner evidently thinks they are all right. "No apologies necessary," he says with a big-hearted wave of the hand. "All of us fly off the handle at times." And he looks at me.

However, the card game is definitely off. When Hatchet-face has scrambled to his feet, he has scattered the cards all over the floor of the box car, and some of them have blown out through the open side doors.

I can hear the engine puffin', and realize we are almost at the top of Two Mile Grade, the toughest part of the twenty mile run to Longhorn City. Droopy Dildock has gone back to the packin' cases and is now sittin' on one, sulkin'.

"It's his dyspepsia," explains Bill Mabie. "Every time he eats horse radish—"

He is interrupted by a sudden joltin' of the car and a loud hissin' of compressed air.

Windy sticks his head out through the door and gives a gasp.

"What's wrong?" demands Bill Mabie.

"Our car," McCarthy answers hoarsely. "The couplin's busted, and we're coastin' back towards Tanktown!"

FOR A WHILE it looks like the car may get out of hand, jump the rails at the freight sidin', and plow up Main Street right through the doors of the Moosehead! That, I think, will be convenient for the passengers, but maybe not for the management of the Moosehead. Solly Weizenheimer has loaded many a customer in his day, but he might have his hands full, loadin' a box car! Anyway, it ain't necessary. Bill Mabie boosts me up to the roof and I set the handbrake, bringin' the car to a grindin' stop only a few yards from the Tanktown station.

As I climb down the little iron ladder at the end of the car I notice Mabie and Dildock in a huddle. I can't hear what they are sayin' but Mabie is pointin' one way, and Dildock another. Dildock seems excited, and Mabie is apparently tryin' to calm him down.

"Well, gents," Windy says, "what d'you say to a little refreshment at the Moosehead?"

I can tell that Droopy Dildock is gettin' ready to say no, but Mabie kicks him in the shins and that shuts him up. We reach the Moosehead and McCarthy calls loudly for Solly to provide four lagers—with light portions of froth. Solly serves the beer, and with it, some information.

"Don't know where you fellas've been," he begins eagerly, "but yuh sure missed some excitement. Cattleman's Bank got held up—two gents wearin' bandannas across their faces."

Windy pricks up his ears.

"Ol' Squidge," Solly goes on, "says he could reckernize one of 'em by the voice—kind of a whiney little cuss. Lucky for you, Gordon's off lookin' for 'em now. He was lookin' for you and Piccolo afore it happened."

"Tell the marshal," McCarthy says airily, "that if he needs some advice on ropin' outlaws, I'm his man."

"Yeah," I says, "you're his man all right—when he finds out yuh got his signature on false pretenses."

Droopy Dildock starts to say somethin', but Bill Mabie stops him by another kick in the shins.

Windy lifts his stein and washes his tonsils. Bill Mabie and his hatchet-faced pardner have polished off their beers and now are wipin' out the taste with a couple of ryes for chasers.

Windy explains confidentially to Mabie: "The trouble with Grumpy Gordon is, he ain't got no dee-ducktive ability. Now I wouldn't be surprised myself if them two robbers is layin' low right here in town."

I notice that Droopy Dildock looks at Mabie quick, and I began wonderin'—

The batwing doors swings inward, and Marshal Grumpy Gordon stomps in. The marshal's bandy legs are planted about a yard apart, and a hogleg almost as big as a cannon is bristlin' in his right fist.

Bill Mabie spots the lawman almost at the same time I do, and for a minute it seems like I see Mabie slip somethin' in Windy's pocket. Then I decide I'm mistaken, and forget about it. I suddenly have a lot of other things to occupy my mind.

Trailed by his lanky deputy, Ollie Jensen, the marshal walks over to the bar and claps a horny hand on the shoulder of his rival for the marshal's job.

"McCarthy," he announces in a loud voice, "you're under arrest for fraud—gittin' a signature under false pretenses!" He turns to me and growls: "You'll have to come too, Peters. You was with him when he done it."

"But—" begins Windy.

"Ain't no 'buts' about it this time," snaps Grumpy Gordon. "Comin' peaceable, or do I gotta charge yuh with resistin' arrest, too?"

"He'll come peaceable," I promised him, "or take that sock on the jaw I should'a' give him in the first place."

The marshal grunts, then says to his deputy: "Watch 'em a minute, Ollie." He whirls around on Bill Mabie and

Droopy Dildock. "Sorry, gents, but I'll have to search yuh both. Had a robbery in town, and I can't let no pilgrims through without a search."

Droopy Dildock opens his yap to protest, but Bill Mabie promptly shuts it for him. He gives Droopy another kick in the shins.

"Why, sure, marshal," says Mabie agreeably, "go right ahead and search. Me and my pardner here is prospectors in from the Bear Tooth country. We ain't got nothin' to hide."

The marshal goes quickly through their pockets but apparently finds nothin' incriminatin' because he says: "Sorry to have bothered you gents." Then he turns to Jensen, McCarthy and me. "Herd 'em along in back of me, Ollie. I gotta get some jail grub." We trail him two doors down from the saloon to a lunch room from the front of which hangs a sign readin': "EATS—Come & Get it!" The marshal steps inside, and while we wait on the doorstep I hear him order a loaf of bread, two cans of beans, and, in a sudden burst of generosity, two hunks of alleged peach pie.

He don't seem to notice Mabie and Dildock follow us across the street to the clink, but I do. Them two hombres slink along behind us like a couple of ghosts.

AT THE DOOR of his office the marshal dismisses Ollie Jensen and takes us in alone. He hauls down a tray from a shelf back of his desk, then escorts us to the little one-cell jail in the rear. There he takes out his key ring, unlocks the grilled door of the cell, then lays the keys on the tray as he shoves the door inward and steps inside.

He puts the tray on one of the two wooden bunks in the cell. "There's your chuck," he says stiffly, and turns his back on us.

He slams the door and stomps out. Then we hear him shut the door to the outside office. As his footsteps fade on the board walk, Windy lets out a gasp.

"Well now, will yuh look at that!" He is gazin' down at the dinner tray.

"You look at it," I says coldly. "I ain't hungry."

McCarthy is always hungry; for a little hombre, I never see anybody that can tuck in the chuck the way he can. "Them beans don't look bad atall," he says, lookin' things over carefully, "and another thing about 'em is they're free gratis. And that pie—"

A sudden glint from the tray catches my eye, and that glint ain't made by no pie. "Look," I points. "On the tray there. That absent-minded old jigadee forgot to take his keys!"

My pardner stares. Then he turns toward the door, and he is starin' at somethin' else—the black holes of a pair .45s, slantin' down at him through the bars!

Behind those guns are Bill Mabie and Droopy Dildock, and the way Mabie is swishin' the air with his gun there ain't no "maybe" about it. He jabs that gun towards Windy. "Peel off your coat," he barks. "I need it!"

My pardner needs it too, but lookin' into the business end of that .45 he decides that Bill Mabie might need it more'n he did. He takes it off and hands it through the bars, lookin' puzzled.

Mabie lowers his gun then, but Droopy is squintin' along the barrel of his cutter as if he is ponderin' the possibility of droppin' the both of us with one shot.

Mabie gives him a shove. "Go on, dang yuh! And put up that gun afore yuh rouse up the whole blasted town with it!" He pushes Dildock again. They disappear into the office, and then the outside door slams.

"Come on," McCarthy yells, "after 'em! That big one's got my petition, the buzzard! Gordon must'a' hired him to steal it! Come on!"

I grab the keys, but find when I try the door that it's unlocked anyway! Havin' forgot the keys, Grumpy has held true to form and forgot to lock the door! I give it a push, and Windy and me come out like water pourin' over a dam.

We grab our guns on the run and head for the front door. McCarthy gets there first and yanks so hard the knob comes off in his hand. He leans out and throws it right after Mabie and Dildock.

"There they go!" he hollers. "Come on—after 'em!" He starts dashin' right out of that door and would've done it, except that I reach out and drag him back by the seat of the britches.

"You loco?" I snarls. "Them two hombres is liable to shoot."

Two horses is tied to the hitch rail in front of the hotel—Gordon's and Ollie Jensen's—and Mabie and Dildock are leggin' it towards 'em as fast as their boots can kick up dust. At the sound of Windy's yell, however, they pull up and stare back pop-eyed with astonishment. Droopy's gun is liftin' when my pardner fires from the hip.

Dust spurts up at them outlaws' feet and breaks 'em outa their tracks like a pair of startled jackrabbits. They start firin' wildly all over the place, and duck behind the horses which are rearin' up on their hind legs. A crowd starts pourin' out of the Moosehead and somebody on the porch of the hotel begins yellin' murder.

Takin' advantage of the uproar and my loosened grip on the seat of his pants McCarthy leaps from the jail door and flattens out in a gully alongside the board walk. I dive right after him like a bull-frog goin' after a minnow.

Windy's smoke-pole lets go with a regular broadside as he hits the ditch, but that's about all he does hit, outside of maybe one or two Moosehead customers who are a little slow divin' back into the saloon. McCarthy ain't discouraged that easy, though. He tries a second salvo, and there is a mass retreat off the veranda of the hotel.

"Can't seem to get the range," McCarthy complains irritably.

My right ear is practically outa commission by now as a result of his bombardment. "You'll get the range if you're not carefuler," I yelps. "You'll get the whole danged Poco Pisada Range!"

Droopy Dildock is returnin' Windy's fire while Mabie is tryin' to quiet the spooky cayuses, but the more he fires, the more them horses rears and bucks.

Lookin' up the street, I lets out a yell of alarm. A woman is drivin' down towards us—a woman in an old rattletrap of a buckboard—headin' straight into the line of fire! Windy sees her at the same time, and jumps up wavin' his arms wildly.

"Luella!" he bawls. "Turn around! Go back! *Go on back!*"

BUT LUELLA GORDON, sittin' in the middle of that saggin' old buckboard, don't seem to savvy her danger in time. She is tryin' to pull up her bronc when Bill Mabie springs up alongside of her and grabs the reins outa her hands. He whips up the knock-kneed old skate and at the same time Droopy Dildock gives a flyin' jump and scrambles aboard from the back. The overloaded wagon rocks crazily down the street. The bronc is gallopin' straight for Sneed's Grain & Feed Store, scatterin' dust like a stampedin' steer. Twenty feet from the loadin' platform of the feed store the skinny old flybait veers suddenly and slams right through the gate adjoinin' the buildin'.

The gate is just wide enough to let the horse through, but not the buckboard. There is a sound like a whip crack as the harness snaps, and a crunchin' sound as the whiffletree splinters like a kindlin' against the sides of the gate. The buckboard upends and hurls all three passengers into a nearby hay mow.

By now half of Tanktown is runnin' after the runaway, with me and my pardner in the lead. McCarthy skids up to the hay mow just as the hatchet-face of Droopy Dildock comes pokin' out and looks around in a kind of daze. Windy shoots out his fist, and Droopy never comes out of the fog.

Then Luella and Bill Mabie come crawlin' out of the hay, and I have to haul McCarthy back so he won't go for the big bird too. I get hold of the backside of his britches with my left hand, and with my right pull out my smoke-pole and bounce a fast one off Mabie's top-knot. Mabie sags back in the hay with a contented sigh.

"Gosh, Luella," blurts Windy, "yuh sure do look fancy with your yella hair all mussed up thataway!"

Luella swings her arm kittenishly, and it catches my pardner square on the kisser. Down he goes, out like a light in only the first or second round.

"Now yuh done it!" I bleat. "If yuh gotta spark, whyn't yuh play gentle?"

"It was just a love tap," Luella Gordon says regretfully. "Why—"

"I'd hate to see you get a real cravin' for a man," I mutters. I am bendin'

over the fallen gladiator, tryin' to bring him to. "If that was a love tap, no tellin' what'd happen yuh got really b'iled up over a fella."

Windy still looks kind of dazed, but I get him on his feet just as Marshal Gordon stomps through the busted gate, followed by Ollie, Artemus Squidge and half the people of Tanktown.

The marshal stares hard at McCarthy and me and scratches his head. "I could'a' swore I arrested you two," he mutters. "Well, if I forgot it, yo're under arrest right now!"

He turns to Luella and points at the outstretched figures of Mabie and Dildock. "Hope yuh didn't damage 'em none," he says. "I gotta bring them in, too. Disturbin' the peace."

My pardner takes advantage of this tender domestic scene to step across to the huddled form of Bill Mabie with the object in view of retrievin' his stolen petition. His coat is there alongside the unconscious miner, and as he picks it up and feels in the left hand pocket his hand closes on somethin' that brings a funny look to his face. He takes out his hand and stares open-mouthed at a thick bundle of bank notes.

Nature ain't give my pardner any very heavy amount of brains, but he can add up two and two and get four. A bank has been robbed, and here is an hombre with a bankroll big enough to choke a horse. All right, this bozo might be a bank robber!

Windy steps over to Artemus Squidge and slaps the bills into the banker's palm.

"Mr. Squidge," he announces dramatically, "there's the *dinero* which was stole from your bank!" He turns to the gapin' marshal and motions towards the outlaws. "Marshal," he says, "arrest them two jaspers! They're the outlaws robbed the Tanktown Bank! I been on their trail all afternoon—even after you throwed me and Piccolo in jail for tryin' to give yuh a litle perfessional assistance."

Suddenly Droopy Dildock stirs and mutters in a whinin' voice: "Damn it, Bill, where's my iron? I told yuh—"

Artemus Squidge gives a shout. "That's him! That little one! I'd know his voice anywheres. Threatened to shoot me! Arrest him!"

The marshal clears his throat and turns to McCarthy, who is standin' with his chest pushed out enjoyin' the admiration of the gallery and especially the shy, flutterin' glances of Luella. "Son," he confesses reluctantly, "I shore gotta give yuh credit. I—yessir, I plumb have." The old man looks as though he is gonna break down and cry.

"Shucks, that's all right," says Windy big-heartedly. "You'd'a' done all right if it'd been a minor case, maybe."

SOMEBODY in the crowd yells, "Windy McCarthy—our next marshal!" and the top button of Windy's shirt flys off with a pop.

"Pull in your chest," I whispers. "Yuh wanta lose all your buttons?"

Just then there is a long blast of a train whistle, and Windy gives a jump. The 5:10 is leavin' the depot—and it's the last train to Longhorn City before tomorrow. And tomorrow will be too late to file his petition for marshal.

Windy jerks up an arm.

"One minute, gents!" he cries. "I wanta take this here opportunity to announce I'm withdrawin' from the race for marshal! And I think that with the experience gained from observin' my methods in this case, our friend Gordon here will make a pretty middlin' lawman, in time."

The marshal's bushy eyebrows twitch up. "Son," he says sadly, "guess I done yuh an injustice. Too bad they ain't no reward on these hombres, but"—he glances meanin'ly towards Luella, who is blushin' like a Poco Pisada sunset—"reckon mebbeso you'll git another kind o' reward, eh?

At this sinister remark, I grab my pardner by the sleeve and move him fast out of the crowd. "If I got anythin' to say," I states emphatically, "that there's one reward you ain't never gonna collect!"

Poor Windy fingers his sore chin very gingerly.

"Maybe you're right," he says.

Then he pauses and looks back. "But if you'd ever tasted her maple sugar buscuits—!" ●END

GUNSMOKE IS A BADGETOTER'S GLORY

by JAMES SHAFFER

The gallows was ready for the hanging. The sheriff wasn't, though, and neither was the killer!

THE SLANTING sun was lengthening the shadows in Tumbleweed City. It threw grotesque silhouettes of the false-fronted buildings across the thick dust of the main street. It splashed crazily off the deputy sheriff's badge pinned to the shirt of Joe Kirby. And it threw a long, gaunt shadow of the gallows across the town.

Joe Kirby was standing on the sidewalk in front of Moore's Mercantile; and as the sun slanted downward, the shadow of the waiting noose settled around the shadow of Kirby's head and shoulders. The deputy moved a few feet. He'd tested the gallows that afternoon. They were ready for the hanging.

The rancher moved towards the cell door as Kirby brought his gun around.

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Sheriff John Hawkes stepped out of his office a few feet down the street and let his gaze linger long on his deputy. There was puzzlement, and faint suspicion in the lawman's eyes. Kirby knew the suspicion was there. Hawkes had hired Kirby on the strength of a letter of recommendation from Sheriff Palmer, which Kirby had. But Joe Kirby knew that his boss had never fully trusted him, during these six months he'd worn the badge of Tumbleweed City. And Joe Kirby knew the reasons.

One was that old John Hawkes had had to kill his former deputy. Hawkes had put a bullet through him one dark night when the sheriff, singlehanded, had stopped a rustling drive. The badge Joe Kirby wore was bent, where the lawman's lead had hit and glanced. After that, Sheriff Hawkes didn't trust anyone. For there was lawlessness aplenty in his bailiwick. And he'd found out why he'd been powerless to stop it—that night he'd uncovered the crookedness of his former deputy.

The other reason was the letter of recommendation Joe Kirby had brought. Sheriff Palmer had been a good sheriff—down in the southern part of the state. But a week after Joe Kirby had gone to work in Tumbleweed City, Palmer had been bushwhacked. Even if Hawkes had wanted to check up with Palmer about Joe Kirby, he couldn't. Not now.

The old lawman strolled up the street to pause a minute beside his deputy. He glanced suggestively at the grim instrument of death that set in an open lot right off the main street, then looked at Joe Kirby.

Then deputy nodded. "Tested it a while ago. Put a new rope on it. Hank Bowers is a heavy man."

Sheriff Hawkes nodded and moved on. But the puzzled look was still in his eyes as he passed through the batwing doors of the Golden Chance Saloon. A sardonic grin creased Kirby's features. His boss mistrusted him, yet there was a grudging admiration for his deputy, for Joe Kirby was a good deputy—he kept Tumbleweed City quiet and peaceful.

But up until a week ago, Joe Kirby had done nothing more than that—keep the peace in town. He hadn't ridden out after rustlers—never being around when a posse was being formed. And the fact that Kirby had never taken the trail, had increased Sheriff Hawkes' suspicion of the close-mouthed deputy.

But a week ago the stage had been held up—the driver killed. Deputy Kirby had gone out, and had come back with Hank Bowers—and the evidence. And Sheriff Hawkes was puzzled. If his deputy was in league with the crooked element in town—he'd hardly go out and track down Bowers and bring him back to hang....

Joe Kirby watched his boss disappear into the Golden Chance, then fished for the makings. A man was coming up the street toward him, but Kirby gave his full attention to the little brown flakes that spilled into the thin brown paper, and didn't look up until he was licking the cigarette shut.

"Hello, Masden." The greeting was low—almost drowned out by the sputter of the match Kirby struck with his thumbnail.

Alf Masden owned the Split M ranch. A hard, taciturn man, whose worn clothes and general shabby appearance gave no hint of the wealth he'd piled up. He had pale blue eyes that seemed to view the world with a look of perpetual bewilderment. They did not change their expression now.

He acknowledged Kirby's greeting with a quick bob of his head. "Haven't seen you in a couple of weeks, Kirby. Not since you brought Hank Bowers in to hang." His lips twitched slightly. It could have been a smile—or something else. "Reckon congratulations are in order."

Joe Kirby shrugged and studied the glowing end of his cigarette. "I don't feel any too good about it, Masden—bringing in a man to die isn't pleasant."

Masden chuckled and looked at the shadow of the gallows, as the setting sun threw it across the dusty street. "Guess not. Makes you wonder how *you'd* feel, knowing you was going to dance on air."

KIRBY tossed his smoke away, shifted around till he faced Masden squarely. "Bowers had it

coming. The stage driver didn't have a chance. A cold-blooded thing, it was."

"There was money on that stage," Masden said. "And men'll do anything for money."

Yes, Kirby was thinking, men would do anything for money—or for a woman. He lifted his glance down the street—till it rested on the little dress shop down on the corner, and he tried to find resentment against himself for staying as long as he had in Tumbleweed City. But the resentment wasn't there. Only a dull, aching regret for the last five years of his life. Wasted, thrown carelessly away, like a cigarette butt.

"John Hawkes is a smart sheriff," Masden's voice grated through Kirby's thoughts. "They say he's offering Hank Bowers a life sentence—instead of hanging—if Hank will tell what he knows about some people around here."

Kirby didn't look at Masden. "Hawkes knows his job, all right." And he was thinking, "that's why Hawkes never put any trust in me, because he knows his job." Then his thoughts were swept aside by a movement down in the little dress shop. Somebody on the inside had pulled down the window shades.

"Can't see how Bowers could enjoy living in the penetentiary," Masden went on, "but he might prefer that to hanging." His tone was conversational. "And if he decided to turn state's evidence, it would embarrass a lot of people. They'd rather see Hank dead—than alive and talkative."

Down at the little dress shop, a woman had stepped out of the door, and was locking up for the night. Kirby watched her as she gave her hat a final pat and started up the street. Masden was watching Kirby closely, after one brief glance down the street.

"Hank Bowers would try to escape—if given half a chance," Masden said. "But a smart lawman—right on the job—could probably kill him before he got plumb away."

Kirby had been expecting that, but even so, the actual sound of the words shocked him, and he knew that his face must have paled under his tan.

"Right poor sport, I'd call that," he said harshly. "Like turning a mouse out of a trap—with a cat waiting for him."

"Wouldn't call it sport—just a lawman doing the duty he's sworn to do. And by doing your duty, you'd be doing some people a favor. Maybe them same folks could do you a favor some time—" he paused —"say, for instance, not mentioning the fact to Sheriff Hawkes that your looks have changed considerably since you worked for Sheriff Palmer. In fact, it's hard to believe that you're the same man. And I notice you don't wear two guns, but your pants are worn where the second holster has rubbed."

He nodded briefly and moved away, throwing one quick glance at the girl from the dress shop, who was walking toward Joe Kirby. The deputy watched him, his hand straying to his left hip. No, he only wore one gun. It was that second gun that marked him for what he was.

A month or two ago, Joe Kirby's heart would have sung as the girl approached him, but now there was only emptiness within him. This was what he'd turned his back on, five long years ago. He was a fool to think he could retrace his steps; for always there was his past, looking over his shoulder, leering at his dreams of peace.

She was pretty; there was a calm, restful beauty about her that made a man forget the roar of guns on a dim trail...

As Beth greeted him, he swung into step beside her—it was a daily ritual.

"You look worried," she said. "Bowers? You shouldn't think about it—I know it's—awful, but such things must be."

Kirby tried to grin, knew that he'd made a poor job of it. "Not worried—but didn't enjoy the Chinaman's beans at dinner. Now, if Mrs. Bussman will let you cook me some biscuits—"

They were passing the sheriff's office now. Hank Bowers' face was pressed against the bars of his cell window, around at the side.

"Yah, look at the law-abiding deppity!" he jeered. "Strutting along like he owned the town—'cause he done caught hisself a prisoner—"

A few passersby were stopping to stare, and listen. Kirby was conscious of Beth's hand on his arm, hurrying him along. Bowers' voice followed them, growing louder, as they drew farther away.

"...sporting that badge like he had a *right* to wear it—the damn thing would change color if it knew what I know..."

Sheriff Hawkes stepped out of the Golden Chance at the sound of Bowers' voice. He stood listening, his grey eyes studying Joe Kirby. He moved as if to cross the street, but just then Alf Masden stepped out of the saloon behind him. Joe Kirby heard Masden's voice.

"Never knew an outlaw yet that didn't claim he was innocent—or that the lawman that brought him in was a crook," the rancher said with a half laugh. The sheriff turned slowly, his eyes rested on Masden for a long moment, then he shrugged and stepped back into the Golden Chance.

THE REST of the walk to Mrs. Bussman's boarding house was silent. Joe Kirby kept his eyes straight ahead. Beth still held his arm; and her grip was tight. The deputy turned to go as they mounted the front porch steps, but the girl held on.

"I—I think Bowers cleared up a lot of things—in my mind," she told him. He couldn't understand the light in her eyes. He expected to find loathing, disgust there. Instead, her eyes were almost shining. It puzzled him.

"What things?" he asked.

A blush crept into her cheeks. "It explained why you—" the words came with a rush—"why you never talked about the future—our future. And I'm glad!"

"Glad! I don't understand—"

"That's because you're not a woman," she told him, almost gaily. "I thought perhaps the reason you never talked about our future—was me—now I know it isn't."

"No—God only knows I've wanted to—but now," again he was mentally cursing those bleak years on his backtrail, that were coming back to haunt him. An anger at himself was welling up inside him, for being fool enough to think he could shake them. And the girl—he'd had no right to drag her into this. His association with her could bring her nothing but grief.

"I reckon this is goodbye," he said bleakly.

"It needn't be," she replied quickly. "This West is big—there are plenty of places—"

A bitter smile twisted his lips. Big! Plenty of places! There'd been a time when he'd thought that, too. There'd been a time when he thought he could ride over the next horizon and leave his past. But he'd found out he couldn't—and he'd found out the hard way. There was no turning back. He'd thought that he'd shaken his past, here in Tumbleweed City, but as always, it had popped up.

There would always be a Masden—or a Hank Bowers, no matter where he went.

He shook his head. "This is goodbye—it's better that way." And before she could speak, he was striding down the street—back to the jail, and whatever awaited him there.

Sheriff Hawkes was at his battered desk when Joe Kirby entered. The lawman looked up, nodded briefly and went on reading the reports in front of him. Kirby sat down and rolled a smoke. From the rear of the building came the creak of springs, as Hank Bowers tossed restlessly on the narrow cot in his cell. Presently, Hawkes looked up.

He indicated the letter in front of him. "From the governor—commuting Hank's sentence to a life term—if he talks." Kirby nodded, and the lawman went on.

"I think he'll break," he said quietly. "He would have already, but somebody's talked to him—that's why I moved him to an inside cell. Somebody's told him they'll get him out—and Hank believes 'em." He stared at his deputy. "I guess there's a lot of folks around here that don't want Hank to talk."

"There always is," Joe Kirby said quietly. "Hank didn't work alone—ordinarily."

"You go on out and get some supper," Hawkes said. He stood up. "I'll let Hank read this." He indicated the letter. Joe Kirby nodded and left.

Masden was standing on the sidewalk in front of the saloon. Two of

his riders lounged nearby. Joe Kirby could feel their eyes on his back as he moved down the street to the hash house. Dusk was settling over Tumbleweed Town as the Chinaman set his food before him.

And in the dusk, men moved silently about. Grim, hard men, with guns slung low, whose watchful eyes kept track of the movements around town. One strolled into the restaurant and ordered pie and coffee, but Joe Kirby didn't turn around. He knew that he wouldn't have to watch his back—not yet. He kept on eating, and presently, the man who'd ordered moved over and sat on the stool next to Kirby. The Chinaman padded back toward the kitchen on soundless feet.

"Was talking to Alf Masden a few minutes ago," the man said conversationally. He didn't lift his eyes from his plate. "Said he figured you'd make a right good sheriff."

"We already got a sheriff," Kirby said.

"Yeah, but you never can tell when we gonna need another one," the other grunted. "Tumbleweed City might need one before morning. Never can tell. And Masden's got a lot of pull—he could make a man sheriff—if that man already wore a deputy's badge anyhow."

"You can go now," Joe Kirby said. "Tell Masden that you spoke your piece—and that I listened."

THE MAN hesitated a minute, debating whether to say more. But the Chinaman came back, and the man left, lingering a long moment in the doorway. Kirby let him get well up the street. The food he was eating had become tasteless lumps. He shoved his plate aside and left.

Hank Bowers' voice was rumbling, loud and sneering, when the deputy reentered the office. The sound of Kirby entering stopped Hank. Sheriff Hawkes walked into the office and dropped the letter on the top of the desk. He slumped into his chair, and for the first time, Joe Kirby noticed how old and tired the lawman looked. "They've talked to him—made him believe that they're going to get him out. He's cocky and impudent." His gnarled old hand clenched, then relaxed. "And right when I was on the verge of breaking the crookedness around here wide open!"

Joe Kirby nodded, busy with his own thoughts. He'd been on the verge of something, too. He'd had it in his grasp, only to have to turn it loose. But did he have to turn it loose? He remembered what the man in the eatery had said. He, Joe Kirby, sheriff of Tumbleweed City! He looked at Sheriff Hawkes, suddenly fearful that the wise old lawman could read his thoughts. But the lawman was staring moodily out the window. Presently, he arose.

"Reckon I'll get some grub."

"Watch the shadows," Joe Kirby said, and didn't know why he did. Hawkes nodded, giving him a long glance.

"You keep your eyes open," he replied. "There's—things going on in Tumbleweed—"

A moment after the door slammed, Hank Bowers called cautiously, "Kirby! Hawkes in there?"

"He's gone out," Joe Kirby said.

"Come back here. Want to talk to you." Kirby walked back. Hank was gripping the bars of his cell door tight. Masden talk to you?"

"I saw him on the street," Kirby admitted.

"Lemme outta here," Bowers said bluntly. "You dam' fool! You shouldn't have arrested me in the first place."

"On the contrary, it was a smart trick," Alf Masden said. Kirby whirled quickly. He hadn't heard the rancher come into the outer office. Masden stood in the doorway of the little corridor that ran down the cell block. The dim light fell on his face, showing the tight half-grin he wore.

"Nothing like a future sheriff building up a reputation, so's people will have confidence in him. C'mon out in the office, Kirby. Wanta talk to you. And you, Hank! Shut up! That big mouth of yours'll git you killed someday."

Hank muttered profanity and sprawled on his bunk. "I better git out of here—that's all," he growled. "I ain't hankering to stretch rope—remember that, Masden! And you, Kirby—I saw you lift that dead deputy's

badge and letter of recommendation—and I know where you buried him."

Kirby remembered the day he'd found the body of Sheriff Palmer's deputy. He'd figured by lifting the man's credentials, he could stay over in Tumbleweed City long enough to get a good rest. And then he'd met Beth, and lingered longer...

"That's right," he told Hank tightly. "But I didn't kill him. He was already dead."

"Enough of this jawing," Masden snapped. "C'mon Kirby." He led the way into the office, and shut the door leading down the corridor.

"Hank's a bad risk," Masden said. "Suppose we got him out tonight—and he got caught again. We'd have it all to do over again—to keep him from talking." He shook his head. "Hank's a bad risk. After you got to be sheriff, he might even blab about how five of us watched you take that deputy badge and letter."

"Did you kill Joe Kirby?" the deputy asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, Kirby was the real deputy's name. Never mind that now. Things are set for ten o'clock tonight. Hawkes usually goes to the Golden Chance for a beer about then." His eyes were boring into Joe Kirby's. "We can count on you?"

Joe Kirby looked out the window into the now darkened streets of Tumbleweed City. The old, familiar sounds came to his ears—the tinny jangle of the mechanical piano from the saloon, the jingle of a bridle as a waiting cayuse tossed its head impatiently, the thump of high heeled boots on the board sidewalk and the occasional mutter of voices in the dark. They were all there, but somehow, they seemed curiously subdued tonight.

He could sit in this office and listen to those sounds every night, Joe Kirby was thinking, and wear the sheriff's badge, too. Tumbleweed City would be a safe haven for him. But another thought, ugly and black, forced itself into his mind.

TONIGHT would be the first job he would pull for Masden. After tonight? Kirby knew enough about long-riders, about outlaws, to know that there would be others. And the longer he lived this lie, the deeper he would become involved.

"Hurry up," Masden growled, impatience edging his voice for the first time. "We ain't got all night."

Joe Kirby grinned tightly. "We got until ten o'clock." From the corner of his eye he saw Masden flick a glance toward the side window of the office—and he tucked that bit of knowledge in the back of his mind.

Feet padded outside the door, and fourteen-year old Pete Bussman came in, his bare feet scraping on the rough board floor. The son of the boarding house keeper held out a neatly folded piece of paper.

"From Miss Beth," he said, and scampered away with the four-bits Kirby tossed him. Kirby opened the note.

"...you were right about running away. I understand. In this life, we pay for the joys we receive, or the sorrows we cause. I love you, but there could be no place, in hiding, where we could feel safe."

"No place, in hiding, where we could feel safe." Kirby turned the words over in his mind. No place, in hiding. Not even Tumbleweed City. Kirby grinned at Masden.

"It's crazy as hell for an outlaw to side the law, Alf—but that's what I'm doing."

"The things a woman'll cause a man to do," Masden said, and there was almost a sigh in his voice. He stood up, elaborately casual in his movements, and the action from then on followed the pattern Joe Kirby had expected.

Masden ducked out of the line of fire. A shot whanged through the wide window of the office. Kirby was trying to dodge it, but he wasn't quite quick enough. Something hot and breathtaking slugged into his side. For a split second it seemed as if the whole world had stopped. Curiously, during that period of slow-motion, he saw a face appear in the rectangle of broken glass at the window. Without knowing just how, he found his gun in his hand.

The man at the window was overconfident, thinking his first shot had scored dead center. Before he could

rectify his mistake, Kirby's lead smashed his face in. Masden let out a startled curse. The rancher had been moving toward the door that led to Bowers' cell. Now he whirled, crouching. Kirby was trying to swing his gun around, but was still gripped in the paralysis of bullet shock.

Masden fired and the lamp on the desk jumped like a thing alive, then exploded in a shower of glass and darkness came suddenly to the office. Kirby fired, but the flash of his shot showed that Masden was already through the door.

Hank Bowers was yelling delightedly. "Over here, Alf! I knew you wouldn't forget—"

"I'll say not!" Masden yelled. "I'll shut your big mouth—"

His words were chopped off by the roar of his gun. Bowers screamed in terror. Kirby was moving toward the corridor, now. Moving slow, as his iron will tried to pump strength back into his body.

It was pitch dark in the corridor. "Masden!" Kirby's voice was a croak. He ducked back as orange flame tongued along the narrow hallway, then thumbed a shot in answer.

"Kill 'im, Kirby!" Hank Bowers' squawled. "The dirty son tried to murder me—kill 'im, Kirby—"

Masden yelled something unintelligible and turned his gun toward Hank's cell. Over the roar of two shots, Kirby could hear the slugs strike the steel bars of the door and richochet. Hank Bowers' cursing was high-pitched with fright. And from a distance, Joe Kirby could hear gunfire rolling along the dark streets of Tumbleweed City.

Then suddenly, things were quiet. Only the thump of Masden's boots, growing fainter, as he scurried out the back door and ran. Kirby leaned against the door jamb and automatically began to reload. A moment later a whisper of sound came from the back door, and a form was silhouetted. Joe Kirby recognized the drooping shoulders of Sheriff Hawkes. He called softly and the lawman stepped inside, pulling the door shut after him. Two shots blasted and two slugs buried themselves in the door.

"Tried to whipsaw me—over at the Golden Chance," was the sheriff's only explanation of the gunfire Kirby had heard. "Who was that went out the back door?"

"Masden," Kirby said, in a tired voice. "He tried to kill Hank. How are you?"

"Never touched me, the dirty son—" the outlaw broke off into a stream of profanity. "Masden's the kingpin of everything around here, sheriff," Bowers went on. "He engineered that stage hold up—and it was Masden hisself that killed Sheriff Palmer's deputy, Joe Kirby—cause he thought Kirby had the deadwood—" He broke off suddenly, realizing what he had said.

THE SILENCE began to build up like something tangible that you could touch and feel, and after a moment, the sound of three men breathing was loud and rasping. The deputy called Joe Kirby felt warm stickiness dripping down his side, and the palms of his hands were moist and sweaty. His eyes were peering through the gloom at the dark blotch that was Sheriff Hawkes. Down the street a gun blasted, and glass tinkled in the front office. Sheriff Hawkes laughed, a short, bitter cackle.

"Figured Masden did the brainwork," he said, and utter weariness was in his voice. "But a lot of good it'll do to find it out now. We're all three slated for boothill—we'll go out of here on a slab."

Other guns were joining in, now, and Kirby noticed grimly that they had completely surrounded the building. The heaviest concentration seemed to be almost directly across the street, in the narrow alley between Moore's Mercantile and the post office. During a lull in the firing, they heard Masden's voice. He was in the alley.

Then the firing broke out afresh. Hawkes moved past Kirby and dropped to his knees at the front window. Kirby saw a man dart out of the alley, saw Hawkes' lead cut him down. Kirby moved to the side window, thumbed a careful shot at a gunflash.

"Here it comes," Sheriff Hawkes said. "They're smoking us out." A stick, blazing at one end, came from

the alley, sailed high into the air, and landed a few feet short of the building.

"They'll tie a rock to the next one—so's they can throw it farther," Hawkes said matter-of-factly. Kirby nodded to himself. The jail house was of stout logs, but dry as tinder. Its shingled roof would blaze like powder. And once one of those flaming sticks landed, they'd be caught like rats in a trap. Kirby peered at the alley.

"If one of us could blast them out of that alley," he said, "he could set up a cross fire that would make it safe to leave the building."

"Our lead won't reach the alley from here," Hawkes pointed out. "One of us would have to leave the building—"

"That was what I was thinking," Joe Kirby said. "One of us could get through that little window in the storeroom before they found out what we was up to. I could wriggle through and outflank 'em—"

Then he stopped, aware of what he was saying, and how it must have sounded to Hawkes. Once out of the building—why should he stop to help Hawkes out? Once out of the building, what was to keep him from riding? He looked at the sheriff. The oldster was still hunkered down at the window, watching for a target. Just then another torch sailed out of the alley. Hawkes fired at it in midair, but missed. They could hear the gentle "thump" as it landed on the roof. Within a matter of minutes, now, Kirby knew, the building would be a mass of flames.

He got to his feet, and moved toward the corridor. He paused by the gun rack and picked out another six gun, shoved it in his belt. Somehow, he'd felt undressed without that second gun. Sheriff Hawkes turned, and Kirby could feel the lawman's gaze boring into his back. Involuntarily, he slowed down, waiting for the sheriff to speak, but no words came, and then he was in the dark corridor. Hank Bowers cursed and asked for a gun as Kirby passed his cell, but the deputy kept on going.

It hurt like hell to pull himself up through the window, and the pain in his body sent dancing lights in front of his eyes. He made it, though, then slid both legs across the sill and dropped. Dizziness overcame him when he hit the ground, and whether he wanted to, or not, he sprawled full length, his face pressed against the earth, until the spell passed.

"You hear anything?" The voice was close by, and Kirby froze.

"Naw—just them shingles popping when they catch on fire," another voice grunted, and Kirby breathed again. Slowly, inch by inch, he crawled along. It was growing lighter by the minute, as the roof of the jail became a flaming mass.

And the light increased the danger of exposure. Then, he was in the alley back of the Golden Chance.

He stood up, and moved slowly toward the street. When he reached the sidewalk, the street of Tumbleweed City was almost light as day. Across the street, he could make out the four men hunkered in the alley. The flames silhouetted Masden's head and shoulders.

Then he was running—a shambling, stumbling stagger—but running, nevertheless.

Both his guns were out now, and flame from his right gun was lancing into the alley mouth. Other guns began to spurt around him now, and he felt the dull shock of lead. But the staggering run itself saved him, for it made him a hard target, and the dancing light from the flames helped. And he knew his lead was hitting home, into that close-packed bunch in the alley.

Then, midway across the street, his right hand gun clicked empty. *Now*, he thought, *there won't be any doubt in Hawkes' mind as to who I am. Not now.* And Joe Kirby did a curious thing.

HE TOSSED both guns into the air, and when he caught them, he'd transferred guns. The loaded gun was in his right hand—the empty in his left. And as his right hand began to buck under the gun's concussion, he was thinking of the reward dodger in Hawkes' office, and the words that were printed on it—

"...wears two guns, but only fires

with right hand. Has unique trick of flipping guns into air when one goes empty..."

The flames were dancing crazier than ever now. He was trying to line his sights up on the silhouette that he knew was Masden.

He thought he could feel the gun buck in his hand and Masden jerk, but he couldn't be sure, because the flames were dancing around crazily, and whirling, and whirling...

He woke up with the smell of medicine strong in his nostrils, and the curious laxness in his body that comes when hurt and pain begin to subside. Beth was there, and for awhile she kept her cool hand on his forehead. Then presently she left and Sheriff Hawkes was standing beside him.

His right arm was bandaged, and his seamed face looked white and drawn. He looked old and tired.

"That charge of yours was all I needed," he said. "I got a couple of them myself—and some of the townspeople pitched in and helped. We got 'em all—even Hank."

"Hank?"

The lawman nodded. "I unlocked his cell—when the fire got hot. He tried to fork a bronc during the excitement. I yelled at him to stop, but..." He shrugged, and was silent for a moment.

"Reckon it's a good thing you got Masden," he said slowly. "He was plenty crooked, but the main thing we had on him was the murder of a deputy sheriff named Joe Kirby. And when Kirby hisself shows up alive and kicking—well you cain't make a murder charge stick. I got to go down and clean out my desk—burn a lot of old reward dodgers. Hurry up and get well, Kirby. Me and Tumbleweed City need you." He walked away quickly, as Beth came in.

"He talked like it was just the town that needed you. There's someone else, too."

"No," said the deputy sheriff known as Joe Kirby. "It's me that needs you."

"We can't start off with an argument," she said, her eyes shining. So she fixed it so he couldn't argue, by pressing her lips to his. ●END

THE PRONTO KID COMES HOME

(cont'd from page 81)

Kid felt the bullets searching for him as he went forward, a devilish grin on his lips, weaving, dodging, his gun jumping and kicking in his hand. He heard Big Mitch yell as he cut one of the gunmen's legs from under him. Mitch, the big, dumb cluck, one arm hanging limp, fighting like a fool!

One gunman broke and ran, followed by another. Belder must have seen the handwriting on the wall. But he had too much at stake to stop now. His face was distorted and there was an insane look in his eyes as he came toward the Kid, his six-shooter blasting. The Kid felt lead rip his side, then he fired again and Belder was no longer marching toward him. The man turned around and began walking erratically back up the street. But he stopped rather suddenly and his legs turned to rubber.

The smoke still swirled, but it was quiet now and the Pronto Kid looked at Big Mitch, at the twisted grin on the big man's bearded face. Mitch said, "Mebbe I evened up a little for shootin' off my mouth; mebbe you ain't sore at me now?"

The Kid put his hand on Mitch's shoulder. "I ain't sore, you ornery cuss, and now, you better be ridin'. That marshal is headin' down this way."

Mitch glanced down the street, then back to the Kid. "You ain't comin' along?"

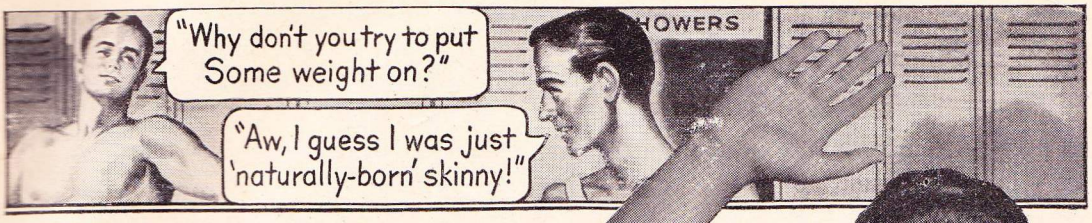
The Kid shook his head, a strange expression on his face. "I'm callin' it quits, Mitch. They can't give a man much time for stickin' up a couple of gamblin' joints."

"A few years," Mitch said. "Then what?"

"After that, I'm comin' home, Mitch, to stay! And to be that big rancher my pa figured I was!"

The big fellow swallowed hard. "I'll miss you, Kid. But I'd go batty makin' horsehair bridles, so I'm ridin' on. So long."

"So long, Mitch," the Kid said, and walked down the street to meet the marshal. ●END



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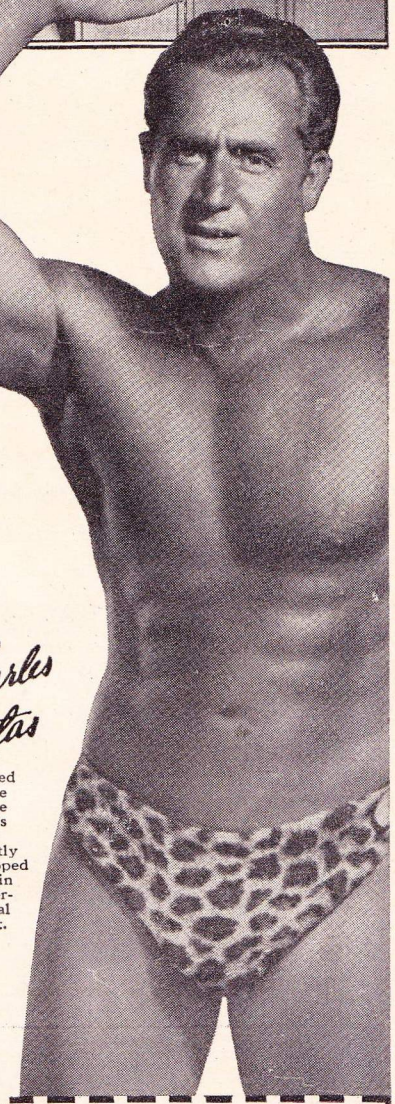

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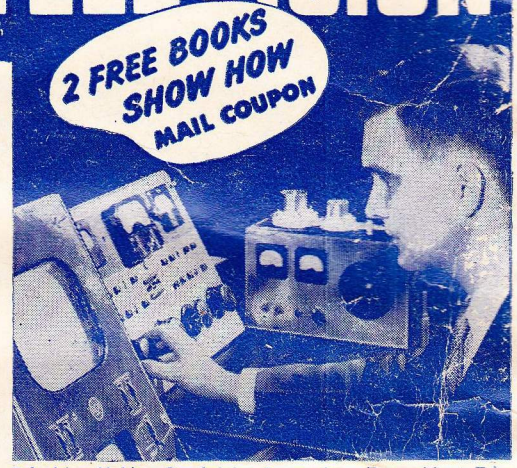

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