

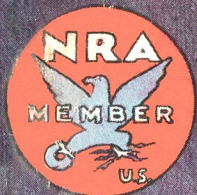
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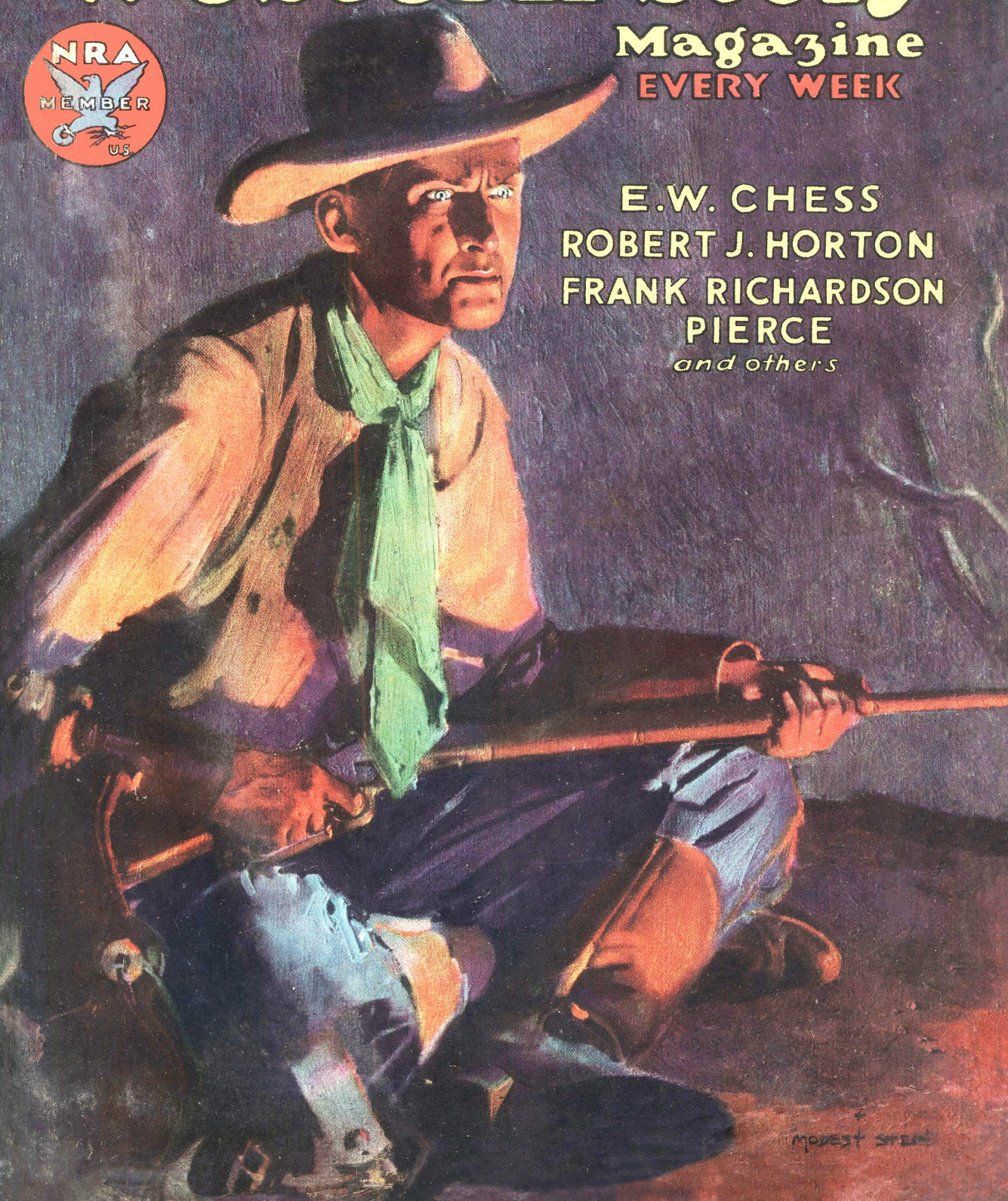
JAN. 27, 1934

Western Story

Magazine
EVERY WEEK



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If you are dissatisfied with your present job; if you are struggling along in a rut with little or no prospect of anything better than a skinny pay envelope—clip the coupon NOW. Get my big FREE book on the opportunities in Radio. Read how quickly you can learn at home in your spare time to be a Radio Expert—what good jobs my graduates have been getting—real jobs with real futures.

Real Opportunities Ahead for Trained Men

It's hard to find a field with more opportunity awaiting the trained man. Why in 1932—the worst year of the depression—the Radio Industry sold \$200,000,000 worth of sets and parts! Manufacturers alone employed nearly 100,000 people! About 300,000 people worked in the industry. In 1932, broadcasting had its most profitable year. It's a gigantic business, even in the worst business years! And look what's ahead! Millions of sets becoming obsolete annually. 17,000,000 sets in operation that need servicing from time to time! Over 600 great broadcasting stations furnishing entertainment and news to 100,000,000 people. These figures are so big that they are hard to grasp! Yet, they are all true! Here is a new industry that has grown quickly into a commercial giant.

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on how easy and interesting I make learning at home. Read the letters from graduates who are today earning good money in this fascinating industry.

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My book also tells how many of my students made \$5, \$10, and \$15 a week extra servicing sets in spare time, soon after they enrolled. I give you plans and ideas that have made good spare-time money—\$200 to \$1,000 a year—for hundreds of fellows. My Course is famous as "the one that pays for itself."

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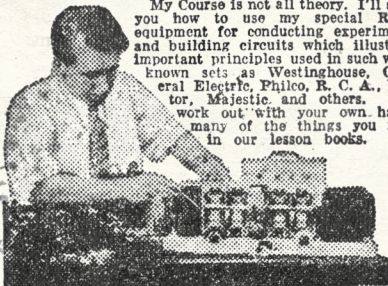
Get your copy today. It's free to any ambitious fellow over 15 years old. It tells you about Radio's spare-time and full-time job opportunities; it tells you all about my Course; what others who have taken it are doing and making. Find out what Radio offers YOU without the slightest obligation. MAIL THE COUPON NOW.

J. E. SMITH, President
 National Radio Institute
 Dept. 4AD
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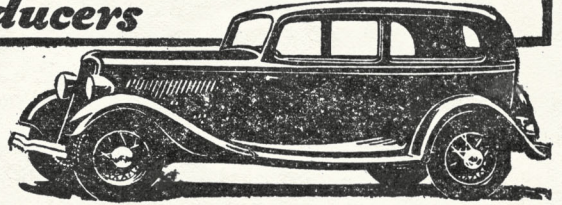
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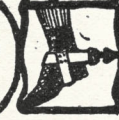
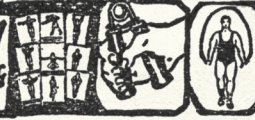


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The Free Demonstration Lesson proved that this way of learning music was as easy as A-B-C. Real fun, too!

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30x5.00-20		2.65 1.05	22x4 1/2	3.35 1.15	
28x5.25-18		2.90 1.15	22x4 1/2	3.45 1.15	
28x5.25-19		2.95 1.15	24x4 1/2	3.45 1.15	
30x5.25-20		2.95 1.15	20x5	3.65 1.35	
31x5.25-21		3.25 1.15	20x5	3.75 1.45	
28x5.50-18		3.35 1.15	20x5	3.95 1.65	
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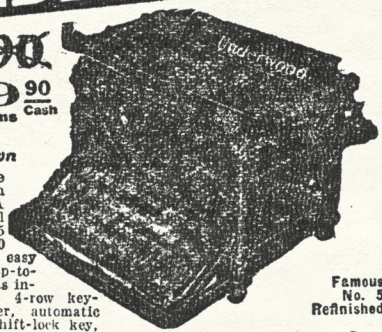
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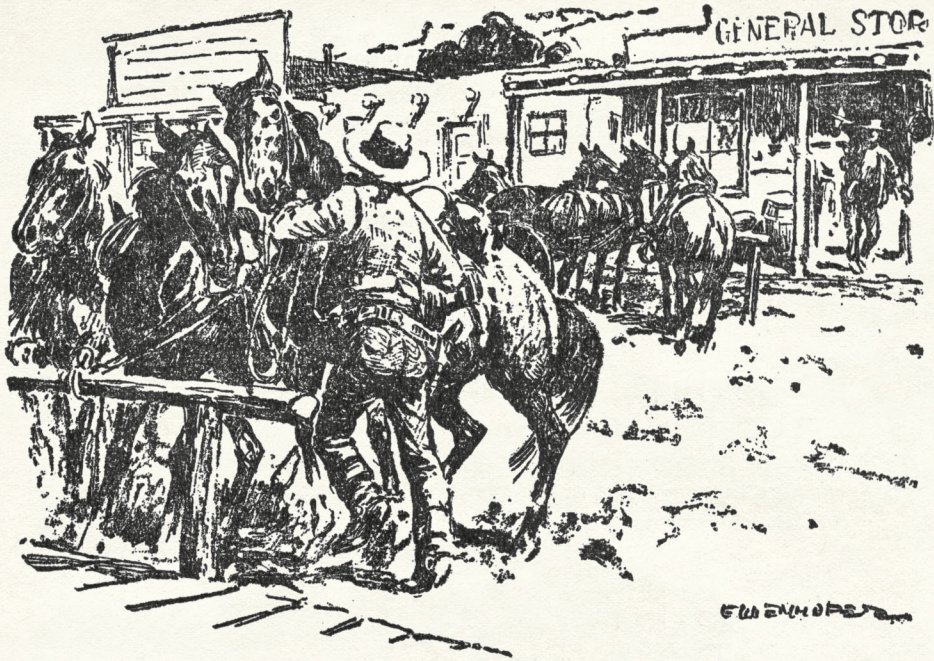
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GALLOPING GHOSTS

By E. W. CHESSE

Author of "Bad Man's Bounty," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE GHOST'S LAUGH.

IT started late one Saturday afternoon in the little cow town of Paradise that lay at the edge of the sand hills just north of the Rio Grande. The usual crowds had not yet come in from the ranches. It was quiet along the single street. The clerks stood around and waited in Philips's General Store, for there was nothing else to do.

Across the way, two figures sat in the dimness of Hansen's Bar.

Hardly a man west of the Pecos but knew of Hansen, the sad-faced bar-keeper and owner. He was a strange man, with dreamy eyes that could hardly be seen this evening as he sat facing his only son, a rawboned youngster of sixteen. Through the windows the darkness came, that same kind of darkness that had once fallen upon the feverish fortunes of the "Gallop'ing Ghost" and his "Shadow," upon "Bad-luck" Fallon, and upon Belle, who was "as perty as a picture."

And this is the tale Hansen told to his only son this Saturday night

before the crowds came in and packed the town of Paradise like a loading corral at the end of spring.

HANSEN said that people had once known all about it down along the Rio Grande, but nearly twenty years had passed since the Galloping Ghost and his Shadow were in their prime. Even then there were those who remembered Fallon, the marshal, and many who'd swear they'd danced with Belle, who'd come from the Panhandle when a single longhorn steer sold for five dollars on the hoof.

The Galloping Ghost was never without his black silk bandanna drawn tightly over his sharp features. He was about medium height, and as slippery a man as you ever saw. The one thing about him that was never forgotten was his laugh, so low and soft you'd think it wasn't there. The black bandanna and the laugh were a part of the Ghost wherever he went, and with him always went a little round-faced Mexican who had more than a normal liking for mescal. He used to take it straight with a taste of salt he carried in a tobacco sack. A funny thing about him: the more he drank, the straighter he could shoot; but even when he was sober he could shatter a bottle at thirty paces.

They were a pair, those two, the Galloping Ghost and his Shadow, and they might have gone on forever if it hadn't been for Fallon, the marshal, who was as lean as a fence rail, with eyes as hard as the barrel of a .45.

The story goes that he promised to clean out Tucson in three weeks, and he did it in two. After that the Mexicans called him *Mala-suerte*—"Bad-luck"—Fallon, because he was so hard on men. Things had always gone well with him until he took the

gun trail for the Galloping Ghost and his Shadow. For two years that lasted, but somehow Fallon always got there a little early, or a little too late to catch them. People got to feeling he must have a kind of liking for the two.

"They'll never mix up, them two outfits," they'd say. "An' who cares? What if the Galloping Ghost has held up a stage or two? He's kinda nice to the ladies, an' he never takes everything a man's got."

And that was about the way it was. Nobody cared whether the Ghost and his Shadow got caught or not. They trailed high, wide, and handsome along the Rio Grande, taking things as they came, real gents of the trail. People tell of one time the two dropped into a saloon near Santa Fe and walked up to the bar. The ghost was masked as he always was.

"Seen Fallon around?" he asked good-naturedly.

"Nope," said the astonished bar-keeper.

"Ain't sick, is he?"

"Can't say."

"Nice fellow, Fallon. Too bad if he's sick," said the Ghost. After he'd finished a single drink, he threw a four-bit piece on the bar. "Tell Fallon," he said with a low laugh, "tell Fallon when he comes in that the Ghost bought him a drink."

With that he turned and walked out, but the Shadow lingered behind. He took a last regretful look at the mescal bottle, fingered his sack of salt, and said ruefully:

"Adios, amigo!"

After a wave of his hand, he walked out the door as if he felt guilty for not drinking enough. When they'd gone, the barkeeper shook his head and released a sigh.

"Never seen the like of it," he said. "Never."

And that was how friendly things stood between the Ghost and Fallon, the marshal, when a beautiful girl stepped into the scene. Then the Galloping Ghost came to an end, and there was blood on the street of Paradise.

Her name was Belle. From the moment of her coming, the shadow of a tragedy fell upon the gun-trailing marshal and his elusive prey.

It was hell when they met.

BELLE MARTIN came along one sunny spring day from her Bar 3 place in the Panhandle to her new home just outside of Paradise. Along with her was her brother, who was a young banker with a liking for cows. The stage they were in was rounding the curve down west of Santa Fe. Belle was sitting on the box with the driver, when suddenly the Galloping Ghost and his Shadow drew alongside. They seemed to have come out of nowhere.

"Pull up," said the Ghost in a pleasant way. "Mighty sorry to do all of this. Don't wish to cause none of you no trouble, people. Would you mind putting your valuables in the hat my Mex friend'll oblige me by passing around?"

That was Belle's first sight of the Ghost, and it was over a gun barrel. He was masked, but even then she couldn't keep her eyes away from him. When that hat came her way, she smiled and covertly dropped a lace handkerchief which smelled so sweet that the Shadow sniffed the air and said, with a kind of ecstasy:

"Ah, que bueno, señorita!"

The Ghost looked at Belle for a moment. His eyes fell upon her faint, alluring smile. He didn't move until the Shadow gave him the hat and its contents. He took out

the white handkerchief and held it up before his eyes.

"Lace," he murmured. Then he turned to his Shadow. "We take this, amigo. We leave everything else behind."

The Shadow shook his head mournfully as he emptied the hat upon the ground. Through it all that faint smile never left Belle's face. She seemed the only one who knew why the Ghost took for himself only that single thing. She turned and watched him as the stage finally went on its way with its puzzled driver toward Paradise.

No sooner had the stage pulled into town than Fallon got wind of the holdup. He brought the driver and all the passengers into Philips's store and questioned them. The last of the lot was Belle. People say that the first time the marshal's voice ever became mellow and low was when he was questioning Belle.

Somehow she neglected telling Fallon about the handkerchief. That part of the story was for herself alone, and there was no reason to tell any one. All she said about the Ghost was:

"He was so nice. He had large gray eyes, and he laughed most of the time. The Mexican he was with must have been drinking a little. Neither of them seemed so bad to me. If you see him, Mr. Sheriff, won't you tell him I spoke kindly about him?"

"He's a thief," objected Fallon sharply.

Belle smiled at that. "I don't believe it," she said sweetly. "Why, he was really too nice to be a robber, Mr. Fallon."

Everybody knows what happened after that—how Fallon fell in love with her, and how the Galloping Ghost sent her flowers from Santa Fe. And they tell how Fallon de-

veloped a killer look and spoke of getting the Ghost, and getting him dead.

Something had to happen. And it didn't take long.

It was the nastiest gun fight the town of Paradise had ever seen. There were three men with Fallon, and the Galloping Ghost had only his mescal-drinking Shadow. They met in the street. It was Fallon who fired the first shot. For ten minutes the shooting lasted. No one of the five moved until he dropped. A strained bit of laughter passed through the Ghost's lips when his legs finally gave way. Blood came from his mouth as he lay there in the dirt.

The Shadow bent over him. Of the five, only he was left untouched. Slowly he picked up the Galloping Ghost and carried him away as he might have carried a child. Soon the two of them were on a single horse that beat with terror down the street.

With a single brown hand the Shadow clutched the saddle horn, and with the other he held the man who was almost a god to him. So they were as they tore down the way.

And so ended the Galloping Ghost and his Shadow. They disappeared as if they'd never been. They were gone. They'd taken the trail that had no ending. From that day until this, no one could say he'd seen either of those two masked figures. They'd galloped into oblivion that day from Paradise, and all they left behind were memories of a dumpy little Mexican with a liking for mescal, and a thin, wiry man who laughed his way into what seemed eternity.

As for Bad-luck Fallon, the marshal, he was too hard a man not to get over his wounds. He soon mar-

ried, and so did Belle, but they did not marry each other. The gun fight had brought that romance to a sudden end. Only the stories were left. Only those, and nothing more.

And such was the tale Hansen told to his son Bret, a raw-boned youngster of sixteen, when the kerosene lamps had not yet been lighted in Hansen's Bar, and through the windows came the dry wind of the desert. Little did those two know there'd be another tragic death in Paradise that same Saturday night.

LIKE vague shadows the two of them sat in Hansen's Bar while the darkness filtered through the windows. Outside, the street was deadly still. And it was still inside, as if in silent respect for those two who had galloped away into eternity.

"What you think ever happened to the Ghost?" asked Bret.

"People don't know," said Hansen. "Some says he come into town the night Belle got married to an up-an'-comin' lawyer named Maitland. But people don't know. They never seen him when he had no bandanna over his face. I guess he was just heartbroken, and maybe settled down some place, tried to forget about everything what was passed, an' just come to bein' a law-abidin' hombre. Maybe he even got married, like the rest of 'em." Hansen paused before he added in a hoarse whisper: "An' maybe his wife died when she had her first kid."

"How about the Shadow?" asked Bret.

"Well, the Shadow, he always had a knack with leather. Maybe he started makin' saddles some place."

"Carros makes saddles. Made my first saddle," said Bret quickly.

"Something like him, I guess. Something like him."

"And Belle, what happened to her?" asked Bret.

"Well, after she got married, she had a daughter. An' Fallon— You seen Fallon plenty o' times. You seen his boy. Why, they come into Philips's store most every Saturday night."

"That skinny kid they call Ed?"

"Sure, Ed," said Hansen.

"I don't like him. He looks mean to me," Bret confided.

"Maybe he comes by it natural, an' again maybe he don't."

They dropped into silence again, a long, tedious silence, while the darkness kept coming in through the windows. Neither of them spoke until Bret said:

"He sure was a nice fellow. So was his Shadow."

"Yes," said Hansen, "some say they was."

"I'd like to be like him."

"You would?"

"Sure. I'd like to do something like that." Lean specters of the Ghost and his Shadow were in Bret's mind, and so was the last bloody fight upon the street of Paradise. He could almost hear the galloping of the horse that beat down the silent way that led to eternity. His hand gripped the edge of the table before him. "Funny," he said, "I sorta felt the Galloping Ghost and his Shadow was still here. Seems to me I hear him breathing, he's so close. An' way down inside of me there's something like him."

And all of this was on a Saturday evening, while for twenty miles around the ranchers were coming for their weekly fun, and swapping yarns of what had happened the week before. Soon their horses would be wedged in along the single street. Philips's General Store across the way would be packed. Two deep the men would stand, fac-

ing the bar in Hansen's place, and the smoke from their cigarettes would hang over them, as transparent as ghosts of the past.

AS Hansen and his son sat there alone in the silence, Bret laughed, a quiet, almost inaudible laugh that floated over the room like something of a world beyond. It played upon the ears of Hansen, who'd never told until then, and then only half. That laugh brought back memories. It conjured up thoughts that were better left forgotten.

"Sounds just like him," Hansen said in a half whisper. He looked afraid.

Again Bret laughed, the same sort of laugh as that highwayman's who'd hit the long trail to eternity. How strange came that sound to Hansen's ears. How far off it seemed. Quietly he moved himself until his long hand clutched the arm of his only son. His voice cracked under the strain of speaking. His shoulders bent, and his face looked worn from too many years of inactivity, a vague shadow of what he once had been.

"Don't laugh like that, Bret. Don't!" he pleaded.

"The Galloping Ghost wasn't bad," said Bret. "I want to be like him. I want to find a girl like Belle. I want——"

"Don't. Don't!" implored Hansen. "Don't try to be like him. It sounds all right while I'm talking to you. But it was hell. You can't buck the law, because the law'll break your heart. It'll take it and break it up into pieces. I'll tell you, I know, Bret. I know what it done to the Galloping Ghost. It killed everything inside of him. I don't want it to do things like that to you. I——"

But the story had done too much to Bret. He got up and backed away, step after step, until he stood in the middle of Hansen's Bar. His head raised itself slightly. In the half darkness came the sound of his laughter. It was no longer the laughter of a youngster, but the laugh of the Galloping Ghost. It was as if the dead had come back to life.

A strange chill ran down Hansen's spine. His head drooped lower. His shoulders stooped more and more. And through it all he heard the sound of his son's voice.

"I wanta be like him. I wanta be——"

Then he heard Bret turn and run toward the door and out into the street, and along with him was the laugh of a man who all but died in the single street of Paradise.

Hansen was left alone. His eyes leveled at the door. As he stood there, his brain clouded with thoughts of another day. A horse drew to a stop at the hitch rail. A fat little Mexican dropped to earth and walked up to the door.

"Carros, that you?" asked Hansen.

"*Si, señor.*"

Carros came forward slowly through the darkness of Hansen's Bar.

"Listen, Carros," Hansen said gravely, "there's some trouble about Bret. I just told him about the Galloping Ghost. I didn't tell him who the Ghost was. He just listened, and when I got through he laughed. Carros, you don't know what it sounded like, but I do. Just like the old days. Just like the old days."

Outside, some one walked to the hitch rack. For a moment they both heard the subdued strain of laughter. They knew it was Bret, but it sounded so much like some one else.

A low gasp passed Carros's lips. A horse pulled away from the rack. Carros ran to a window to see a figure gallop off down the street.

"What does that sound like to you, Carros?"

"Ghost!" mumbled Carros.

They remained silent for a little while before Hansen said:

"Maybe it's only a kid trick. But you never can tell. Maybe I wasn't right in telling him. Maybe——"

Carros ran to the window and peered out while Hansen said:

"You better go out an' get him, Carros. I don't want to have no trouble with him. You find him an' bring him back, understand?"

Carros waved his hand. He'd find Bret, all right. He'd bring him back. Then the fat little Mexican walked through the door and stood outside, calling "Bret. Bret."

In the darkness Hansen waited. The minutes passed. An hour. And still neither Carros nor Bret came back.

CHAPTER II.

BLOOD ON THE STREET.

IT got darker still. The hitch racks were packed with horses, and Philips's General Store was crowded almost to the doors when a buckboard drew up in front with a savage-eyed man and his son. As they walked into the light, one of the clerks nodded and said:

"Howdy, Mr. Fallon."

"Hello," said Fallon, but his son didn't say anything. He was a surly youth, was Ed Fallon.

The kerosene lamps spread light over those who stood about in the store. There was a general din of voices, and everywhere in town it was the same. The life of Saturday night had come to Paradise. The bars were filled. They were now two deep at the bar in Hansen's place

across the way. The horses at the hitch rack balanced their weight upon one leg first and then another. More cowhands came down the street. Everywhere the pale light of kerosene lamps shone against faces of men and hatbands that glistened with sweat.

A clerk carried out a hundred-pound sack of flour and shifted it into the buckboard in front of Phillips's store. When he came back there was sweat on his face. He wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"Guess it was wilder here in the old days, eh, Mr. Fallon?"

"Yep," said Fallon curtly.

"No life now—no nothing," observed the clerk.

"Nobody's got any nerve now," Fallon told him coldly.

"Guess not," answered the clerk as he wiped his face and turned away.

A mare snorted at the hitch rack. A half-broken mustang at her side reared up and broke his bridle, then trotted off down the street. No one paid any attention. No one seemed to care.

From the far end of the street a single horse came on slowly. Its rider sat erect. A single hand held the reins. A second hand held the butt of a holstered .45. He came on as if aware that some hideous misfortune might overtake him. When the first faint light from a window fell upon him, it also fell upon the black bandanna he wore stretched tight across his narrow face. Halfway down the street a man stood staring at the masked rider. He had no feeling other than wonder. Then he backed against a wall as far-off memories ran through his mind.

It was Carros, the Mexican.

He stood stiff and still, as if forced to by some unearthly power.

His eyes followed the masked figure which moved on down between the houses that Saturday night when men from miles around were crowding behind the dobe walls, while their horses waited with patience along the hitch racks of Paradise.

It was still crowded in Phillips's store, and men were two deep at the bar in Hansen's place. A constant melody of voices played there between its white walls. And as they talked there, a lone horse and its masked rider drew up in front of Hansen's place. No one inside heard it come. No one would have stopped talking, anyway. For a horse to draw up at Hansen's place on Saturday night wasn't strange. The talking went on just as it had, and as it went on, the door was opened little by little, until it could go no farther.

Then some one shouted: "Look!"

A couple of men turned. The talking stopped. Every man's eyes were upon the one who stood framed in the doorway. He wasn't so tall as most men. There wasn't anything strange about him but the mask. That and one other thing—a low-pitched laugh, a careless wisp of a laugh that caused those who were there to wonder.

"Don't want to cause none of you no trouble," he said as he drew his gun. "All you got to do is put your money there on the end of the bar, and then I'll come over an' get it."

Not a man moved. There was something unconvincing about the manner of the one who stood there. They thought he was playing. But he had a gun in his hand, and he spoke like a man who might shoot, and shoot to kill. The light shone against him, and his shadow was thrown out to mingle with the darkness toward Phillips's store across the street.

"You heard what I said," said the

masked one. His voice was harsh this time, and his gun hand was shaking. But no one moved.

"Do I shoot?" he demanded of them frantically.

Hansen looked over the heads of the men who lined the bar. His eyes caught sight of the one in the doorway and the shadow which stretched toward Philips's store across the way. He started to say something when he saw the one in the doorway falter. His hand moved nervously from right to left, as if he were wondering what he would do next.

Still no one moved. Of all of the lot who stood there in Hansen's Bar that night, not one of them so much as whispered a word nor offered a protest to the thing they saw. They took it as it came. They wondered. But that was all.

ACROSS the way a woman stopped at the door of Philips's store and looked out. Her eyes fell upon the black silhouette of a man crouched in the doorway of Hansen's Bar. She saw the dull gleam of his gun as the light shone upon it. Then she screamed. The sound of her voice echoed down the single street. Not far behind her, Fallon wheeled and rushed to the door. People crowded after him. He stood on the porch of the store. Plainly he could see the figure across the way. Fallon's hand went to his gun. He paused then, waiting for the time to come when he might shoot without the chance of hitting the wrong person.

The one in the doorway of Hansen's place moved his weight from one foot to the other. Whatever he'd expected hadn't happened. If he thought they'd do what he said, he was wrong. He'd planned that they would. And when they didn't, he was at his wits' end. He leaped

suddenly backward. He wheeled as his feet first struck the ground.

Some one shouted: "Get him!"

He ran toward his horse at the hitch rack, but before he was half-way there, Fallon fired. The one with the black mask dropped. A voice shouted: "He's down!" But almost before the words had left his lips, the one with the mask was on his feet again.

Fallon ran out into the street. He fired as the masked one drew himself upon his horse, and he fired again as the horse wheeled. The masked rider dropped forward over his saddle. His horse took a few steps, then stopped, and no one knew why.

The crowd had gone half crazed. They stood in front of Philips's store and they pushed themselves out of Hansen's Bar. In the street between the two places was Fallon. He was thirty paces from the masked rider when some one rushed out of the darkness to the aid of the bleeding rider, put his short arms around him, and held him erect, and tight to the saddle.

It all happened so fast that no one was sure. All they knew when it was over was that some one had jumped on behind the masked one, and the horse with its double load had gone off swiftly down the street. Every one had seen Fallon shoot again, and they'd seen the flash as the second rider turned and fired a single, well-timed shot. Fallon rose to his toes and fell in the street.

The first one to get to Fallon was his son Ed. When the people realized what had happened, they rushed to where Fallon lay in the dirt. They picked him up and slowly carried him into Hansen's place. Hansen backed away as they came. His eyes saw the blood on Fallon. He saw the limp form of the man who had been sheriff.

"What happened? What happened to him?" he asked impatiently.

But Hansen didn't really have to ask. He knew even before he heard a voice say:

"He came outta your place—fellow with a black mask. Fallon seen him an' ran into the street. Shot a couple of times. The rider went down. He was leaning over his saddle, and he must 'a' been hit, when somebody jumps up behind him and rides him off. They went down the street, an' they hadn't got no more'n twenty paces when Fallon aims to get 'em right. Then the bullet got him. Damn shame."

"A shame," repeated Hansen as he looked down at the body upon the floor. "A shame."

People knew Fallon was dead even before a little Dutchman by the name of Holtz came in. He was a horse doctor in those parts. He lowered his ear to Fallon's bleeding chest and waited a minute before he looked up, shaking his head.

"Py golly, he's dead," he said.

Ed, Fallon's son, knelt down on the other side. You might expect a youngster to cry when he sees his father get a hole through his middle and hears him breathe his last. But Ed Fallon didn't. He wasn't that kind even then. His hands clenched, and his lips seemed to curl back in a contemptuous way. He didn't even look at his father as he said:

"He oughta killed 'em when he had the chance."

Then he got up and pushed his way through the crowd to the door of Hansen's place and stood looking down the street the way the two riders and horse had gone. When he came back he said:

"Let's get him over to the buckboard."

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CHAPTER III.

THE BLOOD TRAIL.

THE people of Paradise got a feeling of contempt for Ed Fallon that night. Maybe it was because the blood of a man hunter was coming out in him. Maybe it was something else. Anyway, there was something sour about the way he acted after his father had been shot down dead in the street of Paradise. A couple of no-good cowhands helped him with his father's body and went away with him. When they were gone, some one made a solemn observation:

"If that kid of Fallon's has got a heart, I ain't never seen it."

Men stood around in Hansen's Bar talking for a long time after Fallon's buckboard wheeled around in the street and drove off. Hansen silently served out the drinks, moving back and forth behind the bar as if he were in a dream. No one noticed it at first. No one might have noticed it, had not some one said:

"Why, that there was just like the fight what happened 'bout twenty years back, when the Galloping Ghost was ridden out by his Shadow!"

Hansen's hand relaxed. The bottle he held in his hand shattered upon the floor, and for the first time in his life Hansen lost that complete control he'd always possessed.

"Get out!" he yelled then suddenly. "Get out—all of you!"

They didn't know what was wrong, but they got out. Hansen was trembling as he watched the last of them go and listened to the diminishing sound of their horses' hoofs upon the street. An inky darkness soon settled over the village. The lights flickered dimly in Hansen's Bar. Time passed. It

must have been hours afterward that a horse pulled up almost silently at the hitch rack. Its rider got cautiously to the ground. Then came the sound of his feet crossing the porch. The door opened halfway.

Carros sneaked in frightenedly. He stood at the bar and spoke in a husky whisper:

"Mescal!"

As he drained his drink, Hansen bent over the bar, took hold of his arm.

"How is he?" he asked shakily.

"Bad," said Carros. "Bad."

"Where'd you take him, Carros?"

"*Mi casa*," he said.

"Your house," repeated Hansen. Then he said in a whisper: "Fallon's dead."

Carros looked at the windows and at the door, as if afraid some one might come. When he turned back to Hansen there was a tragic smile on his face, but he didn't speak.

"It was a straight shot, Carros," said Hansen. "It's a shame you killed him, Carros. It's a shame you kinda had to."

THEY left Hansen's place a little after that, and they held their silence, as if they well knew each other's mind. They moved on side by side through the night. Once Hansen said:

"It's a shame you had to kill him—a shame."

That was all.

Their horses walked through the twisting trails to Santa Ana, and they stopped before the door of Carros's saddle shop. They could smell the leather as they went in.

The kerosene lamp burned low. Upon the earthen floor lay Bret, his head resting upon a rawhide saddle-tree. His eyes were closed, and he was breathing through his half-open mouth. Hansen bent over and took

his hand. Bret's eyes opened, and a futile kind of smile came to his face. He tried to laugh, but he couldn't.

"It hurts," he said.

There was a bullet hole through his shoulder, and there was one in his leg. They did their best to help him. They bound up his wounds and gave him a drink of mescal. It was nearing morning when he sighed and said:

"It doesn't hurt so much any more."

In a little while they knew he was sleeping. Neither Hansen nor Carros spoke for a long time after that. They sat upon a bench at the side and waited.

It got light. The sun came up. The two men sat on and on. Still they didn't speak. They continued to watch the slightly contorted face of Bret, who lay unmoved upon the floor. Finally his eyes opened. He lay staring into the sunlight that came through the window.

"Where am I anyway?" he asked weakly.

"Never mind," said Hansen. "You're all right."

"I remember," murmured Bret. And after a feverish pause he said in a tone that sounded more like a gasp: "Who brought me here? Some fellow got on my horse and helped me. Who done it?"

No one answered. Carros pressed a bottle to Bret's lips. The color came to his face after he drank. He tried to move, but he couldn't just then. After a while he said:

"The Galloping Ghost—the Galloping Ghost!" And then he laughed that same strange way he had before. "I don't know why I did it," he went on. "I don't know why. I just wanted to. I didn't want to shoot. I just wanted to go in and see what would happen. I didn't

know any one would shoot me. Why did they shoot me? Why——”

“Fallon was in town. Fallon’s a bad hombre.”

“Funny, he was the one who got the Galloping Ghost, wasn’t he?”

“Yes—funny.”

The sun lighted up the four square walls. The smell of leather was heavy in the room. Outside they could all hear the sounds of the people of the little Mexican village.

“Fallon was killed last night,” said Hansen.

“Killed!” gasped Bret.

Through his feverish mind he was trying to remember what had happened. But he couldn’t remember it all. He didn’t know how it all happened. And as he lay there, he thought to himself: “I’ve killed a man. If they get me, they’ll kill me. I killed the marshal. I shot him. I guess I must’ve done it.” But he said nothing. They didn’t know what they were doing to him then. They didn’t know they were leaving Bret with the conviction that he was a murderer.

Carros sat on the bench. His head dropped between his hands, and he stared at the floor. He was shaking inside. Poor little Carros, with his pock-marked face, was trembling like the leaves of a cottonwood tree in the fall. Hansen had his hands behind his back, his fingers fumbling, while he looked out of the window. He stood there for a long time before he turned.

“Carros—Carros,” he said, but Carros didn’t look up. “You’d better take him out of the country. It ain’t going to be safe. You take him up to Belle Maitland’s place. Take him there, an’ then you come back and act like nothing’s happened. I don’t think no one knows it was him. It was pretty dark then in the street. I don’t think nobody knew. But

you take him up to Belle’s place, her Bar 3 Ranch in the Panhandle. I’ll get word to her.”

“Belle?” said Carros.

“They tell me she’s visiting her place just outside of Paradise. Not far. I’ll get word to her.”

The sound of his voice fell dully on the whitewashed walls of the saddle shop. Carros got to his feet. He thought about Belle, who sometimes lived six miles outside of Paradise. He walked to the door, opened it, and walked out. It wasn’t long before he came back to say the horses were ready. They helped Bret up. They supported him and raised him up to his saddle. A few Mexican youngsters looked on. But they’d say nothing. They had an inherent distrust of the law. They’d look up blandly when the time came and say:

“Me no savvy.”

Carros said a few words of caution to them before leaving. And he waved as the three horses walked away over the trail to the east.

The Mexican boys waved back.

About an hour after that a posse came over the hills on the trail of the killer and a wounded rider. They went through the village, looking for any information they could find. They even asked the youngsters, because one of the posse said that a child always tells the truth.

“You can bank on what a kid says,” he observed.

So he asked a little Mexican youngster who was no more than six. The boy looked up with bright, open eyes at the man who questioned him and answered in a childish voice:

“Me no savvy.”

The one who questioned went on. And after the posse had passed out of the town, the youngster who’d been questioned said to one of the others:

"I ain't tell him a thing. Carros is my frien'."

SO that tragic episode ended with Bad-luck Fallon dead and buried, and with his being lowered into the ground, people again forgot about the Galloping Ghost and the rest of them. They talked for a while as people do, but more than that—nothing. Poses passed the hillsides, but all of their trails came to a futile end. Three days after the killing, Hansen returned. He was a little afraid he'd be questioned at first. But he was not.

He was a little quieter than he might have been. He never spoke of the Fallon killing, and once, when he was asked about Bret, he ventured no other knowledge of his whereabouts than:

"He's up in the Panhandle, learning about cows. Friends of mine up there."

A few days after he got back he wrote a letter. It was a tedious thing for him to do. After it was completed, he read it over. He well knew the one to whom it was addressed. He had seen her many times, but there had never been the slightest sign of recognition exchanged.

DEAR BELLE MAITLAND:

I kind of thought my boy was better away from Paradise. I sent him along with a friend of mine over to your Bar 3 place in the Panhandle, so as he can learn about cows. My friend is coming back, but I want Bret to stay. If you can, won't you write up there and tell them to take good care of him? It would be mighty nice of you if you did. MR. HANSEN.

He wrote the address upon the envelope with a shaking hand, and wondered what her answer would be. About a week after that he got the answer. But he wouldn't open it at

first. He didn't seem to have the courage. All that day he carried it around in his pocket, fumbling with it at times. Finally he walked over to one of his tables and sat down. He took the letter out and tore off the end.

MY DEAR MR. HANSEN:

I've often thought that I would write you, but somehow it hardly seemed the thing to do. I'm glad you have written, but I think it might better be the last. One may never tell what might happen from things of this kind.

I'm glad you've sent your son to the Bar 3. I seldom go there myself. I keep it for Barbara, my daughter. I don't think you've seen her. She's very pretty and reminds me of myself when I was her age. I've kept her in school in Kansas City most of the time. She's quite a young lady now.

Affectionately yours,

BELLE.

Hansen reread that letter many times before he put it safely away in a drawer in back of his bar, a drawer that contained a lace handkerchief, a .45, and a black silk bandanna. He closed the drawer cautiously and locked it. Only one man would ever know what was in that drawer, and that was Carros, who had a saddle shop over in Santa Ana. Carros had come back, all right. Once again he was bending over his half-finished saddles, but he was drinking more mescal than was good for him, for Carros had memories.

CHAPTER IV.

DOUBLE KILLING.

TIME galloped past, but little happened that was new in the cow town that was known as Paradise, down by the Rio. Hansen's place never changed. The cowhands came in on Saturday nights, as they had always done since the

beginning, and stood two deep at the bars, as was their custom.

There were times when they spoke of Bad-luck Fallon and his son, who was bound to follow the footsteps of his father. But there was something nasty about young Ed Fallon. There was the same look in his eyes that you see in those of a mean horse. It was a look that came from inside somewhere. You couldn't change it. That was the way they talked in Hansen's Bar on Saturday nights. Ed was bad, and when he grew up he was going to be worse. He was going to be a king-pin killer, but he'd be on the side of the law.

And whatever happened to Hansen's son, Bret? Nice youngster he used to be. A little dreamy, but clean. Say, Hansen, whatever happened to that there son of yours?

"Mine?" Hansen was getting old. He looked sad and lonely. But people liked him, because there was only one man like Hansen in the West. "Why, he's up in the Panhandle—learnin' about cows."

"Ain't he comin' back some time? He has been gone a long time, ain't he?"

Sadly Hansen said: "A long, long time. Glad you asked about him. Thanks. I'll tell him you asked about him."

Time galloped on and on. Something had to happen. Tales of the Ghost and his Shadow had been dead too long. One Saturday night in Hansen's Bar they spoke of Belle Maitland's death. For a month she'd lain sick in her little place six miles outside of Paradise. Then she died. It was just ten years after she'd written her single and only letter to Hansen. People had almost forgotten that she'd been the Belle who had known the Ghost and Fallon. They'd almost forgotten that she'd once been the most beautiful

girl ever to have passed the line that separated the State of New Mexico from that of Texas. And those who did remember spoke of it in whispers. For when Belle Maitland had died, the up-and-coming lawyer she had married had become the governor of the State.

Hansen saw the funeral over in Santa Fe. He and Carros watched it all silently, and as the carriages passed, a girl looked out from one of them. Hansen thought she smiled faintly. He wasn't sure. His hand fell upon Carros's shoulder.

"Look!" he gasped.

Her eyes were large and tender. There was a slight cast of red in her hair.

"Like Belle," whispered Hansen.

Carros didn't speak. Some place down inside of him he knew that Hansen had understood the truth. She did look like Belle; Belle as they had seen her in other days, when she had smiled sweetly and dropped a lace handkerchief into the hat Carros was passing.

"Must be Belle's daughter," said Hansen.

The carriages passed on, and as hers passed, Barbara Maitland turned her head slightly and allowed her soft eyes to fall upon the penetrating gazes of the two who had once been the Galloping Ghost and his Shadow.

BELLE MAITLAND had not long been dead before the name of Fallon's son was again passed from mouth to mouth. He'd followed in his father's footsteps. He'd become a deputy marshal, and he was gunning the countryside into subjugation. From the first, he asked no quarter and gave none. He was a wizard with his gun. People spoke of him as a natural-born man hunter. It was in

his blood, and Heaven help the poor cowpoke who got outside the law in that section of the State of New Mexico.

"Lightning" Fallon, they called him, a thin-eyed, fence rail of a man who looked a good deal like his father. Only his father had had a heart at times. With a man like that as sheriff of Paradise, something had to happen in connection with the old Fallon killing on the street. It was strange the way it came out. Ten years is a long time to remember. But there are things a man doesn't forget.

The Mexican youngster who'd said "Me no savvy," was sixteen now. Lightning Fallon happened to pick him up for stealing saddle blankets from horses along the hitch racks in Paradise. He brutally dragged the youngster along the street until he got to the jail, where Fallon intended to thrash him and let him go. The first crack of the buggy whip brought a terror-stricken scream from the young Mexican. After the second lash he backed against the wall and pleaded for mercy. He was on his knees when Fallon struck him the third time.

"I tell you something!" he screamed in agony. "I tell you something."

"What?" snarled Fallon.

"I know what happened wit' *Mala-suerte*."

He didn't mean to tell. Just a part of what he knew to be the truth came out under torture. But even then he withheld the name of Carros.

Hansen's son, Bret, had come into Santa Ana, he said, along with Hansen. Bret was bleeding. He went on to the east out of the State. Hansen knew about it. Ask Hansen. He can tell you.

The youngster swore that what he told was truth, but Fallon struck him three more times for luck before he allowed him to go. When Fallon was left there alone, he sat back in a chair, his hand fingering his .45, his eyes narrowed in thought. He wondered what his next move should be.

He might have acted immediately had not something else interfered, a double killing that occurred three nights afterward, and, strangely enough, in Hansen's Bar in Paradise.

THE two Jones brothers weren't particularly bad. They'd been in on a few raw deals with cattle, and had done a little rustling in a minor kind of way. But their good fortune got too much for them, and they started boasting that the law in the State of New Mexico wasn't big enough to get them.

One night they came into Hansen's Bar with their first thousand dollars. They set up the place and called themselves bad. They were getting pretty drunk when some one whispered that Ed Fallon was coming.

"The devil with Fallon!" shouted one of them.

He didn't know when he said it that Fallon was standing just inside the door. The men at the bar backed away, and the Jones brothers were left standing alone. One of them turned, and his eyes fell upon Lightning Fallon. He made a pass for his gun, but as he did, flame spurted twice from Fallon's gun. When the smoke cleared, the Jones brothers were lying side by side upon the floor. The crowd was awed into silence. The only one who had enough courage to speak was Hansen.

"Ed, you're too good with that there gun. You never give 'em a chance."

Fallon's eyes narrowed. He stepped up slowly to the bar, and in a husky voice said:

"Keep outta this. I'm the law in this here State. When I shoot, I shoot to kill."

"Seems to me you're right," said Hansen.

He was an old man by then. His hair had become thin, and his face had gotten a little sharper with the passing of time. He had a habit of looking up from under his lowered head with a kind of pleasant smile on his face, and rather laughing as he spoke.

"Listen, youngster," said Hansen, "you had a pretty straight-shooting old man until something happened. I'm not saying he wasn't in the right. But what I tell you is that a man's got to have some kind of heart, whether he's on the side of the law or outside of it—that is, if he wants to live. Here, have a drink."

The crowd hadn't moved. Fallon stood with his elbows on the bar. At his feet lay the two men he'd just killed.

"Listen," he said, "I hear you know a little about that killing what happened in front of this here place about ten years ago."

Hansen never moved. All he said was: "You can put your trade-mark on a couple of gun dummies, but when you start playing with me, Fallon, there might be some trouble."

"Yes?"

"That's what I said, Fallon."

Fallon cracked a surly smile. "Where's that kid of yours, Hansen?"

"Panhandle," said Hansen without hesitation.

"Panhandle," repeated Fallon.

"Well, there'll be a thousand-dollar reward for his capture."

He took his drink and drank it. Hansen held up his own glass and said:

"Here's to the nastiest killing I ever saw, and to a man who's got about as much heart as a rattler."

Fallon's hand dropped to his gun, but it stayed there when he heard Hansen say:

"Don't touch your hardware, Fallon; you'll get into trouble."

They stood looking at each other. Fallon's eyes trailed around the crowd of men who were there. He had sense enough to know there wasn't one in the place who was on his side. He turned quickly and walked out.

And that night Hansen began another letter that was addressed to Bret at the Bar 3 place in the Panhandle. He wrote:

Keep out of this place; there's trouble here. So don't come back like you was thinking of doing. I suppose you heard over there that Mrs. Belle Maitland died. I heard her daughter Barbara will be going out there to look the place over. It'll be hers now.

He paused a moment before he continued:

Fallon killed the two Jones boys in my place to-night. It was a nasty killing, and before they took the bodies out, Fallon said he was offering a thousand-dollar reward for you in this State.

And through Hansen's mind ran strange thoughts. The son of Fallon, the son of the Galloping Ghost, and the daughter of Belle. The ghosts walked. Shadows of the past moved over the letter Hansen wrote that night in his bar in the town of Paradise.

CHAPTER V.

SHADOWS OF THE PAST.

THERE were twenty-eight thousand acres in the Bar 3 place. Beside that, the Bar 3 had a grazing permit from the government for twice that much more. When the grass was good, they sent as much as three thousand steers to the slaughterhouse in Kansas City. The houses were close to the fence on the highlands in the north. "Belle's Place," as it was called, was one of three dobes. It was a great square house, with a patio in the center where flowers grew. For years its shades had been drawn. Most of the flowers had died from lack of care, and it all looked dismal and pale. No one ever went in, and those who passed by now passed with a strained reverence.

For a quarter of a mile around the brush had been cleared. At one side was a windmill at the edge of the corral. At the other side was a long, low dobe that had once been used for the men. For years it had not been used. The rain and sun had caused it to decay. Its walls were blotched with spots where the mud dobe blocks shone through the whitewash. Its doors were closed, its windows shut. Between it and Belle's Place was a three-room house that was known as the office. In front was a spot of green grass, while from its single door a crooked trail led to the corral. It was in that house that all of the Bar 3 business was transacted. It looked cheerful amid evidences of decay. Horses were usually tied to its hitch rail at its side. In front, saddles hung from pegs by their stirrups.

In the summertime the flies buzzed. There was no other sound but the constant creak of the windmill that went slowly and almost

cautiously around in the breeze that never seemed to grow tired. Away, a quarter of a mile to the west beyond the greasewood and the sand hills, lay the long dobe bunk house at the side of a creek. In the spring-time the water came up high in the narrow, deep bed. Sometimes it roared so that you could hear it plainly from as far away as the north pasture, where the herds moved in the wintertime, for there was grass there in the north pasture all year round.

What it all lacked, the ranch with its office and its houses, its decay and dismal setting, was the touch of a woman's hand. Belle had been gone too long. She would have had flowers growing; she would have seen that the spot of grass in front of the office would have been larger and greener; she would have forced them to still the windmill so that its creaking sound would not have gone on interminably. But the men there never thought about that. They might have forgotten it forever had they not heard one day that Belle was dead.

One morning the heavy-jowled foreman received a letter from Belle's brother, who had become the president of a bank in Santa Fe. The letter read:

She died in her place just outside of Paradise after a sickness that lasted for a month. Why she didn't go to the Bar 3 more often, I hesitate to say. There seemed to be some reason for her staying near to Paradise. Even after she married Maitland, she went back there often. Some memory or something, I suppose. I hardly know. She often told me that if she were to live her life over again, she would have changed it a lot, and that she would have spent the rest of her life on the Bar 3 place.

But all of this is away from the point. Barbara, Belle's daughter—you remember her, I suppose—says she

wants to come out to look over the place, and if she likes it, she will stay. Whatever a girl like her will do there, I don't know. However, she wishes to go, and no one can stop her. She is rather headstrong, and I hope you remember that when she gets there within a few days.

Before the sun set that day, Belle's Place was opened, and for the first time in years water was thrown into the patio where flowers used to grow. The windmill was oiled, and that night the foreman rode the quarter of a mile over to the bunk house to tell the hands about the coming of Barbara Maitland.

IT was a Sunday night, and they'd all come in from the north pasture. They were seated at a long table while the foreman told them all he knew.

"Her name's Barbara. She's Belle's daughter, an' her ol' man is the governor of the State of New Mexico. I seen her when she was a kid. I don't know what she looks like now, but she was sorta lean and gawky then, an' she had freckles, an' plenty of 'em. But she could ride like hell. Better watch yourself when she gets in. She's the boss of this here place."

When he got through telling 'em, he let their thoughts do the rest. It was strange the kind of person they figured on seeing: tall and gawky, and as homely as sin. That was the sort of person that got in their minds somehow, and it stayed there until the afternoon she came. It was just a little after noon. Several of the men stood around the corral when in the distance a little cloud of dust foretold the coming of Barbara Maitland. They got to feeling a little uncomfortable then.

"That's her," said one. "Sure as blazes, that's her."

The buckboard came to a slow halt. She sat by the foreman's side. She didn't move, but sat looking at the dobe houses that were there, at the corral, and the men.

"This is the place, Miss Barbara," said the fat-faced foreman.

There was something soft and sweet about her. Her hat lay in her lap, and she held it between delicate fingers. Her hair had blown carelessly back from her forehead, and she gazed out through the largest blue eyes they had ever seen. Every one was still. There was no sound other than the walking of a horse in the corral. For a long time she sat motionless before she murmured:

"It was all my mother's."

"Yes, ma'am," said the foreman. "Her place, but she never came here much. Tol' me once she was just savin' it for you."

"I know," said Barbara.

The foreman helped her to the ground, and again she became motionless, looking about at the strangeness around her. She took a few steps and then stopped. She almost laughed then.

"Howdy, boys," she said. "I'm your new boss."

Then she turned away toward the largest of the dobe houses. Her luggage was carried after her. The fellows crowded around the corral fence had seen few people in silks before. For a while they held their silence. A boss in silk. They shook their heads, and they whispered among themselves for the better part of half an hour. Then suddenly they were interrupted by a call.

"Hey! You fellows!"

Their eyes fell upon Barbara Maitland, who stood on the porch. She was dressed in a pair of overalls and a white shirt. There was no hat upon her head. She stood holding

onto the porch rail, and with one hand she pointed out at them.

"If you haven't got anything to do out there but whisper like a bunch of old maids, I'll find you something to do!"

From that moment until the day she suddenly left under a cloud of mystery, Barbara Maitland was never seen in any other clothing than heavy overalls and a white shirt.

IT was Gill who told the story of her coming to the hands who hadn't seen it. Gill was a sour-faced little man with sneaking eyes and hands that wouldn't stay still. He was one of that kind whose age you can't tell. He always carried a short-barreled .38 under his jumper, and no one knew why. He'd been at the office when Barbara came in. But it was almost sundown when he rode up to the chuck wagon in the north pasture, where the men had been singling out strays from the Lazy U place down the way. Gill dropped to the ground and said with a shout:

"She's here, boys!"

They knew what he meant, and one of them came up to Gill and said:

"What's she look like?"

A sneaking look came into Gill's little eyes.

"Perty as anything," he said. "But it's funny workin' for a woman, an' worse workin' for a girl. I don't like it."

A tall figure of a man leaned against a rear wheel of the chuck wagon. He had brown eyes, and hair that couldn't be kept under his worn Stetson hat. He was usually silent, and seldom gave an opinion on anything. They knew him as "Bret" around there. The rest of his name didn't make any difference.

They knew he'd come over from New Mexico some place, where his father ran a bar. It seemed a little strange to them that he'd never left the Bar 3 place. He stayed on and on, keeping quiet most of the time.

Slowly he rolled a cigarette between his lean hands. As he dampened it, he looked over to Gill.

"It's her place, ain't it?"

"Sure it is," admitted Gill.

"Well, keep your mouth shut or get out."

Bret lighted his cigarette in a casual fashion. A cloud of smoke hovered over his head as he turned and walked away. Gill followed until he caught up with Bret.

"Say, Bret," he said.

"What?"

"Needn't get so hard. I didn't mean nothing."

"All right. Forget it."

"That's what you always say."

"And I mean it."

Gill puzzled a moment. His little eyes blinked nervously as he said:

"Say, Bret, there's something funny about you. Ten years now, they tell me. Keep quiet all the time. Keep to yourself. That ain't natural. A man what's a man oughta talk. He——"

"What?" demanded Bret.

"It ain't natural, that's all."

"Maybe not, Gill. Maybe it ain't natural for a man to keep quiet. But it's my business. And keep out of it, Gill. Just keep out of it, that's all."

The sun was setting, and the rest of the men were coming in. The cook squatted on his haunches over a greasewood fire. The smell of it hung over the brush. Up in the north, the sand hills lay squat and still as death. And to the south, acres of prairie went on and on until the Pecos River cut into them like a knife.

"No hard feeling," said Bret.

Gill forced a smile, and through his little eyes a gleam of light came.

"No. No hard feelin'. Just want you to talk sometime, that's all. If you got anything on your mind, speak your piece, why don't you?"

THE fire was in their faces when they ate that night. Long shadows of crouched men lost themselves in the darkness after the sun went down and the moon moved up over the horizon in the east. Gill was next to Bret, and both of them looked at the fire.

"Was she really pretty?" asked Bret.

"Sure," said Gill.

Bret was gazing into the fire. There was a kind of abstract vagueness about his face, as if far-off memories were galloping noiselessly through his silent thoughts.

"Her mother was Belle," said Bret. "They tell stories about her an' the Galloping Ghost. A lot of things that happened over in New Mexico. Nice stories. I heard 'em when I was a kid. Maybe you heard of them."

"Sure," said Gill. And then he lied, because he'd never seen the Ghost, and he'd only heard about the shooting in Paradise. "Why, I knowed the Galloping Ghost. Knowed him as well as I know you. Slickest man with a gun what ever came past the Mississippi. Funny about him an' that there last fight. I was there an' seen it."

"Tell me about it," said Bret.

Gill told the story in half a whisper through his thin lips, and for the second time the Galloping Ghost and the Shadow moved on padded feet before Bret's eyes. The distant laughter of a phantom man played upon his ears. Again the Shadow came to life and bent over the inert

form of the Ghost, who lay still on the street of Paradise. And again the galloping, and the Ghost and his Shadow were gone off on the trail to eternity. He was a good story teller, was Gill.

Gill became quiet. Bret murmured only half aloud:

"Funny, an' Barbara Maitland was Belle's daughter. Funny."

Just before sundown the next night, Bret heard the sound of a horse coming. He looked up.

"Who's that?" he asked.

CHAPTER VI.

DOUBLE CROSS.

BARBARA MAITLAND came up quickly. She dropped to the ground at the side of the fire and stood looking at them. They were eight men, and she a girl in overalls and a white shirt. She was brushing her hair away from her blue eyes when Bret came up to her. Her smile was soft and pleasant as she looked up at him and said:

"I'm Barbara Maitland. I'm Belle's daughter. I heard some of you were over here on the north pasture, and I came over to see you, that's all."

"That's nice," said Bret. He fumbled the brim of his hat between his hands.

"What's your name?" she asked. "Bret," he told her.

The cook glanced up from his squatting place beside the fire. Gill got to his feet. He drew his hat from his head and said:

"Howdy, miss."

"I just rode over," she explained. "I wanted to see how things looked, and to meet the boys, that's all."

Bret called out their names: Thompson, Cary, Gill, and the rest. After he was through, she smiled at them and said:

"How do you fellows think you'll like me for a boss?"

They mumbled things about liking it, because they didn't know what else to do. Suddenly Barbara mounted her horse.

"So long," she said. She was gone almost before they knew it.

They talked about her then. They said a girl who wore overalls and a shirt would have a time bossing the Bar 3 place. They didn't mean it. It was just something to talk about. They didn't know they'd said too much until Bret flared up.

"The next man who says anything more about her will have trouble."

And there was nothing more said.

She came back the next day at about the same time, and dressed as she had been before. In her hand was a letter. She came up to Bret and smiled.

"It's for you, Bret," she said. "Your last name's Hansen, isn't it?"

He looked down at her. It made her feel strange, his looking at her the way he did. Possibly it was because he held the letter and looked at her without saying anything. She turned away, but all the time she knew he was still looking at her. She thought she felt relieved when Bret finally said:

"Thank you for bringing it. Thanks a lot."

"Oh, that's all right," she said. "I thought maybe you'd like to get it as soon as it came, that's all."

The others looked on silently. They had a feeling that something was developing between those two, something they couldn't understand.

"I'd better go. I just wanted to bring you the letter," she said, and walked to her horse. She didn't draw herself up as she had the day before, but stood waiting.

"I'll help you," said Bret.

He caught her foot and swung her

up. She sat there looking down on him, and in a whisper said:

"I like you, somehow."

She wheeled away then, adding: "You might come over sometime."

Bret's eyes followed her until she disappeared beyond the brush. He didn't turn immediately, and when he did, he came face to face with Gill.

"She brung you a letter," he said expectantly.

"Yeah," Bret said. He wasn't listening.

"Funny, people getting letters."

Bret walked to the other side of the chuck wagon and opened the letter. He read to the end, where Hansen's studied scrawl had written:

Fallon said he was offering a thousand-dollar reward for you in this State.

BRET didn't want to sleep that night. He stood by the fire after the others had turned in. Gill lay with his head on his saddle, staring up at him.

"Why don't you sleep, Bret?" he asked.

"Don't feel like it."

"What's the matter? Something in that there letter?"

"Maybe."

After a while Gill said: "Listen, you outside the law?"

Bret's eyes fell upon Gill, but he didn't answer. Gill turned over. In a moment he was snoring.

When they were alone the next morning, Gill came up to Bret.

"I shot a man once," he said. He looked around to see if any one was near. "You know about the Galloping Ghost, an' you know about Bad-luck Fallon, the marshal what cleaned up Tucson in two weeks. Seems I shot a man over a stud game one night when Fallon was the law

there. He trailed me out, but his horse broke a leg in a prairie-dog hole. Had a liking for prairie dogs ever since."

"Fallon's got a son," said Bret in a moment of confidence. "He's sheriff of Paradise. Just offered a thousand for me."

"A thousand! What for?"

"I shot a man there once," said Bret slowly. He didn't realize he'd be sorry he'd spoken until it was too late.

"That's a lot of money."

"Too much."

A calculating look came over Gill's face. His hand brushed his chin slowly. And again he repeated: "A thousand dollars. A thousand dollars."

Bret felt they had something in common after that. He no longer held his silence. That night he spoke of Barbara Maitland.

"She asked me to see her."

"Why don't you go?" asked Gill.

"Because I'm outside the law in her State. And her father's the governor."

"Hell, she won't know, will she?"

A MORNING after that Bert started riding fence. He was moving slowly along the beaten trail by the side of the barbed wire, counting the posts as he went. It was something to do, counting posts. It kept the thought of a ten-year-old killing out of his mind. And as he moved slowly along, he came upon Barbara Maitland. Her shirt was open at the neck, and her hair seemed redder under the morning sun.

"I been looking for you," she said as she rode up.

"Why?"

"You said you were coming over sometime."

"Yes—sometime," said Bret.

"Don't talk like that. Come over now."

"No," said Bret.

"You're a strange man, Bret," she said with a faint laugh that stopped suddenly.

They looked at each other, and in that look the shadows of the past fell upon them. The destinies of those who had gone before were galloping through the hazy mists of time. They tried to understand it, but they couldn't. They didn't know. Bret took her hand. His fingers closed slowly. His lower lip quivered. For a moment longer they stood gazing at each other.

"Why do you look at me that way?" she asked.

Bret shook his head. His fingers relaxed. A feeling of guilt came over him. He drew away, but he had not gotten far when Barbara called after him.

"Here to-morrow at the same time!"

They met the next day, and the day after that. At times they talked, and at times spent minutes just looking at each other without speaking. After they parted, each one waited patiently for the coming of the next day and the same time. It was the tragic shadow of the Ghost and Belle. But they didn't know.

And then one day Barbara didn't come. She failed to meet him the next day, either, or the next. A week passed before they saw each other.

"I just had to come back," she said half hysterically. "I shouldn't, but I just had to."

"What's the matter?" asked Bret.

"I just learned something—something terrible about you."

"What?"

"You're a wanted man in the State of New Mexico. There's a thousand dollars reward for your capture."

Something always happens to things I like. It always does." They sat on their horses facing each other. "I thought there was something strange about a man like you being here so long. A hunted man. And a thousand dollars reward for your capture."

"Who told you?" asked Bret.

"A sheriff from Paradise. His name was Fallon. He wrote and asked if you were here."

"Fallon," he repeated.

SHE thought he would say it wasn't the truth. She had prayed he would. But he didn't. He turned away and left her there. He did not look back. He half thought she would follow, but she didn't. It wasn't until the next morning that he heard from Gill that Barbara Maitland had suddenly decided to return to New Mexico. Gill stood with a silly sort of grin on his face, looking at Bret.

"She's pulling out this morning. Funny, her going like this," he said. There was a sneaking strangeness about Gill as Bret turned away. Bret walked over to the corral and singled out his horse. He was tightening the cinches when Gill came up.

"Where you goin'?" Gill asked.

"See Barbara," said Bret.

His horse was puffing like a bellows when he pulled up outside the office. He walked hurriedly up to the door as the heavy-faced foreman came out.

"Where's Miss Barbara?" asked Bret.

"Why, she's gone, Bret. Left nigh onto an hour ago. Yep, just about an hour. But she left something for you. Wait." The foreman turned and went back inside. He came out at once. In his hand was an envelope. "Here," he said.

"Thanks," said Bret. "Thanks."

He didn't open it until he was on his horse moving through the brush toward the bunk house. Inside there was a lace handkerchief. There was an aroma of perfume about it, and it felt soft in his hands. The faint memory of a handkerchief that had been given years before slipped through his mind as he moved on slowly.

He sat upon his bunk, his head between his hands, eyes staring at the floor. Then he got up. The few possessions that he had he put together. As he strapped a gun around his waist, Gill came in.

"Slinging' a gun now, huh?"

"I'm leaving, Gill."

"Where?"

"Straight as I can to Paradise, an' I'm stopping only one place, an' that'll be Santa Ana. I got an old friend there. An old Mex who makes saddles."

"But I thought you plugged a man in New Mexico once."

"I said I was going back."

He walked out of the door. Gill followed him and waved good-by.

Bret was scarcely out of sight before the thought of that thousand dollars got into Gill's mind and stayed there. A thousand dollars—Fallon—Paradise. And scarcely an hour passed before Gill was prodding his ugly white horse toward the road that led to the State line, to Santa Ana and Paradise, whose single street had once been stained with the blood of the Galloping Ghost.

CHAPTER VII.

LIGHTNING FALLON.

SEVEN days after leaving the Panhandle, Bret rode into Santa Ana, passed through the crooked street between the dobe houses, and drew up before one that

was known everywhere as the shop of Carros, maker of saddles. The door was open. Behind a low table strewn with bits of leather sat a pock-marked Mexican with watery eyes. Slowly his head raised.

"*Quien es?*" he mumbled.

"It's Bret. Bret Hansen."

Carros's lower lip quivered, and from his throat came a hoarse cry.

"Bret! Bret! *Como la va!*"

He grasped Bret by the shoulders, and clung to him as a man might cling to anything he'd thought was lost.

"You come back," he said. That was all.

He got out a bottle of mescal. He poured it into a shallow gourd that acted as a cup. He offered salt from a bag that had once held tobacco.

"Just the same as you used to be," said Bret. "Here's luck."

They sat facing each other after that, while Bret told of the years that had passed.

"I wanted to come back," he said. "It's been ten years, Carros. That's a long time. And something happened there. A girl. You wouldn't understand. You've never seen a man who is in love with a girl. Name's Maitland, Carros. She's got reddish hair and blue eyes."

A tragic look came over Carros's face. His head shook slowly from side to side. Memories ran rampant through his brain. And as he sat there, Bret drew from his pocket a lace handkerchief.

"She gave me this, Carros."

Only then did the real feelings of the saddle maker come out. His little eyes blinked spasmodically, and a look almost of fright came over him.

"Bad—bad," he murmured.

Bret laughed at him. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I'll see the old man, that's all. And I want

to see her. She's at her place outside of Paradise."

And through it all Carros shook his head from side to side.

"I won't get into any trouble. Here, take my gun. Take my gun, and put it away. Maybe that's the best thing to do, anyhow. Here, take it."

He thrust it upon Carros, who fingered it in his hands. He watched Carros put it into a box of leather scraps at the side. Bret wondered at the strange actions of this old friend of his father's. The setting sun was coming through the door, and the flies buzzed in the lingering heat of it.

"I may see her. I don't know. Don't you worry about it, Carros. I won't get into any trouble. Only one man knows about my coming here. Fellow named Gill over at the Bar 3 place. Gill wouldn't tell. Gill and I——"

Suddenly he paused, listening. "Listen—I hear a horse. Some one just stopped outside."

As he got to his feet, a man leaped into the frame of the doorway. He stood crouched, with a gun in his right hand. His face was lean and hard. His lips were tight, and from his rattlerlike eyes came a hate whose roots were deep in his heart.

"Reach for it," he snarled.

Bret's hands raised slowly.

"I'm Ed Fallon," spat the man in the doorway. "Maybe you don't remember me, Bret Hansen. Maybe you don't remember about that there killing in Paradise ten years back. I been waitin' for you to come, an' I come to get you. Come out!"

Bret made no move.

"*Buenas,*" said Carros in a soft, easy way. He motioned for Fallon to come in, but Fallon acted as if Carros wasn't there.

"Take out that gun of yours an' throw it on the floor. An' if you make a move to shoot, you get a hole through you. That's right—take it out, an' then drop it."

Bret's right hand went toward his holster before he realized that his gun was already put away in the box for leather scraps. Carros stood with his hand upon the door, peering out at them through watery eyes. He stood motionless, his mouth slightly open, and his breath catching some place in his throat. Bret's hand jerked nervously when he realized that he had no gun.

Fallon didn't wait. The roar of his gun was deafening within the narrow confines of the dobe walls. Bret staggered backward a step. His right hand clenched upon his left shoulder, and blood oozed out between his fingers.

His face went white as he said: "You didn't have to do that, Fallon. You didn't—" He sank slowly. The pungent odor of burned powder played upon his nostrils even as he fell. He lay there, looking up at the man in the doorway.

"That was a nasty thing to do, Fallon. Nasty thing to do."

And as Bret lay there looking, Carros swung the door closed. Fallon's gun hand was caught between the door and the jamb. With all the vigor he had, the pock-marked Mexican pushed against the door. He bent and grunted. He mumbled threats under his breath. While above him, caught in a viselike pressure, was Fallon's hand. It grew white, and blood came from its wrist. Its thin fingers finally opened, and the gun it held fell to the earthen floor.

"Open that door!" he screeched. "Open it!"

Carros picked up the gun. He held it in his hand as he opened the

door and faced Fallon, whose agonized eyes bore into him.

"Adios!" Carros said.

Fallon backed away, with one hand disabled. He mounted his horse and rode out and away from Santa Ana. And there was blood on the jamb of the saddle maker's door.

IT was hard for Bret to remember. When his thoughts at last came clear, his shirt was off, and there was a bandage around his shoulder. He could feel a dull pain, but nothing more as he lay still upon the floor.

Carros sat on a bench, looking down at him. He was hunched over, and from his eyes there came an almost pitiful stare. At his side was a half-filled bottle of mescal.

"Si," he murmured. "Fallon, he go. He come back pronto. *Muy pronto.*"

"I'd better leave here, Carros. I'm all right to leave. You give me a coat—anything. I don't care what it is, but I got to cover up this blood."

After Carros found an old coat, he took another drink and continued to sit upon the bench, staring at the floor. At times his head shook from side to side, like the mournful gesture of one who has seen blood flow more than once.

"You had better come, too," said Bret.

Carros started to raise his head, then let it drop back. In that simple gesture of negation, all the sadness of his lonely life was silently expressed.

"Adios—adios."

"Why good-by?" asked Bret.

Carros didn't reply. Possibly he understood in some strange way that the destiny of one Carros, maker of saddles in the town of Santa Ana, was already in the lap of the gods.

BRET was weak. The pain in his shoulder became greater as he rode. He could feel the dampness come, its liquid warmth as it passed down his left side and stopped at his belt. The night closed in around him. No stars shone. Slowly he moved on and on, until the single street of Paradise seemed to move along on either side of him. How long it had been since he'd ridden there before. Ten years, and ten years was a long time. And there was Philips's store with its lights, and there was Hansen's place. As he labored forward, the lights blurred slightly, ever so slightly in the night. They blurred still more as he dropped from his horse and walked to the door of the saloon. His hand found the knob somehow. A flood of light struck his face.

Behind the bar, his head bent over a game of solitaire, stood Hansen.

It was a long time before he spoke, and then all he said was:

"That's you, Bret."

"Howdy," said Bret weakly.

"What's the matter with your voice?" asked Hansen. "Ain't sick, are you?"

Bret shook his head.

"Drink?" asked Hansen.

"Yeah," said Bret.

The drink made him feel better. It made him feel healthy inside, and his head cleared. He took Hansen's hand and held it.

"I just wanted to see you," he said. "I had to come back." He leaned against the bar, fingering his glass. Hansen watched him, and the feeling came to him somehow that there was a woman mixed up in Bret's return. He didn't know for sure. Only, he remembered. That was all.

"How long's Fallon had a reward out for me?" Bret asked.

"Almost a month." Hansen be-

gan to realize that something was terribly wrong.

"A thousand dollars," mumbled Bret hoarsely. "A thousand. You don't know what it is to be trailed by the law. Every place you turn, you think you see them coming."

"No, maybe I don't," said Hansen quietly. He saw Bret's empty gun holster. "What's happened to you? Where's your gun?"

"Gun?" said Bret. A look of surprise came over his face. "In Carros's place, I guess. Left it there to make sure I wouldn't get in no trouble." Bret tried to smile, but the skin on his face only drew drawn and pale. He reached suddenly for another drink, and as he wiped the moisture from his lips, his coat parted.

The front of his shirt was red.

"What is it, Bret!" cried Hansen. "Tell me what happened!"

"Fallon," said Bret in a dull voice. "Fallon's not a bad shot." As he spoke, his hand went to an inside pocket of his coat and drew forth a little something that looked like a square of white cloth. When Hansen bent closer, the aroma of something pleasant played upon his nostrils.

"Why, that's a handkerchief," he said.

"And it's lace," said Bret. "Lace. It belongs to a woman I can't see because I killed a man. It was because I was a kid and did a kid trick, and it finished with a man dying out there on the street. You know what I mean by that. He died, an' he died because I shot him."

He swayed slightly. Hansen thought he was going to fall. He grasped Bret's arm and held to it.

"Listen, Bret. Bret! You didn't kill him. It certainly wasn't you. It was——"

"Who?"

"Carros."

"Carros?" A laugh broke from Bret's lips. There was no softness in it now. There was no mellowness. He twisted away from the bar.

"Wait, Bret. Wait. We got to get you fixed up."

"No, no. Let me go. I'm going to tell her. I'll tell her. I'll——"

"Then they'll get Carros. And Carros is the only friend I ever had. He saved your life that night. You surely ain't goin' to tell on him now."

But Bret drew a way. His clouded brain couldn't grasp it all. He stumbled toward the door and out into the darkness while Hansen ran after him, shouting:

"Bret! Bret! You can't go like that. You can't!"

But Bret was already climbing on his horse, struggling to seat himself properly. His arms suddenly weakened, and he almost fell. Hansen was at his side when he wheeled away and moved slowly down the street. And behind him stood the dreary form of Hansen, repeating to himself:

"A lace handkerchief. A lace handkerchief."

BRET didn't knock at the door of the Maitland house. Maybe he didn't have the power. When the door opened, he straightened. He tried to force a smile, but he failed.

"Miss Barbara," he said. "Just tell her Bret wants to see her."

A little Mexican girl stared at him frightenedly a moment before she found her tongue.

"*Si, señor!*" she gasped.

Bret held himself straight. It seemed to come easier. He heard the sound of some one moving toward him, and when he looked again,

Barbara Maitland was standing in front of him.

"I had to see you," he said.

"Come in," she faltered. "Come on in, Bret."

She drew back from the door. For a brief moment he gathered all of the strength he had and walked in. He sat down on the nearest chair. Then he suddenly wondered why he'd come. Everything was strange, the fireplace at one end, and little Navajo rugs with streaks of red in them like the red he'd seen running down the door jamb in Carros's saddle shop.

"I didn't expect to see you here," she said.

Her voice was mellow, as it had been the first time he'd heard her speak. He remembered how blue her eyes were, and the coppery glint of her hair.

"I remember why I came. I remember. I just——"

He faltered in his speech, and she asked him why. Why was his face so white?

"Riding," he told her. And just then a door opened somewhere. Bret heard the sound of the knob as it turned. He felt the presence of some one else in the room. He looked up and saw an oldish man with gray hair and penetrating eyes. He stood just within a doorway, looking at Bret. He must have muttered something, for Bret saw his lips move as he came toward him.

"This is my father, Bret," said Barbara. "You know about him, don't you? He's the governor of New Mexico."

With all of his power, Bret forced himself to his feet. One of his hands still held to his chair. For a moment everything was clear, and then the room seemed to move slightly. Things blurred. The black opening of the fireplace grew suddenly larger.

"Bret!" she called.

He turned slightly, his knees gave, and he fell.

As he lay there, he could hear what seemed the distant sound of their voices. The sound of one was soft, yet almost hysterical.

"There's blood on his shirt. He's—he's wounded!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SHADOW PASSES.

BRET was in bed when his eyes opened the next morning. The sun came in through the window of the room in which he lay. At his side was a chair, a chest of drawers across from him, and a door that opened into a closet at one side. He lay stiffly, without moving. Bitterly his thoughts went to the day before, and as he lay there, there was a gentle knock upon the door.

"Come in," said Bret.

The knob turned slowly, and Barbara came in. Her troubled eyes fell upon him.

"I got worried about you. I came to see if you were all right," she said softly. She came over and sat in the chair and held her white hands together in her lap.

"It's afternoon," she said slowly. "The doctor will come back again."

"Was he here?" Bret asked.

"Last night. He'll be here again to-night."

Her eyes wouldn't meet his. He took her hand, and she made no effort to draw away.

"Who shot you?" she asked suddenly.

"It makes no difference," he said.

She sat for a little while without moving. Then she got up and said:

"I've got to go."

After the door closed behind her, Bret was left alone for hours. He thought about Fallon and about the

thousand-dollar reward. He thought about Carros. It was pleasant thinking he was not a murderer, but if he said anything, it would involve Carros. Poor Carros! They'd put a rope around his neck, and they'd pull it taut. They'd ask him if he had anything to say before he died. And Carros would say with a smile: "Mescal. Mescal, an' a leetle salt." And after he'd taken the drink, they'd pull him up and leave him there until he was dead. His pock-marked face would be looking at the sun, but he wouldn't see the light, because the soul of Carros would have galloped on.

So went the thoughts through Bret's mind as he lay there, knowing full well that if he said a word, his father's closest friend would be hanged by the neck until he was dead. He'd have to see Carros. He'd have to talk to him. When Bret got a little better, he'd sneak out and ride over to Santa Ana.

And so his thoughts went until night fell and the doctor came in to see him.

"A week, anyway," the doctor said. "Better not get up, young fellow, for a week."

Barbara stayed after the doctor left.

"Who shot you?" she demanded again.

"Doesn't make any difference."

"You came here to tell me something. Why don't you tell me?"

"Me?" he said. "I guess it's better if I don't say anything."

She seemed cold and indifferent. "Father left to-day," she said. "He had business in Santa Fe."

Another day passed, and then another. Bret's meals were brought to him by a young Mexican girl who always stood against the wall, looking at him until he finished. She never said anything. Barbara sel-

dom came. She continued to be distant. On the fourth day that Bret was there, she came in and stood beside his bed.

"Howdy," he said with a smile.

"Fallon came last night."

"Fallon," repeated Bret. He raised himself up slowly. He thought she'd say something more, but she didn't.

"Does he know I'm here?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell him?"

"Yes."

Bret lowered himself again, and lay staring at the ceiling.

"His right wrist is hurt. He fell off a horse."

"Yeah," said Bret.

HE thought of Fallon. He thought of Fallon's clutching hand caught between the door and the jamb in Carros's place. Strange, but Bret said nothing.

"Do you see Fallon often?" Bret asked.

"Yes," she flared.

"What you see him for?"

"He's strong. Something inside, I guess. Makes me afraid sometimes."

She jumped up suddenly, and for the first time he heard her voice grow loud and challenging.

"Why did you ever kill a man, Bret? Why did you ever murder? You would never have told me if I hadn't found out. You would have kept it quiet and let things go on and on. But Fallon told me. He told me everything! When you were only a kid, you were a murderer. Heaven knows what you are now!"

Tears clouded her eyes quickly, and she ran sobbing from the room.

Hansen came that afternoon. He waited until no one was there, and then he said:

"Carros came to the place to-day. He says he's goin' to tell the whole

thing. I told him not to. I told him to hold off for a spell. He's the best friend a man ever had, son. Sometime I'll tell all about it. Everything." He took hold of Bret's hand and added: "Now I better be going." He paused a long time before he left.

After he was gone, Bret lay waiting for the darkness to come. Just at nightfall, Barbara came in quietly. She seemed more cheerful, and she smiled faintly.

"I'm sorry I lost my head," she confided.

"That's all right." Bret paused a moment before he said: "Where's my clothes?"

"In the closet there," she said. "Why?"

"Just thinking, that's all."

She cast a significant glance at him before she left, and she said: "You're not well. That was a nasty wound, the doctor said. You can't walk even if you wanted to."

The little Mexican girl brought him something to eat just after dark, and stood waiting for him to finish.

"Where's my horse?" he asked.

"Corral," she said.

"Thanks."

She lighted the lamp before she left. Black shadows played against the walls. Minute after minute, Bret lay still, gazing at the ceiling. An hour passed, possibly two. The usual sounds within the house became silenced before Bret raised himself and allowed his feet to reach out to touch the floor. He almost fell as he stood by the closet door. With one hand upon the wall, he held himself erect as he put on his clothing.

For a long time he stood leaning against the door before he opened it and crept out. His hands guided him along the walls of the patio. No lights shone from the windows. Sev-

eral times he stopped, gathered his strength together, and forced himself on past the room in which he'd first seen Barbara, and on through the door that led into the open.

Outside it was dark, for only a few stars shone. He could see only the black silhouette of the barns and the rail-fence inclosure where the horses were. He could hear them crunching their corn as he moved in the half darkness until he found his mare. He held to her neck as he guided her to the fence where the saddles were. Pains shot across his shoulder, dull pains that played havoc with his insides and made his head reel. He steadied himself. His face was damp and wet as he drew his saddle from the fence.

"Hold still, there," he whispered.

He pulled the single cinch taut and buckled it. Slowly he led the mare to the gate. Once outside, he paused. His mind became cloudy. The road to Santa Ana seemed endless. It reached out to the south of the Maitland place. Paradise lay to his right as he rode on through the mesquite to that cluster of dobes that was known as Santa Ana. As he neared the house of the saddle maker, his eye fell upon a horse that stood outside.

Bret pulled up, dropped to the ground, and moved forward cautiously on foot in the darkness. Soon he could hear the sound of voices which filtered out from Carros's shack.

"I thought you'd say something like that. You Mexes are lying skunks, anyhow." Clearly it was Fallon's voice. "You didn't kill him, Mex. You couldn't shoot that good in the night. The best you ever done was to make a rotten saddle. What you want to tell me you killed my father for? Bret done it, an' I'm gettin' him."

Bret backed slowly away, a strange feeling of discomfort filling his mind as he drew himself slowly to his saddle again and started back to the Maitland place. He'd heard enough to know that Carros had confessed to the killing of Bad-luck Fallon ten years ago, and by that confession Carros was going to hang himself.

Poor Carros!

The road back was darker than ever. The pains became more regular in Bret's side. A dizziness came. Just outside the Maitland corral as Bret tried to swing himself to the ground, his foot slipped from the stirrup, and he fell. His side struck the rail fence. He lay there without moving. He tried to crawl to the house, but his strength gave way. It wasn't any use.

ONE of Maitland's cowhands found Bret lying there the next morning. He'd crawled as far as the door of the house before he'd dropped again. His eyes were open wide, and he was staring at the sun that came slowly over the horizon.

At the side of the corral, his mare still stood.

"Fell off," Bret confided. "Didn't have enough strength, I guess."

Barbara came out before he'd moved.

"Mornin'," he said.

She gazed at him through troubled eyes.

"Fell off," he explained.

She helped take him back to his room, where he slept all through the day. It must have been around six in the evening when he heard some one ride up, and he heard the distant sound of voices. He was certain Fallon had come to tell of Carros's confession. There was silence again for a while before a knock

came on his door and Barbara came in, holding one hand behind her. Bret knew by her manner that something had happened.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Perty good," he said.

"Listen, Bret. Where did you go last night?"

Bret forced a smile. "I was goin' to see a friend of mine, a saddle maker in Santa Ana. But I didn't go all the way. What did you hear about him?"

"Was his name Carros?"

Bret nodded, and Barbara's face paled.

"Carros was murdered last night."

With a nervous voice she told him all that was known. Some one in the village had heard a shot in the saddle shop, and almost at once a rider was seen to disappear in the night. When the shop was entered, Carros was lying upon the floor with a nasty hole through him. His eyes were open wide, and he was staring at the ceiling.

"It was somebody in the town that found him," Barbara continued. "He was dead."

A strange stillness fell upon both of them until Bret asked:

"Who did it?"

"They'll get him, all right, I guess. They found the man's gun there. It had just been fired."

"That's lucky."

She challenged him with a glance as she took a step toward him, still holding her hand behind her back.

"Yes, that's lucky," she said, with a queer catch in her voice.

He knew she was hiding something, then.

"What have you got behind your back?"

She drew out her hand. In it was a gun.

"It's the one they found in Carros's place."

"Let me see it."

Bret took it between his hands. A single shell had been fired. He didn't say anything right away, but when he did, it was simply:

"That's my gun."

Barbara's eyes were accusing him. Her lower lip quivered slightly. A sigh escaped her, and she started to turn away.

"Wait," he begged. "Wait."

As he lay there, the tragic feeling of loss swept over him. Carros was dead. But all Bret could think to say was:

"He's dead."

He fingered the gun and gazed at Barbara, but he couldn't say anything more.

"He's dead, all right," she threw at him, "and they found your gun there. They say you did it. You went there, and you killed him."

"Who said that?" demanded Bret.

"Fallon. He came here to get you. He wanted to come in, but I wouldn't let him. I wanted to be sure. That's the reason I brought the gun in."

"Do you think I did it?" he asked her.

She evaded his glance. He paused for a while before he said:

"Go and tell Fallon that I'll come to him soon as I get dressed."

"You can't get up."

"I can do anything now."

Barbara didn't seem to want to leave. She took a step toward the door and paused. Her eyes fell upon Bret for a moment, and another sigh escaped her lips. Then her hand reached for the knob of the door, and she was gone.

She'd left the gun behind. Bret still held it in one hand, gazing at the door through which she'd gone. So Fallon had accused him of the murder of Carros! A bitter smile played over Bret's face. He got up.

He dressed, pausing several times for strength. When he was ready, he picked up the gun again and walked out. Before the door behind which Barbara and Fallon waited, Bret steadied himself. His hand found the knob. He turned it suddenly, and he flung the door open with a force which caused it to crash against the inside wall.

"Don't move, Fallon," he said grimly.

Fallon wheeled as his hands drew up. His back was toward the fireplace, his thin little eyes leveled at the crouched, white-faced man in the doorway. At Fallon's side stood Barbara.

"I'd just as soon put a bullet through you as not, Fallon. And don't make any move toward your gun or I'll drill you clean," said Bret.

"No, you wouldn't," said Fallon with a sneer, "me with a bad wrist."

"That makes us even, because I got a hole in me, a hole what you drilled when I didn't even hold a gun. So take out your gun now, Fallon. I wouldn't shoot you until you got it out. Take it out, an' I'll count ten. An' when it gets to ten, we'll fire together. You know what I've got in my mind. You're a lying skunk and a killer. Take out your gun, Fallon!"

"Don't!" gasped Barbara. But they didn't even hear her, because her voice was no more than a whisper.

"It's me or you, Fallon," said Bret. "An' we may as well finish it here."

FALLON made a move for his gun. He drew it out slowly. Not more than ten paces were between them, and they stood with their guns drawn and their eyes blazing out hate that neither of them could understand.

"Please, please," pleaded Barbara, "don't do anything here. It's my house. And, Bret, I told him you'd come down—that there would be no trouble."

But her pleading didn't help.

"You killed Carros, Fallon. And don't put any pressure on that trigger yet. I could keep on firing with a dozen holes in me."

Fallon took a step forward and crouched.

"I'm paid to get men like you, and the way I get them is my own business. This here State doesn't forget, an' I don't forget, neither. When I know my man, I get him, an' I get him in my own way, see?"

"I'm through talking, Fallon. We know who killed Carros. We know you did it, and we both know it was because he helped me. You're just a snake of a killer, an' you're on the side of the law. So I start counting now, Fallon. Both of us can't live in this State."

"One—two—three——"

Barbara screamed: "Don't! Not here. I couldn't stand it!"

She ran between the two and stood there, turning first toward one and then the other, and all the time she was swaying slightly and saying in a pitiful voice:

"I'm pleading with you. Can't you see that? I'll get on my knees if you want me to, but don't do anything here. Please—please! Don't do anything here."

She took a step toward Bret. She could see his white face and the light that was reflected from his gun barrel.

"You wouldn't do anything here," she cried. "You wouldn't!"

Her hand pressed against her mouth. She staggered another step before Bret forced himself forward. She might have fallen had he not caught her. He hardly knew him-

self how he stood the added weight in his weakened condition.

There was a moment of silence before Bret said:

"She's right, Fallon. But get out, or I'll shoot."

Fallon moved slowly, holding his gun upon the two of them until he got to the door.

"I'll get you," he snarled, "and I'll have men with me when I do." He leaped backward.

It wasn't long before Bret heard the sound of Fallon's horse which moved away in the night. Bret gazed upon the open door through which he'd passed. Then his eyes fell upon the strangely placid face of the girl he held in his arms.

As he stood there, the little Mexican girl peered into the room. Bret called her, and they helped Barbara over to a couch.

"Get water," directed Bret. "Put it on her face, and stay with her until she's all right. Don't leave her."

"*Si, señor,*" the girl said.

"And tell her I'll be at Hansen's place in Paradise to-morrow. Savvy? Hansen's place—to-morrow."

She nodded and watched him with wide-open eyes. She had not moved when Bret turned slowly, his hands upon the wall, and walked out through the door.

It wasn't until he was on his mare, and passing through the darkness toward Paradise, that he knew he was almost a dead man.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GHOST GALLOPS ON.

THE coolness of the night air cleared his fagged brain. The saddle beneath him was comforting. Even the pain of his wound grew less and less. Halfway to Paradise he stopped. He felt too

weak to move on. Wearily he lay upon the ground, using his saddle for a pillow. The first red streaks of dawn flushed the sky and wakened him. Not far away was his mare.

Bret felt much better.

The sun was just rising as he rode down the single street of Paradise. Philips's General Store had not yet opened. There wasn't a horse at the hitch rack in front of Hansen's place. Bret drew up and lowered himself painfully to the ground.

He walked slowly toward the door and opened it. Hansen looked up from the far end of the bar, where he was playing solitaire with a pack of greasy cards. As Bret walked up, Hansen straightened himself.

"You oughta be in bed," he said.

"What you doin' up so early?" asked Bret.

"I ain't turned in yet," said Hansen.

"Listen," Bret said then, "I got something bad to tell you, but maybe you heard."

"Heard nothing," said Hansen.

Bret hated to tell Hansen. He walked closer to him slowly.

"They found Carros with a hole in him. He was dead."

Hansen's hands closed tightly. His lower lip quivered slightly, but other than that he made no movement. He continued to look at Bret without lowering his glance, and the only words that escaped his lips were:

"Who done it?"

"They say I did it," said Bret.

"Who done it?" repeated Hansen. "Fallon."

Hansen walked back of the bar and poured a drink. He drank several, one after the other. And while he was drinking, Bret said:

"It's Fallon or me after that killing, but if he gets me, it'll have to be with a slug from a .45."

Hansen drank another drink before his hands passed behind his back and untied the apron he wore. Carefully he folded it and put it under the bar. He turned to a drawer then and opened it. He took out the gun that was there. For a moment he fingered it, putting shells into its empty chambers. Finally he swung its holster belt around him and buckled it. After he placed the gun in its holster he walked around the bar.

"I'm ready," he said.

"If you're hittin' the gun trail, I'm hittin it with you."

"No, you ain't, Bret. An' listen here. I did plenty of gunning in my day, an' I ain't lost the knack. Fallon's ol' man trailed me before you ever made a squawk."

"What do you mean?" asked Bret.

"Just what I said."

Bret took his father's arm and drew him up close.

"Listen; you're staying here," he said harshly. "You're not going any place. An' don't try to tell me you were ever a bad man. What you think I am?"

A grim smile flashed over Hansen's face, and one corner of his mouth dropped a little.

"Do you remember the Galloping Ghost?"

"Sure."

"Ever seen him?"

"What you tryin' to do?" demanded Bret.

"I was just askin' you, that's all."

"No, I never saw him."

"Well, Bret, my boy, you're lookin' at what's left of him right now."

BRET started to laugh, but the laugh wouldn't come. Something kept him from it. A kind of hollowness came where his stomach should have been. His mouth opened slightly. But before

he spoke, there came from Hansen's lips the sound of a laugh that played against the walls of Hansen's Bar until the sound of it went into nothing, and Hansen spoke.

"Just plain Hansen now. Just plain Hansen, what's got a place in Paradise, down by the Rio. Funny, ain't it? But I been Hansen too long. I been something I never should have been, just like Carros. An' him the Shadow of the Galloping Ghost. Him goin' to waste making saddles until Fallon comes in an' puts a bullet hole through his heart. But he didn't kill Carros. Carros died a long, long time ago. Why, he wasn't the kind to make saddles. He wasn't the kind to sit all day long in a dobe shack. Should 'a' been on the open road, with the sun coming down, an' nothin' but mesquite an' sand hills as far as a man can see."

Hansen paused, and his eyes dropped to the floor. He looked as if age had come suddenly upon him. His head drooped more and more; his shoulders sank. And in that moment of quiet, Bret wondered why he'd not known all of this before. He tried to think of something comforting to say to his father, but he couldn't. All he could think was: "The Galloping Ghost. The Galloping Ghost, the slickest man that ever held a .45." And for the first time in his life Bret understood the feelings that played in the soul of the owner of Hansen's Bar.

"Funny, ain't it?" Hansen continued, and his voice almost broke. "I can't keep from thinking about that pock-marked little Mex what had a way with leather. Give him a hide an' he could make most anything. Made the finest chaps you ever seen. Had Injun beads around the pockets, an' silver for buttons. Yeah he——"

Hansen's voice drifted off into si-

lence. His shoulders collapsed. A look of infinite sadness came over his wrinkled face. In a sort of whisper he said:

"An' he liked Belle. Why, she was as perty as a picture. Yes, you wait here, Bret. Wait."

He turned quickly and moved like a half-drunken man around to the other side of the bar. Bret heard the opening of a drawer, and when Hansen came back he held within the grasp of his hand something that was soft and white.

"A handkerchief," whispered Bret.

"Sure, it's a handkerchief. It's lace. Belle give it to me. She give it to me the first time I ever saw her. An' things was getting along well until one day she rode out to meet me. Seems to me I can hear the sound of them horse's hoofs now. Yes——"

And in the pause that followed, the sound of hoofs did play upon their ears. Hoofs beat hard down the single street of Paradise. Bret turned his head toward the window, and as he looked, Hansen continued:

"Yep, I can still hear the sound of her horse when she come up to say she was finished. No beating about the bush. She wasn't that kind, Belle wasn't. She just said we was through. She didn't know she was sounding out the death warrant of the Galloping Ghost."

As his last word left the mouth of Hansen, the sound of hoofs along the street came to a sudden halt. Some one dropped to the earth at the hitch rack in front of Hansen's Bar.

"Look!" said Bret.

HANSEN turned, and both of them saw Barbara pass beyond the window and move toward the door. She took a step inside before she stopped. Her eyes

closed for a moment, and a faint murmur passed her lips.

"Thank Heaven!"

Her face was flushed, and her hair was tangled from the ride. Hansen walked up to her slowly.

"You look like her," he said softly. "Only I think her hair was a little redder. Just a little."

"Who?" she asked.

"Belle," Hansen said slowly. "Maybe she told you about the Galloping Ghost."

"The Ghost?" she whispered.

"The Ghost was me," Hansen confided.

Her eyes jumped to Bret. Then she looked at Hansen again. A tender feeling came into her eyes. Her lips moved slightly. Maybe she thought she said something, but no sound came. It was hard for her to understand. Finally her hand fell upon his shoulder, and tenderly she said:

"The Ghost? My mother told me. She said she was sorry it turned out the way it did. She said that before she died."

Hansen's shoulders straightened; his eyes lighted.

"Sorry?" he said.

"But she had to run away," continued Barbara. "Things were different then. But I'm not going to run. I won't let a Fallon change my life like one changed Belle's."

"She said she was sorry," said the Ghost. His voice sounded like an echo. "She said she was sorry!"

Suddenly fear played deep in Barbara's eyes, for the sound of horses beating along the single street came sharply to their ears.

"What's that?" cried Bret.

"Fallon," said Barbara.

Closer and closer the sound came, until it was almost in front of Hansen's Bar.

"Fallon came with a posse," she

explained quickly. "I rode cross country to warn you. Hide, please hide, Bret." She ran to Bret and dropped her hands on his arms. She looked up at him through terror-stricken eyes. "Please, Bret, for my sake. There—back of the bar!"

"No."

"But they'll get you!"

"No," said Bret.

"It's not for you, Bret. It's for me that I'm asking. I don't care what you've done. Save yourself for me."

"All right," Bret told her.

He walked slowly back of the bar and dropped down. His hand reached for his gun as he waited. He knew he'd not stay there long. But her pleadings had been too much, that was all.

JUST then Ed Fallon and his posse came to a halt at the hitch rack in front of Hansen's Bar. As he dropped to the ground, Fallon shouted:

"That's his horse! Come on, a couple of you men, an' you, Gill. You're a double-crossing rat, Gill, but if you want that thousand, you stand by the door, and not a man comes out. Hear that? Come on, a couple of you men. The rest of you wait and hold onto your guns."

Three of them walked up to the door and in, while outside crouched Gill like a sneaking rat. But he wanted to leave. He hardly had it in him to stay.

The three stood just inside. Fallon was in the center, and one of his men stood on each side. Facing them was the Galloping Ghost, while Barbara stood with her hands gripping the edge of the bar.

The Ghost's gun was tucked in well at his waist, all ready to fire, and as he stood there, laughter came from his thin lips, laughter of the

old kind, when Fallon had trailed him, and the Shadow had never had his fill.

"Howdy, gents," said the Ghost. "Seem to be having something on your minds. You come in sorta quick, an' that's no way for gents to come in a bar."

Fallon sneered in his nasty way.

"Why, pardners," continued the Ghost, "I'm the Galloping Ghost. Shuffle up to the bar an' have a drink. Don't make no difference to me if you got no money."

"Drunk!" spat out Fallon. "Drop that gun!"

"I'm not drunk. I just heard something I'm glad of hearin'. Said she was sorry, she did. So step up to the bar, men, and have a drink on the house."

"Where's Bret?" snapped Fallon.

"Bret who?" said the Ghost.

"Why, I never heard of him."

"I seen his horse outside," said Fallon.

From behind the bar, Bret raised himself. His movements were slow and deliberate, until he paused in the center of the room. Barbara looked on through transfixed eyes. And she stood perfectly still.

"Drop that gun!" demanded Fallon.

Bret shook his head slowly.

"No, Fallon. I'm not dropping this gun. If you get me, you're getting me dead."

"I got eight men outside," warned Fallon.

"Not enough," said Bret. He was standing by the side of the Ghost.

A strange quiet came, a quiet that seemed endless. Outside, the sneaking Gill leaned against the panels of the door, listening hard for words that were yet to come.

He heard Bret's voice, a voice that was strangely cool.

"Better go, Barbara."

"No," she said. "No, I'm staying here. I don't care what happens; I'm staying here."

Their eyes met for a second.

"All right," said Bret.

FALLON turned to one of his men, then. "Tell the boys outside to get around this place. Tell 'em Bret's here. Tell 'em to get at the windows, and if he makes a move, to put a hole through him."

The man turned toward the door, but Bret shouted:

"If you take another step, you're a dead man!"

The man wheeled. He looked over at Fallon, and then at Bret. The silence was terrific. None of them said a word until Bret took a few steps forward.

"You killed Carros, Fallon. Murdered him!"

Fallon's lips curled away. He muttered something under his breath and fired.

The slug slipped past Bret's side and buried itself to a stop in the dobe wall. Barbara screamed. Before he could fire, her arms were holding him while she said hysterically:

"Don't shoot. Don't!"

With all of the vigor she had, she held to him, while flame leaped out from the Ghost's gun. Fallon fired back at him. Glass shattered, and heated smoke hung over the floor. It lasted but seconds, yet through it all Barbara held to Bret, forcing him to be still.

And one strange thing happened in those few fitful moments. A stray slug splintered a panel of the door. A squeaking voice outside said:

"It got me!"

The listening Gill tumbled backward. He fell upon the single street

of Paradise. He was dead. And if he hadn't died that way, he might have heard what happened then, for Bret drew himself away from Barbara. There was pressure on his trigger finger, and that strange madness of the kill in his heart when the Galloping Ghost shouted at the top of his voice.

"Stop!" he cried. "Stop!"

There was a hole in him. They didn't know it until then.

"Stop!" he shouted again. Then a kind of smile passed over his face, a hopeless little smile. "Step up to the bar, gents. Step up to the bar. Have a drink with the Galloping Ghost. You won't have much more time. Come on. Come on, boys; it's my day. Drinks on me."

They all looked at him curiously. They wondered why he talked as he did in a smoke-filled room, while outside the sneaking Gill lay dead in the dirt.

"No more shooting to-day, boys. No more to-day. It wasn't Bret what killed Bad-luck Fallon. It was the Shadow what killed him. It was that grinning little pock-marked Mex what this young Fallon killed over in Santa Ana. And believe me, because it's the truth. Just forget it all. It's my day, to-day, so step up to the bar, gents."

HIS eyes had a listless look in them. When he walked, there came the sound of his dragging feet across the floor. When he got to the bar, he turned. He sighed, and the last bit of a vanishing smile played over his face.

"Yep, it's my day. Yep." He turned slowly. His hand caught the neck of a bottle that was there. The whisky spilled over the bar as he poured. His hand clutched the glass. He raised it slowly:

"To the old days, gents. To the

days of Marshal Bad-luck Fallon, and to the Galloping Ghost, and to Belle, who was perty as a picture. She had kinda reddish hair, and eyes as tender as——”

They all stood still and looked at him, the Ghost with a hole in his chest. His head sank forward. He tried to jerk it back, but he couldn't. He drew up his hand. His quivering lips touched the glass of liquor he held. As he lowered it, he said in a husky whisper.

“She never forgot—never. An' no hard feelin's, boys. I learned all I want to know. Good luck, Bret. I'm trailin' along with Carros. We always were together, me an' Carros. No hard feelin's——”

His hand relaxed. The glass fell and shattered. There was a dull thud as his body struck the floor. They knew he was dead.

And so the Galloping Ghost played his last hand. He lay upon the floor of the bar, his face turned toward the east, where lay Santa Ana, and where a little pock-marked Mexican had once plied his trade, a little, fat Mexican who had once been called the Shadow.

Barbara raised her arms from Bret and knelt upon the floor.

“He's dead!” she gasped.

It wasn't until then that there came a sound from the wall at one side of the bar. When their eyes turned, they fell upon Ed Fallon. His legs were stretched out awkwardly, bracing his back against the wall.

“He said the truth. Carros told me he plugged my old man.”

His mouth closed. His eyes trailed

around over those who stood before him. Then he fell over on one side. He, too, grew still, because the slug of a .45 sometimes makes holes that men never get over.

Those were the two that were killed that morning, along with Gill, who lay in the street. The posse took out Fallon's body, but they left the Ghost behind. People came out of their houses in Paradise and crowded in the streets between Philips's store and Hansen's Bar.

“Hansen, he was the Galloping Ghost,” they said to one another in awed tones. “Hansen—it was Hansen.”

One of them said: “Why, I knowed that all along.”

Because that's the way people were in Paradise, down by the Rio. They never could have known unless he'd said so himself. But that was what they said out in the street that morning, while inside the Galloping Ghost lay upon the floor in front of the bar. On one side of him knelt Barbara, and on the other was Bret.

“Look—look,” said Bret.

He pointed to the hand of the Ghost. Clutched in it was a lace handkerchief!

Tears rolled down Barbara's cheeks. Bret took her hand, and their eyes met. And in that single glance they knew their future would forever be together. He drew her to him and held her in his arms. And as they stood there, Barbara and Bret, they felt the undeniable presence of the Galloping Ghost, and Carros the Shadow, and Belle, who was “as perty as a picture.”

A New Serial Begins in Next Week's Issue,
“THE TOUGH TENDERFOOT,” by MAX BRAND.



WHITE FANGS

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

Author of "Grass Hogs," etc.

SIMULTANEOUSLY with the closing of the trap's steel jaws, the timber wolf leaped high into the air.

Reaching the limit of the drag chain, it was jerked back cruelly into the snow. Immediately it twisted around, and its long, white fangs snapped viciously at the inanimate thing of steel that was causing pain to its hind leg.

Finding that of no avail to effect its freedom, the wolf did what all trapped animals try to do. It ran. But its progress was short-lived. The trap drag, intended for just that purpose, caught securely in a nearby bush.

Then that cunning instinct, for which the timber wolf is renowned, predominated. It lay perfectly quiet, save for an occasional backward twist to lick the trapped leg, crouched down behind the bush, its fiery red eyes searching the timber, its tongue lolling from its mouth because of the agony it now stoically endured.

And, presently, along came Jean Renaud on his snowshoes, making the rounds of his trap line. An unholy light came into his eyes when he caught sight of the wolf, and he tilted back his head and laughed long and loud.

"Ha-ha, *mon bravel!*" he roared.

"So I have at last caught *le loup*, the wolf! W'at luck! Now we shall see w'at we shall see, no?"

Renaud went to work with thoroughness and dispatch, which proved beyond any doubt that he had been expecting this thing to happen for some time. He jerked out his hunting knife and cut a long willow. To its tip he fashioned a running noose of wire. Then he produced a strip of adhesive tape and a length of stout cord.

CAUTIOUSLY he approached the huge wolf, with the willow held out in front of him, the wire noose dangling. The trapped animal bared its fangs, snarled, and leaped for his throat, only to be yanked back again when it reached the limit of the drag chain.

"Gently, *mon loup*," Renaud said teasingly. "Do not, I beg of you, break ze hin' leg. Just be nize wolf."

Nearer and nearer came the man and the noose, and twice more the pain-crazed beast lunged savagely. Then, like a flash, the noose fell, settled about the wolf's neck, and was jerked tight.

There followed a short snarl, a quick indrawn, rasping breath, and then a flurry of snow as the wolf's powerful forepaws thrashed out in a frantic effort to free its throat of the constricting wire. But Renaud lay back on the willow mightily, laughing raucously, and the struggle came to an abrupt end by the animal crumpling up on its side.

Instantly Renaud dropped the willow and flung himself on the choking animal. One hand closed over the wide-open jaws, and the other taped them shut. Another quick movement secured the three free legs, and still another hog tied

them securely. The releasing of the trapped leg from the steel jaws followed.

Then Renaud slipped the wire noose from the wolf's head and rose to his feet. He brushed the snow from his mackinaw while watching the captive suck air into its tortured lungs through its nostrils.

With the return of its breath, the wolf began to struggle. However, with only one injured leg free, and with its jaws taped shut, it could do little more than roll over and over. Renaud roared with laughter at its antics, and his laughter echoed strangely in that lonely wilderness of timber and snow.

"W'at a wolf!" he kept repeating between spasms of laughter.

And he was right. Never in all his trapping experience had he seen such a huge and perfect specimen. Its head was big, also, and its bulging jaw muscles and thick neck bespoke terrific power and certain death to man or animal if either encountered a slash from those white fangs, only the tips of which now peeped from beneath the taped lips.

But Renaud wasted no more time in watching the wolf's futile struggles or in admiring its size and suggested power. He bent low over it and examined the injured leg, taking it in his hands and flexing the joint back and forth.

"Not broke," he finally muttered, and there was a note of great relief in his voice. "A week or so and ze leg will be all right again. And then this spring——"

The sentence was cut short by a grunt as he grabbed the wolf's bound legs and heaved it to his shoulders. His laughter bellowed out afresh when he felt the wolf's body quiver at the touch of a human hand.

"Why so afraid, *mon brave?*" the trapper said. "I tak' you to good home and feed you *bon*. No more you chase ze deer and rabbit. From now on, you live zee life of—w'at you call her?—Riley. Yeah, that's ze name, no? And then——"

He started away with his strange burden, singing a gay song of the *voyageurs* at the top of his lungs, until he reached his cabin. At the rear of it, dug out of the side of the hill, was a cellar in which he stored traps and odds and ends.

He unfastened the heavy door, entered, and dumped his burden on the dirt floor. Then he struck a match and lighted a candle. As the flame brightened, it revealed a strange object. In the center of the cellar stood a cage fashioned out of an old iron bedstead and cunningly interlaced with barbed wire. It was a crude affair, but amply strong and serviceable for the purpose for which it was intended. At one end was a hinged door.

THROUGH this Renaud pushed the wolf, and then jerked the cord from its feet and dropped the hinged door with one quick motion. Free again, the beast bounded to its feet and stood there a moment regarding the trapper with those fiery red eyes that glowed with the light of murder and hatred. An attempt to snarl reminded it of the tape around its jaws. Instantly it clawed at it with its forepaws and soon ripped it off.

Its hackle raised up, and in spite of the injured leg, it sprang at the man. But the iron frame and interlaced wire of the cage flung it back in a heap. Nevertheless, time and again it leaped, suffering the same defeat each time, while Renaud howled with mirth. Only when it was almost exhausted and the barbs

on the wire had taken gory toll of its mouth did it abandon its attempts to kill its archenemy—man.

"Easy, take it easy," Renaud cried, fearful of permanent injury to that hind leg. "Save your strength and do not waste her on that so beautiful cage. By and by, I show you somet'ing better to exercise them pretty white fangs on, no?"

Renaud finally went out, closing and carefully locking the door. But before entering his cabin, he stood gazing down at the distant valley, to where several specks stood out clearly against the background of white. And now the same light of hate and murder burned in his eyes that he had seen burning a moment ago in the eyes of the captive wolf. Those small objects he was looking at were the ranch house and out-buildings of Tom Nelson's sheep ranch.

The trapping of the timber wolf had been the first and most important part of a plan of revenge that had formed in Jean Renaud's twisted brain months before. It was a plan to get even with the man who had given him a sound shrashing instead of sending him to prison for years.

Renaud was a trapper, but one with a habit of squandering the proceeds of an entire winter's catch in a few nights in the nearest settlement. The result was that he had to look for work during the spring, summer, and early fall when pelts were not prime. Being lazy, he followed the line of least resistance, securing work at anything that required little physical exertion.

On that account, sheep herding had appealed to him, and Tom Nelson had hired him that spring. However, with wool and mutton bringing low prices, Tom could af-

ford to pay him only small wages, but with the promise to raise them if the market improved.

Always a schemer, Renaud had finally figured out that, unless he stayed with the job until late in the winter, long after the trapping season had opened in the mountains, he would not be able to save money enough to grubstake himself on the trap line.

So, during the late spring, when prospectors began coming through on their way to the mountains, a plan to acquire the money for this grubstake, thus allowing him to start trapping on time, suddenly presented itself.

Invariably these men camped with the herder, availing themselves of his companionship and the opportunity to rest their pack horses. To them Renaud sold the meat of slaughtered sheep, representing himself as their owner. At first it had been an easy matter for him, when Tom Nelson drove out to the sheep camp with supplies, to show him the slashed pelts and tell him how a wolf had attacked the herd.

But Tom Nelson, being an experienced rancher and not a fool, had finally become suspicious because of the frequency of those wolf raids, and he had laid for Jean Renaud, catching him red-handed. A sound thrashing had resulted, and Renaud had left his assailant with dire threats of revenge.

And to make matters still worse, Renaud had been forced to seek other employment, in order to save money enough for the winter's grubstake on the trap line. He had obtained it with the forest service, fighting summer fires, cutting trails, building roads, and plowing fire guards—the hardest kind of labor. Every stroke of pick, mattock, or ax had only served to intensify that

desire for revenge that was eating into the black heart of him.

Nevertheless, he had found time to carry off an old iron bedstead and some barbed wire, which he had stolen from the forestry camp, to his own cabin, and had constructed the cage that now held the great timber wolf captive. But the time he had completed it, snow was flying, and he had quit his job and set out for his trap line.

NOW he was impatient for spring in order to carry out the last of his plan, which was to deal a blow at Tom Nelson that would break him in his present financially weakened condition. The caged wolf, when the time came, was to be released to work havoc among the sheep.

Toward this end Renaud worked with fiendish cruelty and cunning. For days, he would be absent on the trap line, and when he returned, he invariably brought back a rabbit from his snares. This he cut up and laid just beyond the cage, where the starving wolf could see it but not reach it. Then when the beast had almost beaten itself insane against the barrier of iron and wire, in an attempt to assuage its hunger, Renaud would feed it only a little of the meat.

His entrance into the cellar, therefore, was the signal for the wolf to leap snarling at him. Its hatred of him was so intense that it completely eclipsed all fear of that barrier of wire that bristled with sharp barbs and which continually flung it back in a heap after each assault.

Once, however, the trapper grew careless in his teasing, and those long, sharp fangs stripped his finger to the bone—a hint of what would surely happen to his throat if that

barrier ever broke under the impact of the wolf's wild lunges.

And so, kept in a half-starved state, the wolf lost much of its former weight, and became gaunt, which was exactly what Renaud had planned should happen. To have turned out a well-fed killer in the spring to prey on a herd of sheep would have been to defeat the very object of his all-consuming desire for revenge.

At last a chinook howled down from the crest of the mountains, and the snow melted before the blast of its warm breath. Spring had come, and so had the time for Renaud's revenge.

Yet Renaud was far too foxy to hurry matters now and make a fatal mistake. Instead, he went back along the trap line and collected all his traps. Then he took a telescope from his pack and, day after day, scanned the Nelson ranch below until he saw the band of sheep being herded away from winter quarters toward the foothills.

Even then he was not quite satisfied, and went down into the foothills, where he would be closer to the sheep, and again brought the telescope into play.

"It's him!" he cried suddenly, and hurried back to his cabin.

The "him" was Tom Nelson himself, herding his own sheep because financial conditions would not allow of his hiring a herder. This Renaud had instantly divined and was now gloating over as he raced back.

The alarm clock on the cabin table warned the trapper that it was almost noon, the hour when Tom Nelson would go into his camp wagon to prepare a meal. Accordingly, Renaud worked feverishly. Taking a long rope, he fastened one end to the catch on the hinged door of the cage, left the cellar door open,

and climbed to the roof of the cabin, carrying the other end of the rope with him.

Once again he scanned the herd below through his telescope. Presently he saw Tom Nelson start toward the camp wagon.

"Now!" Renaud cried, and yanked the rope.

WITH eyes turned eagerly toward the door of the cellar, the trapper waited. Suddenly out of the doorway shot a streak of gray—the gaunt timber wolf. It paused just outside for a moment, blinking in the strong light it had been deprived of so long, scenting the breeze.

Then it caught sight of Renaud on the cabin roof. It cleared the intervening space in a couple of leaps and stood on its hind legs with its forepaws scratching for a foothold on the log wall and looking upward with eyes that burned with murderous intent. Finally it dropped back on all fours, retreated a few paces, and leaped high, snarling.

Renaud's ironic laughter rang out. "Ah, *mon brave loup*, how you love me, no?" he shrilled. "Now listen to Jean Renaud. Down below, there, is meat—ver' juicy, fresh red meat. It is all yours, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Soon the wolf paused in its frantic attempts to get at the man, and again sniffed the breeze. This time to its supersensitive nostrils was wafted the scent of its favorite prey—sheep. The next second it was off like a flash at a fast, mile-eating lope, headed for Tom Nelson's herd of woolies.

"*Au revoir, mon brave,*" Renaud called after the beast. "You will fill up on nize fresh sheeps, then go back to the timber, and we shall meet no more. Ah, *oui*. I'm ver'

sorry. W'at a gentle house pet you would have made, I t'ink not, yes?"

Into the foothills descended the huge wolf, and as it ran, the scent of sheep became more and more pronounced, and it increased its speed, eager once again to taste warm blood.

And presently it reached the brush land where the sheep grazed. There instinct halted it, caused it to crouch and to reconnoiter, for it had again caught the scent of its deadliest enemy—man.

After a time, certain that no human was near, it came out from behind a bush just in time to meet the rush of Tom Nelson's faithful shepherd dog.

They met with a snarl of hate. One slash of the wolf's fangs and the dog lay over on its side, dead. And now the taste of warm fresh blood was in the beast's mouth, the lust to kill once again rekindled in its savage heart.

Of all animals that prey on others, the wolf is in a class by itself. It kills for the sheer love of killing. It stops only to satisfy its hunger when it is exhausted from killing or because there is nothing more to kill. Then and then only will it eat.

So in among the unsuspecting sheep darted the great gray wolf, slashing right and left with the speed of light. Sheep fell to the ground in the throes of death, their throats slit as if by a razor, or with their hind legs hamstrung.

Alarm quickly spread to the rest of the herd, and, true to habit, they began to pile up, smothering to death the less fortunate beneath that pyramid of flesh and fleece. And into that pile tore the gaunt wolf, slashing, always slashing.

The terror-stricken bleating of the sheep was the first intimation Tom Nelson had that all was not well.

He grabbed his rifle, parted the canvas flaps of the camp wagon, and jumped out. Astounded at the moment because of the havoc he saw being wrought among his herd, he seemed turned to stone. Sheep carcasses strewed the ground all around, and still more lay at the foot of that pile that was constantly growing higher.

For just a second, he caught sight of the sheep killer. Letting out a roar of rage, he ran toward it. The wolf saw him coming and paused from its gruesome task, its hackle stiff and straight, its crimsoned fangs bared. From deep down in its throat issued a snarl of open defiance, of age-long hatred.

STILL on the run, Tom Nelson snapped the rifle to his shoulder and fired, but with poor aim. Instead of hitting the wolf, the bullet only added another sheep to the already long list of dead.

"A ver' cleveair shot, no?" Jean Renaud chuckled derisively from his safety perch on the roof of the cabin, where he was watching the scene of slaughter through his telescope.

But the next moment he held his breath as he saw Tom again raise the rifle and fire.

"Ah, that's bettair." Renaud laughed, watching the wolf flinch, then turn and make off at terrific speed.

Again and again he saw smoke issue from the barrel of the rifle as Tom pumped the magazine, but only one of the bullets reached its target, bowling the wolf head over heels. However, it was on its feet again almost instantly, running like the wind, and gained the shelter of a near-by ravine before the rancher could reload.

"Well, that's that." Renaud

shrugged. "That wolf she one big killer, no? Mebbe she go off now somew'eres and die in ze timber, I hope."

Satisfied now that his diabolical plan of revenge had succeeded, the trapper climbed down from the roof and entered the cabin. His first thought was for his own safety. For he knew the kind of man Tom Nelson was; knew that he would track down that wounded wolf until he caught up with it and killed it or else found its dead body.

Renaud knew, too, that the search for the wolf might bring the rancher to his cabin. Since there had been no love lost between them in the past, Tom would naturally be suspicious when he saw the man whom he had caught stealing from him before; would undoubtedly insist on searching the premises. The trapper had no desire to be there then, nor did he intend to leave behind evidences of his guilt. So he began to pack up his things.

The winter's catch of pelts was his first concern, the value of which was far in excess of the cost of the damage his plan of revenge had caused Tom Nelson. The pile of pelts was high, for the trapping had been good. Renaud's only regret was that the hide of the big gray wolf was not with the rest, not so much because of its value as because of the bounty it would have brought at the county seat.

"But you ought to be ver' well satisfied, Jean Renaud," the trapper muttered, "for *le loup* she sure fix Monsieur Tom Nelson."

It required time to pack the pelts and remove the greenest from the wooden stretchers. With that

accomplished, Renaud turned his attention to his personal effects, which were few indeed, but which required more time to sort over and pack.

"And now for ze cage," he mumbled.

He was clever enough to know that all evidence of it ever having existed must be either destroyed or carefully cached. A greenhorn might not understand the significance of that contrivance of iron and wire, but a rancher most certainly would.

So Jean Renaud picked up a short steel bar and a shovel and went outside. A few strides brought him to the door of the cellar. It was as dark inside as the mouth of the wolf that had so lately been imprisoned in it, but the trapper stepped over the threshold with confidence.

And then, from out that dark void, and straight at his throat, shot a gray streak. There followed the click of sharp fangs and a strangled, gurgling human cry of pain and terror; then silence. Back across the threshold reeled Jean Renaud with his life's blood streaming from his throat as he sank to the ground.

Over the body leaped the great wolf, and slowly loped away toward the timber, pausing occasionally to lick the bullet wound in its side.

Thus there had been but one flaw in Jean Renaud's plan of revenge. He had entirely overlooked the fact that the cellar might have appealed to the wolf's instinct as a safe haven in which to rest until it recovered from the shock of its wound and proceeded to escape its bitterest enemy, man, and return to the pack.

Coming Next Week, "BAD JAKE—AND WORSE,"
by ROLAND KREBS.

LAMP IN THE DESERT

By ROBERT J.
HORTON

Author of "The Bullet Ring," etc.



FOR the first time in three long, weary weeks, Paddy Orville's burros needed no pommeling as they proceeded across the hot desert, and Paddy could save his breath instead of spending it swearing at them. Indeed, Paddy needed his breath to keep pace with his pack animals now that they were nearing home after an absence of six months.

Eureka lay ahead, and Paddy could almost see the old mining town with dusty pepper trees feathering over its drab buildings and Spider range crawling about it. Paddy's old legs gained strength as he followed his burros toward water and food and rest. His prospecting trip had yielded nothing except hard work, but he trudged along with a gleam in his misty blue eyes, eager

and expectant. He had heard a rumor.

Sure enough, when Paddy caught his first clear glimpse of the town, he cried out in his high-pitched voice and tried to run. It was true there had been a strike in Eureka! The vague rumor which had reached Paddy's ears was confirmed by the dazzling white flecks about the weather-beaten buildings. These were tents and signified there were more people in Eureka than the cabins and hotel could accommodate. Only a strike could bring people to revive the old camp.

He hurried on, talking to himself after the fashion of veteran prospectors, tugging at the white fringe of hair around his face and chin—an undersized man of uncertain age, but with the wrinkles and lines that make their mark at sixty.

There still was a greater surprise in store for the old desert prospector. Eureka had been a silver camp, and Paddy had roamed hundreds of miles in search of gold. Now, when he drove his burros into town, he learned that it was gold which had started the rush and made Eureka a roaring, booming camp with a population of six or seven thousand in a week. He merely grinned at the trick the precious metal had played him.

It was noon when Paddy reached town, and by sundown the gold fever was raging in his veins. He had left Eureka empty, almost, six months ago, with the mines shut down, the hotel and all but a few cabins and stores vacant—a ghost town. Now it was teeming with activity; every shelter was crowded, its short main street jammed. He proposed to go about the business of opening a prospect in the Spider hills methodically. The strike had been made in white quartz, and hard-rock mining was to Paddy's liking.

HE stood in the door of his cabin and watched the lights break out as the twilight fell swiftly over the town below. He had wandered for years in search of a boom in its inception, and here at last was one at his own front yard!

A man came scrambling up the gentle slope. Paddy recognized "Teek" French instantly. Teek was another ancient of the desert who had kept his headquarters in Eureka after the camp had died. He, too, had heard a rumor and had hurried back. These two were glad to see each other, and the talk flew thick and fast between them as Paddy lighted the bracket lamp in the cabin.

"I'm going to howl like a wolf and shake my rattles to-night!" Teek cackled, the wrinkles in his face gathering into rosettes of fine, intricate lines as he peered at Paddy out of feverish eyes.

"You mean you're going to get drunk, that's the size of it," Paddy said in disapproval, rubbing the white fringe of whiskers about his face. This thin fringe gave him something of the look of an old chimpanzee.

"What difference does it make?" Teek retorted defiantly. "But I ain't going to spend much. I've got eleven silver dollars that'll have to see me through. There are plenty of coasters here, and drinks are circulating like water in a cradle. I aim to get my share."

Paddy frowned in further disapproval at mention of the cradle; for Teek went in for placers, and Paddy thought they were a waste of time.

"It's too hot to drink hard liquor," Paddy declared firmly. "And I can see you sticking to an eleven-dollar outlay—if you've got a bigger stake. Trouble with you soft-dirt fellers is that you don't have to work hard enough for what you get."

This precipitated an argument about the merits of soft and hard-rock mining. If the two had ever been able to agree, they would have been partners long since.

Night came and threw its canopy of yellow stars above the seething desert. It was hot. The hoarse sounds of wassail floated up from the town. Teek French heard, and his eyes lighted with eagerness.

"I'm going down," he announced, drawing a heavy pouch from inside his shirt. "Paddy, I wish you'd keep this for me so's I can't spend any of it. I don't want to show it,

anyway. Keep it in your shirt. Don't hide it here for somebody might have follered me. You don't drink, and I can trust you. Want a peek?"

His voice and manner betrayed excitement as he put the pouch on the table and untied its buckskin thong. He held the yawning poke under the light, and Paddy caught the gleam of dust and grains of gold.

"Where'd you get it?" Paddy blurted in astonishment.

"I got it a speck at a time by some of that hard work you was talking about," Teek cackled, tying up the pouch and darting a swift glance at the open doorway. "Stow it away and forget it till I ask for it—and, whatever you do, don't give it to me if I'm drinking." He scowled his emphasis.

Paddy took charge of the gold with a dubious look.

"I'll see you sober up to-morrow and take it back," he said, "for I don't want to be packing another man's poke when I'm working."

Teek French had stepped to the door and turned.

"I heard Bull Trent was in town," he squeaked. "He always aims to hit a boom camp and leave it before the law gets in."

Paddy's hairless brows went up in a funny expression.

"Is *that* why you wanted me to pack your cleanings?" he demanded. "That cutthroat goes after bigger game than a five-dollar-a-day placer washout."

"There's some small nuggets in that poke," Teek flared. "I reckon Trent wouldn't bother an old desert rat like me. I just mentioned him as news."

"It won't be news till he kills somebody," Paddy grumbled.

Teek turned to go.

"Black Wells has dried up," he flung back over his shoulder. "I guess that's news."

"You been over there?" Paddy asked in surprise. Black Wells was a water hole across the Spiders in a basalt district where no mineral ever had been found.

"How would I know what I do if I hadn't been there?" Teek retorted. "Nobody told me. See you later, if you come down."

He went out, leaving Paddy staring and wondering if his old friend had made a find in hitherto barren territory. Perspectives were all taking on a golden hue. Paddy was rather bewildered, and he brushed his watery eyes with a sleeve. The sound coming up from town was increasing in volume. Miners and prospectors would be in the minority among these first arrivals. The majority would be gamblers, camp followers, tin-horns, and a sprinkling of outlaws and gunmen. Of these last, "Bull" Trent would be the worst, of course. But such dangerous denizens of the desert had never bothered old Paddy Orville.

He looked down at his faded overalls and his worn boots. From a box under his bunk he got out a better pair of boots and put them on. His eyes caught sight of a gun belt and two old .44s in the box. In a spirit of devil-may-care he buckled the belt with the two holstered weapons about his slim waist. It would keep Teek's poke snug inside his shirt.

"Sort of dresses me up," he said to himself with a grin.

Then he put on a blue denim jacket and his best hat. He put out the light, closed and locked the door as he went out. The lights twinkled a welcome below as he started down to town.

THE Silver King had been Eureka's foremost saloon and gambling establishment in the town's former heyday. In the past few days it had been reopened with fresh stocks of fiery refreshments hauled in from Florence and gaming tables and devices repaired and put in order. It had been renamed the Gold King, and Mike Foster, its former proprietor, had returned. Sawdust had been sprinkled on the floor, and there still were piles of drills, picks, shovels, and other mining tools along the wall opposite the bar and at the rear where they had been left or stored. It was a big, barnlike place and this night it was packed with a mixed crowd which drank and gambled, cursed and shouted and sang with a vehemence that almost made the hanging lamps sway in the floating cloud of smoke.

Chief among those participating in this rough celebration was a giant of a man who had taken his station at the center of the long bar and was surrounded by a motley crew none of whom bore the appearance of miner or prospector. This huge, beefy, red-faced man, with cold gray eyes and a stubble of rusty beard, was Bull Trent, gunman, outlaw, and killer, who wore two guns to back his formidable reputation. Those who didn't recognize him or know him very soon learned who he was, and Mike Foster kept a worried eye on him and catered to his bellowed orders.

Mike didn't want trouble in his place before the sheriff got in from a business trip to Los Angeles to lay down the rules for Eureka on the spot. He was due any day now. Mike's huge safe was being used as a bank, and Bull Trent was a first-class bank bandit as well as a stage robber. But Trent had not once

tipped his hand in the three days he had been there—and he had spent considerable money while exposing huge rolls of bills.

Trent seemed to be in his element this night. His eyes were a fiery red, and his face was flushed from three nights of steady drinking and fitful sleep by day in the terrific heat. Ordinarily this season of the year found him in the mountains to northward, away from the desert inferno. But he was roaring orders for drinks and coarse jokes in a husky voice and to all appearances enjoying himself. His big guns bumped against the bar, and when he slapped a man on the back, he sometimes knocked him over; always staggered him. He was an arrogant and ruthless bully, but unusual in that he could back up any move with the menace of his draw and the uncanny accuracy of his aim. He had the camp stopped, as the saying went.

"Hey, Mike, what's that shiny thing in that cash box over there?" Trent asked the proprietor in his loud voice.

"Eh?" Mike's brow wrinkled in a frown. The object Trent had seen had been accidentally dropped in the box in the private office and carried out to the back bar.

"That's the star for the constable out here," Mike said with a wry grin. He had received the badge from the sheriff's office the day before.

"Lemme see it," Trent commanded, holding out his huge right hand.

Mike passed over the star with a shrug. Trent had to be humored.

"Who's the constable?" the outlaw asked, drawing back his lips in a mirthless grin as he inspected the badge.

"Haven't got one yet," Mike re-

plied. "They sent that over from the county seat with a letter saying we'd have to get together and appoint one till the sheriff could get here."

Trent's grin was genuine now. "Do you hear that, boys?" he roared. "We've got to appoint a law constable for Eureka! Here's his badge that the sheriff sent over for him to wear." He held the glittering star aloft until every eye was focused on it. "Who wants to be constable?"

THERE was an outburst of laughter at this which seemed to signify that no one wished to be constable with Bull Trent around rampaging.

"Why don't *you* take it, Bull?" Mike Foster suggested amicably.

Trent shot a piercing glance at him. "You know better than that," he snapped out. "I'm just here on vacation, unless I see a good thing to invest in." His voice was hard as ice.

"My little joke," Mike apologized with a wave of his hand. It would not do to make Trent angry. "I'll buy a round, since you turned my joke back on me." He signaled the bartenders.

This placated the outlaw who again faced the crowd with his back to the bar.

"C'mon, boys; somebody volunteer," he shouted, although the room was quiet enough for his ordinary voice to be heard. "We've gotta have a constable to wear this star. Nominate somebody, one of you."

"Here's one!" called a laughing voice at the upper end of the bar.

Bull Trent, Mike, and the others looked toward the front entrance where the crowd had broken away from a diminutive figure under a

big hat with two ancient .44s slung at either hip. It was old Paddy, his eyes bright and his face red within its ring of white fringe. Startled and wondering what it was all about, Paddy presented a ludicrous spectacle. A big laugh went up from the crowd.

"Why, sure enough!" Bull Trent roared to the delight of the throng. "Bring him here!" He stepped forward as the crowd opened an aisle through its ranks and grasped Paddy by an arm when he was pushed along from behind.

"What's your name, Fuzzy-face?"

"Paddy Orville," the old prospector shrilled. "You let me alone, Bull Trent. I ain't bothering nobody." Paddy looked about at the grinning faces apprehensively.

"Now isn't that gratitude, men?" Trent boomed, jerking Paddy to the bar. "Here's a man that's been nominated for a high office, and he snarls and snaps and says to leave him alone." He raised his hands. "Don't you pull those guns on me, Fuzzy!"

The crowd roared at the spectacle of the notorious gunman holding his hands high and looking down at the wizened prospector with mocking fear in his eyes. Paddy's face grew redder. He was being made fun of, and it rankled. This was really his home camp although all the men were strangers except Mike Foster. He looked appealingly at Mike, but the proprietor did not see fit to interfere.

"What—what do you want?" Paddy asked in his high-pitched voice.

"We want you to be constable of Eureka," Trent thundered, holding the star-shaped badge before Paddy's astonished eyes. "The sheriff wants a constable here, and you've been nominated for the

office." He looked around at the grinning crowd. "Are there any more nominations?"

"No—*no!*" shouted a hundred voices.

"Do you hear that?" Trent demanded. "It's unanimous! Why, you're all heeled and ready to go to work. How about it, boys? Do we want a two-gun constable?"

There was a roar of approval as the bully led them on.

"I'm too old!" Paddy cried shrilly. "I don't want to be——"

His words were cut off as Bull Trent stooped suddenly, scooped him up, and slammed him down in a sitting posture on the bar while the spectators howled with brutish glee. There would be plenty of drinks after this; for mean fun always put Trent in a buying mood. Mike Foster went into his private office, his lips tightly compressed.

"Now, boys," Trent began, "how many——"

He paused as a hand gripped his lower arm, then, as he looked into a pair of small, fiery eyes, a rasping voice jarred on his ears.

"You let Paddy alone! Pick somebody your size, you horned toad of a bully!"

"Teek, go away!" Paddy commanded as Trent's eyes narrowed. It was plain to be seen that Teek French had been celebrating too well already, although he was serious in his effort to save Paddy from being the butt of Trent's cruel joke.

Trent thrust his right hand, palm outward, into Teek's face and pushed him back into the crowd which swallowed him.

"I reckon that'll be your first job—taking care of that fellow," Trent jeered at Paddy. "Boys, all who want Fuzzy-face, here, for constable say aye."

The great shout of the affirmative chorus fairly rocked the room.

"You hear that?" Trent roared in Paddy's ears. "You're elected! Now I'm going to decorate you with your badge of office." While the crowd yelled and slapped each other on the back, he pinned the star on Paddy's jacket.

PADDY'S eyes had a glint in them. Anger had driven away his resentment. For the first time in a score of hard years, he was fighting mad. But he was helpless. He didn't even know if his guns were loaded; and if they were, it would be futile to attempt to draw down on Trent.

The outlaw was holding a glass of whisky out to him.

"We're drinking to your success," Trent told him. "Boys, here's to Fuzzy-face, Eureka's new constable."

Glasses were tilted amid laughter and nudges on the part of the crowd. Then came a second interruption.

"Don't drink it, Paddy—*don't drink it!*"

But Paddy had decided to take the unwanted drink and get the whole business over with as quickly as possible so he could get away.

Teek French had managed to squirm back through the throng and now he made a futile grab for Paddy's glass.

Trent's face darkened, and his right hand moved with incredible swiftness as he drew his gun. The weapon's heavy barrel cracked against Teek's wrist, shattering the bone. Teek cried out in pain, and this merely seemed to infuriate the bully whose mean fun was being disturbed. He sheathed his gun and picked the smaller man up as the crowd broke away. Using all of his great strength, Trent hurled Teek

clear across the room where the prospector fell on his head on a pile of steel drills.

A hush came over the room, and Mike Foster, standing in the door of his office, drew a quick breath. He had seen the red signal of the killer flash in Bull Trent's eyes. Paddy was staring over the heads of the crowd from his higher position on the bar and he saw his friend lying motionless on the hard steel.

"Does anybody else want to butt in here?" Trent demanded savagely.

There was no answer to this, and then the silence was broken when some one dared to laugh. As the talk and chuckles broke out again, Trent scowled at Paddy Orville, sitting in that foolish posture atop the bar.

"Come off there!" Trent barked, grasping Paddy about the waist and sweeping him to the floor. The bully's mood had changed.

Paddy straightened, and his eyes gleamed as he caught the reflection of the star he wore in the mirror above the back bar.

"I'm going to buy a drink," he announced, thrusting his hands beneath his jacket and inside his shirt where they fumbled with something. "But I'm not going to take one myself because the rules don't allow it."

While those about them laughed at this, Bull Trent glowered.

"You'll drink with the rest of us, funny-face," he snapped.

Then Paddy's right hand came out from beneath his jacket and darted above the bar where he opened it slowly.

A gasp came from the crowd. Trent's eyes widened. Mike Foster walked down behind the bar, and silence descended upon those who watched.

From Paddy's partly opened fist a golden stream scarcely larger than

that which filters in an hour glass rained upon the bar—dust, grains, and a few small nuggets of pure gold!

As the little pile of gleaming gold formed upon the bar, men crowded to see it and stared in fascination. It was the first display of the precious metal they had seen in Eureka free of quartz. It was native gold!

"He's found a pocket!" a spectator cried hoarsely.

Paddy's hand opened above the little pile, and he dusted his palm off. Then he slipped back and sidled through the crowd to where Teek French lay on the steel drills with blood oozing from a temple.

"Put this stuff into something," Bull Trent ordered the bartender, jerking a thumb at the gold. "I want it. I'll buy a round with cash."

Paddy found a man he knew to help him carry Teek out of the place. They took the badly wounded prospector to Paddy's cabin. Paddy closed and barred the door and went to work to stop the flow of blood from the deep gash in Teek's head. The yellow lamp-light struck silvery gleams from the star pinned to Paddy's jacket as he worked. There was no doctor in Eureka.

PADDY watched over his friend all night while Teek moaned and spoke a meaningless word occasionally. At dawn, when the camp was just awakening, Paddy went for help. Two men from the livery carried Teek to the storekeeper's house where the latter's wife could look after him. The promise of pay in gold dust sent a messenger for a doctor. Then Paddy went back to his cabin to get some needed sleep.

When he awoke, it was late afternoon. He went calmly about his chores and cooked a meal. After he had washed the dishes and put the cabin in order, he sat where he could see the path which led down the slope from his abode to town. He had hidden Teek's poke where he was certain it could not be found by any one except himself. He had asked that word be brought to him if Teek got worse. He had no intention of going to town unless he failed to have a visitor by nightfall. His eyes were sparkling expectantly.

When he thought of the way he had been made the butt of Trent's belittling joke the night before, Paddy puffed hard on his pipe, and his pale blue eyes grew cold as ice. He was a veteran of that district, although it was not to his credit that he had failed to find gold there. But, as usual, the gold-bearing quartz outcropping had been stumbled upon accidentally. He removed his constable's badge from his jacket and put it in a pocket.

It was fearfully hot. Beyond the drooping pepper trees, drab buildings, and glistening white tents of the town the yellow desert simmered and rolled in heat waves. But Paddy was used to the inferno. It was not the heat that gave him his serious expression this afternoon. And it was not altogether his angry resentment because of Bull Trent's unwarranted and cruel attack upon Teek French. No, Paddy's pride had been hurt.

The sun dropped behind the lava ramparts of Spider range, and the twilight crept over the desert. Still Paddy sat and waited. When it was almost dark, he lighted the lamp, turned it low, and took up a position in the doorway. He had hardly done so when a shadowy form loomed down the path. He

turned up the lamp and sat down at the table. Soon he heard footfalls on the hard ground. Then a man was at the door. Paddy looked up and swallowed hard. His visitor was Bull Trent!

"Hello Paddy," Trent greeted gruffly, stepping into the cabin.

"Humph," Paddy grunted. "Last night I was old Fuzzy-face." He looked put out but inside he felt jubilant. It was the sight of the free gold that had brought the outlaw to the cabin just as Paddy had expected. He noted that Trent didn't look as though he had been drinking during the day. But, for that matter, he hadn't been drunk the night before. Paddy's thin lips tightened.

"Oh, forget that," Trent said with a wave of his arm. "That was all in fun. But they elected you constable all right." He paused and looked at the prospector shrewdly. "Of course there isn't any money in it," he added.

"I wish there was," Paddy said wistfully.

"I saved this dust for you," Trent said quickly, producing a tobacco sack heavy with the gold Paddy had left on the bar. "No use in you spending that."

He put the sack on the table, and Paddy tossed it on a shelf.

"Did you find that around here?" Trent asked, sitting down on a bench by the table.

"I'm not saying," Paddy replied in a querulous voice.

"Oh, that's all right." Trent grinned with another gesture. "I know you prospectors don't like to say where you make your finds, but I know something else, too. That's why—one reason why—I came up here."

"What else is it you think you know?" Paddy asked coldly.

TRENT hitched the bench closer to the table. "I know you fellows usually need capital. You just said you wished there was money in being a dinky constable. Now if that gold came from a pocket, you need money for development—to open up a mine. You could probably raise it, but whoever put it up would want control, and sooner or later you'd be squeezed out unless——" He paused and lifted his brows significantly.

"Go on, Trent. I'd be squeezed out unless what?"

"Unless you had somebody in with you who didn't want control. I've got a straight proposition for you, Paddy, and I'm going to put it to you just that way—straight. Show me where this gold came from so's I'll know it's on the square, and I'll put up the money to work the mine. I won't stick around to bother you, either. I'll just let you go ahead and trust you to see that I get my share; and all I want is a third. That'll be enough if it turns out as rich as that sample."

Trent had spoken eagerly and now he flashed an avaricious look at the sack on the shelf where Paddy had tossed it.

"The place isn't around here close," Paddy complained.

"All the better!" Trent exclaimed, his eyes glistening. He had a vision of another boom camp with himself in on the ground floor. As for the old desert rat in front of him—he almost gave himself away by smiling. He didn't know that Paddy Orville was reading the cunning in his eyes.

"Just how far away is it?" he asked, striving to make his voice casual.

"I wouldn't say—now," Paddy replied craftily. "It's a lamp in the desert, you might say."

"What do you mean by that?" Trent demanded with a puzzled frown.

"Gold shines on the desert where the sun can strike it, Trent."

"Oh, I see. So it isn't in these hills around here. It's out on the desert."

Trent's voice betrayed his eagerness again. He reached in a pocket and drew out a thick roll of bills. He carefully counted out ten twenty-dollar notes and put them on the table.

"There's two hundred dollars that I'll turn over to you to show you that I mean business," he said hoarsely. "I'll furnish you with a good horse. If there's any expense on the trip, I'll pay it. But I don't want any one else to know about this. Just you and me." He pushed the bills across the table, returned the roll to his pocket, and then wiped the sweat from his brow and face with a bandanna handkerchief.

Paddy pushed the bills back.

"I don't want anything in advance," he said in a cautious voice, "because I wouldn't tell you in advance where we were going." He peered intently at Trent, as if he were debating whether to accept his proposition or not.

"That's all right with me," Trent declared. Inwardly he was exultant. These old desert rats were all crazy. "You lead the way and when we're there, you tell me. That's fair enough, isn't it?" He leaned forward, tapping the table with a finger. "Now! When do we start?" He held his breath awaiting the answer.

Paddy didn't look at him; he wasn't thinking of him.

"We better start just before sunrise," Paddy said slowly, "so we can cross the Spider hills in daylight."

THE sun was climbing into a slate-blue sky above the eastern horizon. A haze hung over the distant desert, and already it was hot. The black lava hills of Spider range were bare with no living green thing in sight. There was no faintest breath of breeze for the air was as still as if it hung in a silent tomb.

Paddy was riding a stout bay horse up a defile of the Spiders. Behind him followed Trent on his regular mount. They had been in their saddles since the dark hour before dawn, climbing steadily up the steep trail. They carried two canteens of water each and food in a small pack secured to their saddles. They thought they had managed to leave town unobserved. This was once when Bull Trent didn't want any members of his small band along; not even his right-hand man, Benning. For Trent didn't intend to share his secret with *any* one. He had stayed in the Gold King resort almost all night but had drunk little. Paddy, on the other hand, had rested save for one hurried and unseen visit to town.

Paddy wore one gun, and this was for the sake of appearance. He knew he would never have a chance to use it in a clash with Trent. He was not fast enough on the draw. He realized there wasn't a man in Eureka who could match guns with Trent and win. And the outlaw had had men with him in town. Paddy suddenly was assailed by doubt and suspicion. Suppose Trent's men followed them! It was just possible that Trent had so arranged, thinking—as he certainly did think—that Paddy was leading him to another gold strike. But Paddy had not once said he had found the gold in Teek's poke; nor

had he definitely told Trent he would take him to where the gold had been found. But this was dangerous business, and Paddy knew it.

He looked back, and Trent waved a hand. The outlaw had been mopping his face. Paddy knew the debauch Trent had indulged in would tell on him fast. But he might sweat out the poison and be as fit as new after a rest. They would have little time for rest. Paddy stole another glance behind, but Trent was taking a drink of water from a canteen and didn't see him. Paddy's eyes gleamed brightly, and he pursed his lips as he again scanned the trail ahead.

Presently they rode out the head of the defile, and Paddy checked his horse. They were about to traverse a dangerous piece of trail, and Paddy searched it with a keen gaze to be sure there were no rocks in the path. The trail here looked as if it had been cut in the face of the cliff. It was just wide enough to permit a horse to pass. On the right was a sheer wall of rock. On the left the edge of the trail fell away in a precipice hundreds of feet deep. A single misstep by a horse would send it hurtling over the precipice.

Paddy dismounted and spoke to Trent.

"I don't know how sure-footed this horse is so I'm going to lead it. It's a long way to fall and a sudden stop over that drop. You want to be sure of your horse if you're going to ride this stretch."

"My horse is used to the mountains, but I'm not going to take a chance here," Trent growled. "I might get dizzy myself." He let himself down from the saddle.

"This is the worst stretch there is," said Paddy. "We're getting up toward the pass. We'll be out of the hills by sunset."

He started across, leading his horse. Trent let him get a few yards away; then he followed cautiously. Paddy thought it strange that he should think constantly of death while on this piece of trail this morning. He had crossed it many times without concern. Now he thought of Teek French tossing in fever and delirium back in town. Could Teek be dead? Paddy found himself loath to look over the edge of the precipice, whereas he usually stopped midway for a look when driving his burros across. He imagined Trent, suddenly taken with a dizzy spell, kneeling over for the big drop. The obsession amounted almost to a premonition. He was glad when they were finally across and in the shade of an overhanging outcropping of rock.

TRENT took a heavy pull at one of his canteens. Paddy unscrewed the cap of a water bottle and took three swallows. He was about to mount when a stone rattled on the other side of the dangerous strip of trail. Both he and Trent whirled about as a horse and rider came into view over there and pulled up.

Trent swore in a low, hoarse voice. Then he spoke in an undertone.

"That's one of the men who was with me. He must have seen us and followed. You ride on, and I'll send him back. He's no good nohow."

He fixed a fierce gaze on Paddy, and the prospector mounted and rode on.

But Paddy didn't ride far. He moved out of sight and that was all because a stealthy glance over his shoulder showed him Trent walking on the narrow ribbon of trail toward the horseman, beckoning to him. Paddy tied his reins to a sliver of

rock and crept back to where he could see. The horseman had ridden out on the trail, and Trent was confronting him afoot. They were talking; and now they raised their voices angrily so Paddy was able to hear what was said.

"I told you to stay in town till I got back, Benning," Trent was saying.

"Sure you did," the man addressed as Benning answered. "Stay in town while you sneaked off with Fuzzy-face and grabbed yourself a juicy claim as well as what gold he's got. I didn't tell the rest of the bunch, but you can't ditch *me* and take to mining, or juggling claims, or anything else. You might as well declare me in, seeing as it won't cost you anything."

"It'll cost *you* something if you don't go back and keep your tongue in your teeth when you get there!" Trent roared.

"I couldn't turn around here if I wanted to, you fool," Benning said hotly. His hand was close to his gun.

"Then come along where you *can* turn around!" Trent roared. But Trent seemed loath to turn his back to the other.

"Go ahead," Benning said. "I can't get off my horse here, either, and he's getting fidgety."

Trent swore a horrible oath. He began to sidle along the trail with his back to the rock wall, keeping an eye on Benning, his lips moving queerly. The left hind hoof of Benning's horse clicked and dipped on the edge of the precipice. Benning caught up his reins. In that winking instant of time Trent's hand darted in and straightened. Two shots rang out, and the horse went to its knees, toppled, and plunged over the precipice, flinging its rider far out into empty space.

A piercing, blood-curdling shriek came from the abyss. Then the trail was clear, save for Trent who leaned back against the rock wall, putting up his smoking gun.

With cold sweat pricking his skin, Paddy Orville stumbled back to where he had left his horse. He kicked his mount into a gallop as fast as possible. When it was necessary to slow the pace again to a walk, he calmed down. So Trent really was figuring on going into mining? With Trent and the other gone, the outlaws left in Eureka would doubtless start out to look for them, or quit town on their own.

This was just as well, Paddy thought grimly.

IT lacked an hour of sunset when Paddy and Trent rode down the last slope on the western border of the Spider hills. Ahead of them was spread the vast yellow desert, alive with heat devils—a yawning inferno, baking and blistering under a relentless sun. At a distance too far to compute, the hazy outlines of mountains swam in a blue mist.

Bull Trent took a drink from his second canteen and was amazed at the angle to which he had to tip it. His other canteen was empty. The water didn't seem to do him any good. He cursed himself now for having stopped in Eureka on his way north. He was soft—that was it. He had hit the raw liquor in town too hard. Benning's shriek still rang in his ears. He had told Paddy that Benning had shot at him when he turned his back, his horse had shied, and both horse and rider had plunged to death. *Any* explanation was good enough for that little desert rat. Paddy wouldn't have a chance to repeat it anyway after Trent had learned the location of the gold strike. Paddy's

foot would get caught in a stirrup, and his horse would bolt and do the rest!

"What did you say was the name of that water hole?" Trent called.

"Black Wells," Paddy answered for the twentieth time. "There's shade there." He didn't see fit to say that the shade consisted of a clump of palo verde. But there was more shade than water, for Teek French had said the hole was dry.

As they straightened out on the floor of the desert, it was like riding into a white-hot furnace. They were facing the setting sun, and it seemed an eternity before it dropped behind those distant mountains, splashing the skies with crimson.

"We'll make dry camp and eat something when it gets dark," Paddy called.

Trent answered him with an oath. He was in an ugly humor. His lips curled in a snarl when he spoke, and he literally spat his words. He swung his horse in close to Paddy's.

"Stick your hands out!" he commanded. "Ride those reins!"

Paddy put his hands out over the saddle horn, and Trent jerked the gun from his companion's holster. The outlaw spilled the .44 shells on the ground one by one as he rode. Then he thrust the empty weapon in his waist.

"I'll give it back to you when we get to where we're going."

"I might need that for a rattler or something," Paddy complained.

"You yell to me if you need any shooting done," Trent growled. He licked his lips and scowled as he saw Paddy take a generous drink of water. It seemed that he never had known the desert to be so blistering, blazing hot—and he didn't know this part of the desert at all.

They stopped when night fell and ate some food.

"We've got to keep going," Paddy said when they had finished.

"You sure you know your landmarks?" Trent asked.

"My landmarks are the stars to-night," Paddy replied gravely.

But they stopped to rest several times during the night and for quite a spell toward morning. Paddy looked after the horses and he managed to exchange one of his canteens half full of water for the empty canteen tied to Trent's saddle. He knew Trent would take his water when his own was gone. And when all the water was gone, so far as Trent knew, there would be water right on his own mount of which he would be in ignorance. It was the safest place for it. They gave the horses very little.

They finished breakfast as the sun came up. Trent was savage and silent. When the diminished packs were put back on the saddles, he turned to Paddy.

"How much water you got?" he demanded.

"I've got a little more than half in one canteen," Paddy answered. "How much have you got?"

"Mine are all empty," Trent snapped. "I just finished the second. I'll take charge of the water. Give it to me and take this empty." His eyes flashed fire as he tore the partly filled canteen from Paddy's hands. "You lied about the distance!" he accused. "If we run out of water, I'll leave you afoot!"

"Do you think you could find your way back?" Paddy asked calmly.

TRENT looked about. The Spider range had long since disappeared. The mountains to westward were too far away to go to for water. He didn't know the landmarks. Paddy was laying

his direction by some peak or notch, or more than one of them. Trent boiled with inward rage as he realized he was at Paddy's mercy.

"You steer us to that water hole or you won't go back *anywhere!*" he threatened.

"Then give *me* a swallow of water every time *you* take one," Paddy said coolly as he pulled himself into the saddle.

Trent announced at noon that the water was gone.

"We can make it to Black Wells all right," Paddy said cheerfully.

It was a horrible afternoon. A yellow fire seemed to be burning up the world. *Heat!* Trent nearly lost control of himself half a dozen times. He cursed and gritted his teeth and almost went to pieces. In this way he came close to wearing himself out. It was only Paddy's repeated assurances that they would reach Black Wells by sundown which kept the outlaw from losing his head. That shriek of Benning's—his death cry! It kept ringing in the killer's ears.

At sundown a blot appeared on the desert ahead. Paddy pointed to it, and Trent tried in vain to kick his horse into a steady gallop. But the blot marched toward them, took form, and the green clump of palo verde came in sight.

Now Paddy was struck with his first misgiving. Had Teek French been *sure* Black Wells was dry? Could the hole have filled in some way? He looked at Trent's bloated lips and bloodshot eyes. Dissipation had told quickly on him during the hard journey. He was on the point of collapse. Paddy kept back as they neared the water hole.

Trent threw himself from his horse and fell. He got up and staggered to the water hole. There he stopped with his arms out-

stretched, and a horrible croaking cry came from his throat. He turned, reeling.

"It's—it's *dry!* *It's dry!* It's——"

Red fire seemed to stream from his eyes, and Paddy slipped from his saddle as the outlaw jerked out his guns. The pistols barked, and bullets whined. The air was filled with lead, but it was all going wild. Trent seemed blinded by the ferocity of his rage and frustration. His curses became inarticulate as he emptied his weapons. Then he shook all over, dropped his guns, and fell forward on his face.

Paddy brought out a pair of handcuffs from a pocket and snapped them about Trent's wrists behind his back. He drew his constable's badge from another pocket and pinned it on his shirt.

The twilight lay over the land when Trent recovered consciousness. Paddy gave him a swallow of the water which Trent had carried unknowingly.

"I got the handcuffs from Mike Foster the night before we left," Paddy explained. "I reckon poor Teek is dead by now. And I saw you fire two bullets into that man Benning's horse on that narrow trail. I guess you're wanted for other killings, too. I'm sure they want you down State.

"I had to do my duty as constable after the dirty way you used Teek," Paddy went on. "I wouldn't have had a chance to get you back there in town. You could outshoot and outdraw me and everybody else and you had a gang there. But I never said that was *my* gold, Trent. And I never said *I* found it. You just took that for granted. And I never said I was taking you to a strike, either. Your greed pictured the whole thing out for you and you were going to kill me if you

found a strike. I could see it in your eyes."

"The water," Trent mumbled. "Where——"

"I changed one of your empty canteens, Trent. The water was fastened to your saddle all the time. There's enough to get us to a hole below here, and then the next stop will be the county seat and jail. If you make a fuss, I'll bash your head in and tie your feet and drag you. That was Teek French's gold, Trent, and he found it right here for I've seen where he was working below the water hole. He mentioned this place when I asked him where he got it, but I didn't realize this was where he found it. He's the prospector you threw across the room in Eureka. You broke his wrist, too. He's my friend. So now you know you better be good or I'll make you!"

SHERIFF MARTIN rode into Eureka four days later with Paddy Orville. They got a rousing reception and learned the other outlaws had vanished. The sheriff went to see Mike Foster first, and Paddy hurried to the storekeeper's house.

Teek French tried to talk when he saw Paddy, but his friend stopped him.

"They won't let me stay but a minute," Paddy told him. "But you're going to get well, they say. I took Bull Trent out in the desert on a ghost gold hunt and let the heat get him. Then I packed him in to the county seat and turned him over to the sheriff. There's a lot of rewards. We'll take the money and open my prospect right here in the Spiders. I reckon it's time you got down to hard rock."

These two old men of the desert smiled at each other.



Herd Going North

By H. C. WIRE

Author of "Canyon Ride," etc.

At a national convention just held, workers in social research stated that men of the Southwest are bigger than those born in other parts of the United States. No reason was given.

—Newspaper item.

PROBABLY "Bud" Lanton did not see that recent news paragraph. Certainly the scientific men sitting in their convention had never seen Bud Lanton. So they missed a chance to study one good reason for the fact that men of the Southwest grow big.

It was going to be a tough job, trailing those three hundred Mexican steers north to Gun Sight. Bud

knew that. But a buyer was waiting up there, spot cash when the animals were delivered; and besides, Bud had a girl in Gun Sight, and when his half of the money was in his pocket, there was something he wanted to say.

He stood with the ranch-house door pulled shut behind him, key fitted to the lock. Over one shoulder he asked:

"Got everything, mom?"

A woman sat on the seat of a light spring wagon just beyond the porch step. She held stiff reins on a pair of impatient buckskin ponies, easily controlling their restless pawing and short forward lunges. Abilene Lan-

ton, dressed to follow the trail herd, in blue jeans, wide hat, and dust-protector handkerchief hung loosely around her neck, looked like a man.

Mother and son had the same straight features, sharp and angular, leaned down to the essentials of firm cheek muscles over well-defined bone. They had the same direct brown eyes and skin as richly dark as new leather. Bud, though, could have swung the woman up and carried her about in the circle of his left arm.

"Come on, son," she flung to him. "I've got everything. Looks like dad's having trouble." She slackened her reins, and the buckskins sprang forward.

Bud snapped the ranch-house padlock and kicked away a rock that had propped the screen door open. The door banged. From the porch edge he forked into the saddle of a black horse and was instantly bent into the wind at a dead run. He passed the spring wagon with its camp supplies. On ahead of him, at the bottom of the ranch-house knoll, was a barbed-wire fence with the gate dropped, and beyond that the wide canyon bottom between a tangle of barren Arizona hills.

THREE hundred steers had been pushed through the opening, onto a flat, and a man riding a tall gray had swung off to tie up the wire gate.

"Old Man" Lanton was only fifty-five; a good many years left in him yet, but his hair was white, his figure was stooped, a lifetime of working cattle in the border country had hardened him into something like a limb of weathered juniper. His back was toward the three hundred half-wild steers as he stood waiting for the spring wagon and his son to come through. He had already

picked up the pole onto which the gate wires were twisted. Perhaps, after all, his ears were not as sharp as they used to be, and a sudden thud of hoofs did not register.

Bud Lanton heard his mother scream. But he had already seen one crazed animal turn and break back. Earlier, as if possessed by the idea of returning to the freedom behind them, a bunch had charged along the fence. Now a lone steer, still "on the peck," came head-on toward the open gate and Old Man Lanton.

Bud yelled and waved warning. Lanton twisted then and looked behind him. It was too late to mount his horse. He threw up both arms, as to swerve the charging steer. The half ton of beef came lunging on, and in the fog of its dust Bud could not see what happened.

It was perhaps only half a dozen seconds until the dust whirled up and he saw the white-haired man lying flat. The steer's charge had carried it on past. Now it wheeled back, curved hayfork horns lowered in a rush to gorge the prone figure.

Rodeo patrons have paid good money to see less of a bulldogging exhibition than the one which Bud Lanton put on there in an impromptu moment. His flying black horse was alongside the brindle steer. Bud seemed to lean from his saddle casually, unhurried. Long arms reached downward. He followed in a clean dive.

As his hands struck and gripped the curved hayfork horns, Bud's one hundred and seventy pounds swung down and under. The steer's head twisted. The animal staggered two more steps and then plowed earth in a somersault that slammed all the wind and fight from its great body.

Bud leaped up, slid a six-gun from his belt holster, and fired twice be-

hind the steer. In a scramble the brindle beast was on its hoofs again and went trotting off to join the herd.

Old Man Lanton rose groggily. But when he tried to reach for his horse, something stabbed like a knife blade into his right side. He could not lift his arms as high as the saddle horn. He turned to his son, ignoring pain, but with sudden worry written in the deep lines of his face.

"I've went and busted a fool rib," he said. "Maybe a couple."

Those three hundred steers had to go north to Gun Sight. The buyer was there now and he wouldn't wait long. He'd go on to some other outfit, and his cash would go with him.

The Lantons went into a family council. This was bad, all right.

It had been bad enough last night when Florentino had quit, pulling out unexpectedly and leaving them short-handed. Old Man Lanton had flared angrily when the Mexican cow-puncher had told him he was going to go. There seemed no reason. A good rider, Florentino; they needed him. But the fellow had given a vague excuse, and when the cattle were gathered, had gone loping off south into Mexico.

The Lanton family council was short. The herd had to go north. There was nothing to talk about. That was Bud's opinion.

"Mom," he said, "they're beginning to scatter, and I've got to get 'em moving."

Abilene Lanton was already tearing a long bandage from the stiff canvas tarpaulin. She'd brace up Lanton's broken ribs, and they two could trail behind in the wagon. Bud could ride flank and point the herd. They'd make it.

"Sure," said Bud.

They had to. Every dollar they had in the world was out there on the hoof.

That day they made fifteen miles, a fair drive, in rough country, under a blazing sun. Their route slanted northwesterly at first, and all morning the brown stream of cattle flowed through winding canyons which were as frequently in Mexico as within the United States.

In earlier years a herd like this, moving on Mexican soil, would have been too open a temptation to renegade bands of the Sierra Madres. Bud, flanking the drive, glanced often southwest and thought of those times, and even now felt a little easier when the route at last swung due north. In the evening he lay on his blankets to rest before going on night guard. The cattle were bedded in a hill cove. The spring wagon was drawn up at a water hole and Old Man Lanton made comfortable before a fire.

Skeleton Canyon to-morrow, Bud was thinking, the Mule Skin range to cross after that, and then a long stretch of desert. Three days, maybe four—three nights. He grinned to himself and fell into a gleeful reverie of counting his small fortune in front of the amazed wide eyes of a brown-haired girl.

FULL dawn came late into Skeleton Canyon. Two hours the sun had poured across the mountain ridges before it edged over the Skeleton Canyon lip and filtered to the narrow bottom far below. A thin trickle of water gave back a dancing reflection of light from the stream bed. Sycamore leaves glistened.

Day had come, but even then, between steep canyon walls the grayness of night was not wholly dispelled, as befitted a spot where

ghosts walked up and down beneath the trees, planning vengeance and hunting for their lost adobe dollars. These were Mexican traders and smugglers, killed by American outlaws and robbed of silver and gold being carried north in the aparejos of their pack mules. Many a cold-sober man has heard their whisperings of vengeance, particularly at night; cowboys once played poker with a cache of adobe dollars found under a sycamore root. Bones of the slain mules, and sometimes a human skull, are still to be seen there. Skeleton Canyon is well named.

This day was on toward ten o'clock, when a lone horseman riding a fleet-looking red cow pony emerged between twisted sycamore trunks and paused at the stream to let his animal drink. He had come soundlessly, as if materializing directly out of the canyon wall.

He sat straight in the saddle while the horse arched its neck downward and drank. His features were sharp and thin-lined, and dark as the wide hat crushed low upon his head. He was a tall man, hard and lean. A heavy six-gun sagged on his right hip. Under the left stirrup leather was a rifle scabbard with the gun stock projecting forward. Indian-fashion, head motionless, his eyes took in the silent canyon bottom.

Skeleton Canyon broadened a little here to form a bowl some twenty rods wide by a quarter of a mile long. Short yellow grass matted the floor between huge boulders. The walls were steep, but of loose rock and brush-covered. Only once the man lifted his eyes to the rim above.

The red pony finished drinking, sighed, and stood with water dribbling from half-open lips. Still the rider waited.

Then from somewhere far along

the canyon came a faint bawling of cattle on the move. The pony twitched both ears and turned its head toward the sound; man and beast listened with the same rapt attention. Again the rider lifted black eyes to the canyon rim, shifting them along toward the far end of the grassy bowl. He raised his left arm momentarily upright, then melted back within the sycamores and brushy oaks.

The old warrior steer, with brindle hide and hayfork horns, came first into the bowl, pointing the rest of the Lanton herd. Behind him the brown stream came flowing along slowly in its dust fog, filling the bottom with a throaty bawling and the rattle of cleft hoofs.

Bud rode easily off to the left of his drive. Trail herding was a cinch in here; no way for the fools to break. He slipped his right foot from the stirrup and hooked his knee restfully over the saddle horn. He was sleepy. Three more night guards and he'd be ready to hit the hay for a week. But he wouldn't! He rode along, dreaming of his girl.

Up ahead, some of the cattle stopped to graze. Others began to pile up behind them; the rippling surface of the brown stream was broken by a flash of horns as steers climbed one another's backs. Bud unhooked his knee and felt down for the stirrup. He touched up his black horse and started forward to break the jam, and next was half jarred from the saddle by a sudden crash of a gun.

HIS horse had instantly wheeled beneath him. He clung in his seat, off-balance, through another moment, while the gun's crash, somewhere behind him, was twice repeated. Shotgun, was his fleeting thought. And then he heard

a rifle crack, so close that there followed the metallic click of the shell being ejected. The bullet had pinged past within inches of his head, yet the mad buck jumping of the horse clamped between his knees made of him a hard target.

The black's lunges had carried him out of the bottom and into boulders of the canyon slope, when the rifle cracked again, and the animal went down, as if its forelegs had been jerked by a rope.

Bud left the saddle spread-eagled, struck the jagged rocks head-first, and lay still. It seemed to him only the next instant that he opened his eyes, then grabbed for his gun. His mother screamed. His eyes cleared, and he saw plainly what had been before but a moving shape.

Abilene Lanton bent and put one hand under her boy's head.

"Bud! Bud, are you all right?"

He rolled himself to a sitting posture against the sloping rock, and saw first just below him the lifeless heap of his black horse, then beyond that the canyon bowl, quiet and peaceful, and empty.

"Mom!"

"I'm all right." She held to his arm as he stood up. "Can you walk?"

"I'm all right," Bud said. "Was it Florentino?"

"Yes. And when I think of all the meals that man has had in my house!"

Old Man Lanton was born with a strange sixth sense which, all his life, had forewarned him of approaching danger. He could feel it somehow. This day, that sense had saved him once more. For no apparent reason he had ridden into Skeleton Canyon with a double-barreled shotgun lying across his knees. It might be that past ambushades in this place stirred in his memory, or vaguely

he might have been troubled over his Mexican cow-puncher quitting with no good cause.

He had fired the first shots, blazing away a split second before two men rose on the bank with murderous rifles leveled. Their aim was spoiled. Abilene Lanton whirled the buckskins into an oak thicket. The old man fired more shots at the rustlers, which Bud, unconscious, had not heard; but Florentino, up ahead, had turned the drive by then, and there was no stopping the stampede as it swept back southward.

Bud was only half listening to this report of what had happened. That was done. His mind was more filled with laying a swift plan into the future.

He unhitched one buckskin from the spring wagon and pulled off the harness. He had already brought up his saddle from the dead black.

It was not until Bud mounted, and then leaned to drop a reassuring pat on her shoulder, that the woman gave in to her feeling.

"Son, I don't know as it's worth it! There's three of them."

Bud grinned. "Don't you worry, mom. I'm all set to work the old sleight of hand! You camp here. I'll be back." He didn't say when.

The trail of his stampeded cattle was easily followed. The wide swath of their tracks returned to the head of Skeleton Canyon, crossed a barren divide, and plunging into a desert of low sand hills, continued due south toward the distant gray barrier of the Sierra Madre Mountains. Here on the desert a lazy roll of dust farther marked their progress.

BUD LANTON did not push in close. Three to one, he'd have no chance in an open attack. But one at a time—that would be different. He jogged on,

unhurried, interested in the country. A quiet confidence rode with him.

By noon he was in Mexico. The cattle continued south. Far ahead a dark V lay against the Sierra Madres—the opening of a canyon, and toward this the cattle were being driven. When certain of that, Bud no longer trailed directly in the tracks of his herd, but angled west and then rode parallel to its movement. Florentino might think he was lying dead back there in Skeleton Canyon, or too badly wounded to follow. Still the three rustlers would be on watch.

At nightfall the cloud of dust was rolling among foothills, in and out the shallow canyons, and before full dark it halted, settled, and rose no more. The herd was being bedded near some water hole.

Bud closed in, until only one rock ridge separated him from his cattle. Waiting there in the saddle, he rolled tobacco in a brown paper and comforted himself with a smoke. This was always a lonely time, the hour between sundown and night. It never failed to give him a queer, hollow feeling, and he understood the doleful chattering of coyotes at dusk.

For the moment, confidence that had supported his planning all day slipped a little. His brown eyes grew sober, and his face was no longer young, as it came to him with sudden, sharp awareness that his whole life hinged on the next two or three hours. But he had an awful lot to live for! So he knew then that he was going to come through. Confidence again moved like a good companion at his side.

He dismounted, crawled to the ridge top, and looked over. In the last faint twilight the canyon bottom lay below, a wide, flat floor between gentle slopes of the hills. A water hole ringed by gaunt and leaf-

less cottonwoods showed in a side gully. From it, grass rooted in the water-hole seepage made a dark wedge for perhaps a quarter of a mile out into the main canyon. His cattle were being bedded on the far end of that grass wedge.

Dimly he made out the shapes of three men who circled the animals until the herd was like a quiet pool. Then one man rode back to the water hole, leaving two on the first hours of their night guard.

Bud retreated down the ridge to his pony. He dropped the reins over a brush clump. The buckskin turned its head and eyed him.

"You stay here," Bud said.

He unbuckled his gun belt, leaving the gun in its holster, and hung it on the saddle horn. Then he went back up the ridge.

It was dark now. In the blackness below was a single red pin point of a camp fire near the water hole. He went down soundlessly toward that, taking his time, feeling ahead through growths of brush, avoiding loose rock that might rattle.

Half an hour brought him into the side gully, with the ring of cottonwoods looming against a band of star-freckled sky. The camp fire was still burning, and he could see the lean figure of a man seated beside it. As he had expected, it was Florentino who had taken the first rest, to change with his guards later.

Until within fifty yards of the camp, Bud moved in cautious silence. Then he let his boots scuff the gully rock.

Instantly Florentino sprang up, a rifle in his hands. His leap carried him away from the circle of firelight.

"Don't shoot," Bud called. "It's only me."

"Who?" the man's voice snapped from the dark. "Who is it? Come with your hands up!"

Bud raised both arms above his head and walked on in.

"It's only me," he said again. "It's all right, Florentino."

He went boldly into the light and stopped with the red coals glowing at his feet.

"Didn't expect to find you here, Florentino. I ran into some tough luck to-day."

Metal of the rifle glinted against velvet blackness in front of him, and then the Mexican came warily forward.

DARK eyes ran in quick search over Bud Lanton's form, looking for a gun. They fixed upon his face, puzzled and suspicious. The man said nothing, but stood there, rifle aimed from hip level.

Bud lowered his arms.

"Yeah," he said, "my fool herd got stampeded on me. Got clean away, up there in Skeleton Canyon." He rambled on with a loosened tongue. "Darned if I know. The old man got hurt yesterday, in the morning, right off before we'd hit the trail. What'd you want to quit us for, Florentino? Maybe you'll help me round up the stuff again. How about it? They come off south here somewheres. I'm looking for 'em now."

Again the dark eyes searched him, disbelieving. They touched his boots, blue jeans, up along the faded cotton shirt, still looking for a gun. At last the man lowered his rifle. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

Bud looked at him. "What's funny, huh?" He squatted down on his heels beside the fire. "What you laughin' at?"

The tall Mexican sobered. "You're loco."

"Yeah, sure," Bud agreed.

"Shouldn't have started on that drive without more help." He reached up with his right hand and rubbed the back of his neck. "Got any smokin', Florentino?"

The man crouched down across the coals from him, rifle at his knee, six-gun handy in a side holster. Suspicion was in every move, but also uncertainty. His face hardened, long lines deepening in the light cast upward from almost between his bent knees.

"What you do, kid?" he demanded. "What you here for?"

"Why, lookin' for my cows," said Bud. "I aim to find 'em somewhere and trail back north. Gimme the makin's."

Guardedly, Florentino reached to his shirt pocket, unbuttoned the flap, drew out tobacco sack and book of papers. He extended them in his left hand.

Bud leaned a little forward, lightly balanced in his squatting position. He had continued to rub the back of his neck, fingers under his shirt collar.

Next instant, in a move that was almost sleight of hand, he seemed to be reaching for the tobacco, but a long, thin knife was in his fist. A broken loop of string hung from the haft. He lunged forward from planted boot toes with the smooth swiftness of an uncoiling steel spring, and his stiffened, outstretched arm drove the stiletto blade for the Mexican's throat.

Catlike, Florentino twisted, rolled his head; the knife shaved past, and then the two were locked. Bud had grabbed for the Mexican's pistol with his left hand. Florentino gripped his wrist with the weapon but half drawn. They fought for the gun and for the knife, their hands clamped in each other's iron fists.

They rolled across the camp-fire embers and out into darkness, crashed hard against a log, and lay in silent straining. Bud Lanton had never before tested the Mexican's fighting strength. He found himself now pitting his endurance against that of a hard and seasoned man. And it was to be endurance, he saw that. Neither could break away. There remained only to see who could hold out longest in this slowly contracting strain of muscles.

For a little while, the water hole might have been deserted of all life. The camp-fire coals glowed brightly under a faint breeze, faded, glowed again. On soft-feathered wings a desert owl sailed to a cottonwood branch and stared down, round-eyed.

From the earth came the rasp of indrawn breath, followed by a choking word, cut short. A moment later that same voice cried out in sudden inhuman agony. The desert owl suddenly rose and drifted on across the night.

Silence settled upon the water hole again, until the two dark forms suddenly fell apart, and one crawled toward the camp embers.

WHEN the Big Dipper had swung almost to midnight, a man came riding toward the cottonwoods, slid from his saddle, and approached into the dim fire glow. His shadowed face glowered across at a prone figure. He snarled angrily in Spanish:

"Why don't we change? Your guard, Florentino. Wake up, you!"

He took a step and bent over, perhaps discovering that his boss was thoroughly bound, hands to his belt, feet tied together, his mouth stuffed. But before he could jerk upright, a voice in the dark told him:

"Hold it! If you move, I'll kill you!"

Bud Lanton walked into the light.

"Now back toward me! Put your hands up!"

Not long after that, down below the water hole, out in the wide canyon bottom, Florentino's red cow pony moved toward the bedded cattle. An erect figure rode in the saddle, topped by a black felt sombrero. Florentino, surely—but when the third Mexican on guard there reined in close with the beginning of a curse for such lateness, a six-gun flicked into his startled face.

At dawn, when the desert was very cool and pleasant, Bud trailed north. Three prisoners, hands tied to their saddle horns, feet bound under their horses' bellies, and the animals themselves strung in line on a picket rope, moved behind the cattle. By steady traveling they came again into Skeleton Canyon toward night, and to the man and woman waiting there.

"Hello, mom," Bud said. "Anything to eat? I'm hungry."

A day late, the Lanton herd reached Gun Sight, but the buyer had not gone on.

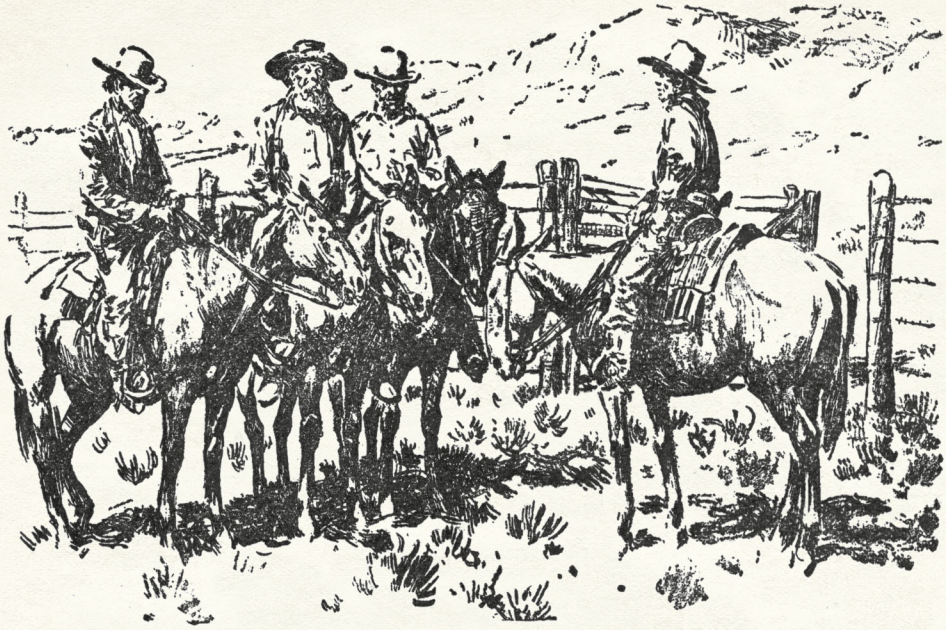
The price tag was still pinned to a rear pocket of Bud's new blue jeans, and there was a store smell of fresh denim and dye and leather about him as he sat on a wide front porch in the evening of that same day, trying to explain to a girl.

"But, honey," he said, "I couldn't help it."

"But your letter said you'd be here yesterday!"

"I know," Bud agreed patiently, "and I sure didn't want to be late, either. Wastin' time like that!" Then he hugged her.

Bud Lanton rode home in a week or so, and his bride rode with him; and that same week he was twenty.



A DEPUTY'S MULE

By JOHN BRIGGS

Author of "Timber Tramp," etc.

RISING from his breakfast table, Aaron Gaylord stepped to the fireplace mantel, reached down his pipe, filled the bowl with home-grown burley, and tamped it with a heavy, calloused thumb. His strong, homely features lacked their usual boyish expression of good humor. He avoided the anxious glances of Matty, his young wife.

Matty was a mountain girl, bred to the traditions of her people who had pioneered Westward from the mountains of Virginia. Her man was the lord of her household. Yet she was more fortunate than some hill-billy wives she knew, for her husband always included her in his reckonings. Aaron also was of the second generation in their secluded

backwoods section of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

His stubborn campaign to bring law into the mountain colony had resulted in reviving an old feud between the Gaylords and the Sleekers. He had accepted the office of deputy sheriff, thus earning the resentment of nearly every Buck Meadows resident. To climax matters, he and his brother, Jess, had aided the outside law in arresting one of the Sleekers for theft. By thus breaking the mountain code, the brothers had incurred the enmity of their own clan as well. But Aaron and Jess had lost their father in a feud. Thereafter they had pledged themselves to oppose local warfare. And Aaron always regarded his official duty as sacred.

BUT to Matty the star above his suspenders buckle only meant that she was liable to become a martyr's widow. So she hated the deputy's badge. Standing by the table, her heavy golden braids reaching to the trim waist of her gingham dress, she faced Aaron until at last he looked at her through clouds of pungent tobacco smoke.

"Matty, I—I reckon I'll saddle up Balaam and ride over to see Jess," he hesitated. "I'm sorta wonderin' if—"

Matty nodded shortly. "I've knowed you to go all of six months, 'thout pinin' for a sight of kin folks," she said. "I don't know what's it all a-comin' to, Aaron! Atween yore bein' a deppity and a-ridin' that ornery Balaam mule, I'm a-losin' my senses with worry!"

She lifted her hands and dropped them helplessly.

"Honey." The young mountaineer grinned, catching her in a powerful embrace. "Don't you go to waterin' them purty eyes o' yoren. I don't reckon my law job is any tougher to handle than Balaam, neither. And I shore ken set that mule!"

At the door he left her with a parting hug. He had a heavy presentiment that all was not well with his brother Jess. As he reached the corral, he sighted a column of dust against the sunrise. It was approaching down the grade from the brush flats to his meadow land. Before entering the barn, he made out three riders.

Meanwhile, he climbed into the haymow, carrying saddle and bridle. From the mow, he entered Balaam's manger and grabbed the mule's halter rope. He was met by a long head reaching for him with bared teeth and flattened ears. From his pocket he jerked a short stick to

which was tied a small loop of cotton rope. Seizing the vicious little beast's long, prehensile upper lip, he slipped the loop over it and commenced twisting the stick. Having squeezed the mule's nose into a tight knot, he held to the twister and jumped down into the stall. With his free hand he deftly swung on the blanket and saddle.

The mule kept all-fours on the ground, knowing that to lift a hoof would induce sudden pain to his nose. Yet, by rolling his murderous eyes, he managed to watch every move. Being wise, he wasted no time in false efforts. He was waiting his chance. Balaam's slick brown hide and bad reputation were known to every mountain resident. There was always a cleared danger zone surrounding him. His kicking and striking reach was deceptive. He was avoided like dynamite with a sputtering fuse attached.

With his nose still knotted in the twist, he was led out through the corral gate. There he sunfished and reached a stealthy rear hoof up under his belly to crack his rider's shins. But Aaron timed the maneuver perfectly and landed neatly in the saddle. He removed the nose twist. For, once mounted, the treacherous game was ended until he should dismount. Balaam was ready to carry him straight into fire and high water, if necessary.

Aaron's three visitors had reached the lower field gate, and they waited until he rode up to them. One was a gray-bearded patriarch, bareback astride a mule, with a carbine crossed in front of him. He was Aaron's grandfather. The two younger men were armed each with a six-gun and a rifle slung in a saddle scabbard. The chubby-faced red-head, with powerful rounded shoulders, was Aaron's cousin. The blond

horseman was his uncle. After short greetings, Old "Gran'pap" Gaylord opened the conversation.

"We're a-comin' over to tell you, Aaron," he announced in flat, emotionless tones, "thet yore brother Jess was shot dead yestiddy by Ezra Sleeker. And we're a-askin' what be yore intentions!"

Aaron paled, and his jaw muscles tightened. His face seemed turned to stone. After a long moment he asked:

"Whereabouts was Jess killed?"

"He was shot offn his hoss," the old man answered. "We found him last night, about three miles up the canyon back o' his place. In the mornin', he'd set out fer the upper meadows to see how many o' them dad-blamed Box Cross cattle has been run in on us. He wasn't t'home by midnight. And we found him plumb cold. He was tuk right atween the shoulders with a .44 rifle bullet. His hoss was tied, so's it couldn't travel home."

A DARK frown crossed Aaron's face at mention of the Box Cross cattle. They belonged to an outside outfit that had "muscled in" on the free government range of the mountain ranchers.

"I'm a-thankin' you-all fer seein' me first," he slowly addressed the old man.

"It was our bounden duty to tell you, Aaron," announced the aged spokesman. "Jess was yore only blood brother. Yore Uncle Zez, here, is next closest kin. We'll be a-givin' you ontill to-morrer night fer to try and get yoreself a Sleeker. By then, if you ain't done nothin', it'll be Zeb's turn—if yo're thet low as to let him."

Aaron's gaze met the old man's and hardened. In the stony stares of his kinsmen, he read the verdict

of the mountain code which demanded an eye for an eye, a life for a life. His failure to act would be final proof to them that he was a traitor to his clan. Yet he inwardly seethed to avenge his brother's death in the old way. He could not find it in his heart to resent the patriarch's cutting innuendo concerning his oath to the law. Stonily he stared beyond the three Gaylords. As they waited for him to speak, they could see that for the moment, at least, he was at one with their will to take a life for a life.

An outsider could not have understood the connection between Ezra Sleeker and the killing. But Ezra had a motive. And that, to the Gaylords, left not the slightest doubt of his guilt. Ezra's youngest brother, Peleg, was now serving a jail term on evidence furnished by Jess Gaylord. Peleg's arrest and his conviction of theft in an outside court had aroused the fury of the Sleeker brothers. The score rested with Ezra, the oldest, to settle according to the mountain custom. Apparently he had settled it. The treacherous manner of the killing was a bold challenge to the kinsmen of the victim.

Finally Aaron's gaze rested upon the graybeard.

"Where at is Ezra Sleeker now?" he asked.

The old man nodded approval of Aaron's apparent decision.

"Ezra ain't hidin' out nowheres," he declared.

And the red-haired cousin put in: "They's about eight Sleklers and Fawcetts hangin' round Ezry's store. I come by Hawkville jest now. They all sorta looked me over while I was passin'. Are you a-wantin' fer us to ride with you?"

"No," Aaron refused, "you-all ride on and tell Matty."

"Aaron, aire you a-headin' fer Hawkville alone?" demanded his grandfather.

Aaron nodded. "I aim to talk to Ezra," he said.

The faces of his kinsmen darkened suddenly with suspicion. The blond Zeb scowled wrathfully.

"You got till to-morrer night," he grated, "to shed that tin star and do yore talkin' with lead!"

Aaron stared fixedly ahead. "I've heard what you-all said," he replied. And he rode on through the open gate.

AN hour later he entered the settlement of Hawkville. Four weathered buildings faced one side of the dusty road. A number of saddle horses and mules were tied in front of Ezra Sleeker's store. A bench on the front porch supported five bearded mountaineers. They watched Aaron ride to the opposite rail fence and dismount by leaping to the top rail.

All of them stood up as he stepped onto the porch.

"Wearin' his star!" he heard the words muttered.

"Yeh, I'm wearin' it," he affirmed, striding to the doorway which was blocked by a bristling, barrel-chested man.

"Aire you a-hidin' behind that star, Aaron?" demanded the big fellow who opposed his entrance.

The Buck Meadows deputy looked into the grizzled visage and cold eyes of the other. "While I'm a-wearin' the star," he replied, "I'm attendin' to the law's business, if they's any that needs 'tendin' to. I come here to talk to Ezra. Any objections?"

"I reckon we got plenty objections," the hill-billy growled. "But you ken talk to him, if that's all you want!"

Bristling with guns, the gang crowded in behind him. Ezra Sleeker was standing behind a littered counter. He was a stoop-shouldered, narrow-faced, buck-toothed man. A scraggly mustache drizzled over his lips and looped his shaven, pointed chin. Only his small, squinting eyes betrayed a crafty and cruel daring. Aaron met his canting look with a level gaze.

"I've been told, Ezra," he remarked quietly, "that you murdered my brother. If you did, I reckoned you wouldn't object to ownin' up to it. The way sech things 'as always been settled hereabouts, it wouldn't do you no good not to admit it."

The storekeeper responded with a low, raspy chuckle. "Mebbe so. But now it's different. If I was to confess to you, I'd be givin' myself up to the law!"

A burst of guffaws greeted Ezra's objection. The menacing hill-billies also understood that Ezra might not profit by making a denial to the dead man's kinsfolk. That would only give the Gaylords a blanket privilege to shoot any Sleeker on sight. But for him to admit the crime to a representative of the law, would be to place his head in a noose—provided the law could take him!

"Ezra, I'm askin' you once straight out," Aaron retaliated. "Did you kill my brother Jess?"

"That's a fair question," Sleeker conceded, nodding. "I'd jest as leave answer it. No! I ain't no sneakin' bushwhacker. I could 'a' faced Jess and drapped him, if I'd wanted to. What's more, I didn't leave this place. Doc Watts ken tell you, and he ain't no kin o' mine! He was here all day yestiddy, on account o' my wife givin' birth!"

"Well, Ezra, that 'pears to let you

out," Aaron admitted. "Anyhow I've got another guess. But I'm warnin' you. If I don't ketch the right houn' afore to-morrow night, they'll be war!"

"I'll give you a tip to chaw on," spoke up Ezra.

Aaron waited suspiciously. But the storekeeper continued with apparent sincerity:

"They tell me yore brother was up to the divide, spyin' on thet Box Cross camp," he declared. "Mebbe he seen somethin' they didn't want to let leak out—him bein' too close to the law! Ain't you never figgered how a Box Cross ken cover a Twin H or a Bar Block C brand? Likely them fellers is brand artists. Thet's why they edged in here, figgerin' they was safe from outside outfits till their work sorta has time to cool and look natcheral."

"You've spoke my other guess, Ezra," Aaron acknowledged.

HE left the store under a barrage of bantering remarks suggesting that the law might have some use in the hills, if its deputy could rid them of the tough cattle outfit that was crowding the range with stock rustled from the east-side plains. The Box Cross was a mystery brand, run by a gang of hard hombres.

Another hour's ride over pine flats and ridges brought Aaron to a point about two miles above his murdered brother's little ranch. There he slipped down into the canyon to the trail which ascended to the upper meadows of the divide. The dust had been thickly tracked by the searchers of the night before who had returned with their burden. He rode on with lowered head, observing sign.

The churning rumble of the stream in the canyon depths, the

whine of wind in the pines, and the occasional screeching of crested blue jays made a medley of sound through which his accustomed ears instinctively strained for unusual notes.

He came upon a spot where the tracks in the trail were more numerous and blurred. He knew that this was where they had found the body of Jess. With the usual difficulty, he dismounted and tied Balaam. Walking on, he inspected every inch of the trail, desperately hoping that no important sign had been obliterated. But the dust was tramped only a dozen yards beyond the spot where Jess had been picked up. Aaron continued on.

At about sixty yards, he found a small stone that showed fresh earth stains. It had rolled down into the trail. Here, a large fir had fallen across the trail, years before. A section of the log had been cut out and rolled to the lower bank. The trail bed at this point was hard, moist, and gravelly. Clearly imprinted were boot marks of some one who had crossed from the lower to the upper side. The impressions were of high-heeled boots without the usual hobnaills used by mountaineers. Aaron muttered with astonishment. For they were not man-sized tracks! They were incredibly small, indicating a size-four boot!

Was it possible that a young boy, or a girl, had shot Jess from ambush? It was unbelievable! He climbed the upper slope, following the tracks, careful not to disturb them. The person had made some effort to erase the sign. But the small boot heels had pressed deeply into the earth, and over those impressions the pine needles had been raked with a stick, or with the muzzle of a rifle. On hands and knees, Aaron measured the boot

prints. They were strangely short-spaced. Even a small woman would not have taken steps so short! His puzzled frown deepened. There was something wrong here. Those boot heels had sunk into the soil under real weight! A person so small must have been carrying a heavy load!

The trail led to an ironwood thicket at the head of a swampy bog. In the moist soil, the small, deep boot marks were still short-spaced. A horse had been tied to the up-ended roots of a fallen tree. If the rider had been small, the horse had been unusually large for saddle work. Then he discovered how the rider had mounted—from the log!

What sort of a load had that horse been carrying, after the rider was in the saddle? Aaron followed the big, calk-shod hoof marks to where they re-entered the trail and turned up toward the divide. Farther on, he found where the same set of tracks, coming down-trail, had turned out. There were also tracks of his brother's horse. And the mystery rider had ridden down-trail ahead of Jess. But the same rider had gone back up the trail, after Jess had passed!

HE hurried back to where he had picked up the trail of the small boots. Carefully he searched for the exact spot where the ambusher had stood. Behind the lower log, he found a large round mark that first appeared to be a scuffled track. Closer, it looked like the imprint of a bended knee—a very large knee, unless the kneeler had shifted position. A black oak leaf had been pressed by the weight. He held the leaf up to a ray of sunlight. Running opposite to its natural veins were a number of close, hairlike markings which might have been impressed by the short, stiff hair of raw cowhide chaps. It had

taken a lot of weight to make those marks in the leaf!

Directly back of the knee mark he discovered the pointed impression of a boot toe. If it was the actual toe mark, the length from knee to toe was ridiculously short! But Aaron could find no other imprint that would indicate normal length of shin. With his spread hands, he measured the distance from knee to toe. Side by side, his hands just covered the space. It was grotesque!

Again mounted, he continued up the trail, determined, but almost despairing over the doubtful nature of his quest. Of only one thing he was convinced, the killer had knelt behind that log! Apparently he must look for something in the semblance of a human being, a creature of great weight that tottered about on warped limbs not longer than the legs of a seven or eight-year-old child!

Near its head, the long canyon shallowed out into a series of rocky benches and buckbrush slopes abutting broken ridges that were spiked with lightning-blasted snags. Balaam's swift uphill pace never slackened. Sweat dripped from his glistening shoulders and flanks, for the summer sun scorched the highlands at midday, despite the chill feelers of air creeping down from the surrounding snow-banked peaks.

Aaron gave close attention to the small cattle herds browsing the buckbrush slopes and scattered over the bench meadows. He saw a sprinkling of Box Cross brands. Some of them, as well as the ear markings, looked too fresh to be honest. He was convinced that his brother had made too close an inspection of those brands, and probably had surprised the running-iron artists at work.

From the divide, he dropped into a broad meadow country that was ribboned with water and dotted with dark clumps of tamarack. As he topped each low rise, his restless gaze searched the flats for riders. He sighted none until he approached the Box Cross camp.

In a cove flanked by timbered swells stood a large log cabin, a horse shed, and a number of pole corrals. Two men were leading saddled horses from the shed as he rode up. They looked him over without interest in their unshaven faces. Obviously they had been watching his approach. They were ordinary-looking punchers. Neither of them answered his mental picture of the killer.

The tallest and grimest of the pair deliberately glanced at his star, spat leisurely, and squintingly eyed him before speaking.

"You must be the rip-snortin' deputy them mountain bucks complain of," he remarked. "You lookin' for somebody?"

Aaron did not miss the insulting nonchalance of the tones. Both men viewed him with a coldly indifferent look.

"Who's boss o' this camp?" he asked.

"I am." The first speaker laughed, with a mocking note. "Name's Joe Gregg. What can I do for you?"

Aaron had no inclination to spar with words.

"Mebbe you ken tell me the whereabouts of a feller that rides a big boss," he replied promptly. "He's sort of a large feller that walks around on little short legs, in size-four boots!"

"Yeah?" Gregg chuckled, while his companion's thin, stubbled lips broke into a tobacco-stained grin. "You musta wanta see Jupe Seffano.

WS-6E

You'll find him in the house yonder. He don't get out much. Sort of an invalid. Jest comes here, off and on, for his health. Go on up and visit with him," the puncher offered, with a queer grin. "Pete and me has to ride. We'll see you later."

Gregg swung into the saddle, his last words sounding like mockery, or a threat! Aaron wondered.

HE glanced toward the log house. It was built facing the mountains, but there were windows overlooking the corrals. Some one moved away from a window as he stared. He noticed a stout tie pole, anchored by posts, about twenty feet from the cabin's end.

The two riders were already galloping away. Aaron wondered if their errand had anything to do with his presence here? Then he rode up to the house. He edged Balaam against the tie rail, swung out of the saddle and over the pole, rope in hand. The mule made only a half-hearted reach for him—a reach which Aaron deftly parried with his elbow as he made the tie. A casual observer would hardly have suspected Balaam's character.

Whether he was following the right clew or not, Aaron realized that he had placed the moment for hesitation behind him. And he was in a mood for action. He walked around to the front of the house and mounted the roofed porch to a solid door of a single hewed slab. He raised his hand to knock, then lowered it slowly to the latch slide as a gruff voice within ordered him to enter. Steeling himself to expect anything, he slid back the latch and pushed the heavy door inward.

As he stepped into the long, dim room, his glance swept all four corners and hardly rested on the huge

man seated at a long dining table, facing him. He had heard a slight scraping sound and a distinct metallic click, at his left. From the corner of his eye, he noticed a blanket-curtained entrance to what was probably the sleeping quarters. The blankets overlapped the center of the space, but fell an inch or two short of meeting the woodwork at one side. He caught the bare suggestion of a rifle muzzle pointing from behind that crack. His glance did not pause. He knew that he was not alone with the man who sat facing him.

And that man was playing solitaire. On the table, a deck of cards was arranged in rows, faces up. The player's immense, bushy, dark head was lowered. With intense deliberation, he was shifting the positions of the cards. Then Aaron's glance traveled under the table to the backless chair on which the player sat. It was simply a slab stool of four pegged supports. On it the man's small, useless-looking legs were drawn up and crossed, Turk fashion.

A singular chill of certainty gripped Aaron as the card player lifted a bulging face and looked at him out of dark, basilisk eyes utterly devoid of animation. His first shocked impression was that the eyes held no expression at all. Then a tingling sensation mounted his spine as he continued to meet the stare.

"Sit down, Gaylord," Jupe Seffano spoke, rolling back his thick lips and flashing perfect teeth. "Opposite the table here!"

Aaron was almost startled by the vibrant, musical voice. Its depth was all that conformed with the speaker's coarseness. His swift glance had noted packed book shelves ending the room, by the fireplace. Another oddity!

"I don't aim to sit," he responded. "Seffano, I'm doubtin' if that feller behind the curtains ken blow me out afore I ken plant a bullet square in yore heart! You called my name, so you know I've come here for you."

The hulking creature before him was slowly lifting an ace of spades, as if to place it down. The furtive signal conveyed its deadly significance to Aaron. He tensed, eyes fixed on the rising hand. He knew that the man behind the curtain would shoot when that card should be lowered to the table.

"Hold it!" he grated. And the rising hand paused, while the glassy eyes regarded him without a trace of interest.

Yet the death dealer understood that he was called. He kept the ace up. In his turn, he was looking into the fearless eyes of a hill-billy who was prepared to swap death for death!

"Yes," Seffano purred, "I recognized you by the family resemblance, since I met your brother yesterday. Unfortunately, for him, he stumbled onto some dangerous knowledge. Unfortunately for me, perhaps, my physical peculiarities furnished you with a clue to his slayer. I hardly expected there would be one of you so intelligent. Do you propose to arrest me, or would you prefer to continue this little game as it's started?"

"Name it yoreself!" Aaron answered, with his gaze fixed on the card, his elbow kinking and his fingers crooking for the grip of his .45! And he silently prayed for the ace to be lowered!

But Jupe Seffano in his treacherous heart realized that the chances were even against him. And he chose to play with them all in his favor.

"You can arrest me," he announced.

Aaron was terribly tempted, at that moment, to act as an avenger and not as a deputy. The difficulties of arresting Seffano and getting him to jail were tremendous. He made the error of slightly shifting his gaze to the killer's expressionless eyes, and in that instant the card was dropped.

Several unusual elements contributed to the freakish happenings of the next few seconds. First, the man behind the curtain had a rifle rested against the wall and steadily aimed just above Aaron's ear, that being the most vital spot exposed by profile. The concealed gunman might have relaxed, upon hearing Seffano declare that he would stand for arrest, but the man was a dull-wit, just able to obey orders strictly. He had been instructed to shoot when he saw the ace lowered. Mentally incapable of focusing upon more than one purpose at a time, his physical reflexes were abnormally quick. He saw the card fall, and he fired before it had struck the table. His aim was already fixed.

Aaron had not relaxed. His predetermined action was to leap closer to his human target. It did not include fully drawing his gun. Like most mountain men, he could shoot accurately from the hip. He barely glimpsed the flutter of the card. He started his lunge with his hand already gripping and tilting his gun. He even pressed the trigger as the light went out for him.

HE returned to consciousness, lying on his face, exactly as he had fallen. About him was silence. The back of his head felt numb, and his temples ached. For a moment, he remained perfectly still, listening and trying to

think clearly. His throbbing ears picked out the ticking of an alarm clock in an adjoining room. He reasoned that Seffano was waiting for him to come to, or believed him to be dead. Still, the unaccountable silence! Was he alone? Very slowly, he lifted his face until the sharp pain nearly caused him to faint. He was lying with his head almost under the table.

On the opposite side was the stool on which Seffano had sat. And the great-bodied dwarf was still sitting on the stool! His massive hulk was bent forward onto the table, motionless. From the table's edge was just commencing a red trickle.

Aaron lowered his head until the dizziness partly left him. Cautiously he pressed a hand to his wet and matted curly hair. His scalp had been creased, deeply. Feeling for his gun, he glanced toward the curtains. His gun was still partly in its open-nosed holster. The gap at the edge of the curtains was a little wider. No one was standing there. He gathered himself, crawled a few feet from the table, and giddily rose to his feet. One look assured him that Jupe Seffano was dead. Suddenly he caught the faint sound of some one talking in a low voice, outside. He staggered to one of the windows facing the corral.

From the window he stared in utter astonishment, then drew back a little to avoid being seen. A man was holding Balaam's unfastened tie rope; he was mumbling and caressingly stroking the mule from head to tail! Balaam was standing as docile as a pet lamb. It was incomprehensible, until Aaron saw the fellow's vacuous, doggish face. Then he commenced to understand. The man was witless. And the mule recognized it!

As Aaron had ridden up to the barn, the poor fellow had been looking through the window, his whole heart fixed in covetous admiration of the trim, speedy saddle mule. Then, as Aaron had approached the house, the fool's master had instructed him what to do, and had promised him the mule as a reward. After he had shot, and had seen Aaron fall, he had stepped out childishly eager to claim his reward. He had seen his master still sitting at the table, and he had asked if he might go out and take the mule. Sefano's big head had nodded forward at that instant, and the half-wit had hurried out, never suspecting that his master was dead from a shot that had been fired simultaneously with his own.

Aaron suddenly mastered his astonishment as four horsemen heaved in sight. He saw them ride up to the imbecile and talk. The foolish fellow nodded several times and pointed toward the house. Then he patted the mule's neck and stuck his own chest as a token of possession. By the gestures, Aaron guessed that the fool was reporting him dead.

The riders dismounted and approached the front of the house, Gregg, their leader, striding ahead. Aaron dodged into the semi-dark bunk room behind the blanket curtains. Gripping his gun, he peered through the narrow aperture that had served his would-be assassin. To get the drop on the four men together appeared to be his only chance of escape. He hoped to succeed at the critical moment when they should discover that he was not lying on the floor.

Gregg entered the door first.

"Hey, boss," the tall foreman spoke, "where's that——"

Aaron saw him halt, stride sud-

denly around the table, and lift Sefano's face. Only one man had followed him part way into the room.

"Hell!" Gregg exclaimed. "Jupe's shot dead! Where's that—— Hey! Out, you fellers! Ask Dummy Jim what he done with the deputy he kilt! It looks like——"

THE man, Pete, was stepping back out of the door. One of the punchers on the porch was calling to the half-wit. Aaron acted on a desperate chance. He couldn't possibly get the four together now.

"Hand's up, Gregg!" he ordered quietly. "Back up this way!"

The lank foreman stopped short. Aaron clicked back the hammer of his Colt. At the sound Gregg's hands went up, and he started backing slowly toward the curtain.

"Keep yore trap shut!" Aaron hissed. "Back faster!"

Within two yards of the curtain Gregg made a false stumble and dropped his hands. Aaron lunged and cracked his .45 barrel down on the tricky fellow's head. He caught the falling puncher and dragged him into the bunk room.

At that moment bedlam broke loose on the front porch. A series of crashing thumps, shouts, oaths, and screams of fright. Aaron peered around the curtain as three men catapulted back into the room. The last one tried to slam the door and was knocked sprawling by a battering bolt of brown mule in action. The table was knocked over with a splintering crash. Two men were crawling, screaming. One of them dived for the curtains. Aaron tapped him, as he came through, and laid him beside Gregg. The last one to enter was lying in a twisted, motionless heap by the door, and Balaam was chasing "Dummy Jim,"

the poor half-wit, into the kitchen. There was a crashing of pots and pans, then the back door slammed shut as the poor fellow who had coveted the mule escaped out that way. Dummy Jim had come, leading Balaam, when he was called. Balaam had seen his chance to rush the men on the porch, and had ended up by getting after his captor. Now he seemed to be working over everything in the kitchen.

Cautiously Aaron stepped out to the porch. Another man was lying there, squirming and gasping, hands gripping his stomach. His dazed eyes rolled as Aaron bent over him and took his gun.

"Keep yore shirt on, feller," Aaron advised. "And roll out o' the way. I'm comin' out with the mule!"

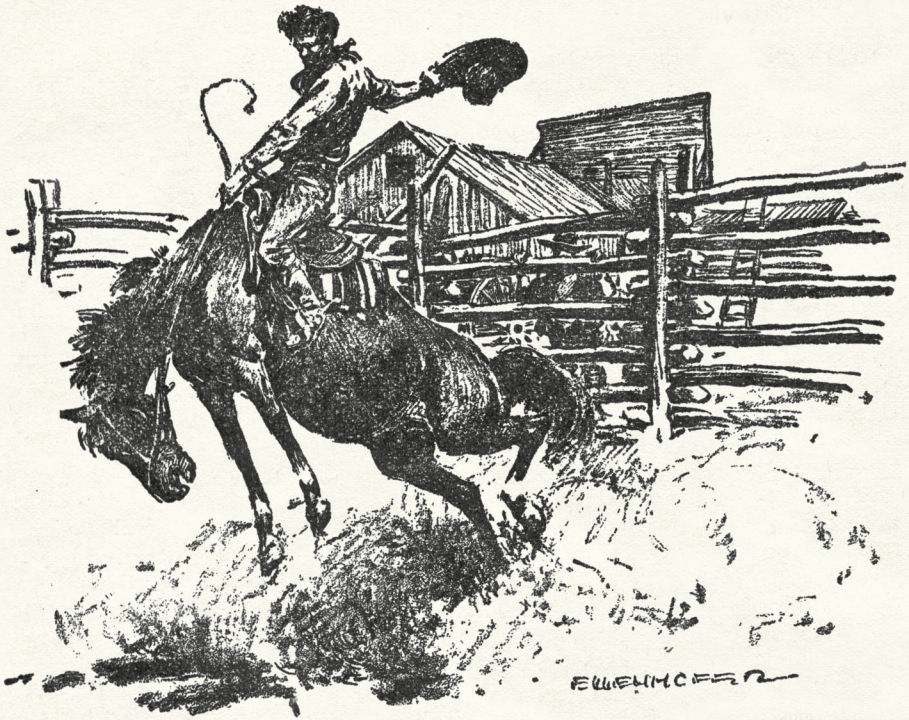
Reëntering the wrecked room, he closed the heavy door. The unfortunate man lying beside it needed no attention. His neck was broken. Returning to the bunk room, Aaron made sure that his two victims were still unconscious. He gathered up all the weapons he could find and hid them under the mattress of the

bunk which he judged to be Sef-fano's. He guessed at the bunk's past occupant by a pair of exceedingly small boots lying beside it. He picked up the boots. He needed them as evidence to convince his kinsmen. They would fit the tracks that their owner had made after murdering Jess.

Stepping back into the main room, he saw Balaam's head and shoulders projecting from the kitchen doorway. The mule was snorting with more satisfaction than fright. Aaron reached into his hip pocket and pulled out the short stick with loop attached. Balaam eyed it, quivered, calmed down, and stood still. He accepted the nose twist as a necessary evil. Led by it, he stepped daintily, following his master.

The man outside had rolled a few feet from the steps. He was still gasping. He did not even look up, as Aaron mounted and rode away from the shambles that had been wrought by a man who had fulfilled the mountain code, and by a mule that knew no code at all!





CRIPPLE RIDER

By EUGENE R. DUTCHER

Author of "Good Men and a Bad One," etc.

THE stranger, "Rider" Dean by name, was very sensitive about his limp. He stood at the bar in the smoke-eddy room and wondered was it this deformity that made men's eyes drop from his so queerly.

In reality, those furtive glances weren't directed his way at all, but toward a man behind him who edged nearer. This man's movements were casual enough, yet all knew the very presence of "Wee Willy" Willows boded evil for some one. It looked as if the tall stranger were to be the goat, but one could never tell. And

so they watched, and Dean thought they stared at him.

Was it the limp, he wondered, or was it that some one had recognized him and passed the word around that there at the bar stood Rider Dean. Once a top-notch rodeo rider, now a confidence man, a cheap crook. A man who had been hazed out of many towns by irate cowboys whom he had fleeced of their money. A man so low they disdained to shoot him down, but drove him off with their rope ends, welting his back. They did that to Rider Dean, who a short year ago had heard bands playing in his honor, and the

cheers of the crowd as he rode out the worst buckers. Then a broken cinch, a bad fall, a crushed leg that was set poorly and healed crooked.

Now Dean rested an elbow on the bar. It eased the ever-present pain in his right leg. But his head was high, his chin forward. Dean was a proud man. He was glad this was to be his last crooked job. It would give him enough money, with what he had saved, for the operation on his leg. Men said that doctor in the big city could do wonders with broken, twisted bones.

DEAN turned to the bar. A sudden hush fell on the room as his hand fastened around the neck of a quart bottle. Every one but Dean, who had been deep in his miserable thoughts, knew that was not the same bottle the bartender had placed there. All had seen Willows substitute one he carried under his arm for the quart of whisky. They also knew the cook, at the J J had asked Willows to bring a quart of vinegar out from town. So they put two and two together and stood waiting breathlessly.

The bartender's weepy eyes widened. He wanted to warn the stranger, but to spoil Willy Willows's practical joke was to draw the enmity of the little man to himself. So the bartender discreetly turned his back as Dean poured the little glass brim full of the amber fluid. He lifted the glass to his lips. The day was hot, and Dean very thirsty. He drained it in one big gulp.

Of a sudden his long, tanned face turned a violent red. He fought for breath silently; no excitement. One big hand grasped hard the edge of the bar; the other squeezed the heavy little glass till knuckles

showed white. Slowly the gagging left him. His head came forward.

For many months Dean had practiced self-control. Without the least sign now to tell of his distress, he slowly replaced the glass on the bar. Just as slowly he turned the bottle and read the label.

It was a silent group who watched, for they realized somehow Willy Willows's joke had misfired. Willows was realizing the same thing. His broad grin faded to a sickly little smile as Dean turned and looked him over carefully. Dean noticed the whisky bottle under Willows's pudgy arm. He judged the little fellow to be twenty-six, though his round, freckled, red face looked much younger. Dean knew the type; there was one in every cow town, always making life miserable for the cowboys with their practical jokes.

Into Dean's blue, deep-set eyes a little-boy twinkle was coming. "That," he said, "is what I call a real drink. Yes, sir, a man's drink." He poured another glass of the vinegar. "Have one on me, little man. And take it from me, that liquor is like a fighting man; it's darn hard to keep down." He shoved the glass toward Willows.

Cowboys about the room were grinning. Cold-eyed gamblers, riffling cards, wore crooked smiles on their lips. Even the bartender's fat stomach quivered with suppressed laughter.

But Willows was game, and he reached for the glass.

"Here's to you, cowboy," he said carelessly, and tossed off the vinegar.

Right there Willows's nonchalance left. The stuff went down, searing, burning like boiling water, went down clear to the pit of his quivering stomach, then started up again. Willows clamped his teeth hard, his

round, little face going from red to redder. Sweat came out with a rush. He groped for the bar; tears filled his eyes. Down again went the vinegar. Like a wild horse fenced for the first time, it went rushing about, kicking, pitching, biting at tissue unaccustomed to anything more fiery than a cold bottle of beer.

There was choked laughter all about, but Dean only smiled very softly and watched. Willows straightened as the turmoil inside subsided slightly.

"Gosh, that—was—was good." He fought to keep the pant out of his voice. "Sure good—good——" He tried to say "stuff." It wouldn't come, so he let it go at that.

"Like it, eh?" Dean's left eyebrow sagged while the right shot high. "Barkeep, another glass. Thanks. Now, pardner," he said, "that you and me are even on drinks, we'll have another one together." Dean let the bottle neck tinkle against the glass. He poured the fluid so the gurgle of it would reach his victim's ears.

THE very thought of the stuff gagged Willows, and the vinegar lurking in his tortured stomach saw its chance. Up, up it came with a rush. No stopping it this time. In fact, Willows had no desire to stop it. He started for the swinging doors. First at a walk, then at a run. It was a race to see who would get into the open first, Willows or the vinegar.

With a howl of joy, the whole room started in pursuit. At some time or other, every one of them had felt Willows's cruel jokes, and now none wanted to miss what they were sure Willows would be doing outside. But Dean was of a forgiving nature, and he stopped the wild rush with magic words.

"Hey, boys," he called loudly. "The drinks are on me, and I don't mean vinegar, either."

The crowd hesitated, drawn between two pleasures, then they swerved toward the bar, and for many minutes the bartender was an awfully busy fat man. Men slapped Dean on the back. They pumped his hand, and Dean was very happy, for it was like the old days again, when men thought it an honor to drink with him. His shallow cheeks filled with laugh wrinkles. His eyes showed deep joy.

Then Dean remembered why he was here, and a coolness spread slowly through his body. His head was still high, but a droop had come into his fine, square shoulders. In just a few days he must euchre these same men out of their hard-earned wages. Then they would have no smiles for him, but with curses and blows they would drive him away. Dean would gladly have dragged that crippled leg along for life before he'd steal a dollar from any man. But there was his sister Hatty and the three youngsters, all dependent on him.

He just had to get that leg straightened out so he could again sit a buckler and bring home the prize money to Hatty and the kids. It didn't matter what these men did to his body. Let them beat him, kick him, but he'd get their money. He'd go to the big city, and that doctor would make him well again.

A man was facing Dean. A typical cowboy in dress, but about the thinnest, homeliest individual Dean had ever seen. It seemed his hips were actually wider than his shoulders. Everything about him was loose-jointed and floppy, like his battered old Stetson. His face was one giant grin as he said:

"Stranger, you was sent from

heaven. Us boys had just about give up hope of ever seeing Willows bested at his own game. Would you mind shaking the mitt of Harry Rollins?"

Dean had a big hand, but it was completely lost in the other's grip.

"Might you be staying here a while, or just passing through?" asked Rollins.

"I'm looking for a job," Dean lied.

"Say, that's swell." Rollins slapped the bar. "There's a riding job open on the J J. I work for 'em. They feed good, and the work ain't too tough." Rollins neglected to mention that Willows also rode for the J J, nor did any one else enlighten Dean. With this stranger and Willows in the same bunk house there would be no dull moments.

Dean needed an excuse to stay around for a few days while his con game rounded itself into shape.

"I'll take that job, Rollins," he said, "and thanks a lot."

The swinging doors opened, and Dean turned. A very capable-looking town marshal stood surveying the crowd.

"What's all the excitement, boys?" he asked mildly. "Does somebody hanker to spend a day or two in my boarding house?"

Dean sensed here was a man of quiet power, a man who might easily be his downfall.

Rollins started forward.

"There ain't no trouble, Tom," he called to the marshal. "I want you should meet the gent what th'owed Willows at his own game."

Rollins grabbed the marshal and hurriedly explained what had happened as he led him up to Dean.

"Tom, shake with——" Rollins paused foolishly. "Gosh, what is your name, stranger?"

"Dean."

"Dean, eh?" Rollins echoed.

"Well, meet Tom Kittle, and don't make no mistakes; hes' a man getter, for all his nice, mild looks."

THE marshal's hand went out, hesitated, then gripped that of Dean. Kittle's smile did not change, yet Dean had a cold feeling inside. He told himself it wasn't likely any one would know him either by reputation or sight so far from his home range.

But Kittle did know him, for not five minutes ago he had slipped a poster into his office desk, and on it had been Rider Dean's picture. The poster said nothing about making an arrest; it was just a warning to marshals and sheriffs to be on guard against this confidence man who was so slick he could steal a town blind and the law couldn't touch him.

"So you took a fall out of Willows," Kittle was saying. "That's mighty good news. He's needed it for a long time."

Dean had a great desire to get away from those probing eyes. "It just happened my stomach was stronger than Willows, was all," he said. He turned on Rollins to ask, "When do we start for the ranch?"

"Right now, cowboy. We was just coming back from driving a herd to the railroad, and stopped off for a drink. Come on, fellas, let's vamose. So long, Tom," Rollins called back to the marshal. "Don't let no bad man steal your star."

About two thirds of the cowboys in the saloon followed Rollins and Dean to the hitch rack. There was no sign of Willows anywhere.

Dean winced as he went into his saddle. It always shot pains through his crippled leg. They swung out of town, leaving a dust cloud to settle on already dusty buildings. The pace was fast, and Dean clamped his teeth against the torture in his

leg. He was gripping the saddle horn hard when they arrived at the ranch two hours later. Somehow he managed to crawl to the ground and unsaddle.

Rollins noticed how badly Dean was limping, and he saw sweat beading the new man's forehead.

"Gosh, you got a bad peg, ain't you?" he said solicitously. "Why didn't you say it was hurting you to ride so fast?"

Dean leaned against the corral. "It's all right, Harry. A bronc pitched me a while back, is all."

"Gee, that's tough." Harry Rollins's big, homely face was full of sympathy. "I sure hope it gets better quick."

Dean smiled just a little. "It's not the kind that gets better," he said, and turned away.

"Ah, gee." Rollins's hand fell on his arm and squeezed. "I'm sorry; awful sorry."

That squeeze sent queer pains shooting into Dean's chest. There was so much of friendship in it.

By the time the dinner gong rang, Dean had secured his job from the foreman at the big ranch house, and he trooped into the mess hall with the rest of the cowboys. He was mildly surprised to see Wee Willy Willows seated across from him. The little man's round, pink cheeks were still a little off color. He kept his eyes on his plate and ate fast.

Rollins, sitting next to Dean, nudged him in the ribs.

"I should 'a' told you Willows worked here," he whispered apologetically. "That was a dirty trick."

"It's all right." Dean grinned. "I'll forget it if he will. What gets me is why the boss don't fire Willows if he's such an all-fired nuisance."

"'Cause he can ride anything with hair on it." Rollins snorted. "That's

why. The boss likes to bring home the rodeo honors, and Willows sure does it."

"Oh," Dean muttered, and finished his coffee. He was thinking of his own lost powers in that sport.

THE meal over, the men retired to the bunk house. A poker game started, and Dean was asked to take a hand. He pulled up a chair. Dean never played crooked cards, but he played well.

"Before we start," he said, "I want you boys to get this straight. When I play poker, I play to win, and pretty often I do."

Willows was sitting surlily on the edge of his bunk. Now he stood up.

"Listen to him blow." He sneered. "Give me cards in this here game, too, and we'll see just how good this gabby gent is."

At the end of three hours they had found out. The game broke up with Dean winner by thirty dollars, most of it having come from Willows.

The lower bunks were all occupied, and Dean was assigned an upper. He knew what pain it would cause him to drag his crippled leg up there, but he said nothing.

Rollins realized the same thing. "Hey," he called, "would you mind if I was to switch bunks with you, Dean? I been meaning to move up there for a month, but ain't got around to it." Dean knew this was a lie.

"Thanks," was all he said. "Thanks a lot."

But little Willows had more to say. "What kind of a spread is this," he wanted to know, "when they hire hands what can't climb into a bunk?"

The men started talking loudly in an effort to cover up Willows's cruel gibe at the crippled man. They dropped boots heavily and in gen-

eral made a lot of unnecessary noise. But Dean hardly heard the insult. He crawled into his blankets, deeply touched by Rollins's kindness. As the gawky, loose-jointed cowboy stepped on the edge of Dean's bunk and started to swing to the upper, Dean reached out impulsively and squeezed hard the big boot.

Then he turned his face to the wall. There had not been tears in Dean's eyes since he was a very little boy, but they were there now. This past year of constant pain, both physical and mental, had slowly been breaking him down. Only those pitifully brave letters from his sister kept Dean roving from town to town. She would say they needed flour and bacon, but could get along without them for a while yet. The youngsters were trapping rabbits, and doing quite well.

Dean would send her money and go on to another town to steal more money from more hard-working cowboys. He had, at this moment, eight hundred dollars in a money belt around his waist. This money was working capital used by Dean to cover bets made by unsuspecting men. Bets they had no chance to win, for Dean had worked out his crooked game until there was no possible way he could lose.

Now, in a few days, he must work this trick on Rollins and these other kind fellows.

Finally Dean slept. He dreamed bad dreams, and when he awoke, it was to live those dreams in reality.

The days passed, and each one was worse for Dean. The men shielded him from the harder riding jobs without seeming to do so. They watched Willows like hawks for any practical joke that might hurt the crippled man.

Willows's enmity had grown, for each night he stubbornly bucked

Dean at poker. The rest of the men knew when they were licked and stayed out, but not Willows. He drew advances on his wages and continued to lose.

Then Saturday came—the day Dean had planned for his clean-up on the J J outfit and all the other outfits around there. It was the end of the month, and pay day. The men were all going to town.

Dean was in the corral with the rest, saddling up, when Rollins draped the upper part of his unbelievably long body over the top rail of the corral and called Dean over.

"I was wondering if you'd mind riding with me in the wagon?" he asked. "It's sort of lonely riding alone. That dang cook always wants a lot of chuck from town, and I gotta fetch it out to him."

DEAN looked hard into the homely face. He had heard the Chinaman say there was nothing to come out from town. Rollins was taking the wagon for but one reason: to save him, Dean, the pain of that ride on horseback.

"I'll be glad of the chance to ride," Dean said, and turned away fast, for his eyes were burning, and his throat seemed full.

During that ride, with Rollins chatting so friendly beside him, Dean forced himself to think of his sister. Hatty and the kids in that dirty shack where the rain came through as if there was no roof. Hatty and the kids huddled around the kitchen range, shivering, hungry, and the flour barrel empty.

They rolled along the rutted road, and Dean thought of Willows. There was the sort of man he didn't mind stealing from so badly. Where had Willows gone? He wasn't with the rest of the boys.

The answer to Dean's question

was that Willows had left early for town to make arrangements for the shipping of some rodeo horses. He was now walking gloomily back through the big stable with its double row of stalls, toward the big corral in the rear. The story of the vinegar had circulated widely, and the whole town was laughing at him. Willows's thoughts were very bitter toward Dean as he stepped into the corral.

"Hey! Look out!" some one shouted, and Willows was jerked violently back. Angrily he shook free and glared at a very old man with white whiskers and blue eyes.

"What's the idea, you old fool?" Willows growled.

"What's the idea?" shrilled the old man. "Why, you was walking right into Mild Boy." He nodded his gray head toward a horse tied to the corral fence.

Willows looked at the black. The horse's head was so low the air from its nostrils made dust eddy about the ungainly hoofs. Its eyes were closed, and one hind hoof was cocked in an attitude of great weariness.

"What's the matter, dad?" Willows chuckled, for the animal was a sight to behold. "You scared if I bumped him he'd fall down?"

"Sonny," said the old man solemnly, "that there horse ain't never been rode, and there's plenty what's tried it, too."

"Go on," Willows scoffed. "You're joshing."

"No, I ain't, lad. I'm takin' Mild Boy to the big county rodeo right now."

Willows looked again at the horse. "Maybe he used to be a buckner, pop," he said, "but his day's gone. Why, throw a hull on him and I'll show you how easy it's done."

The gray head shook knowingly. "That's what they all say," he re-

plied. "And there ain't no way to convince 'em till they try sittin' Mild Boy for a spell, and it ain't a very long spell, neither."

Already he was cinching a saddle on the horse. Mild Boy grunted and wheezed as much as to say, "Go away, won't you, and let me sleep."

Willows led the horse to the center of the circular corral. He adjusted the stirrups, and then, like a cat, was in the saddle, tense and ready. Nothing happened.

"Well, dad, what do I do now?" Willows asked.

"Yuh don't do nothin', sonny boy, but try and stay where you are."

At this moment Mild Boy blinked his big eyes as if aware for the first time that some one was atop him. There was a snap as big teeth clamped hard the bit. With iron in his neck, Mild Boy's head shot out and down, taking all the rein he could get. Then started the weirdest wild-horse dance Willows had ever felt under him. There was nothing orthodox about Mild Boy's pitching. He switched ends without the usual heave that warns the rider. When the heave did come, it was so mighty as to crack loose Willows's clamped knees. Then back to earth, four hoofs hitting as one with a terrible jar that drove bone joints smashing together and paralyzed nerves.

MILD BOY started spinning till Willows saw the old man's grinning face flashing by at express-train speed. They were off in a wild bit of bucking. It seemed to Willows his saddle was cinched to a bowl of jelly as it slid and slewed about on Mild Boy's loose hide. It was impossible to keep his balance. Willows lost a stirrup as the horse did a corkscrew. He made a wild grab for leather, missed,

and went skyward. He came down behind the saddle. Mild Boy didn't pitch again, but scooted forward. Willows slid off the horse, and, in a sitting position, reached the earth.

He sat there, hands on his knees, and watched Mild Boy cock his right hind hoof comfortably, lower his head, and go back to untroubled sleep. Willows rose slowly, getting his small body back into its normal shape as he did so.

"Dad," he said thoughtfully, "I want to borrow that horse for thirty minutes. All you got to do is bring him out front and leave him standing at the hitch rack." Willows was waving a ten-dollar bill before the wrinkled face.

The old-timer grinned wisely. "You got somebody you want to see piled," he cackled, and pocketed the money. "That's it, ain't it, sonny?"

"Yeah, that's right," Willows snapped, and he wasn't the usual grinning man who played pranks on unsuspecting cowboys. Willows was nasty mean. "Get that horse out front," he said, and passed into the barn. He reached the street just in time to see Dean and Rollins leave the wagon and enter the saloon.

Dean did not see Willows slip through the swinging doors, for Dean was fighting a battle, and he was losing. He could not force himself to go through with his plan. These men at the bar with him, the whole J J outfit, and others, too, they had taken him in as a friend. He just couldn't double-cross them now.

Dean felt himself breaking up inside. Nerves were snapping one after another. They seemed to crackle like a fire gaining headway. For months he had been forcing himself to do things directly opposite to his kind, gentle nature. For months he had been carrying that

searing, shooting pain in his leg. Now Dean was flying to pieces. His face was drawn and white, his eyes wild. What about Hatty and the kids? He'd give them that eight hundred dollars around his waist and try to forget about that doctor who could mend his leg.

"I can't do it to you, Harry," Dean hissed. "I just can't do it!"

Rollins straightened from leaning comfortable on the bar.

"Can't do what, old son?" he asked, alarmed at the look on the other's face.

"I can't, that's all." Dean's voice rose. "I'm getting out of here. I'm quitting!"

He started for the door. The room grew very quiet. Puzzled men looked at one another.

It was Willows who started first after Dean; the rest followed.

"Hey," he called nastily, "you ain't pulling that on me. I want a chance to win back that dough I lost at poker. I figured you was a cheap sport, but you ain't getting away with my jack."

The crowd had emptied into the street after them when Dean whirled and faced his tormentor.

"I'll give you a chance," he hissed savagely, and pulled the money belt from under his blue shirt. "There's close to nine hundred dollars in there. Cover as much of it as you want, and make your own bet. Any kind of bet. I don't care." Immediately Dean wished he hadn't said that, for most of this money belonged to Hatty and the kids. But there was no backing down now, for already Willows had taken him up.

"You wait right here, Dean," he said excitedly. "I'll be back and with enough dinero to cover your whole wad." He hurried across the street to where Marshal Kittle stood talking earnestly with a stern-faced,

clean-cut rancher, the owner of the J J, Wit Hornby by name.

Rollins's great hand gripped Dean's shoulder.

"If you was bluffing about shooting that whole wad, you better back out quick," he warned. "'Cause Willows will cover your last cent. Wit Hornby, the boss, has been takin' care of Willows's prize money for him, what he won at rodeos. See, they're heading for the bank to get it now."

BUT Dean just nodded dully. He didn't feel just right in the head. A fire seemed to be burning into his brain. Willows came rushing from the bank directly across the street. Marshal Kittle followed leisurely, with Wit Hornby at his side.

Willows waved two hands full of bills in Dean's face.

"There's the color of my money," he shouted. "Now let's see yours."

Stiff-lipped, Dean counted out bills from the leather money belt, and Willows matched him dollar for dollar until nine hundred and thirty dollars had been counted out.

The marshal stepped forward.

"I reckon I'll hold the stakes," he said quietly, "till we see who wins it. Don't want no arguments."

Dean waited quietly for Willows to say what the wager would be laid on. Thirty men had gathered. They also waited breathlessly while Willows glanced around, as if hunting something that would do as a betting medium. Then, for the first time, he seemed to see Mild Boy tied across the street. He pointed at the droop-eared horse.

"There you are, Dean," he said, as if with a sudden inspiration. "I bet you can't ride that nag yonder. You got to rake him front and rear."

An angry protest went up from

the J J men. This wasn't fair, Dean being a cripple.

Willows whirled wrathfully on them.

"What you growling about?" he wanted to know. "I'm admitting this Dean gent is only half a man, but how do I know that old nag's got a buck jump in him? I'm willing to take that chance if Dean's game."

Dean was unconsciously pulling his belt tight, the instinctive action of a rodeo rider. The crowd realized he was going to call Willows's bet, and there was a flurry of side wagers among the cowboys. Only the J J outfit stood solemnly silent. In the past few days they had grown to like this crippled man a lot, with his quiet smile always tinged with pain, and his deep-set, mild eyes.

Dean had been staring at Mild Boy standing so languidly at the hitch rack. Now he turned on the betting men. His eyes were queerly bright; a warm flush spread over white cheeks. He was like a man tingling with strong drink.

"I can ride that horse," he said quietly. "You hear? I can ride him." Dean turned and limped across the dusty street toward Mild Boy.

"Hey," Willows called after him. "Do you want a box to help you get atop him?"

No one laughed, and Dean did not answer. It was always a painful job getting into the saddle; with his left boot in the stirrup, the injured right leg must take all his weight for a moment. Dean swung up and settled to the saddle. Farther along the street a dog barked, but here there was no sound as men watched and waited.

Dean rode toward the group. Willy Willows, quivering with chuckles, waited for the explosion. The chuck-

les faded, for Mild Boy was setting down his hoofs like an old plow horse. The beast's head nodded with each step. Then Dean raked his heels fore and aft, as the bet specified. A quiver ran through the horse. Mild Boy grunted as if he enjoyed immensely this scraping of his bony shouldlers and flanks, and came plodding on.

Dean rode straight up to the marshal.

"I'll take that money," he said, and Kittle, without a word, handed the bills into Dean's hand, but there was a twitching about the lawman's lips, and his eyes sparkled.

It was then the owner of Mild Boy came riding up and addressed Dean. "Hello, old son," he said friendly. "I near didn't get here on time. Run into a sand storm a day back."

"Hello, pardner," Dean replied. "Glad to see you. Well, I reckon we'll be going if there's no objections."

But there was an objection, and it came from Willows, who suddenly realized he had been tricked.

"Marshal," he shouted, round face red with excitement, "they're a couple of crooks. You ain't going to let 'em get away with my money?"

KITTLE looked at Willows. "You made the bet yourself," he said, "and we all heard Dean say he could ride that horse. I don't see why he ain't won that

money. You're just a fool, Willows, that's all." The marshal rubbed it in. "Those two, the old man and Dean, have been working this con game for quite a spell. That horse is a trick animal. Dean owns him. Sometimes the boys get pretty nasty and run 'em out of town; sometimes they take it as a good joke on themselves. I reckon this town's going to like it and laugh."

Dean's eyes met the marshal's. "Thanks," he said, and would have ridden away, only the owner of the J J stopped him with:

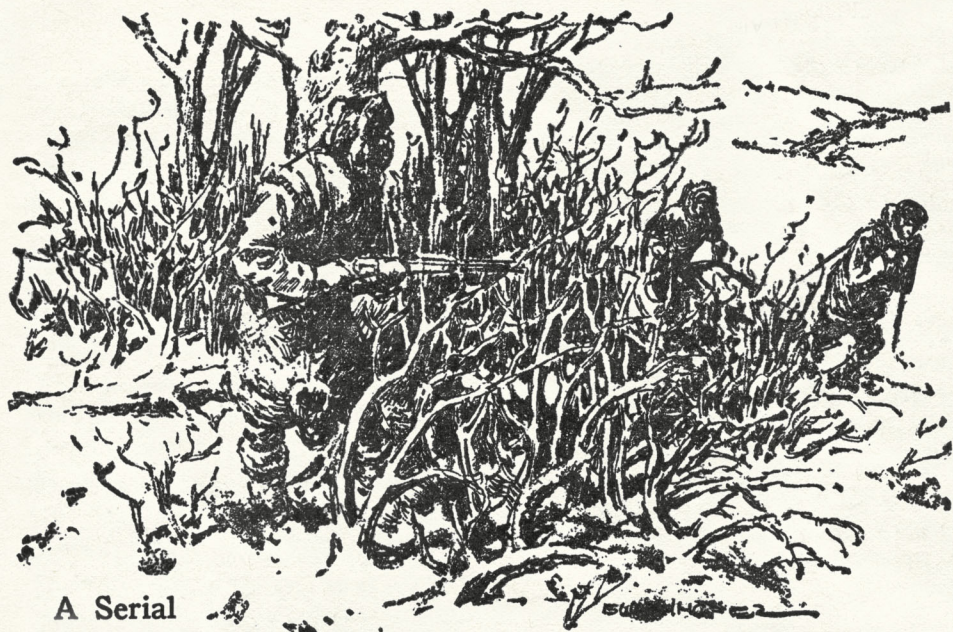
"The marshal's been telling me your history, Dean. He looked you up right careful. When that doctor makes you a bronc buster again, stop by at the J J. I'm looking for a top-notch rodeo man. The one I've got now is quitting by request."

Dean looked at the kind-faced old rancher. He wanted to speak his appreciation, but the words stuck, so Dean just nodded and rode away beside the old man. Once he looked back and saw the whole J J outfit lift their hands to him in salute—all but Willows, who was slouching toward the barn.

"Oh, Dean," Rollins shouted, standing head and shoulders above the rest, "we'll be looking for you right soon."

"And I'll be coming right soon, too," Dean called. "And when I do, I'll crawl into an upper bunk without any trouble. So long."

In Next Week's Issue, a Complete Novel,
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A Serial

CHECHAHCO'S TREASURE TRAIL

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

RAY DURAND, a young tenderfoot from the Middle West, and two older sourdoughs, Splinter Colton and Parson Pinchot, come to the Far North in search of a lost gold mine discovered years before by an Indian named Laska John. Their coming into the region is opposed by the Bear, a white trader who is shaman of a native tribe, and who inflames the superstitious natives against the three newcomers. Living with the natives is Rita Gibson, an orphan, whom the Bear wishes to marry. The white girl is loved by Red Fox, young chief of the tribe, who learned

the language and ways of the white man from the girl's father, a trader.

For a time, the three partners encamp near the native village, being prevented by the cold weather from traveling farther. Ray and Rita fall in love, and before he leaves, she promises to marry him.

Mushing into the interior, the partners come to the three peaks known as the Three Aces. There they discover Laska John's gold. Ray makes a return trip to the native village to see Rita, and is captured by the Bear. The renegade trader has infected a native with typhoid germs, and blamed his death

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upon his being bewitched by the white men. The Bear tells Rita that he will permit the natives to kill Ray unless she agrees to marry him, the Bear. To save Ray's life, she consents.

The Bear releases Ray, but double-crosses Rita by setting the natives upon the youth. However, he escapes them and rejoins the two sourdoughs. The three of them plan to return immediately to rescue Rita from the Bear, but they are prevented by the spring break-up.

The trader starts with Rita for the Outside, where he plans to marry her. During their absence from the village, Red Fox discovers typhoid cultures in the Bear's cabin.

CHAPTER XIII.

RED FOX ACTS.

AS RED FOX picked his way unerringly through the flooded land, he was given to lengthy periods of self-analysis. With a thorough knowledge of the country, he moved as a man might move in his own home town. Almost mechanically, he avoided swamps and wide rivers. There was no conscious direction. As a man in town would walk briskly up the street, turn to the right or left, cross a bridge, proceed several blocks, turn to the left, open the gate, hurry up the steps and knock at the door of a friend, so Red Fox hurried along ridges, dropped into canyons, crossed streams and fallen trees, and continued at a brisk pace in a given direction with barely a thought as to what he was doing.

His mind was deep on the conflicting forces within his nature. Old Hank Gibson had taught Christianity, tolerance, and to forgive one's enemies. This was logical enough,

Red Fox reasoned, when nothing more was at stake than a minor dispute. But when a man was dealing with the Bear's breed, that, it seemed to him, was something else.

The Indian in him held full sway, and Red Fox lusted for revenge. The Indian in him was conscious of his great physical power, knowledge of the country, ability to live off the land indefinitely, and swiftness of foot. He was young, he reasoned, and so was Rita Gibson. Had not the white youth, Ray Durand, intruded, they might have been married, had he, Red Fox, been able to circumvent the Bear, and this he felt capable of doing. A knife thrust would have eliminated the trader, if nothing else.

Against the inherited code of the full-blooded Indian was the small protesting voice of the white man's teachings. Red Fox's breed never forgot a favor, and never failed to avenge a wrong. Had not Hank Gibson earned his undying gratitude when he taught him the white man's language, to read and write, and otherwise educated him to the point where, everything else being equal, he could hold his own against any white man? Yes, he reflected, he owed Hank Gibson's memory something.

For a pitifully brief period, the white man's teachings were in the ascendancy, and then the native element in Red Fox's make-up cried out to ignore the white influence on his life and never to forget that he was a full blood. He could therefore not even justify the white man's viewpoint by claiming to be a breed. A breed of the right sort might justify his actions and claim it was the white blood in his veins speaking.

Although the Bear and Rita had taken the trail many days ahead of

Red Fox and were thus well on their way when the break-up came, nevertheless the Indian youth was covering two and sometimes three miles to their one. One night he stood on a wind-swept ridge and looked across the country and beheld their camp fire. The next night he approached so close that the flickering light struck his face, and but for the denseness of the thicket in which he was concealed, those grouped about the fire would have observed him.

There were five in the party, Rita Gibson, the Bear, the three natives whom the trader had brought along as packers. The girl's mood was dejected, almost beaten, as though she considered herself a helpless pawn of fate. Red Fox studied her through the eyes of a man deeply in love, and later on through the eyes of one who was considering many things in a cold-blooded light and weighing the results impartially. He saw no trace of regret although much of sadness in the girl's manner. She had made her bargain, forced on her though it was, and she was going through with it despite the cost. The Bear's eyes seldom left Rita, and there was an eagerness, a growing triumph in them that infuriated the Indian to the point of murder.

POSSIBLY the girl in her highly nervous condition responded to Red Fox's presence. Perhaps her sudden start and quick eager gaze toward the shadows beyond the fire were caused by her imagination. In any event she half started from her sitting position, almost cried out, and then, regaining control with an effort, relaxed.

"What's the matter, Rita?" the Bear demanded sharply.

"Nothing," she answered. "I guess—I guess I'm just tired."

Red Fox faded away as silently as he had come. He did not rest that night but pushed steadily ahead until he reached the bank of a river. Despite the icy waters he swam the stream, and emerged dripping and chilled. Not deigning to dry out by a fire, he kept warm by physical exertion, and by noon that day his clothing had dried without being removed. He delved into a thicket and emerged, dragging a canoe that was green from exposure and inclined to be mossy, but sound. He launched the canoe and dropped downstream to a point where he had left his pack.

Two hours' sleep was sufficient for his powerful constitution. He climbed a near-by hill and watched five human beings and several dogs move slowly over a timbered bench and then drop down to the stream. Ringing axes came sharp and clear, then a blaze in the twilight, the crackle of dry wood, and the odor of smoke and savory food.

The native inched closer and closer. As twilight faded into the brief period of darkness, he crawled through the brush on hands and knees, and no rattle of gravel or crack of twigs broke the peace of the night, such was the silence of his progress. And then he cried out sharply, and those in camp squirmed from their sleeping bags and instinctively lifted their hands at the menace of the gun he held in the left hand, and the knife, gripped, ready to hurl in the right.

"You," he said sharply to the native youths, "know me, and you will stay as you are and not interfere. And you, Bear," he added, changing from dialect to English, "will keep your hands up, or I will kill you! I may kill you anyway—sometime! But first, I must be sure." He nodded his head gravely,

as though wrestling with a problem not yet solved. "Yes, sometime I may kill you. You took Rita by force, Brandon," he continued, addressing the trader by his seldom used name. "I am taking her from you by force."

"You dirty savage," the Bear snarled furiously. "You can't expect any decent white girl to marry an Indian, when there's a white man around."

Red Fox restrained himself with so much difficulty that the knuckles stood out white and distinct beneath the copper skin of the hand gripping the knife. He did not speak until he had regained the full measure of his self-control, then he hesitated a moment until his limited vocabulary supplied the necessary words.

"It depends on the white man and on the Indian and on the girl." He turned to Rita. "Which would you rather marry, Rita, Red Fox, full-blooded Indian and a chief, or the Bear, full-blooded white and"—again he hesitated until the proper word came—"scum?" He fairly spat the epithet.

"I would sooner marry Red Fox over and over again," the girl panted with anger and emotion. "But I have made a bargain and I am going to keep it."

"You're not," Red Fox said sharply. "You're going with me."

At his word of command two of the natives leaped forward and bound the Bear hand and foot. The third hastily gathered up Rita's personal belongings and then, as though she weighed nothing, Red Fox stooped and picked the girl up lightly, tossed her over his shoulder, and ran from the scene. It was but the work of a moment to place girl and equipment in the canoe; but the work of a moment

for his moccasined foot to kick the craft free and drive it with powerful paddle strokes into the foam of the restless river.

Rolling back and forth, purple with fury, cursing and sobbing in his helplessness, the Bear exerted his great strength against the thongs that bound his wrists. Deeper and deeper the moose hide dug into his wrists, forcing the blood away, breaking the skin, and cutting the flesh. Then the thongs gave way, and as he freed his hands, the frightened natives fled to the security of gloomy thickets. The Bear rolled over and over until he reached the ax and with its keen blade he severed the thongs binding his feet. Then he bounded up, raced to his tent, and secured a rifle.

"I'll get him," he screamed, "if it's the last thing I do. I'll get him, and what jury of white men would call it murder to kill a dirty Indian stealing a white girl?"

He ran to the brink of a canyon, and dropped to his stomach. The canoe was leaping from crest to crest, wallowing from right and then to left in a smother of foam. Ahead the stream tumbled over a low falls and beyond from bank to bank it was studded with boulders that stood, black and menacing like the fangs of some monster. Again and again the rifle roared as the Bear pumped cartridges into the chamber and pulled the trigger. But the tall, broad-shouldered figure in the stern of the canoe never looked back, never winced, but continued, eyes ahead, to drive the paddle deep and send the canoe onward by powerful strokes.

The craft shot over the falls, disappeared in a smother of spray, and there was a moment or two that seemed an eternity before the Bear and the crouching Indians saw it

burst into view and rush onward, through the boulders and into the smooth swift waters that led to the wild country beyond.

CHAPTER XIV.

SMOKE SIGNALS.

RAY DURAND'S sense of imprisonment and utter helplessness continued. Even the hard work incident to preparing for mining operations on a large scale failed materially to aid his mental state. And because the partners understood, they not only urged him to explore the country with the hope of blazing a logical trail to the village but put in considerable time searching for possible routes. Again and again they were invariably beaten back.

At length even the optimistic youth was forced to concede the only possible chance lay in crossing several mountain ranges and working his way through an unknown country and perhaps approaching the village from another direction. But even this could give no actual promise of success.

It appeared as if the village were almost entirely surrounded by swamp area, and this suggested that the founders, ages ago, had selected the site as a defense against stronger enemies. The cold itself would be a formidable ally during the winter months, and most of the men would naturally be at home. Swamps and turbulent streams would thus offer a defense in the summer months when men were often away hunting or fishing.

When all preparations to blow the beaver dam had been completed, Ray Durand reluctantly admitted they were marooned within the shadow of the Three Aces until the freeze-up came. Splinter Colton

and Parson Pinchot had proved their sportsmanship by spending many days in searching for a way out. He in turn was now prepared to prove his by throwing himself whole-heartedly into the work.

The beavers had done their work well, and a tangle of fair-sized trees formed the basic network of the dam. Time and many periods of high water had cemented the dam with gravel, silt, and muck. It had an air of permanency as though it had been there for ages—and probably it had except for the infrequent visits of prospectors chancing the curse of Laska John's gold.

Parson Pinchot crawled forth from a test pit he had dug and announced he had encountered a rock dike on which the beavers had erected their dam. Originally, he explained, the beavers came into this country looking for a place to build their dam, and finding a pond already formed by this dike, set to work.

"I don't want to get you boys unduly excited, but it's my opinion that dike has been acting like a ripple in a sluice box and has been catching all the gold for centuries. I can hardly find little more than a color at bed rock below the dike. Somebody give me a match; mine got wet down there."

Ray tossed him a waterproof match box, and the powerful sourdough disappeared down the shaft. He was gone but a minute or two when he emerged, showing surprising speed for one of his stockiness and weight. Ray and Splinter reached down from the bank on which they stood, and hauled Parson up with a jerk. The three thereupon legged it for a tangle of brush and boulders, where they crouched and awaited results.

A faint whiff of fuse smoke trailed

up from the shaft. The ground shook sullenly, and then dirt, sticks, and trees shot upward with a column of water. Muddy water began pouring through the breach which grew wider every moment. The last of the dam gave way with a roar, and the flood rushed down the creek bed, tearing out trees and brush, undermining old logs, and tearing away vast sections of the bank in its mad rush. The backwaters, with the weight of many thousand tons behind, rushed in and ripped and tore at the gravel in the old pond. Silt, muck, sand, and even small rocks were carried away like chips. All along the bank frightened and indignant beavers were scampering to safety. Beaver houses had vanished in a twinkling and become so much mud and sticks.

"Tough luck, boys," Parson observed, addressing his remarks to the beavers. "You have had this to yourselves a long time, and it is better a bunch of gold-hungry prospectors come here with their shovels and gold pans than some other gents I can mention with their traps. You can at least start housekeeping over again this fall, while a lot of your less fortunate relatives are keeping some fair ladies' backs warm."

"Yeah," added the skeptical Splinter, "and some ladies not so fair."

BY midafternoon the backwaters had spent their force, and the site of the beaver pond was a vast, yawning, water-torn hole. Here and there lay shallow pools in which struggled trout that had washed down from the upper pools and been caught. Ray scooped up some fifty of the rainbows ranging in size from eight to twelve inches, which are the finest

eating, and dumped the remainder, including five more than twenty inches long, into the stream.

With sunlight or twilight almost continuous at this season of the year, sleep became a matter of convenience rather than a set time. They clumped about the muck in hip rubber boots searching for large nuggets that might lay exposed where the gravel had been washed down to bed rock. Ray let out a yell as he picked up one worth seventy-five dollars, but his victory was short-lived because the observant Parson produced one twice that weight. All of it was beautiful gold showing little stains and wear.

The ledge from which it came could not be far away, and many were the hopeful glances that Parson and Splinter cast at the Three Aces. Somewhere high up above the snow line lay the mother lode, the source of all this treasure. More wealth lay under their feet than any three normal men could hope to use, and yet they wanted more, not because they were gluttonous but for the thrill of finding and taking something that jealous nature had hidden for ages.

As for Ray Durand, the bigness of the land and its men had killed the petty ambition to return wealthy and successful, to his native town, and indulge in a pardonable amount of gloating over such worthies as Butch Keyes and others who had laughed at him as a boy. To him the gold now meant happiness and a relief from labor for his mother, sisters, and a means of business expansion to his older brother. As for himself? Well, without Rita to share it, the gold meant less than nothing.

While Splinter and Parson slept the heavy, snoring sleep of the just and righteous, their younger partner

tossed restlessly on his bunk and thought of the girl who had come so unexpectedly into his life, and who had bargained her freedom, yes, one night say life itself, for his safety.

"Outside, somewhere," he muttered in his misery, "with the Bear. And here I am," he half sobbed, "hemmed in by swamps, a prisoner in this devilish land. The curse of Laska John's gold works in other ways than violent death. It sometimes decrees a living death."

The miserable youth felt something touch his shoulder, then work along until it found his hand. There was warmth and friendly pressure in the grip. Parson Pinchot had reached out of the darkness and extended the hand of fellowship.

"Son, we're white men, Christians, who know the strength of God, and we are stronger than any Indian superstition or senseless curse. Be of good cheer, Ray. We're going to beat this game yet." Again came the friendly pressure, and strength, both spiritual and physical, seemed to be transmitted from the older man to the younger.

"Thanks, Parson," he whispered brokenly, "you seem to know just how to put your finger on the right spot. I'll be all right now."

And Parson, lying tense and expectant in the darkness, heard him roll over in the bunk, and presently came the deep, heavy breathing of a young man whose mind is at peace.

WHEN every shovelful of gravel means just so much gold, then it is astonishing the number of hours a strong, yes, even a weak man, can labor. After the first clean-up, with riffles fairly choked with clean, coarse gold, Ray Durand experienced a bad attack of the fever that invariably

assails the chechahco. Nor is the old sourdough always immune. The best of them undergo recurrent attacks particularly if a long period has elapsed between strikes.

Ray shoveled in until he was ready to drop, rested an hour or so, and then went back for more. Each shovelful seemed to say "Another dollar! Another dollar! Another dollar!" And always there was the water, pure and clean as the driven snow, pouring into the flume to emerge muddy with its burden of sand and muck.

"Don't bother him," Splinter commented, as Parson was about to protest. "Let him get it out of his system."

And when Ray Durand's frantic session of shoveling in was over, more than ten thousand dollars' worth of gold was taken from the sluice box.

"You've been at it forty-eight hours, kid, with about two hours' rest, and that's hard work," Splinter explained. "But you can't kick about the pay. Five thousand dollars a day is good money at any man's job. We can't get out till fall, anyway, so we might just as well take it easy. That gold isn't going to get away from us—yet."

"Why did you say 'yet'?" Parson scowled. "I'm trying to pound it into your stupid head that there's nothing to this curse. Besides, nobody but Red Fox knows where we are, and he's too wise an Indian to tell. There probably isn't anybody within twenty-five miles of us."

This seemed logical enough to Ray until the following day when he chanced to look up and noticed what appeared to be a small cloud above a hill seven miles away. He resumed his work but on glancing up again noticed the cloud had disappeared. A few minutes later it

was there again, and once more it vanished. He stuck the shovel in the gravel, climbed out of the pit, and made his way through the blueberry bushes up to the ridge. He turned, cupped his hands, and belted at his partners:

"Splinter, you and Parson come up here a minute. I may be crazy but I think there's a fire over on that hill."

The two old sourdoughs, easily intrigued by anything suggesting a mystery, left their work and came panting up the ridge.

"Keep an eye on that hill," Ray said, "while I run down to the cabin and get my binoculars."

He returned several minutes later, puffing from a combination of excitement and effort.

"Anything happen while I was gone?" he queried.

"Yeah," Splinter answered laconically, "a couple of puffs of smoke went up all right. At first I thought it was one of these small, woolly clouds, but it's smoke right enough. If it was down in the lower country, I'd say some Indian had killed a moose and was sendin' up a smoke signal to all his friends to come and help pack it away. You know, they pack away all they can in their stomachs, and the rest on their backs. Hello! There it comes again. No, that isn't a signal. He's just throwin' more fuel on the fire."

Ray adjusted the binoculars and viewed the hilltop for a considerable period. He could make out a tiny figure moving about, a figure that paused frequently and stood erect, with elbows out as though it were shading its eyes with both hands while looking into the distance.

"Just for luck, boys," Ray suggested, "suppose we build a fire of our own, and see what happens."

In a short time Parson had kin-

dled a little blaze while the other two dragged up every bit of dry wood in sight. When the main body of wood was fairly ablaze, they dumped on green boughs which sent a column of white smoke high into the air. Almost instantly action was forthcoming from the hilltop. The figure was now manipulating a blanket in such a manner as to send up a series of smoke signals.

"Parson," Splinter suggested, "scratch that head of yours and see if you can recall your old Indian lore."

Parson Pinchot watched narrowly until the signals were completed. There was a lengthy pause, and then they were repeated.

"Generally speaking," Parson said thoughtfully, "that signal means 'Peace unto you' or 'All is well' or 'There's nothing to fear.' Different tribes have different ways of saying it, but, boiled down, it means the same thing. In good plain American slang it means, 'Cut out the worry.' Of course I'm assuming that signal was intended for us. It might be meant for some native somewhere in the back country of whom we know nothing, but you notice as soon as we got our fire to going, he got busy and sent the message."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Ray hopefully. "Maybe Rita is all right, and she sent some Indian to send up the smoke signal."

"Yeah," Splinter objected, "but only one Indian knows where we are, and that's Red Fox. He ain't sendin' up no friendly signals, not that cuss. Kid, I hope it means all is well and that the signal is for us. But have you thought of this? It may be just a trick to find out our location. Well, if it is, it worked. And it will give us somethin' else to think about while we're shovelin' pay dirt into the sluice box."

UNDER the friendly influence of a warm sun that struck the hillside at just the right angle, the blueberries grew large and ripened rapidly. Three or four times a week, Ray knocked off work early and gathered enough berries for a couple of pies. Taking a page from the Scriptures, Parson Pinchot made a batch of blueberry wine, as he insisted, for the stomach's sake, but which Splinter knew would always be available in an emergency. The rawboned sourdough was quite adept at creating emergencies. He hardly waited for the wine to become wine before falling into the creek, and needing a stimulant to warm him up.

And so the weeks passed, with the men working early and late and dining on meat that had hung several weeks in their ice box, varying their diet with trout from the stream; and later on, when the nesting season was over, they fried young ptarmigan in deep fat. The vegetable garden, that Parson planted in the deep black loam where the sun shone twenty hours a day, grew so rapidly they could fairly hear it. Lettuce, radishes, turnips, carrots, and new potatoes. And with plenty of green stuff available thoughts of scurvy vanished, and as the smoke signal had indicated, "All was well."

But there were periods when speculation as to Rita's fate gnawed at Ray's heart, and fear for her safety almost overpowered him. Even the excitement of a clean-up failed to penetrate these dark moods. The friendly pressure of Parson's hand, a few words from the Scriptures, and Splinter Colton's understanding smile, did much to lighten the burden. With an effort the youth would master his feelings and continue buoyant for another week or two.

They worked methodically in the pit with its golden sands—sands often so rich in gold, the entire area took on a yellowish glint, in the sunshine. When three quarters of the bottom had been thoroughly cleaned, even to the cracks in the rock which contained fine gold that Parson swept out with a broom, they diverted the creek into a new channel and cleaned up the other half.

As twilight settled one late fall day, Splinter Colton seated himself on a muck-covered rock, filled his pipe, lighted it, and with a sigh of satisfaction watched Ray Durand toss the last shovelful of muck into the sluice box. For several moments, the youth held the shovel in the water until the last of the muck was gone and the shovel stood, dripping and polished, from constant use.

"That ends it, boys," Ray cried.

"The last of Laska John's gold," Splinter added.

"Amen," Parson rumbled piously. "Just a moment, boys, while I return thanks to Him whose divine guidance brought us here without injury, gave us health and strength to do our work as we saw it, and rewarded us as few men have been rewarded for a season's labor." He kneeled in the muck, and words of humble appreciation flowed eloquently from his lips.

They cleaned up the next day, Splinter shutting off the water while Ray and Parson picked up the coarse gold behind the wooden ripples. The thrill of its weight and color was as strong as ever with the youth. Familiarity, in this instance, had not bred contempt. They poured the nuggets into moosehide pokes that grew stiff from their weight, and were closed with draw strings and carefully tied. And

when the larger nuggets had been picked up, they turned down a low head of water and loosened the gravel that had stuck to the bottom of the sluice box. They washed off the ripples and panned the last of the muck to obtain the fine gold, and then they took the sluice boxes apart and salvaged that which had caught in the cracks. They even washed the boards, scrubbing vigorously with the broom to obtain the bits that had lodged in cracks and beneath splinters. When the last board and ripple had been cleaned, they cut the bank and let the water rush once more into the pit and rise slowly until a pond had been formed behind the dike.

"And that," Parson said, with a note of regret in his voice, "ends our work until the freeze-up."

THE crash of a tree broke the silence of a moonlit night. Ray Durand's feet struck the cabin floor with a thump. Instinctively he reached for his six-gun.

"Did you hear that, boys?" he whispered.

"Yeah," Splinter answered, "and here I am right beside you, kid, gun in hand. Now that we've got the gold, it's time for Laska John's curse to start workin'."

Parson Pinchot piled out of his bunk a second later. He shook his head sadly. He regarded his raw-boned partner with deep affection, but years of association had not enabled him to drive the last shreds of superstition from Splinter's make-up. Splinter had no patience with witchcraft and such things, but he did believe in hunches and was equally certain bad luck could attach itself to a man or to gold and could even offer proof that such things happened.

Guns in hand the three slipped

quietly from the cabin, crawled through the blueberry bushes, and listened. There was a sound of movements directly below.

"We'll order them to put up their hands," Splinter whispered, "and if they're slow about it, we'll shoot first and talk afterward." He crawled a couple of yards farther, lifted his head, and ducked. "The drinks are on us!" he muttered.

Ray stood upon his knees to get a better view. A few yards away a beaver was industriously gnawing at a tree. The gnawing stopped frequently, as if the little animal were attempting to check up on its work. The beaver sat up, listened as though for danger, looked intently at the dam, and then resumed its gnawing. Suddenly there was a crackle of splintering wood, and with a heavy swish of upper branches the tree dropped square across the stream.

"There are a lot of fur coats there for somebody," Ray whispered, "but that somebody will have to come up here and get them, as far as I'm concerned. If I thought it would help any, I'd get an ax and give them a hand, but——"

"I tried it once," Parson Pinchot confessed, "and somehow I couldn't seem to suit the beavers at all. They had their own ideas, and all I did was to make more work for them. So I quit and watched them. Winter can't be far off now, boys, the way they're hurrying. They know we're here, but that don't stop them, and that means their time is limited. Mark my words, we'll be out of here soon."

The following day Parson's prediction was partly confirmed by the honking of geese. Ray galloped into the cabin and dragged his partners out, pointing excitedly into the air.

"Look, boys! The ducks and geese are heading south!"

A double-V formation came over the ridge and disappeared between Durand and Colton Peaks. Hardly had this great flock vanished when a second and third came. And later on during the day there was a flight of mallards—a silent, lordly V formation escaping the first grip of winter.

Here and there a shallow pool was frozen over. The frost had painted the leaves in glorious colors, but the rivers and creeks continued to brawls their way to the sea, and the swamps remained mucky and treacherous.

WHEN the beaver pond had frozen completely over and the ice was thick enough to bear Ray's weight when he jumped up and down, the last of his patience vanished.

"Come on, boys," he cried; "let's go. There's snow enough in most places to carry the sled, and we can pack the stuff over the bare spots if necessary. The dogs are just r'aring to be off, and the dogs have nothing on me."

"The switchback looked bad," Parson said; "we'd better make up packs and carry them on our own backs until we get the sled and dogs down to the level country. A broken sled runner at this stage in the game would be disastrous. We've got nearly a thousand pounds of gold. In other words a half a ton. It's taken me a long time, but that's what I estimate it weighs."

"How much is that worth?" Ray queried. It was the first time he had thought of their clean-up in terms other than ounces.

"Figure it out," Parson answered. "A thousand pounds of gold is twelve thousand ounces, and each ounce is worth over twenty dollars."

"Let's see," Ray mentally calculated, "twenty times twelve is two hundred and forty, add three zeros and— Holy smoke!" he exclaimed. "Two hundred and forty thousand dollars! Gosh!"

"Two hundred and forty thousand dollars to get out of this superstition-ridden country," Splinter added.

"Confound you, Splinter," Parson cried furiously. "You danged calamity howler! Some of these days I'm going to lose my temper and swear. And if I swear, I'll use words you never even heard of! Now I don't want another word about Laska John's curse or hard luck out of you."

"All right, all right!" Splinter conceded good-humoredly. "But just the same it don't pay to relax our vigilance. Shakespeare or somebody once said eternal vigilance is the price of success and until this gold is safe in a Seattle bank, I'm goin' to keep my eyes open, and after that I'm goin' to keep my eyes open, too, because some of them city slickers will have it transferred to their bank account before I even know what's happenin'. Well, let's make up the packs."

He spread out their faithful pack sacks with the broad shoulder straps and the headband that Parson favored for his heavy load, and proceeded to fill them with gold and necessary equipment. The gold was heavy so everything not absolutely necessary was to be left behind.

"Kid," Splinter said suddenly when the packs were made up, "you remember a long time ago when you was just a weak chechahco, before you became a sourdough who doesn't realize his strength, you couldn't pick up my hundred-pound sack, nor Parson's hundred-and-twenty-five-pound load. You said it would be a great day when you

could pick Parson's pack up off the floor and slip your arms through the shoulder straps unaided. Well, kid"—he thumped Ray vigorously between the shoulders—"the great day is at hand. Get Parson's pack on your back while we tip back in our chairs and prepare to cheer the hour of your manhood."

"And don't you think I haven't looked forward to this day," Ray answered. "This is the first step of several I hope to take. First, shouldering Parson's pack; secondly, knocking the Bear out in a rough-and-tumble fight, and last, well—" A wistful expression came into his eyes. "I've talked a lot about my mother from time to time, and I guess you're pretty well sick of it."

"Never," Splinter said calmly.

"Amen," added Parson.

"When I was a little kid and afraid of the dark, she used to set her light in the window to guide me. It sort of cheered me up, showed me the way, and vanished my fears of the goblins that came into my boyish mind, and often along that path which I could follow with my eyes shut, Butch Keyes would lie in wait. I never ran from him. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to do it. I'd sooner take the beating I knew I'd get. When I left home, Butch was there waiting for me and he knocked me cold. And he promised he'd be there when I came back, and—gosh! I hope he is. Gee, boys, it's going to be great to go up that path once more and see the light burning in the window, coming quietly up the steps, opening the door, walking in, and grabbing ma."

ALTHOUGH Ray Durand was smiling, his eyes were filled with tears, and Splinter turned his head away, and muttered something that sounded like

"Oh, hell!" while Parson Pinchot brushed the tears away with the back of his hand and growled, "Bless my soul!"

"You're going with me of course," Ray added, "and—I'd be willing to say that I'd had all of life's happiness if Rita was going along with me to meet—our mother."

He eyed Parson Pinchot's pack with an appraising eye. "Well, boys, here goes!"

"Just a minute," Splinter suggested, "why not try out mine first? If you can lift mine, then tackle Parson's."

"Nope, Splinter, I'm all through going around the long way. Until I get home with my feet on the little crooked trail leading up to the house, I'm taking the short cut."

He braced his feet, gripped Parson Pinchot's pack straps, and heaved. The pack straps creaked and groaned from the weight; the pack shifted slightly, but held to the floor. A shade of surprise mingled with annoyance passed over Ray's brown face. Again he heaved, and the pack merely shifted. The third time he put all of his strength into the effort, but the pack stuck as though glued to the floor.

Parson got to his feet, scratched his head, and gave Splinter a suspicious glance.

"Confound you, Splinter," he roared. "That time I almost swore. Ray, lookit here. That confounded, long, lean, lanky, worthless Siwash, that lop-eared pelican we call our partner has showed just what a sneaking, low-down, double-crossing wolverene he is. He's nailed that pack to the floor." And with that he kicked Splinter with such force as to lift that worthy almost out of his moccasins. Parson caught up a hammer, and removed the nails, then lifted the pack to as-

sure himself it was actually free. "Now, kid, put that pack on your shoulders, or you're no pardner of mine."

Ray Durand reached down and gave a heave. The pack came almost lightly into the air. He thrust his right arm between the straps and the pack, let the weight drop partly to his shoulders, and jammed through the left arm. And then he danced a jig.

"Come on," he yelled; "I'm on my way. At the start, Parson, I'm going to pack yours, and you can pack mine, and the rest of the stuff comes on the sled." With that he was gone.

He scorned the use of the switch-back but went straight down taking the short cut as he had promised. They relayed the remainder of the burden to the bottom of the slope and were following with the dogs when Parson Pinchot held up a warning hand.

"I thought I saw a flash, Splinter."

"Mebbe you did," Splinter Colton returned. "The flash of a camp fire. This was to be a Hudson Bay start, you know."

The faint crack of a six-gun reached their ears. They looked at one another in the gloom, and then strained their eyes in the darkness before them, as though to pull aside the curtain and look upon the unfolding drama just ahead. Seconds ticked into a full minute, and there was no other sound, no answering fire, just the soft moan of the wind across thousands of square miles of snow-covered land, and the panting of their eager dogs. Each to his own reaction in this critical hour—on Splinter Colton's lips, "the curse of Laska John's gold"; on the lips of Parson Pinchot there was a prayer.

CHAPTER XV.

AT DUSK.

SPLINTER COLTON and Parson Pinchot had faced many kinds of situations together, but none had held quite so sinister an aspect as the present. Regardless of one's views on superstitions and the curse of an old Indian chief, the fact remained no group of men had yet succeeded in removing any great portion of Laska John's gold from the country and lived to enjoy it. Death or disaster had invariably overtaken each party, and now with the greatest clean-up yet made, they had left the protection of the Three Aces only to hear the crack of Ray Durand's six-gun and then silence.

Ray in his enthusiasm had hurried ahead, to establish their first night's camp. What had happened? Had he been ambushed?

"We've got to watch out," Parson warned, as they drew near the scene of the shooting. "We may walk into an ambush."

"Not if we're in our right minds, we won't," Parson retorted. "Let the dogs go on ahead. They'll follow Ray's footprints, anyway. You go to the left, I'll go to the right, and we'll parallel the trail. If you see any footprints leading toward the trail, well, you know what to do."

The two sourdoughs vanished in the gloom, and it was Parson Pinchot who stumbled onto moccasin prints plainly outlined in the fresh snow. With drawn weapon he closed in and presently caught sight of a figure advancing from the opposite side.

"Don't shoot, Splinter," Parson whispered. "It's me."

"I thought it might be. That's why I held my fire until I was sure just who it was."

"I found some footprints on my trail," Parson whispered. "See, Splinter, they swing right in behind Ray's footprints."

Again fearing ambush, they separated. Several hundred yards ahead the dogs came to an abrupt stop, hesitated for several seconds, then closed in. Parson's strong hand suddenly touched Splinter's arm.

"Look at that!" he cried. "Those savages have killed Ray and pinned him to that tree with their arrows."

One arrow had apparently gone through his head for the parka hood was spitted to the tree by the shaft. A second had gone exactly through the center of the back. The arms dangled curiously, and in the gloom added to the grotesque appearance of the figure.

"I'd say Ray had heard a noise, had shed his pack—you see it there on the ground—and had crouched behind that tree tryin' to locate the source of danger," Splinter growled, with a searching look around. "The Indian sneaked up and shot him from behind. You stay here and get the drop on anybody that takes a shot at me. I'll see what I can do for the poor kid. I'm afraid he's done for—that arrow through the back—"

He hurried up, half sobbing with grief and fury, paused, grasped the parka, then turned around and called his partner.

"What do you make of this?" The parka was empty. "Stay here with the dogs, Parson; I'm takin' up the trail from here."

MOCCASIN prints led from the spot, and presently joined another set of footprints. From the length of the stride it was evident the owner of

the second footprints was leaving the country at a rapid pace. Splinter legged it for nearly a half mile and came to a stop where the snow was badly disturbed, as though a terrific struggle had taken place. From this spot the two sets of footprints continued. There was less length to the strides as though both were weakening.

Splinter increased his pace. The crackle of brush caught his ear, and he swung off sharply to the right, and came upon two figures struggling in the snow. The broad back and powerful shoulders of the top figure belonged to Ray Durand. He drove home a couple of punches, then straightened up to survey the result.

"All right, Ray?" Splinter yelled.

"I seem to be," Ray answered, although he was breathing heavily from his efforts. "The unconscious gent at my feet is our old friend, the bob-eared Indian. He sure pulled a fast one on me. He must have heaved a rock or something over in the brush to make a noise. Naturally, I jumped behind a tree to take observation, being of a suspicious nature on account of Laska John's curse and other things. I couldn't see anything, but all at once I heard something go *whang!* just above my head. It was an arrow and it had just about parted my hair in the middle. I tried to drop to the ground, but the shaft had pinned my parka hood to the tree. I just skinned out of the parka, and it was a good thing I did so, because the second arrow went straight through the back.

"By then I was on the other side of the tree just in time to see Bob-ear come prancing up yelling like an Indian. Come to think of it, that's natural enough; he is an Indian. I yelled for him to stick 'em

up, and when he was a little bit slow, I fired just to scare him. The scare seemed to have settled in his legs," he added humorously, "because he fairly evaporated. I took after him and was hopelessly left behind until he ran into a sort of blind canyon. Trying to climb an almost sheer wall, he pulled down forty or fifty tons of snow before he gave it up.

"While he was wallowing around in the snow, I closed in, and we had it hot and heavy for a minute or two. He got away, and I guess some of my punches must have slowed him up because he didn't seem to have his speed after that. The next time I got him, he pulled a knife, but I had a gun, so he dropped the knife. He apparently quit, then suddenly dived into me with a crash. I could have killed him, of course, but since lifting Parson Pinchot's pack, I figured I might handle him man to man, and——"

"There he is," Splinter interrupted. "Now what we'll do with him? You don't want him for a souvenir, do you?"

"Gosh, no! But I've got a scheme that I think will work. Those superstitious devils along the river are evidently stirred up again. They are trying to eliminate the white man's curse by eliminating the white man. I figure we'll be safe enough in the daytime because they are afraid to close in, when we can see them, but at night they have the advantage and know it. The flight of an arrow is silent, and that's what gets under my skin."

The Indian had recovered sufficiently to regain his feet. He glanced hopefully about as though contemplating flight, then thought better of the idea as Splinter significantly tapped the butt of his gun.

"You never get away," the In-

dian muttered. "The Bear say white man get away alive, all in the end die. The Bear, he knows. White boy touch me; I die."

"You know better than that," Ray cut in. "You've been around white men a lot at Telegraph Creek, and even down to Wrangell. Nothing ever happened to you. You're not so dumb as you would like us to think. You're playing the Bear's game. Now what is it?"

The native refused to answer.

"If you're playing the Bear's game, you're double-crossing your own people. At that I think I made a mistake in letting you live, but maybe not. If the Indians are determined we'll not leave this country alive, then you probably know where we'll be attacked."

"He won't tell," Splinter said. "He's all set to make it tough for you. He's been around Telegraph Creek enough to know that we won't risk a run-in with the Provincial police by killing him."

"Where is the Bear?" Ray asked.

A nasty smile played around the native's lips. "Outside with Rita on what he call honeymoon." And the Indian knew that he had deeply wounded the white youth.

RAY did not betray his plan until late the following day, when he abruptly requested a halt. He shed his own parka, then pulled off the native's parka, eyed it with misgivings, set his face determinedly, and pulled it on. Then he jammed his own parka on the Indian. With the aid of dog chains he secured the native to the sled.

"I believe you said," he drawled, "that they're after me in particular. I'm the one the Bear wants killed. Well, it'll be just too bad if you're killed and it's a case of mistaken identity."

Whereupon Ray ran ahead of the team, and his attitude was that of a prisoner in the custody of watchful captors. It was an hour later that the Indian grew apprehensive, and as the sled dipped downward toward a thicket, he became frantic with fear.

"Thanks a lot for the trip," Ray Durand said. "You're evidently expecting something to happen just ahead."

He plunged into the nearest thicket and paralleled the trail for a half mile before encountering moccasin tracks. They led toward the clump of trees that had caused the native so much concern. Ray followed the tracks until within a short distance, when he approached with exceeding caution.

The twang of the bowstring, followed by a howl of pain, caused the youth to crouch behind a clump of brush. It was a matter of seconds before a native came bounding down the trail. He was looking behind as though expecting pursuit. His first hint of Ray's presence was when a mighty force struck him about the waist and bore him to the snow. As the native turned to look upon his assailant, a fist crashed against his jaw, and along with the stars dancing before his eyes was the finest aurora borealis he had ever looked upon.

Ray tossed the unconscious figure over his shoulder, and hurried to join the party. Splinter Colton had called a halt while Parson Pinchot bandaged an arrow wound in the bob-eared Indian's arm.

"It worked!" Ray cried. "And it would have served Bob-ear here right if he had been killed. Well," he added, turning to the native, "you've served your time as target. Your little playmate wears my parka to-morrow night. The pro-

gram seems to call for an arrow or two each night at dusk."

The next two nights Ray Durand was fortunate in bagging his man before the latter had a chance to shoot an arrow. With more prisoners on their hands, it was necessary for Parson to drop behind with two of them, leaving the other two with the sled under Splinter's watchful eye. The natives, waiting along the trail, were expecting a party of three, and if they found four or five their suspicions might be aroused. There was a lull, and two nights later Ray got the drop on a precious pair, one of whom was armed with a bow and arrow, and the other a rifle.

Their prisoners were now a problem. They not only made serious inroads on the food supply, but it was necessary for one man to stand guard at all times. They dare not release them, lest the village be notified, and the natives return in force.

"And we can't take them with us forever," Splinter growled, "nor can we put them in a bag and drown them in the river like stray cats. I'm hanged if I know what to do."

"Nor I," Parson grumbled.

Parson was awakened that night by Splinter's vigorous pokes in the ribs.

"Listen," he said. "That kid's gone crazy or something."

RAY, standing guard duty, or rather sitting, while he watched the sleeping prisoners, was fairly exploding with laughter. Splinter crawled from his sleeping bag and walked over to the giggling guard.

"What's the matter with you, Ray? Have you missed too many boats? In case you don't know, that's another way of sayin' you've stayed in the country so long you've gone crazy."

"I've just thought of a way of getting rid of our prisoners," he whispered. "Listen here." He pulled Splinter's head to within a few inches of his lips and whispered.

Splinter, also, broke forth in laughter.

"Two crazy men, eh?" said Parson, joining them.

Again Ray whispered at length, and there were three crazy men, apparently. The bob-eared native awoke from a sound sleep, gave one startled glance, and nudged his fellow prisoners. Six Indians lay without moving while their dark eyes remained apprehensively on the three white men.

"And before we can pull it off with success," Ray added, "we'll have to get 'em good and tired."

The following morning the load was evenly distributed among the prisoners. The three white men carried nothing, and the sled was empty except for a few cooking utensils. The Indians were started down the trail properly herded by Ray and Splinter while Parson handled the dog team. A very brief stop was made at noon, and it was nearly midnight before Ray called a halt. The Indians dropped in their tracks. The march had been a success in more ways than one. It had not only brought about the desired state of utter exhaustion, but it had also enabled the white men to cross a series of ridges with the empty sled, and thus avoid coming down the river and passing through the native village.

Again Ray Durand was left on guard, while Parson and Splinter were supposed to sleep. If they slept at all, it was with one eye open although several times Splinter found it necessary to stuff a mitten into his mouth to keep from laughing aloud.

Ray quietly opened Parson's tin medicine box and removed therefrom a bottle of iodine. He whittled a stick to a nice point, wrapped a bit of cotton around the end, and made a swab. He dipped the swab in the iodine, and then approached the sleeping natives. Each was snoring in a different key, each so far gone from exhaustion that, during the first hour or two of sleep, nothing less than a gunshot would have awakened them. Ray dabbed tiny, round spots of iodine on the foreheads and cheeks of each native.

"Again," he whispered softly, "the white man's curse has fallen on the poor Indian. If the Bear's story of the danger of contact with the whites don't prove a boomerang this time, I'll be surprised. It doesn't look like the first stages of a white man's disease—it looks worse."

He turned in sometime later while Parson stood guard. Ray was awakened early the following morning by a howl. It was a blood-curdling sound that fairly lifted the sleeping youth right off the ground. When fully awake, he found himself half out of his sleeping bag and gripping his six-gun while his eyes stared around in search of expected danger.

The bob-eared Indian was staring in horror at his companions while in turn they were equally horrified with one another's appearance. Managing to repress a smile, Parson Pinchot pointed at the group, and clutched Roy's arm.

"Look!" he cried. "The Bear's words were true! The white man's curse!"

Ray Durand leaped away as though from a plague, then he drew his gun and cried out the Indians should be killed before they spread the disease. To this Parson Pinchot

apparently entered a vigorous protest. It was at this moment Splinter Colton vanished. He could no longer restrain his laughter. If it were possible for an Indian to turn white with fright, this miracle had been wrought. Their color was a curious mixture of copper, orange, and green.

Parson Pinchot made up a pack of food, cut their bonds, then shooed them down the trail. The dumfounded natives, either through fear of recapture, or fear of disease, bounded over the country like frightened caribou. There was no order in their going. Each selected the course he thought best, and the last the three whites saw of them was their heads, rising and falling as they bounded through the brush.

"And now," Parson wisely suggested, "we'd better show a little speed ourselves, before they wash their faces and get some of that iodine off."

"I don't think we need to worry about any miraculous healing," Splinter drawled. "It's been my observation the bob-eared Indian only washes about once a month."

Nevertheless the rawboned sourdough speeded their own departure.

THE Bear was anxious. But little of importance had taken place since Red Fox had taken Rita from him by force. The trader returned to the village and to his place in native life. The white men, he felt sure, had found Laska John's gold and were mining it. At such times as the natives were not engaged in fishing, he sent them into the hills to trace the white men, if that be possible. They were not to look for footprints which naturally had disappeared with the snow, but were to climb the ridges and smaller peaks and search about

the country for signs of smoke. It thus happened one of his men had observed the "All is well" smoke signal.

Reading the signal, the native had at first been mystified, and this mystification had increased when there came an answering signal from the Three Aces. Accordingly, he had reported to the Bear who had instantly taken the trail.

In the course of time the swamp, that imprisoned Ray Durand and his companions, also turned the Bear back. He had bided his time, knowing the men would be coming out as soon as the swamp froze over. Then the trader had played on the superstitions of the younger natives and impressed upon their minds the necessity of killing all three of the white men, if they wished to avoid the white man's curse—the white man's sickness, which, he predicted, would certainly wipe out their loved ones before the following spring.

If Ray Durand and his partners were indeed bringing out Laska John's gold, then the Bear wanted the loot for himself, and to insure this, it was necessary the natives know nothing of what might be on the sled. For that reason he instructed them that the white men must be killed, but that it would be fatal for any native to touch either the bodies or any of their belongings. Six men, somewhat apprehensive, but nevertheless determined, had gone into the hills, and none of the six had returned.

Fortune had favored him in one respect. Red Fox was not in the village to interfere. The native had vanished completely since that day he had forcibly taken Rita Gibson, nor had anything been heard of the girl.

Making every allowance for de-

lay, at least one of the six should have been back by this time, for food if for no other reason. The Bear was on the verge of making a personal investigation when an uproar in the village brought him to his door.

He stepped outside, and found not one but six—six badly winded natives. Old men, young men, women, and children were scuttling in every direction, and some of the children had been snatched up with such speed that their legs trailed out behind them, like the tail of a kite, as frantic mothers fled to safety.

There were several tense seconds when the Bear himself contemplated flight, and then he stepped closer, his piggy eyes glittering with interest and curiosity. The stricken natives plainly indicated if the Bear's witch-doctor abilities were worth anything, now was a perfect time for a demonstration.

The trader dragged the bob-eared Indian into his cabin and gave his face and forehead a scrubbing. Many of the spots faded slightly. The scrubbing was repeated until a complete healing was accomplished. Then, with a growl of disgust, the Bear kicked the miserable body into the open and ordered his companions within.

By evening the Bear had made a complete demonstration of his magic, but no amount of persuasion could induce any native in the village to consider further attacks on the whites. Even when the mysteries of iodine had been carefully explained to the bob-eared Indian, he remained unmoved. He was quite convinced that in his dealings with the three men in general and Ray Durand in particular he had used up a considerable portion of his good luck. Death might be his fate in the next encounter.

From the men, however, the Bear learned that the sled was heavily laden and each small pack was all that a strong man could lift.

"Gold!" he muttered. "Laska John's gold! And so they got it!"

He had believed they would be successful from the first, but now the matter was confirmed in no uncertain evidence. Each hour it was getting farther and farther beyond his reach. Soon it would be out of the wild country and on the main-traveled trails. Other white men would be moving to and fro. The hairy trader sat in the gloom, reflecting, and presently he asked himself, "Why not?"

CHAPTER XVI.

A SHOW-DOWN FOR THE BEAR.

IT was the Bear's belief that no better country in which to commit a successful murder existed in the North. Provincial police might investigate the disappearance of a trapper or prospector who followed the ordinary routine. But it was pretty well established that those who sought Laska John's gold disappeared. And their disappearance was credited, not to the treachery of mankind, but to the natural elements of danger existing in a wild country.

The Bear's plan was simple. He would kill the three men, dispose of their bodies, and cache the gold. A year or maybe five years hence, when the Durand party had been forgotten, he would return to the Three Aces, go through the motion of successful placer-mining operations, and then, digging up the cached gold, suddenly appear at Telegraph Creek with the information that he had struck it. Thus, if the Provincial police checked back, everything would be in order.

It was a common practice for the Bear to go on periodic sprees. At such times he locked his door, drank alone, well knowing the natives, having had experience with his drunken rages, would leave him strictly to himself. This night, with the odor of moonshine on his breath, he stalked from cabin to cabin, finding fault and making complaints. Here and there he dropped a threat, and then, conscious that they were nodding their heads wisely, he entered his cabin and locked the door.

It was shortly after midnight that he emerged. The village was silent. He carried a week's food on his back, a rifle in his hands, and a well-cared-for six-gun in a holster fastened to his belt. It was not a difficult matter to pick up the trail. He merely had to back-track on the course taken by the frightened natives. True, the strides were often far apart, but he found them without difficulty. There was some snow in the air, but not enough to cover moccasin tracks, and later, when he picked up the sled tracks, he knew he had won out. So deep were the cuts that nothing short of a blizzard could cover the scars.

Sixty hours after leaving the village, the Bear was within striking distance of the party, and at noon the following day, he was ahead, crouched in a thicket, lying in wait.

Presently the dogs came into view. Ray Durand was running alongside while Parson Pinchot was at the gee pole. The team was moving slowly, straining at the harness, sometimes almost halting where the snow was deep. "They must have a hundred thousand dollars worth of gold on that sled," the shaggy trader muttered. Little did he dream how far short his estimate had fallen. He waited for the third man, Splinter Colton. As he failed

to appear, the Bear hesitated a moment, and eyed the sled critically. It was possible that in the back end was a man; possible Colton had been injured.

The Bear rested his rifle on a boulder and drew a bead on Ray Durand's breast. There was a roar, and something struck the trapper's face. He looked down at the shattered breechblock, then up at Splinter Colton's six-gun.

"We had a hunch," Splinter drawled, "that either you or one of the Indians might show up, and so one of us has been keepin' to the high country and lookin' back. The poor superstitious Indians having failed to pull your chestnuts out of the fire, you decided to try a hand at murder yourself, eh? Well, get goin'! There's a gent named Durand that's just spoilin' to look you over. And say, what did you do with the girl?"

"I'll tell Durand what happened to the girl," he snarled.

The Bear wondered if he'd have an opportunity to use a knife or a six-gun on Splinter. Splinter settled all doubts in his mind by giving him a poke in the back, then disarming the shaggy brute.

WELL, well!" Ray Durand cried cheerfully, at the approach of Splinter and the captive Bear, "The old medicine man himself, eh?"

The Bear favored the youth with a glare of hate. "Durand, I knocked you cold once, and I'll do it again the first chance I get."

"You're in luck," Splinter interrupted. "You're goin' to get your chance right away."

"And maybe you'd like to know," the trader snarled, "that I never did get to marry that girl." Ray's astonishment was evident. "Sur-

prised, eh?" the Bear continued in his sneering tone. "Red Fox took her from me, and the last I saw, they were going down a river that leads into a country few Indians and no white men ever see. Now that you've got me, what are you going to do?"

"You mentioned a moment ago," Parson Pinchot said quietly, "knocking Durand cold. Well, it's Ray's turn now, and he'll give you a fairer chance than you ever gave him."

The Bear's thick lips curled contemptuously. "Fair chance, eh? With you two ready to pile in as soon as the kid's knocked out."

"This is just a private affair between you and Durand," Splinter explained. "If you lick Durand, we'll turn you loose, without your weapons of course."

"And if Durand licks me, what?" the Bear countered.

"You're to promise to clear out of the country, call off the Indians if they already haven't got enough of our game, and let us go our way in peace," Splinter explained. "How about it?"

"I'll agree to that," the trader growled. "As long as I'm challenged, I can lay down the rules of fighting, eh?" he queried.

"Sure," Ray quickly agreed. "Name them."

"Then it's rough and tumble, and everything goes. Kick, bite, and gouge eyes—anything to beat the other man."

Parson and Splinter were about to protest, but Ray silenced further argument with a terse, "That's satisfactory with me."

Parson and Splinter seated themselves on the heavily loaded sled. The dogs were strung out in formation but lying down panting, their tongues out as usual. Splinter lighted his pipe and relaxed.

The Bear and Ray Durand shed their parkas, and stood in their woolen shirts, facing each other, their moccasined feet lightly stepping about in the snow. Briefly they sparred, Ray pecking away with his fists, and the trader knocking them aside with a bearlike dab of his paws. And then the trader rushed, with a roar of fury.

Ray stepped quickly back, and then drove his fists into his opponent's face. The piggish eyes blinked, and the man's nose appeared to flatten out from the impact. With a howl of rage, he reached for Ray's arm, but it was gone. Again and again the Bear repeated his bull-like rush, and each time was met with a mighty smash in the face.

He shook his shaggy head, and snarled a string of epithets from his bruised lips. His words were calculated to sting Ray Durand into hurling himself into the fray with wild abandon. The trader almost succeeded, for the youth, his face flushed with fury, flung himself at his enemy and then stopped just as the Bear waited to receive him. Again came that bull-like rush, but this time, just as the youth stepped forward to deliver the blow, the trader doubled up and hurled himself at Ray's legs.

AS the powerful arms went around his legs, Ray Durand could fairly feel the bones crack from the crushing embrace. In the hand-to-hand struggle which this was developing into, the trader, because of his bull-like strength, had an overwhelming advantage. Bit by bit, the Bear worked upward, until his arms were around Ray's waist, and he could drive his powerful fists against the youth's ribs.

Some of the blows were sicken-

ing, and Parson Pinchot turned his head away and was moved to prayer. Splinter Colton restrained himself with difficulty. He felt like taking a physical part, and as this was not permitted, then he experienced an urge to shout advice, but in the end he remained silent, for such were the rules laid down in advance—man to man without interference.

"Got you!" the trader snarled as his hand reached up for Ray's throat.

But the youth's chin came down and blocked the effort, and then the Bear's thick thumb started into the youth's right eye. The thumb was doubled up until it was almost like a hook, and with this he tried to force the nail under the eyeball.

Ray Durand cried out with pain and then drove his teeth into his enemy's wrist. With a howl of pain the trader jerked his hand away, and with strength born of desperation, Ray twisted and freed himself. He was on his feet with a bound, rubbing his eye gently, closing the other one to assure himself the vision had not been impaired. Tears were streaming from the right eye, but there was time for little more than an impatient dab with the back of his hand.

As the trader rushed in again, seeking a grip around his opponent's legs, Ray straightened him up with a blow against the chin that seated the Bear in the snow. He crawled to his feet again and rushed, flailing with his right and left fists, wasting ninety per cent of the blows, but hoping for a lucky punch. It was not in the cards that all these wild punches should miss, and when at length one caught Ray Durand flush on the chin, he was lifted clear off his feet and slammed on his back with crushing force.

The trader rushed in now, all set for another eye gouging. It was the sort of conflict he loved, and knew best; the sort in which he had been unfailingly successful because of his brute strength.

Somewhat dazed, Ray instinctively got to his feet and retreated, head hunched down between his shoulders, fists and arms and elbows warding off his enemy's blows. His own strength surprised him. He knew the grueling work all summer had increased his weight and strength as well as endurance, but he had not expected anything so gratifying as his present physical condition. Yet even so, he was tiring. The pace had been at top speed and furious from the first. If he expected to win, he must change his tactics.

This time he feinted for the Bear's jaw with his left and let go his right hand with all his weight behind it. His fists sank deep into the trader's stomach. The Bear grunted, and an expression of surprise came over his face. Ray stepped back and met his next rush with a right and a left to the same spot. Down came the Bear's guard, and Ray hung what Splinter described as a "beaut" on the trader's jaw. For the first time the Bear began to falter then slowly to retreat.

There's nothing so encouraging as signs of an enemy weakening. Ray forced the attack now, shifting from stomach to chin, then back again. This fight would end in no sudden knock-out. The Bear was too strong for that. He must be beaten by degrees, and by degrees he went down to defeat. His instinctive movements of defense became slower, his knees sagged, his jaws dropped, and each time Ray's fists struck it, the man's teeth clicked sharply. For a moment, he tot-

tered, and then under the impact of a tremendously powerful left punch, he half folded up, then crashed into the snow, and rolled over on his back, his eyes open and glazed, his mouth wide and gasping.

The victor staggered back, his shirt hanging in shreds about his waist, his lips parted as he gasped for breath, his arms and chest pink with red splotches from the trader's blows. There was a slight cut under one eye, and the flesh on one shoulder had been scraped from a glancing blow.

Splinter opened Ray's pack and tossed him a fresh shirt, then he helped the youth pull on his parka. In the meantime Parson Pinchot had picked up the Bear's tentlike parka, and extended it. The big trader snatched it from Parson's hand, and snarled something the sourdough could not understand.

"Ungracious in victory, ungracious in defeat," Pinchot thought. "Oh, well! As the fellow says, you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

The trader got to his feet, staggered to a snow-covered boulder, knocked the snow aside, and seated himself with a jolt, as though his muscles had suddenly weakened under the weight. He did not look up at the three men, but sat there, eyes on the snow, brooding. Presently a glitter of treachery came, then it was gone as he looked toward the dogs.

"I'll be all right in a few minutes," he said thickly. "Just leave me here. I'll get back—to the village—all right. Have you got a chunk of meat a man could have? My grub's about gone."

Parson and Splinter immediately began unlashng the load to reach the grub. Ray shifted his position to another boulder, during which the

backs of all three men were turned. The Bear's hands went into his pants pockets and emerged with a fistful of dried salmon cut in squares. He tossed a square to Spike, the lead dog. The latter caught it in mid-air. The remaining pieces were as deftly caught by the other dogs. The entire team now sat on its several haunches, licking its several chops, ears pricked up, hoping for more.

The trader got to his feet, accepted the food Parson had prepared, dropped it in his pack, tossed the pack over his shoulder, and headed toward his village.

"I know when I'm licked," he growled. Then to himself, he added, "But I'm not licked yet. They won't get far with them dogs when that stuff begins to work."

THE poison the Bear had concealed in the square bits of salmon worked slowly. One by one the dogs sickened, and dropped in their tracks.

"More hard luck!" Splinter growled. "They must have eaten something that knocked them out. It'll be some time before they can get into shape again, and this load is almost too heavy for dogs in top-notch condition. There's only one thing to do, and that's for one of us to light out for Telegraph Creek and come back with horses."

"I'll go," Ray volunteered. "I'm sure I can find my way over the trail."

"You probably could, kid," Splinter replied, "but I know the country pretty well, and if I travel light, and ain't bothered by a dog team and sled, I can take some short cuts."

"You'd better go," Parson agreed. "Ray and I will keep the load moving. There's no sense in us loafing

around while you're gone. By packing the gold on our backs in relays, we can take some short cuts ourselves and save seventy-five or a hundred miles." Parson did a little mental calculation. "Suppose we meet you at Rocker Creek. With luck we should hit there within a day or two of each other, providing you can get the horses."

"I'll have no trouble getting horses," Splinter returned. "The big-game hunters are all back, and there'll be horses to spare."

An hour later the big rawboned sourdough was hitting the high spots. Ray and Parson turned the dogs loose, and began pulling the sled themselves. It was heart-breaking work from the start, and frequently it was necessary to dump half the load until the sled was hauled up a steep pitch, then come back and pick up the dumped portion. For the most part the dogs buried themselves in the snow, shivered until the men were out of sight, and then rejoined them, where they would again curl up—trembling, furry balls with bushy tails keeping their noses warm.

Several days passed—days which Ray Durand occupied with the hardest kind of labor, pausing only to scout behind and make sure the treacherous Bear had not returned. Gradually the two men formed a conviction that the trader had accepted defeat. Their vigilance relaxed, and the hairy brute was all but forgotten in their efforts to reach Rocker Creek at the appointed time.

Although the two men could not possibly know it, the conflicting forces, that had raged about them since entering the country, were gradually centering on the creaking sled and its tremendous burden of gold. The violence that all men as-

sociated with Laska John's gold was again destined to flame.

In feeding slow poison to the dogs, the Bear had made certain the gold would not leave the country any swifter than it could be dragged by the men. Instead of returning to his village, he struck into the mountains, and in two days' time reached one of his shelter cabins. Here he found trail grub which in this instance was moldy bacon, beans, and several pounds of dried salmon and jerky. In the loft, wrapped in a blanket and concealed under a pile of rubbish, he found a well-oiled and greased .30-30 rifle. There was also a box of ammunition, each bullet of which would mushroom and tear a hole as big as the palm of a man's hand.

Next he picked up a coil of rope and trudged through the snow to a draw a mile from the cabin. Steam drifted lazily up from the draw and hovered in a cloud over the surrounding ridges. Here the lower hillsides were green, and there was an exceedingly damp warmth to the atmosphere.

The man worked his way slowly through the brush, pausing from time to time to look immediately ahead. Presently he stopped. A band of five horses stood, hoof-deep in a small, warm stream trickling from the hot springs. He selected one with saddle marks on its shaggy coat and sent the rope spinning. The loop dropped neatly over the animal's neck, and after one or two slight plunges, the horse, a bay with a mild eye, docilely followed the man.

The Bear put in a portion of that night and most of the next day removing the floor of the cabin and digging a hole of sufficient depth to conceal a considerable quantity of gold. A day later he took the trail,

keeping under cover lest his presence be detected by Ray Durand's watchful eyes.

HE was within a half mile of the two men when he stopped abruptly and looked apprehensively about. On a previous occasion when there were only two men visible, the third, Splinter Colton, had gotten the drop on him. He did not propose to get caught in the same trap twice. Accordingly he galloped from the scene, rode several miles ahead, and circled. It was his intention to get the drop on Splinter first, and handle the others later on. To his astonishment he came on Splinter's moccasin tracks. The snow was not deep at this point, and Splinter had removed his snowshoes and was making time. Also, the trapper noted, the trail was several days old.

"Huh!" the trader growled, and for a moment was in doubt as to what next to do. "Splinter Colton has hit the trail for Telegraph Creek and horses. Instead of bagging all three, I can only get two of them, and that'll leave Splinter alive to make trouble. Still, there'll be several snowstorms before he can get back, and if I shove everything, except the gold, through a hole in the river ice, there won't be tracks or evidence left for him to work on. He might have his suspicions, but you've got to have more than suspicions to hang a man."

The trader tied his horse to a convenient thicket, and then, rifle in hand, made his way toward the two men. As on a previous occasion the position put the men dragging the sled at a disadvantage. Parson Pinchot was ahead, tugging at the rope which was drawn over his shoulder. His straining body was at a forty-five-degree angle. Be-

hind came Ray Durand pushing, and at times fairly lifting the back of the sled over some obstruction.

For several moments, the Bear practiced. He would take a bead on Parson, go through the motions of pulling the trigger and reloading, and then, quickly shifting the rifle to Ray Durand, the trader again brushed the trigger with his finger.

"I want to get 'em before they know what's happening," the trader muttered, "and if I don't drop Durand before he dives into the brush, I'll have my hands full."

After the beating the former chechahco had given him, the Bear had no desire to play hide and seek in the snow-covered thicket with six-guns. A grin of anticipation and triumph spread slowly over his bearded face. The piggish eyes seemed to narrow and turn to pin points, as he closed one and sighted with the other. His finger caressed the trigger, then grew rigid. He squeezed the trigger, and the rifle leaped. Like a flash he pumped a second cartridge into the chamber, shifted slightly, and fired again.

Parson Pinchot lay stretched out on the snow, his hand still clutching the rope, his toes digging in. The sled had shifted back a few inches, and the rear ends of the runners were resting on Ray Durand's body.

THE sky was clear, and in the dazzling sunlight the dark figures and sled stood sharply out against the snow. The Bear waited for some signs of movement. There were none.

"I'll shift a few rods," he muttered, "and put a couple of more bullets in each one of them to make sure. They may be trying to draw me into the open."

Several minutes passed, and again he rested the rifle and took careful

aim. As the weapon roared, a jet of snow leaped up a few inches from Parson Pinchot's head.

"Missed him," the Bear muttered, "but I'll get him this time."

He stood up for a better view, his eyes alert for some indication of life. To the left he heard the soft fall of snow as it dropped from the branch of a tree.

He turned and grew rigid with a mixture of surprise and fear. One hand was resting against a tree, the other held the rifle. Before he could jerk his hand from the tree and swing the rifle to cover this new danger, a knife had whistled through the air and struck, pinning his parka sleeve to the tree. The blade had narrowly missed the wrist itself. A few yards away stood Red Fox, his face as grave as ever, but his dark eyes smoldering with revengeful fury.

"The hour of reckoning has come, Bear," he coolly informed the trader.

"Not yet, Red Fox!" And the trader hastily fired with one hand.

The bullet went wild, but Red Fox had leaped for cover. The next instant the trader had jerked free and was running low through the brush, turning occasionally to fire at his pursuer. Gasping for breath, the Bear reached the horse, untied the rope, and leaped into the saddle. "Not yet!" He sneered. "The day of reckoning hasn't come! Didn't know I had a horse, eh?"

At the first open stretch he glanced back. Red Fox was following with the long swinging pace of the Indian runner—a pace the trader knew the native could maintain hour after hour, and day after day. He was keeping close to the timber, ready to retreat to cover the moment the Bear paused to open fire. He put the horse to a mad gallop, and the Indian increased his pace,

until it matched the horse's, yard for yard, mile for mile.

Red Fox's pursuit was like sand running from an hour glass, and as steady. It was as remorseless and certain as death itself. When the shadows fell and the long night commenced, the ghostly figure was still coming, still clinging to the timber's protection, yet never losing the trail. All night the trader rode, and when, with the first streaks of dawn, he looked fearfully behind, Red Fox, his pace somewhat slower, was there.

But even the Bear's tough horse had slowed up. In speed through the snow the pace of horse and native was the same, but in endurance the Indian runner had the advantage. To the Bear it seemed incredible that any man could outlast a horse, and yet he knew his horse was giving way beneath him. Frequently it stumbled, and twice the trader found it necessary to dismount, and drag the animal to its feet.

Around noon the horse fell for the last time, and rolled over on its side with a tired sigh. The Bear, with the whine of a trapped beast on his lips, ran for the nearest timber. He looked wildly about, a cornered animal hunting an easily defended site for the last stand. He found it—an overhanging cliff which made attack from above or behind impossible. A tangle of brush and boulders shielded him on one side and in the front. A fifty-foot cliff, which no man could scale, was his protection on the other side. To reach the spot, a man must cross an open stretch of some hundred yards, that was barren except for a few leafless shrubs.

Here, the Bear waited for two days—two days of twenty-four hours each, and every hour an eter-

nity of fear and apprehension, and not once did he catch even the faintest glimpse of Red Fox. Not by the crack of a twig or the passing of a shadow could he tell the native was besieging him, and yet the instinct of the hunted told the trader the Indian waited.

Another day, another night, and then, rifle in hand, the Bear boldly stepped into the open. For several seconds, he stood a few feet from a boulder, parka hood thrown back and his ears exposed to catch the slightest sound. Only the sounds of a frosty night came. To the northward, the aurora borealis was blowing its colored ribbons into the heavens, but the beauty was lost on the man. He was a hunted creature who slunk from shadow to shadow, a prey to a thousand fears, as well as the ever-present dread of the native's resourcefulness.

"He finally had to sleep," the trader muttered. "Now's my chance—to-morrow it may be too late. If I can just shake him off my trail and——"

THE Bear instinctively chose a natural opening leading from the cliff through a small canyon and under a large tree. It was the only logical means of departure. Every other possible course led through brush thickets that were almost certain to snap as some protruding branch was broken. The trader paused briefly beneath the tree while he looked ahead for possible danger.

On the limb above the Bear lay Red Fox. His sinuous body, tensed for the spring, suggested the panther. His movements, as he shifted his position slightly, carried the stealth of the cat. His eyes measured the distance, duly considered the rifle gripped tightly in the

Bear's hands, and then he dropped. He struck the trader with his knees and bore him to the snow. With a swift jerk of the hand, he disarmed his enemy and hurled the rifle into a near-by snow bank.

"I knew you could stay there about so long," the native snarled, "and then your nerves would drive you out."

His strong hands choked the trader until his face was purple, then holding his head down with the left hand, he searched the Bear's clothing with the right and removed a keen-bladed skinning knife. His face flushed darkly as his hand gripped the knife and for a moment was poised above the trader's heart. With an obvious effort Red Fox regained his self-control, and hurled the knife after the rifle. It landed with a soft thud, and the snow above shifted over the spot.

"The hour when I could feel your trembling flesh beneath my hands has been long in coming," the Indian said quietly, "but it is here. Listen, while I speak. For many years, ever since Hank Gibson died, you have robbed my people of their furs. You've taught them to fear the white men by saying that whoever touched a white man would sicken and die of a white man's disease. You told them they must creep up on white men in the darkness and kill them with arrows or knives. Rita Gibson told them you lied, and my people were willing to be friendly with Splinter Colton, Parson Pinchot, and Ray Durand when they came into the village.

"And then Crooked Legs was cured of pains in his head by Parson Pinchot. You told my people that for that Crooked Legs would die, and Crooked Legs did die, and Afraid-of-moose died after a fever and pain inside. Their deaths and

your words inflamed my people, and the three white men would have been killed, but they could not be found until it was too late, and my people were unable to get through the swamps. But I, Red Fox, with an Indian's body, and an Indian's heart"—he leaned closer and fairly hissed as he added—"and an Indian's revenge had a white man's education. I could read some and add up figures like Hank Gibson taught me, and so I would not believe these things just happened.

"And so when you went away with Rita, I searched the house and in a tin box I found medicine and a piece of paper that said if something in a bottle was put in a man's food, that man would have a fever. This did not seem possible to me so I took the bottle Outside to a great white medicine man and I told him what had happened. And he said I should tell the Provincial police, and they would hang you. He called what was in the bottle a 'culture' and said that with it you could give any man a fever, the white man's disease, by putting it in what he ate or drank."

AS Red Fox neared the climax of his story, his emotion increased until again his fury was murderous. His voice rose to a high pitch, and somewhere in the hills above, a wolf howled his misery.

"I am Red Fox, an Indian. I don't tell the police. I take my own revenge."

"You'll hang for this," the Bear snarled. "If you kill me, they'll catch you, and you'll hang for it. You can't get away from the police."

"The police will know nothing about this. You are very smart, and if I told the police, they would not

believe me, and you would escape justice. No! Red Fox as chief of his people will take his revenge."

"Remember," the desperate trader half sobbed, "what Hank Gibson read to you out of the Bible. It said in the white man's Bible, 'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.' That means you shan't kill. You—"

"I am Red Fox, an Indian, not a white man."

He fumbled in his pockets and drew forth the familiar bottle containing the typhoid cultures. He drew his knife, forced the blade between the trapper's teeth, then twisted it sharply, prying the mouth open. Then he hurled the contents of the bottle into the Bear's throat. The trader struggled mightily and did his best to expel the dose. Red Fox held him pinned on his back to the snow, shut off his breath until the man was black in the face and gulped down the liquid.

For a moment, all was silent except for the gasping of the trembling wretch, and the rattle of the leafless limbs in the thicket just below. Again came the eerie wolf howl. Overhead, stars hung low and brilliant in the cold air. To the northward the aurora borealis lingered briefly, and then all but faded.

Red Fox leaped clear, and stood some twenty feet away, watching the trader. He got to his feet, pawing at his chest like an infuriated bear.

"Typhoid!" he whispered. "Typhoid germs in my throat! You've got me, you copper devil!" He shook his shaggy head, his body swaying like that of a bull moose at bay. "A doctor might help me!" The thought gave him hope and brief defiance. "I'll beat you yet!" His voice rose, broke, and became a scream matching the wild quality

of the lone wolf's, then died away in a whisper. "I'll beat you yet." Stupidly he calculated the days which must elapse before even his great strength must give way to the onslaught of the disease. "I might reach the doctor at Wrangell before it's too late! I've got to do it."

He turned, crazy with fear, and crashed through the brush with the heedlessness of a frightened bear—stumbling, falling, yet always rising to drive his powerful body onward toward the distant trail.

Red Fox remained in the shadows, finely chiseled features grave, eyes on distant scenes, ears picking up the story of the Bear's madness.

"And now to settle with Ray Durand," the native muttered. "Soon, Red Fox's slate will be clean, and his account with the white men—balanced."

CHAPTER XVII.

DISASTER.

ALTHOUGH taken by surprise at the sudden burst of rifle fire, both Parson Pinchot and Ray Durand had dropped in their tracks, feeling they had a better chance pretending death than running for the nearest cover. But when another bullet kicked up a jet of snow about his head, Parson called back to Ray:

"We've got to run for it, kid. That fellow is out to finish us. Run low and zigzag—it's our only chance."

"All ready," Ray answered.

Parson got to his feet, staggered, and then reached the nearest cover, where he collapsed in a heap. Ray dived into the snow beside him.

"Parson," he cried sharply, "you're hit!"

"Got me the first shot," Parson admitted, "but I couldn't afford to

cave in out in the open. I wonder why he didn't pot us while we were running. Even if he was using a carbine, he should have had a couple of cartridges left in the magazine."

Let me take a look at that wound," Ray insisted.

Parson shook his head. "Not now, kid. That fellow may be creeping up for a better shot."

They had no means of knowing that at this moment "that fellow" was being hotly pursued by Red Fox. As the minutes passed, and no sound broke the silence, Ray took matters in his own hands, and examined Parson's wound. The bullet had cut a furrow in the right leg and split. One part had glanced off. The second had continued on through the left leg, splintering the bone, and coming out on the opposite side.

"And you ran on legs like that!" Ray cried, in astonishment.

"I had to run," Parson grimly answered. "Now let's keep our shirts on, or it won't be so well for me. First, swab out the wounds with iodine, and see if you can't head off infection. After that we'll bandage her up and——"

"Get you to a doctor as soon as we can," Ray interrupted.

"That's about the size of it," Parson admitted, "and the sooner, the better. I can hobble along, I guess, but I won't be much help on the sled."

"Hobble, your old grandmother! You're going to ride! If you try to walk, you won't have a chance in the world!"

Ray returned to the sled, dragged it to the thicket, cleared away the snow, built a roaring fire, and when the ground had thawed sufficiently, dug a hole and buried the gold. He carefully scraped the dirt over the spot, built another roaring fire,

trusting to the charcoal and ashes to conceal their cache from prying eyes.

The logical plan was to continue on toward Rocker Creek where Splinter Colton was certain to show up with horses. With Ray's assistance, Parson managed to climb some of the steeper ridges that day, but the next he was absolutely helpless. Again and again the youth found it necessary to carry his partner up the steepest parts of the trail, and then return for the sled and equipment. Parson was paler, too, Ray noted—the fine bronze in the sourdough's cheeks was slowly fading.

Weather conditions were perfect; the sky was cloudless; objects a great distance away seemed close; each capped peak and ridge stood out sharply against the blue sky. But the beauty of the land was lost on Ray Durand as he drove himself forward day after day. He found the incessant glare of the sun on the snow annoying, and much of the time he traveled with his face averted, and his eyes half closed. The watchful Parson observed his young partner gently rubbing his eyelids.

"What seems to be the matter, kid?" he demanded sharply.

"I guess I got something in my eye," Ray answered. He stopped, gently lifted the lid, pulled it down and let it go, hoping to remove a bit of foreign matter.

PARSON said nothing, but a new fear tugged at his heart, the fear that Ray Durand was becoming snow-blind. "How do the eyes feel, Ray?" he asked, at the next stop.

"Just like there was a lot of sand under the lids," Ray answered. He tried to pass the matter off lightly,

but the experienced sourdough knew he was suffering. He picked up a bit of charcoal from the fire and smeared it under the youth's eyes.

"That'll help some. How much tea have we left?"

"The tea's all gone, Parson."

"A bandage of tea leaves over the eyes would help a lot," Parson explained.

Hardships had changed Ray Durand so much mentally and physically that he would have faced snow blindness or most anything without complaint, if only he alone would suffer. But Parson Pinchot's very life depended upon his ability to reach Rocker Creek in the shortest possible time. As he drove himself forward, Ray unconsciously tested his eyes at frequent intervals, and was nearly driven frantic as the truth dawned—it was becoming almost impossible to keep his eyes open, yet it hurt to close them. It was like a cruel lash on exposed nerves, and Ray's nerves were already on edge because of Parson's condition.

"We'd better stop," Pinchot said abruptly. "Drag the sled over near that spruce tree and get me some of the inner bark."

Patiently the wounded man brewed a tea from the inner bark of the spruce while Ray Durand sat dejectedly on the sled, elbows on knees, and eyes resting in his cupped hands.

"Gosh, Parson," he groaned, "I feel like a five center going back on you when you need me most."

"Forget it, Ray. If you laid down on me because you were tired, you would be a five center, but I've watched you and you've been driving yourself until it's fairly made me hurt all over. Now come over here, and I'll have your eyes fixed up in a jiffy."

With care born of many similar experiences Parson applied the bandages.

"Can't you leave one of them so I can see out just a little bit?" the youth pleaded. "So I can see to find the way?"

"No, you can't beat nature, Ray, and those eyes have got to be cared for."

"But a blind man can't travel, Parson," he blurted.

"We'll make out, kid," Parson said with an optimism he did not feel. "I'll furnish the eyes, and you supply the legs."

And later Ray again bent to his task, head downward, ears alert for each command.

"A little to the right, son. That's it. We missed a tree. Now to the left. Watch out, son. Lift your foot over that branch. You've cleared it." So came Parson's orders as the sled was lowered down steep inclines.

At times something approaching an oath escaped Parson's lips as his wounds gave a twinge. The bronze had finally left his face, and the pallor of a very sick man was spreading. Each night they made camp before darkness, Ray gathering fuel under Parson's direction, the latter building the fire and cooking the meals from a seat on the sled. He slept on the sled, also, because it was easier. At the break of day they were on the trail again, the youth almost frantic with helplessness, driving himself forward hour after hour.

THERE were times when he grew dejected, and then Parson would sing hymns in a fine, rich voice. His "Onward Christian Soldiers" was a particularly stirring tune and never failed to rouse the youth. The burden ap-

peared to drop from the weary shoulders, and the step grew lighter. As they neared a large river, the demands on Parson's voice became greater, and he sang at times when each note seemed to speed the deathly sickness stealing over him. They toiled up a series of hills, crossed a narrow plain, and the river lay below.

Ten miles beyond that river and over a ridge lay Rocker Creek—and aid. Parson was tense as they dropped down a precarious switch-back to the stream. The sled stopped, and for several moments, there was silence, then a convulsive sob from the wounded man. The edges were frozen, but the center was filled with running slush ice.

"What's wrong, Parson?" Ray cried, groping until he found the other's shoulder. "Do the wounds hurt, old man?"

"My wounds are doing fine," Parson lied, "but your killing pace has been in vain. The river isn't frozen over, and we're blocked."

"Could—could I wade it?" Ray ventured.

"Not a chance, son," Parson answered. "How do the eyes feel?"

"They've quit hurting. Does that mean they're well?"

"That's about the size of it, Ray. We'll take off the bandages to-night when it's dark. Now if you'll just drag the sled around, I see some dry stuff that'll make a good fire. We'll camp on the river bank and rest until she freezes over."

Later when the fire was going and it was warm, Parson examined his wounds.

"Pretty bad," he whispered, "pretty bad."

Darkness descended, and all was black except the glowing coals of the camp fire. Ray Durand dropped to his knees beside his partner, and

with nervous fingers Parson Pinchot removed the bandages.

"Aren't—aren't the bandages off? All of them?" A high-pitched nervous note had crept into the younger man's voice. His fingers brushed his eyes, and again the lids popped open. "Parson," he cried wildly, "I'm blind! I can't see you! I can't even see the fire, but I can feel the heat of it on my face! Oh, Parson, Parson! Won't I ever see again?"

"Easy, boy, easy." With an effort Parson retained his composure. He, too, wanted to cry. "Sure you'll see again." He knew he'd be forgiven the lie. "Sometimes it takes several days after a man's eyes quit hurting. You got quite a dose back there." Inwardly he was thinking: "What's wrong? In all my experi-

ence of men going snow-blind, this has never happened."

Night! A night in which Ray was a prey to the tortures of his imagination. He could picture himself groping about endlessly, day after day, and year after year. He laughed bitterly as he thought of the gold. Enough to care for him and his as long as he lived, and yet how worthless it really was! And he thought of the curse of Laska John and how it seemed to descend like some inherited disease from generation to generation of miners.

Toward morning he slept, and when he awakened, the full rays of the sun were on his face. He felt its warmth as he had felt the heat of the fire the night before, but all was blackness.

To be concluded in next week's issue.

In Next Week's Issue of

STREET & SMITH'S WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

THE TOUGH TENDERFOOT

By Max Brand

Poker-face Jerry Ash, ex-prize fighter and ex-crook, comes West resolved to go straight. But in the boom town of Piegan he soon has forced upon him a new and undesired reputation as a bad man.

THE ROMANCE KID

By Johnston McCulley

They called Barney Mannock the Romance Kid, and said he was traveling a love trail. So everybody laughed—and forgot to be suspicious when Barney prowled around the country.

Also Features by

Frank Richardson Pierce

Roland Krebs

And Others

15c a COPY

At All News Stands

COWBOY'S DICTIONARY

OF

TECHNICAL TERMS

By RAMON F. ADAMS

(Continued from last week's Issue)

- PICK-UP MAN**—a horseman who stands by ready to take up the horse being ridden by a contestant in a rodeo at the judges' signal that the ride is ended.
- PIED**—spotted; painted.
- PILGRIM**—one new to the country; said of either men or cattle.
- PILOT**—a man whose duty it is to guide the round-up wagons over the roadless plains and breaks to the next camp.
- PINON**—dwarf pine.
- PINTO**—a piebald or spotted horse; in parts of Texas called "paint hoss."
- PINWHEEL**—when a horse leaps forward in an upward jump, and turns, feet in air, and lands upon its back. Such a horse is very rare.
- PITCHING**—the Texan's name for bucking.
- PLAIN TRAIL**—clearly visible sign in trailing.
- POINT RIDER**—the man who rides near the head of a marching column of cattle on the trail and acts as a pilot. Point riders usually work in pairs, and when desiring to change the course of the herd, each rides abreast of the foremost cattle when they quietly veer in the desired direction, and thereupon the leading cattle swerve away from the horseman that is approaching them and toward the one that is receding from them. It is the honored post of the drive.
- PONCHO**—a covering made by cutting a hole for the head through a blanket's middle.
- POSSE**—band of men organized to run down a man or bunch of men, usually outlaws or thieves.
- POTHOOK**—a hook used for holding a pot over the fire.
- POTROS**—young horses; colts; fillies.
- PRAIRIE SCHOONER**—a wagon, the canvas cover of which suggests a schooner under sail.
- PROD POLE**—a pole about six feet long, with a steel spike on the end and with a heavy handle. It is used to prod cattle up into stock cars. Also equipped with a flat-headed screw driven into it near the business end and extending out a short distance at right angles from the pole. When a "down steer" refuses to respond to the numerous jabs and swearing, the end of the pole with the attached screw is then engaged with the matted end of its tail, and by sundry twists, turns, or pulls on the pole a severe strain is applied to this very sensitive appendage.
- PROWL**—to go back over a territory after a round-up in search of cattle which may have been missed.
- PUEBLO**—town.
- PULLING THE CHICKEN**—a Mexican sport. The rooster is buried in the earth, its head only being left above the ground, and the contestants are mounted on horses. They dash by, one after the other, and as they pass the rooster, each man swings himself down from the saddle and reaches for its head. The chicken naturally dodges more or less, rendering it no easy matter to catch him. Finally secured, however, by a lucky grab, the body is brought out by a jerk which generally breaks the neck, and the horseman, chicken in hand, dashes away at his best speed, all the rest giving chase for the possession of the rooster. If another overtakes him and wrests it from him, then he leads the race until some one else can take it.
- PUTTO**—a wooden stake, which is driven into the ground and to which one end of the picket rope is attached. The word is derived from the French *potreau*, meaning post.
- QUIRT**—a flexible, woven-leather whip, made with a short stock about a foot

long, and carrying a lash made of three or four heavy and loose thongs. Its upper end ordinarily is filled with lead to strike down a rearing horse which threatens to fall backward. A loop extending from the head provides means of attachment to either the rider's wrist or to the saddle horn. The word is derived from the Mexican *cuarta*, meaning whip; and this, in turn, is from the Spanish *cuerda*, meaning a cord.

R.

RAFTER BRAND—one having semicone-shaped lines above the letter or figure similar to the roof of a house.

RANCH—either an entire ranching establishment inclusive of its buildings, lands, and live stock, or else the principal building, which usually was the owner's dwelling house, or else that building together with the other structures adjacent to it, or else the collective persons who operated the establishment. From the Spanish *rancho*, meaning a farm, more particularly one devoted to the breeding and raising of stock. Used both as a verb and a noun.

RANCHER—a word restricted to members of the proprietary class.

RANCHERO—A Spanish synonym for ranchman.

RANCHMEN—a word including employes as well as employers; any one connected with the running of a ranch.

RANGE BRANDED—branded upon the open range away from corrals.

RANGE DELIVERY—this means that the buyer, after inspection of the seller's ranch records, and with due regard to his reputation for veracity, pays for what the seller purports to own, and then rides out and tries to find it.

RAWHIDE—the hide of a cow or steer. It is one of the most useful products of the cattleman. From it he can make ropes, hobbles, clothes lines, bedsprings, seats of chairs, overcoats, trousers, brogans, and shirts. It patches saddles and shoes; strips of it bind a loose tire or lash together the pieces of a broken wagon tongue, as well as being a substitute for nails and many other things.

REATA—a rope, more especially a rawhide rope.

RELIEF—change of guard for the herd.

REMUDA—extra mounts of each cowboy herded together; also called "remontha," this latter word a corruption of the Spanish *remonta*.

WS—9E

REMUDERA—Mexican name for a bell mare.

REMUDERO—Mexican name for wrangler.

RENEGADE RIDER—a cowboy employed to visit ranches, sometimes as far as fifty miles or more away, and pick up any stock branded with his employer's brand found anywhere, taking it with him to the next ranch or range. He brings his "gather" to the home ranch as often as he can, changes horses, and goes again.

REP—(as noun) a cowboy who represents his brand at outside ranches; (as verb) to represent. Also called "stray man."

RIDING SIGN—the act of riding the range to follow animals which have strayed too far afield and turn them back, or to rescue beasts from bog holes, turn them away from loco patches, and to do anything else in the interest of his employer.

RIGGING—the middle leathers attached to the tree of the saddle connecting with and supporting the cinch by latigos through the rigging ring.

RING BIT—a bit with a metal circle slipped over the lower jaw of a horse. This cruel Spanish bit is not looked upon with favor by the American cowboy.

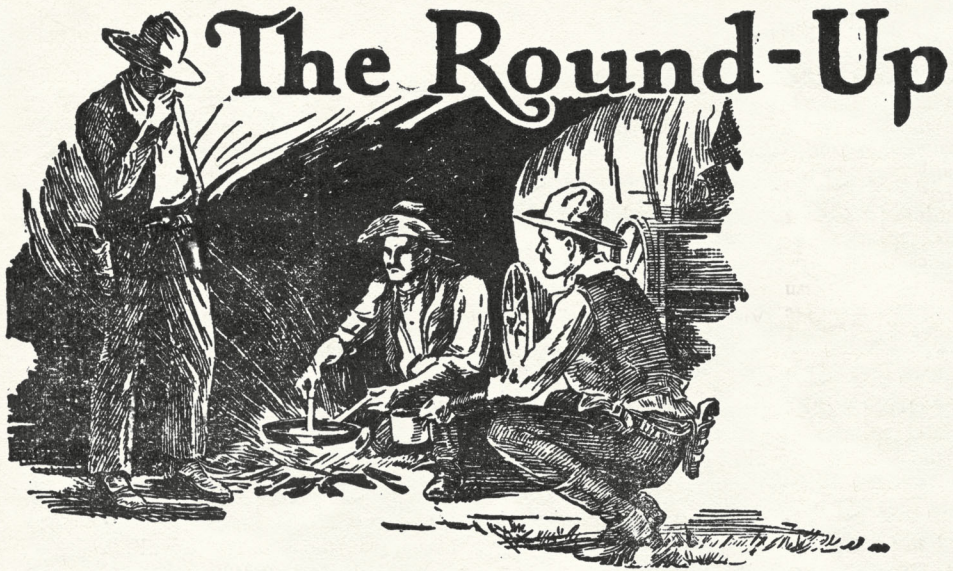
ROAD AGENT—a robber; more commonly a robber of stagecoaches.

ROAD BRAND—a special brand of any design for trail herds as a sign of ownership en route. This brand assists the herders in identifying their stock, and tends to prevent these herders from improperly merging in their herd, and spiriting out of the jurisdiction, animals of other owners. The brand originated in Texas when a law was passed that all cattle being driven to market beyond the northern limits of the State were to be branded with "a large and plain mark, composed of any mark or devise he may choose, with which mark shall be branded on the left side of the back behind the shoulder."

ROCKING BRAND—one resting upon and connected with a quarter circle.

RODEO—a Mexican word for "round-up" and so called for the earlier round-ups, but in later days used strictly as a cowboy contest.

ROLL—a corkscrew, wavelike motion of a rope, which, traveling along it to its end, lands on the object roped with a jar.



NOT from any source but the best source, actual, personal experience, can we declare that everything Mart Lord, of 7411 Third Avenue, Brooklyn, New York, is about to remark, is absolutely true. To say that animals can't talk is absurd. To say that they can't understand different words, a great deal of what is said to them, is even more absurd. It is true that they do not speak our particular language, they do not use our words to convey their thoughts. Neither, we might say, do the Zulu tribes of Zanzibar use English words when talking with each other, but they use words, expressions, to convey thought one to the other.

"BOSS AND FOLKS: The question upon the possibility of animals holding palaver with each other, which was brought up in the council here, and the interesting comments that followed said question, took such a firm hold on me that I've just got to come out of my shell and cut loose.

"Waal, suh, all I got to say is any

hombre who thinks animals can't talk, or reason, should pay a little more attention to his daily newspaper. If such hombre takes the trouble to do this, he is certain to come across little items from time to time which should show him the way to a broader viewpoint.

"It was only a couple of weeks ago that I read in the news the story of a little blind dog who was losing all interest in life, when his mistress adopted a big dog from the dog pound, a chummy old fellow who was half Spitz and half Eskimo dog. Well, the short and long of it is that the big fellow straightway brought the sun back into the life of his smaller brother, taking him out for a turn around the block, guiding him on a leash, giving the poor little fellow a fresh slant on things. This leash guiding the Spitz did voluntarily. The instinct of the traces, like as not, the dog having that dash of Eskimo in his blood. And today his little pal's as spry as a squirrel, and as carefree, although he's still as blind as a bat.

"All of which goes to prove that there is, beyond a doubt, a system

of communication between the lower animals. A system not of words, or sounds, was the system of the aforementioned dogs; but with other dogs, with other animals, there is a system of sounds.

"And if the gents of the A. G. Frazier stamp be unwilling to believe it, let them get each a dog, any kind of dog, large or small, young or old, ornery or good-natured. Let them study their dogs a while, and then they shall know something of the dog tongue.

"Why, I've got an old fox terrier who's got a manner of expression all his own. If he wants a drink, he'll give a few deep-throated grunts, and if I don't serve his want right off, he'll give his bowl a good smack with his paw and keep smacking it around till I get up and fill it. And though he does not speak the language, he has an extensive knowledge of English. My mother will be telling me to get into my coat before the store closes, and right at the mention of coat and store, up jumps Spot, wagging his tail for all he's worth. And at night, when it grows late, she'll say, 'Better take the dog down,' and that word 'down' brings Spot right to his feet.

"He knows when you're talking about him, too. If it's praise, he wags his tail with full content—like some men are apt to do—and if it's a rap, he'll scowl like a sulky kid and grunt his retort in that quaint way of his, eying you askance and expressing in every way a polite indignation.

"There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of instances wherein dogs have proved themselves reasoning, charitable, and even heroic. In fact, more dogs than I can say have received medals for heroism and the saving of human life.

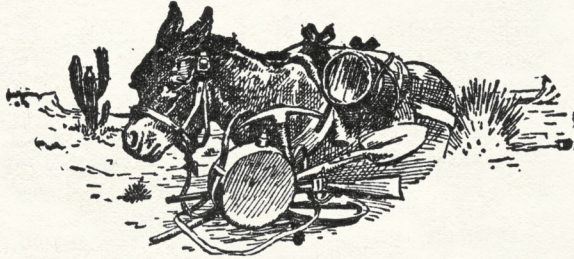
"If the skeptics be unbelieving

still, let them step up to the arctic and hearken once to the wailing call of the hybrid wolf as it squats upon its haunches in the snow, with head raised to the blinking stars, summoning its brethren to the chase! Or spy upon a pair of porcupines as they gambol about in the moonlight, chuckling to one another like fat dwarfs. And listen to the twittering call of the loon as it serenades its mate!

"Or let the skeptics repair to the dark jungles of South Africa, where they can look upon the ape tribes and hear their strange chattering. Or hole up in New York for a night and roll abed with murderous thoughts as the tom cats set up their ungodly wailing—which is one method of animal communication that can't be denied!

"Waal, boss, when I commenced this thing, I had no idea of the stretch I'd go, but while I'm at it, I want to put in a good word for your very able and enviable scribes.

"To name any single man would be unfair, as I like every man Jack of them; but I will say that the names, Brand, Morgan, McCulley, Pierce, Baxter, Horton, Wire, Hall, and Kenneth Gilbert are ever the insurance of a good yarn. Briggs, too, gets me now and then. And as for your newer hands, including Glenn H. Wichman, they twirl a neat rope and well fit the saddle. And as for your policy of one long story per issue, it makes no difference with me, either way; for, in my estimation, a story with the W. S. M. brand is always a good one, be it long or short, of the adventures of men, or the adventures of animals. Nevertheless, say I, the more short stories, the better! For I always find in the shorts that very palatable twist in the climax that makes one's blood sing."



MINES AND MINING

By J. A. THOMPSON

This department is intended to be of real help to readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be answered in this department in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

THERE are quite a variety of do's and don'ts for the prospector to keep in mind when he tackles the southern California desert country. If he watches them, the chances are he will come out safely. Carelessness may result in fatal tragedy. The desert is a grim playmate.

G. B., of Sioux City, Iowa, plans a prospecting trip in southern California's desert mining regions this winter, and he comes to us for a little advice.

"I want to do a little desert prospecting later this winter. Had southern California in mind. Would you give a tenderfoot a few pointers about desert travel, and an idea of the gold-mining possibilities of that region, Mr. Thompson?"

Lots of men have been going over the mountains back of Los Angeles and into the Mojave Desert lately, questing gold, G. B., and the desert mining towns of Kramer, Rands-

burg, Johannesburg, Mojave, and Barstow have seen more prospectors headed into the back country lately than they have in many a long day.

Southern California has a vast amount of mineral territory still to be probed—an arid waste, much of it, blazing hot in summer, and often stormy in winter.

The Colorado Desert, the Mojave, and the Death Valley regions take in some sixty-eight thousand square miles of sand and sagebrush, of turtle-backed hills and rugged mountains. On the east, the Colorado River marks the boundary of this great arid stretch. West and north, the Sierra Madres and the Sierra Nevadas shut it in. Mexico itself is the southern limit.

Barring two or three main highways across this tremendous expanse of arid country, roads are few and far between. The regions away from the roads often provide good mineral hunting for the desert explorer. Gold and onyx, turquoise

and opal have been brought into town from the fastnesses of the lonely desert.

The desert terrifies some. Others feel a definite fascination about it. It all depends on your make-up and whether the weird whispering of the shifting sands gets on your nerves.

Now for those do's and don'ts. It is all right to take a gambling chance on coming out with a canvas sack full of yellow dust and nuggets. But never gamble on finding water. The prospector *must* know his next water hole, if he expects to come out at all. Which means be sure and provide yourself with adequate maps, plainly showing each well and water hole in the desert area you expect to prospect.

And, G. B., unless you are experienced, don't tackle the desert alone. Have a partner, one who is desert-wise, if possible.

Flinty fragments of desert trails and the endless sand play havoc with shoe leather. Wear stout, hob-nailed, calf-high boots. And for headgear, wear a felt hat thick enough and wide enough of brim to cut off the rays of the blazing sun.

Get pack animals accustomed to the desert. Animals not used to arid country soon grow weak and sick on salty water, and the sandy road will bother their feet.

Except in midsummer, at which season you should stay out of the desert, anyhow, carry clothes suitable for both heat and cold. The days are hot, the nights cold. Furthermore, the valleys and lower gulches may be stifling, but if your hunt takes you high up toward some arid mountain peak, and you intend to camp there, you will find it pretty airish. Have a good, heavy blanket along for such occasions, and a warm wind-breaker, or lumberman's jacket, for personal wear.

If you do not bother with the luxury of a tent, take with you a canvas tarpaulin to spread on the ground before you bed down. And have it big enough to fold over you when you are all settled in your blankets. In threatening or windy weather, pull it right over your head so that if a sandstorm blows up overnight, you won't be smothered.

Don't forget flour, sugar, tea, coffee, rice, beans, oatmeal, and bacon. Go light on the bacon where water is scarce. It will make you thirsty. Canned tomatoes are good emergency thirst quenchers, but bulky if you carry much of them.

A final warning before you go into the desert to bring out your gold. It concerns getting lost. Yes, sir, it can happen. And it may mean disaster. First of all, don't get panicky. Sit down and study the situation calmly—or as calmly as you can. Get out of the sun, if possible. Put your head in the shade of a rock or clump of sage.

Remember, if there are others in the party, they will be hunting for you. Go to a high spot. Even a small rise will do wonders. Build a brush fire out of anything that will burn—greasewood, dead cactus—so your partners will see the smoke by day, or the blaze by night.

If you must start out yourself to seek civilization, wait until night. It is cooler then. Count the distance you walk by pacing it off. Roughly, about two thousand steps to the mile. Keep track of your direction, by compass, some known outstanding landmark, or the North Star on a clear night.

If you have a general idea where the trail, railroad, or nearest settlement lies, head for it and keep going. Don't waver. Don't lose heart. Don't waste steps. And the chances are you will come out safely.

The HOLLOW TREE



Conducted by
HELEN RIVERS

It is a natural impulse and it is a good impulse to desire to wander and to roam. Not too much, of course. But the desire to go places and see things should be and is in all of us—in all of us who amount to anything, at least, for traveling educates us, and changing our geographic location often is of great benefit to health, mind, and economic well-being. A wise man once said, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," but a wiser man, we think, added, "but a standing pool stagnates."

If you are one who would travel, it is a mighty good thing to have man's best asset along the way, and at your destination. We mean, of course, friends.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write to Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N.Y.

ABOVE the Mescalero Indian country, and to the westward, are the Ancho desert lands of southern New Mexico. "Ancho, No-chechahco," can tell you folks about prospecting for gold in the Southwest.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Yes, I am no chechahco! And although I am just a kid in my very early twenties, I have been on prospecting trips all over California and the Southwest with old-timers. I know the country pretty well, especially Imperial County, in southern California.

Prospecting is fascinating. I love the hills. And I love animal life. I mounted several specimens while I was studying taxidermy. I am a fairly good shot with a rifle or six-shooter. And I have lived with Indians and Mexicans, and I know how to get along with them.

Two years ago I tried to get some one to go with me into the Colorado desert. I wanted to go where we would have to pack in for about two days, away from any road or ranch. I couldn't find a pard, and so I did a foolish thing, although it turned out all right. I strapped on my six-shooter, packed up my old car, and went alone. I was gone nine days. I found one piece of float that I brought back and showed to an old-time prospector who is over eighty years of age. He claims that

it is of the same formation that "Peg-leg" Smith brought out. He claimed that it would run at least seventy-five dollars per ton.

I could write on and on about experiences and mining. Last winter while I was in California, I perfected a machine that several old-timers claimed would save at least eighty per cent of gold. There is nothing else like it on the market or in use. I tried to keep in mind all of the disadvantages in working the desert with a dry washer. In the winter, if the ground is a little damp, the usual dry washer will not work satisfactorily. It may sound absurd, but I can work damp sand in my washer; or it can be worked with water—about the amount of water that will run through a small garden hose. And of course I can work it dry! The machine that I made is compact and can be easily taken down and packed. It is a one or two-man machine. Two men can easily run ten yards a day and not work hard. Now, folks, an inexperienced person would wonder why I didn't go out and work my machine if it is so good! Or why I don't get a patent on it. Well, there are many drawbacks. I don't get a patent on it because I would probably be beat out of it anyway! And I am not out using the machine because I am saving a grubstake now, and I am looking for a good location. I am also looking for a good partner. I have had several partners, but they all went gold-crazy and all seemed to change into different men at the sight of gold.

Yes, pard, I am saving up enough of a grubstake so as to go ahead by spring. I would like to go to New Mexico to the Ancho Desert, as I hear that in places the yellow metal will run from two to seven dollars a yard. Do any of you folks know anything about it? I would appreciate any information you old-timers could give me.

ANCHO, NO-CHECHAHCO.

Care of The Tree.

A Louisianan would like to corral some information from you folks of the West and Northwest.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a young man who has spent nineteen winters and summers in the out-of-doors, farming in the spring, summer, and fall; hunting and trapping in the winter. I have lived in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana, and have roamed all three

States in the last four years looking for a good place where hunting and trapping were profitable. But fur-bearing animals are mighty scarce here at the present time. I would appreciate hearing from folks living in the Rockies of the West, or the



Ancho, No-chechahco, is a young old-timer who can tell you folks about prospecting for the yellow metal in the great Southwest. Wear your friend-maker membership badges, folks, and speak right up to this hombre who is looking for a straight-shootin' pard.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

Canadian Northwest where I believe game is plentiful. I know all about the three States mentioned above, and will gladly swap information with any one living in the West or Northwest.

CLARENCE MATHEWS.

Bastrop, Louisiana.

Here is a would-be prospector in search of a Pal.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am hoping that through the old Holla I may come in contact with some woman prospector who is looking for a partner on a gold-seeking trip. I have lived in several of the Western States, and I am exceptionally fond of fishing and outdoor life. In fact I lived on a homestead for quite some time, and I helped to do a great deal of the outside work. For some time, I have had the gold-prospecting fever, so I am ready to pull up stakes and be on my way.

I sure would appreciate hearing from the lady prospectors, and if any of them desire a Pal to go along, please write pronto. I shall be glad to answer all replies to this letter.

JANE LYND.

434 Clement Street,
San Francisco, California.

Bob, of the United States Steamship *Houston*, is looking for a sack of letters.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a sailor of the Far East. I sure would appreciate it a heap if the old Holla would help me get some Pen Pals. Yep, I have been in China for two years, and I know lots of interesting things to write about. So, folks, please help me to get rid of the "Navy Blues."

This hombre is twenty years old.

BOB BOTTERELL.

United States Steamship *Houston*, care of Postmaster, Seattle, Washington.

You folks who would like to hear about life back stage, just speak right up.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I collect postage stamps, and will exchange stamps with other members of the old Holla. Come on, Pals—send along your duplicates for some of mine.

I'm on the vaudeville stage. I've plenty of time to write every one. I will also exchange snaps, and I'll tell about life back stage. I'm twenty-six. BILLY BUD.

Care of Billboard Publishing Co., Kansas City, Missouri.

H. S., of Pennsylvania, is looking for a Pal.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a boy of seventeen, and I would like to get in touch with some one living in a good trapping and hunting country. I am a lover of the wilds and like to hunt, fish, and trap above all things. If one of you young hombres wants a good pardner, just write me pronto. I am free to go when and where I please.

H. S., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

Care of The Tree.

A Louisianan is looking for new stomping grounds.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am very much interested in trapping, hunting, and fishing, and I would appreciate it very much if you would put me in touch with some one living some place where a man can do all three—hunt, trap, and fish—to his heart's content. I would

like to hear from any outdoor man who enjoys these sports, and I would like especially to hear from men living in the Rockies of the West or the Canadian Northwest. I have trapped and hunted in the swamps of the South, but now game is scarce here, and trapping is barely profitable, so I'm looking for new and better stomping grounds. FRED WHITEHEAD.

Bastrop, Louisiana.

A college miss is here to corral Pen Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a twenty-one-year-old girl and a junior at college. I would like to hear from Pen Pals in other countries. Won't you girls please write? I'll be glad to exchange snaps, souvenirs, and news.

HELYN DIETRICH.

125 Orchard Street,
East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania.

Forest rangers, will you please speak up?

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a city boy, living here in the East. I am looking for a forest-ranger Pen Pal, as I am interested in forestry. So come on, rangers—sling some ink my way.

LOUIS FORGUES.

13 Noel Street,
Springfield, Massachusetts.

An Ohio member of the old Holla is here to corral Pen Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I want everybody to write to me, and I'll answer all letters. I have traveled through eight States, and I can tell some interesting things about the South.

MRS. VERONA ANDERSON.

Kingsbury Park, Defiance, Ohio.

From Nova Scotia comes this little miss.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am interested in the West and ranching, and I would like to have some Pen Pals from Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, Arizona, and Texas. I am interested in horseback riding, swimming, and skating.

Come on, every one, and write.

PHYLLIS HATFIELD.

Tusket, Nova Scotia.



WHERE TO GO and How to GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

We aim in this department to give practical help to readers. The service offered includes accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. We will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to us, for we are always glad to assist you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THIS is the season when the hardy trapper is carrying on his trade in the tall woods and along frozen streams, far from the haunts of civilization. One of them, Tom W., of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, is asking for some information relative to trapping that most elusive fur bearer, the fisher.

"I've been living in my mountain

shack up here in British Columbia for several months now, Mr. North, and so far have had a pretty good catch. But I'm up against a problem, and would like a little help from you. I contracted to trap a couple of fisher for a fur farmer, and so far I haven't had any luck. So I'd like some tips as to methods for taking this fur bearer. Just where are they apt to be found, and what technique would you suggest for

trapping them? I'd also like to know how to prepare the pelt of the raccoon for market."

Nothing could please us more than to pass on what facts we possess on this subject to Tom. Fisher usually inhabit high, wooded, broken country and the thickest parts of the older forests. We are not surprised to hear that Tom has not had much luck trapping this animal, for the fisher are said to give trappers considerable trouble, ranking second only to the wolferene as stealers of bait. They are also very keen on scent and great gluttons. In trapping them, even more care is required than in trapping mink and marten.

Tom will find fisher trails along small inland creeks running through wooded ravines. In the track of the fisher the marks of its claws are discernible. In this its track differs from that of the marten, in which no claw marks appear. It is almost wholly carnivorous, and lives on rabbit, squirrel, porcupine, birds, insects, and small rodents. It is also partial to fresh beaver and muskrat meat.

Bait covered with honey is said to be especially attractive to them. Fisher are trapped by steel traps, pen sets, and box traps. The last-named method is adapted for taking them uninjured, and we would recommend it to Tom. Another method used for taking them is to set out a plentiful supply of fisher

food in a locality where they are known to be. The fisher, after he has gorged himself on this food, usually goes into some hole in the locality to sleep off his repast. This may be a hollow tree or log, or under a rock pile. The trapper, after locating the hole, blocks all passages but one, and smokes or drives the animal out by other means.

Raccoon pelts should be taken in December, as the fur is prime at this time. Care should be taken in killing the animals, for if they are struck

or bruised on the body, the blood will clot on the pelt and thus reduce its value. The animals should be skinned by the open method, unless specially ordered cased. The hide should be carefully fleshed in order not to injure the grain of the fur, and it should then be stretched evenly and dried.

All trappers will find the pamphlet, "Preparation of Pelts for the Market," invaluable. We are telling Tom where it may be procured free of charge, and shall be glad to send the address to any other trappers among our readers.

Trapping just naturally suggests Alaska, that frontier of the Far North. It is there that Harry T., of Portland, Oregon, is planning to trek, and he is asking for some facts about this Territory.

"I'm making my plans now to move up to Alaska in the late spring or early summer, Mr. North, and would like some information from

SPECIAL NOTICE

THE FLATHEAD VALLEY OF MONTANA

The lower Flathead Valley on the Pacific slope possesses many of the requirements for a desirable farm home in the West. Here the settler finds an agreeable climate, land with good soil, moderately priced, schools, churches, and cheap electric current. Mountains, lakes, and streams furnish plenty of opportunities for recreation, and there is scenery to thrill the eye. For detailed information about land in the Flathead Valley of Montana write John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

you as to farming conditions. Just how much land up there is capable of agricultural development, and where is it located? I expect to homestead and engage in farming, as I am experienced along this line. But, of course, I want to know just what I will be up against."

Harry's attitude is the wise one, for it would be most imprudent for him to go to Alaska without some preliminary knowledge of true conditions. The hombre planning to settle in that Territory should bear in mind that in many parts of Alaska strictly pioneer conditions still obtain, and that home markets are at present restricted to a small population, as compared with many sections of the States.

The area of Alaska capable of agricultural development has been variously estimated, some of the estimates being as much as one hundred thousand square miles. The principal area where it is believed farming can be successfully conducted are in the valleys of the Yukon and Tanana rivers, in the interior; the Susitna and Mantanuska valleys, which extend from Cook Inlet toward the interior; the west side of the Kenai Peninsula, and parts of the valleys of the Copper River and its tributaries. There are also many relatively small areas along the southern coast where some kinds of agriculture can be successfully pursued.

Much of the area of possible agricultural development is rolling in character or is composed of gently sloping bench lands, nearly all of which are more or less heavily wooded, some of the ground being covered with moss. The cost of clearing land in interior Alaska is comparable with that in Minnesota and Michigan. Alaska soils are not usually deep and rich, except in the

immediate vicinity of rivers, but most of them have a fair degree of fertility and they readily respond to the use of fertilizers and cultivation.

There are two very helpful pamphlets which every prospective settler should read before going to Alaska; one is published by Uncle Sam, and is called "Information for Prospective Settlers in Alaska." The other is published by the Alaska Railroad, and is entitled, "Alaska, the Homeland." They are both free, and we shall gladly tell interested readers where these publications may be procured.

Well, we have our farmers of the Far North, and our farmers of the Southwest. Bound for the Lone Star State, James P., of Baltimore, Maryland, is asking some questions about conditions down there. "Is there any farming done around El Paso, Texas, Mr. North, and where? What products are raised? Is there much non-irrigated land in the vicinity of El Paso, and for what is it used?"

Yes, there is considerable farming done in the El Paso section, for about one hundred and eighty thousand acres of land in the Elephant Butte Reclamation project are under cultivation. This land extends along the Rio Grande Valley for about seventy-five miles each way from El Paso. Long staple cotton is the principal crop. Next in importance are alfalfa, pears, cantaloupes, other melons, and vegetables.

Practically all the non-irrigated land near El Paso is either owned by cattle raisers, or leased from the government for pasture.

Free pamphlets describing farming in this section are available, and we shall be glad to tell any readers who are interested in the Lone Star State where this literature may be obtained.

GUNS AND GUNNERS

By CHARLES E. CHAPEL

Lieutenant, U. S. Marine Corps



The foremost authorities on ballistics and the principal firearms manufacturers are coöperating to make this department a success. We shall be glad to answer your questions regarding firearms of any make or age. Address your letters to Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

AUTOMATIC-PISTOL jams are usually the fault of the shooter. Dirt and damaged magazines are the two most frequent causes. Both are avoidable. Obvious damage to a magazine is easily detected, but the insidious defect is a crack, or two parallel cracks at the back of the open end. These permit spreading that leads to malfunction. Discard such cracked "clips."

Pom-pom.

The Pom-pom was an early, heavy-type Maxim gun.

Case head shape.

The shape of the cartridge-case head may be rim, rimless, semi-rimless, or belted.

Lubrication purposes.

Lubrication on a cartridge reduces friction, prevents oxidation in the case of iron or unplated steel, and excludes moisture from the propellant charge.

Division of military explosives.

Military explosives are divided into four classes: propellents; high explosives; initiating agents; and gunpowders, together with pyrotechnics, and other compositions which are not subject to detonation.

"Believe it or not"—nitroglycerin.

Nitroglycerin was discovered by Sobrero, at Turin, Italy, in 1846, but its only use was as a medicine

for the treatment of angina pectoris, until 1859, when Alfred Noble, the Swedish scientist, discovered its detonating qualities.

Requirements for cartridge-case brass.

Cartridge-case brass must contain no antimony or tin, and from 68 to 74 per cent copper, with from 32 to 26 per cent zinc. The percentage of nickel, iron, lead, arsenic, cadmium, and bismuth allowable is all under two tenths of one per cent.

Primer-cap composition.

British priming caps average in weight about 6-10 of a grain, and contain the following: 8 parts fulminate of mercury, 14 parts chlorate of potash, 18 parts sulphide of antimony, 1 part sulphur, and 1 part mealed powder, all parts being by weight.

Armor-piercing bullets.

An armor-piercing bullet theoretically should be made of steel, but to take the rifling, it is necessary that it be surrounded by lead, which is forced by gas pressure into the grooves of the bore. Since four hundred yards is considered the maximum effective range of an armor-piercing bullet, the accuracy need not be great, but the weight of the core and the velocity should be at the maximum.

Peters's and Colt's have resumed sending free booklets to our readers. If you failed to get one before, write us now.

Bullet accuracy.

The accuracy of the bullet is determined by the first inch or two of travel in the bore, and not on the rifling at the exit.

Air resistance.

Newton made the first quantitative experiments in air resistance by dropping balls from the then unfinished dome of St. Paul's, in London, in the year 1710. These experiments laid a foundation for present success in ballistics.

First use of iron ramrod.

Frederick William of Prussia introduced the iron ramrod for the first time.

Cylinder stops.

S. F. E., Griffin, Georgia: A ratchet cylinder stop allows the cylinder to rotate occasionally, whereas a positive cylinder stop registers and locks the cylinder in line with the barrel each time the hammer is cocked.

Coil vs. flat springs.

J. R. W., Seneca Falls, New York: A coil spring is a better mainspring for a revolver than a flat spring, because it does not lose its strength or break.

Government supplies of Krags and Russians are exhausted, but the U. S. Rifle, Model 1917, caliber .30, is sold for \$7.50, plus shipping charges, under certain restrictions which will be explained to readers upon request.

MISSING

This department is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track. While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come to you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it. If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking. Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

KESELOUSKI, JOHN.—Write to Rudolph Sliz, Decatur, Michigan, as soon as possible.

BARTHOLOMEW, DAVID.—When last heard from in 1926, he was in Chicago, Illinois. Any one knowing his present address, kindly notify Hilda Bartholomew, 64 West Burnham Street, Battle Creek, Michigan.

HAMILTON, JOE.—Reginald has asked me to find you and tell you that there is some money of his which, if you will get it, you can keep half of. The other half he wants his father to have. Send me a good description of yourself so that I shall know that you are the right Joe Hamilton. Information from any one in Virginia concerning the present whereabouts of Joe Hamilton would be appreciated. If they prefer, they may call this notice to his attention. Kindly send any news to A. D., care of Western Story Magazine.

ATTENTION.—I would like to know where my grandfather died, and want to locate some of my relatives. He was John Quinn. Grandmother's maiden name was Sarah Cunningham. Grandfather had a brother, Bruce, and there was a sister Rebecca. The last my mother knows of them was when they moved to Missouri from Cutler, Ohio. Mother was just a baby when her father died. After his death they moved back to Cutler. Mother was Elizabeth Quinn and she was an only child. Mother and father have been dead for a number of years and I would like so much to know some of her family. Kindly address Sarah J. MacKall, P. O. Box 785, Parkersburg, West Virginia.

NELSON, JOHN NED.—In December, 1921, he left Raymond, Washington. In May, 1922, he was heard from in Beesport, Oregon. Has not been heard from since. He was six feet tall and weighed between one hundred and eighty-five and ninety-five pounds. His eyes are blue and hair is light-brown. It is possible that he is quite bald by now. Would be around forty-five years of age. The thumb on his right hand is blunt, having been crushed to the base of the nail. Both arms are tattooed. He is of Danish descent. His nature is very genial, and he is usually singing or whistling. It is possible that he is using the name of Martinson, which was his father's name, but, as is the Danish custom, he adopted the first name of his father, Nels, and added "son," hence the name Nelson. Any one who can give any information concerning him, please communicate as soon as possible with his daughter, Helen Loris Nelson, 717 1/2 Ellis Street, Raymond, Washington.

GREEN, MRS.—She is an old friend of mine. For several years she operated a hotel in Corsicana, Texas. Had a son with her. In 1923 or 1924 the hotel was destroyed by fire. She is about fifty years of age. When last heard from she was in Amarillo, Texas. Any one knowing her present address, please write to Mrs. Bobbie T., care of Western Story Magazine.

RUSSELL, ALLEN J.—Must see you, Al. Won't you please come, if possible? I need you, Al. I blame only myself. Everything is all right. Please come or write at once. Mildred.

ASHLEY, TIMOTHY.—Generally called Tim or Red. Would be forty-nine or fifty years of age. Is six feet tall and is lame in right leg. Has red hair. He is a barber and plays the banjo quite well. Is very fond of horses and was last heard of in 1905 or 1906 in either Horner or Cortland, New York, where he drove a horse at the fair. The horse was called "Little Pete." This man is my father, and I would like to know if he is alive or dead. Any one having any information, please get in touch with Mrs. Grace Newton, General Delivery, Syracuse, New York.

LENOCKER, MRS. VIRGIL.—She was a Mrs. Bartlett before she married Mr. Lenocker. Her last known address was Electric, Texas. Her husband is a plasterer by trade. She is an old and dear friend of mine, and I should be very happy if I could hear from her. Address Helen Golden, Enfield, North Carolina.

SPRAGUE, HENRY and CORAL.—About three years ago they were heard from somewhere in Idaho. No news has come from them since that time. They had three children, Virginia, Victor, and Fay. Any one knowing their whereabouts, kindly notify Miss Hilda Curtis, Box 280, Dorris, California.

PASZKIEWICZ, JOHN.—Why don't you write to your old friend, Lu-Lu? Any one knowing his present address, please notify Louis Bilcowski, Eden, Manitoba, Canada.

JOHNSON, CAROLINE GARNET.—When last heard from, in 1915, she was living in Lynn, Massachusetts. Her daughter Lillian is very anxious for some word of her. Any one knowing her whereabouts, kindly communicate with William B. Nelson, Greenway Station, Tucson, Arizona.

NOTICE.—I would like to hear from any of the boys who served with me in Battery B, First United States Field Artillery, from 1921 to 1924, and stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Address Edward Brown, 746 School Street, Los Angeles, California.

GRISSOM, ROY.—He is my father and has been missing since 1926. The last time I saw him was in Wichita, Kansas. He is forty-five years of age and a carpenter and builder by trade. Dad, if you see this, please write to me. I would be so grateful for any news of him. Address Miss Minnie Grissom, Box 23, Simpson, Kansas.

WIENS, HARRY ORLANDO.—He is six feet tall and has black hair. Was born May 8, 1907. From 1924 to 1928 he served in the United States navy. Since 1928 he has sailed as an independent seaman. On March 5, 1932, he wrote to us just before he sailed on the S. S. "American Press" from New Orleans. He was employed as an engineer by the Dixie Mediterranean Line, owners of the boat. Having no further word from him, we inquired concerning him from the company who informed us on November 2, 1932, that Harry had left their employ, and that they had no way of tracing him. He had returned from the Italian trip and had then given up his job. Any information regarding him will be gratefully received by his parents. Address J. D. Wiens, 1539 L Street, Reedley, California.

FORD, EVELYN A.—She would be about eighteen years of age and was born near Paul's Valley, Oklahoma. When last heard from she was at Guyton, Oklahoma. She moved from there to Amarillo, Texas. Her mother's maiden name was Vena Nation. She has an aunt named Betty. Also an uncle, Strider Nation, Evelyn, if you should read this and care to get in touch with me, my father, write at once. Any one knowing this young lady, please communicate with Bill, care of Western Story Magazine.

JOHNSON, RICHARD.—About fourteen years ago, Richard, with his brothers and sisters, was placed in the Miami or Lucas County home in Maumee, Ohio, by his father. Richard has dark hair and is of medium height. Seven or eight years ago he left the home to go to work for an elderly man, who was supposed to live in the West. Any one knowing him, please ask him to write to his sister, Ruth, in care of Western Story Magazine.

KARLAN, JOHN.—When last heard from, in 1910, he was working in a shoe factory. Any one knowing his present address, please write to J. K., 47 Mader Street, Schenectady, New York.

DAKES, CHARLEY or JACK.—Please write to your sister Jessie E. Oakes. I am the granddaughter of Martha or Mattie Jane Casary, better known as C. Lamity Jane in history. You know this woman as your Aunt Mattie. I am also related to James Butler Hickok, known in history of the West as Wild Bill Hickok. Address me care of Western Story Magazine.

SALTERS, AUGUSTA.—Generally called Peaches. He was last heard from in 1924 when he was a member of Headquarters Company, Thirtieth United States Infantry. Any one knowing his present whereabouts, please write to Mrs. Margarette Hogan, Box 151, Bisbee, Arizona.

HOLT, REUBEN M.—He is my father and has been missing for four years. His eyes are light-blue, is light-complexioned and had blond hair which is probably entirely gray by now. Weighs one hundred and ninety pounds and is five feet eleven inches tall. He is sixty years of age. Any one having any information regarding this man, please communicate with his daughter, Nancy J. Carpenter, Tribby, Florida.

FISHER, JAMES.—Who lived at Hidden Timber, South Dakota, in 1927 and 1928. Vess isn't so well. He would like to hear from you and talk over old times down on the Poncho Creek. If you see this, write. Should any one knowing his present whereabouts read this notice, kindly bring it to his attention. Hattie M. Vance, Route 3, Box 110, Coyote Pass, Hemet, California.

WEST, JOHN EDWARD.—He would be about sixty years of age and has reddish-brown hair and gray eyes. Is five feet five inches tall. He is pure German. Has not been seen or heard from since he left his home in Oregon, Missouri. His children would like some word of him. Their ages range from twenty-three to thirty-three and their names are now, James Callen, Velma Mildred Lane, Floyd M. West, and Zella May Flewelling. If any of the readers know this man, kindly address Mrs. Zella Mae Flewelling, care of C. F. Farmer, Stanley, New Mexico.

CURNUTTE, BENNETT.—Frequently called Red. Is between thirty-six and seven years of age, and is a native of Virginia. Has curly auburn hair and brown eyes. His chin is deeply cleft. Has been missing since just after the World War ended. Celebrated Armistice Day in New York City with several pals, two of whom were Hinky Dinky Carberry and Snake-eye Fields. Saw seven years service in the army in the Philippines. Was a barber while in service. He is a talented musician and may be playing in an orchestra. He was in Portland, Oregon, when last heard from, and spoke of going to South America. Has friends in Oakland, California. His father is very ill, and his one desire is to hear from his long-lost son. No financial aid is required. Address: K. M., care of this magazine.

COWEN, MRS. MADGE.—Of Hidden Timber, South Dakota. Have lost your address. Write to me or let me hear from you through Bess Radford, Hattie M. Vance, Route 3, Box 170, Coyote Pass, Hemet, California.

YOCUM, SISTERS AND BROTHER.—Who were inmates of the Johnstown Children's Home in November, 1917. I am your sister and I have been trying to find you. On November 14, 1917, I was taken from the home in adoption. Please, if any of you see this, get in touch with me. Mrs. Dorothy Y. Myers, Bowmansdale, York County, Pennsylvania.

HUSH, WILL U.—Please write. We are heartbroken. Don't you know that we love you more than life, and will always be waiting? We couldn't do anything rash. Write to us in care of Western Story Magazine. L. H.

ATTENTION.—Would like to hear from the following boys who worked with me in Wes Milford's outfit in Carlyle, Saskatchewan, Canada, in the fall of 1926: Jack Buchanan, Jack Steel, Hughie Houtson, and Cecil. The latter was nicknamed Crummy. Hughie and Cecil are from Huntville, Alabama, and Buchanan comes from Dauphin, Manitoba. Write to Art Purvis, 631 Milverton Boulevard, Toronto, Canada.

DOWNING, CHARLES.—He is my father. My mother was Mamie Carpenter. They were married in New Albany, Indiana. Father had dark eyes and was partly bald. Was noticeably deaf. Usually worked as a waiter. Daddy, mamma died at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in July, 1932. Won't you please let me hear from you? I have tried so hard to locate you. Please write to your daughter Boots at once. Address Mrs. Camille Williams, care of Savoy Hotel, Champion, Alberta, Canada.

JESSE G.—Who left home on the Saturday before Labor Day, 1933. On October 2, 1933, he was in Los Angeles, California. Has not been heard from since. J., your father is sick with worry. Please come home or write to me. You can trust me. Your aunt Ida.

OWENS, LUELLA.—She is nineteen years of age and five feet tall. Her hair and eyes are brown. Her mother is trying to locate her and would be very grateful for any news regarding her daughter. Address Mrs. Cassie Owens, General Delivery, North Platte, Nebraska.

NOTICE.—Information is requested as to the whereabouts of Michael Conway, a blacksmith by trade. Was last seen in New Haven, Connecticut, in July 1933. It is possible that he may still be in that vicinity. He is very tall and dark-complexioned. Any information, whether dead or alive, will be greatly appreciated. Please notify M. C., care of Western Story Magazine.

KISSINGER, EDGAR THOMAS.—In October, 1931, he was in the coast guard at New London, Connecticut. No word has come from him since that date. He is thirty-four years old and a World War veteran. Is light-complexioned, five feet four inches tall, and is of medium build. His father and mother would be thankful for any kind of news. Please address William Kissinger, 422 West Main Street, Zanesville, Ohio.

BLACKWAY.—My father was Robert Blackway. He died in Chestertown, Maryland, in 1931. My mother was either Maggie or Margaret Blackway. Her home was in Townsend, Delaware. I was born in Delaware, and was adopted by Rachel Jones, of Gotta, Kent County, Maryland. Somewhere I have four brothers, all older than I. I do not know if they use the name of Blackway or have names by adoption. I should like so much to learn something about them and would appreciate hearing from any one bearing, or knowing any one bearing, the name of Blackway. Kindly write to Percy L. Blackway, 3028 West Louisiana Avenue, Denver, Colorado.

ARGODALE, GUS.—Please come home. Your mother is much worried. All will be forgiven. Write home immediately. Your brother, James G. Argo.

VARNEY, FRANK.—Dear dad, please write to us. It will be kept a secret. We have been worrying about you and want some word from you. Your daughters, Elma and Edna. Address your letter to 2934 East Thirty-fourth Street, Tacoma, Washington.

MORLAN, CHESTER C.—Was last heard of in 1919. At that time he was living in Oakland, California. Any information as to his present whereabouts will be gratefully received by his brother, Edward A. Morlan, 1613 West Twenty-fourth Street, Los Angeles, California.

MILLER, BERTHA.—Please write and tell me if you are still living and happy. I wrote to you several times, but never received any reply. For the last eight years I have been employed by one of the biggest companies in Central America, and I have made a man of myself. I am not the boy I used to be. Still love you and remember the past. If you need my help, please let me hear from you. Sam, care of Western Story Magazine.

GRAMLEY, WILLIAM.—His brother is asking for news of him and would appreciate any help that the readers of Western Story Magazine can offer him. These brothers have not been each other for fifteen years. Please write to Albert Gramley, Twenty-seventh Infantry, Schofield Barracks, Territory of Hawaii.

DAVIS, CHICK.—An enlisted man in the United States army and stationed in the Philippines during 1931. Any one knowing his whereabouts, or who can furnish any information that will establish his correct identity, please communicate with Richard Mahan, Attorney, 230 Park Avenue, New York, New York.

SPRAGUE, HENRY, and FAMILY.—Henry married my sister, Coral Curtis, of Spearfish, North Dakota. Their children were Henry, Coral Dorothy, Clinton, Jack, and Gladys. When last heard from, three years ago, they lived in Idaho. Any one knowing their present address, please notify Mrs. Frank Burr, Box 280, Dorris, California.

STONE, CLEMENT.—Formerly of 3090 Webster Avenue, New York City. I wrote to him at that address while I was in Oakland, California, but never received any reply. Clement, please write to your old pal, James A. Harrison, care of Wenner Ranch, Merrimac Star Route, Oroville, California.

POE, A. A.—Generally known as Dock and Uncle Dock. Was last heard from in Muleshoe, Texas, in 1928. He is my father, and I have been trying to find him for some time, as my little sister, who is in a "Home" and does not want to stay there, needs his help. He is six feet two inches tall. Has fair complexion, light-brown hair and blue eyes. Between fifty-five and sixty-five years of age. Any information received will be much appreciated by Lewis Poe, 754 North Cedar Street, Larabee, Wyoming.

ATTENTION.—Would like to hear from Sergeant Fry, Jimmy Shipp, James Kelly, Dinehart, or any one else who was at Camp No. 38, East Elmhurst, California, in April, 1933. Please write to Cecil B. Stephenson, 707 East Wyanodotte Avenue, Freeport, Illinois.

BRADEN, MRS. R. M.—She is my mother, and the last time I heard of her, her address was Route 3, Sycamore, Georgia. I was adopted from the Child Welfare Association of Atlanta, Georgia. I also have a sister, Annie May. When last heard of she lived in Sibley, Georgia. It is very possible that she may now be married. I have an aunt, Mrs. Maggie Russell, who lived in Afta, Georgia, in 1925, but I do not know her present address. Any information regarding any of these persons, will be much appreciated. Address Mitchell Smith, Priors, Georgia.

MERLE.—Please communicate with me at once. J. A. H. is desperately ill. Your business affairs are O. K. This request is most important, and any answer will be strictly confidential, if you should so wish. Frank.

HUDSON, OSSIAN ALLEN.—He is thirty-four years old. Is six feet tall and weighs one hundred and seventy pounds. Has blue eyes and light curly hair. Wears glasses. On right cheek is a small, faint scar. Right-hand thumb is partly missing, and left hand is partially stiffened. He is smooth-shaven. It is very important that he either write or come home. Please help me find him. Address M. H., care of Western Story Magazine.

PIEFMAN, WILLIAM, and wife, STELLA.—They were last heard of in 1906, when they were about to move to New Mexico from Fort Scott, Kansas. I was employed by them on their farm from 1885 to 1887. I would thank any one who may know them or their whereabouts, if they would be so kind as to bring this notice to their attention. Would be glad to hear from any member of the family. Address Will E. Holland, R. F. D. 3, Morrow, Ohio.

ROBINSON, ISAIHA JAMES.—He is my brother, and when I last heard from him, nine years ago, he was in Memphis, Tennessee. He would be about thirty-two years of age. Is five feet seven inches tall and weighed one hundred and thirty pounds. Has black curly hair which he wears parted on the left side. His eyes are blue. He is a baker by trade. Buddy, if you see this, please write to your sister, Helen Works, General Delivery, Crater, New Mexico.

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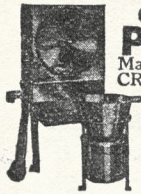
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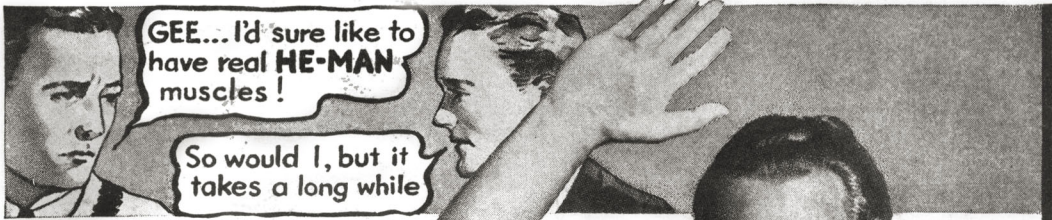
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Thousands of other fellows now know this secret, too—and know from their own personal experience what Dynamic Tension has done for them. When they turned to me for advice, they were just as frail and puny as I once was. Now they are life-sized examples of what a man *can* and *ought* to be—with mighty energy, tireless endurance, and muscles that stand out like bridge-cables all over their bodies.

I have written an interesting booklet, filled with pictures, which tells my story—and theirs. I would like to send you a copy of it entirely free.

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On this page you will see an actual photo of how I look today. This picture has not been changed in any way.

No muscles have been "painted on." This photograph is the camera's honest proof of what I have done for MY body. I myself am ready to prove what my secret of Dynamic Tension can do for YOURS!

To look at me now you wouldn't recognize me as the same man I was a few years ago. Then I was a physical wreck, a 97-pound weakling—flat chested, spindly legs, arms and legs like pipestems.

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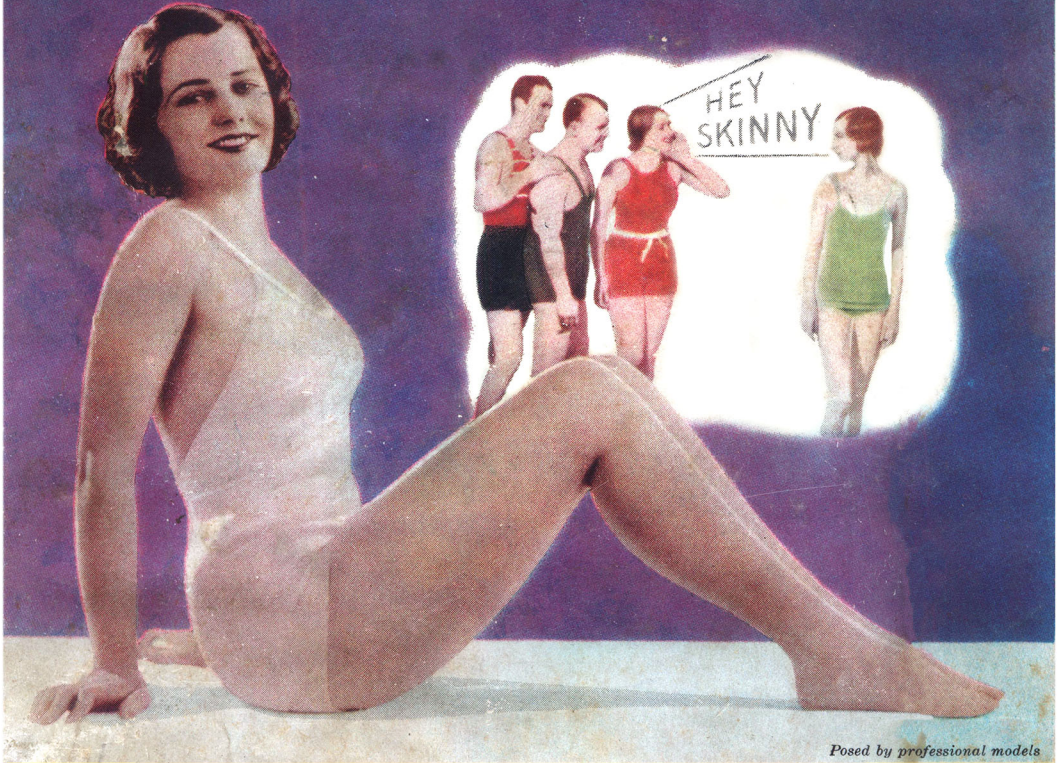
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