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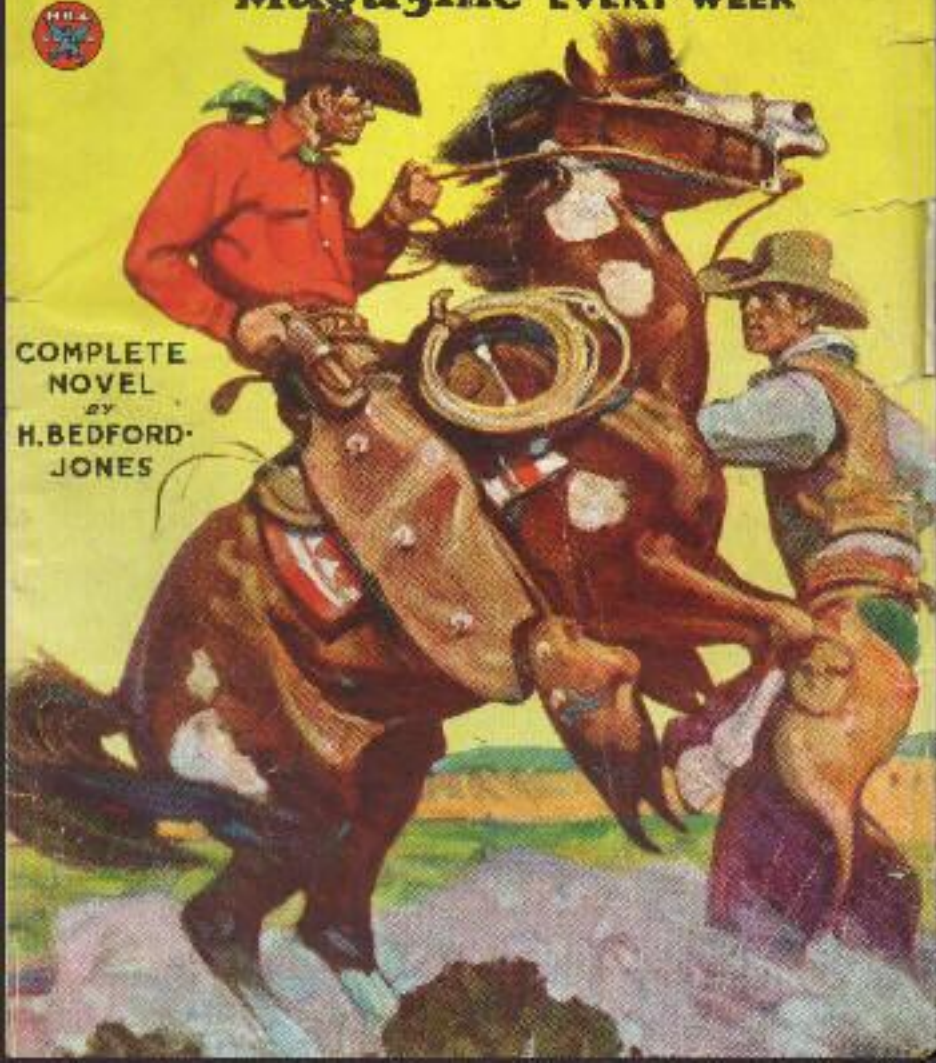
APRIL 7<sup>TH</sup>

# Western Story

Magazine EVERY WEEK



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BY  
H. BEDFORD  
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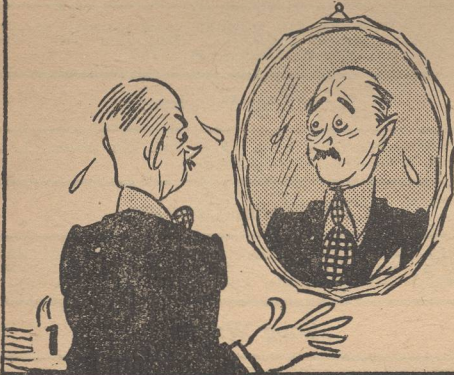
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# REFLECTIONS

BY JEFFERSON MACHMER

### REFLECTION



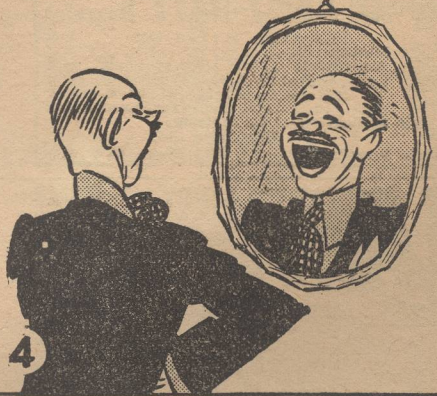
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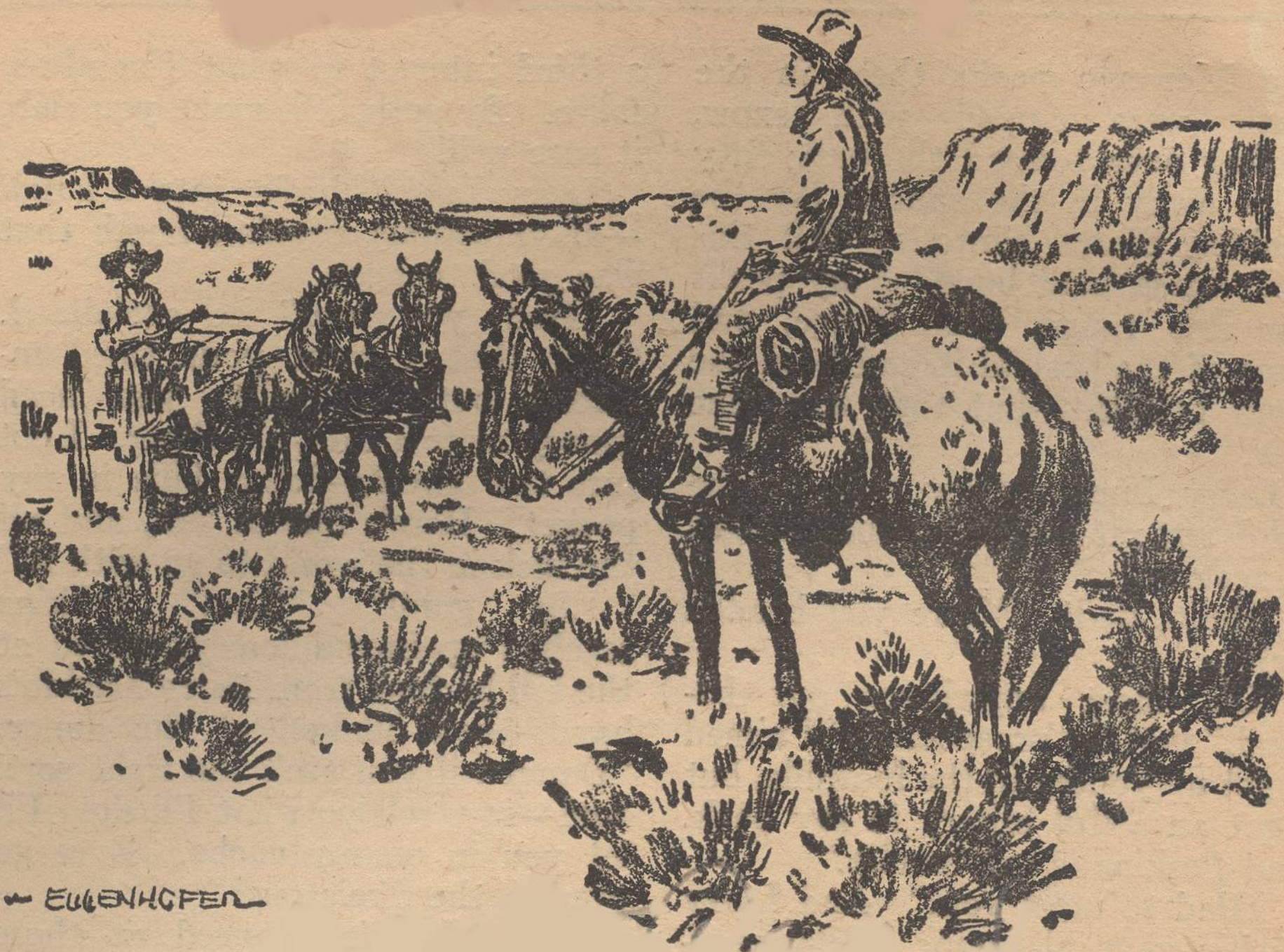
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# LARRY'S LUCK

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "Bullet Barometer," etc.

## CHAPTER I. STEPPING OUT.

LARRY LUCKIN was on his way to town—for the last time. A strange journey it was, dotted with incidents which seemed trivial yet were destined to have a tremendous repercussion in the near future.

Rolled in his soogans was everything he owned on earth, including the branding iron which had impressed the Twin L on the off shoulder of his flea-bitten gray. Under the wide brim of his Stetson, Larry Luckin's features were bronzed, hard-chiseled, eager. For the mo-

ment, the brooding gloom of disaster was gone from his eyes; their keen, sharp blue flashed in the sunlight. The old gay smile touched his lips, as he watched the approaching man who plodded along behind two burros. An old man, long-bearded, ragged. A desert rat.

There was desert enough in Sunset County, and other things beside. Off to the left the Skeleton Hills rose like a naked rock wall, out half-way across the desert stretch that was called the Devil's Frying Pan. Their blue and red tips glittered in the morning sunlight.

On south ran the good range, on past Burnville, the county seat, for which Larry Luckin was headed.



The Morongo peaks there in the south were tipped with snow, circling over toward the east; fifty miles away in the sunrise lay the jumbled Sierra Pintada. All this great mesa land bounded by peaks was fine range, good range, and some of the best of it had been the Twin L outfit—but that was gone now.

Larry Luckin drew rein, as the old desert rat peered up and croaked a greeting.

"Hello, dad! Where you headed for?"

"Oh, most anywheres out beyond," said the prospector. "I aimed to get up yonder in the foothills, but I got an awful misery in my back. Dad Perkins is my handle."

"Glad to meet you." And Larry Luckin gave his name. "Prospecting?"

"Yep. Been peckin' away fifty-odd year and still goin' strong. I got a notion where to find the best-payin' ore you ever seen, too! Only this dad-burned misery sure aches me. Ain't there a crossroads store up north a ways, where I can get me some medicine?"

"Sure. About twelve mile north."

"That's good. Only I ain't got no money. I done got some dust over in the Skeletons, and put it all into this here outfit. Say, young feller, if you want to grubstake old Dad Perkins, you can't go wrong! If I get my back fixed up, I'm on the trail of some free-milling quartz that'll knock your eye out!"

LARRY LUCKIN rolled a cigarette. He was familiar with the story; every desert rat had a fortune in sight, at the end of the rainbow, and would probably die en route to it.

"If I had just about ten dollars," went on the old man, "I'd save you

a third interest in what I'm after, feller. By gosh, it'll make you rich, it sure will!"

Larry Luckin broke into a laugh—an infectious, carefree laugh that was good to hear.

"Dad, you win!" he exclaimed. "Not that I want your third interest; but, by golly, you need money more'n I do, old-timer. I got just two twenty-dollar bills in my pocket. Here's one of 'em, and all the luck in the world to go with it."

"By gum!" "Dad" Perkins reached up incredulously, stared at the bill he took from Larry Luckin's hand, then blinked at the donor. "Danged if you ain't the right sort! And—say, tell ye what I'll do! I'll let you in on my cache. Ever go over to the Skeletons?"

Larry Luckin glanced at those cruel gold and red peaks.

"I might," he responded whimsically. "The Devil's Frying Pan couldn't be much worse'n the stew I'm in now, anyhow! Yeah, I might take a *pasear* over that way. Why?"

"Well, it's like this." Dad Perkins glanced around, then lowered his voice. "I been over there two months, see? Lookin' for an old mine that's plumb lost. And I found something danged good, feller. You know where the old North Trail runs? The one that ain't used no more since a road was opened up through the Skeletons?"

Larry Luckin nodded. He was amused, but decided to let the old man impart his secret, since it would make Dad Perkins feel as though he were repaying the grubstake.

"You take that there old North Trail, and turn out where it used to fork—take the right fork. You'll lose it, but head straight for them twin buttes and you'll pick it up, and go square in between them twins, savvy? Looks like there ain't



only a little box canyon there, but you head up the right wall. You'll see my tracks. Ain't nobody ever found that place in all these years, I reckon. Up and over the top you'll come on water. And a shack. It was there when I located it—prob'ly some old hermit lived there. And if you want to hide out, feller, you can have the place. So long!"

"So long," said Luckin, smiling, and headed his horse toward town.

Dad Perkins should have more sense than to think his water hole unknown. No inch of all the desert and mountains but had been scoured by just such prospectors, or by outlaws. And a shack had been there. Nonsense! Like all desert rats, the old chap was off his nut. With which reflection, Mr. Luckin rode on, and his mind reverted to his own troubles.

Ahead grew a road fork, and a spurting cloud of dust approaching it. A team was coming out from town. It was probably taking that fork and returning to the Bar C Ranch. Larry Luckin grunted unhappily; no way out of it now. Here was the one person he did not want to meet this morning! For June Carrol, or rather old "Trumpety" Carroll, her father, had more of a share in his present imbroglio than she realized.

Larry Luckin rolled a fresh cigarette, drew rein at the road fork and slouched comfortably in the saddle until the team came along and halted.

"Morning, June!" he exclaimed, bringing his gray alongside.

"Same to you Larry. Where bound?"

"I'm stepping out."

"Uh-huh. So I gathered in town. I just couldn't stick around, Larry. I couldn't bear to see it—to hear about it."

THEY were both silent for a little, embarrassed. June Carroll had steady dark eyes under raven hair; poised, lovely, her features held a certain capability that was good to see. She had been mistress of the Bar C ever since her father's illness began, a year ago, and ran the outfit so that it made money.

"Larry, why didn't you tell us about it?" she broke out suddenly, a ring of passionate reproach in her voice. "You know we'd have helped. Even now it isn't too late."

"I ain't whining," he responded quietly. "Thanks, June. But it is too late. I didn't know about it all until it couldn't be helped."

"Surely, it can't be all gone?"

"Nope. I still own the Twin L brand, anyhow."

"Oh!" She caught her breath. "The ranch, everything! But Larry! You have a year to redeem it after the tax sale, you know! And that means a year from to-day. The tax sale isn't until noon. Let me give you a loan."

"June, you're a darned good pal," said Larry Luckin, a glow in his eyes as he watched her. "But I'm stepping out, like I said. Give your dad my regards, will you? I'll drop you a line when I get where I'm going."

Had he so desired, he might have read a startling meaning into the impulsive flame of the girl's dark eyes. Perhaps he did not want to see that eager, anxious light. He waved his hat gayly, gave his horse a surreptitious prod of the spur, and as the gray snorted and sidled off, Larry Luckin headed the beast on toward town.

"Don't forget to write, Larry!" came the girl's voice.

He looked back, laughed, and waved his hat again in assent.



From the courthouse steps in Burnville, at noon, the Twin L outfit was being sold for back taxes to the highest bidder. But behind that forced sale was an amazing story.

With keen, alert glances, the sharp blue eyes of Larry Luckin searched the road ahead. Over the rolling uplands, dust was spurting here and there, not from wandering cattle alone. Men were on the road, and coming into it from the hill trails. Riders by ones and twos, most of them headed for town and the tax sales. Other men than Larry Luckin were being sold out this day.

Putting his hand to the gun at his hip, Luckin snapped it from the holster, glanced at it, twirled the cylinder, and with a nod thrust it back. Another long flicker of dust was coming toward him, this time a rider headed out from town, and his face changed as he eyed the shape, still hidden from recognition. His lips tightened, the gayety fled from his eyes; one would have said that he was watching for an enemy to draw down upon him, as he rode.

Then, as the other rider came over a rise and drew closer, he frowned for a moment, broke into a laugh, and relaxed in his saddle. The other man was brawny, powerful of build, with a sweeping grizzled mustache and a face like brown granite. A silver star was pinned on his vest. He drew rein, nodded, and sat in silence.

"Well?" demanded Larry Luckin. "You ain't looking for me, I hope?"

"Yeah," said the sheriff. "Gimme your gun, Larry."

"Having known me since I was a kid," drawled Luckin, "you prob'ly will know that I don't mean no offense when I tell you, 'Nothing doing.' I keep my own gun."

"Blast it!" broke out the sheriff, sudden emotion in his face. "Larry,

your dad was my partner and friend. I've been like another father to you, ain't I? And since he died, I've done the best I could to look out for you. Now, you just trust me, feller, and hand over that gun. I rode out from town to meet you."

"You're the salt of the earth," said Larry Luckin, "but you're also the sheriff. I suppose the whole Pickering tribe are in town, and you aim to protect them from my righteous wrath. Is that it?"

"Durn your fool hide, I aim to protect you from yourself!" snapped the sheriff. Then he changed front abruptly. "Larry, loosen up, will you? You ain't been yourself for a month past. You wouldn't speak to a friend, hardly. You've kept off out of the way. You been over to Cathedral City gambling and drinking and raising hell. Why didn't you come to me and let me give you a hand?"

"I ain't whining," snapped Larry Luckin, color rising in his cheeks.

"There you go—gettin' your mad up!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Old feller, give me a square deal, will you? I want to help you if I can. Anyhow, you owe me a square deal. Tell me how it all happened."

"Agreed," said Luckin, "on one condition. You forget about my gun and figger me for a man able to hold his own end up, not for a boy you got to look after. Yes or no?"

"Have it your own way," said the sheriff, and turned his horse. "I hope you ain't really lost the ranch?"

"Hope's a good hoss till she founders." Larry Luckin laughed shortly. "Yep, old-timer. I'm cleaned. And then some. I got a telephone call this morning from my lawyer over in Cathedral City. Slim Pickering won the case he brought



against me; got a judgment for six thousand dollars personal injuries and so forth. You're the first to learn the news."

"My gosh! Six thousand? Just on account of you beating hell out of him? How you going to pay it?"

"I ain't." Larry Luckin chuckled. Then he sobered. "Sheriff, I'm stepping out—that's all. That judgment, which was won by lying witnesses, trickery, and fraud, was just the last straw. It don't really matter."

"Well, you settle right down to confessing your sins," said the sheriff grimly. "Maybe I can find a way out, short of arresting you like Red Pickering wants. He aims to put you under bonds to keep the peace, and so forth. How did all this funny work start?"

"After dad died last year," said Larry Luckin, his blue eyes somber. "But you got to get the picture, old-timer. That Pickering clan is strong over to Cathedral City. Old Ezra Pickering owns about half the place, and Slim, his older son, helps him run it. He's been trying to jockey the younger feller, Red, into the same prominence in these parts."

"Yeah, so I figgered," said the sheriff, with a nod. "What about your dad?"

"Notes, promissory notes," said Luckin. "Three of his own, and two he had endorsed for Trumpety Carroll. And they run into money. Before he died, dad told me he didn't owe a red cent, had paid off everything. But he was sort of careless about papers and so on."

The sheriff swore heartily. "If he said he was clear, then he was! Your dad never lied. Neither did you."

"Yeah. Get a new line, will you?" said Luckin bitterly. "The bank had sold all them notes, see? Well, all of a sudden this here Ezra Pick-

ering bobs up with them. And nothing to show they were paid. The worst were those he had endorsed for Trumpety Carroll. You know, Old Man Carroll ain't been up to much since that hoss trampled him—he's been just about hanging on alive for the last few months—and June is kept poor by doctor's bills and so on."

The sheriff whistled softly, and gave him a shrewd glance.

"You and June—well, I supposed you and her understood each other?"

"We do," said Larry Luckin. "We're good friends, if that's what you mean. If it ain't what you mean, then you're wrong."

"Well, boy!" broke out the other. "You could raise money. I ain't broke. You can't pay Carroll's debts——"

"Now, listen to me, and I don't want any argument about it." Larry Luckin turned in the saddle, his blue eyes like ice. "I ain't hollering and whining, understand that? If I can't hold up my end, that's just my bad luck. Personally, I know damned well all those notes were paid off, but I can't prove it. And the law has got me. So let's not talk about that part of it any more."

With a curt nod of assent, the sheriff gnawed his grizzled mustache and then grunted.

"Durn it! You got the cards stacked against you. What about you having a run-in with them fellers at Cathedral City, and having a shooting scrape?"

"Want the truth, or just a few excuses?"

"Listen, son," came the earnest reply. "You're too durned proud. You been getting hit below the belt right along, and instead of hollering for help, you take it all and keep your mouth shut, and aim to hit back hard. Well, look out! I'll bet



ten to one you're figuring this minute on pumping lead into Ezra Pickering or one of his sons. Ain't it so?"

"No," said Luckin. "Not one of those rats, but both of 'em."

"Yeah; then you go to jail and get hung, most like. Now, get to talking! My gosh, you been bottled up so long you're about spoiled. What about that shooting with Pickering's outfit over there? Weren't they the boys off his ranch?"

"Yeah," said Larry Luckin. To tell the truth, it was doing him good to get things off his chest. He had indeed been bottled up too long. "I been missing cattle heavy all fall and winter—big losses. Finally I got it figured out that they had been herded out acrost the hills into the desert, and maybe on somewheres else; not so much to get the cattle, as to hit me. And the loss sure hit me hard. Well, one day, prowling up around the north end of my range, I found a silver concho with the initial, 'Y,' stamped in it. This was along in March."

He paused, rolled and lighted a cigarette, eyed the road ahead, and then went on.

"One night at Cathedral City, after I shipped the last o' my stock last month, I set into a poker game at the Salty Dog. Mostly with vaqueros from the EP outfit—the Pickering crowd. A feller come in all dolled up rodeo style, and he had big silver conchos, and one of them was gone. His name was Ybarra, and he was a half-breed Mexican, and he worked for Pickering—and the concho I had found, matched the rest. He was one of the crowd that had run off my stock."

Luckin grinned reminiscently.

"I only shot him in the shoulder anyhow," he said. "Then somebody

grabbed my gun, and they aimed to shoot me, and there was a ruckus—a good one. The Salty Dog was wrecked. Four or five of them jaspers were hurt bad, but I got out with a whole skin and rode right out to the EP Ranch and interviewed Slim Pickering. The old man was gone. That's when I beat up Slim, for which he went to law instead of going after his gun."

"I see," said the sheriff. "Did you feel better after raising all that hell?"

"No. To be honest about it, I felt damned sorry—that I had missed Ezra and his other offspring, Red," confessed Larry Luckin.

"Uh-huh. Well, what about losing your ranch? Pickering ain't back o' that?"

"Sort of in the background. He's in cahoots with Dan Murphy, the county tax collector. Murphy's ranch is down the valley here, but he's in town most of the time gettin' rich, and this here Red Pickering, that aims to horn into Burnville and make his pile, plays around with Dan Murphy, and there you are."

"But your taxes have been paid?" cried the sheriff. "Hell's bells, Larry! Your old man paid up everything—he never owed a cent while he lived! And this here tax sale is for taxes that run away back. Where are the receipts?"

Larry Luckin was silent a moment, his eyes steady on the road ahead.

"Old-timer," he said at last, in a low voice, "I'll tell you what I wouldn't tell to any one else. Two nights before my dad died, he went off his head. It was the medicine that the doctor gave him. He got so bad we had to tie him down and he was all right next morning, but he had sure raised Cain around the house. He upset a lamp that set



fire to his room, and durned near burned down the whole place. Destroyed his papers and everything."

"Shucks! I never knew that," said the sheriff. "But——"

"Do you think I'd tell that story around?" Larry Luckin turned savagely in his saddle. "On my dad? Not by a damned sight! Well, this here Dan Murphy said something one day about back taxes. I couldn't show up with the receipts, and he smelled a mouse, and said some more about back taxes. Finally he claimed a default for years past."

"Then he must have doctored the books!" The sheriff swore. "I wouldn't put it past him, the skunk! I never did like that jasper anyhow."

"Well, now you know the story,"—and drawing a deep breath, Larry Luckin turned with a smile—"keep it to yourself. I'm stepping out, and I ain't whining, understand?"

"Yeah. But I want you to promise me that you won't have any trouble in town with Red Pickering or the fellers with him."

"I don't make promises that I can't keep."

"Durn it! Don't you savvy that they're laying for you, son? Condemn it all, listen to reason! They want to get you clapped into jail. I'll have to do it if you give 'em half an excuse."

"And I suppose Pickering will buy in the Twin L outfit, eh?" Larry Luckin smiled slightly. "Listen here, I'll tell you something. For the past few months, I've been fighting things off alone, see? Hoping for a break, hoping to get somewhere, hoping for a chance! Everything I've touched has gone bad. Still, I've tried to go straight. I've wanted to play fair and square. Well, I didn't get a break."

For a moment, the blue eyes of

Luckin met the gaze of the sheriff, and they were like glinting ice.

"Now—the devil with it all!" he said. "I'm stepping out, and I'm keeping my gun."

"My gosh, Larry—you don't mean that! You ain't quitting?"

"No," said Larry Luckin. "No. I ain't quitting. I've quit, that's all."

## CHAPTER II.

### THE POSSE.

**B**URNVILLE had once been a flourishing place, thanks to the silver mines over in the Sierra Pintada range. In those days it had become the county seat of Sunset County, and it still was that.

But silver had gone out, a railroad spur had come into Cathedral City, twenty miles to the west, and copper had aided Cathedral City to boom. Burnville, with nothing left except the ranches up and down the mesa, had become a sleepy little cow town with some imposing buildings but mighty little energy, while its dwindling vote gave it small voice in county affairs.

Standing about the courthouse steps, grouped on the greensward and beneath the trees around, was a motley crowd. The long hitch racks were lined with cow ponies, teams, buggies. Not only was this a Saturday, which normally drew a throng to town for its weekly trading, but it was tax-sale day as well.

Women as well as men had turned out, mostly from curiosity. Ranchers, townsfolk, horse traders, vaqueros, and wranglers gossiped around. As the string of EP broncs at one rack bore witness, some of the Pickering outfit from Cathedral City way were here; and they were marked off from the rest of the crowd. Seven of them, with "Red" Pickering. They bunched together.



They were a different crowd; hard-eyed, hard-drinking men, tricked out with gay kerchiefs and trimmings, two or three with rodeo shirts and huge chaps, all with guns.

Red Pickering was tall and gaunt. He had freckled white skin that never tanned, pale-blue eyes, an unpleasant, arrogant twist to his lips, and a thatch of red hair. He kept quiet as the sheriff droned out the sale lots, his eyes roving about the crowd. One of his riders sauntered up.

"He ain't showed up, Red."

Pickering nodded. "He will. Scatter around and keep an eye on the street."

True, Larry Luckin had never shown up, though half the crowd was watching for him. How the Twin L outfit came to be "bust," nobody knew. It was an open secret that Red Pickering meant to bid it in; the fact had been spread about to discourage possible bidders. Whether Larry would show up to bid in his own place, was the burning question.

"—known as the Twin L," droned the voice of the sheriff. "Legal description—"

A stir, a gathering of the crowd, quick glances everywhere. Three thousand dollars back taxes. Sold subject to a first mortgage now held by Ezra Pickering of Cathedral City, also subject to the usual redemption by the owner within a year's time.

Bids? They were lacking. Red Pickering bought the Twin L for exactly the amount of back taxes due, and not a soul opposed him. And Larry Luckin had not appeared.

"Hey!" exclaimed somebody shrilly. "He's over in the ice-cream parlor, eatin' a dish of ice cream! I seen him as I come past the window!"

The word spread around, with

puzzled looks. Why should Luckin be eating ice cream while his ranch was slipping away? Why, for that matter, should the Twin L have slipped away at all, when it had been one of the best outfits anywhere around?

Then, out by the street, something started that got the crowd swarming through the dust, past the hitch racks—a fight. A former Twin L rider and one of the Pickering outfit had tangled. Two more of the EP riders chipped in, somebody lent the Twin L man a hand, and it looked as though a small riot were starting. Red Pickering came showing through the milling throng, yelling savagely at his riders to lay off.

**S**UDDENLY the crowd split apart. Red Pickering came to an abrupt halt. Before him, face to face with him, was Larry Luckin, regarding him with a slight smile. The fight came to an end. Those closest to the two men, hurriedly drew away, leaving them in the open.

"Howdy, Red," said Larry Luckin calmly. "Right kind of you to buy in my place. I'll be taking it back before very long, and obliged to you for the loan."

This was one way of looking at it, and drew a laugh from those who heard the words. But Red Pickering did not laugh. His upper lip drew back in a snarling grimace.

"Oh, yeah?" he observed. "Expect me to hand it back, do you?"

"Not you," said Larry Luckin. "Your estate. You'll be dead."

Pickering's white skin turned even whiter. He stepped forward threateningly, drawing back his fist. As he did so, Luckin suddenly lashed in a blow.

Gasping out an oath, Pickering



staggered back and reached for his gun. Like a streak of light, Larry Luckin followed him, was on top of him, crashed in another blow. The gun came free, only to be twisted away and thrown into the dust. Another thud, and another.

"Look out, Larry!" rose a warning yell. "They're fixin' to gang ye!"

Luckin was already set for a final crack. It thudded home, and Pickering lost balance and sprawled in the dust. Luckin whipped around. His gun leaped out. The seven EP riders, too slow to save their chief, were crowding forward. They halted abruptly.

"Come an' get it," invited Larry Luckin. "One step—any of you! Or reach for your guns. Come on!"

The seven began to sidle out in a circling movement. None of them advanced. The crowd scattered wildly. Then, with a rush, the brawny figure of the sheriff came leaping through the dust and intervened.

"That's enough," roared the sheriff. "First man starts anything, gets it!" The two guns he flourished, backed up his words. He shot a low murmur into Larry Luckin's ear. "Beat it, you fool! I'll hold 'em."

"Thanks," said Luckin, and put up his gun. "Adios, boys! Here's hoping we'll meet again before long. In fact, I might ride over your way one of these nights and drop in at the EP for a social call."

He turned and sauntered away, nodding to acquaintances, Red Pickering, pawing at his bruised features as he got up from the dust, began to bawl for Luckin's arrest. Larry Luckin smiled, crossed the board walk, and went back into the ice-cream parlor.

Behind him, pandemonium broke loose. Half a dozen fights started. At length Red Pickering and three

of his men—the others were engaged with antagonists—got around the sheriff. Both of Pickering's eyes were badly puffed, and rapidly swelling into black beauties. He got the sheriff by the arm and spoke words that burned.

"Come on, sheriff, put up or shut up! I demand that you swear in my men here as a posse and arrest him; they'll back you up, no fear of that. He drew a gun on us and threatened us. I want his arrested, placed under bond to keep the peace, and prosecuted for assaulting me. If you refuse, I'll see that your action is placed before the State legislature and the governor within twenty-four hours—and you know what that means."

The grizzled sheriff knew, all too well. The Pickerings and their allies had a drag at the State capital. If he once gave them cause for such action, they would put it through and use every effort to have him removed from office.

"All right," he said. "You men, hold up your hands——"

**A**NOTHER EP rider, wiping a battered nose, joined the three. All four were sworn, and then followed the sheriff into the ice-cream parlor. Mr. Luckin was not there—had not been there for some time. He had come in the front door and gone out the back door, as the sheriff shrewdly suspected he would do.

"Go after him, then!" snapped Red Pickering. "Here, sheriff—we'll provide a hoss. You can take mine."

To save his own face, the sheriff assented. Red Pickering spoke briefly with his four men, who grinned and nodded.

"Ride like hell!" he added, under his breath. "My hoss is about done up. Leave this old fool behind—"



ride his legs off! Then go on and get that Luckin. Being a posse, you're covered when he resists arrest, savvy?"

Five minutes later, the sheriff and his posse of four rode out of Burnville. And each of the four had a booted rifle at his hip. Red Pickering, it seemed, had neglected no precaution when laying his plans.

Red Pickering procured a beefsteak, a hotel room, and retired from public view to nurse his two swollen and blackened optics. Also, to make use of the telephone.

Larry Luckin, meantime, had forgotten that there was such a thing as a telephone in the world. On this bitter day, he had learned a lesson in self-control. Maddened by injustice, stung to the quick by outrage after outrage, his hot wild impulse had been to cut loose with his gun and make the Pickerings pay dearly for their triumph. Why not? He was done for anyhow. He had nothing to lose, he assured himself.

He quite forgot that he had a future.

Yet something had held his hand. That talk with the sheriff had steadied him; he had opened the floodgates of his heart, had poured forth his story to a friend, and Larry Luckin was somewhat himself again. As far as he ever would be, indeed. Never would he be the same carefree Larry of the old days. He was older, harder, sterner.

And as he rode, it was with a cold and deliberate lust for revenge taking form within him. Old Ezra Pickering—not so old in point of fact, being scarcely fifty—was a cruel and deadly man, a rich and powerful man, a very shrewd man. He had turned over the EP Ranch to his oldest son "Slim" to run, and himself spent much of his time in

Cathedral City, where he had built up a hauling and express service, in conjunction with other activities and a large share in the chief bank, which made him a foremost citizen.

Then there was Slim, shrewd like his father, much more of a man than the crafty Red. All three of them unscrupulous to a degree, with the influence of wealth and guile to back them up, all sticking together and playing one another's game.

Larry Luckin could see now they had picked him for breaking, and by the aid of sheer luck, had broken him, stripped him. Proof of their knavery? He had none. He needed none. He had been whipped at every turn. He had fought hard against long odds, in silence, without whining. And he was licked. Not a break of luck had come his way.

Kill them! Nothing else was left. If he must go down, at least drag them with him, all three of them. Slim was a fighter, so was old Ezra. Red Pickering was strong, with a yellow streak. But, as Larry Luckin jogged along toward Cathedral City, he thought only of how he might repay craft and trickery with hot lead; he saw nothing else ahead of him. That judgment was awaiting him there, but he could dodge it by bankruptcy. Bah! Better to dodge it with bullets, go down fighting, since he must go down anyway!

He jogged along at a fast clip. He had by no means overlooked the possibility of some pursuit by the Pickerings, but saw nothing amiss until he had covered twelve of the twenty miles. Then, from a rise above the creek, he looked back and caught dust—distant dust, a lot of it. Four or five riders coming in a clump, to cause that much dust.

"After me, are they?" he muttered, and his eyes flashed.



The gray had no great speed, but tremendous stamina. Now Larry Luckin hit up a faster clip. Not fast enough by a good deal! Fifteen miles covered. As he came up the hill pass, he had a clear view behind and picked up four distinct dots trailing out. They were not two miles behind him now; probably were killing their horses to catch him up. With a laugh, he came to the crest of the pass and started down the winding descent.

Ahead of him, he descried a single rider pushing his horse up the twisting road, spurring hard. Then, at a bend, he caught a wave of the hand and recognized the other man. Dave Somers, the shipping agent from Cathedral City, who had once worked for his father. A good scout, Somers! Why was he— Ah! Somers was drawing rein.

"Hey, Larry!" The quick, hurried call reached him. "By gosh, I'm glad I met up with you! I put out hell-for-leather hopin' I'd run into you on the road."

Larry Luckin drew rein, reached for the makings, and smiled.

"Hello, Dave! What's the rush?"

"Huh? Ain't they after you?"

"Sure are. How'd you know it?"

"Ezra Pickering was in my place when a feller come in with a message. I heard 'em talking. Seems like you were headed this way with a posse after you, and Ezra was to grab you when you come into Cathedral City. Said something about shooting to kill. Say, Larry, you ain't gone haywire, have you?"

"More or less." The blue eyes narrowed sharply, alertly. "And you rode out to warn me?"

"Yeah. Killed anybody?"

"No. Sort of wish I had. Well, if they're laying for me ahead, and catching up with me behind, looks like a finish play."

"Don't be a fool!" broke in Somers excitedly. "Look here! A quarter mile down the road is where the old Fort Doniphan Trail used to run. Remember it? Goes up past the EP range and strikes out into the desert, or used to. It's the old wagon road from the Skeletons. You duck off that trail, see? I'll go back there with you and then wait. My hoss has a loose shoe anyhow. I'll be fixing it when they come along, and tell 'em you headed right on for Cathedral City."

"Done," said Larry Luckin with decision. "Come on."

Side by side they rode down the dusty incline. At the brush-filled canyon entrance where the old wagon road had once wound away, both men dismounted. Luckin held out his hand.

"Put her there, Dave; many thanks."

"Hey! If you need money——"

"Nothing. Much obliged to you, old-timer! See you some day. Adios."

Larry Luckin led his gray in along the precarious old trail. The brush closed in behind him. Five minutes later, all sound of his passage had ceased. When four men on foam-lathered horses came down the winding road, they stopped briefly to exchange a word with Dave Somers, then went pounding on toward Cathedral City.

Larry Luckin had stepped out, indeed. Clean out of sight.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE DEVIL'S FRYING PAN.

ALL that afternoon Larry Luckin fought his way along the vestiges of the old forgotten wagon road, unused for many years, ever since Fort Doniphan had been abandoned.



He was not blind to the fact that this trail would bring him within striking distance of the EP Ranch.

All he wanted was to strike, and to strike hard. Just how he had been jockeyed into the position of a fugitive from justice, he was not sure; it was the last straw. Larry Luckin was undergoing a process of change, and the outcome was a gamble, with the odds in favor of his becoming a morose killer. At the present moment, his intentions fully fitted with the odds. He had played too long against stacked cards.

"I've gone straight long enough against that pack of crooks!" was his thought. "If I'd had a chance, if I'd got one break, I'd have showed them a few things; but I didn't. And now let 'em take the consequences."

The afternoon was half gone when, abandoning the old road, he struck out openly across the range toward the EP Ranch. Larry Luckin had no idea of sneaking up on his enemies in the dark. What he did, he did without disguise. As it was Saturday, he would probably find Ezra Pickering out at the ranch for the week-end, and figured on getting there about supper time.

He was dismounted, leading his horse down a deep winding gully and up the other side, when he heard two rifle shots close together, then a third. They came from his left, somewhere over the rise that blocked out the horizon there. He was, he calculated, still several miles from his objective. Another shot—this time from a revolver, as the lighter bark indicated. Then silence.

What had happened? Who was there?

Regretting that he had not brought along a rifle—he had hid-

den his rifles and other personal belongings before leaving home, in a safe spot—Larry Luckin hesitated, then swung up into the saddle and turned his gray toward the rise. The shots had come from some little distance, though it was difficult to be certain because of the rolling ground.

Nearing the crest, he dismounted, threw the reins over the head of the gray, and went ahead on foot. All this took time. He was taking no chances of appearing against the sky line if any EP riders were in the offing, and was cautious enough about his advance. When he finally had a view of what lay beyond, he stretched out on his face, astonished. For no one was in sight.

Incredulous, he stared about the rolling range. Cows were grazing at some distance, that was all. His eyes roved. Suddenly he started; off to the north had appeared a little group of riders, three or four in number—appearing for a moment, then vanishing again, as they rode along a gully. A good mile distant.

"Trying to keep out of sight, huh? I wonder why!"

Larry Luckin rose. An exclamation broke from him. Now, only a hundred yards or so down the slope, he saw the head of a dead horse. A little basin was there. He advanced toward it, then broke into a run as he got a full view of it. A dead horse, indeed, saddled and bridled—and beside the horse, a man, apparently dead, also.

On closer approach, he recognized the man. It was Ybarra, the half-caste EP vaquero whom he had shot recently. The man's left arm was still in a sling, but blood from other wounds had dyed the gaudy green shirt, the beaded vest, all scarlet. Two bullets through the man's body—the first two rifle shots he had heard. Ybarra had gone down, but



his hand had fired that revolver shot. The revolver was in his hand.

Not dead! Luckin knelt over him, took away the weapon, lifted the man's head. Ybarra's eyes opened. A faint smile touched his lips.

"Hello, amigo!" he exclaimed. He seemed not to recognize Luckin at all. "Get after 'em. They got her. Rode off with her."

His voice failed. His eyes closed. Luckin tried to open his shirt and examine the wounds, but Ybarra's hand shoved his fingers away.

"Let me alone! I'm done for. They got me. Get hold of Ezra—get her back! This will break—break his heart—only person he loved in the world, I reckon——"

"She?" queried Larry Luckin. "Who was it?"

"Niece. Come to live with him." Ybarra's voice was fading out. "Nellie—Nellie Blythe. I dunno why in hell they done it—them fellers—ridin' for us—ridin' for——"

He sighed, and with the sigh, the life flowed out of him.

**L**ARRY LUCKIN gently lowered the dead man's head, then stood up. Amazement was upon him. Nellie Blythe? He had never heard of any such person, yet Ybarra's words had told him the story. Ezra Pickering's niece, eh? The blue eyes darkened, then came clear and alert once more, as they sought that gully to the north.

No time now to go find the Pickerings and get them after the unknown riders who had carried off the girl. The better chance was to follow them, catch up with them. There was a booted Winchester beside the saddle of Ybarra's dead horse. Larry Luckin whistled, high and shrill, and whistled again. Presently the gray came over the rise, saw him, came toward him.

Removing the rifle and boot to his own saddle, taking cartridges from Ybarra's pocket, Larry Luckin swung up into the saddle and headed the gray toward the north. He saw nothing of the riders, but caught a glint of sun on metal, farther away, and headed directly for that flash. As he rode, his brain was busy with teeming questions.

Who were they, these unknown marauders? No telling now. Ybarra had known them; his last words indicated that they had been some of the EP outfit, which seemed singular in the extreme. However, no matter; that would straighten itself out. But where could they be heading, off in this direction? Nothing up yonder except the old Doniphan Trail that led out to the Devil's Frying Pan and the Skeleton range beyond. Outlaws, then? Either they would circle, or else they were making for the desert.

Sunset found Larry Luckin in a pass between the rolling, bleak hills that swept down to the desert. He had the trail here, plain to see, easy to read, and it surprised him. Three horses in a line, undeviating, and one out to either hand. This meant that the captive girl was followed by two pack horses, all three animals being tied together; and there were but two captors. Two men only! His spirits rose as he figured out the trail.

True, they were well ahead of him, and they were not wasting any time. No doubt now of their destination—they were heading straight out for the blistering salty sink known as the Devil's Frying Pan. Beyond this desolate, burning basin rose the Skeleton range, purple and gold in the sunset.

Luckin had no water, had not considered the need of any. He knew little of the desert water holes, but



the party ahead doubtless had a definite objective. He had no grub, but those two pack horses probably were loaded with everything necessary. The moon was at full. After a couple of hours, there would be silvery light to last out the night. And the two would not dream that any one was on their trail.

"Hit 'er up, partner!" he said to his horse, and the gray picked up ears at his voice. "We've got to catch 'em before daylight if we want to surprise 'em. No surprising any one on the desert by daylight. This is our chance, so make the most of it."

He quickened his pace, as twilight closed down.

As those ahead were keeping to the old Doniphan Trail, which was still visible despite long years of disuse, it was possible to follow in the starlight without much risk of going astray. Luckin's hope was that the pair of scoundrels would soon make camp for the night, but in this he was disappointed.

He realized finally that they must be hoping to get as far across the Devil's Frying Pan as they could, before the blazing sun arose. He pressed on, therefore, as fast as he dared push the gray. He was rather grimly amused by the manner in which his desire for vengeance had been sidetracked. Instead of striking at the Pickerings, he was actually aiding them—no, not that! He was merely after two murderers who had kidnaped a woman. The Pickerings did not enter into it. This would make no difference to his plans, he told himself savagely.

**T**HE old trail was clear enough to follow. As is usually the case in any alkaline or salt basin such as this, the desert winds had slight effect; old wagon tracks

made fifty years ago might be seen almost as plain as the day they were made.

Hour succeeded hour, and still Larry Luckin was jogging along, the risen moon revealing no sign of his quarry except the fresh tracks, no speck of firelight breaking the dark expanse ahead. Here were miles of open, unbroken salt sands. On the farther side of the sink, where the old road approached the Skeletons, there would be outcrops of rock and a maze of queerly eroded pinnacles stretching to the hills beyond.

Midnight. Sorely against his will, Larry Luckin halted for an hour to rest the gray, snatched a bit of sleep himself, then saddled again and rode on.

Probably this girl had come recently to live with the Pickerings, and had gone out for an afternoon ride with Ybarra. The latter had obviously anticipated no danger; must have taken along the rifle on the chance of seeing a coyote. Why on earth would two EP riders have made the attack and carried off the girl? They must have known that the whole county would be raised to run them down. It looked like sheer madness.

"Still, they had two pack hosses," reflected Luckin. "How come? Must be something behind it all that I don't know, to make it stand to reason. Well, leaving it like that, my best plan, when I come up with those two skunks, is to come a-shooting. Don't give 'em any chance to open up on me like they did on Ybarra! And we got to hit up a better gait than this, little hoss. I reckon you can stand it."

The gray assented. The salt sand was firm underfoot, the moonlight was clear, the night was cool; no reason not to make better speed. There would be reason enough, once



the sun came up in a brazen sky, but that was another day.

Another hour and another jogged past. Now Luckin thought he could discern the dark clump of horses and riders, far ahead, but it was uncertain. They were pushing on hard to get across the sink and beyond sight of any pursuers. The Skeletons loomed closer now in the moonlight, bulking bigger, their long naked shapes rising against the stars. Since the previous noon, neither the gray nor his rider had tasted food or water. Luckin drew in his belt tighter, cut a bullet from one of his precious rifle cartridges, and chewed it.

"Might be worse off!" he soliloquized, and patted the gray's neck. "Long's I got you, partner. I'm not clear down and out after all. You and me—I guess we can handle them coyotes ahead."

The high-hanging moon made the approach of dawn almost unnoticed. When he saw the naked sand around giving way to hummocks, Larry Luckin whistled softly. Almost across the Devil's Frying Pan, then! And the eastern sky was graying, certainly. Ahead showed the first signs of rock, of broken desert. This last hour had been a long trudging climb up an imperceptible slope. The Skeletons looked very near.

Then—a spark of fire. They had halted!

No doubt of it. Still a couple of miles ahead. Luckin grunted harshly as he realized the fact. No chance now of catching up under cover of moonlight. Either he must seek cover among the rocks, and follow the party, or else ride straight in upon them and take what might happen. Thought of the girl decided him. He pushed on.

The rifle magazine was full, and

he had half a dozen extra cartridges—more than enough.

The glimmer of fire remained constant. Sagebrush and greasewood clumps appeared; rock, carved by wind and rain into fantastic formations, began to show on either hand. The silver moonlight was whitening, blending insensibly with daylight, and all the eastern sky was tinged with gold and blue, as the stars paled. The foremost buttes of the Skeletons showed rosy color in advance of sunrise, and were very close ahead.

Larry Luckin pushed straight on.

They had made camp in a bare expanse of sand, dotted with brush but free of rock clumps such as rose all about. Now, as Luckin drew in, he saw two men rushing about, saddling in haste; they were not afraid of one lone pursuer. Three horses remained tethered by the slight smoke of the fire. The two men mounted, swung their beasts around, headed out to meet the newcomer. Luckin drew rein, the rifle ready. He was about to dismount when it happened.

Perhaps they guessed the secret of his abrupt halt. As he swung his leg over the saddle, the two dim shapes broke forth with jets of flame. Rifles crashed, the echoes rolling back from the gaunt rise of the Skeletons.

"Caught me, by gosh!" thought Luckin, and came to earth. Bullets whistled around. The gray gave a whimper and plunged down. Larry threw up his rifle, a swirl of fury in his heart—then he felt the bullet hit. He was whipped around as though an unseen hand had smashed him in the breast.

As he lost balance, he heard the thud of bullets hitting the gray. Then he went down.



## CHAPTER IV.

## THE EASTERN GIRL.

THE rifles fell silent. The two men exchanged a call, then rode in together and advanced to where the dead horse bulked beside the outspread figure of the man. The full daylight had not come as yet, objects were far from clear-cut and distinct. Yet their storm of bullets had gone home—this was plain enough.

They came closer, warily, but confident of success. So slight was the movement of the man sprawled in the sand that they failed to observe it. Yet one of them did notice Larry Luckin's rifle was thrust out, and cried sudden warning. Too late!

The rifle crashed. The one who had cried out, toppled from his saddle. The other halted his horse, drove in his spurs to turn the animal. Again that rifle against the sand spurted flame. The second rider threw out his hands and went down, his spur entangled in his stirrup; the frightened horse plunged, dragged him, then leaped into a dead run and was gone, with the man still dragging.

The other three horses by the camp fire, terrorized by the first wild outbreak of shots, broke away from their tether. They were unhobbled, and within two minutes were coursing over the sand and in among the rock hummocks. The animals were gone, all five of them.

Larry Luckin paid no heed to them or to anything else. He came erect, painfully, found blood streaming down his shirt, and walked over to his horse. The gray was dead, and for Larry Luckin this meant the end indeed. He drew a deep breath, looked down at his chest, and winced as he fingered the mess there. He

felt no pain, but the touch of his own blood was unpleasant.

He dropped the rifle and walked forward. A glance at the dead man whom he had first shot—a Mexican, apparently. Some vaquero, unknown to him. Ezra Pickering employed quite a number of them. Then he went on toward the camp fire, stumbling as he walked. The pain was apparent now—stabs of it through his chest. Only his will drove him on, kept him going.

His eyes cleared. There was the little camp, ahead and close. Blankets outspread, grub, supplies. And sitting there, staring at him, a young woman. Larry Luckin stumbled, almost went down, then regained his balance and laughed.

"Hello! Got here after all. Why, you're tied up!"

"Yes," he heard her voice. "You'll have to cut me loose. Good heavens! Are you hurt? What's all that blood?"

"Just what it looks like. Blood," said Luckin. He fumbled in his pocket. Somehow, his fingers had lost their power, their cunning. Yet he found his knife, got it out, and opened it. He could not see her for a moment. His gaze cleared again, and he approached her.

"Hold up your hands. Yeah, I guess they read my mind and beat me to it! Meant to get in the first shot myself. How's that? Wrists free? Then take the knife."

He keeled over sideways all of a sudden and sprawled in the sand, senseless.

Nellie Blythe's hands were free, but so numb that for a little she could not use them. Her eyes dilated with horror as she realized the plight of this man who had freed her; she thought him dead, at first. She uttered no cry, however, work-



ing her fingers frantically to restore circulation.

She was not the shrieking type, by a good deal. Her features, framed within masses of hair that were the brownish gold of corn silk, were singularly lovely. Their sweetness and the frank eagerness of her gray eyes were firmed and hardened by an expression of sound common sense. If at first glance she seemed a child, one soon discerned the character beneath the surface.

There was nothing of the range, even of the West, in her attire or manner. Her skin was delicate, and was sun-reddened as though exposed for the first time to blazing sunlight. When she picked up the knife and cut loose her ankles, it was done with an awkward hacking. Then she turned swiftly. Oblivious of herself, of her fallen hair, she caught Larry Luckin's shoulder, turned him over on his back, and with unshrinking fingers unbuttoned his shirt and explored the hurts beneath.

The wound looked frightful. In reality, it was no very serious matter. The bullet had struck from the left side, glancing directly across the chest and tearing open the skin; and nothing more. Not even a rib was broken, but an inch deeper would have brought death.

**R**ISING, the girl cast a glance around. She knew already there was but a single canteen of water here, but she was searching for something else, in vain. No shred of anything that could be used for a compress or bandage. She turned up her khaki skirt, hacked with the knife at the slip beneath, and presently knelt again beside Luckin. The wound washed and bandaged, and very efficiently,

too, she held up his head and poured water between his lips.

"Gosh! That sure tastes good," he murmured, half awake, and drank thirstily. Then he came to himself, looked up and met her eyes, and smiled. "All right, partner! Luckin is the name—Larry Luckin. Of course you're Miss Blythe."

"Yes. Nellie Blythe." She aided him to sit up, until he was leaning against a packsaddle. "But how did you know? Are they looking for me?"

"I dunno." Luckin reached for the makings and began to roll a smoke. "I happened onto Ybarra just before he died. He told me enough to get me after you. Hurt?"

"No. Not yet," she said. "But they meant— Oh, well, what matter? It's all right now. Where are they? I couldn't see what happened."

"They're gone, clear gone." Luckin finished building the cigarette. He lighted a match, inhaled, and regarded the girl with open wonder. "I didn't know they made 'em like you, in real life! Say, thanks a lot for this bandage. Much of a wound?"

"It looks bad, but isn't deep," she said quietly. "My father was a doctor, so I know quite a bit about wounds. Did you come here on foot?"

"Eh? No, not hardly——"

Larry Luckin's voice died. To cover up his dismay, he smoked furiously. His blue eyes flickered about the sand, among the rock pinnacles. No horses in sight. Even had they been in sight, it would probably be impossible to get hold of one.

And he knew what that meant.

"Got any water left, Nellie?" he asked quietly. She reached for the



canteen and shook it, then smiled at him.

"No. This was all they had; they were talking about it. Where can we get some more?"

Larry Luckin bit his lip. "Search me. Say, where did you come from, anyhow? Back East?"

"Yes, from Ohio. How did you guess? Ezra Pickering was my mother's brother. She had never got on well with him, but after she died, he sent for me. I think he really likes me, too. He's a queer man, isn't he?"

"Yeah," assented Luckin dryly. "Been here long?"

"Only two weeks."

"I see." He tossed away his cigarette. "Hosses clear gone, eh? Weren't they hobbled?"

"No. Tied. They broke loose when the first shots sounded."

No use telling her the truth, of course. Larry Luckin questioned her about the two men, about why she had been carried off. While he talked, his brain was busy with their situation. It appalled him at first.

"They were two Mexicans. Uncle had a row with them the other day and fired them," she explained. "They wanted to get back at him. They appeared suddenly and rode up to us, and then began shooting. When they carried me off, I thought they were drunk, but they were not. They did smoke queer cigarettes."

**A**N exclamation broke from Larry Luckin. He leaned forward and picked up a half-smoked cigarette that lay on the ground. He tore open the paper, examined it, sniffed it. *Marijuana!*

"Yeah, I see. A lot of these hombres smoke *marijuana*; it makes 'em killers. Like dope, only worse. They want blood. I've seen one of 'em jump into a corral and slash at

the hosses, just to draw blood. Darned lucky you're alive, Nellie! Well, forget all that. It's past and done with. I guess you're safe now."

"I know it." She smiled, reached forward, and caught his hand in hers. "I haven't thanked you, but——"

"Shucks!" With a laugh, Larry Luckin gathered his feet under him and rose, still holding her hand. He pulled her up, then met her gray eyes with a sudden direct look. "Listen here—you may as well face it. We're in a hole, and a bad one. No water. No hoss. And feel that sun! You can guess what it'll be like about noon. We've got to do something, and I don't know what we can do."

"Is it really so bad?"

"Yes. Across this sink is a good many miles. Guess I've lost some blood; I couldn't make it afoot, without water. We've got plenty of grub, looks like; but that's all. We can send up a smoke, but I reckon it wouldn't do us much good, even if any one saw it."

"Won't they come looking for me?"

"Not in this direction. Not hardly." Luckin shook his head regretfully. "Here, let me try to figure things out a mite. I'd better fetch in that rifle, too. You wait here."

He turned away and walked back toward where the dead man lay, and the rifle.

While he could walk well enough, he knew his strength was badly depleted by loss of blood. And the sun, barely risen, was already hot. In an hour the sand would be like a furnace. He looked over at the Skeletons, bulking up into the sky. Yes, they were not far; better seek some shelter from the sun, at least.

This girl was pretty soft; she



would never get anywhere afoot, in the Devil's Frying Pan. She was pretty, darned pretty, but good for nothing, he thought rather contemptuously. Had to be steered, looked after, taken care of. If it were June Carroll, now—well, you'd see a thing or two! She was as good as any man in a pinch.

And the devil of it was, Larry Luckin knew he himself was not good for much just now. He was in no shape, thanks to this wound that had drained the blood out of him, to act as Santa Claus to a helpless female. If there were only water somewhere near at hand—

He came to a dead stop. Remembrance hit him like a blow in the face.

What was it that old desert rat had told him? He grasped at the shreds of memory, then swung around, and his eyes went to the Skeletons. The old North Trail—why, he knew well enough about it! Somewhere close at hand it began, running out of this Doniphan wagon road. Yes, not far ahead there, beyond the camp. Perhaps those two greasers had meant to take it, for this old trail cut straight through the Skeletons.

The fork lay not more than a couple of miles away, then. There were the twin buttes old Dad Perkins had mentioned. The twins—sure! Plain in sight, under the level rays of the sunrise. Two big oval lumps of rock that backed up against the mountains behind.

"By gosh, we'll do it!" With swift decision, Larry Luckin went on, picked up his rifle, eyed the gray and his saddle regretfully, then turned. No use trying to pack his soogans—nothing in them worth taking, anyhow. Every pound in a load was going to count, and grub was the most important thing.

HE paused by the dead Mexican and took from the body a bandoleer of cartridges—.30-30; just right. When he came back to the dying camp fire, the girl there had finished putting up her hair. She gave him a quick, bright smile.

"You look mighty cheerful! Any one coming?"

"Nary a soul." Luckin swept a glance over the Devil's Frying Pan, already sizzling under the new-risen sun. "Chase up some brush for that fire, will you? We'll make us a meal here and now, then get going."

"Back to town?"

"Nope." As between them they gathered enough scraps of fuel to serve, Luckin patiently explained the situation. He liked the way she accepted it; no exclamations, no dismay, just a quick, calm nod.

"A prospector told me yesterday about a place close by here," he went on. "Over there in those hills—not over four or five miles away, I should judge. If we get off before the sun is too hot, we can make it. Water and a shack. What do you say?"

"Of course. You know what's best," she said simply.

"If we had a hoss, it'd be different. If I were able to get back across this sink and send help, it'd be different," went on Larry Luckin. He found some coffee mixed in the pot—no other drop of any fluid. Bacon and a knife; he worked as he talked. "But we have to face facts. You'd never get across there alive, without water."

"Whatever you think," she agreed.

"It'll mean a hard tramp for us both, though," said Luckin. "I'm warning you! We have to pack the rifle and grub and blankets. It means a load for both of us. You'd



better run out and get that greaser's hat, too, or your face will blister."

"No, thanks." She flinched a little. "Not that! I might take yours, though——"

"All right. I'll use his." Luckin laughed a little. "Don't blame you for feeling that way about it. If you stayed right here, if we built up a smoke and kept it going, of course there's a slim chance that somebody would see it, perhaps some party searching for you. But it's a darned slim chance. Especially as the new road through the Skeletons runs on the other side of these hills. And then it'd be too late for us to go find this place."

She broke into a smile. "All right, Larry; no need of arguing the matter. You know much better than I what's to be done. I'll hold up my end, so don't be afraid to give me a good load. I may be pretty green, but I'm willing enough."

True. And Larry Luckin took her at her word. When their hasty meal was over and he made up the packs, he took a certain delight in giving her the worst and most awkward of the tinned stuff. It was a mean thing to do, he reflected, but he was curious to see how she would measure up. He knew what June Carroll would do under the same conditions—grin and ask for more. He was not sure about this girl, however. She interested him. He had come to entertain a sneaking notion that behind her loveliness, she had a lot of stuff on the ball, and he meant to find out more about her.

Those two vaqueros had assembled enough of an outfit to last them for months, but he could take only the best of it, unfortunately. Nellie Blythe watched, looking on in futile helplessness. She could not hitch

a pack or even make it up. He fancied that she flinched when she realized the size and weight of the load she must carry, and he smiled grimly.

"Get this into your head, Nellie," he told her quietly. "What we can take with us—is all. How long it must last us, we can't tell. I expect that in a day or two I can set out for civilization and bring help; we may send up a smoke that will fetch help before night; but we can't bank on anything. The load we must carry is insurance against disaster."

"Couldn't we come back and get another load to-morrow?"

"Yes, maybe. The canned meats and stuff would be left, but nothing else. What with pack rats and coyotes alone, this camp will be licked clean by morning. Burying the stuff wouldn't help; besides, I've no strength or time to waste."

She made no further comment.

**W**HEN the loads were ready, Larry Luckin prepared his own and then lifted that of the girl to her shoulders, adjusted the straps, and slipped into his own. At the pull on his hurt chest, he winced but said nothing. Picking up the rifle, he was ready.

"Lean forward—let the weight walk you along," he said, as she staggered. "You'll get the hang of it presently."

Twice he thought she was going down, but each time she recovered. She said nothing, made no protest. They trudged along until they reached the place where the old North Trail branched off, then rested for a few minutes. The Devil's Frying Pan, behind, stretched away emptily into the sunrise blaze.

On again, and now less easily, for the old trail led across more broken



ground, and they proceeded under the towering mass of the Skeleton rock cliffs. The heat was refracted a thousandfold from those granite masses. A mile crept behind them and another; the girl made no complaint, but when they reached the fork in the trail, she was white and about done up.

Here Luckin insisted on resting for half an hour—for his own sake, rather than for hers. The heat was becoming intolerable. With every step, the stabs of pain at his wounded chest racked him. He said nothing of this. His astonished admiration at her gameness uplifted him past his own troubles.

As they rested, he pointed out to her the twin buttes and described the box canyon and the trail up, as he knew it. Probably they would have to leave the packs in the box canyon and haul up the stuff later, or take it up piecemeal, as the ascent was sure to be bad.

"Suppose"—she gave him a sudden look—"we get there and find no water?"

"Then we're out of luck." His blue eyes twinkled cheerfully. "You might suppose a lot of things, but it doesn't pay."

"Hm-m-m!" She studied his face for a moment. "I think you ought to lie down for a while, Larry. Have you got a thermometer?"

He grinned at that. "I've got a comb and a razor and a cake of soap in my hip pocket, but I left the thermometer home. Want to see how hot it is?"

"No; how hot you are. I'm afraid you have a touch of fever."

Luckin hitched the empty canteen along his belt.

"Never mind about me; I'm tough. Don't you know that only an extra big bullet can kill a puncher? It's a fact. Small bullets

don't hurt him a mite. That's why I'm caching this six-gun—too small for any use. I can come after it later."

As he spoke, Luckin removed his belt and holster. He tucked them under the lip of two large rocks, and put a third rock on top, both to conceal and to mark the deposit.

"Stick to the truth," she said quietly. "You're getting rid of that weight—that's the real reason. Give me part of your load."

"Not much. Come on, let's get moving. I'll give you a lift."

Her pack adjusted, he got under his own—and could barely make it. Merely to keep his feet was an effort. He was amazed at the way the strength seemed to have suddenly ebbed out of him. Yet after a moment he managed well enough, despite the pain of his wound. His head was indubitably hot, however, and he knew she was right about the fever.

"You'll notice this trail passes right by that little box canyon, after going up to it," he observed when they were once more resting, closer now to the canyon that loomed above. "There's a reason for everything. I expect in the old days water came down from above into that box canyon—that's why the old trail meandered up that way. No water now. All up on top, sad to say. Can't see any trail up the right wall, but we'll see it when we get there."

A smoke did him no good at all; merely turned his parched throat and tongue into a hot oven. The heat from the sun behind, and from the blazing wall of rock ahead, was overpowering. At their next halt, he thought the girl had fainted, but she smiled wanly and insisted that she was all right. After this, neither of them spoke very much.

Larry Luckin, indeed, was nearly



beyond speech. He had ceased to think about how this girl was standing the gaff; his every faculty was concentrated upon standing it himself, keeping up with her, maintaining his footing under the load. His head had begun to feel very light; his feet were like lead. He was soaked to the skin by a fierce perspiration—very fortunately, as it held off the gaining fever.

But after a time the perspiration ceased entirely. A hot, dry heat consumed his whole body. Foot by foot, they made headway up the talus slope that floored the box canyon, and at length Luckin caught sight of the trail up the right wall which he had been seeking. The rock there was crumbled away and broken up, leaving good footing.

"Let's rest," he said abruptly, and suppressed a groan as he eased off his pack. "How you making it, partner?"

"All right," she said, and her eyes went to him anxiously. "But you? Oh, can't you leave the stuff here?"

"Nope. Never say die." And Larry Luckin's old gay, carefree smile leaped out for an instant. His blue eyes were very bright and glittered strangely. "Say, partner, you're good! I'll tell the world you're good! Wish old Ezra Pickering could see you now. Wish I could see him my own self."

"I'm glad you can't, right now," she said softly. He did not sense the meaning of her words for an instant. Then he turned. "Eh? What was that?"

"You're in no shape to see him and start trouble," she rejoined.

Luckin stared at her.

"Say! How did you know anything about me and him?"

"I've heard them talking about you, of course."

"Thunderation! Then you know — But how come you trust me?"

"Don't be silly," she said, and smiled faintly. "From all I heard, I thought Larry Luckin was the worst kind of a rascal. But now I know he's all right. Isn't that enough?"

"Must be you don't care a heap for the Pickerings."

She turned, as though impulsive words were on her lips. Then, meeting his burning eyes, her face changed. She put out a hand, felt his forehead.

"Oh, Larry!" Anxiety shrilled in her voice. "You have got fever, you *have!* You must leave that pack and let me help you——"

"Come on, let's go," said Larry Luckin, and shouldered the pack again.

## CHAPTER V.

### PARTNERS.

A FAINT but still perceptible trail no doubt left by Dad Perkins, mounted that broken ramp of rock. Despite this aid, the climb was a sheer nightmare to Luckin. Fever images flitted through his brain. His inflamed wound throbbed with the most exquisite agony—the very pain of it, indeed, was all that helped him to keep going.

There was not the slightest indication that anything except savage rock masses awaited them over the top. To either side towered the naked twin buttes, blistering hot. The tramp, the climb, accomplished in his riding boots, had left his feet in frightful condition; thirst tormented him; above all, the fever played through his entire body with an intensity that grew with every moment.

Yet, despite his own troubles, amazement increased within him at



the way Nellie Blythe held up her end. Never once had she faltered or complained.

Panic swamped everything else in his mind as the last stretches of the climb fell behind. What if the old prospector had lied, or had merely embroidered facts with erratic imagination? In that case, it meant the end. Larry Luckin was in a bad way, and realized it clearly. Every last ounce of his stamina, of his will power, was driving him now. No reserves were left to meet any further emergency.

The buzz of a rattler, a sharp cry of warning from the girl behind, halted him. He wavered, but could see nothing; he was dizzy, sun-blinded. Everything was a blur. Then he kicked out as he went on—kicked savagely. He felt the rattler strike. The high boots had saved him. The reptile was flung aside, to vanish rapidly. With a curt laugh, Luckin staggered on.

The vision broke upon him. With a groan, he lowered his pack, straightened up, peered ahead. Was it a mirage of his fevered brain? That tattered excuse for a shack, nestling against the cliff. The smell of water, the sight of water—a tiny spring seeping out, to be lost again within a score of feet. A few scrubby jack pine, twisted blood-red manzanita branches, a cook-oven made of stones, a rank growth of brush stretching away. Larry Luckin turned his bloodshot eyes to the girl. He spoke hoarsely.

"Is it real? Do you see it?"

"Of course it's real!" She laughed, almost hysterically. "Water—why, I never knew before how good water could look!"

That was Larry Luckin's last memory. He started forward, then the stones seemed to rush up at him, and he fell asleep.

His waking was a gradual thing, a succession of snatches, of brief pictures, gradually merging into reality. He was dimly conscious of grateful luxury, at first unexplainable; of soothing, restful ease. It seemed that he was a child again, in bed, being tended by his mother; but she had the likeness of Nellie Blythe in his vague memories.

One picture remained with him, a brief flash, no more. She was sitting there near him, a blanket wrapped around her figure, her long hair flowing over it like molten gold, while she sewed up a tear in her khaki dress. He remembered her white arms in the sunlight. He tried to speak, and could not. Then everything drifted away.

**G**LINTING firelight, silver moonlight, burning sun flames—through the visions ran the face of Nellie Blythe, and a comforting realization of tenderness, the touch of his mother's hands. No, she had passed away years ago. There must be some mistake. He was lying here alone, looking up at the blue sky, the gaunt brown-red spires of the twin buttes.

Real, yes. His brain cleared. It was all true; he lay here, alone, outside the half-ruined shack. To one side, the trickling waters of the spring showed sparkling. It must be afternoon, for this whole niche between the buttes was flung into shadow.

Gradually Larry Luckin's gaze took in details. There was the cook-oven of the desert rat, built of stones and mud. Beside it a frying pan and coffeepot, and a heap of gathered brush. Beyond, everything from the two packs neatly stacked. Under the spring was a desert ice box—a box with shelves across, hung endways and covered



with burlap, over which a stick was fastened to bring a constant drip of water. Probably made by Dad Perkins.

Alone! His thoughts reverted to himself. He lay between blankets. There were his boots, and most of his clothes, at one side. He lifted a hand to his face—and his jaw fell. Beard! What the devil! A growth of days over his cheeks and his chin. How long had he been lying here, then? Who had been taking care of him? He was weak, too; the effort of lifting his arm showed him this.

He pushed back the blanket. Bandaged, yes; neatly, freshly bandaged about the chest. And his feet as well; walking in those high-heeled boots must have worn the skin off his feet. Luckin raised his head and looked about, astonished. Was the girl really here? Or had some one else come to care for him?

His bewilderment passed, and was succeeded by a feeling of dismay, of shame, of chagrin at his own plight. He tried to move, then desisted. Yes, she must have been taking care of him, and for some little time. A moving figure caught his eye. He watched as she came, in her arms a heap of brush, manzanita, juniper roots, which she had been gathering. Her hair was knotted in braids down her back—she looked like a child.

With a sigh of relief, she dropped her load on the pile, then turned and saw him.

"Oh! Larry—are you conscious?"

"I dunno; been trying to figure that out my own self," he rejoined whimsically.

With a glad cry, she sank down beside him, caught at his hand, and her fingers rested on his pulse. Her gray eyes were excited, a flush rose in her cheeks.

"Normal. Oh, I'm so glad! I

thought you'd never come around, Larry. But the fever's gone. And the wound is healing up beautifully, too."

"Look here, how long have I been like this?"

"This is the fourth day since we came."

Larry Luckin whistled softly.

"Give me a hand, will you. I want to get up."

Quickly she caught his shoulders, pressed him back. Her face was anxious, intent, earnest.

"Please, Larry, please! You must not. Everything depends on your taking it easy now. Don't spoil everything!"

"Don't you see?" he exclaimed. "I can't stay here this way—I can't have you looking after me, waiting on me!"

**H**ER gentle pressure forced him to relax. She looked down at him, smiling. He felt suddenly helpless before the quiet confidence in her face, the capability of it, the tenderness of it. And he had thought this girl a useless creature!

"Listen, my dear, you must just forget all that," she said simply. "I've taken a nursing course; I know a good deal about it. You're a hurt, sick man, and I'm your nurse, and you must accept matters. Don't you think it's a pleasure, a real pleasure, to be able to give you help and comfort, after what you did for me? Well, it is. We're partners; won't you look at it that way, sensibly?"

His fingers tightened upon hers, and he relaxed.

"All right, partner," he said.

She patted his hand, then came to her feet.

"I've a dozen things to do—chiefly to get fuel. That's the big



job, or has been, but away at the other end of the place I've just located a lot of dried stuff. I'll get it, then see about some broth for you. I have some all ready to heat."

"Have you a mirror of any kind?"

"No, but there's a cracked piece of one in the shack. It's so filthy in there we couldn't use it, and I haven't had time to clean it out."

"Well, get me the cracked piece, and some water. Then give me my razor and soap from my pants' pocket, and run along. I'll improve the shining hour by fixing up a bit."

She nodded, brought what he desired, and presently was gone.

Larry Luckin drew a deep breath; he could not get over the astonishment with which she inspired him. Then he fell to work on his beard, slowly and painfully. This took time and care, but he was able to manage it by degrees. Getting rid of the brush made him feel much more like himself.

When she came back again, this time with a huge load of fuel, he called to her gayly. She got rid of the load, brushed off her clothes, and came to stare down at him with laughing eyes.

"My, what a tremendous difference! Barring a few cuts, you've done a pretty good job, Larry. Feeling hungry? I'll get a fire going."

"Hold on a minute." Larry Luckin reached up, and she took his hand. "Partner, we've got to start clean. I have a confession to make. I took you for a tenderfoot, a useless sort of girl, a pretty doll who wasn't worth a durn at real stuff. Well, I take it all back! You're a peach. I didn't know you very well, that's all. Forgive me?"

"Nothing to forgive, Larry," she said. "I'm not good at a lot of

things, but with others I can manage. You might as well know the worst and forgive me, also. After you told me who you were, I was scared stiff."

"You hid it, all right. Why were you scared?"

"On account of what I'd heard. They'd made you out a bad man, you know—a real bad man, a killer. They'd been talking over all sorts of schemes to run you down and finish you. Uncle Ezra positively froths at the mouth whenever your name is mentioned."

Luckin broke into a hearty laugh.

"Fine! That's the best news I've heard for a long time. I didn't know I was on his nerves—or his conscience—so bad! Well, now that you've got acquainted, do you think I ought to be hung?"

She reached down and touched his cheek. Her gray eyes were shining.

"You're a dear fellow, Larry," she said, then rose. "All right, we start all over! Now I must get your broth fixed. Then, when it gets dark, we'll have supper. Isn't it strange how much work there is to be done, just living? I had a terrible time getting used to this queer stove, but I have the hang of it now. And we certainly have provisions to burn—more than we'll ever need, I hope."

"No sign of any help?" he asked.

"Haven't had time to look."

**P**RESENTLY he was gulping down warm broth, while she propped up his head and shoulders, then he rolled a smoke and inhaled gratefully. She was busy getting supper ready—taking infinite pains, making a real meal from the rough materials and the tinned grub to hand. Larry Luckin



wondered whether June Carroll would have managed so well at this job.

The two women were different as night from day, he realized as he lay watching her at work. True, he had not been in love with June Carroll; they had just drifted, good friends, comrades, each one busy with personal problems, living for the day only. Love? He was not sure. True, he hungered for her company, enjoyed life when he was with her—but now he had shut her out of his life. Love and marriage were not for him. He was wrecked and done for. His future lay in striking at the Pickerings!

Unused to the saddle Nellie Blythe might be, and awkward in it, but she was not awkward now. He marveled at her grace of flowing motion as she walked or moved. Her body was as lovely as her face. There was something cheerful and uplifting about her—an innate bravery, a radiance that smiled at all the world, good and bad.

He noted that the khaki dress fell loosely about her figure, and remembered his fleeting vision of her sewing up a tear. Yes, there was the tear, freshly mended; it was not a vision, then, but real! He laughed a little, only to sober quickly, push back his blanket, glance down at the bandage about his chest, with wondering eyes. Then he looked again at the girl, who was unconscious of his glances. Why, no wonder her dress hung so loosely—she must have mighty little else on! Her undergarments had gone to serve for his bandages. There had been nothing else to use, naturally.

Larry Luckin closed his eyes and lay quiet. This was nothing to mention, of course; it was a thing to accept in silence, and yet it startled

him, raised fresh amazement in his heart. Now he began to understand the bravery of her; the sensible, cheerful way in which she shirked none of the facts, but met them half-way. Just as she had held up her end of the load from the start.

"By gosh, she's a mighty fine sort!" he thought reverently. "No, I mustn't mention that I know of her sacrifice, of her tenderness. Not because it's me, either—she'd have done as much for anybody. She's just naturally made that way. No false stuff about her, no pretense. She looks things square in the eye and smiles at 'em."

Which was a pretty good estimate. He opened his eyes again, and found her beside him, flushed by her work.

"There—everything's ready to light the fire and go to work, so I can take it easy. Larry, this is the most wonderful place!" She looked out across their little domain. "This niche between the two great rocks—and it's all rock wall at the far end, too—why, it is a little world all to itself! There's a queer happy feeling about being in your own world. If—if——"

Suddenly her voice failed. She turned to look down at him, with so peculiar an expression that Larry Luckin came to one elbow in swift alarm.

"Hey! What's the matter? You look as though you'd seen a ghost!"

"—I just remembered something," she exclaimed. "Do you know, I'd clean forgotten it? Terrible of me, I suppose."

"What?" he demanded.

She laughed a little, confusedly.

"Why, it was Saturday when I went riding, wasn't it? And Sunday that we got here. Oh, poor Ralph! I suppose they all think I'm clear



lost or dead or something! And Ralph was to reach Cathedral City on the Sunday night train!"

Larry Luckin's heart sank, most unaccountably.

"Who is Ralph?" he inquired.

"Why, Ralph Forbes, of course. You see, we were friends back home in Ohio, and he had arranged to come out here and go into business."

"Just friends?"

Luckin smiled as he met her eyes. She made a charming grimace.

"Well, old friends, if you like to put it that way. Real good friends, Larry." She read his expression and colored slightly. "No, we're not engaged, if that's what you're thinking. We might be some day, perhaps—I don't know."

"Be honest about it, partner!" he urged. "Do you know or don't you?"

"I don't, and that's honest." Her gray eyes met his so frankly that he knew she spoke the exact truth. "I like Ralph awfully well; he's a splendid fellow, and I know you'd like him. But marriage is something else again. And as to why he's coming out here—well, that's quite a story. About my money, and all. I'll tell you about it later. Mercy! I'll have to get busy with that fire."

She leaped up, then paused to look down with a merry, laughing glance.

"And you might just as well be honest, partner, too! Are you engaged to June?"

"Eh? June?" Larry Luckin's eyes widened. "What June are you talking about?"

"Come, come, be honest! You did a lot of talking about June during the fever."

"Oh!" A laugh broke on his lips. "Maybe I did. Well, I'll say just the same thing you did, and just as

honestly. June Carroll is an old friend, and a swell girl—but love and marriage simply look a long way off, partner. No, we're not engaged. We're just good comrades, and glad of it."

She nodded. "It isn't so easy to be honest about it, is it? I always used to feel that Ralph and I were made for each other; I expect that's the way you felt about June, too. But after I left home and got out here—well, things just changed somehow. Hard to explain."

"Right. Suppose we let it go at that?"

"Agreed."

She laughed and fell to work at the fire and her cooking. The afternoon was passing.

There were a thousand things tormenting Larry Luckin, driving at his brain; things to be settled, to be done, to be planned. Things to be understood, even. But all of them slipped away before him as the shadows fell. For, almost as soon as their meal was finished, an overpowering drowsiness came upon him.

His worn-out nature needed sleep above all else, and would not be denied. His eyes closed, and he was sound asleep.

Later, he wakened for an incredulous, drowsy moment. Here in the desert hills the nights were bitterly cold. He knew it was late, for there was moonlight on the peaks above. But he was warm; and the figure of the girl, lying beside him, was breathing in deep and gentle slumber. He reached out, touched her, found her real, then smiled and closed his eyes again. He knew dimly that she must have given him all the blankets.

Smiling, he reached out and took her hand as she slept; and smiling, himself fell asleep again.



## CHAPTER VI.

## THE CACHE.

I'M not up to doing a blessed thing, that's flat. To-morrow I'll start getting around a bit. Then I'll be myself in no time." So said Larry Luckin, as the morning sun struck down through the twin pillars of rock and illuminated the niche. Later, through the day, everything here would remain in grateful shadow of the giant guardians.

Breakfast was over, and after attempting to get about, he realized his weakness and gave up utterly. Nellie Blythe came to him, smiling, and pulled down the blanket that covered him. She had water ready to hand.

"Now, patient, for the dressing! Can you sit up? Fine! Hold it."

That bandage was good, and it had to be good; there was a lot of ripped skin and flesh under it. It was composed of everything from sheer lace to silk stockings, but neither Luckin nor the girl made any comment as she got it off and laid bare the wound.

"Fine!" she exclaimed. "No fever in it, and it's healing in good shape. In fact, it shouldn't bother you a bit right now—it's the fever that has taken your strength."

She washed the wound and then bound it up again with swift, deft fingers. When she had finished, Luckin slipped into his shirt and rolled a cigarette.

"What about plans?" he demanded.

"Well, I'm going to fetch over all that lot of old brush and wood I found——"

"I mean, about getting away."

"Oh!" She regarded him speculatively. "I hadn't thought about

it. I don't know what to do about it. Do you?"

He nodded as he smoked. She had no stockings, he knew. Her shoes were pretty well cut up by the rocks and were giving way. Well, by to-morrow he could relieve her of a lot.

"Our best and most foolish bet, partner, would be for one of us to sit up above on the hill and watch for some one to heave in sight, then start a smoke. No use trying to keep a smoke going all the time—fuel is too scarce. So are people. I reckon our best bet is to wait till I can travel. Then you can go along or not, as we may decide."

"All right," she assented. "Right now, we have plenty to think about. See you later."

She departed toward the other end of the little plateau. He called a warning to look out for rattlers around the brush, and she waved her hand in assent. Then she was gone.

Larry Luckin, who really had no intention whatever of lying idly all day, reached out for his clothes. He got into them after a fashion, but passed up the boots. The bandages had been taken off his feet; none the less, he wanted no boots right away.

The shack was close by, but he almost despaired of reaching it. After his first weakness passed, however, he managed to hobble to the shack, then he sat down in the doorway and looked things over.

Once there had been trees growing in this niche, for the shack was constructed of small logs. Whoever had originally built it, had no doubt used up all the timber. The little structure was now patched up with old bits of tin and daubed with mud, but one glance was enough to show why Nellie Blythe had passed it up. The place was filthy, and the holes



of scorpions showed about the mud floor.

"Think I prefer the open air myself," reflected Larry Luckin. "Old Dad Perkins prob'ly didn't know what water was for, except drinking."

He glanced about the littered interior, with disgust. Then, as he was about to turn away and gain his feet, he took another look, of surprise this time. Inside the open doorway, on the left, were two makeshift shelves, which a casual glance would not reveal. And on those shelves were piled a lot of things.

L UCKIN pulled himself up, stepped inside, and investigated. Three full boxes of .30-30 cartridges. Two wrapped-up packages in newspapers; a bottle of whisky and one of gin. Another newspaper package; half a dozen sticks of dynamite with fuse and caps. Three bags full of tinned meats. Another, holding a small sack of flour, some sugar and salt, and other such adjuncts of a grub supply.

Nellie Blythe was calling him, alarm in her voice. She had returned, had dropped her load of fuel, was looking around. He came into the doorway, and she suddenly relaxed at the sight of him.

"Larry Luckin—and dressed! How dare you——"

"I ain't dressed," he drawled easily, giving no sign of his inner dismay and agitation. "Look at my feet if you don't believe me! Shucks, partner, I'm just getting into shape. Upon my word, I'm pretty fit."

She surveyed him, her gray eyes dancing.

"Well, you do look like a healthy

patient! Promise me you won't do any wandering?"

"Promise."

"Then I'll get in the rest of that stuff. There's some real wood in among the rocks, at the end of the canyon."

"Watch out, then! Rattlers like brush."

"Heard you the first time. Don't worry. I'm taking no chances on snakes!"

She departed, and Larry Luckin turned back into the shack.

The whisky bottle had a screw top. He opened it, took a swallow; the fiery liquid put life into him, gave him new strength. He replaced it, and eyed the stuff appraisingly. How long since Dad Perkins had left here? No telling; probably quite a while. Certainly the old desert rat would not have left with all this stuff here, especially the liquor.

"Looks a whole lot," Luckin mused, "as though somebody had prepared this cache until they could come back. Perhaps kept it here for emergencies. That must mean that somebody else knows about the place. We may see them show up any time. Hm-m-m! Not so sure it's good news, at that. Anybody who holed up in this place would have a reason, and no very honest reason either, unless it was a prospector like Dad Perkins. But maybe he did leave the stuff."

He had not left it. Examining the newspaper wrappings, Luckin found them all to be Gun Sight newspapers of the same date, two weeks ago. Gun Sight lay thirty miles west. Therefore, somebody from Gun Sight had been here, had left this stuff, within the past fortnight. This much was sure. But why the dynamite? And the huge supply of cartridges?



"Looks like we can either look for help, or for unpleasant company," thought Larry Luckin. "Glad I brought along that rifle."

He went back to the spring, bathed his feet, and washed. Action and movement had done wonders for him; he was not nearly so weak as he had been. Presently he heard Nellie coming, and looked up to see her with full arms, breathless and eager.

"There!" She dumped her load triumphantly. "And I found another bunch of the finest sticks you ever saw, but it's in among some cactus. I'll let it wait until afternoon. Then we'll have wood to burn—how's that one? Now I'm going to be luxurious and just be idle, until we think about lunch."

She flung herself down, and surveyed him with approval.

"You look worlds better, Larry! Tired?"

"A little," he confessed.

"Tell me about yourself. About your trouble with the Pickerings."

"No." His refusal was flat, uncompromising. "Not now. I want to know more about you."

THEY both laughed, fell into talk that was easy and natural. So he learned how she had been left alone in the world, how she had come out here to live with Ezra Pickering. She spoke of Ralph Forbes. He was going into business in Cathedral City. On her money.

"Your money?"

"Yes. Father's insurance. I'm giving him a part of it; we'll be partners. He's going to have a store. I was going to keep the books and so on. But"—she faltered and looked up at the naked rock hummocks above—"I don't know. Somehow——"

Luckin felt glad. He could feel what she left unuttered. A store! It seemed so unreal, so petty, here in this little world of their own. They went on talking. Insensibly he guessed something behind her words, some feeling deep within her, some resentment against the Pickerings. He did not press this, either. Time enough for all things.

Noon found them still talking, but much closer together, better acquainted. She leaped up in dismay to prepare a meal; he realized that she was enjoying this castaway existence, reveling in her work. It was all new, delightful, to her.

He did not mention the stock of stuff there in the shack, or its implications. But he did go to work cleaning his rifle.

Somehow, she contrived to make the meal, every meal, a charming affair. When the things were cleaned up and Luckin was rolling a smoke, Nellie Blythe turned.

"Well, now for the last load of stuff! Then we'll have fuel to last for a couple of days. I wonder how far we'd have to climb, to see out across the desert?"

"We might find out, to-morrow."

"Right. Up here in this niche, everything is hidden away. Well, see you later."

She swung away, humming a gay tune. After a little, Larry Luckin rose and walked out to where the trail came in. From there, a segment of the desert, far out, was visible. All empty and bare, glaring in the white sunlight, the Skeleton peaks closing in everything else. He turned and made his way back.

A darned shame that she should be toting in all the fuel, he thought, when he was feeling fit and able to help. He drew on his boots, not without wincing a little, then started out to join her. The niche widened



out until it was a hundred feet across. At the far end was a precipitous wall of rock that stretched on back to adjoin the mountain behind. The ground was prolific in cactus, but Luckin saw no further indications of rattlers.

He was astonished to discern no sign of the girl, as he neared the end of the niche, which was only a hundred yards deep. It was very rocky at this end, uneven, heaped with fragments fallen from above.

"Nellie!" He called her in sudden alarm. "Hey, partner! Where are you?"

"Here. Quick, Larry!"

Her voice was faint, gasping. It drew him. Suddenly he caught sight of her figure, face down, rock and brush piled on top of her. With a quick cry, he hastened to her, his own weakness forgotten. She was struggling to rise as he joined her, and with his aid came to her feet.

"I thought the whole mountain had fallen on top of me!" she gasped out, laughing at her own plight. Then her face changed. Swift pain whitened her cheeks. "No, no—don't touch me! Oh, it's terrible! It came down on top of me——"

"What did?" Luckin stared at her. "Are you hurt?"

"It—it's the cactus." She held out her arms. "My back! It feels like fire—all that cactus——"

"For the love of Pete! It's cholla—no wonder! Down your back, eh? Let's see."

One glance at her torn dress, and he took her hand, turning.

"Come on! Your working days are over for to-day anyhow; you're in a fix. Get back to the camp where I can work on you and plaster you up with mud afterward. That cholla is bad medicine. I'll have to pick it out. And the rocks have cut up your shoulders, too."

The emergency made a new man of him. He was himself again, alert, vigorous, dominant. She accompanied him back to camp and sank down on the blankets.

"I'll look up some mud—there's adobe down below where the water disappears," he said, picking up the frying pan. "Get out of that waist; lie face down. Back in a minute."

Thus began an hour that neither of them were to forget easily.

HER shoulders and back were not only scratched by the rock, but the silvery skin was studded with the tiny cholla thorns. She lay with the blankets tucked around her, while Larry Luckin pricked out the almost invisible barbed needles with his knife.

"Positions reversed, eh?" he exclaimed cheerfully. "Now I'm paying you back, young lady! Have to get every one of these out, or they'll fester and make matters worse. Lost your footing in that loose stuff, and pulled it all down, eh? Well, grin and bear it! I'm no great shakes as a nurse, but you'll be all right by morning. Have to do another mending job on your dress, I expect."

It took time, infinite patience, and the greatest care. When at last the smooth back and shoulders were free of the deadly stingers, Larry Luckin got the whisky bottle and washed the tiny hurts and scratches thoroughly; the alcohol would serve to kill infection. Then he daubed her back and shoulders thickly with the mud, and relaxed.

"There!" He met her sidewise look, and grinned. "Lie still and let it dry. My turn to get supper, anyhow. The mud will take out all the soreness by dark."

"I'm comfortable already," she confessed. "Now stretch out and



talk to me. Do you know, Larry, you've lost all that hard, bitter look you had the first day? There was something savage in your face, then. It's quite gone."

"Yeah, I guess so, but it'll come back," he observed, pulling the blanket over her back and then making himself comfortable. "Meeting up with you this way, has saved your relatives from heap big trouble—temporarily."

"Tell me about it."

He found himself talking freely. Before, he had not wanted to tell her the truth about the Pickerings; but now it was different, somehow. Nothing much mattered. He poured out all his story in a rush, keeping back nothing.

"Sounds like Uncle Ezra," commented the girl, when he had finished and relapsed into a dour, bitter silence. "He cheated my father out of a lot of money, years ago—well, no matter about that. I'm not proud of him. So you've been too proud to holler, eh?"

"I didn't want to drag June into it," Larry Luckin said. "And about my father—the same thing. It would do no good."

"Or so you thought. You just took it on the chin instead. They've probably got the law after you now. Well, just what are your prospects?"

"None." He suddenly smiled at her. "Except taking you home, or getting you home."

"No, I mean in regard to Uncle Ezra and his precious offspring."

"You don't seem to like them."

"I don't. But you're evading the question. What do you intend to do?"

Larry Luckin said nothing. But she read his gaze, and reached out suddenly, catching him by the wrist. Her gray eyes widened on him.

"No, no! You don't mean that, Larry!"

He shrugged. "Nothing else left."

"Oh, all right. Nothing more to be said about it, then." She drew back her hand and lowered her face to the blankets, with abrupt dismissal of the whole matter. "Hand me that torn waist, will you? I've a needle and a little thread left, and I might as well be sewing up the torn back while I'm waiting for this mud to dry."

LUCKIN complied. He was a little bewildered by her abrupt change of manner, and at a loss to understand it. However, time was passing, and he had to bestir himself about the evening meal. So he set to work, threw personal affairs overboard, and by the time darkness fell had dished up a meal of which he was proud. Even Nellie Blythe admitted it was extremely palatable.

Later, by the flickering flame of the little fire, he removed the caked mud from her back, wiped the hurt skin clean, and found no inflammation to speak of. When the fire died out, they lay side by side, wrapped in the blankets, and looked up at the stars.

"About me and the Pickerings," he began, but she laughed softly.

"Never mind, Larry! Let's talk about other things. Is June Carroll pretty?"

"Of course. Handsome, rather. Is Ralph Forbes fine-looking?"

"A regular Adonis!" She broke into another laugh, and squeezed his hand. "Oh, Larry, aren't we funny? It's nice to be away off from the world like this."

"Yeah. A couple of days more, and I can start out on the back trail. I'm afraid you'll have to wait here,



though. Your shoes are about in shreds."

"No matter; we'll manage somehow. Tell me, do ranches pay? Successful ranches?"

"Oh, sure; not many successes in these parts, though. Folks have been running along on the same old lines. Some day, if I ever get the Twin L back, I've got an idea about something different."

"Cattle? Sheep?"

"Nope; everybody else does that. Trouble with this part of the country is the cold winters; not much snow, but a lot of altitude. Feed costs like the devil. Cattle don't get much on the range—early cold kills off the grass. It'd pay somebody to forget all about cattle and go in for nothing but raising feed. Alfalfa, Sudan grass, and suchlike stuff. Go into it intensively, if you get the idea. Then what? Winter comes. No expense, no cattle, no outfit to keep up. Just feed to sell—and it'd sell."

"Why not ship it in? Uncle Ezra does, and makes a lot of money."

"Sure. And if anybody raised it, they could cut the prices under his feet and make more money. Shipping costs a lot."

"I see. Sounds good. You're a sensible person, in some ways."

"That goes double," said Larry Luckin, and sighed happily.

He remembered nothing more until daylight wakened him. The subtle fingers of sleep had stolen upon him suddenly.

Early sunlight struck down between the twin buttes. He turned, looked at the sleeping girl beside him; she was smiling as she slept. What a lovely creature she was! And she had a good head, too. Lots of sense in that pretty head of hers. More than any one would suspect.

Her hand was lying on the outside

of the blanket. Larry Luckin touched his lips to her fingers, then quietly rose, tucked the blanket about her shoulders, and began to think about breakfast.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A BARGAIN.

NOON. None the worse for her misadventure, Nellie Blythe was busily preparing their midday meal. Another day had come and gone, almost unheeded by either of the two castaways. To the girl, the whole thing had become a joyous adventure; to Larry Luckin, it had become a very sweet and welcome interlude. He was unaware how true were her words—that he had changed greatly since the day he had come upon her. He had come out of the depths; the harsh, steely glint of overstrung nerves, of utter despair, had fallen away from him. He was the Larry Luckin of old, gay and laughing, efficient, capable. His wound had become a mere scar that was rapidly healing and bothered him no more.

As he picked his way down from the shoulder of the right-hand butte, he saw her figure at work below, and rejoiced that he had seen nothing on the floor of the desert. He was now beginning to fear the time of separation. Another day or so, and he must make up his mind to act. This must have an end; it could not last forever.

He had told her about the cache of stuff in the shack. They had found in it a needed replenishment to their stock of food; and if there were any danger concealed in it, she had best face it and be done. Yet no living creature had appeared. The Devil's Frying Pan stretched out in its ghastly emptiness. The bodies of the Mexicans, of the horse,



had vanished. Those other horses must have wandered home long since—yet no searching parties had come.

Panting, Luckin rejoined Nellie Blythe as their meal was ready, and made report.

"Nothing stirring, partner. I guess the world has forgotten us," he said. "Hello! Still in the dumps?"

"I'm not in the dumps," she rejoined.

"You are. You've been looking like misery on a monument all morning."

"I've been thinking. Does that look like such a thing?"

Larry Luckin grinned. "Depends on your thoughts."

"Well, you buckle in to this meal, young man. Then I'll have a few words to say."

For all her cheery smile, her words and the look in her eyes disquieted him. She meant business. Had he offended in some way? No; they had come to a frank and friendly way of speaking out, of hiding nothing disagreeable. No pretense—that was what he liked about her, found so different from other women he had known.

"Aiming to lecture me, ma'am?"

"Uh-huh; a real lecture." She nodded brightly. "Wait till we've finished."

Luckin complied, perforce. Nothing very serious, he thought; but he was wrong there, far wrong.

When the meal was over, and he was rolling a cigarette she sat down facing him and regarded him steadily. Her gray eyes had a way of looking far into him, he thought uneasily; he would hate to lie to her. She would feel it, somehow.

"Something I want to say, Larry; something I've been thinking over a lot. Will you promise not to

evade, but to come straight out with the truth?"

"Promise," he said curtly, and licked his cigarette. "Partner, I've got nothing to hide; from you, anyhow."

"All right. Now, I'm going to talk about you, and right to the point."

Luckin reached for a brand from the fire, lighted his cigarette, and nodded.

"Shoot."

"It's about you, and your story, and my relatives. You call them my relatives, but I don't feel bound to them," she said gravely. "First, about you. As I understand it, they've stripped you of everything, by the worst kind of crooked work; they've got you right down to bed rock."

"Keno," he commented laconically.

"And your reaction to this," she went on, "is that you have nothing left to do except haul out a revolver and kill them. Is that right?"

"More or less," he said. "That hasn't been my reaction right along; but it's the only thing left to do. What are you aiming at? Trying to save them?"

"Bosh! I'm trying to save you. I don't care a thing about them, but I care a lot about you, Larry Luckin," she said quietly, looking him in the eye. "I didn't know there were men like you in the world—honest! You're worth saving. You're worth anything."

"Listen, now!" he began uneasily. "You're wrong about that, and anyhow——"

"We're talking frankly," Nellie broke in.

"All right, then!" came his impulsive words. "Just let me tell you that I could say the same thing



about you, only a thousandfold more!"

"You don't act it," she said.

He stared at her in surprise.

"Eh? Have I done anything to rile you?"

"Oh, don't be silly! Listen to me. This talk of going out and killing people is all nonsense. It's about what one would expect of a ten-year-old boy, or a blind drunken man who had lost all his brains. You should know better."

"Yeah," he said. "That's good talk, partner. But you're a woman. You don't know how it feels to have everything wiped out, not a chance left——"

"Neither do you," she broke in, a sudden flash in her eyes. "Oh, I don't know much about the West, I admit; but I've got some sense. A woman, eh? You bet I'm a woman, Larry! And that's why I'm trying to show you a few things."

"I'm listening," he said.

"Well, you'd better listen!" A trace of angry color rose in her cheeks. "Why, you're acting just like a silly girl! Your doll is broken, and you burst into tears and quit. Quit! Just when you should fight the most and the hardest, you quit. You step out, as you put it. You've sunk so low that you see nothing left except a display of brute force, so you can get revenge. Do you think that's manly?"

Larry Luckin puffed away at his cigarette, a flush deepening the sunburn of his face.

"Partner, that may be your way of looking at it," he returned patiently. "But it just ain't so. I haven't quit; I'm not quitting, until the Pickerings are paid in full."

She made an exasperated, irritated gesture.

"Oh, what a baby you are! Does shooting any one help you? Does it

hurt them particularly? Does it do a particle of good? Does it do anything, in fact, except get yourself in jail for murder? Seems to me that's a pretty foolish sort of revenge to take on any one you hate. And you do hate Ezra and his sons, don't you?"

"Not exactly, come to think of it," Luckin replied. He frowned a little, trying to face the question squarely. "Hate is a pretty strong word, partner. I despise them, yes; I'd kill any of them in a minute—but not because I hate 'em. Because they're low-down coyotes, rather; because they've got me down by the worst sort of a dirty, underhand game. You don't hate a snake. You just kill it."

"I see," she returned slowly. "Yes, I begin to see. Nothing burns into a person so much as injustice, does it? But suppose you wanted to get the rattles off a snake, and wanted him to grow more so you'd get them, too. Never mind if snakes grow more; I'm just putting up a case. You wouldn't kill him. You'd take his rattles, then let him go to grow some more. Eh?"

Luckin nodded, puzzled by her words, wondering just what she was driving at.

"Yeah, I guess so. Trying to argue me into a Christian frame of mind?"

"No!" For a minute, her gray eyes blazed out. "When Slim Pickering grabbed me and kissed me and said he meant to marry me inside a month——"

"What?" Larry Luckin turned white. "Did he do that?"

She paid no attention, but went on, unheeding the question.

"What did I do? Slapped him so hard it jarred his teeth loose, and I'd do it again in a minute. No,



I'm afraid I'll never make a good Christian person, Larry."

"Look here!" He leaned forward, tense, his blue eyes chill as ice. "Did he really do that? When was it?"

"Will you kindly listen to what I'm trying to drum into your head?" she demanded. "You can talk about him later. Yes or no?"

"Yes," and Luckin relaxed. "Go ahead."

"If you were a fool, you'd start in shooting. If you have the brains and grit I think you have, you'd show them that you can come back—and come back hard."

"With what?" he inquired dryly. "Just turning the other cheek?"

"No. Slapping them on the other cheek."

His eyes kindled suddenly. "What's in your mind, partner? Spit it out."

"Two things, Larry. First, instead of trying to fight fair against a dirty crowd, why not use fire against fire? They've used illegal, underhand, dirty tactics, I admit; you need not come down to their level, but you can abandon your position of taking a sock behind the ear. Turn around and go after them in their own style—rather, in your own style! Fight from cover. Disregard the law. Oh, I don't want you to be a criminal. That isn't what I mean, but just wake up to—"

"Holy smoke!" breathed Larry Luckin suddenly. Her words had abruptly opened a closed section in his brain, as it were. He caught his breath, stared at her with dilated eyes; he did not see her, but the rush of thoughts that passed before him, visions, ideas.

"By gosh, I believe there's something in it—I believe you're right about it!" he exclaimed, and ran his fingers through his hair excitedly.

It was a habit that he had in moments of tense decision. "What a fool I've been! Just like you say. It never occurred to me——"

"Oh, I knew it! I knew you'd see it, realize it!" she broke out happily, her gray eyes radiant as they caught the new light in his face. "Larry, there's so much you could do, even from under cover! I don't know the details, of course."

"Well, I do! I'm beginning to see a few things," he interrupted. Energy rang in his voice, blazed in his eyes. "Partner, what a fool I've been! Yes, I wouldn't come down to any dirty stuff—but there are plenty of ways to go after those coyotes. Steal back the money they stole from me, eh?"

"I don't know; I don't mean stealing——"

"Well, I do!" He laughed harshly, then sobered. "Stealing is like lying; it all depends on how and why you do it, I reckon. Anyhow, let that pass. By gosh, you've certainly shown me something! Shake!"

He extended his hand, and she took it with a firm, quick grasp.

"Larry, you make me very happy—that you can see things," she said simply. "It isn't every one who'll admit that they see new ideas. You're so far above——"

"Never mind the compliments, though I thank you for 'em," he cut in briskly. "You're the one with the brains, with the vision! You could make any one see anything, Nellie Blythe. And to think that all this time I've been butting my head against a wall for nothing!"

"Not for nothing, Larry," she said. "We don't grow and change in a day, you know. If I had put up this sort of a talk to you the day you rescued me, would you have listened?"

"Probably not," he admitted



frankly. "I guess I was in no frame of mind to listen to anybody then."

"Well, I've not finished." She hesitated. "It's a little hard to say; I don't know just how you'll take it, Larry."

He laughed eagerly. "Go ahead! Call me a fool all you like, and I'll love it!"

"It isn't that." Her gaze searched his face gravely. "Listen; let me get at it my own way. They probably know that those two Mexicans carried me off. Well, I want to go back and pretend that I've been here all alone. I don't want any one to suspect that you and I know each other, or that you rescued me."

Luckin regarded her in astonishment.

"And why? Easy enough to tell a good story, of course, if you have a reason."

"The best of reasons, my dear," she said. "I want to have a hand in your coming back. I want to help in it. I want to be partners with you in it."

"Bless your heart!" Luckin pressed her fingers quickly, and smiled. "You've already opened a road to me, shown me a new vision, Nellie."

"You don't understand." She drew back, her gray eyes very steady. "There are ways I can help, many of them. For example, I've heard them talking about you and others. The plan was to get your ranch and get rid of you, then build up a regular empire like Ezra has done near Cathedral City with the EP Ranch. For instance, they've mentioned Carroll."

"Eh?" Luckin's blue eyes bit out at her. "Old Trumpety Carroll?"

"Yes. They call him an old simpleton. There's some idea of Red Pickering getting married to June Carroll—I don't know the details,

but there it is. Things like that. If they don't suspect that we're partners, I could help a lot. And I'd love to do it! Oh, Larry, they haven't really been good to me! They're selfish, all of them; they're no good! It's my money they're after—my father's insurance money, and the mining stock he left me. Don't you see? I've got to fight, too. I must fight them for myself—and you must help me!"

"The dirty rats!" breathed Larry Luckin. His lips set in a thin line; white ridges outlined his mouth for an instant. Then he relaxed. "Nellie, my dear, I'll help you with all my heart and soul. I'll help June Carroll, too."

"Yes," she assented. "Now we've come to it, Larry. You have a year in which to redeem your ranch from the tax sale?"

He nodded, his eyes alert.

"Well," she went on, "why not do it at once? That would give them an awful blow. Do it. Start out with your own new ideas about the ranch."

"My gosh, partner! I've got nothing to redeem it with!"

"I have," she said. "Ten thousand dollars. I'm lending Ralph Forbes two thousand to start his store with. I'll lend you three thousand; we'll really be partners then, Larry, you and I!"

He leaned back, with a decisive shake of the head.

"Nope. It's a fine dream, but nothing doing. I can't take your money. Besides, old Ezra would never listen to it."

"He has nothing to say about it. He's not my guardian; I'm of age, and have my own money in the bank."

Luckin smiled. "Nope. Thanks a lot, anyhow; but you're a girl——"



She blazed out at him in swift anger.

"A girl? Just waking up to the fact, are you? It hasn't worried you all this time that I'm a woman, has it? We've been partners here; all that terrible way here, was I a woman or a partner? When I nursed you through that fever, you were glad enough that I was not a man, I guess!"

"Forgive me, my dear Nellie," said Larry Luckin, with that fine touch of courtesy which could so become him at times. Her sudden outburst not only startled him, but hammered the truth of her words into his brain. "I didn't mean to offend you; my words were thoughtless."

"Yes, and mere pretense. Didn't we agree to do away with all that?" she demanded. "If I were a man, you'd use the money quickly enough. But because I'm a girl, must I sit back with my hands folded and let that money lie in the bank? Nonsense, Larry!"

"I can't risk your money," he said. "Besides the tax redemption, there's a mortgage on the Twin L place. Ezra Pickering took out the mortgage on account of those notes he claimed had never been paid. That has a year to run, but——"

She smiled suddenly.

"Larry, do I have to make a chart of everything? Listen. I want to gamble that money on you, on Larry Luckin. Risk? There's none, if you play the game right. And if you start out by using my money—a girl's money—it'll hold you down to earth, as nothing else would do. You'll not forget that we're partners; you'll not lose your head."

He broke into a laugh.

"You sure do use your noodle!" he exclaimed admiringly. "Yes; I think you're right about it. But"—

and his eyes flashed with an earnest light—"I'll not lose my head again. You've shown me a lot of things, partner."

"And, I hope, you've too much sense to be afraid to change your mind," she retorted. "Am I right or not?"

For a moment, he met her steady gaze. Then, as she read the growing decision in his face, her gray eyes lighted up, her hand came out to him.

"You will? You'll do it?"

"I'll do it." For the second time, he gripped hands with her—a quick, earnest grip. "Thanks; it's a bargain. Nellie, if I had half your sense and brains——"

"Half? You have ten times as much, if you'll only set 'em to work!" she broke in, a gay laugh on her lips. "Good! I'm tickled half to death by this, Larry! Now we'll show them all a few things, and instead of stepping out, you'll come back with a bang!"

"Anyhow," promised Luckin gravely, "I'll make one durned good stagger at it."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### STRANGE RIDERS.

**A**GAIN the morning sun came up above the twin buttes, to blast all the desert round-about with its cruel blaze of heat. Breakfast over, Larry Luckin rose and eyed the girl's broken shoes.

"We'll have to decide to-day," he said soberly, "whether or not you'll try to come with me to-night."

"To-night?" She looked up in surprise. "But I thought you said to-morrow!"

"Changed my mind. We'd ought to leave here about sunset and have the night to get across the Devil's Fryng Pan. Moon's on the wane,



but we'd not need it anyhow. We can fill up with water before we go, and then get along on the one canteen. The question is, can you tackle it?"

"Yes," she said. "We'll have no great amount of loads to carry this time, and won't need much except the blankets. I can always tie strips of blanket around my feet."

"It don't work out so good as it does in stories," said Luckin dryly. "Well, we'll see. There's a good deal of reason for your going, and a good deal against it. Let's see; afoot, we might make it in a couple of days. With hosses, of course, it'd not take so long, and we'd get there in better shape. But no use whistling for hosses. Well, I'm taking a look around the box canyon and from there out on the desert. Easier than climbing that butte. You'd better get in some extra sleep if you can."

As he made his way toward the box canyon below their camp, his thoughts were busy with what lay ahead, once he was out of all this.

Come back? Yes; he could do it. Her words, her faith, had fired him with resolve, had wakened new depths of character in him, had given him new hope. Details were vague in his mind, but all that would come in due course. The main thing was to master himself first, be able to keep a tight rein on himself—and he felt that he could do it. Since that dread day when he had touched bottom, he was a different man.

He climbed down the broken ridge of rocks. It was his first descent of this trail since the morning he had come staggering up. Strength had come back to him, his wound gave him no trouble at all, and he looked at life with new eyes.

Once down, he made his way out

to the old trail, where he could gain a full view of the Skeletons along to the right and the open salt sink out ahead. Blue in the distance were the hills that marked their goal.

"Hm-m-m! It's a bee line from here, straight over yonder—and we'd hit the EP range," he reflected. "But that'd be all plain desert, and it's one hell of a *pasear* to take. If we'd follow this here trail along a ways, we'd find it cut through to where the new road runs. That'd take us to Gun Sight, over the State line."

He knew little about Gun Sight, except that it was a place of some importance and on the railroad. To the best of his belief, the distance was about the same as if they hit straight across by the Fort Doniphan road and so reached the EP range. By going to Gun Sight, however, they would stand a fair chance of meeting travelers after they hit the new road; and from there, could return by stage or railroad to Cathedral City.

At Gun Sight, too, they could separate. The girl could tell whatever story they might decide upon, and when she got back to Cathedral City, there would be no suspicion that Larry Luckin knew her. While if they came out on the EP range, there would be little chance of telling anything except the exact truth.

"And," thought Luckin, "if we do put over the play we've arranged, it'll be danged important for the Pickering's not to know we're friends! She has the right idea there. Well, I guess——"

**H**IS jaw dropped. Scarcely a mile distant, four riders and two pack horses appeared suddenly. They must have been following the old trail among the weather-worn pinnacles of rock be-



low the hills. Now they came into full sight—and they were headed this way.

Searchers, looking for Nellie Blythe? Unlikely, after this lapse of time. Nor would any such party be apt to have pack horses, nor would they apparently be coming from Gun Sight. Prospectors? One or two men, yes; not four. For a moment, Larry Luckin's blue eyes narrowed thoughtfully; then his face cleared. After all, no matter who they might be, these men would not refuse to help a woman in distress.

But were they coming here? Of this he could not be certain until they reached the fork in the trail.

He had a strong inclination, a hunch, to get back up there with Nellie, and do it now. From there, his rifle would command the box canyon and any one in it. He drew back among the scattered rocks, then halted. No; if he slipped out of sight, and they rode away along the trail, he would lose any chance of getting in touch with them. He could not risk this.

"Shucks! I'm just borrowing trouble," he decided. "They'll provide a hoss for her, and maybe one for me, and glad of it. Just the same——"

His mind flew back to that cache of provisions and dynamite up above and he frowned again. He wished now he had brought along the rifle, instead of leaving it in the old shack.

He waited, leaning forward, watching intently. If they took this fork of the rail, then they must be coming here—no place else to come. If they rode straight along, he must step out into the open and signal them. If they did come here, he had not much chance to climb the rock ridge and get up above, but he must do it. Something warned him, some sixth sense whispered to

him, that there was a queer feel about the whole business, but he laid it to nerves.

"Your rope's dragging, you fool; get a grip on yourself!" he muttered angrily. "Maybe it's one of the Pickerings with three searchers. Then Nellie can climb down and ride off with 'em, and I can stay out of sight."

But, as they came closer, this supposition died. These four men were strangers to him. Even at the distance, to his keenly perceptive eye they looked and rode more like miners or city dwellers than cow-punchers. They were coming close to the fork now. Two of them, in the lead, were pointing to the twin buttes, evidently showing the place to the other two. One of the foremost had a heavy black beard. Strangers, yes.

They turned off by the fork. They were coming here.

Larry Luckin drew back. The closer these men came, the less he liked their looks. All four carried rifles—not an ordinary thing at all. He turned and made hurriedly for the trail that led up to the niche. Better do his talking from up there, just in case!

A shout, deep-throated, vibrant with surprise and angry alarm, greeted his moving figure. He glanced back. The two foremost were spurring up the long slope, lashing their horses. In his haste, Larry Luckin put his weight on a loose stone. It gave under him, and he went down. As he did so, something whistled past him, then splattered from a stone in front. A rifle crack echoed along the box canyon, followed by an exultant yell. He was up and hurling himself forward again, with a furious oath. Shooting! Without provocation, as they might shoot at a coyote!



**M**ORE rifle cracks crashed out. The bullets came nowhere near. None the less, to go scrambling along that rocky ridge with rifles spouting death below, was no joke. Larry Luckin felt the tug of fear at his heart, as well he might.

Then, ahead and above, he saw the face of Nellie Blythe. She was coming forward, to peer down in amazement at what was going on.

"Get back!" panted Luckin frantically. "Out o' sight! Get me the rifle from the shack, and move fast!"

She disappeared.

A fresh burst of firing, bullets jerking from the rocks all around. Luckin flung himself at the last broken rubble, furious and dismayed, bewildered by this savage determination to drop him. Why, they had opened fire without a word, at the first sight of him!

Then he was over the edge. A final bullet ricocheted from a rock within a foot of him, then screamed and whanged away in the air, and he saw Nellie Blythe running toward him with the rifle. Luckin halted instantly. Cool nerves, unhurried pulses—that was what counted in a rifle duel. When the girl came up to him, he grinned easily at her, licked the cigarette he was making, and pinched it.

"No hurry," he said, as she extended the rifle. "Wait till I get a light."

"Who are they?" She was white-faced, excited. "Why are they shooting at you?"

He lighted his cigarette before replying, then broke the match and took the rifle.

"Ask me something easy. They're strangers, that's sure; probably the gents who left that stuff here."

"But why would they want to kill you?"

The icy glint of his eyes silenced her.

"I'll find out. There's some explanation. Your job is to stay back, out of sight, and then I'll not have to think about you. There's a package wrapped in newspaper on the shelf in the shack. One I opened and then wrapped up again. Bring it out here and leave it on the rock where I can reach it in a hurry; and don't drop it, mind. Bring a box of those cartridges, too. Then stand by."

No use telling her what the dynamite was, of course. It would only set her nerves to jumping. What he needed in a moment like this was some one like June Carroll, who could use a rifle as well as any man—then he swore at himself for thinking such a thing.

Working back cautiously to the rocks at the edge of the niche, where a patch of brush would serve him as a screen, he inched forward until he could look down into the box canyon below. A grim smile touched his lips.

One of the men was unsaddling and hobbling the horses, over among the rocks on the other side of the canyon. The remaining three were standing talking together, looking up as they spoke. He could catch no words. The fools! Did they think he had no weapon, then? Why, he could pick them off from here in short order—if he were that kind.

"Hey, you!" he called. At the leap of his voice, the three of them jumped apart in a hurry. "What you mean, shooting at me?"

"Come down out o' that!" roared the deep voice of the black-bearded leader. "You've no business on my place!"

"Who sold you the Skeletons?" retorted Larry Luckin, with a de-



risive note in his voice. "Look here, feller! Two of us are stuck up here—no hosses. All we want is to get away. Will you lend me a couple of hosses?"

"Sure!" replied Blackbeard heartily, and voiced an oath. "Why didn't you say so in the first place? We thought somebody had jumped our claim!"

"The devil you did!" muttered Larry Luckin. Then he raised his voice. "What you think I'm going to do—walk out and let you plug me?"

"Aw, forget it!" was the response. The man flung out his hand in a gesture. "Come on and talk it over. We ain't aiming to hurt you, if your yarn is true."

"Oh, Larry! It's all right, then?"

With a rush, Nellie Blythe, who had heard the exchange of words, came running forward in relief. Luckin glanced around. She was carrying the dynamite, ignorant of its nature.

"I'm so glad!" she panted, and with a careless gesture—threw the package away.

AS though on springs, propelled by the hideous outburst of wild panic within him, Larry Luckin went up into the air. He caught hold of the girl, swung her around, flung her down and threw himself above her—all in a flashing instant. He saw the package fall among the rocks at one side.

And nothing happened.

For a long moment, he was absolutely unable to move. Cold sweat had broken out all over him; he closed his eyes, white as death, and utterly unnerved. He was aware that the girl had scrambled clear of him, then was pulling at him. He sat up. She stared at him dumfounded, her gape eyes wide.

"Larry! You're not hurt—what on earth was the matter? I thought you were crazy."

"My gosh! I guess I was," muttered Luckin, and smiled wanly. Then he gestured her to be silent.

From below, a voice, then another voice, reached up through the silence.

"—got a woman up there, I tell you! I seen her!"

"Yeah. It's that girl that got carried off over to Cathedral City, most like. Hey, Bragg! This is pretty soft for us."

Still white and shaken, Luckin came to his feet and retrieved his falled rifle. He looked at the girl and drew a deep breath.

"Nellie, me dear—I didn't tell you, but that package has dynamite in it. My fault. Heard what they said, just now? Don't you think for a minute it's all right? Get back. Stay back. Let me handle this business."

"Hey, up there!" Bragg, the bearded leader, was shouting at him. "Where are you?"

"Waiting," responded Larry Luckin, wriggling back to his vantage place.

"Well, damn it, come on down! You don't got to be scared of us."

"Yeah? That's what you say."

"Well, we mean it. Here, fellers, put down them guns!" Bragg turned to his three companions, who had scattered out. They laid their rifles aside. He looked up again—a massive man, powerful, black beard sweeping over his chest. "All right, you. Coming?"

"I guess so." Larry Luckin stood up, leaving his rifle. He saw that they had wanted to discover if he were armed or not.

"Fetch us down a swaller o' water," said Bragg. "We ain't got a drop."



"Sure," responded Larry Luckin, and turned away from the edge. Nellie Blythe was watching him, white-faced, startled comprehension in her eyes.

"Larry, don't! You can't trust them."

He laughed a little. "Yeah, but I got to find out, for sure. There's just a chance they're playin' square. You sit tight."

After a moment he went back to the edge of the descent and looked down.

"Hey, Bragg! Two of you gents come up here—and leave your rifles behind."

"What?" Anger vibrated in the deep voice. "You fool, we can't stand around here all day! Come on down."

"Nope. I'm holding the cards, gents. You come on up, Bragg, and that other gent near you, with the white hat."

Bragg turned, exchanged a few low, inaudible words with the man nearest him. One of the others spoke up.

"Chance it! We got to get to that water or we're done!"

"All right," said Bragg. "Come on, Pete."

THE two of them started up the ragged ascent along the ramp of rock. The other two, picking up their rifles, strode back down the canyon the way they had come. Luckin frowned as he saw their action. What was their purpose in this retreat? He watched them disappear among the boulders to the left, then saw the man with Bragg suddenly pitch forward with a groan.

"I can't make it up! I'm done up," he wailed. "Hey, Bragg, gimme a hand!"

The two were only a little way up

the ascent, among a cluster of fallen rocks. Bragg turned and swung a hand frantically at the man above.

"Pete's done up—he's been hurt!" he shouted. "Come on, gimme a hand with him, you! We got to get him to water quick."

Impulsively, before he stopped to think, Larry Luckin started forward. So well was it all done that he was completely deceived. The action of the two men in starting up had served to allay his suspicions. Bragg had helped the other man to his feet; he stood swaying, leaning heavily on the bearded leader, his head hanging.

Larry Luckin advanced from his cover. Then he halted. Something in the intent, savage look of Bragg gave him pause. Caution leaped in his brain—too late!

The two men below saw his halt, knew it was now or never to spring their trap. They moved apart. Revolvers leaped out in their hands; as Larry Luckin saw the gesture and sprang back, the heavy reports lifted with dull vibrance. Something wrenched at him. He lost his balance and pitched forward. Bullets thudded all around.

Then, almost above his head, the rifle exploded, and again. Nellie Blythe was standing there, in the open, firing. With a yell of dismay, the two men below took cover among the outcrop of rocks. Her bullets went wild—but served their purpose.

Next moment, flushed, excited, she was helping Larry Luckin back under cover of the brush. He seized the rifle, turned, and stretched out.

"Good for you, partner!" he exclaimed jubilantly. "Well, we sure pulled their teeth—and now we know their mind, right enough! Look at my right leg, will you? Something wrong with it. And



mind you stay back there! They can't reach you if you do."

Something wrong, indeed; but he could pay no heed now. Fiercely intent, his blue eyes blazed over the sights of his rifle at the jutting rocks below. The two men there were cursing furiously. The other two had disappeared from sight.

With a cry of dismay and pity, Nellie Blythe was baring his right leg as he lay.

"How bad is it?" he demanded. "Didn't feel broke."

"It isn't, thank Heaven! I'll have to cut the cloth away. It's torn the flesh badly, just above the knee."

The man Pete rose up suddenly and made a rush back down the trail—no doubt for the rifles. Larry Luckin pressed the trigger. The man flung out his arms and pitched forward headlong, and lay in a crumpled heap among the rocks.

"That's one rattler has lost his fangs," said Larry Luckin, sniffing contentedly at the acrid odor of powder, as he worked the bolt of the rifle. "Hey, Bragg! Come and get it!"

Bragg remained quiet—very quiet.

"Got it tied up?" Luckin asked the girl presently.

"Yes," came the voice of Nellie Blythe. "But I had to spoil your trousers leg to do it."

"I should worry." As he spoke, Luckin kept a sharp eye on the clump of rocks where Mr. Bragg was concealed. That gentleman, having only a six-gun, was taking absolutely no chances.

"Larry, what do they mean by all this?" broke out the girl. "Why would they try to kill you?"

"I ain't finished the serial story myself yet," rejoined Larry Luckin. "Right now, reasons don't worry me very much. Just facts. You'll

oblige me a heap, partner, if you'll back up a ways and stay out of sight. One of them buzzards caught a glimpse of you, and we'll be having some more hot lead flying around before long."

"All right," she assented reluctantly. "Where are the other two men gone?"

"That's just what I've been trying to figure out and can't."

THE girl withdrew, much to Luckin's relief. He knew that the other two men had withdrawn from the scene for some very definite reason, and had taken their rifles with them. Now that he had no longer any doubts in regard to the philanthropic intentions of Bragg, he began to have a shrewd and unpleasant suspicion as to why those two men had departed.

A movement among the rocks, and his rifle crashed. He distinctly caught an oath in the deep voice of Bragg—a close miss, no doubt.

The morning was still early. Granted that these four men had come from Gun Sight, they must have left there early the previous night. Why? What was their purpose in coming here? It was all nonsense about a mining claim, of course. Their astonishing determination to kill him at sight lent a sinister aspect to the whole thing, but the reason for it all eluded him.

"Hey, Bragg!" he called. "Want to come on up and quit slinging lead? I'm willing to call it a day."

Bragg made no answer beyond a sullen oath. He had got himself into a bad fix, apparently, but he was doing no talking. Luckin pressed the trigger again. The rifle crashed and echoed. Then, working himself backward, Larry Luckin finally rolled over and came to his



feet, well sheltered from sight of Bragg.

The fresh wound caused him to limp perceptibly.

He caught up the newspaper package of dynamite and tore it open. Nellie Blythe joined him, her face anxious.

"Isn't there something we can do, Larry?"

He regarded her with a cheerful grin.

"Plenty, and we got to do it quick. Partner, you're a peach! You sure handed them galoots the surprise of their lives—and me as well!"

She flushed rosily. "I couldn't hit anything."

"No need of it. They'd have plugged me sure, except for you. I don't expect they even saw you, either—they were in a hurry to cover up. Well, you're going clear back to the end of the place, partner. In about ten minutes, things are going to be hot."

"Why?"

"Those two coyotes who snuck out, are climbing up on the shoulder of the butte, to get above us and have us under their guns. That's why Bragg is lying low. He'll stay right there until they pick me off, see? That's what he figures, anyhow. But they have a long climb—and I'm going up to the ledge above, where I climbed yesterday. They'll have a surprise coming. I've got to keep them from getting the hosses; they've got to put us out of business to get to water—and no half-way measures."

"They're not officers, after you?"

Larry Luckin grinned again. "Not a chance. Skip, now! No more time to waste. Head right back there to the place you had the fall, and lay low. Don't worry about me—they'll never catch sight of me until it's too late."

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He hurried her off. Then, with two sticks of dynamite under his shirt, with fuse and caps and matches ready, he picked up his rifle, filled the magazine, and started off back behind the shack.

As he knew well, this battle had to be settled one way or another without delay. The men below needed water. He needed those horses. And he meant to have them.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE TWO RIFLEMEN.

WITHOUT regard to his injured leg, he climbed swiftly and steadily. Up above there was a ledge which commanded the box canyon below, the shoulders of the twin buttes, and the whole Devil's Frying Pan out beyond. His one risk now was that Bragg might take a chance and rush the place—but that was extremely unlikely. Bragg was no hero.

"They asked for it, and they're going to get it," muttered Larry Luckin savagely. "It's root hog or die, and no mistake!"

He was up in the sunlight now, the blinding white desert sunlight, and the rock was blazing hot. It would be still hotter this afternoon, however. Above him showed the ledge; he was well behind the shack, but that ledge ran clear up around the side of the giant core of rock.

He gained it with a final effort, threw out the rifle, lay for a moment panting. Then he came erect. One last look down, showed him that Nellie Blythe was waiting at the back of the niche, well beyond harm's reach. He waved his hand to her, then turned.

Cautiously, now, he made his way out along the ledge, out toward the front of the butte. He had to be careful to dislodge no stone, give



Bragg no warning of his whereabouts. From the edge of the rock rim he peered down—he was directly above Bragg now. The man sat amid the clump of rocks, unmoving, waiting. With a chuckle, Larry Luckin drew back and continued his way.

Presently he came to hands and knees, where the ledge narrowed, then he halted abruptly and stretched out full length. He had discerned a movement, ahead and below.

It came again.

After a moment he saw a man, then the second man. They clambered into sight, well underneath, making slow progress along a rift in the granite. They were not together, but some little distance apart. The uppermost man was scrambling along now at pretty good speed, having found clear going, and was rapidly attaining the same level at which Luckin lay. As he came around the shoulder of rock, the niche and the cabin gradually drew under him, so that he could look down upon them—enough to make his bullets reach, at least.

All unsuspecting that Larry Luckin lay watching grimly, this uppermost man, a scant two hundred yards from Luckin, came to a halt. He called to his companion, softly, but his words carried.

"All right, I'm set. No sign of him—he's layin' low. Soon's you get placed, open up and flush him. Then I'll drop him."

"Don't hit the woman," called the other man.

"The devil with her!" was the savage reply. "We don't want her doin' any talking later on, do we?"

"Well, but while we're here——"

Larry Luckin's face whitened a little; his blue eyes blazed. He

shifted the sights of his rifle a little, estimating the distance carefully.

The second man, while not so high as his companion, had come farther around the face of the butte. He was on a narrow shelf—so narrow that he had barely room to kneel.

"All set," he called, and brought up his rifle to flush the expected quarry with a shot or two.

"Hold on!" returned the first. His position changed. His rifle came up eagerly. With a cold hand clutching at him, Larry Luckin knew that the man had caught sight of Nellie Blythe and was deliberately——

*Crash-sh-sh!*

The rifle in Luckin's hand smashed out, the report echoing up along the butte, flinging back and forth from the opposite wall or rock. The aiming man dropped his rifle, slowly sank to his knees, then slumped forward and rolled from the ledge. His body disappeared below.

ONE frightful cry burst from the second man, on the narrow shelf. He knew that Luckin had the advantage of him; none the less, he whipped around, aimed rapidly, and sent two shots so close that the dust spurted in Larry Luckin's eyes. Luckin sighted—not to kill, but to cripple. He pressed the trigger slowly.

The shot reverberated, volleyed back and forth, died out. The man on the shelf cried out. Then he gave a wild, convulsive leap—straight off the shelf of rock, into midair, and down. He whirled over and over and was gone from sight.

Luckin drew back, frowning, his hand shaking a little as he worked the rifle bolt. Well, he could not help it. There remained Bragg.

He worked back along the ledge, looked down on the clump of rocks. Bragg was gone. With sudden



panic, Larry Luckin straightened up, glanced at the niche. No sign of the man. Then comprehension came upon him. Crafty Bragg had guessed the truth—had retreated in beneath the overhang of the ledge on which Larry Luckin stood.

"Hey, Bragg!" He called down to the man. "Your partners are gone. Come out of that! Lay down your gun and come on up to the shack. I'll not harm you."

"You're a liar!" floated up the surly roar.

Luckin reflected swiftly. Bragg had been unable to see what happened to the other two men, and disbelieved him. Under the overhand, nestled there among the rocks, Bragg was in position to make all kinds of trouble, and could not well be reached.

"Give you one chance, Bragg," he called down again. "You're done for if you show fight. All we want is to get away from here with a couple of horses. I'll give you two minutes to walk up to the shack unarmed. We'll not bother you."

His only response was a wild and furious volley of oaths. The man flew into an insane rage—for which, as Luckin was to learn ere long, there was some shadow of excuse.

Without further parley, Larry Luckin laid aside his rifle and took the two sticks of dynamite from inside his shirt. He knew fairly well where Bragg was located; he could not drop the sticks directly upon him, did not intend to do so. But he could drive the fellow out from cover and give him the fright of his life.

He capped the sticks, attached fuses, and tied them together.

"Last chance, down there," he called. "Will you come out, or not?"

Another volley of oaths, with profane affirmations of fighting until

hell froze over and seeing Luckin buried in said ice. Striking a match, Luckin lighted the fuses, saw them catch, then let the two sticks drop to the rocks below. He had only a hazy idea of the time required for the fuses to burn.

Snatching up his rifle, he started in hot haste for the shack. Bragg must have caught a glimpse of him, for he heard a shot, then another, and bullets whistled close. He had nearly reached a position above the shack, when suddenly the solid rock shook and thundered. He was hurled from his feet. With one choking cry, he felt himself dropping—then a crash, and darkness.

Water on his face, dripping over him; gasping, he woke up and fought free of the girl who strove to hold him. Gaining his feet, his eyes cleared. He saw her standing there in dismay, and a laugh broke from him in sudden realization.

"Gosh! I thought the mountain fell on me!" he exclaimed. "No damage done, eh? How long have I been out?"

"I just got here and dragged you to the spring," she cried. "What was it, Larry—the dynamite?"

HE nodded. Then, recollecting Bragg, he turned and hurried to the beginning of the trail. He himself was unhurt, except for bruises and scratches. He had merely been knocked off the ledge with the force of the concussion, and had come down with a rush of rubble and small stones. But Bragg—

He stopped short, and whistled softly. There were no obvious results of the blast, the trail had not suffered to mention. But Bragg lay flat on his face, sprawled out across the trail. After his brief halt, Luckin hurried forward and knelt



beside the man. Bragg was senseless, but had suffered no apparent hurt except a clip over the head.

"Which is good luck for us both," murmured Larry Luckin, in relief. Hurling the man's gun over into the canyon, he removed the belt from Bragg's waist and bound the powerful arms together, firmly, mercilessly. He spared his own belt for the time being, to make sure of Bragg's ankles, then glanced up as Nellie Blythe approached.

"He's all right—merely knocked out. Come along down, and we'll look over those hosses. Lucky thing they're hobbled. I'll join you in a minute."

"And the other two men, Larry?"

"That's what I'm going to make sure about."

He preceded her down the trail, and then, reaching the canyon floor, scouted around the base of the huge mass of rock. Presently he found what he sought, and was satisfied. Both men were dead. With a shrug, he turned away.

The first man who had been shot, Pete, lay below the trail, and one glance at him was sufficient. Larry Luckin started across the box canyon to where the girl stood with the six hobbled horses. To one side lay the rigs, and near them the packs taken from the two pack animals.

Luckin kicked the empty canteens, which lay in a pile, then turned to the packs. Curiosity rose in him. Beneath these blankets and canvas probably lay the secret of what had brought Bragg and his companions here. He squatted down and fell to work upon the packs, and presently had them open.

After a moment he called to the girl.

"Hey partner! Come over here and look at something."

He stared down at the pouches and the boxes that had been brought to sight. Express boxes, still locked and sealed; two mail pouches, untouched as yet. These things told their own story, explained everything. Larry Luckin rolled a cigarette, then smiled as the girl looked at the packs, and up at him.

"Mail pouches, Larry!"

"Yep, and express boxes. And that's the answer."

"But—how? What does it mean?"

He exhaled, his eyes narrowed reflectively.

"Mail and express robbery. Evidently Bragg knew this place. Maybe he chased old Dad Perkins off; doesn't matter. He made his plans carefully, left provisions and everything already cached here, you see. Then he and his pals pulled off the job—most likely it took place at Gun Sight. If they could get away with it and reach this place, then they could hide out here indefinitely until the pursuit blew over. No wonder Bragg cursed me out! Finding us here had spoiled all their plans. They had to kill us to shut our mouths, they figured. They were that kind. The fools! If they'd had sense enough——"

He fell silent, staring at the packs. Then he looked up quickly.

"Partner, this changes everything. Now we've got to separate."

"Here, Larry?" she questioned. He nodded decisively.

"Yep, here and now. First, we don't want Bragg to see you; the less he's able to tell about you, the better. Anyhow, nobody will believe him. You take this black hoss, which looks real good, with a blanket, some grub, and two of the canteens—maybe three. Strike straight back along the old wagon road; you can't miss it, and this horse will likely follow it himself.



You'll have to stand the sun all afternoon, but I reckon you can. You ought to come out on the EP range sometime to-night."

"But what will I say, about you? And this place?"

Luckin regarded her with a smile.

"Not a thing. Tell about those greasers carrying you off, and how you got to some place in the desert with them. Don't describe this place, naturally. Then say they had a fight, and you ran off. That's true enough, anyhow. You wandered around and were more or less used up when a feller picked you up. Draw on your imagination there. He took you to a water hole and next day gave you a hoss, and showed you the road back."

"But will they believe all that?"

"Sure. Remember, nobody's going to investigate your story. It's me they'll check up on. Got it straight, now? Think you can manage?"

"Of course," she said. "But you?"

Larry Luckin puffed reflectively at his cigarette, then grinned.

"Me, I'm going to pack Mr. Bragg and one of these corpses into Cathedral City, and this here loot to boot. That'll use all five hosses that are left. The sheriff has a deputy and an office there. I can find my way to Cathedral City, easy enough, and ought to get there sometime to-night, with luck.

"I'll say nothing at all about you, understand? Just say that I ran foul of this here outfit as I was resting up in this place, and so forth. They'll probably check up and send out here to view the remains of them two jiggers who stay here. So that's that. Now, I'll go cover up Bragg with his own coat, so he won't see you if he comes around, and then we'll get you loaded up and off. All set?"

"All set, Larry," she assented.

Twenty minutes later, they passed the still senseless Bragg as they descended again to the canyon. There Larry Luckin saddled the black, and hung the canteens on the saddle, making a roll of the other things. The girl mounted, then leaned over, and extended her hand.

"Good-by, Larry—for this time. Is it understood, about everything? We're to be partners?"

"You bet!" Larry Luckin caught her hand and looked up, his blue eyes laughing. "I'll come over and look you up first chance I get."

"I won't be at Uncle Ezra's ranch," she said quietly. "I can't live with him and work against him at the same time, you know. Probably I'll be in Cathedral City."

"Right. I'll find you, and we'll take back the Twin L in a partnership deal, eh? Well, good-by and good luck to you! If you'd just lean over a trifle more——"

She complied. For a moment, their lips met.

"Good-by, my dear!" she said in a low voice, and was gone.

Larry Luckin remained looking after her until she was out of sight. Then, drawing a deep breath, he turned to the work that awaited him.

## CHAPTER X.

### EZRA'S YARN.

THE deputy sheriff's office in Cathedral City, an adobe building with living quarters in the back room for the deputy, was the scene of a late but animated gathering.

It was three in the morning. The reason of such a gathering at this hour was a United States marshal, who had no respect whatever for persons or hours. As Ezra Pickering had confided certain suspicions to the authorities, the marshal upon



his arrival had dragged Mr. Pickering forth to this meeting, regardless of slumber.

A deputy marshal was here. So was the grizzled sheriff from Burnville, with his deputy. So were two more officers who had come over from Gun Sight with the United States marshal.

"Well, Mr. Pickering, spit it out," said the marshal, a keen-eyed, quiet man. "You've alleged that the robbery over at Gun Sight was done by this Luckins or Luckin man. You have grounds for this assertion?"

Ezra Pickering nodded. He was a rangy, powerful man, his face deeply seamed by sun and wind. There was nothing pretty about that sharp-nosed face, with its tight lips, its clipped red mustache, its massive chin. His eyes were a grayish-blue with red lashes and big lids, which gave him something the appearance of a fish. A bulging brow and sparse red hair of coarse texture, and the picture is complete. No weakling, this man.

"Luckin's gone to the bad, as every one knows," he declared in his harsh, rasping tones. "He skipped out more'n a week ago. The sheriff, here, was after him. He'd laid threats agin' me and my boys; tried to kill us. Last seen of him was over this direction, until yesterday."

"Did you see him yesterday?" put in the sheriff.

Ezra gave him a scowl.

"No. I been scouring the country for my niece, that you and your danged outfit can't locate. I sent two o' the boys over to Gun Sight to see could they pick up any news of her. They were there yesterday. They come in with word they'd seen Luckin there, and he was drinking hard. He was with two,

three other fellers. When I heard about this robbery——"

"And murder," put in the marshal. "Don't forget, the express agent was murdered. Who were the men seen with Luckin?"

"Strangers, accordin' to my riders. Tough-looking jaspers. Looks to me like all you have to do is to run down Larry Luckin, and you'll find something."

The marshal spoke up coolly.

"I suppose you know, Mr. Pickering, there's five thousand dollars reward for any information that'll lead to the apprehension of this gang?"

"Heard something about it," replied Ezra, his fishy eyes glinting.

At this instant the telephone on the desk rang sharply. The deputy sheriff answered, then extended the receiver toward Ezra Pickering.

"It's Slim. Wants you."

"Well?" growled Ezra into the telephone. His face changed. "What? Is that so? Hurray! I'll be out to the ranch soon's I get through here."

He hung up. "She's come home!" he declared. "Them two greasers carried her off, like I said! I dunno what else—Slim didn't know. She come riding in. Nope, she ain't hurt. Say, this is fine! Well, to get back to this Luckin feller——"

"You don't need to bother," said a voice, and the door swung open to reveal Larry Luckin. "Hello, everybody! I been hearing a lot about myself."

"Larry!" The sheriff leaped to his feet. "Where on earth did you come from, boy?"

"Out a ways in the desert," drawled Larry Luckin, his eyes sweeping the men before him. "Say, Ezra, it was durned good eyesight them two riders of yours had, if they seen me in Gun Sight yesterday!"



"They did," rasped Ezra Pickering. "You condemned gallows bird!"

Larry Luckin laughed easily.

"Tut, tut, Ezra! I've got two witnesses outside who know better. One of 'em's dead. Lucky thing it's this time o' night, because otherwise I'd have a whole crowd trailing along. So you folks are discussing a mail express robbery over to Gun Sight, huh?"

Ezra Pickering shook his fist angrily at the speaker.

"Yeah, and you know a lot about it, too!"

"For once, Ezra, you're telling the truth," drawled Luckin.

"What's that?" The marshal came to his feet. "You're Luckin, are you? What do you know about this robbery?"

"A whole lot. Who might you be?"

"United States marshal, in charge of the investigation."

Larry Luckin laughed.

"Fine! Step outside, and you'll find the mail pouches and express boxes, a gent named Bragg who done the job, and one of his partners that I fetched along for evidence. There's a couple more out the other side of the Devil's Frying Pan, but I guess they'll stay——"

"Hey, you! Gimme a drink!" came the hoarse, throaty bawl of the suffering Bragg from outside.

Larry Luckin flung open the door.

"Meet Mr. Bragg, folks! He ain't had a drink all day—I figured that was the best way to make him talk, and I was right. All day and night——"

**I**T broke upon the general comprehension that Luckin was not joking, and there was a rush to get outside. Bragg was hauled off his horse after being cut loose; he was a pitiable wreck of his once

formidable self. The dead man was fetched inside, the packs taken from the horses, and the deputy's office buzzed with excitement.

While the marshal conferred at length with Bragg, who was now adorned with close-fitting bracelets, Larry Luckin and the sheriff foregathered outside.

"Hell's bells, boy!" And the grizzled sheriff smote Luckin on the shoulder. "You look like a different man, danged if you don't!"

"Correct, old-timer," said Larry Luckin cheerfully. "I always knew I'd be a changed man if I got a break—and this time I've got the break. I'm coming back, savvy?"

"I'll tell the world! Say, where did that durned Pickering slide off to, huh? We'd ought to go into that yarn he told about you bein' seen over to Gun Sight."

"Let him go. I ain't interested in him—not right now," said Larry.

"Huh? Then you ain't gunning for him and his boys?"

Luckin rolled a cigarette thoughtfully, then grinned.

"Nope—not right now. Say, what was that the marshal said about a reward? I was listening outside but didn't get all of it."

"By gosh, you will get all of it!" declared the sheriff. "Shake, Larry—shake! Bet you're done up, huh? What you limping for?"

"Scratched my leg." Larry chuckled. "Say, got a bed anywheres around here?"

"Sure. We'll give you a shake-down in the back room. Come on in."

"Well, I can't stay awful long," said Larry Luckin. "Got to get me some sleep and then be on my way."

"On your way?" The sheriff paused in the doorway. "Where to?"

"Back." And Larry Luckin grinned again.





# OLD-TIMER

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Author of "The Wooden Horse Of Windicut," etc.

**H**E felt that he belonged to the Z9 outfit, was piece and part of it, this old Sam Martin. Hadn't he punched cows for Jim Sullivan, Sr., the present owner's father, and helped to raise young Jim, "larnin' that younker plenty 'bout handlin' cattle, too?" He had. Seemed as if ol' Sam had always been with Z9. But he hadn't always been old, hadn't always been "stove-up" and crippled as he was now.

His right leg and foot, mangled and crushed in a long-ago night stampede, bothered him constantly these days. Nor was this all. He knew he was "slowin' up, couldn't

stand the work like he useter could. Powerful hard to climb a hoss of a cold mornin' when his game laig was a-givin' him particular hell."

Yet full realization of his plight did not come to the range veteran until he overheard the unfeeling remark of a young Z9 waddy replying to a new hand's question: "Who's that shriveled-up lame ol' codger? Name's Sam Martin. He's an ol' pensioner that Jim Sullivan keeps on the pay roll just 'cause of what he used to be."

This revelation staggered Sam. So that was what the rannies were thinking about him. "'Ol' pensioner, huh?" he muttered bitterly. "Dog-goned if I am. *I won't be laid*



on the shelf. When it's time fer me to cross the Divide, I'll still be holdin' up my end."

Then came another blow. It was beef round-up time, and Sam was expecting to go out with the chuck wagon and the waddies as always, but young Jim Sullivan drew him aside.

"I hate to mention it, Sam, but I don't believe you can stand up to the grind this fall."

The wizened old-timer started to speak and choked. There seemed to be something in his throat. He thought he was being told, gently, yet with finality, that he was all done on the Z9.

"It happens," the rancher went on quickly, "I've another responsible job for you—cookin' and handlin' the cavvy for a little trail-herd outfit."

Sam swallowed twice and found his voice. "Good! I'll sure hol' up my end, Jim." He wasn't to be shelved after all! "This herd's the three hundred choice steers we been holdin' in pastures all summer?"

"Yes. Smoky Dean'll boss the outfit and go with the cattle to market," Sullivan answered. "I've picked up a couple of new hands to help you two steady Z9 men. Don't know anything about 'em except they look like real cow-punchers. You four'll trail the herd to Freeman. A branch railroad has just been built to that town, and it's closer than our usual shipping point."

"To Freeman?" commented Sam. "There's some awful mean country to cross afore we get there. But we'll make it all jake." His faded eyes rested fondly on the business-like young rancher.

"Of course you'll make it," assured Sullivan. Then he hesitantly added: "Sam, kinda as a favor to

me I wish you'd take that little blue pony for one of your string. He's a homesick critter, Blue is never happy unless he's close to the house where my girl can feed him sugar or biscuits, so be sure you picket him nights, or he'll quit your cavvy and ramble for the ranch."

"All right," agreed Sam, and turned away to hide his flaming face. Sullivan was giving him Blue—a girl's pony—because Sam could no longer ride any but the gentlest horse.

This truth did not soften the bitterness when Sam remembered how once he'd ridden anything that wore hair. Anyhow, by Jiminy! he could still help with a beef drive, and cook the best round-up chuck a cow waddy ever "threwed into his in-nards."

**E**ARLY the following morning the beef herd took the trail. With the steers drifting along easily at about fifteen miles a day, the outfit would reach Freeman in six days. For this period, old Sam would be happy, making a hand as of old; in charge of two pack horses and the small cavvy, he was both cook and horse wrangler.

"Yourn is a dag-goned easy job, Sam," said "Smoky" Dean, eating the dinner the old-timer had cooked on the first day out. "I figure you orter help night-herd."

"I figure the same," drawled Sam. "I wasn't expectin' to get off light. I has sung to dogies time and again. Know how to bed 'em down and kinda soothe 'em. What shift'll I take?"

"We-el," replied the trail boss, reflectively, "of evenings, quick as you've got supper ready, you take care of the herd for a couple hours while us cow-punchers rest and feed our faces."



Accordingly, that very evening Sam stood guard while Smoky Dean, Bruce Nolan, and "Hod" Judson ate supper—and rested. Circling around the big steers in the quiet twilight, with all the world still and peaceful, Sam observed that the cow-punchers "rested" by shooting craps and playing poker.

Although this was to be expected, old Sam felt disturbed. He was subject to "hunches," and felt one now—a premonition of impending disaster. A keen judge of human nature from having watched and sized up men for years, Sam Martin had already decided that Nolan and Judson, the two new hands, were not just happy-go-lucky, drifting cowboys. On the contrary, they were "tough nuts," or Sam's judgment was all wrong. He had seen men of their ilk before.

A heavy-set, pugnacious fellow with a scarred cheek and flattened nose, Hod Judson was loud-mouthed, cranky, insolent. For Smoky Dean, as boss, Judson showed no respect whatever. Earlier to-day Judson had openly defied Smoky's authority. In fact, it had struck Sam that the fellow was deliberately trying to pick a fight with the trail-herd boss. If that was what he wanted, he'd get it, for Smoky Dean, rough, tactless, and aggressive, was not a man to take "lip" from anybody. At the camp fire he and Judson were now wrangling about something.

Sam noticed that Bruce Nolan took no part in this argument. Nolan was reserved, thin-lipped, cold-eyed. Certain little mannerisms and actions had told Sam that this man was a killer, cool, deadly, ruthless. Yet Sam felt more friendly toward him than toward swashbuckling Judson. Possibly because at noon Nolan had complimented Sam's "chuck" highly, waxing particularly

enthusiastic about the mashed potatoes—one of the old-timer's specialties.

"Some spuds, Sam! Couldn't be better. But put more black pepper on 'em. I like heaps, of pepper."

Now Sam grinned, remembering Nolan's praise. "I'll feed them tough eggs good as ever I can," he commented. "When men's well fed, they's less apt to be cranky. Mebbe my hunch is all wrong."

Finally he saw two of the cow-punchers at the winking fire preparing to come and relieve him. Then soft, velvety darkness blotted out even the nearer hills, while old Sam's cracked voice rose in song to the bedded, cud-chewing bees.

"The sun circles upward; the steers as  
they plod  
Are pounding to dust the hot prairie  
sod;  
And it seems as the dust makes you  
dizzy and sick,  
That we'll never reach noon and the  
cool, shady creek.

"Come tie up your kerchief and ply up  
your nag;  
Come dry up your grumbles and try  
not to lag;  
Come with your steers from the long  
chaparral,  
For we're far on the road to the rail-  
road corral."

**A**FTER breakfast on the following morning, Smoky Dean had Nolan and Judson string the herd out on the trail while he, himself, lingered at camp to help Sam pack up.

"Sam, d'you realize we're ridin' with a couple of sidewinders?" asked the trail boss abruptly.

"Uh?" ejaculated the old hand, startled by the concerned look on Smoky's square-jawed face. "Sidewinders? What makes you think so? They're all right to drive cattle. Fact, they're fust-class cowhands."



"Yeah, they're too dog-goned good," said Smoky significantly. "Cow thieves jus' has to be top-notch cow-punchers."

"Cow thieves?" Sam exclaimed. "You got somethin' to go on 'sides a hunch?"

"It's the looks of them geezers, the way they act," Smoky growled. "Also I know from playin' poker with him as Judson's a cheat and a liar. Bruce Nolan knows that, of course. Yet he's Judson's pard."

The trail boss threw the pack on the second pony, continuing: "I figure that Jim Sullivan made a big mistake in hirin' that pair of snakes. Sam, I may be wrong, but, way I see this thing, it's up to you and me to see as Sullivan's mistake don't cost him this beef herd."

"Aw, you're loco," derided Sam. "Them jiggers may be tough, but they can't swipe the cattle."

Nothing untoward happened that day. Hod Judson seemed to have forgotten any idea he might have had about picking a row with Smoky. He talked as much as ever, but he obeyed orders without questioning them. Sam had opportunities to watch how both Judson and Nolan handled the herd. They were expert cowhands in every respect.

"We-ell," ruminated the old-timer, "that don't mean as they're rustlers. Everything's goin' to be jake. Is it? Them fellers, a-eatin' their dinner, swapped some mighty meanin'-filled glances."

That evening there was neither a poker game nor a crap-shooting match. Although Judson wanted a game, Smoky Dean refused to play. Undoubtedly he realized that playing cards with Judson was a sure way of bringing on a fight. He had stood for the blustering cowhand's

cheating once. But he couldn't stand for it a second time.

Bruce Nolan soon left the camp fire to join Sam on herd duty.

"You're the best cook on the range, old hand," observed the thin-lipped rider pleasantly.

"Thanks, Nolan. We got a dog-gone good herd of dogies here, ain't we? I reckon they're worth seventy bucks a head on the market."

Nolan's chilly gray eyes traveled over the steers, now bedding down in the twilight.

"And three hundred head of 'em," he commented. "Twenty-one thousand dollars' worth of beef on the hoof. Nice hunk of dough for the big boss. What kind of country is there atween here and Freeman, Sam?"

"Worsen'n this where we is now. To-morrow we'll be into the desert—almost desert, anyhow."

"Populated much?" Nolan inquired casually.

Old Sam's pulses suddenly raced. He found himself wishing the desert country was thickly settled.

"Horn' toads, snakes, owls, and jack rabbits is about all," he answered truthfully.

"Just as I allowed," said Nolan. "The Z9 ain't shipped many cattle from this town of Freeman, has it?" Sam thought, "I'm bein' pumped for a reason. Might lie to this killer—yeah, he is a killer, got all the earmarks—but he'd catch me at it." Aloud he said:

"We ain't loaded cattle there afore."

"Still, I s'pose everybody in Freeman knows Jim Sullivan, owner of the Z9?" Nolan remarked.

"Uk-un, no." The answer slipped out before Sam thought, and he instantly tried to correct what he knew was an error. "Aw, I don't



mean that. Sullivan's knowed every place. Every place!"

A thin smile formed on Nolan's lips, while his eyes mocked old Sam. "Fine large night," said the killer, and rode around the herd.

Judson came out to join Nolan, and Sam went to camp. Should he say anything to Smoky Dean of this latest development? No, Smoky was worried enough already.

**D**AWN of the third morning on the trail, and once again Smoky was helping Sam pack the ponies. Smoky's lips were a straight line; in his eyes a smoldering fire.

"Old hand," he said abruptly, "I notice you ain't totin' a smoke pole. Why ain't you?"

"Why, Smoky, I quit packin' a hog-leg right atter that smash I got into what left me all bunged up like I am. Quit carryin' it 'cause it hurt my game hip so like hell."

"That so? And you ain't got a gun in yore bed even?"

"Nope. Never figured I'd need none."

"I wish you had a Colt." Smoky's rugged face looked haggard. Sam had never seen the younger hand so "worked up." "Wish you had a Winchester, too, and was cold-blooded enough to blow Bruce Nolan's head off his shoulders from long range."

"W-h-a-t?"

"That hombre needs to be shot without warnin'. If I was ornery enough, I'd do it. Yet there's another reason than the ethics of the thing to keep me from it, which is, we need help to get these dogies to the railroad. The two of us couldn't handle 'em."

"Jus' what's bitin' on you, Smoky?"

"Las' night when I rid' out to re-

lieve them two new hands on night herd, the ground was soft an' my hoss wasn't makin' no noise, so I got close to 'em. They had their heads together, an' I heard a few words. 'Then we can pull it off?' Judson asked Nolan. 'Easiest thing we ever tackled,' the frost-eyed jasper answered. 'I'll pass myself off as Jim Sullivan, sell to a buyer. We'll high-tail with the cash afore anybody gets wise.' 'Slick,' said Judson. 'But what 'bout Smoky?' 'Leave 'im to me,' said Nolan.

"Sam, my gun was outta the leather, an' I'd have called for a show-down right then, only shots would 'a' spooked the steers, sent 'em ramblin' t'hell an' gone. I jus' moved away, bitin' blood outta my lower lip. When I come near them fellers again, I was whistlin' like nothin' was wrong. But——"

"But what?" asked Sam, now equally as concerned as the trail boss. This situation was loaded with dynamite. He and Smoky rode with two cow thieves, one of whom was a ruthless killer.

"Bein' forewarned is half the battle. I'll be ready fer 'em," Smoky resumed grimly. "I figure, Sam, as they won't try an' get the pair of us till we're within twenty miles of Freeman. Why should they? They need us, you to cook, me to haze the steers. Afore they expect it, I'll force the show-down, with my Colt a-smokin'. Whatever you do, Sam, don't let on t'-day as anything's the matter."

"Listen, I'll pull their teeth t'-night," declared Sam. "Ph-huh. Get their lead chuckers. That'll be heaps safer'n for you to try stickin' 'em up, Smoky. With their teeth pulled, they'll dance to our music."

Smoky nodded emphatically. "Good! Your ol' noodle's workin'. Do that t'-night!"



**H**OWEVER, the show-down came much quicker than either Sam or Smoky had any expectation that it would. It came that evening, when the herd was about fifty miles from both the Z9 and from Freeman, well out on the alkali and greasewood wasteland, semi-desert country which had to be crossed.

Sam had made camp, picketed the blue pony which he had been riding all day, changed his saddle to another mount, and after getting supper ready, had ridden out to the beef herd. In the twilight he was circling around the steers while Smoky, Judson, and Nolan were at camp. Immediately these three had finished eating and as though it had all been prearranged, Bruce Nolan addressed the trail boss:

"Smoky, you're a tolerable good cowhand and a jigger with sense. Ever stop to think you're workin' for measly wages when you could easy line your pockets with big money?"

"Meanin'?" Smoky didn't have much hair on the back of his neck, but he gave the effect of being all a-bristle like an enraged Airedale.

"Meanin', if you're minded to play the game with me and Judson, we'll cut you in on the wad we aim to get for this Z9 herd and on——"

The frosty-eyed, thin-lipped killer stopped, for Smoky bellowed:

"So yuh think I'd play with you?"

Out with the cattle, Sam heard his voice. Heard, and instantly spurred toward the camp.

"Here's my answer," the hot-headed trail boss boomed on. "Fill yore hand, you!"

Nolan's hand streaked to his gun butt. So did Smoky's. Two Colts cleared leather, one that infinitesimal part of a second swifter than the other, so absolutely necessary as

a margin of safety to the gun fighter. And Bruce Nolan, not Smoky Dean, was the gun fighter.

A vivid flash from the killer's .45 before Smoky's weapon was leveled, the crash of a report, and the Z9 trail boss, shot through the brain, buckled at the knees, sagged and fell, his own Colt unfired.

Old Sam Martin, goading his horse onward hell-bent, was a witness to this swift gun play—a one-sided battle at the best, for Nolan had the edge on any ordinary cow-puncher. In a blind fury that never reckoned consequences, Sam, armed only with a quirt, left his saddle before his horse had halted. Quirt swinging, he rushed at Nolan, who stood leaning slightly forward, gun level at his hip, smoke curling from its muzzle.

But Hod Judson, who stood to one side, galvanized to action. Diving forward, he caught the old-timer around the legs, brought him crashing down, and Nolan, turning, calmly, deliberately drove his hot gun barrel to Sam's skull. For a split second, a million stars danced before the old hand's eyes, then he seemed swept away in a black emptiness.

**S**LOWLY consciousness returned to old Sam. His head throbbed so he could scarcely think. Was he still alive? Yes, he decided, but it was amazing that he should be. Rallying his faculties, he sat up. The fire was blazing cheerfully, and there was Nolan looking at him. Smoky's body lay where it had fallen. Judson was not in sight.

Recalling now what had happened before he'd been knocked cold, Sam wondered if the steers had stampeded. He gazed into the darkness of the quiet night. A dark blot out



yonder was the herd; a taller object moving slowly about it was Judson on guard. The cattle were still here!

"Glad you came round," spoke Nolan. His voice was as cool and steady as though nothing out of the ordinary had taken place.

"Glad I came round—why?" Sam muttered. How he hated that cold-blooded hombre! "Why?" he repeated in a clearer tone. "You know plenty well I'll put a rattlesnake in your bed if I get half a chance."

"You won't get half a chance," declared Nolan. "I didn't kill you 'cause I want you to cook for us while we finish this drive."

"Uh?" Sam was doing some thinking. He was still alive only because his cooking had pleased Bruce Nolan. Alive, and perhaps he might still hold up his end! Save the herd. They'd be three more days in reaching Freeman, and in that time——"

"You make the best sinkers I ever socked my teeth into," resumed the killer. "And your mashed spuds jus' melt in a feller's mouth. Willin' to cook for your new boss?"

"Hell! Guess I ain't got no choice."

"Correct. It's settled then. Don't try sneakin' up on either me or Hod when we're bedded down, 'cause we sleep light—awful light, hands on our guns, too. Bury your Z9 pard if you want to."

The old-timer rose and stretched, took a drink of water to see if it would help his head. His body ached in every muscle and joint, too, especially his game leg, so digging a shallow grave for Smoky Dean was an ordeal. Over that grave Sam piled many rocks. Though he shed no tears, his heart was sad—and bitter. Smoky had been a loyal hand, liked by all the Z9 waddies.

He had died for his outfit, brutally murdered. He'd be avenged—if Sam could arrange it.

That wasn't all Sam must arrange. The trail herd would go through to Freeman, driven by two thieves, but the old hand just couldn't let them get away with the cattle. How prevent it?

Suddenly the answer came to him. He'd make use of Blue, the home-sick pony.

About one o'clock that night when Judson was on herd and Nolan in bed, as Sam was supposed to be, also, the old-timer wrote a note to Jim Sullivan, placed it in a tobacco sack and, going out to where Blue was picketed, tied the sack to the pony's mane. Then Sam fixed the picket rope so it would look as if Blue had broken it, and leading the pony well away from camp, he turned him loose. Wasn't he pleased when Blue kicked up his heels and headed for home!

Sam would have skinned out on the horse himself, only he realized that Nolan or Judson would be sure to miss him; sure to overtake him. As it was, the old-timer now had an ace in the hole, and his staying with the crooks would help to put them off guard. The chances were Blue would reach home by dark of the following evening. The tobacco sack would be discovered. Sullivan, with plenty of fighting cowboys, would overtake the herd, giving Judson and Nolan the surprise of their lives!

**A**BRUPTLY Sam's exultant thoughts were cut short by Bruce Nolan, who came riding along at a lope. He reined in, stared at Sam.

"Did you get bucked off?" he asked. "I heard a hoss hittin' the back trail. Figured you were on it."



Nervously the old hand gulped, offering no explanation. He had not counted on anything like this. Evidently Bruce Nolan slept with both ears wide open!

The trap-mouthed killer fixed his wicked eyes mockingly on Sam's face. "I suppose 'twas that blue hoss, the homesick critter, as left you afoot? Come back with me."

When Sam and the killer reached camp, Nolan went to look for Blue.

"Busted his picket rope," he called. "He's high-tailed it. Well, no matter. There's plenty more hosses. Still I can't see how you got left behind, Sam."

Sam wiped cold sweat from his forehead, then whispered throatily: "That was sure a close shave for me!" and went to his bed.

Next day the trail herd moved on across the waste of this no man's land. A copperish sun burned down, hot, breathless. Alkali dust powdered cattle and riders. Bloodshot eyes smarted. The steers lagged, their tongues lolling. The infrequent water holes were rank with alkali. The men could drink none of this water until it had been made into strong black coffee.

Old Sam, still in charge of pack horses and cavvy, no longer rode ahead to make noonday camp and cook dinner, nor did he strike out again after dinner to get supper and make camp for the night. Nolan had forbidden him to leave the cattle, so he stayed with the slow-moving, dust-shrouded herd. The killer had said meaningly:

"In this open country a hoss-backer can be seen for miles. You try to vamose, and I'll go after you. Only one'll ride back."

Nolan thought the swing the proper place for Sam to ride. He himself rode point. Judson brought up the drags, thoroughly hating this

job where the choking dust was thickest.

"Bruce," Hod said that evening, "put the old coot back on drag. I'll watch him from the swing. If he starts to lam out, I'll stop him—with a bullet."

"All right. Try it to-morrow," agreed Nolan.

They were eating supper, and since the new boss had ordered "mashed spuds," they had boiled mashed potatoes.

"I like black pepper," said Nolan. "Pepper 'em plenty, Sam."

"All right," said Sam. "There's oodles of pepper."

Sam now hated to cook for the two toughs, yet what else could he do? However, if Blue had gone home, help would soon come. But what if the tobacco sack containing the message should have been lost? Unless they found the message, no one at the ranch would think Blue's appearance out of the ordinary.

Sometimes Sam was exultant; at other times despairing. He wondered why Nolan looked at him so oddly; why Hod Judson often grinned as if enjoying a secret; enjoying the old hand's silent misery.

The night passed. No cowboys from the Z9 arrived. "Why don't they come?" Sam worried all the next day while he brought up the drags, eating dust, breathing dust. Camp that evening being only a little over twenty miles from Freeman, he thought of making a break and trying to reach town. However, Bruce Nolan seemed to read the old-timer's thoughts.

"We won't trust you t'-night, Sam," he said, with that same odd look. "We'll tie you up."

"You geezers seem mighty s'picious of me," Sam returned.

"We are. Turn round and let



"We tie your wrists. Or would you prefer to be shot?"

Sam preferred the former, so obeyed Nolan's order. After a wretched night, Judson released him at dawn, ordering him to get breakfast. The old-timer was so stiff and sore he could scarcely move, yet he managed somehow to do the work.

**A**FTER another day of heat and dust, the herd stopped less than five miles from Freeman. About four in the afternoon camp was pitched in a wide valley where there was a stream of good water. Here the hungry, thirsty steers needed little herding.

Judson and Nolan were laboring under suppressed excitement; Sam was in an agony of apprehension. Help from the Z9 was long overdue. What could have happened to Blue and the message?

As the wizened cowboy-cook was starting his supper fire, Hod Judson suddenly stepped in front of him, grinned triumphantly, and tossed a small tobacco sack on the ground.

Sam Martin could not help recoiling from the sack as if from a rattlesnake. His faded old eyes met Judson's mocking ones. He turned and looked into Nolan's glittering orbs.

"Matter, Sam?" asked Nolan.

"Nothin'," stammered the old-timer.

"Nothin'? Might look at what's in that sack—though I reckon you know." The killer picked up the tobacco sack and tossed it on the fire. A thin smile played on his lips as he resumed: "That night the blue pony got away, Judson took out after it. He caught Blue, but let him go on again—without the message!"

"Ho! Ho! Haw-haw!" cackled Judson with boisterous triumph.

Old Sam's mouth felt dry and hot.

He couldn't have spoken had he wanted to. His last hope of saving the cattle, of avenging Smoky, was burning with that tobacco sack. He felt a thousand years old, baffled, all gone, helpless.

Judson stopped cackling and chortling long enough to say: "We'd better shoot him now."

"It's time Sam cashed in his chips," Nolan agreed callously. "But I'm honin' for one more of his good meals. Sam'll get supper—golden-brown sinkers he bakes so swell, good old mashed spuds with pepper, and plenty gravy. And Sam, fry the sage hens I killed today. Make it a meal like only you can cook."

Still Sam said nothing. No help would come from the Z9. No chance riders had come from Freeman to see the herd. No ranches were near. If he tried to escape, he wouldn't live three minutes.

Nolan saddled a fresh horse and loped away toward Freeman. Judson watched Sam start the evening meal. He never allowed the old-timer to get near. Crippled as Sam was, he might, by some lucky break, get possession of Judson's Colt.

It was nearly six o'clock when Bruce Nolan, accompanied by a stranger, rode into the valley and went to look at the beef herd. In a few moments, however, Nolan left the newcomer and came to camp.

"A buyer?" asked Judson tensely.

Nolan's pale-gray eyes shone exultantly. "The whole play's comin' out slick. I asked the liveryman in Freeman if he knew Jim Sullivan of the Z9. He said he didn't. So far as he knew, Sullivan had never been in Freeman, though folks had heard of him and his Z9 outfit. I told him I was Sullivan, and had three hundred choice beef



steers a few miles from town that I wanted to sell."

Nolan allowed himself one of his rare, thin smiles, then resumed: "The liveryman hunted up a buyer and introduced us. 'Mr. Robbins, this is Jim Sullivan. You've heard of the Z9 outfit? Jim's the owner.' I imagined I really was a big cattle-man.

"Robbins said he'd like to look at my steers and make an offer. When I said I was one of those cranks who didn't believe in takin' checks, this buyer told me confidential he was carryin' plenty cash. And here he is!"

"Has Robbins really got the dinero?" exulted Judson. "With him?"

Nolan nodded. Then his eyes bored Sam. "Old-timer, listen: If you warn Robbins, I'll kill *him* first and *you* second. If you try anything, 'twon't be just *your* life at stake! Savvy?"

"I savvy." Try as he would, Sam couldn't keep his voice steady.

"I asked Robbins to stay to supper. If he buys the steers, he'll want us to take 'em into the stock-yards to-morrow mornin'. Me and Judson'll do that, Sam—but *you won't be along.*"

Sam's eyes met the killer's with bitter defiance, but he said no word.

"One thing more," Nolan resumed. "If for any reason Robbins don't buy the steers and pay for 'em, he won't leave here alive, for we intend to get his wad! Supper ready? Mashed spuds?"

"I'll be fixin' 'em," muttered the old-timer.

"Fine! Remember to pepper the spuds, Sam. Kinda wait on Robbins. Treat him like he was some punkins." Nolan wheeled his horse and rode out to the herd, where he

put in a few minutes with the stock buyer.

Judson grinned triumphantly at the wizened range veteran. "Kinder gets your goat, don't it?"

SAM paid no attention to the fellow. Sweat dripped from his forehead, though his body was icy. For himself, he wasn't afraid to die—not if he could go out holding up his end—and if *his life alone* were at stake, he would surely warn that cattle buyer.

"Warn Robbins—tip him off—my only chance," ran Sam's desperate thought. "Gunless, old, crippled, I can't tackle them two reptiles with one chance in a million of winnin'. If I was jus' young and whole again! Can I outsmart 'em?"

Suddenly he paused in mashing the potatoes. For a moment, he remained frozen, staring at the fluffy white mass. Then his gnarled old hands trembled as he spooned the potatoes into an extra large tin plate and mixed in salt and butter—but no pepper. Carefully he smoothed the top of the mashed potatoes. Oh, so smooth! Then, with his back to Judson, Sam did something else, making liberal use now of black pepper. Finally he covered the plate with another.

"Don't believe I'd 'a' thought of it," he whispered, "if Nolan wasn't such a pepper hound!"

Bruce Nolan loped to camp with Robbins. The buyer was a big, florid man, breezy and jolly.

"Hot stuff!" he shouted as he stepped off his mount. "Many's the time I've et at the grub wagon. Hello, cook! How are you, old hand? I bet a hoss smashed you all to pieces one time so you had to take up cookin' 'stead of bronc-bustin'. Eum-m, lookit them biscuits! And



fried sage hen an' gravy. Man! oh, man! but ain't I goin' to fill up?"

"Like mashed spuds, too?" asked Nolan.

"You betcha," said the cattle buyer. Already he had picked up plate, cup, knife, fork, and spoon; was pouring himself a cupful of coffee.

"Set over there on that bed," urged Sam politely. "'Tain't often we has a cattle buyer fer a guest, and you're goin' to be waited on some."

"My cook, Sam, Mr. Robbins," put in Nolan hurriedly.

"Glad to know you, Sam, though a knock-down wasn't necessary. Hm-m-m, I'll bet you never wait on cowpokes, but if you insist——"

Sam had brought the plate of mashed potatoes, uncovered it, and pressed it into the hands of the buyer.

"Yummie! them spuds look swell," Robbins began enthusiastically. "But you surely do pour on the pepper! What's——"

Sam stepped on the man's toes, and his faded eyes met those of the cattle buyer, significantly.

"Jus' help yourself to the spuds," the old-timer urged, "an' I'll be gettin' you some meat."

Both Nolan and Judson were now filling their plates and cups. Sam picked up the Dutch oven containing fried sage hen and carried it to Robbins, who carefully scraped aside the peppered top layer of the mashed potatoes before helping himself to a portion. He did not raise his eyes to old Sam, who in turn avoided looking directly at the buyer.

After a moment or two of silence, Robbins called jovially: "This is chuck what is chuck. Hi, Sullivan, you're to be congratulated on your cook."

"I've kept him just because he

could cook," said Bruce Nolan dryly. Going to sit beside Robbins, he picked up the potato plate and grumbled, "Gosh, Sam, you peppered these more'n aplenty."

But he did not notice that the stock buyer's hands shook a little, or that the man's ruddy face had whitened a fraction, or that sometimes when Robbins thought Nolan was not watching, his eyes followed the wizened old cowboy cook.

"You like the steers, Robbins?" asked Nolan when plates were emptied.

"Yes, I do, Sullivan. Now if we can get together——"

THE deal was closed at sixty dollars per head. Robbins produced his money belt stuffed with bills of large denominations. He counted out eighteen thousand dollars and put back into his belt a lone hundred-dollar bill.

"You've cleaned me," he said. "Now for the bill of sale."

With steady hand Nolan wrote out the bill of sale and signed it "James Sullivan." Robbins pocketed it, saying:

"It's understood you fellows'll deliver the steers at the yards, first thing in the mornin'?"

"We'll trail 'em in early," promised Nolan. "I'd ask you to stay all night, only we got no extra bed."

"Thanks, but I been livin' in a good hotel room and have got used to it. Been waiting a week for some herds to show up. So long, Sullivan. So long, Judson. So long, Sam. I'll never forget your cookin', 'specially your spuds.'" The buyer rode away, and the soft night hid him.

"He'll never forget my spuds," thought old Sam as he washed dishes. His stanch old heart



pounded exultantly. His eyes were bright. He smiled from time to time.

Bruce Nolan, hard-bitten thief and killer, could not understand that smile. It had him bothered. In fact, old Sam's smile seemed, somehow, to mock the killer, even after a single shot had shattered the silence of the night, and the wizened, crippled range veteran was still in death.

Nolan was still worrying about that smile when early the next morning he and Judson drove the beef herd over a newly-made grave, thence on into the stockyards at Freeman. As the toughs turned to ride out through the gate, they unexpectedly met the sheriff of Freeman, five posse men with sawed-off shotguns, and Robbins, the cattle buyer.

"Steady, you two thieves," ordered the sheriff.

"What's the meanin' of this?" demanded Nolan, cool and contained as ever.

"Telegraph and telephone wires were hot last night," answered Robbins. "Messages flashed between the Z9 Ranch and this town, even though they had to be relayed to and from the Z9 on horseback. As the result we found out you're not Jim Sullivan, that Smoky Dean is unaccountably missing, and that you two have sold three hundred steers you don't own!"

At this statement, Hod Judson seemed to shrivel and wilt, his face turning ghastly greenish-white.

Nolan, however, did not lose his nerve.

"Some mistake, Robbins," he began blusteringly. "I'm Jim Sullivan and——"

"No use, fellow!" snapped the cattle buyer. "The Z9 confirmed more even than old Sam told me."

"More than Sam told you?" Bruce Nolan looked at Robbins oddly. "My old cook couldn't have told you anything."

"Think not?" asked the buyer. "Well, his mashed spuds turned the trick. He printed words in their smooth surface with the end of a match, and filled the grooves with pepper. These words stood out, black on white:

"Crooks! Buy cattle or you'll die!  
Wire Z9. Get 'em when they yard steers."

Nolan's eyes glittered like those of a trapped wolf. "So that message was peppered into the mashed spuds. Clever. Damned clever!"

"I agree," snapped Robbins. "Where's Smoky Dean? Where's Sam this morning?"

"Dead. You birds would find that out anyhow." The killer bit off his words. "Dead, but——"

"Dead!" The cattle buyer blanched. "Somehow I never thought of Sam's being in danger. You *killed* him?"

"Dead," Nolan iterated, as though speaking only to himself. "But that loyal ol' cow-puncher whipped us and saved the herd. Now I savvy his last smile. He went out holdin' up his end!"

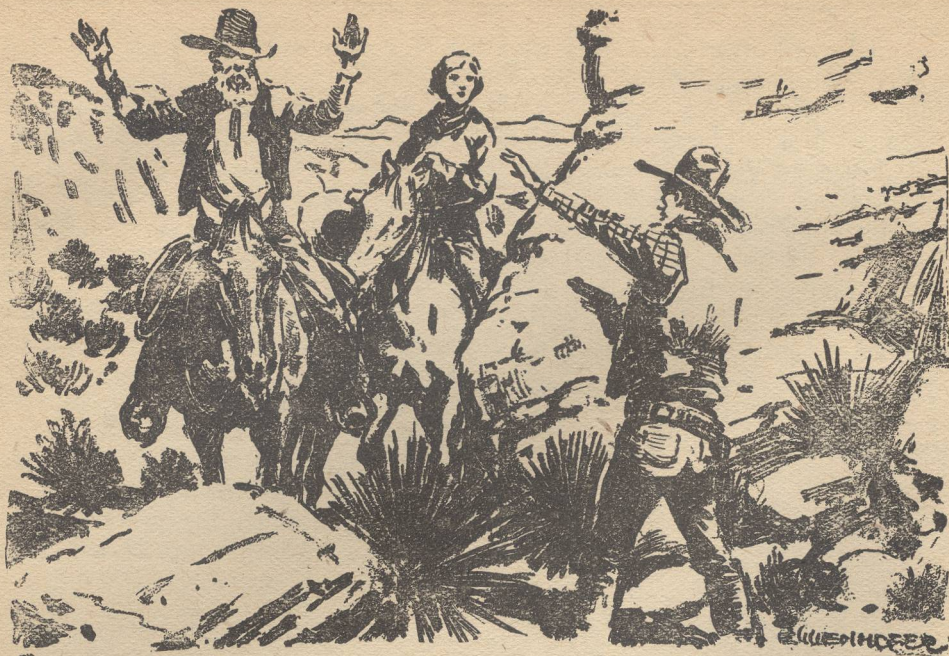
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# STACKED CARDS

By LLOYD ERIC REEVE

Author of "The Calgary Kid," etc.

PAST the adobe ranch house flashed the foaming stream, around drooping willows, green grass, and tumbled granite boulders. Tremulous moonlight seeped through the rustling leaves; the balmy air was as soft as a caress, pungent with desert verbena, damp sage, the fainter tang of distant pine.

In a clump of mesquite, halfway between the house and the willows, crouched Jarvis Wolfe. Wolfe watched two black silhouettes, a man and a girl, seated beside the splashing stream. His eyes were cold, calculating. In his right hand he held a six-gun.

The man and girl sat close together, on a granite slab—Tom

Wander, who was lean and hard and tall; Linda Aron, whose face, elfin brown, was like a lifting flower, her hair tawny as sunlight, whose slender body was as young and supple as the willows curving above.

Tom Wander crushed out his cigarette, smiling.

"It's getting late," he decided. "We better go in."

Linda laughed. "It's been such a wonderful night, Tom! Let's stay just a little longer."

"You're going with your father in the morning," he reminded. "You'll be starting early."

"I wish you were going, too, Tom."

He didn't answer. She moved closer, looking up. She sought his



eyes, but he glanced quickly away, staring moodily at the dancing water. The brown line of his jaw tightened. She reached up impulsively, touching his arm. She felt the arm stiffen, and her face crimsoned. She drew back bewildered, a little hurt.

She had known Tom Wander for so short a time. Less than two months past, he had drifted into her father's ranch, taken a casual job busting a string of rough ones; about him she knew nothing more than that, nothing of his past, his future, no desire to probe his curious silence about himself. Yet in her heart she believed that he loved her. As she loved him. It was impossible to deny, and yet unsought; it had just happened, as the stars set and the sun rises.

He moved on the rock beside her; his tall frame swung erect. He held out his hand, smiling.

"Bedtime, Linda."

SHE answered his smile and took his hand. In the mesquite yonder, as he helped her to her feet, she glimpsed a moving shadow. She glanced that way, half turning, and slipped on the smooth granite. She fell sideways, and Tom's quick arm caught her. She forgot the shadow. Suddenly she was pressing against Tom Wander, her face lifting. His eyes were close to hers, lighting with a dark fire. Their lips touched, clung, and it seemed the world stood still.

He drew back quickly, his mouth tight.

Her swift laugh was like the running water. "It's all right, Tom," she told him. "I mean—I——"

He watched her with a steady gaze, silent.

She said simply, "I mean, Tom—I love you, too."

His lean face set slowly, a hard mask. Then he laughed, and the cruelty in his laugh was like an edged knife.

"Linda," he said, "don't be crazy."

"Crazy? Why, Tom, I meant it—I——"

"I didn't," he said. "Maybe you're one of these girls who figure a kiss is as good as a marriage license."

Her slim body flinched straight. She stared at him.

He laughed again. "I'm a drifter, girl. I'm seeing the world. You don't catch me getting myself hitched."

Still she stared, not speaking. Only her eyes moved. They widened slowly. An instant past they had glowed with tenderness, a passionate generosity. Now they were filled with nothing but humiliation, an amazed scorn.

He grinned. "I suppose you figure you've been insulted."

She spoke for the first time, her voice low, controlled. "Tom," she said, "I hope you'll at least have the decency to draw your pay and leave. It wouldn't be easy now, to have to meet you every day."

She turned, her head high, and walked swiftly away. He watched the slender form move wraithlike through the silvering moonlight, past a darkening clump of mesquite. He saw her melt against the violet shadow of the adobe, heard the closing door.

Then he spoke aloud. "I'd have felt better," he said, "if I could have just shot myself."

He sat again on the rock. He rolled and lighted a cigarette, his fingers slow and steady.

Never in his life had he wanted anything as he had wanted Linda Aron to-night. Yet he had deliberately hurt her, insulted her, wounded her. Because he had



wanted her enough to give her up. Because it was better that she should hate him. It would have been easier to have held her in his arms, and told her about himself. But she would have accepted him as he was, and later she would have suffered. He would have broken her pride, and her faith in life, and taught her the meaning of fear. He had thought about that, and made his decision, and carried it out.

She hoped he would have the decency to draw his pay and leave. Well, the pay didn't matter. It would be easier for them both, if he should go now, at once.

He turned his cigarette, and stared at the ember. It glowed in the dark, a drop of flame. Linda was like a flame. A flame in the dark. The cigarette flipped from his fingers. It described its brief arc, struck the flowing water, hissed, and vanished.

HE laughed shortly, and came to his feet. As he walked through shimmering moonlight, toward the bunk house, he came abreast a shadowy clump of mesquite. The figure of a man loomed suddenly, a leveled gun. A voice said:

"Lift 'em, Wander. 'Way up."

Tom became motionless. He felt the gun, a blank stare. Slowly his arms rose.

"Wolfe," he stated quietly, "I'd been hoping to meet up with you. But not this way. If I'd seen you a second sooner, one of us would be dead now."

Wolfe reached forward and took Tom's gun. Moonlight fell on his face. A gaunt man, stooping slightly, he suggested a poised hawk, thin lips, a beaked nose, hooded eyes that were curiously hard and brilliant.

"I could have killed you," he told Tom, "but you're worth more alive."

"Aim to turn me in for the reward?" Tom asked.

Wolfe shook his head. "Not enough," he explained. "There's only five hundred on you."

"Then what?"

"I figure you can help me pick up about four thousand."

For a long instant, Tom was silent. His eyes narrowed. Finally he nodded. "Maybe I get you, an' maybe I don't. But if it's what I think, you can shoot me first."

Wolfe smiled. "There's a better way," he reminded, "than shooting you. Get down to the corral, an' walk slow."

Tom swung helplessly around. Wolfe herded him forward, his gun pressed against the cowboy's spine. At the corrals they halted.

"Catch up your horse," Wolfe ordered. "If you try one funny move, I'll let you have it."

Tom shrugged. He caught up his pony, and saddled.

Wolfe stepped up, his gun lifting. "Now turn around," he directed; "put your hands behind your back."

Tom obeyed, and Wolfe drew a couple of tie ropes from his pocket. He bound the cowboy's wrists, helped him to mount, then tied his feet beneath the horse's belly. Leading the horse, he crossed to a thicket of greasewood, where his own mount was concealed. He swung aboard, and again leading Tom's pony, rode north across the moonlit range.

They drifted on, two flowing shadows. Tom saw, far ahead, a darkening loom of mountains, massive granite shoulders, lifting against the flashing stars. The warm air rippled against his face, heavy with sage, the dry sweetness of sunburned grass; leather creaked, their spurs jingled, the hoofs of their



jogging ponies beat a rhythmic tune. A weight of deepening futility, an inability to think, oppressed him; as though caught in some inscrutable current, he was sweeping blindly forward, into a hidden maelstrom.

THEY came to the rim of a wide arroyo. Working downward with stiffened legs, sliding and scrambling past gigantic boulders, their ponies wound through shadowy forests of chaparral, descending into the heavier darkness. On the sandy dry bed, Wolfe at last dismounted. Untying Tom's feet, he helped him to ground; ordered him to sit with his back to a rock, and again tied his ankles. Except for the brief commands, still silent, he built a small fire of mesquite twigs. Then he crouched beside the tiny flame, looked across at Tom, and grinned.

"Well," he stated, "you had it right."

Tom's eyes were cautious. "Had what right?"

"About the four thousand."

Tom shook his head. "I don't get you."

Wolfe laughed. "Old John Aron is buying a herd to-morrow. Delivery is at the Bar 2. Aron rides there to-morrow, an' he carries four thousand with him. He might take any of a dozen trails. I don't know which. But you do."

"What of it?" Tom asked.

Wolfe leaned forward in the fire-light, his bright eyes glittering, his hawk face cruel.

"You know what I want, Wander. You're going to tell me which way Aron will go, where's the best place to stick him up. What's more, you're going to do the sticking up yourself. I'll be right close, with a gun at your back, but I won't be seen."

"Didn't I tell you," Tom reminded, "that you could shoot me first?"

"An' I told you," Wolfe countered, "that I knew a better way than shooting. What about the kid?"

Tom's face was a little startled then. He forced a quick laugh.

"Wolfe," he lied, "you've slipped up. Billy's already escaped to Canada. Two months ago."

"Like hell." Wolfe grinned. "He's riding for the Fence Rail right now. Thirty miles south of here."

Tom lowered his gaze. For a long instant, he was silent, staring at the ground. When he finally looked up, his eyes were dogged.

"All right," he said, "what'd you want?"

Wolfe shrugged. "Either you string with me on this stick-up, or I turn both you an' the kid in. You'll both go to prison for long terms. An' don't think you're going to put anything over. I got a friend watching the kid. If I don't show up at the Fence Rail, if anything happens to me before to-morrow night, then that partner of mine tips off a sheriff. How long the kid stays out of prison is up to you, an' nobody else. Think it over."

Tom looked past the fire. He stared into the brooding night. He realized suddenly that he had either to do as Wolfe ordered, deliberately to rob Linda's father, or to put himself, and his own brother, that laughing kid, behind steel bars.

He thought of Billy, and Linda, and Linda's father. Old John Aron had been a friend, and more. Linda was the girl he loved. For a brief moment, he had held her slim body in his arms, her lips against his, and the memory of that instant stirred within him now, a deathless flame. Yet against this, he saw Billy Wander, his freckled face and laughing



blue eyes, his slender swaggering body. Billy was his brother, whom he had raised.

Did the image of Linda, her father's money, mean more to him than ten years of Billy Wander's life?

Wolfe moved impatiently, tossed fresh twigs on the fire.

"Well," he urged, "speak up. Are you sending the kid to prison?"

Tom met his gaze.

"No," he said, "you know I'm not."

"You're showing some sense." Wolfe grinned. "All right. What time is Aron leaving to-morrow?"

"Sunup."

"An' he's carrying four thousand?"

"Four thousand, five hundred."

"Anybody going with him?"

"Linda."

"Who's Linda?"

"His daughter."

"A girl, eh? Well, she won't be any trouble. Anybody else?"

"Nobody else."

"What way is he going?"

"Through Skeleton Canyon."

"Fine. Best place in the world for a stick-up. Well, we'll catch a couple hours sleep, an' then drift over to Skeleton Canyon." Wolfe grinned across the fire. "You're a great partner, Wander. Sticking up a man for me, an' not even taking any of the loot. Reckon you'd do anything I asked you, wouldn't you, Tom?"

"Some day," Tom promised, "I'll kill you."

Wolfe chuckled, and stretched beside the fire. Tom leaned back against the rock. He watched the fire dwindle to a puddle of embers, fade and flicker and finally vanish. The lonely arroyo brooded; darkness, an utter stillness, pressed down;

only once, from some distant pinnacle, a coyote lifted its mournful cry.

A GOLD train from Mexico had once been ambushed in Skeleton Canyon. Twenty men had been killed in less than five minutes. Some of the skulls were still to be found, half buried, with sprigs of green, or even a pale flower, sprouting from the empty eye sockets and grinning jaws.

A flashing stream murmured and tinkled between the towering cliffs, muted voices ran whispering up the granite walls. Some said the whimpering voices were only the echoing waters; some said that unseen ghosts still wandered here, still seeking the door of life that had closed so suddenly behind them.

Death had walked here before, and again to-day it would walk. Death sat in Skeleton Canyon, tossing the dice of destiny.

In the blistering pour of sunlight the canyon dreamed; blue tendrils of heat crawled over gigantic boulders; the frowning walls edged closer together until, at the head of the gorge, following the weeping stream, winding through massive rocks and thorny tangles of chaparral, the trail became scarcely wide enough for two horsemen to ride abreast.

It was here, in this tortuous defile, that Tom Wander and Jarvis Wolfe waited. They crouched behind a jagged rock. Wolfe had unbound Tom, returned his gun. Squatting just behind the cowboy, he held a ready rifle. They could both hear, far ahead, an advancing clink of hoofs.

Wolfe spoke in a low voice. "Here they come," he warned. "Remember now, if anything happens to me, the jig's up for Billy Wander. I'll have you covered every second.



Slip up, an' I drop you first. Then the other two."

Tom didn't answer. He was finally resolved to go through with this play exactly as Wolfe had ordered. Any failure on his part, he knew, meant prison for Billy, perhaps even the life of John or Linda Aron. At every turn, he was being forced into doing the exact opposite to that which he desired; last night, caring for Linda as he did, deliberately to wound and insult her; to-day, in her presence, as deliberately to hold up her father. He sensed again that strange inevitability, that inscrutable stream of events, which swept him helplessly on until, now, it was no longer possible to turn back.

He listened to the advancing hoofs. He listened to their steady clinking as a condemned man might listen to a ticking clock. Then abruptly the two riders came into view, swinging around a projection of rock. Forking a massive bay, old John slouched lazily in the saddle, his curly beard against his huge chest. Slim and straight, the girl rode beside him, astride a nervous palomino. She had removed her sombrero, and tangling in her yellow hair, the sunlight made a golden flame. They came on, advancing to within twenty feet of the unseen ambush.

Wolfe prodded Tom with the barrel of his rifle.

"All right," he said. "Get out there!"

Tom came to his feet. Stepping quickly into the trail, he whipped up his gun.

"Hold it!" he ordered. "Lift 'em way up. Both of you!"

John Aron and his daughter reined up suddenly. They stared in amazement at Tom Wander, stand-

ing there in the middle of the trail, his gun a leveled menace.

Then Aron's hands rose slowly, shoulder-high. His eyes became angry pin points.

"Wander," he asked, "are you trying to be funny, or jus' drunk?"

"I want the money in your saddlebags," Tom said.

Linda caught her breath. She said, "*Oh-h-h*," and pressed one hand to her throat.

Tom ignored her. "Aron," he insisted, "let's have the money. I mean it."

The old rancher's gaze turned contemptuous, suddenly bitter.

"Wander," he said, "I took you in as a drifter, treated you like a man. That's the crazy part of it—I treated you like a man."

"Last night," Linda said, "you kissed me." Her face flamed scarlet.

"Don't take all day," Tom said. "Hand me the money."

The weathered cattleman shifted slightly; his leathery face went curiously hard. Then slowly his left hand descended, into his saddlebag. And it came up like a flash, but not with the money. It held a crashing gun.

In that second Tom could have saved himself. He could have shot Linda Aron's father. Instead he tried to leap violently aside, and even as he leaped, he felt something, something like a swung ax, smash against his head. Blood filled his eyes. The ground flew up and struck his face. He sensed that he was whirling over, yet at the same time it seemed he was motionless. It was the chaparral, the canyon, Linda and her father, that were spinning around him. Then, for one brief instant, clear-cut as a carved picture, he looked straight at Jarvis Wolfe.

Wolfe was springing erect, his rifle



leveling at John Aron. Tom knew that Linda's father was about to die. At that instant, uncontrolled, it seemed, his own body swayed to its knees. He felt his gun jerk up his hand, toward Wolfe, felt it steady. He felt it throb, crash, spew a pale shutting flame. Wolfe flung both arms above his head. The rifle whirled through the air, flashing in the sunlight. Tom heard Wolfe's scream, faintly, as though he were miles away. Then he saw him sway, double in the middle, topple forward. He went down slowly, his arms flapping, like a disintegrating scarecrow.

Linda's voice came sharply. "Tom! Tom!" Then it faded; it was a far-away whisper. She and her father were out of their saddles, running toward him. But a black curtain descended between them. He stood on the edge of a giddy precipice, an inky maelstrom roaring far below. He plunged off the precipice, breathlessly downward—down into that soft and utter blackness.

**E**ARLY that evening Tom came up from the darkness. He was on a cot in the big living room of John Aron's old adobe. A fire burned on the hearth; an oil lamp glowed on the table. Linda had brought him a drink, placed cool hands on his head. They had talked a little. Now she sat at the table, watching him with tired eyes. He felt limp, infinitely weary. Even to try to raise an arm was like lifting an enormous weight.

Presently a door opened, and John Aron came into the room. He stood above Tom, scowling.

"Well," he growled, "how do you feel? Able to talk?"

"I can talk," Tom said.

Aron's voice was gruff. "The

sheriff was jus' here, Wander. Says he was tipped off to find you here, an' that you're under arrect. You an' your brother, he claims, stuck up a stage down in Pima County three months past."

"It's been coming," Tom answered. "Is he taking me now?"

"Told him you couldn't be moved for a couple of days," Aron grumbled. "He left you in my charge."

"What else did he say?"

"That they'd arrested your brother." Aron was silent an instant, pawing at his curly beard. "Something queer about this whole business," he muttered. "You shot that fellow this morning, an' I reckon saved my life. But at the same time you was trying to stick me up. It don't jibe. Understand, I ain't got much sympathy for a hombre like you. But if you want to talk—why, go ahead."

"You might as well know," Tom said. "Billy Wander is my kid brother. I raised him. He's young, kind of wild. But inside he's all right. We had a ranch down in Pima County. Billy started drifting around with this Jarvis Wolfe. About three months ago Wolfe got him drunk an' talked him into holding up a stage. They got away with about two thousand, but Billy was wounded. Wolfe brought him back to the ranch, an' while I was working on Billy, Wolfe skipped out with the gold. A posse trailed 'em to my place, an' Billy an' me had to shoot our way out. We winged a couple, but I found out later none of 'em died. Well, they recognized me an' Billy, an' as only two men held up the stage, they figured we were the two. Wolfe had gone clean with the gold. Ever since, me an' Billy have been on the dodge, a five-hundred-dollar reward on our heads."



Aron combed his beard with gnarled fingers.

"Yeah. But what about holding me up this morning?" he asked.

"Wolfe had me an' Billy spotted," Tom answered. "Last night he jumped me. Said either to hold you up, or he has the kid turned in. Given a chance, I figured the kid would go straight, but if he got sent up now, he was ruined for good. I decided I'd rather take forty-five hundred from you than send up Billy."

"But when it came to seeing me killed," Aron added, "you didn't have the nerve?"

"I reckon not."

Aron shook his head musingly. "Maybe the cards were stacked against you."

"Seems like," Tom agreed. "An' still are. I'm due to go up for five or ten years."

"An' it'll serve you right," Aron decided. "I told you I didn't have much sympathy for a hombre like you. Even if you did save my life." He turned, muttering to himself, and stalked from the room.

There was a moment's silence. Then Linda stood up, and walked to the bed.

"Tom," she said, "my questions haven't anything to do with hold-ups."

"No, Tom. I want to know why you told me you were a drifter? That you were seeing the world, and afraid to be hitched?"

"I figured you ought to know."

"But it wasn't the truth, Tom."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I'm a woman, Tom, and you're the man I love. You tried to insult me, hurt me. Because you wanted to save me from suffering. Because men were hounding you, and you were afraid you'd go to

prison—disgrace me. Didn't you know me better than that, Tom?"

"Maybe that was why I did it, Linda. Because I did know you."

She pressed his hand.

"Tom," she said, "you'll be strong enough by morning. We can take a couple of horses, start early. We'll be a long ways before the sheriff finds out."

He smiled. "I was right, Linda. There never was a girl as fine as you, an' there'll never be another."

"Then you'll go?"

He shook his head, winced a little with the pain. "On every card I've played, Linda, I've lost. I made your father hate me. I didn't help either Billy or myself. There ain't a chance that I can marry you, and yet I'm making you miserable."

"But we can go away together, Tom."

"No, Linda. We'd always be on the dodge. Our necks would be stiff, child, jus' watching behind. I'm giving myself up to the sheriff."

"And going to prison for something you didn't do?"

"It's in the cards, honey."

"Then I'll wait, Tom."

"Too long, Linda. Five years, maybe ten."

"Tom," she said, "I'd wait a hundred years."

"I can't let you."

"You can't stop me." She turned and walked to the door, looked back and smiled. "Try and get a little sleep, Tom. I'll be in the next room if you want me. I'll always be in the next room if you want me." The door closed softly.

**N**OON that next day Tom Wander leaned against the corral, his head bandaged, his face a little pale. Linda led up his saddle pony.



Her eyes were weary. "Tom," she asked, "isn't there anything I can say that will make you change your mind?"

He shook his head. "I'm going in to the sheriff, Linda. I don't want to. But it's something that's got to be done."

They both heard jogging hoofs, and turned together.

"Here comes dad," Linda said. "He's been gone all night."

"Your father figures I'm no good," Tom stated.

"What dad says," Linda replied, "has nothing to do with what he thinks."

John Aron rode into the ranch yard. He swung stiffly to ground, and walked over to them, glaring at Tom.

"Now where d'you think you're going? Figure on holding up some more of your friends?"

"I'm going to the sheriff's office."

"I never seen a fellow like you," Aron growled. "Can't tell from one minute to the next what you're up to! It's too late to go to the sheriff!"

"Too late?"

"That's what I said!" snapped Aron. "Ain't I been riding around all night, sending telegrams, an' signing my name, an' jus' about talking my fool head off? That sheriff don't want you any more."

Linda stepped forward.

"But, dad——"

"Don't *but* me," Aron said. "I had a good hunch that stage company cared more for the two thousand this Wolfe got away with, than sending a couple other hombres to prison. So I sent 'em a telegram, offering them two thousand if they'd drop the charges against this young idiot an' his brother. They jumped at the chance."

Aron scowled at them fiercely. For a long instant, they were all three silent. Then Tom spoke swiftly.

"John Aron," he said, "now I know why Linda is the kind of girl she is, having you for a father."

The old rancher snorted. "Listen," he grumbled, "I already told you, I ain't got no sympathy for a hombre like you. But you saved my life, an' *that's* something. It jus' happens that I value this old carcass of mine a heap more than two thousand dollars."

Linda laughed suddenly. "That wasn't the real reason, dad."

John Aron looked embarrassed.

"Dad," Linda said, "I've never wanted anything in my life, but what you've tried to get it for me."

"Don't talk that way, Linda," Aron growled. "It ain't proper." He turned and stalked off.

They stood looking at each other, then, a tall cowboy with broad shoulders and a bandaged head, a slim girl with yellow hair.

"Tom," Linda said, "sometimes we win even when the cards are stacked."

He nodded. "Maybe it's only in the way you play 'em, Linda. Play 'em as straight as you can, an' maybe you win even when you seem to lose."

She smiled. "Remember night before last, Tom?"

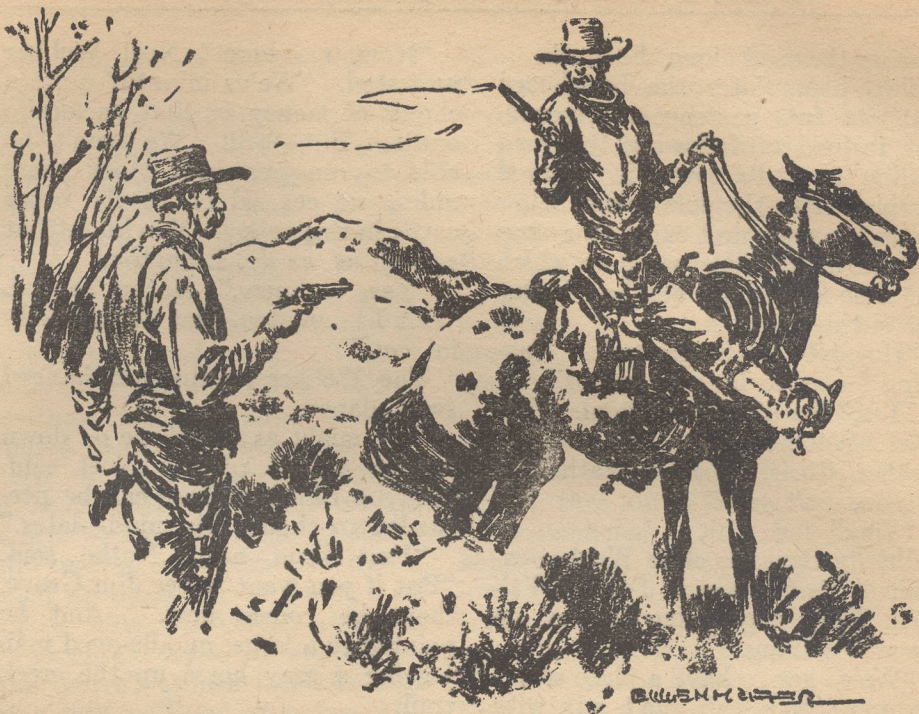
"I remember."

"Well?"

He grinned suddenly. "You're right, Linda. I'm no drifter. I don't give a hoot about seeing the world. All I aim to do, once I can get her to ride to town with me, is to get myself hitched to a girl."

"Fine," Linda agreed. "If you'll wait just one minute, I'll get my horse."





# TWO-LEGGED WOLF

By CLIFF WALTERS

Author of "Hurried Hoofs," etc.

**W**HEN Noel and Chris Webber, owners of the Webber Land & Cattle Co., decided that, as a separate enterprise, they would start raising a herd of pure-bred white-face cattle, their thoughts naturally turned to Feather Valley, that fertile strip of grassy range land cradled between the high and barren heights of Camelback and Monument ridges. For here was a spot blessed by nature with the pure, clear waters of Feather Creek; abundant feed; and

sheltered from the blizzards of winter by virtue of its position.

Thus it was that one bright June day old Nathe Ellington, the first settler in Feather Valley, saw a yellow-wheeled buckboard, drawn by a sprightly team of bays, whisking past his little ranch. Nathe removed his limp hat, squinted his amiable, blue eyes; massaged his sparse, sand-colored hair, and mused:

"Strangers. Huh! Purty foxy-lookin' outfit." And, mildly curious, he watched the shiny vehicle disap-



pear up the road along the creek.

Two hours later the buckboard with its two passengers returned. But instead of following the road leading back to town, it swerved sharply across the pole bridge below Nathe's corrals and came to a stop in front of the little porch on which the first settler of Feather Valley was sitting.

"Howdy!" Nathe greeted. "Anything I can do for you gents?"

"Yes," the driver answered. "I'm Noel Webber—and this is my brother Chris. You're Nathe Ellington, ain't you?"

"Yep."

Briefly then the elder Webber explained his business in Feather Valley. They were going to buy up the whole thing.

"We've got to have a place where our pure-bred stuff can't mix with ordinary range cattle," he explained. "And this is the spot. Now, Mr. Ellington, we've already made arrangements to buy the Jackknife outfit, up above here. That's the biggest place, and leaves just you three little fellers—you, Jim Grove, and Alex Kinkaid. Uh—what's the least you'll take for this place? And we'll take your cattle in at market prices."

"Well, I—I guess you'd better figger on skippin' this place," Nathe answered. "You see, I've lived here ever since——"

"What's the difference how long you've lived here?" Chris Webber put in tersely. "If you get your price, sell out!"

"There ain't no price on this place," Nathe answered calmly but firmly. "And it does make a difference how long I've lived here. This old house here may not look like much to you, with its mud chinkin' between the logs, but it's home to me—and it always will be."

"Now, see here!" Noel Webber protested. "We've investin' quite a chunk of money in that Jackknife outfit. But—hell! We won't be able to run pure-bred stock there unless we get rid of all the other cattle in this valley. You know that as well as we do, Ellington."

"Yes, I know," Nathe replied. "But I know, too, that I'm not sellin' out."

The Webber brothers exchanged swift glances.

"We might as well drive on down to the Grove place," Noel said. "Maybe Ellington here can be persuaded to change his mind—later."

"I'm afraid not," Nathe said. "But if you want to see Jim Grove, there he comes now." And he pointed to a large, middle-aged man jogging a gray horse up the creek trail.

As the newcomer brought his gray to a stop beside Nathe's porch, the Webber brothers once more introduced themselves and explained their mission in Feather Valley.

"Nope," big Jim Grove said bluntly. "I guess you fellers got the cart ahead of the horse this time by cinchin' a deal for the Jackknife outfit. I feel the same way as Nathe does. There's no better place to live than Feather Valley—and I'm stayin'!"

"Maybe you're stayin'!" Chris Webber remarked, employing a sinister tone of voice.

"No maybes about it," Jim Grove answered promptly. "I *am* stayin'. But there's no reason for you fellers to get all red around the gills about it. You're tryin' to make Nathe and me an offer for our places, and we're not interested. That's all there is to it. And if you're expectin' us to sprout wings and fly outta this valley just 'cause you've picked on it for a range to raise pure-breds,



you're bein' kinda unreasonable, I figger."

There was no reply to Jim Grove's statement. The Webber brothers again exchanged quick glances. Then Noel, who was driving, tightened the lines, lashed the off horse with the whip, and away they went, headed down the creek.

"Huh!" Nathe grunted, watching the departing buckboard. "I don't exactly like the way Chris Webber said that 'Maybe you're stayin'.' Sounded to me like there was a lot of grit mixed up in that remark. But, never mind, Jim. Here we are and here we'll stay. Turn old Spider in the corral, and come on in. I slipped up on a pair of young sage chickens this afternoon, and I'll soon have 'em fryin' for supper."

Jim Grove's tanned face wrinkled into a grin. "Fried sage hen, eh? Well, don't coax me no more, Nathe. I'm practically settin' across the supper table from you right now."

**J**UST a week later, Nathe and his neighbor, Jim Grove, were to learn the significance of Chris Webber's assertion; for the Webber Land & Cattle Co. sent one "Blaze" Gorrell into Feather Valley to run their recently acquired Jackknife outfit. Gorrell's unsavory reputation preceded him into this grassy valley where, heretofore, peace and neighborly friendship had reigned. All over northern Wyoming he was known as a killer whose quick, unerring six-gun had been responsible for the death of eight men, and the nickname, Blaze.

"So that's their game, is it?" Jim Grove said to Nathe when the news reached them. "Huh! I guess we'd better get the old guns out and oil 'em up!"

"Hold on, Jim," the calmer Nathe demurred. "That's just the very

thing the Webber brothers—and Blaze Gorrell—want us to do. But tryin' to draw against that killer, and settle your differences with hot lead, ain't only a losin' game. It's suicide. The best thing we can do is keep our heads. Keep away from Blaze Gorrell, and differences, too."

"I guess you're right," the other answered, turning his gray toward home. "See you later, Nathe. So long."

"So long, Jim!" Nathe called.

But the latter shook his head as his caller rode away. Too bad, he mused, that Jim was inclined to be quick-tempered. Not that Nathe had ever seen much evidence of his loyal neighbor's ire. Only once. And that was when a young "front-door" cow-puncher had unnecessarily roweled one of Jim Grove's top horses too deeply with a pair of vicious spurs.

The little, weather-wizened old cattleman was still shaking his head moodily when he walked into his cabin.

"Things look kinda bad, Lobo," he said aloud, reflectively stroking the bristly, gray hide of a mounted wolf that, for ten years, had stood in a corner of the room. "Another wolf's trailed into the valley. A two-legged one named Blaze Gorrell. And I'm afraid he's goin' to raise as much hell with folks as you did with my calves, 'fore I finally put that .30-40 bullet through your hide."

But Lobo, standing in his lifelike posture on the piece of plank to which his feet were fastened, was impassive to his owner's direful prophecies. Words fell dead on the ears that a skillful taxidermist had pointed at exactly the right angle.

That same day Nathe Ellington had another visitor. A tall, raw-boned man, mounted on a pinto



horse bearing the Jackknife brand, came riding up to the corral where Nathe was repairing a pack saddle.

Without the customary "Howdy," the rider asked, and in a voice that was toneless:

"You Nathe Ellington?"

"Yep," the cattleman answered, meeting the narrowed, emotionless grayish-green eyes that were appraising him.

"I'm Blaze Gorrell," the visitor said. Then, with a glacial, distorted smile hovering about his thin lips, he went on, "Maybe you've heard of me?"

"Yeh," Nathe replied. "I've heard quite a bit about you, Mr. Gorrell. But I hope all that I've heard ain't been true."

"It's true enough," the other retorted, apparently glorying in his reputation as a killer. He even twisted a little in his saddle so his listener could better see the notches in the handle of his .45. "I thought maybe you'd changed your mind about sellin' out to Webbers. I've got a hunch," he added significantly, "that some other range'd be about as healthy as Feather Valley fer an old gent like you, Ellington."

Old Nathe's eyes were unwavering as he answered: "Maybe so, Gorrell. But since you've took the trouble to stop in here, we might as well understand each other right from the jump. I know why the Webbers sent you over here to run the Jackknife. They thought that you, bein' what you are, could do what they couldn't, or wouldn't dare to. But get this straight, and pass the word along to them, that Nathe Ellington can be killed—but he can't be bluffed."

"So you're gittin' hostile, are you?" the gunman countered.

"Nope," Nathe denied. "Trouble's the last thing I'm lookin' for,

Gorrell. There's no notches in my gun, and there never will be."

"Afraid to fight?" The other sneered.

But Nathe remained cool. He saw the challenge in those narrowed eyes—and ignored it, refusing to step into the alert Gorrell's trap by letting his anger flare.

"I still think you'll change your mind one of these days," the visitor opined, reining his pinto about. "In the meantime, I'm ridin' on down to see Grove and Kinkaid. Maybe they'll be a little smarter, and not quite so foolish!"

As Gorrell rode on down the creek trail, a snooping coyote appeared on the crest of the little knoll across the stream. Hardly had Nathe glimpsed the animal when he saw Gorrell whirl his horse, sweep his six-shooter from its holster with uncanny speed, and fire. Three shots, fired in lightninglike succession, belched from Blaze Gorrell's gun. And, though it was a long shot, Nathe could see the bullet-punctured coyote leap high into the air and drop dead.

It was while Nathe was standing there, staring wide-eyed at this exhibition of marksmanship, that Blaze Gorrell, still not very far from the corral, turned in his saddle. And again that twisted smile was on the killer's face; a cold, inexorable smile that carried a chill—and a threat.

"Huh!" Nathe said to himself, turning once more to the pack saddle. "Mr. Gorrell can sure shoot straight, fast, and wicked. But still my fingers ain't shakin' like that hombre thinks maybe they are. I—I'm kinda glad Jim Grove went on to town this afternoon, though, and that Gorrell won't find him to home."

Later that evening, Blaze Gorrell stopped in at Nathe's place again.



And a triumphant light gleamed in the gunman's grayish-green eyes as he told Nathe that Alex Kinkaid, the "lantern-jawed gent down the crick," had decided to sell out to the Webbers.

**T**HIS left only Nathe and Jim Grove standing in the way of the Webber brothers. But though old Nathe cautioned his neighbor repeatedly against "tan-glin'" with Blaze Gorrell, the shadow of tragedy swept over Feather Valley.

One afternoon when Nathe, after making a circle through the hills where grazed his cattle, rode into the Grove place, he found the owner lying beside his cabin, a gun still clutched in his hand.

"Jim!" With a low cry, old Nathe jumped off his horse, rushed forward and bent over his friend.

A hasty examination proved, however, that Jim Grove, though badly wounded, was not dead. So Nathe, moving faster than he had moved in many a day, caught and harnessed his neighbor's team of black horses; hitched them to the buckboard in record time, and, loading the injured man into the dish-wheeled vehicle, headed for town.

An hour later Nathe was pulling the sweating pair of blacks to a halt in front of old Doctor Frasier's log dwelling at the edge of Sageville.

"Is he bad hurt, doc?" Nathe asked, after helping the elderly physician move the patient from the buckboard into the house.

"Bad hurt!" the other exclaimed. "If I could've got to him right after it happened— Still, I'll give him one chance in a hundred. Say, who the devil's responsible for this, Nathe? Better go over and see Sheriff Purdy. You can't do any good here."

WS-6C

Nathe followed this advice. But when he reached the sheriff's one-room log office, he saw a pinto horse tied to the hitch rack in front. A moment later Nathe was inside, and confronting Blaze Gorrell, who, calmly puffing on a cigarette, was sitting on a corner of the sheriff's desk.

"Howdy, Nathe," Purdy greeted. "Blaze here tells me there's been a little trouble out your way. That him and Jim Grove got into a gun battle—with Jim losin'."

"Do you call it a 'little' trouble when a white man like Jim Grove's shot down—the same as in cold blood—by a murderin' skunk like—him?" Nathe pointed an accusing finger at the stolid Gorrell.

"Hold on now, Nathe," Purdy cautioned, nervously toying with the ends of his drooping mustache. "Blaze here's got a witness that Grove went for his gun first. Lefty Dorn was——"

"Lefty Dorn!" the irate Nathe snorted. "That sneakin' half-breed couldn't tell the truth, even if he tried sometime. Maybe Gorrell slipped him ten dollars for swearin' to a lie. And maybe he's slipped you a few dollars, or else Webbers did, to buy *you* off! I want this man arrested"—again he indicated Gorrell—"for the shootin' of——"

"Huh!" Purdy grunted. "Don't think you're goin' to git no favors outta me! Not when you come bustin' in here tellin' me that I've been bought off. I ain't arrestin' Blaze."

"Then it's either because you're afraid to, or else he *has* bought you off."

A deep flush crept under the sallow skin of Purdy's bony face.

"If you don't git outta here—and keep your mouth shut—I'll arrest you, Nathe Ellington. And another



thing. 'Fore you call Blaze Gorrell a 'murderin' skunk,' you'd better see how your own gun's workin'. Now—git out!"

Raging inwardly, old Nathe left the place. He went back to Doctor Frasier's home, stayed there for an hour beside his friend, Jim Grove, and then walked up to the post office.

On the way he met two or three friends. And each of them gave him the same advice—to leave town. They told him that Blaze Gorrell was over in the Horseshoe Saloon; that the gunman was drinking hard liquor and making threats against the man who had dared to call him a "murderin' skunk."

Phil Borden, the fourth man to warn Nathe, said:

"You'd better high-tail it, Nathe—pronto. After this evenin', there ain't a man in Sageville that'd give a plugged dollar for your life. That is, not if you stay in Feather Valley. Get out while the gettin's good! Oh, not that we don't hate to see you go. But you ain't got a Chinaman's chance. Not with Blaze Gorrell over there in the Horseshoe, drinkin' with our would-be sheriff!"

"I'll leave town," Nathe answered. "I always do when I get ready to go home. But I aint' leavin' Feather Valley, Phil. I told Gorrell that I could be killed, but not bluffed. Maybe I'm an old fool. Still, that's the way she stands." And Nathe Ellington, thought by the citizens of Sageville not to have a Chinaman's chance, walked slowly toward the black team tied in front of Doctor Frasier's place.

AT daylight the following morning, old Nathe was standing in a clump of willows beside the trail that followed the bank of Feather Creek. At noon he was still

there, sitting down now, with his .45 resting on his lap.

At last there came to his attentive ears the sound of jogging hoofs clapping along the trail, and, peering through the willows, he saw Blaze Gorrell riding his pinto. Watching alertly, Nathe saw the pinto come to a halt not far from the clump of willows in which he was hidden. Then a sudden joy surged over him as he saw Gorrell sweep his gun from its holster and begin firing toward the same knoll on which he had killed a coyote only a few days ago.

But it wasn't until the cylinder of Blaze's gun was empty, and the hammer clicking futilely on the chambers, that old Nathe, holding his own weapon ready for action, stepped out of his hiding place.

"Reach for the clouds, Gorrell!"

The killer whirled in his saddle, stared, terror-stricken, into the muzzle of Nathe's gun and growled:

"So you're ambushin' me, are you, Ellington?"

"Nope," the old cattleman denied calmly. "If I tried ambushin', I have to kill you, Gorrell. Not that you don't deserve it, but, as I told you before, I don't want any notches on my gun. Besides, I want to get the truth outta you first—if you do get rash and *make* me kill you! Now, 'fore you try to sneak some cartridges into your gun, crawl off your horse and lay down on your stomach. Hurry up!"

Gorrell obeyed, having no alternative—except death.

Two hours later Blaze Gorrell was lying, hog tied and helpless, in the bed of the buckboard that old Nathe was driving up in front of Doctor Frasier's place in Sageville.

"How's Jim, doc?" called Nathe as the old physician came out of the house.



"By gosh, he's goin' to make it!" the other replied. "He's able to talk now. Come on in and— Say, who's that you've got there?"

"A murderin' skunk by the name of Blaze Gorrell," Nathe replied, smiling. "He's plumb anxious to make some confessions. That's why I'd like to round up a few witnesses, doc. Do you s'pose you could go out and snare a few—and without Sheriff Purdy knowin' it?"

"You're darn right I could, Nathe!" Doctor Frasier grinned. "I thought, from what rumors I heard around town last night, that you'd be a corpse the next time I saw you. But you can explain later. I'll be back in a minute with some witnesses."

True to his promise, Doctor Frasier returned in a short time with three of the men who had warned Nathe last night about Gorrell's threats. Then the group, including Jim Grove, whose weakness hadn't prevented his wringing the hand of his friend, Nathe, listened to Blaze Gorrell's story; heard how he had been hired by the Webber brothers to get possession of Feather Valley

with "an extry five hundred" for every man he had to kill in the accomplishment of his undertaking. The gunman also admitted that he himself had bribed Sheriff Purdy because of orders from his employers.

"Good!" Doctor Frasier yelled. "Now we can clean up the whole mess of 'em, Purdy included!"

"There's one thing I'd like to ask, now that you're through frin' questions at me," Gorrell said to Nathe. "I want to know if somebody, somehow, tampered with my gun last night while I was in town?"

"Why?" Nathe asked, winking at Jim Grove.

"'Cause," Gorrell went on, "I emptied my gun to-day at a wolf standin' on that little knoll where I plugged that coyote the other day. Hell! A wolf's bigger'n a coyote—and I didn't even make him budge!"

"That," said Nathe, winking again at Jim Grove, "was one of those wolves that don't budge, no matter how straight you can shoot. It was old Lobo, a wolf that's been dead for ten years—and which I planted up on that knoll so's you'd empty your gun at him."

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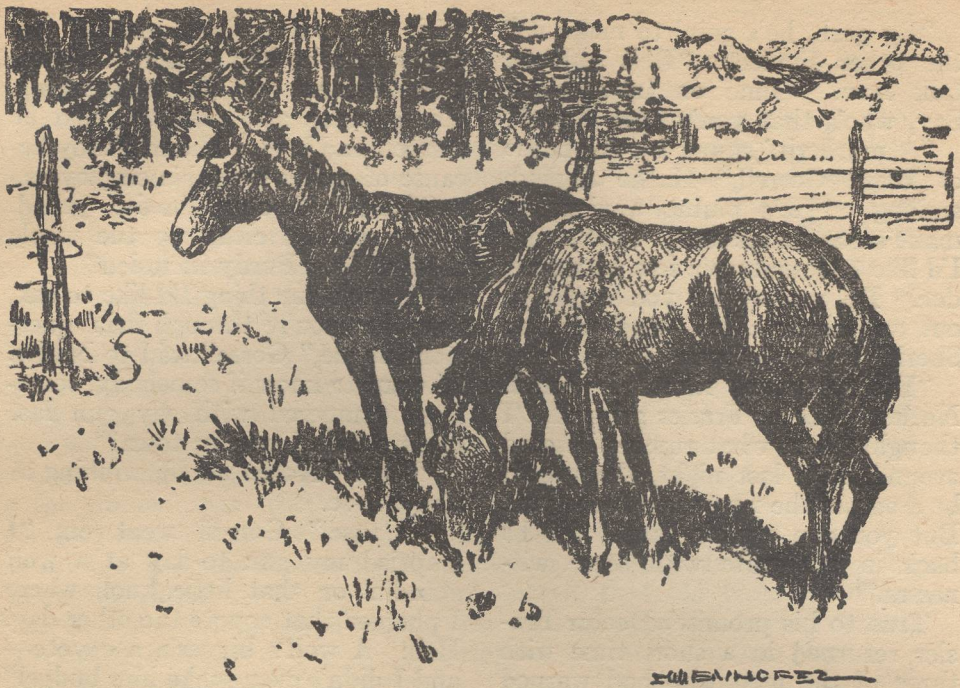
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# THE TRACKING HORSE

By GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

Author of "Timber-line Bronc," etc.

**T**HERE were three of us now in Tom Bartlett's little horse pasture—Quicksilver, the beautiful sorrel with silver mane and tail; Red Dynamite, the bay gelding, that Tom's wife, Ginny, had roped and rode home after the wild horse had escaped from the buyers for the rodeo; and myself, named Dan.

We are as different in disposition as we are in color. I am more proud of Ginny's love for me than I am of

my black coat, which shines when "Shorty" brushes it, like the silver conchas on a new bridle. Quicksilver cares more for his reputation as the wisest cow horse on the Slash B, than he does for his beautiful mane; while Dynamite thinks most of his skill in tracking bands of stolen range horses through the desert country to the south and finding trails that no one else knows anything about.

We horses had come to fear the name of "Black" Juarez from hear-



ing the cowboys talk about him and the men who ride with him. Not that we can talk man-talk, although we do know the meaning of many words and can even put some of them together, but whenever Tom, Shorty, or "Slim" speak the name of Black Juarez, there's a note in their voices which we understand just as well as we do the whinny of a frightened colt, or the warning squeal of a wild stallion.

We came to associate that name with dread of a long, heart-breaking grind into the bad lands to the south, where men live who steal horses and sell them across the border. Not that we are often called upon to make the trip, because Tom Bartlett is the best stockman on the Rio Grande and he keeps riders on the range all the time, guarding his property against raids. Besides that, he has two big yellow dogs, Juno and Bounce, that are turned loose at night to range wherever they please, and when those dogs are trotting along the fences, sticking their noses into every little hole that looks like a track, I feel as safe as I do when Ginny is on my back and I am jogging over the summer range—that is, so far as horse thieves are concerned.

I don't like these dogs though, not even a little bit. They are great, fierce-looking beasts with cruel eyes that blaze like fireballs at night. They wear broad collars studded with long, sharp spikes, and whenever we go near the house where they live, down by the stables, they growl at us, which we understand means for us to keep away. One day Juno snapped her teeth at my nose, and Ginny drove her off with a quirt. There's no doubt at all that they are watchdogs, and not even Juarez with all the cunning of his

half-breed gang would dare to come near our pasture when the dogs are loose.

Horses that work together learn to love each other the same as people do who are friendly. Quicksilver, Dynamite, and I became like blood brothers. If one of us was taken out of the pasture alone, the other two would stand with heads over the bars squealing and making a big fuss until he came back. At night we all slept under the same tree over by the back fence, a quarter of a mile from the house.

ONE lazy summer day, Dynamite and I were cropping the sweet grasses at the back side of the pasture near a spruce forest, when we noticed that the fence wires had been cut and that there was nothing to prevent us from taking a strole among the spruce, something we had always wanted to do. Quicksilver had not been turned out with us that day; if he had been, he would probably have warned us that there was something queer about the wires having been cut at a place that was out of sight of the ranch buildings. But neither Dynamite nor I thought of any danger and we walked off into the woods, biting at the lichens on the rocks and thoroughly enjoying the change of food to be found among the trees. Not only that, we found lumps of sugar on the rocks and could smell more farther on under the shadows of the trees.

Sugar is something that a range horse knows nothing about, but Ginny had taught us to eat it, and we were like Shorty and Slim are about that dark bottle they keep hidden in the grain room—there was nothing we wouldn't dare for a taste of sugar. We pushed each other aside, laid our ears back and acted



cranky whenever one found a piece that the other had overlooked.

We kept on through the woods until we came to a corral made of poles and covered with brush. Neither of us had ever seen this place before and at first we were suspicious. We snorted a bit and stood around, wondering how it came to be there. Once I turned around and started back, but just then Dynamite smelled a pile of sugar that had been put on a clean rock in the middle of the corral, and he walked straight through the opening and began to eat it. The sound of his lips smacking over the sugar was too much for me, and I followed him. A moment later, two dark-faced men, who had been hiding back in the woods, slipped bars into place behind us, and we were trapped.

This was my first experience with the men of Black Juarez's outfit, and I was scared stiff. I stood still trying to figure out what would happen next, but Dynamite didn't wait to find out what they intended to do; he charged the man who had stepped inside the bars and drove him over the fence. Then, after running around the corral to get up speed, Dynamite took off with a tremendous jump and leaped the bars. Away he went squealing and thundering over the turf on his way back to the ranch, doing his best to tell the world that there was trouble brewing.

Too late I tried to follow him. One of the men had gotten on his horse and was waiting by the bars just as I sailed over. He passed a loop around my neck, and I was captured!

"Don't wait, Tarball," yelled the man who had roped me; "that red devil will stir up the whole Slash B. Get on your horse quick. We've got one of 'em anyway; let's go."

IT was no use for me to pull back; the rope around my neck was new and stout, and the man had the other end wrapped around the horn of his saddle. Tarball rode behind quiring me to make me keep up. I had to go whether I wanted to or not. They rode straight to the creek which winds down the valley below the Slash B and kept in the water for half a mile. Where they came out, the ground was covered with rocks, and they followed a ridge back into the broken country.

About sundown we came to a camp, and there I saw for the first time the man whose name I had learned to fear—Black Juarez, the horse thief and renegade. He came out to look me over.

"Worth two hundred pesos across the line," he told Tarball. "I'd like to have got all three of Bartlett's pets, just to show him he can't stop me when I once start after anything. But as we're ready to start south tonight, we can't bother with 'em any more this trip. Perhaps next time we can get the other two. Did you leave any trail that those dogs could follow?"

Tarball laughed. "Not a sign," he told Juarez. "We took to the water and washed out our tracks to the rock ridge, then we followed that to the high mesa and kept above the rim all the way. We didn't leave either mark or scent for Bartlett to find, except right at the old corral."

The sun was down now, and in a few minutes darkness would settle over the bad lands. A bright star shone off to the west, almost directly over the place where I knew the Slash B was situated. My heart throbbed as I thought that about this time in the evening Quicksilver and Dynamite would be standing by the stable door waiting for their sup-



pers of clean, white upland oats. I could almost hear the little bell on old Brindle, the milk cow, that Wan Lee would be driving up from the willow patch below the house, to the corral behind the stable where her calf would be calling for his supper.

I was so homesick that I could hardly stand it. I had already tried the rope and found out that I couldn't break it, but I set back again and pulled until I nearly choked, trying to get loose.

The horse thieves had finished eating and were lying about the camp smoking when I heard the leaves rustle on the ground behind the tree to which I was tied. A moment later I caught a delicious whiff of the scent of my mistress's clean little body, so different from the smell of the men who had stolen me. A low whinny, hardly more than a whisper, gurgled in my throat.

"Shut up, Dan," Ginny ordered, "or you will have that whole pack on top of us." She was trying to untie the rope while standing out of sight, right behind the tree.

**J**UAREZ must have heard that slight sound. He was lying by the camp fire, but he acted as nervous as I feel when I know there is something exciting going to happen. He stood up.

"What was that noise?" he asked.

Tarball motioned down toward the herd.

"The horses are uneasy," he told Juarez. "We should have started them before this; they are gettin' hard to hold."

"All right then," Juarez ordered, "get ready to hit the trail south. I'm going to ride Bartlett's pet black."

I was getting so nervous I couldn't stand still. Ginny was having trouble to untie the knot. When I

had set back on the rope, I had pulled the knot so tight she could not loosen it. If only I had been patient and not tried to get away, she could have saved me. I could feel her little fingers twisting and straining, and her breath come in short, trembling, jerky sobs as she worked at the rope, but the knot wouldn't come loose.

Juarez was walking toward me now carrying a bridle. It was a race to see whether or not Ginny could get me untied before Juarez should come. I knew I should do something to help, but I didn't know what. I stamped my hind foot threateningly and snorted like an unbroken broncho. Juarez turned to Tarball.

"Are you sure that this is the black that Bartlett's wife rides?" he asked. "He acts like that killer-horse, Diablo, to me."

"Sure he's the one," Tarball answered. "Take a club to him if he won't stand for you to bridle him."

By this time Juarez had circled up near my head, and my fears increased as I heard Ginny's boots thudding on the ground as she ran away to keep from being seen by the horse thief. I tried to kick Juarez and would have done it, too, if he had come up behind me, but he knew better than to give me a chance, and I wasn't mad enough yet to bite or use my front feet. I wanted to get loose, but somehow I thought that so long as Ginny couldn't untie the rope, I'd better behave until some other time. I felt lots better now that I knew Ginny was near by and planning to get me away from Juarez. I had unlimited confidence in my little mistress.

The knot had been pulled so tight that even Juarez had trouble to untie the rope, and the other riders were gone before he got his saddle



on me and started to follow them them into the *rincon*. I was wonderfully cheered when I heard the clear, brave neigh that I instantly recognized as that of my friend, Dynamite, and I shrieked an answer. This seemed to make Juarez uneasy. He reined me to a stop and turned in the saddle, listening for another call from the horse behind us. He cursed Tarball and then hurried on.

**G**INNY must have put her hands over Dynamite's nostrils quickly, because he didn't whinny again, and from then on, I was too busy to think about much of anything but keeping my feet from slipping out from under me and dodging quickly pear and cholla beds. Juarez spurred me into a run and forced me down into the *rincon* where Tarball and the others were gathering the band together.

"I thought you said you hid your trail," he stormed. "Bartlett's outfit is right on our tails now. He must have got a posse together and lit right out to follow your trail."

"But that can't be," Tarball answered. "We saw him ride away before we got the horses into the corral. There was nobody at the ranch except the girl and the chink cook, and nobody saw the horses leave the pasture. We tolled 'em off with sugar."

"You can't fool me," Juarez roared. "I heard a horse squeal, and this one answered him right off. There's no doubt about it, we've got a fight on our hands. I'll stay here and try to bluff Bartlett's outfit. Get the horses started and then three of you come back to me. We'll have to fight 'em off until we can get into the rough country and split the herd in two so's they can't tell which one to follow."

Tarball called to his men; they

circled the band and away they all went charging down the gulch. Juarez slowed down and stopped where he could watch the outline of the hill against the stars above the back trail.

I could have told him that Ginny wasn't there, for I had already heard Dynamite running along the edge of the rim rock above the gulch and I had smelled the dogs, Juno and Bounce, as they ran beside her. She was by this time well to the south of the herd, riding toward a narrow place where the rim rocks closed up so that there was only a narrow space left between them.

Juarez reined me into the shadow of a big tree and leaned far over my neck, watching the back trail. After a few minutes three men came back and stopped just behind where I stood. There was no sound but the creaking of saddle leather caused by the heavy breathing of the over-riding horses.

I had been waiting for a chance to do something to help. I knew that Ginny and Dynamite were off there somewhere to the south and I wanted to go to them. Wanted it more than I had ever wanted anything in my life before. Apparently Juarez had forgotten all about my nervousness in his anxiety to locate the men he supposed were following him. His belly rested against the saddle horn, his hands were on my neck, and the bridle reins hung slack.

I thought I saw my chance and stiffened my back muscles, arching them into a curve; the weight of the man who rode me was now balanced well over my shoulders. Suddenly I jerked my head down between my front legs, and at the same time gave a short, twisting buck, which shook Juarez loose, so that he hung over my left shoulder. The trick would have thrown an ordinary rider, but



I soon saw that this horse thief was a better rough rider than either Shorty or Slim.

Even as he slid forward, one of his big-roweled Mexican spurs hooked into the cinch and held. He swung the butt of a heavy quirt to hit me a glancing blow between the ears—that almost stunned me, but I didn't fall down, or think of giving up. I was fighting for my freedom now and I managed to whirl to the right enough to keep Juarez hanging over my shoulder, and prevent him from straightening in the saddle. He stuck like a dried burr though, and I couldn't shake him loose.

**J**UAREZ kept on striking at my head with the quirt, trying to knock me down. I had got enough slack so that I could get my head under me, and each time he missed a blow, he slid a trifle farther over my shoulder. I was bucking now as I had never bucked before in all my life—not even the time when Tom got a rope under my tail. Then I had been just plain scared; now I was fighting in the only way I knew and I was going to throw Juarez and get away, or die trying.

The ground sloped a little, and this favored me. Each time I turned to the right, I could feel Juarez's grip loosen a trifle and I put all the power I had into one high, twisting buck. Something seemed to give way, and the next thing I knew, Juarez screeched with terror as he fell from the saddle, held by the spur caught in the cinch.

Then I went plumb crazy. I plunged down the slope dragging him over the rocks, until a strand of the hair cinch broke, then I kept on across the valley and up to the top of the hill on the opposite side, running from sheer fright, until I came to the level ground above the rim.

Here I stopped and looked back down into the valley below me. Some one had lighted a pitch torch, and I could see two men carrying Juarez to where another man was holding a horse.

One of Juarez's arms dangled by his side, and one of his legs was twisted like Shorty's was the time the steers stampeded over him and he had to be taken to the hospital.

I was confused and for a moment, I didn't know which way to go. Then I caught the familiar scent of the dogs and knew that I had crossed Dynamite's trail. The one thing I wanted now, above all else, was to find some one I knew. I was trembling like an aspen leaf, and I whinnied as nervously as an old granny mare, as I bolted down along the rim rock following the scent that grew stronger every moment.

In a little while I came to a place where Dynamite had slid down a narrow cut into the valley below. I knew he was only a short distance ahead now, and I called as loud as I could. No sound I had ever heard was so sweet as the comforting squeal with which he answered from the sidehill just below. I set my front feet stiff and slid down through the loose rocks. Ginny didn't know that I was loose and she had turned in the saddle and was keeping me covered with her rifle as I came up with them. A moment later I was holding my head against Dynamite's side, and Ginny was rubbing my ears and telling me that I was the best and bravest horse on earth.

What had happened was that when Tarball had hid his trail away from the Slash B, there was one thing he had not taken into consideration, that was the instinct of a range horse. Dynamite had seen me captured and he knew I had gone down the valley, so when he went



tearing cross the pasture toward the house squealing, because he was lonely for his two pals, Ginny had gone out to see what was the matter.

Tom and the men had all left for the summer range that morning, so there was no one at the Slash B, but Ginny and old Wan Lee, the cook—just as Tarball had reported to Juarez. Ginny saddled Dynamite right off and rode out to see what had become of me. Of course she found the cut fence, the corral, and my tracks with those of two strange horses leading me away.

Some girls might have sat down and whimpered like a colt over the loss of her favorite saddle horse, but not Ginny. She spurred Dynamite back to the house, slipped a Winchester saddle gun into the scabbard, buckled on her belt, and loosed Juno and Bounce. Before my tracks were cold, she had traced them to the river and had given Dynamite a free rein. This was his big chance to show how much he knew about trails. The big red hadn't hesitated; he had carried Ginny straight down the valley to Rock Ridge, where the dogs picked up the trail and followed it to the top of the rim rock.

Ginny was too smart to ride into an outlaw camp. No sooner had she seen that the trail led south into the bad lands, than she called the dogs back and put them on the chains. She scouted the country until she had the camp located and worked around until she was close enough to see what was going on from a nearby ridge.

When she had located me by the piñon tree, she had tried to untie me but had had to give it up when Juarez came. She had run back to where she had left Dynamite and was now riding ahead, hoping to stampede the stolen horse herd back

over the men who drove them. That's why everybody loves Ginny—she never quits as long as there is any hope of finishing a job.

**A**FTER she had comforted me till I stopped shaking, Ginny changed saddles, putting her own on me, and the one from which I had dumped Juarez onto Dynamite. She slipped her own bridle on me, but tied the one I had been wearing onto the saddle on Dynamite, leaving him free to follow us, or go wherever he pleased.

I was so happy to be with my friends again that I even felt kindly toward the dogs I had always hated until now. They sat watching Ginny as she worked to change the saddles. When at last she was all ready to go, she unfastened their chains and let them run along beside me, as she rode up the valley to meet the stolen horse herd, Dynamite trotting along behind.

Before long we could hear the pounding hoofs of the herd and the voices of the men who drove it, as they talked in low tones, questioning each other as to what could have delayed Black Juarez and the men who had gone back to help him fight off the gang that Juarez had supposed had followed them from the Slash B.

When Ginny got the men located, she took the Winchester out from under her leg and jumped a shell from the magazine. The reason she had changed from Dynamite to me was because I am gun-broke and she could shoot as much as she pleased without my getting nervous.

Dynamite snorted when he heard the click of the lever and shied away from my side. Juno growled, and Bounce stood up, resting his big paws against the saddle skirts. We all knew, as well as Ginny did, that



something exciting was about to happen.

The strong smell that comes from range horses that have been held in the sage country, told us that the stolen herd was just around a bend in the valley to the west of us. Ginny half hitched the bridle reins around the saddle horn and held the rifle so that the muzzle was away from my ears; then she settled back in the saddle and waited.

I could see shadows moving in the valley, and pretty soon a big gray horse trotted out in full view. Ginny raised the rifle to her face and pointed it toward the ground just in front of the leader. There came a flash of fire and whiplike crack of the rifle. The gray squealed with fright and whirled back.

"At 'em, Juno—Bounce!" Ginny yelled and hung her spurs against my sides.

The dogs bellowed as they charged toward the herd. Dynamite snorted, Ginny yelled and pumped her gun, sending bullets screaming over the heads of the herd.

The stolen horses stampeded back up the valley, forcing the men who had been driving them to run for their lives. Back and forth behind the herd, Dynamite and I dashed, while Ginny fired her rifle above the heads of the horses. The dogs caught up with those behind and nipped their heels. The hills echoed back the thunder of the pounding hoofs, as the stampede swept up the valley driving everything before it.

Not until the frightened horses began to split up into small bands and hunt safety in the cross-gulches did Ginny called the dogs back and turn my head toward the cliffs at the side of the gulch.

DYNAMITE crowded up close to me; the dogs came back panting, their great red tongues lolling from their mouths. Ginny stopped under a tree and listened to the racket in the valley. The stolen herd was hopelessly split up. Not a horse in it but was headed for his home range now, and nothing short of a rope or a fence would stop him. The only way Juarez's gang could have held them would have been to have roped them one by one.

Men were calling, asking what had happened. No one had seen any enemy, but they all supposed that they had been raided by a posse of Slash B riders and the only thing to do was to head south as fast as they could go in order to escape capture.

There was but one place, near where Ginny was now, that a horse could get up onto the rim rock above the valley, and that was the narrow cut down which we had slid. If she attempted to follow one of the bands of horses that were striking for their home range, she might not get back to the Slash B for several days. If she stayed where she was, the horse thieves were sure to discover her if they rode south.

Even a horse knows where he has been headed off, and that's exactly what had happened to us. If Ginny started back for the place where we had slid down, she would be riding just ahead of the horse thieves and straight away from home. If Juarez's men could capture her, they would make Tom Bartlett pay all he had in the world, for her release. She laid one little hand on my neck.

"It looks like I'd overplayed my hand, Dan," she told me. "I never thought of this." Her voice trembled a little as though, now that the excitement was over, she were about to break down and cry.



I couldn't do anything but just stand there and feel sorry; but Dynamite was free to go where he pleased. He had ranged this country for years, in fact was foaled here. He stood for a moment looking back over his shoulder, then turned and walked straight up toward the cliff, at the edge of the valley, and because I didn't want to be left behind, I followed.

Ginny just sat still. She didn't see any way out, so one place was as good as another to her. The dogs trailed behind me. Dynamite walked rapidly, stopping every few minutes to look back. He seemed to know what he was doing and went on confidently. I remembered how proud Dynamite is of his ability to find trails, and that made me feel better. Ginny stopped sobbing and leaned forward, watching to see what the big red horse was driving at.

The cliff rose high and straight above us. I never would have thought of there being a break in it. Dynamite stopped close to the wall, looked back and nickered to me to come on. I broke into a little trot and hurried to catch up but couldn't. Dynamite disappeared; he just seemed to melt into the shadows. One moment I could see him, and the next there was nothing there but the wall of rocks.

Ginny leaned forward, a little gasp of surprise and wonder coming from her lips. She touched her spurs to my sides. I could feel cool, damp air in my face; there was a heavy draft coming, apparently right out of the cliff. I could smell Dynamite

but couldn't see him. Only a narrow belt of stars showed above us. I kept on following Dynamite's tracks by the scent. I passed through a narrow cleft. Ginny's chaps scraped on the rocks on both sides, then we came out on a narrow shelf, and I could see treetops below me and could hear the uproar in the valley again.

Ginny laughed nervously. "Dynamite," she called, "wait a minute. Where are you taking me?"

Dynamite answered with a gentle nicker that I understood to mean that everything was all right and that he knew what he was doing. Up we went; the sounds below became fainter, the dry, warm air of the mesas came to us, then I saw Dynamite just ahead of me, walking on level ground, and realized that we were free to go across to our own valley and home to the Slash B.

**N**EXT day when Tom and the men came home and Ginny told them what had happened, we all went down over the country to see the place where the little girl, helped by two dogs and a pair of horses, one of whom was *real* Dynamite, had played tag with the horse-stealing band of Black Juarez and made them turn loose the band of horses they had stolen. Shorty and Slim repaired the fence where Tarball had cut it, and then they tore down the corral where we had been caught. But they didn't need to have done that. It would have taken something more than sugar to have tempted Dynamite or me to go into that spruce forest.





# TWO MEN AND A DOG

By BRYAN IRVINE

**A**LTHOUGH Basil Bragweld was a confirmed criminal, it is doubtful if he would have planned to kill big Matt Gaines had it not been for jealousy—jealousy aroused by a homely mongrel, a mixture of many canine breeds.

Since he had first seen the half-grown, yellow-eyed dog, Bragweld had hated it. He had never liked dogs anyway, even the well-groomed thoroughbreds; and he was well aware that the dislike was mutual; dogs had never liked him.

Nor could Bragweld understand why Matt Gaines, known throughout Alaska as a thoroughly experienced trainer of half-wild Huskies

and malemutes, should burden himself with a yellow-eyed alley cur that, apparently, could be nothing more than excess baggage anywhere in Alaska. But, then, Bragweld might have asked himself why he, a fugitive from justice, wanted in the States on various charges, and quite as much a human cur as Gaines's dog was a canine mongrel, should be taken in by him.

Skulking about the streets of Fairbanks, half clothed, half starved, cowering before the curious scrutinies of the people of the Alaskan city, Bragweld had been picked up by bluff, boisterous, fun-loving Matt Gaines and taken to the latter's cabin. And it was there that the



sallow-complexioned and furtive-eyed fugitive first saw the dog.

On that day the mongrel, adopted only several days previously by Gaines, had trotted to the door, his too long tail wagging joyously, to greet his master.

"And this," Gaines had informed his hungry guest, reaching down to pat the yellow dog's head, "is Willie. Don't know how I come to name him Willie, unless it was because he seemed to answer more prompt to that name."

"Nice dog," Bragweld had commented laconically, although he would have liked to kick the homely beast, especially since the dog had looked at him just once then trotted away to cower behind the sheet-metal cookstove.

"Hm-m-m," Gaines had grunted, surprised at the animal's actions. "I guess Willie is kind o' bashful before strangers."

"Had him long?" Bragweld had queried.

"No, only three days," answered Matt Gaines. "Found him half starved, half frozen, and with a crippled left shoulder, behind a saloon downtown. Poor helpless critter! He seemed to take to me right off, so I toted him in my arms to the cabin."

"Figger to keep him?" was Bragweld's next question, already resenting the dog's presence in the snug cabin.

"Oh, yes. Yep, I'll feed him up, cure that crippled shoulder, and in a week he'll be a regular dog."

"But is he a sled dog?" Bragweld wanted to know. "Seems to me it'll cost a lot to keep a dog in this country."

Gaines had stroked the stiff stubble on his square chin while looking speculatively at Willie.

"Well, yes," he admitted. "I

reckon it'll cost considerable to keep him. Economically, he's just about down to zero. But I kind of like to help down-and-outers; makes me feel good inside. Willie, I figger, is about one fourth shepherd, one fourth hound, one fourth bull, and the rest just plain dog. But I like the critter, and he likes me. A feller can't have too many friends in this world, y'u know, and a dog friend will stick when all human friends desert y'u."

A YEAR had passed since that day, a year of the hardest work Bragweld had ever done. True, he had not, as Matt Gaines's partner, performed a third of the work Gaines had performed. The long, hard mush of a hundred miles over a high range of mountains and into the little-known country beyond had nearly killed him; while Matt Gaines mushed contentedly on, dragging the larger and far more heavily laden of the two sleds, humming little tunes, and frequently assuring the now morose and irritable Bragweld that "thar's gold in them creek beds where we're agoin', sure as shootin'."

Their entire outfit for camping and prospecting had been packed on the two hand-drawn sleds; and always, trotting at Gaines's heels, was Willie, the yellow-eyed, ungainly dog.

How Bragweld detested the animal! Always Willie seemed to be watching him, distrust, suspicion lurking in the saffron depths of his eyes. Or was it the man's imagination, born of a seared conscience and nourished by the murder that was taking root in his heart? He had barely checked an exclamation when, during one of the long, lonesome evenings out there in the flimsy shack at the diggings, he had looked



up to find the yellow eyes of the mongrel staring intently, unblinking at him. There was far more than distrust in those canine eyes that time; there was menace there, a threat. Icy chills had raced up and down the man's spine, and fear clutched at his craven heart, because—well, because it was only a moment before that he had definitely decided to murder big Matt Gaines.

Did the dog know? Bragweld, in the grip of superstitious fear, wondered. Had the harmless-appearing animal, through some uncanny sixth sense, divined his murderous intent?

But in spite of the fear, the criminal was fully determined to do away with his benefactor, and in such a way that not a single clew would remain to cause difficulties later.

Matt Gaines had guessed correctly. "Thar was gold in them creek beds." They had not discovered a future bonanza, but numerous very rich pockets had been found in the bottom of one small creek. One claim would cover practically all of the pay dirt.

Gaines had staked the claim in his and Bragweld's names. It was to be a straight fifty-fifty partnership. It was now necessary that they mush back to Fairbanks, file on the claim, making a legal record of it, and with some of the gold already taken out, purchase a more elaborate outfit and a string of Huskies to draw it back to the claim.

Those were Gaines's plans. Bragweld had far different intentions. At a certain point, not more than one day's mush from the claim, and on the proposed route to Fairbanks, was Hell Pit Gorge, an apparently bottomless gash across the mountains. All efforts of prospectors and explorers in the past to penetrate the dark, mysterious depths of Hell Pit Gorge had resulted in failures.

An ideal place in which to toss the body of a murdered man, Hell Pit Gorge. Or, better still, since the trail at several points was on the very brink of the gorge, Gaines, unsuspecting, and always in the lead, could be suddenly and violently shoved over the brink. There would be nothing to check the body on that almost sheer wall. Who could say, even if the body were later recovered—a remote possibility—that Gaines had not slipped in the snow on the trail, or stumbled over a stone, and fallen into the gorge?

With Matt Gaines safely disposed of, Bragweld planned to return to the claim and stake it in his own name. Then, after destroying every infinitesimal scrap of evidence that would indicate that Gaines had ever been near the claim, the fugitive intended to return alone to Fairbanks and record the claim in his own name.

The dog, Willie? He, too, would, of course, be tossed into Hell Pit Gorge, and the mongrel must be tossed in alive. There must be nothing left to indicate that the dog or his master were injured in any way before taking that drop of thousands of feet down the icy and almost precipitous wall of Hell Pit Gorge.

**T**HE first snowfall of another winter covered the vast miles of tundra as the little party—two men and a dog—hit the trail for Fairbanks. Only one small sled was taken. On it was packed the camp outfit for the trip. Gaines, dragging the sled as usual, set the pace. Willie trotted along in the wake of the sled. Bragweld came up in the rear, his small, evil eyes fixed on the broad back of big Matt Gaines.



The sky was leaden, threatening, presaging snow and possibly wind and severe cold. There was little conversation. Bragweld's mind was taken up with the murder he intended to commit before the dawn of another day. Gaines seemed somewhat worried, casting frequent glances at the forbidding sky. The dog, too, seemed nervous. In his yellow eyes was adoration as he looked at the bulky form of his master. But in those frequent glances that the mongrel cast to the rear at Bragweld, was fear, distrust, suspicion.

Finally, after a long, hard pull, eight hours on an uphill drag, Gaines halted. Snow was falling thickly, and an icy wind whipped it about in swirling eddies. He called back to Bragweld, several hundred feet down the trail.

"Keep well to the right down there, Brag. Don't get off the trail. We're at the edge of Hell Pit Gorge, and we'll make camp here for the night."

Presently Bragweld halted at Gaines's side.

"Where's the brink of the gorge?" he asked.

"We're standin' not more'n three feet from the brink right now," answered Matt. "And with this snow a-flyin' like this, we'll have to be careful where we step. We'd better pitch camp back there under them spruce trees, about fifty feet from here."

Bragweld's eyes finally located the brink of the gorge only a few feet in front of him but barely discernible in the flying snow. He glanced about to locate Willie. The dog, tail between his legs, cowered in the lee of the loaded sled, seeking some protection from the wind which was becoming colder momentarily. The animal's vigilance was relaxed.

Now was the time. Bragweld quietly stepped behind Gaines who was gazing intently at the brink of the gorge only several feet away. Bragweld stepped back several paces, then, suddenly plunging forward, he threw his entire weight against the broad back of the other man.

The attack was so sudden and unexpected that Gaines had only time to utter one sharp exclamation before disappearing in the impenetrable depths of Hell Pit Gorge.

Quickly Bragweld regained his balance and wheeled about. Now, the dog.

The mongrel apparently had not seen his master plunge to his death. The animal seemed confused now as Bragweld advanced. The yellow eyes looked questioningly at the approaching man, then at the spot where a moment before his master had stood. He whined and began running frantically about in search of Gaines.

Bragweld followed, holding out his hand toward the dog and at the same time speaking calmly:

"Here, Willie; come on, Willie."

Suddenly, as the man was about to reach out and seize the mongrel, Willie bared his fangs and snarled viciously. Bragweld staggered back a pace. Never before had he seen the dog snarl. But never before had the murderer attempted to touch the animal. For a moment, he considered shooting the dog, but criminal caution stayed his hand. There must be no shots fired; there must be no blood above the brink of the gorge.

**T**HE frantic dog ran along the brink in the direction the party had been traveling, then he wheeled about and ran back to the spot where he had last seen



his master. Whining, he dashed back to the sled, paused for a moment, and looked down the trail. It would seem that the animal had concluded that his master had returned the way he had come; so the dog ran down the trail about twenty-five feet and again stopped, undecided, confused, looking back at Bragweld.

The murderer could barely see the dog through the falling snow. It was becoming intensely cold. Darkness was falling quickly over the mountains. And fear crept into the heart of the man. He must, he decided, either make camp and build a fire, or start back immediately to the cabin. He was not at all sure that he could follow the trail at night, especially since new snow was covering their tracks; but it suddenly came over him that he did not care to camp at the scene of his crime. He must return to the cabin. Perhaps—ah, there was the answer! The dog seemed to want to return to the claim. It was merely a matter of following the dog whose instinct, the murderer believed, would lead them back to the claim and shelter.

The man spoke soothingly to the mongrel. "Home, Willie. Go on home, Willie."

The dog hesitated a moment, then turned and trotted slowly down the trail. Bragweld seized the sled rope and followed, calling now and then to the dog to check his pace. He must not lose that dog. His very life depended now on the instinct of the mongrel which, a short time before, he would have killed without a shred of compunction.

An hour passed. With the aid of a small pocket flashlight the man kept the dog in sight. Bragweld had lost all sense of direction. He could not recall having passed that way before. The route taken by

the dog seemed far different than that they had passed over during the afternoon. Still, he reasoned, the dog seemed intent on returning to the cabin, evidently believing his master had returned to it. Perhaps the animal was taking a shorter, though far more difficult, route. Even Bragweld knew that the instinct of a dog in such emergencies was far more reliable than the reasoning of man.

Another hour elapsed, two hours. The murderer, fighting on over very rough territory, dragging the heavily laden sled, had for a time perspired freely, perspired until his underwear was damp. Now the intensely cold wind drove through his outer clothing and seemed to penetrate to his very bones.

He cried out repeatedly to the dog, begging, pleading, coaxing. "Home, Willie; go on home now, Willie. That's a nice dog."

Plunging down a precipitous incline in an effort to keep up with the dog, Bragweld lost control of the sled. It rolled over, jerking the rope from his hand, and disappeared in a large snow drift. He made no effort to recover it. He was growing terribly weary, and the far-below-zero temperature was being whipped into his body by the relentless wind. Still he followed the dog, talking to him, pleading with him, reasoning with him as he would argue with a human being.

More like an automaton than a man, the murderer followed on, fighting over a course that ever lead down, down, down, over large boulders that cut his hands, bruised his limbs. Stumbling, falling, rising again; then on, on after the yellow mongrel.

It was hours later that the wind died down, or at least the man was



no longer aware of any wind. It was quiet, deathly quiet, and intensely cold.

Then at last the dog barked and plunged ahead out of the man's line of vision. Basil Bragweld followed weakly, searching for the animal with the weak rays from the small flashlight. Had the dog found the cabin? The murderer called out again:

"Home, Willie. Go on home."

Somewhere ahead in the intense darkness he could hear the animal whining and scratching at something. The cabin door?

Bragweld finally drew near the dog, but could not see him. He dropped to his knees. With fast-

waning strength he switched on the small flashlight again. In the faint glow he saw first, not more than a foot from his hand, the yellow eyes and bared fangs of the mongrel, and very near the now spent animal was a face—the white, dead face of big Matt Gaines.

A weird shriek came from the throat of the murderer as he slumped forward in the snow.

Several hours later a sickly shaft of Alaskan winter dawn penetrated the depths of Hell Pit Gorge to rest upon the stiffened bodies of a murderer, his victim, and a yellow mongrel. Willie's home was with his master, and he had gone there, taking the human mongrel with him.

**A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION**

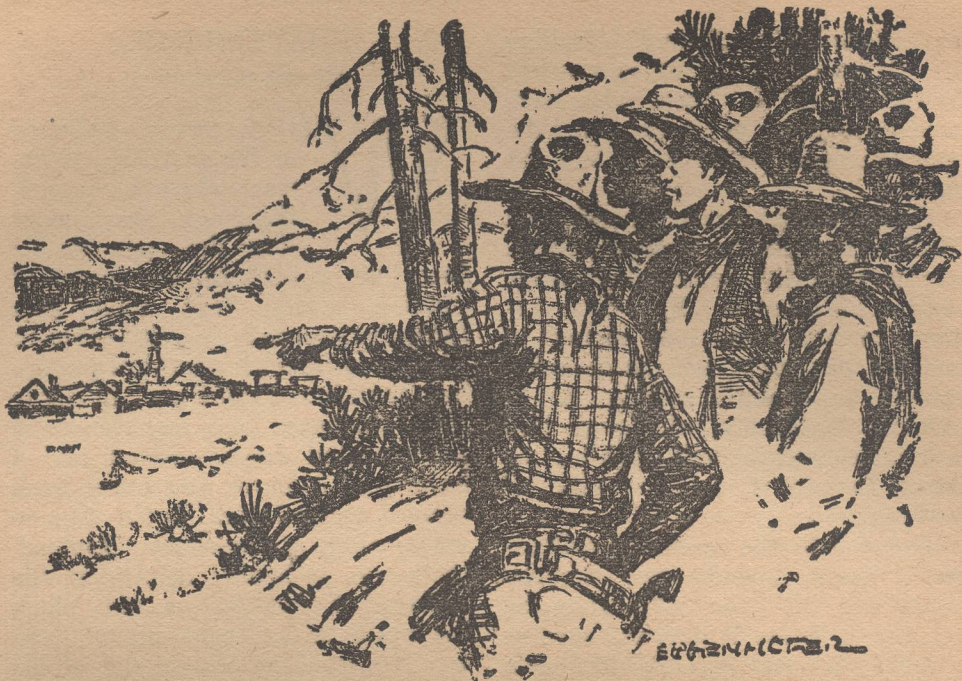


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# GUN GIFT

A Serial

By MAX BRAND

**E**MBITTERED by the loss of his right hand, Daniel Finlay, who practices law in the town of White Water, finds pleasure in being a secret trouble maker. He sees a fine opportunity for mischief when Mary Wilson, a pretty young girl, happens to be noticed by Bob Witherell, a handsome gunman whom Finlay has successfully defended on the charge of robbing a stagecoach. Witherell's brother is the notorious desperado, the Solitaire, and Witherell himself is the leader of a group of reckless spirits. The lawyer tells Witherell that Mary Wilson is engaged to John

Saxon, a hard-working young fellow who has a small place in the mountains where he has a nice start on a herd. And by praising Saxon, Finlay sets Witherell's mind against that honest young man.

Later, Witherell makes fun of Saxon in the presence of Mary Wilson; then, drawing a gun, Witherell orders Saxon, "Dance!" Saxon, who has never fired a revolver, runs from the stream of lead directed at his feet—thus furnishing amusement to a large section of White Water. Witherell and his men then ride away into the mountains. They burn Saxon's cabin,



and rustle his small herd. Trailing the stolen cattle, Saxon encounters Witherell and his men, who have already disposed of the herd, and the gunman beats Saxon badly in a fist fight.

Saxon complains to Sheriff Phil Walker, but the sheriff does nothing, saying there is insufficient evidence against Witherell. The bank refuses to lend Saxon any money to make a new start, and he despairs. About to commit suicide, he is stopped by Finlay, who gives him a revolver and prevails upon him to learn to use it, for the sake of revenge.

Going into the mountain wilderness, Saxon spends two months practicing with the .45. Then he returns to White Water, and secures a job as bouncer at Lefty Malone's Rolling Bones Saloon. Witherell comes to the place, and Saxon kills him in a gun duel.

Mary Wilson is unhappy because Saxon has become a killer. She tells him she'll always love him but they cannot marry now: "Not till something makes you clean again." Greatly troubled, Saxon goes to Finlay to return the gun to the man who had given it to him. But the lawyer cunningly assures Saxon that the world owes him a debt, and that he should collect it like a man—with the gun of which he is now the master. Also, says Finlay, there is the Solitaire, who will seek to avenge his brother's death, and Saxon should become a more experienced gunman before he meets the desperado.

The lawyer sends Saxon to Boots Russell, who formerly rode with the Solitaire, but has fallen out with him. Then Finlay notifies the Solitaire that Saxon is determined to murder him, and has joined Boots.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THREE RECRUITS.

WHEN Saxon wakened in the morning, Boots was already outside the shack. Saxon went into the open in his bare feet, guided by the sound of running water that took him through the woods to a little stream that cascaded with a musical plumping sound into a small pool, in whose black appeared one rosy finger of the reflected dawn. Saxon had a swim and a shave and came back dressed to find that Boots was no longer alone at the shack. Instead, there was with him, helping at the cookery of breakfast, a vast black mountain of a Negro whose head was dwarfed by the spread of his shoulders. All the features of his face were small, except the mouth, and the huge furrows of his grin made everything disappear except his smile.

Boots said: "This is Arthur William Creston, chief. I'll tell you what Arthur William can do. He knows how to make 'soup' and take care of it. He can help you run a soft-soap mold around the door of a safe. And when the trouble starts, he won't run away. He's fair with a revolver, good with a rifle when he has plenty of time, and mighty useful in any sort of a crowd. Do you want him?"

The smile of Arthur William Creston grew a little dim, as he waited in some tension for the answer, and John Saxon forced himself to look over the candidate for crime with a serious eye.

Want him? Of course he wanted those Herculean shoulders so long as there was such an enemy as the Solitaire in view! But it was only after that moment of delay that he



said: "Why, I trust your judgment, Boots. And Arthur looks all right to me." He held out his hand. "If you want to join us," said he, "we're glad to have you."

For answer, the vast grip of Creston almost crushed the hand bones of John Saxon.

"We don't need to be no more," said the Negro. "The three of us, we'd be enough for pretty nigh anything, I reckon!"

Boots merely said: "Don't start telling the chief his own business."

"No, sir. Excuse me, boss," said Arthur William.

After this, they finished their breakfast, and Boots told the Negro to saddle three horses. Creston went out, singing cheerfully, to execute the order, and that gave Saxon a chance to say:

"You're crowding me a little towards something, Boots. What's the direction you want to head for?"

"We'll need some money, before long," said Boots. "I've got a few hundred. That's all. When it's gone, we'll need a lot of money. And here's the lay of the land."

He took out a letter, unfolded it, and began to work rapidly with his pencil on the blank back of the sheet.

"Here's the White Water Mountains," he said as he worked. "Here's the town of White Water. Here's Fairfax down in this corner, and Iron Gulch over here. Banks in all three of them. Here's the railroad running over here, with money shipments on the rails all the time. Here the Fairfax-White Water stage, with a lot of gold in every boot. There are plenty of herds of cattle that we can pick on, too. It's a land of plenty, chief. But it's a land of trouble, too."

"Go on," said Saxon. "I don't think I'll be a bank robber or a

rustler, just yet. Pick out some of the troubles."

"You know the Stillman district?"

"I've never been there."

"Sheriff Cochrane is down there with a big posse, hunting for the Solitaire. But the Solitaire isn't in the Stillman district. He shifted away from there and went up to the headwaters of White Water Creek. He's somewhere over there, traveling slow and keeping his head down, because he's loaded down with piles of hard cash that he got in the Stillman raid, and other places. He's hit three times in three weeks, you know. And every time, he's drawn blood! There's nobody like him when it comes to making a fast campaign."

THE scalp of John Saxon prickled as he stared at the cross which Boots had last made on the map. But the idea that had formed in his throat had to come out.

"There's our trouble and there's our money waiting for us in the same spot," he said.

"Meaning?" asked Boots.

"The Solitaire is the man you want to get. He's the man I have to get, too, before he gets me. And when we get the Solitaire, we get plenty of cash, too. Does that sound to you?"

Boots merely stared.

"You mean it," he muttered finally. "You want to tackle that gang bare-handed?"

"Yes," said Saxon. "The best way is to get the hard work done early in the week. How many men are with the Solitaire, do you think?"

"He had seven with him," said Boots. "But one man was killed in Willett's Crossing. Another died in the Stillman raid. And another died



in the woods, later on. That makes four with the Solitaire. And they're four hard ones. First there's——"

"Never mind the names," answered Saxon. "Four and one makes five. Can you pick up three more to go with us? You and I make two. We want the same number to tackle that crowd."

"The same number? We need three times more than they have!"

"Aye, for murder!" said Saxon. "But what we want is the fight."

There was a long silence, after this. Finally Boots lifted his eyes slowly.

"Partner," he said, "you know the Solitaire, but you don't know him the way I know him!"

"It has to be my way," said Saxon. "If the boys are with me, they have to follow me—and that counts you in with the rest. We don't take odds."

"If that's the way of it," answered Boots, his lips withering back grotesquely over his shining teeth, "why don't you count in Arthur William as our third man?"

"Because he's going to be our cook," said Saxon.

Boots smiled suddenly.

"But you've gotta remember one thing," he said.

"Fire away," said Saxon.

"Back there in the Rolling Bones, when you stood up to Bob Witherell, you liked it, eh?"

"Yes, I liked it," admitted Saxon.

"Having the life of a man inside the crook of your finger—and your life inside of his—and the best man wins! That was pretty good to you, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that was pretty good."

"Well, the next brawl won't be like that. None of this standing up and being honest and polite. It's going to be dog eat dog, and that's all there will be to it. They'll shoot

you from behind if they get a chance. There won't be any flags flying and there won't be any bands playing, either."

"I understand," said Saxon. "But the way I say is the way it has to be—if you want me in. Five of them and five of us. Can you find three more men willing to go with us?"

Boots considered. At last he said: "Aye, three more crazy men—like you! I can find 'em and have 'em here in two days. Will you wait here with Creston?"

"I'll wait here," said Saxon.

AND there he waited, not two days but three, while Arthur William Creston cooked venison and mountain grouse and rabbits. The Negro shot the game that he cooked; except the rabbits and the squirrels which Saxon knocked over with his revolver when he walked out through the trees for three or four hours every day. He no longer said to himself, "Bob Witherell!" every time he fired, but instead, "The Solitaire!"

But the same savagery never came storming up from his heart as he spoke that name. He never had been injured directly by the Solitaire. He had no cause for hate. He was simply preparing himself, from a distance, for the battle which must inevitably occur between him and the desperado. And always there was lodged back in his heart the memory of the tension of that instant in the Rolling Bones when he had faced Bob Witherell and taken the man's life in his hand, and destroyed it.

Other men could live for other purposes, but it seemed to Saxon that there was nothing in the world comparable with the joy of battle to the uttermost.



He lived very silently with big Arthur William Creston, during those three days. Either he was away, walking through the woods, or else he was dreaming forward to the great fight which was to come. Or sometimes his mind drifted back to the girl in White Water, or to Daniel Finlay. But about them both there was the melancholy distance of unreality.

The mountains, the shaggy, great trees, the wild beasts and the wild men who could be found in the wilderness—they were the present reality that filled his mind.

And if he had some doubt about the legal morality of his scheme of things, he could remember the words of the lawyer, assuring him that society owed him what society had taken away from him!

Then back came Boots with his three recruits. And each of them was a young man, all fire and spark. Del Bryan came off the desert, with sun-whitened hair and eyebrows, and pale, wolfish eyes. Joe Pike was out of the Northland, a cold, ugly, silent man. "Tad" Cullen was an old man of twenty-five who was covered with scars of bullets and knives. Plainly he had not won all of his fights, but he had done a great deal of fighting. And the fire in his eyes never rested. It burned constantly, all the day long.

Saxon, looking over these men, realized that they were in fact of the stuff that would stand up to the Solitaire if enough were to be gained by the battle. There are men in the West who have been so long familiar with danger and who have rubbed elbows with death so often that they feel rather lonely and deserted by life unless they are in the midst of mortal peril. There are criminals who embrace a life of crime simply because the savor of it charms them.

These three fellows had been told the purpose of big John Saxon. They liked the idea. But five minutes after they had been introduced, Tad Cullen said:

"There's only one queer thing about this deal. Our partner, Saxon, never did anything, so far as I know, except throw some drunks out of a saloon and then kill Bob Witherell. But Bob was a bum, when it came to using a Colt. How come you claim the No. 1 place, Saxon?"

Saxon smiled on him.

He recognized the danger, but he did not dislike it.

"You see those ears sticking up beyond that rock?" said Saxon.

"Yes. I see 'em. What about 'em?"

"Go and ask the rabbit why I'm the No. 1 man. He may know better than you do. He may have used his ears more."

Cullen looked at him with eyes that were bright little points of fire.

"All right," he said. "I'll ask the rabbit a question."

He flashed a gun as he spoke, and fired instantly. So fast was his hand that the glint of the revolver seemed to be part of the fire of the explosion. The rabbit leaped from behind the rock and high into the air, a big, long-legged jack.

As it landed, Saxon knocked it rolling with a shot from his own Colt.

"Now you can ask the rabbit," said Saxon.

Cullen turned, stared at him again, and then walked over to the rabbit. Pike and Del Bryan went with him, and Cullen lifted the dead habit.

"Right through the bean!" he exclaimed.

"That was luck," said Saxon honestly. "I can't shoot as well as that!"



"You're dog-gone right you can't," answered Cullen. "But you can shoot plenty good enough to suit me. I stay with you hombres, I guess. Now, chief, you tell us what the big plan is. Boots just opened up the idea for us, and that was all."

"The Solitaire," said Saxon, "you fellows all know him?"

"I got the mark of a bullet from the time I met up with the Solitaire," said Cullen.

"My cousin," said Pike, "run into the Solitaire, and he come away minus the lower part of his face. Chewing without no lower jaw got him kind of weary, and one day he walked right off the edge of a cliff. I've done a lot of thinking about the Solitaire ever since that day."

"Me," added Del Bryan, "I never seen him, even, but I've sure done plenty of dreaming about that hombre. It's time for him and me to meet!"

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE SOLITAIRE'S HANG-OUT.

IT was midday when they started. They went along very leisurely, camped in the early evening, and then Boots and Arthur William Creston went off scouting. During the whole of the ride, big John Saxon had not asked a single question because he felt that questions, on his part, would be a folly, and that what was really important was for him to keep his mouth shut until the time came for action.

In the meantime, these proud and savage riders looked upon him with awe, with curiosity, and with a vast and cruel suspicion. They had seen him shoot a rabbit with a shot which, as he himself had instantly admitted, was a good part of luck. But they had not yet seen him in action against humans, and they wanted to see that before they

accorded him any real admiration as a superior being. He was on trial, like the leader of a wolf pack which is followed until it fails in the kill, when it is instantly torn to pieces by the hungry rivals. If he felt this about the others, he felt it even more about Boots, in whose strange nature there did not seem to be room enough for the slightest affection. Only the big Negro had in him a childish touch of kindness, and the desire for applause, as well as a great willingness to deal out applause to others.

Late that night, Boots and the other returned with word that they had found what they wanted. John Saxon lay asleep, looking up at the narrow heads of the pine trees around the camping place, and Boots and Creston sat down close to him. The others got at once out of their blankets and came to listen.

Boots said: "We've got 'em cold. I've spotted the hang-out. Creston had the idea that they might be there. Creston is as many times right as an old woman. Creston took me there, and we laid out and saw the lights in the house, and heard the boys whooping it up in the hollow. We've seen 'em. We've been so close that I could spot the voices. Somebody got into an argument with another gent, and they started singing right up the scale, the sort of a song that means a fight before it's finished, and then we could hear the Solitaire roar at 'em, and the snarling all stopped. We heard him order 'em all to bed, and after a coupla minutes, they were all in bed, except for one gent that was posted on watch. You could see him sneakin' around the house, steady and slow, in the starlight and the moonlight."

"Where's the place?" asked Tad Cullen.



"You know the old Armsby place?" asked Creston.

"Sure do I know it! Do I know the palm of my hand?" asked Cullen. "But what kind of a fool is the Solitaire turned into to go to a place like that, with open country all the way around?"

"There's the creek going right past the house," answered Creston. "And that's why it ain't so bad. No, it's pretty good. I like it. Suppose they were all surrounded, they could get out of the house and right down the bed of the creek."

"Suppose that there was men in the creek, too?" asked Cullen.

"Yeah, I didn't think of that," said Creston.

"There's a whole lot you don't think of," said Cullen scornfully.

"Maybe I ain't so bright, but I wouldn't be needin' none of your ideas, Mr. Cullen," said Creston.

"Don't give me none of your lip!" exclaimed Cullen. "I won't have none of your back-chat."

Something touched John Saxon; it was the toe of Boots. Saxon understood, and before Creston could answer, he growled:

"No more of this nonsense."

A SUDDEN silence rushed over the little group, but he could hear the quick breathing of Cullen as that crippled young savage prepared to speak again.

Saxon said calmly: "The first time that there's a fight in my camp, the winner takes me on after he's won. Remember that and keep your snappy talk to yourselves. Boots, you and Creston were telling me something. I want you to go on, and we'll see who has the nerve to interrupt again!"

There was another small breath of the silence. He could see Cullen rise to his feet and stand like a post,

tense with excitement, ready at a mere touch to break into furious action, but then the voice of Boots began:

"They're in the old house, all right. We can move on up there a little before sunrise and have 'em in a pocket, perhaps. They're sure to have all the stuff with 'em. Unless maybe they buried a little part of it. Boys, this'll make a rich haul for us, and I think we're going to collect. Chief, you give the orders."

Saxon gave them. He would rouse the camp, he told them, at the first hint of daylight. And well before sunup, they would be at the old Armsby house.

Then he concluded: "But mind you, before anything else happens, I'm going to get my fair chance at the Solitaire. Now you fellows turn in."

They turned in, talking quietly for a few moments to themselves. And he heard Cullen say:

"Yeah, and he can have his turn with the Solitaire. Only, lemme see him take on the Solitaire hand to hand, and I'll see him five minutes later as dead as anything!"

There was no audible comment upon this, and Saxon lay stiffened with excitement, knowing that he would not close his eyes again before the morning.

One thing at least he had fixed for the next day—he would have to do his best to encounter the Solitaire face to face; he had made his brag and his boast, and unless he carried it through, his authority over these men would not be worth a snap of the fingers.

Hardly a moment later, he was aware that the pine trees were visible in the sky above him, but that the stars were dying away to a series of very thin points. The day was beginning.



He got up at once, and in five minutes he had the camp up and ready to be away. Creston took the lead, silently, and for some time they traveled over a series of ups and downs, under trees, through the open, through brush that whipped and scratched and tested the chaps they were wearing, until at last Creston waved the others down and himself dismounted.

The sky was pink with the dawn as Saxon stood on the verge of some second-growth timber and looked down, a mere quarter of a mile away, on the old Armsby house. He had seen it when he was a boy. It looked smaller than on that day long ago. The house itself was not so big, and there was not such an extent of sheds and barns behind it. Once the Armsby family had put all this narrow valley under the plow and herded their fine cattle over the slopes adjacent. But the soil was too shallow to repay the plow, and some bad seasons decimated the herd. The Armsby attempt was one of those magnificent failures with which the old range is spotted. The range has its own way, and will not take kindly to foreign methods.

**I**N front of the old house, from which most of the paint had peeled, three men were moving from the door to the creek, one of them leading a pair of fine, long-legged horses. All of the trio were armed; one of them carried a rifle slung at his back. It was plain that they were not hugging to themselves a fancied sense of security merely because they were deep in the mountains.

"There's the place. But I don't see the man, yet." said Boots, at the shoulder of Saxon. "No, the Solitaire wouldn't be up and about yet. He waits for breakfast to be

cooked before he turns out. His lordship takes things pretty easy."

"What's easy," said the voice of Cullen, "is for us to clean up the rest of them, as soon as the *chief* has put the Solitaire out of the way."

He was openly sneering.

"That's no way to do," said Boots. "The thing for us to do is to hang all together. And when we tackle 'em——"

"Aw, sure, he can back out, that way. I thought he had the nerve to tackle the Solitaire all by himself. That would be a pretty good show. I dunno how many years it is since anybody had the crust to tackle the Solitaire hand to hand, all by himself!"

"You fellows stay back here," said Saxon, squinting his eyes a little for fear lest they should be opened and made staring by the dread that was coming up in him. "Stay back here while I ride down and get at the Solitaire. I'll see if I can invite him away from the house."

"Aye, and up here where we can drop him!" exclaimed Boots.

"No," said Saxon heavily. "I'll go up the valley, there, where every one can see, and there I'll have it out with him."

"Will you?" said Boots. "Will you?"

He turned his hungry, flashing eyes straight upon his leader.

"Well, maybe!" murmured Boots. "But it kind of beats me!"

Saxon got to his horse and mounted it. He had been given not quite the best of the mustangs, because the huge gray mare of the Negro was the best of the lot. But his brown gelding was strong enough and fast enough, with the sure-footedness of a true mountain breed.

He said to Creston, in such a voice



that all the others could hear him: "Arthur, you're a good fellow and just as brave as ever came over the pike. But you don't take a hand in this job. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Creston. "But down yonder it's a mighty pretty picture, and I'd like to get a hand in it."

"You stay out, and that's all there is to it," commanded Saxon. He turned to the rest and added: "You fellows stay back here. When I've handled the Solitaire, you'll have an easy job to tackle. Because those men of his are sure to come out of the house to look on. You can charge down the slope from here with a yell and a volley, and sweep 'em right into the creek. They've done their robbing and killing by tricks, and it's all right for us to use a trick or two on them. But wait till you see what happens between me and the Solitaire."

They looked at him strangely, with narrowed eyes, searching to get close to the fear that, they thought, must be in him. But as he rode out of the woods into the open, he heard some one say, in a stifled voice:

"By thunder, it *looks* like the real thing."

"Aye, a lot of things *look* all right that are rotten inside!" said the voice of Cullen.

There would be trouble with Cullen, later on, even if this thing turned out all right. Saxon was sure of that.

But he could not afford to think of the future, as he backed his horse down that slope.

Yonder came the man with the two horses that he had watered at the creek. He whistled as he walked. He was a chunky, powerful man with his face blackly obscured by a beard of two or three

weeks' growth. The two others turned suddenly around, and one of them unshipped his rifle and held it at ready, then dropped the butt of it to the ground, and waited for Saxon to ride up.

Dreadful fear suddenly poured over Saxon like cold water. He wanted, now, to pull his horse around and flee. But he had come too close. If he attempted to retire now, he would be drilled full of holes by the accurate rifle bullets.

He had to go on—though there was in him the surety that he was lost.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE SOLITAIRE.

THERE were not many steps for the horse to take in coming up to those loiterers before the Armsby place. But in that short distance that was covered, another change came over Saxon. Those three were bad men. Otherwise they would not be with the Solitaire. They were murderers and robbers, or they would not have been with him. But whatever they were, they were almost unquestionably less than had been big Bob Witherell.

And he, Saxon, had proved himself the better man of the two! He was better, then, than any of these. And he was very close. If it came to a brawl, perhaps he could ride straight through the lot of them. With swift snap shots to the right and the left, he could drop those fellows, it might be.

As he thought of this, his confidence returned. And, moreover, this was the bright pink of the morning, and the very time when men should live or die. He, John Saxon, intended to live!

And he, John Saxon, might be



facing the great Solitaire, in another few moments.

"Well? Well? Lookin' for strays?" said the man with the rifle.

Another fellow came into the doorway of the house. He was carrying a rifle, also. Four pairs of eyes worked curiously, busily, at Saxon. He pulled up his horse close to them.

"I'm looking for a stray Solitaire," he said. "Is he here?"

"I dunno that there's any Solitaire birds around here," said the first rifleman. "Who might you be?"

"My name is John Saxon," he answered. "I'm the man who killed Bob Witherell, and I thought that his brother might want to have the thing out with me this morning."

"Well I'll be—well, I'll be dog-goned!" said the other.

His two fellows came up close. It was a savage trio—as savage, at least, as the four white men who waited yonder, at the edge of the trees. All of these fellows might be dead, before the sun came over the hills. Saxon looked down upon them from a height of a greater knowledge.

"You're Saxon, are you?" said the rifleman. "Then why shouldn't we shoot you out of that there saddle and take you in to see the chief before all the blood has leaked out of you?"

"I'll tell you why," said Saxon. He looked straight down into the eyes of the man, and saw the glance of the rifleman waver a trifle. "I'm meat for your master," said Saxon. "And he'll raise hell with the man of you who puts a hand on me before he has his full turn. Understand me?"

He pointed up the valley.

"I'm going up there," he said, "and I'll wait beside that big black rock. That's close enough so that

the rest of you can see all the fun. It's far enough away so that you won't be very able to turn loose your guns on me after I've drilled the Solitaire. Now one of you get inside the house and tell him that I've come to finish off the Witherell family."

He turned his horse, as he spoke, and rode it at a walk right up the valley toward the rock which he had seen.

Behind him he heard one of the gang mutter: "I dunno why——"

"Put it down," said another quickly. "He's right. He may be crazy but he's right in this here. The chief will want to have his little go at Saxon. What a nerve that gent packs around with him, though!"

John Saxon rode up to the black rock and looked calmly around him.

OFF to his right was the dark verge of the trees where his four helpers were waiting with their horses. He himself was the bait which was to lure on the chief hawk of the enemy. And as the Solitaire stooped at him, as the rest of the Solitaire's gang came out into the open, down that slope would pour the charge which ought to scatter the bandits into the creek.

It was a simple plan. It was so simple that one might wonder why it had not been used before. The novel point was simply that one human life had to be offered as the bait to make the trap attractive. And still, at this distance from the house, he was in danger. Riflemen as accurate as those would not have great trouble in pumping lead into him. At least, they could put the horse down—and after that they could hunt him as he dodged and scampered on foot.

No, he was still held firmly in



place. And, if he doubted that, he could take heed of one man who lay out on the ground in front of the house with a rifle carefully trained on the target which Saxon offered to the gun. Even from that distance, he was holding the stranger on a leash strong enough to pull him out of this life and into the next world.

Then the Solitaire appeared.

By the way he came into the doorway of the house and stood there for a moment, turning his head a bit as though the whole landscape were interesting to him, and not simply the enemy in the distance, big John Saxon could have told that it was the Solitaire. His spurs flashed on his heels as he came down the three steps to the ground. The band of metal around his sombrero—no doubt it was Mexican wheel-work—glittered, also, and his blue shirt was shimmering silk with a red bandanna draped gracefully around his throat. Even the body of the man looked graceful, elegant.

He was as big as his dead brother; he was as big, very nearly, as John Saxon, and it was plain that here nature had been spendthrift and squandered size, strength, speed, grace, elegance all on one body. Even if he had been an unknown, Saxon felt that he would have been sure at a glance that this was a fearless and a famous man.

One of the band led around the corner of the house one of those gray horses which are stockinged in black to the knees and hocks and so faintly mottled over the rest of the body that they seem white. The saddle shone with silver and gold. And as the horse threw its head proudly, Saxon distinctly and faintly heard the noise of little bells.

That horse, dancing or rearing against the restraining hand of the

follower, was instantly quiet when the master leaped into the saddle.

And still the Solitaire did not come directly toward his enemy but first pointed out some things near the house and seemed to be giving orders—before he jaunted off to wipe this small detail of a fighting man out of his path.

His four men came crowding out of the house behind him. They were on foot, all of them, and they came on very slowly, so that it was plain they had been ordered to preserve a little distance and not crowd their chief while he was at work. They could be seen fanning out to this side and to that, each anxious to get as good a view as possible.

And now the Solitaire came, suddenly, at a swinging, grand gallop. The wind caught the brim of his sombrero and lifted it a little. The red bandanna blew back from his throat. The pressure of the wind molded that thin silken shirt against his body so that at a distance Saxon could see the muscles.

Yes, this was one of those chosen men among a million!

Should he dismount to meet the enemy?

Saxon could not tell. No, he decided to remain in the saddle, as he was. His gun was in readiness. His right hand stole back just once to make sure that it was loose and all in readiness.

When he fired, he would exclaim, "The Solitaire!" He knew that, and even smiled a little.

When he fired? That took for granted that he was able to get his gun out before a bullet from the Solitaire crashed through his brain. He had been confident enough to aim at the forehead of Bob Witherell instead of his body. And no doubt the Solitaire would have a similar



confidence. He would shoot for the head.

Then it would either be a miss, or else it would be mercifully sudden death for Saxon.

And on the other hand, suppose that luck favored the challenger—well, that thought made a spring of music well up in the heart of Saxon.

HE saw the clots of the turf springing up high above the head of the rider, hanging in the air an instant like birds on the wing, before they fell. Then he saw the Solitaire bring his horse to a sudden halt, a scant ten paces off.

Ten paces, thought Saxon, was a good distance. Ten paces is about the distance that a man uses most often when he slips through the woods, hunting for small game.

He considered his target. The magnificence of this man was such that he had seemed just as big and dominant in the distance as he had been close at hand. There was only the glory of the head and face added, and that seemed to Saxon the finest picture that he had ever seen. Bob Witherell had been a handsome man, but he was nothing compared to this olive-skinned hero, this living statue of perfection. The lips of the Solitaire were so red that they seemed to have been painted; and when he smiled, his teeth were wonderfully white. He shone. There was a light inside him, and the central flame burned out through the eyes above all.

It seemed to Saxon that if that fire touched his soul, if he opened his own eyes to it and let it in, it would burn all the manhood out of him. Just so had it burned the soul out of Boots, in that encounter long ago.

Saxon, steadily, with all the strength of his will, centered his

own gaze right on the breadth of the forehead under the hatband. That was where he would aim to send his bullet crashing. Right there where the leather of the hatband pressed a little into the flesh!

"You're John Saxon?" said the Solitaire. "I'm glad to meet you, man. I thought that I'd have to postpone this for a little while. I wanted to let you cook a while before I came for you, too. But I see that you got a bit nervous, and you've jumped out of the frying pan into the fire, eh?"

He laughed, as he ended. And it amazed Saxon to hear the golden quality of that laughter, like a flowing music.

Saxon said: "The Witherells were always great talkers. They'll stop their talking to-day, though."

"Will they?" said the Solitaire. "Well, my lad, I'll do for you what you did for Bob. I'll bury you in the ground and put your name over the grave. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," said Saxon.

A panic was running in him, however. He felt that if his glance wavered one instant down to the flare of fire in those proud, masterful eyes, he would be lost, utterly. "I'm ready and waiting," said Saxon.

"Fill your hand, then," said the Solitaire.

"No," said Saxon.

"No? And you won't look me in the eye, either? You fool, you're beaten before you make a move! Wait a moment! There's a cow lowing over the hill. The next time the sound comes——"

That would be the signal. It was a far-away sound. Distance makes into a softly flowing sound even the beating of great bells. It turned the lowing of the cow into a sadness felt dimly on the air, perceived on the edge of the mind.



But when it came again, it shot an electric thrill through the soul and body of Saxon. He twitched out his Colt. It seemed to him that the flash of the eyes and the flash of the revolver of the Solitaire were parts of the same fire.

And then a thunderstroke beat through his brain.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE BATTLE.

HE felt himself falling through eternal blackness—he was merely bowing over the pommel of his saddle. He felt that a cannon had boomed again in his ear—it was merely the second shot from the rapid gun of the Solitaire, exploding nearby while the bullet clipped past the down-swaying head of Saxon.

He thought that he had fallen into a seething fire, but it was merely the pain of his torn flesh, for the first shot had glanced along his skull and ripped the scalp up in a huge furrow.

He thought that there was a clapping of hands, a distant applause for this sudden, brief battle. But it was the rattling of many guns in the distance.

The instant that the gun of the Solitaire spoke, and big John Saxon fired wildly into the air, without aiming, down the slope from the trees came first the concentrated volley of Cullen and the rest, then the sweeping charge of their horses.

And the Solitaire, twisting his head about, saw that charge going home, saw one of his men already flat on the ground and the other three flying as fast as they could run!

It meant more than the loss of lives to him. It meant, above all, the loss of the money which he had

piled up in the house—one third of it for himself.

He left the body of Saxon to tumble out of the saddle at leisure, and twitching his own horse around, he charged to the rescue.

That was why, as Saxon's brain instantly cleared, he saw the Solitaire galloping wildly away, as if in flight—and across the valley he saw the riot of the battle proceeding.

No, it was no longer a riot, but a rout.

And Saxon, driving spurs into his horse, rushed it in pursuit. He shouted as he rode.

The Solitaire jerked his head about, and saw behind him a man who should be dead, who must be dead with a bullet through his brain, dashing after him, yelling.

Was it that sight which unnerved the Solitaire? Or did he simply see that he had left his rifle at the house, and that with revolvers alone he could not deal with the followers of John Saxon who had driven his own men in rout?

Those fugitives were at the house. They were springing into saddles on the waiting horses.

One more of them fell. The other two dashed their mounts around the corner of the building.

And of those two survivors, one was clinging desperately, swaying far forward as though he had been terribly injured.

The Solitaire did not need more evidence than this to assure him that luck was against him and that he had lost this day. Already, a rifle was turned toward him by one of the victors. It was little Boots of detested memory, dropping to the ground, letting his horse run free while he concentrated rifle fire on the great enemy.

The Solitaire, swinging his horse sharply to the side, dashed for cover.



Behind him he heard the shouting of John Saxon, begging him to turn and fight it out.

Then a bullet from Saxon's gun hummed close to his ear. He turned and fired rapidly three times at the pursuer, and every shot went wild, as his straining horse flew over the irregularities of the ground.

But he was gaining prodigiously at every leap the gray stallion made, and now the sudden shadow of the forest closed over him. And the Solitaire bent low above the pommel, grinding his teeth, cursing in a stream of oaths, and fled for his life.

Presently he knew that hoofbeats were no longer sounding behind him. He could pull up the gray to a soft trot, and remember in detail the strangest encounter of his life and the first great reverse of his fortune!

**A**ND big John Saxon? He saw that there was no more use in his following the Solitaire than for a linnet to follow a hawk. His horse could never keep that pace. If ever he were to hunt the Solitaire again, he would need under him a far finer specimen of horse-flesh!

So he turned back.

He did not really regret that he had failed to overtake his enemy. Man to man, on this day, it had been proved that the Solitaire was the better of the pair. Providence had given to big John Saxon a chance to come away with honor and his life.

He turned his horse, therefore, and rode slowly down the valley to the house.

As he came nearer, he first saw his friends go storming into the house, and then he saw, as he pulled up in front of it, how they came charging out of it, dragging filled

saddlebags with them, and shouting like madmen.

He saw Pike lift one of those saddlebags and hold it mouth down while a shower of greenbacks fell to the ground. Most of the money was in bundles heavy enough to drop safely to the ground, but a lot of it was loose and blew away in a green shower on the wind.

But Pike did not care for such trifles. He began to leap and bound and yell at the top of his voice. He began to laugh, and choke with hysterical joy. In fact, he had poured out a fortune on the earth, and the other men were screeching and prancing like madmen. Every one of them had found portions of the treasure.

Only little Boots came to big John Saxon and looked up at him with a deadly concern.

"Get down! Get down!" commanded Boots.

Saxon slid out of the saddle.

"I'm all right," he said. "The bullet glanced. I'm all right, Boots."

"Here, some of you yahoos!" shouted Boots. "Get some water ready. Bandages! Lend a hand, here! The chief's hurt bad!"

The call—or the last name used—operated very effectively upon the rest of them. They stampeded into the kitchen of the house. As a matter of fact, the treasure they had found remained scattered about on the ground in front of the house, while they stormed into the kitchen and each man hurried to do something for the "chief."

Water was already hot in a big boiler. Coffee was steaming. An ample breakfast of beefsteak and bacon and pone had been prepared before the men of the Solitaire went out to see their master's duel. And now as soon as the wound of Saxon



was cleansed and bound tightly around with a bandage, his men sat down in that same kitchen and ate with a glorious appetite.

Saxon, stunned and ill at ease, only gradually brought his mind back to a realization of what had actually happened. The clearly known world had ended in the flash of the Solitaire's eyes and gun at the same instant.

Now he found himself sitting at a long table in the ruined old house and listening to the clamor of the gang as they ate. Some good whisky had been found among the luggage of the Solitaire, and they were opening the bottles when Boots muttered:

"They'll be drunk as lords in five minutes, if they tackle that stuff. Do you think it's wise, chief? The Solitaire is a foxy bird, and he may come back here any minute—and with more men behind him! He may be hanging about close, right now."

The very mention of the name stabbed a cold pain through the soul of John Saxon.

He shouted: "Down with that whisky! Am I to have a lot of swine rolling around on the ground when you're needed? Give me that whisky, and if I see a man of you lay hand on a drink without my permission, I'll break him in two!"

HE paused, his teeth grinding together, a darkness of rage whirling in his mind. And he saw the others stare at him, and then lower their eyes to the table.

He was amazed. He had expected them to rise up in a crowd against him. Instead, they sat like frightened children. He felt ashamed, but he stood up suddenly and strode out of the house.

When he was in the open air, he

sat down on a rock near the door of the house, and his eye traveled over the mountains and saw the sun come blazing up in the east.

He had a sudden sense of possession. Whatever he saw was his. At least, the dawning beauty of it made the world step into his mind as it never had stepped before, when he was laboring with his hands to make his way.

Behind him, voices wrangled. Well, let them wrangle, for they were suddenly beneath him, apart from him. He had brushed them and their desires aside with an easy gesture. They had bowed their heads like children before an angry parent.

He felt like laughing, but he felt like sneering, also.

Two things were real in this world—the glory of its beauty and full-tasting life, and the Solitaire whose bullet had missed his brain by a fraction of an inch that morning.

Would he ever be able to face the Solitaire again? Not, he felt, unless he had first gained a greater speed of hand and a greater surety of eye. Not, he was certain, until he had steeled himself still more, so that he could face that man as though he were facing, with wide-open eyes, the blazing sun in the east.

Cullen came out carrying the three bottles of whisky. He put them down on the ground beside Saxon and cleared his throat.

"Chief," he said, "I've been kind of fresh a couple of times around you. I'm sorry. I didn't figure you right. Here's the whisky. I'm not touching any more booze when I'm on the trail with you, and when you yip at me, you'll see me jump as fast as my bum legs let me. It that all right?"

Saxon looked into the anxious,



rather frightened face of Cullen. The man was overawed.

"Of course it's all right," said Saxon, and held out his hand. Cullen took it quickly, eagerly.

"The finest thing I ever seen," said Cullen. "I never seen anything like it. I never dreamed that I'd ever see anything like it. The Solitaire being chased by *one man!*"

Saxon smiled.

There were certain features of that "chase" which could be explained, but what was the use? He said nothing, and saw Cullen go off with the others to pick up the dead.

They had lain there, the pair of them, under the rising sun, unheeded. Now they were dumped like dead dogs into crevices along the bank of the creek, and a quantity of the loose rock and gravel caved in over them.

Saxon did not rise to take part in that ceremony. He remained seated, for the pain in his head was growing great. Then Boots came up to him, after a little time, and saluted.

"That loot's laid out on the kitchen table, chief," he said. "All ready to whack it up when you say the word."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE CHIEF.

THE treasure was laid out on the heavy table. And though some parts of it might have been pocketed, there remained a great quantity. Boots was rapidly at work sorting the cash into piles of bills of the same denominations; and out of several small sacks of chamois, Pike poured out diamonds, emeralds, rubies, pearls that had been pried out of their setting, together with rings that still contained their jewels, and some fine gold

watches. There were other trinkets. There was a woman's penknife in the handle of which were set—a curious vanity!—a pattern of small but very fine emeralds of the true dark sea-green, that green with the blue fire underlying. And big John Saxon saw a good quantity, also, of scarf pins, and such jewelry as men will wear even on the range.

He looked at these things in a dreamy way. He picked up an entire handful of the uncut gems and let them drift carelessly through his fingers, like a precious sand.

That made him think of the running sands of time, and the old metaphor made him smile. Time itself, in fact, had taken on a new meaning, a brighter face, and the moments of his life had a greater importance.

He thought back to the years of hard labor in the course of which he had developed his little property and gradually built up his herd. Well, all of that start in life, which had so contented him, was now wiped out; but in a moment, at a stroke, he had taken in enough to balance many and many a ranch larger than the one that had been stripped of all his work.

Well, it was a different matter. He was counting his pulse now in pain, as the blood urged against the bullet furrow across his scalp. And in the moment of the battle he had risked his life. In order to gain this? No, not for the money, but for the man, and the man was gone! This was a mere by-product of his action against the Solitaire. This heaped fortune became as cheap as dirt, viewed in such a light, and he thought more of one flash of the eyes of the Solitaire than of all that fortune had now given to him.

The man grew in his mind, not in size but like a light toward which



one rides through thick night. All of these other people were dim, small, unimportant. The blood that he had lost, the two dead men, nothing mattered compared with the Solitaire, his beauty, his pride, his disdain of danger.

It was a strange trick of fortune that had made the Solitaire turn, and then forced him to flee during the battle. No matter what adventures that famous man had had, it was certain that men had never seen him apparently frightened by a single enemy! It was only an appearance, John Saxon knew. And he knew, also, that he would have to pay in the future for this day's work.

The result was that he looked down on the accumulated funds with a perfectly indifferent eye.

Pike announced: "Gents, there's a hundred and seventy-five thousand in this pile, and that ain't saying anything about the jewels. This here haul," went on Pike gravely, "is one of them things that you don't bump into twice, I reckon. How we going to divide it, chief?"

His hungry eyes lifted to the face of John Saxon, who merely said: "Well, there are six of us."

"Hey," said Pike, in violent protest, "the Negro don't come in for a full share, because he didn't do any of the fighting!"

Arthur William Creston looked at his chief and said nothing. He merely shrugged his vast shoulders in submission to fate.

"Creston," said Saxon, "found this place for us. He would have fought as well as the next man, but I wouldn't let him. He gets a full share."

"It's wrong!" said Pike. "There ain't no justice in that! I wouldn't stand for it!"

"Wouldn't you stand for it?" Saxon sneered.

HE looked at the man and realized the snaky danger in him, and then mastered that danger by the sheer power of his eye alone.

"If you won't stand for it, sit for it, or lie down for it," said Saxon. "What I say, goes."

"Hold on," put in Cullen. "Is it going to be that nobody has any word except you, chief?"

"No. Nobody else has a damned word to say," answered Saxon. "Doesn't that suit you?"

Cullen scowled, but he scowled down at the table.

"You're takin' a mighty high road with us," he declared.

Creston stepped suddenly to the side of his chief and faced the others silently. It was plain that the camp was divided into two distinct parties, at that moment, but Saxon waved the huge Negro away.

"I don't need your help, Arthur," he said. "If these hombres want trouble, they can have all that I can give them."

He saw Pike's hand move suddenly toward his hip; he saw Del Bryan lean over a little like a man about to run forward.

Saxon merely smiled. Why, if there had been a thousand of them, after facing the Solitaire, he felt that he could have laughed at such people.

"Start it, Del," he said to Bryan. "Start it, Pike. I'm ready and waiting."

He stepped back a little and saw that Boots, from the side, was watching with an air of cold amusement and interest. There was plainly no more personal devotion in Boots than in a hawk of the air.

But Bryan and Pike, after staring an instant at their chief, glanced aside toward one another and seemed to realize, after that glance,



that they did not want to fight on this point.

"Well," said Pike sullenly, "you fix things your own way. You done some pretty good work to-day, and we oughta humor you a little."

"Nobody humors me in this outfit," answered Saxon. "You're hired hands, the rest of you. Understand? Hired hands! I take you on when I please, and I fire you when I'm ready. This is my ranch," he added, with a sudden and brutal increase of savagery in his breast even as he saw them submitting. He waved his hand toward the windows. "I used to have a ranch, over youder. It's wiped out. I've got to farm the rocks and the roads now, and I've got to have my hired hands to help me. But I don't ask what they want to do. I tell them. Does that go down?"

Cullen answered gloomily: "It's gotta go down. It looks to me like you got us licked. Pike and Del Bryan are takin' water, and I've taken it from you before. Boots don't give a damn what happens, one way or the other, and Creston is with you. That's the lay of the land. How much of the hard cash are you goin' to give us?"

This was a humiliating surrender, but Pike and Del Bryan, though they scowled bitterly, did not raise a voice in protest.

"If there's a hundred and seventy-five thousand," said John Saxon, "one third ought to go to me. That's the way that the Solitaire worked his deals, and that's the way that I work mine. Whether it suits you or not, that's what I get."

He waved toward the jewels.

"There's another seventy or eighty thousand in that pile of stuff. That rock in that stick pin is worth five thousand alone. I've watched the prices in the jewelry windows.

Well, I won't bother about that. The five of you can split up the jewels any way you please. Give me fifty-eight thousand in cash, and we'll call it quits. That gives the rest of you something around thirty-five or forty thousand apiece. Boots, bring out my share when it's been divided."

HE saw astonishment in their faces. After the tyrannical nature of his opening, it was no wonder that they were surprised by the generosity of this division. No leader of any outlawed crew would have been content with less than two or perhaps three shares for himself. And it was he who had drawn the Solitaire away from the other men, tempted the rest of the crew into a trap, and then stood the brunt of the battle with the great gunman while his men had an easy task given to them.

Amazed, they stared at one another. Del Bryan suddenly jumped up and exclaimed:

"By thunder, chief, that's white of you! If that's the stuff you're made of, you can kick me around as much as you please."

Saxon said nothing. He went out and sat in front of the house and looked again at the mountains. They were, in fact, his ranch. Every road that wound through them was a possible river of wealth on which he might levy a tribute. Immense power would be in his hands. He could strike where he pleased, and success would make him stronger and stronger and gather under him a more formidable band of picked men.

He was in the midst of those thoughts when Boots came out to him. He had a thick sheaf of bills in his hands; Saxon crammed them



with perfect indifference into a side pocket of his coat.

"You did it," said Boots calmly. "I didn't think there was a man in the world that could take Cullen and Del Bryan and Pike and make them eat humble pie the way you've made them. That was a pretty slick job. It was as good a bluff as I ever seen."

"What makes you think it was a bluff?" asked John Saxon, and he lifted his glance to Boots. There was new power in his eye. Before, the faces of men had been objects more awe-inspiring than great mountains, prospects more mighty than the loftiest summits could give upon. But now, since he had encountered the Solitaire, all other men seemed without force. So he looked straight into the bright, slightly puckered eyes of Boots, and saw them widen suddenly.

"Why, maybe it wasn't a bluff, after all," muttered Boots. "You got me beat about as bad as you beat the rest of 'em. But I'd like to ask you a question."

"Shoot."

"What made you give Creston such a break?"

"Because he's the best of the lot of you," said Saxon.

Boots said nothing. He merely stared. And Saxon went on, more calmly than ever:

"You're a poisonous snake, Boots. So is Del Bryan. Pike is simply a brute. Cullen is a better cut, but not so good. Any one of you would put a knife in my back if you had a fair chance and thought that there was much to gain by it. But Creston would give his blood for me—just now, at least."

At this abrupt and cruel summing up, Boots said: "If we're such a rotten lot, I suppose you're through with us?"

"Why should I be through with you as long as I can use you?" asked the leader. "You know the ways of the Solitaire. And the others are tools sharp enough to cut."

It seemed to him, as he talked on with Boots, that wisdom and keen insight were given to him increasingly, from moment to moment. He was certain that what he said was the very naked truth.

"What's the next step?" asked Boots submissively.

"I got to find out if I have a right to this coin," said big John Saxon. "I mean, to the part of it above the price of the cattle and house I lost. The rest of you scatter wherever you please and meet me at that old shack where you and I were together three days from this."

## CHAPTER XIX.

### CRESTON'S STORY.

THE farewells were brief. Of the horses taken from the men of the Solitaire, one was a long, rather low-built and powerful roan gelding with a Roman nose and a little red-stained eye. John Saxon chose that one to carry his bulk. There were three minutes of savage pitching in the brute before the kinks were straightened out of it, then Saxon waved to the others and rode down the slope.

He would make White Water, without much haste, around sunset time, and that, he felt, was the safe hour for him to enter the place. For how matters stood for him in that town or in all the world, at this moment, he could not tell; and how his attack on the great Solitaire and his seizure of this wealth would appear in the eye of the law, he could not quite guess. He only knew, by instinct and the actual words of Daniel Finlay, that the



world owed him something. Finlay would be able to tell him just what his rights were.

He was more than an hour on the way when he heard a horse coming behind him through the thick of a shadowy wood. He pulled back into a thicket and saw, presently, the huge bulk of Arthur William Creston, on the powerful gray mare.

Was the Negro trying to run him down for the sake of the money in his pocket?

He waited until Creston had gone by and then called out behind him. What followed was a perfect answer to his question, for instead of whirling about guiltily, Creston called a cheerful answer, then pulled up his mare.

Saxon joined him at once and saw that Creston was grinning, though apparently not totally at ease.

"You ain't sour because I followed along, are you chief?" asked Creston. "It sort of hit me all at once that those other gents, they didn't want me, much. They felt I was too much on your side, and then I thought that maybe the best place for me would be right alongside of you on the old gray mare. Does that sound to you, chief, or had I better take my own trail and stick to it?"

"I'd rather have you with me," said Saxon calmly, "than anybody I know in the world. We'll stay together. Maybe we'll have a need of each other before we're much older."

Creston was delighted. He was so happy that, as they rode on again, he following a few horse lengths behind his leader, he could not help bursting into song in a vast, huskily melodious baritone. It reminded Saxon a little of the howling of a great dog, with the voice reduced to the order of music.

It was Creston's rifle that picked

up a mountain grouse; it was Saxon's revolver that knocked over a rabbit. And they camped at noon on the lip of a cliff in the upper valley of the White Water, with a ribbon of water flowing over the edge and shaking out into spray, and the forest stopping suddenly on the verge of the rock, so that from pine-scented shadow Saxon could look out over the great valley below, like a bird perched on a lofty cloud.

Creston roasted the meat in generous chunks on the end of splinters of wood. They ate that meat with salt and they had water to drink. That was a meal.

**A**FTERWARDS they lolled for a time, smoking, stretching their bodies on the ground, for a man who lives in the saddle finds no rest in merely sitting down.

"Boss," said the big Negro, "what would you be planning on now, if you don't mind telling me?"

"No matter what I plan," answered Saxon, "the thing I have to do is to find the Solitaire and beat him."

"Boss," said the Negro, "you got a mighty fine eye and you got a mighty fast hand, but you can't stand up to the Solitaire, I reckon."

Saxon stared.

"The other gents," said the giant, "they didn't look none too close. They just seen that you and the Solitaire was shooting at each other, and then there was the Solitaire galloping back as they started shooting up his gang. But I wasn't allowed to use no gun, and I lay on the edge of the woods and saw how the first bullet knocked you down in the saddle. I reckon that the Solitaire thought you was a dead man, chief, before he went and left you."

"That's what he thought, no



doubt," said Saxon. "He was a faster and a steadier man than I was, to-day. But maybe I can learn to be faster and steadier still."

"That's right, boss," said Arthur Creston. "But when you sat there, close up to the Solitaire, was you able to look him in the eye?"

Saxon drew in a quick breath. He had not expected that question. He countered it with another.

"How much do you know about the Solitaire?" he asked.

"I know kind of a lot," said the Negro. "I was up in the mountains, ridin' range, doin' a regular cow-hand's work, and one day I found there was a long stretch on my range that didn't have no cows on it, not even down near the water holes, where mostly I'd find some of 'em loafin' after they come in to drink. And so I looked around and found trails of cows goin' all one way, and the sign of hosses, too. I follered along till I got in the choke of a valley, and seen the herd gathered and marchin', and heard the clashin' of the horns, and the bellerin'. Then I seen gents ridin' point, and when I started lookin' for those in the tail of the herd, all at once a gent comes out at me from around a rock and sticks me up, and that gent was the Solitaire.

"Well, sir, when I seen him, I had to throw up my hands, but he was sort of careless with me, and I got a chance to grab him, sudden, and we both rolled off our hosses.

"And I never yet seen the man that could stand a few grips of my hands!"

He held them out and stared down at them. The tendons of the wrist looked as big as fingers, straining hard.

"And I sort of got the Solitaire under," said the Negro, remembering with a dim wonder and horror

in his eyes, "and I thought that I could smash him, but all at once I looked into his eyes, and those eyes of his wasn't buggin' out, no matter how hard I was squashin' him, and they burned and glared at me, and the fire blew up higher and higher in them, and somehow the man inside of me caught the fire, and burned to a crisp—and all at once he was on top, and he give me a rap alongside the jaw with the rock that he'd picked up from the ground."

Arthur Creston paused and shook his head.

"They was camped, not far from there—the Solitaire and some of his gents, and they took me on for a cook, and they ironed me up with the chain out of a bear trap, so's I was hobbled and couldn't go far, and they kept me there in the chain till one day the Solitaire, he come and showed me a newspaper that had been brought in, and in the newspaper there was a reward offered for anybody that got me arrested. Because, you see, I'd disappeared from the ranch the same time the cows went, and folks nacherally kind of thought that I was the rustler.

"'Now,' says the Solitaire, 'I'm goin' to take the irons off you, and you can run free, because the minute you get away from this camp, they're goin' to pick you up—and the devil with you!'

"Why, I seen that there was a lot of sense in what he said, and I kept with that camp for another month, and finally I managed to get away. But I never been able to work for honest men, since that time, and I been ridin' with this gang, and cookin' for that gang, but I never drawed down an honest dollar to this day!"

He stopped, with a sigh.



"Do you like the life?" asked Saxon curiously.

"Why, sir," said the Negro, "it ain't a bad kind of a life. It's as free as a bird. You get frost-bit in winter, pretty often; and you get sun-dried in the summer, crossin' a desert now and then, and pretty often there ain't any grub; but it's a free life. Only, even a bird nests once a year, maybe, and I'd be pretty glad to lay up once in a while."

"Matter of fact, Creston," said John Saxon, "you're sick of the business. You were always sick of it. And you'd like to go straight if you could find a chance."

"Yes, sir, I sure would!" said Creston heartily. "And if your way goes straight, that's how I'd like to head."

Saxon nodded. Where he would be going himself, finally, he could not tell.

"Getting back to the Solitaire," he said, "I'll tell you the truth—that I couldn't look into his eyes, Arthur. I had to look at his forehead, high up, and keep my mind hard against looking into his eyes because there was such a bright devil in them."

Creston, wagging his head, answered: "Maybe you won't have no luck agin' the Solitaire till you *can* look him straight in the eye, chief."

"What makes you think that, Arthur?"

"I dunno," said Creston. "It sort of come over me when I was standin' in the kitchen of the house, back there, and I seen you look at Pike and Cullen and the rest and take hold of 'em with your eyes, and I sort of thought that nobody else in the world could take hold of men life that, except the Solitaire. And he'll never die till he meets a sharper eye than his own, sir."

"Aye, and maybe," muttered

Saxon. "How does a man sharpen his eye, though?"

"I don't know, boss," answered Creston. "Maybe by doing what the Solitaire has done."

"Murdering people, you mean?"

"No, but going to hell and back the way he's done."

IT was not a very satisfactory answer, but Saxon brooded over it all the way to White Water, and as a matter of fact his thoughts were so seriously pre-occupied that it was well after dark before he rode into the upper edge of the town.

He came up behind the Rolling Bones Saloon, first, and looking through the end window of the bar, he made out Lefty Malone serving three men.

He tapped on the window. Malone at once pulled it up and leaned over the sill into the night.

"That you, Mug?" asked Malone cheerfully.

Then he saw the horseman and started to draw back.

"It's all right, Lefty," said Saxon. "Keep your voice down."

"Sure, kid, sure!" agreed Lefty. "Boy, but I been needin' you to-day."

"For what?"

"Because there's been half a dozen thugs here tryin' to make themselves a name by cleanin' up my saloon. Ever since you went away, the boys all seem to think that the place to stage a fight is right in here. I'm goin' to lose money on broken glass all the rest of my days, kid, because you been here and give the place a reputation."

"How is it for me to be back in the town?"

"It's not good for you to be any-



where the rest of your life!" growled Malone.

"Why not?"

"You've made your bed. Now go and lie on the damn cactus," said Malone. "You wanted trouble and now you got plenty of it, I guess. Not many nights you'll sleep soft before the Solitaire gets to you."

"Who you talkin' to, Lefty?" asked one of the men at the bar.

"The ghost of my father-in-law's uncle's sister," said the saloon man, without turning his head. "Know him?"

Big John Saxon was asking: "Outside of the Solitaire—I mean about the people in town, how does the chatter about me go?"

"What makes you think that they'd be spending time talking about you?"

"I'm just asking," answered Saxon. "I want to know what the feeling is."

"So's you can come back here and go to work? You always got a home here with me, John, dog-gone it!"

"I'm not coming back here, but still I'm asking."

"They talk hard about you," answered Lefty Malone. "They say that you've sure started for hell with a whoop and a holler. But tell me how things are goin' with you, will you?"

"It'd make your heart ache if things didn't go well with me, wouldn't it?"

"You always were a fresh young feller," said Lefty, "but I kind of miss the sight of your mean mug."

"You miss it in the cash register, you ought to say."

"I miss it there, all right," said Lefty Malone. "But listen to me."

"I'm listening, Lefty."

"If you get broke, there's always a hand-out for you here."

"Thanks. I take that white of

you. Can you give me any more news that I need to know?"

"Sure. Your girl has picked up a new fellow."

"Has she, eh?"

"By name of Wilmer Whalen. He's a gent from the outside that's come here to look over the old mill and start the wheels turnin' again. He says that he's goin' to give new life to White Water."

"What sort of a looking hombre?"

"Oh, about your size, but good-looking," said Lefty Malone. "There ain't any scars on him, and the sheriff don't want to know where to find him."

"Does the sheriff want to know where to find me?"

"He's goin' to want to know where to find you before long. It's all in the air for you to take a flop in the jail, brother, or go to sleep in Boot Hill."

Saxon looked away from that broad, dimly lighted face. He saw the stars, and they whirled into thin, brief streaks of light.

"Is that all the news?" he asked.

"Yes," said the saloon keeper. "Now what you got to tell me?"

"Just a little rumor that the Solitaire ran into a snag, got his gang shot up, lost every bit of his loot, and had to run to save his hide. That's all I heard. So long, Lefty."

"Wait a minute! Hey, wait! Is that straight?" pleaded Malone.

"Nothing is straight but a left to the chin," said big John Saxon. "So long, partner."

## CHAPTER XX.

### MARY'S OPINION.

WHEN Saxon pulled back through the darkness and the trees, he rejoined the big Negro, who was waiting patiently at the head of his gray mare.



Even in the darkness, she was grazing. The bit clicked softly, with a muffled sound, against her teeth.

Saxon said to him: "Everything goes right along smooth and pretty in the old home town, and the old folks are waiting for Johnny with a tear in the eye and a joint of lead pipe in the fist. Stay here while I go and see my girl that's giving me the double cross."

Then he added: "Or else you might drift along slowly behind me. Much danger of you being recognized and picked up in this town?"

"God gimme shoulders too wide for my head, and folks never are goin' to forget it," answered Creston, with his usual good nature. "I better wait here till I hear guns, and then I'll come for you, chief."

"There won't be any guns. I'll be back before long," said Saxon.

He went straight to the home of Mary Wilson. Her window, at the back of the house, was open to the soft stir of the night air. Saxon reached up and tapped lightly against the pane. When he repeated the noise, he heard the rustle of bed-clothes, then the squeak of springs. An indistinct form appeared through the blackness of the room.

"Mary?" he called quietly.

In the darkness the figure was lost to him for a moment and then came on again. He reached in both his big hands for her, but she gave him only her own cool hands to hold.

"Is that all?" asked Saxon.

She kneeled on the floor, and so brought her face almost down to the level of his. Leaning forward, she touched his forehead with her lips.

"That's sisterly," said John Saxon.

"You've been hurt!" she gasped. Her hands went out to him and touched the bandage that girdled

his head. "What has happened, John?"

"You'll hear about it later on—rumors are in the air," said Saxon. "But the think I want to talk about is more important. I want to tell you that I've got nearly sixty thousand dollars. Is that enough for us to set up housekeeping?"

"John," said the faint, quavering voice of grief, "what have you done?"

"I've gotten sixty thousand bucks," said Saxon. "Doesn't that make sense?"

"You can't make that much money!" mourned the girl. "Not in such a short time. Dear old John, tell me what you've done!"

"Sure I'll tell you," said Saxon. "I've gone out and stubbed my toe against a pile of hard cash. I shifted it into my pocket, and there you are!"

"You've robbed some one! John, they'll have you in prison!"

"I'll tell you the straight of it. With some others, I ran into the Solitaire. No need for the details. The Solitaire is still alive. He was tricked or perhaps he would have beaten us. But, anyway, we had the luck, and we broke up his gang and got the hard cash. It belongs to us as much as to any people in the world. My share is about sixty thousand. I'm asking you again, is that enough to start housekeeping on?"

"Sixty thousand dollars of stolen money?"

"I'm telling you again, it's as much mine as anybody's."

"It was stolen by the Solitaire—it's stolen money, John!"

"The Solitaire would have kept it, too. I didn't steal it. Taking it from the Solitaire isn't stealing it. It's simply taking a gambling chance and winning cash with guns. Isn't



that straight? Listen to me: I'll have to meet the Solitaire some day. I don't know how soon. He might put me down. I might put him down. I want to know if it's fair for you and me to be married. I've got the money here, and we might have a few months of happiness, no matter how things turn out in the end. If you lose me, you'll have something to make life worth while after me. That's taking things at the worst. At the best, I beat the Solitaire when he shows his hand. And we go on being happy the rest of our lives."

HE saw her rocking back and forth, back and forth, and her head swaying against the rhythm of her body, like one keeping silent in spite of great agony.

"How could I sleep a night in a house built with stolen money, John? Don't you see that?"

"I don't see that. You drive me pretty near crazy when you keep on talking like this, though."

"Will you do one thing for me, John? Will you go to somebody wiser than I am, and ask him whether or not that money belongs to you?"

"Go to some one?" he growled. "I fought for that money. That coin was as good as gone from honest men. The Solitaire and his gang of thugs got it."

"Did you have honest men along with you?" she asked.

"Well, honest enough. What difference does it make?" he demanded.

"Two wrongs don't make a right."

"Mary, I'm not hearing you talk like this. It's some one else! You couldn't talk this way!"

"I'm not talking any way, John, I'm trying to show you the straight thing to do!"

"I don't need any telling about the straight thing to do. I've spent my life working like a dog. Now I get some coin from a thug—and you want me to throw it away! Throw it where? That's what I ask you. Throw it where?"

"Back to the people that the Solitaire robbed."

"I don't know whom he took this money from."

"Everybody suspects that he did the Stillman raid, not long ago."

"People suspect, people suspect—yes, but who knows? Nobody knows. Why should I throw that money away on a suspicion after I've fought for it?"

"Because unclean money can't do you any good, John. You'll only lose the money and your honor along with it."

"You're against me," groaned Saxon. "It's because you don't want to see things my way."

"I'm not against you," she pleaded.

"You are!" declared Saxon, with an aching emptiness where his heart should have been. "You're with the rest of the people of White Water—all against me! You have cut me out of sight, Mary, and now you'll have me out of mind, soon."

"But it isn't true——" began the girl.

"There's the fellow who's come to start the wheels of the old mill and put new life in White Water. You can spend your time on him now. Isn't that straight? This fellow Whalen—what about him?"

"He's as fine and straight and decent and good a man as I know!" exclaimed the girl.

"Yeah. And I'll bet that he is," said Saxon. "He's the best you know, and that's why you'll have him, eh? Well, that's the wisest attitude. That's what makes women



good marketers. They know a bargain when they see one. They know values."

"John," said the girl, "what's happened to you? I've only known him for two days. There's no harm. There's not even been a bit of serious talk between us."

"Enough to make every one in the town chatter about you, though," said Saxon.

"Who? Who?" she demanded angrily.

"Even the mobs in the bars," said Saxon.

"Have you been discussing me with bartenders and drunkards?" asked the girl.

"You're *asking* for a quarrel," declared Saxon.

"I've never heard you talk in such a boorish way!" answered Mary Wilson.

"Then I'll get out of your way," said Saxon.

"John, John, what *is* the matter with you? If you want better advice than mine, go to some one you can trust."

"And who would that be?"

"Well, you've always had a lot of respect for Daniel Finlay. I suppose that he's honest if any man is honest!"

"Finlay? Well, suppose I go to him?"

"If he says that it's all right—if he can say that—then I'll do whatever you say. You know it isn't money that I care about, John. I was always willing to marry you and live in a tent. I don't care about the place. You're the one who always wanted to have me hold up my head as high as the other girls can do!"

The truth of this struck home in him. But still he was wounded. And in a sullen anger, which would

not pass quickly, he drew back from her.

"I'll see Finlay again. And then I'll let you know. To-morrow, perhaps."

"Mary!" called the sudden voice of her father.

"Yes!" she answered.

"Did I hear you talking in your sleep?"

"No," she answered. "I was awake."

There was an exclamation. Feet pounded on the floor. John Saxon would have withdrawn, but the hands of the girl clung to him. That was how Wilson found them.

He was in a fury at once. "Who's that? Who's there?"

"I'm John Saxon," said Saxon.

"Sneaking around here in the middle of the night?" exclaimed Wilson. "I don't want you near this place again, Saxon. Mary, close that window and go back to bed."

"If you order him away from the house," said the girl, "I'll go outside with him."

"What are you talking about?" gasped Wilson. "Haven't I a right to give orders in my own house?"

"Yes. But I have a right to go with John if he asks me to go."

"True," groaned Wilson.

"It's all right," said Saxon. "I'm leaving now. I'll be back sometime to-morrow, I hope. It's all right, Mr. Wilson. Mary, good night."

He got away quickly and lengthened his stride as he went down the street toward the house of Daniel Finlay.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### FINLAY'S PROMISE.

**D**ANIEL FINLAY, after his supper, always kept the light burning until midnight or later, and the sheen of the lamp through the drawn shade in the



front of the room proclaimed to the village the lateness of the hours which Daniel Finlay kept. What percentage of his reputation as a sage was due to this lamp of his, it would have been hard to say. On two or three occasions, when neighbors had a chance to break in on him, he was found leaning over a large tome on his desk. As a matter of fact, he kept smaller volumes of far lighter reading always at hand in drawers of that same desk, and a single gesture of his hand was enough to cause the fiction to disappear. On this night, the rap on the door actually roused Daniel Finlay as his head lay on the book he had been brooding over, and he hastily straightened and blinked the sleep out of his eyes.

Then he called out for the stranger to enter.

The door being pushed open, big John Saxon stood on the threshold with his face a little drawn, that pallor still clinging to the lower part of his features like a white mask, and a big bandage wrapped around his head.

He closed the door hastily behind him, and his eyes flickered rapidly once to this side and once to that, as though to make sure that he was alone with the lawyer.

For an instant, as Finlay stared at that grim face, the dread that springs out of a guilty heart rose like a fountain of ice through his soul, but a single backward glance assured him that the other could hardly know of the treachery of which Finlay had been capable. So the lawyer stood up, slowly, with dignity, and with a grave smile and that handless gesture of welcome, he received his guest.

John Saxon accepted the left hand with something that was almost reverence. He said:

"It's good to see you, Mr. Finlay. I've been out where there ain't many people like you."

Finlay thanked him. "You've been hurt. There's been fighting, Saxon!" he suggested.

"The Solitaire," said Saxon briefly.

Finlay gripped the edge of the desk.

"The Solitaire—he wounded you but you—you killed him, Saxon?"

"I wish I had," said Saxon ruefully. "The fact is that he had me down. He thought I was dead because his first slug knocked me almost out. And then the crew I was with got to work and cleaned out his gang, and the Solitaire had to go along with the rest of 'em. But——"

"Tell me about it!" Who was with you?" gasped Finlay.

"I don't know that I have a right to name 'em," said Saxon. "Not even to you. I trust you. Yes, I trust you a lot more than I trust myself, as I'm about to show you, but I don't think that I have a right to name other men."

"I don't press you," said Finlay hastily. "I wouldn't dream of pressing you. There are, in every good man, certain sacred places of the conscience——"

He made a pause, there, and cleared his throat, for sometimes even Daniel Finlay was a little startled by the profound depths of his own hypocrisy. He saw before him as straightforward a youth as he had ever known. It had been his task to start poor John Saxon on a downward path. He saw, with devilish pleasure, that already, on the path which he had recommended, Saxon had rubbed elbows with death and that master purveyor of destruction, the Solitaire. But a chill of awe and something



that was even remotely akin to shame pierced the lawyer as he looked upon the handsome, troubled, and respectful face of Saxon.

"Let the names go," said Finlay. "You scattered the scoundrels, did you?"

"I drew out the Solitaire. And behind him came his men. My fellows hit 'em from the side and rubbed 'em out. Killed two of 'em and wounded another pretty badly. The Solitaire had to run, finally—though he really beat me. He gave me this—and I didn't scratch him, I think."

"And then?" asked the lawyer eagerly.

"Well, then we found a lot of loot. A pile of it. And that's why I've come to you."

**F**INLAY looked suddenly down, to keep the devil from appearing through his eyes. He loved money only a shade less than he loved mischief.

"The fact is, Mr. Finlay, that I have a share here. It amounts to fifty-eight thousand dollars. I want to ask you if I have a right to that money?"

Daniel Finlay still looked down, because he dared not lift his eyes. But finally he said:

"My dear friend, my dear lad, take the money to another man. You can find plenty who are cleverer than I am. You can find plenty who will give you welcome advice. And in that case, you'll be much happier than if I should tell you what I would have to say."

"I suppose so," sighed Saxon. "I couldn't expect good news. Mary practically told me what you would say!"

"Mary?" snapped Finlay. "Have you told her about this money?"

"Why, of course. And why not?"

"One of the first things that every young man ought to learn," said Finlay, almost angrily, "is to confide in no woman, particularly about money matters."

"Not even in a wife, say?" Saxon gaped.

"Not even in a wife. I might almost say, particularly not in a wife. However, you've done the thing. Well, now you come to me and ask me for advice? Advice about this stolen money?"

"You call it that?" asked Saxon gloomily. "Well, we fought a gang of thieves and we got their stuff. Why does that make it stolen money?"

"Because it was stolen in the first place, and because——"

"Aye, Mary said the same thing. I suppose that it's right. The whole thing has to be given up?"

"Yes!" said Finlay.

"Every penny has to go?" demanded Saxon.

"Ah, well," said the lawyer, "there would be a commission for the recovery of the money. The rightful owners, of course, would pay you a commission for recovering their goods. That's no more than fair and right."

"How big a commission?" asked Saxon.

"Why, five per cent or so. Ten per cent, even, I should suppose."

"Confound them," growled Saxon, "after a man has spent his blood and taken his life in his hands—ten per cent, eh? I should think that they'd pay twenty and thank their lucky stars that they ever saw a penny. It's the first time that anything was ever grabbed out of the teeth of the Solitaire, and the whole world knows it."

"Ten per cent—almost six thousand dollars. But then, why shouldn't you look on that as a very



handsome stake, Saxon? However, let's see the money. Have you the money with you?"

His voice took on, suddenly, such a whining tone that Saxon was startled. For an instant, the scales trembled and almost fell from before his eyes to enable him to see the fox in this man. But Finlay was instantly master of himself again.

Saxon, reaching into the deep pocket of his coat, pulled out the worn, crumpled mass of bills and dropped them helter-skelter upon the table.

"There's the stuff," he said carelessly.

Finlay stretched out swift hands to prevent any of the money from tumbling to the floor.

"Loose in your pocket—a fortune like this?" he exclaimed.

"Ah, well," said Saxon, "I'll get little good out of it, anyway. But I'd like to ask you—how are you to find the men that have lost the stuff—the men that the Solitaire robbed?"

"Oh, easily, easily," said Finlay. "It's always easy to find men who have been robbed!"

"I don't see that," said Saxon. "A lot of robberies are blamed onto the Solitaire, and a lot of them he doesn't commit. People don't get much proof to hang on him."

"Therein lies the use of a lawyer," said Finlay cheerfully. "You needn't worry about that, my lad. I'll look into the case with the greatest care. I'll find out exactly what needs to be done. I'll secure some perfect case against the Solitaire, and then we'll know exactly how much should be paid, and where. Trust it all to me!"

"Thanks," said Saxon. He looked grimly askance at the money.

"There's such a heap of it!" he said. "When I think what that would mean, turned all into beef!"

"Aye, aye," said the lawyer. "And when you think what it will mean as a lasting testimonial to you as an honest man—when I think of that, Saxon—ah, that's the thing that stirs my blood, I can tell you!"

"Does it?" muttered Saxon. He was not in doubt, but he was in a good deal of painful reluctance. The stuff seemed his. Something in his nature cried out violently that he had as good a right to it as any man. But there it was, committed to the honest hands of Daniel Finlay, who was so confident that he would be able to find the rightful owners!

"In the first place," said the lawyer, "I want to know exactly what your next steps will be."

"I'm going—well, I don't know where. I see Mary and her father sometime to-morrow, though. You know how it is with me, Mr. Finlay, and that when a man has the Solitaire for an enemy, he has to be careful where he shows himself."

"Of course I know that—of course I know that!" said the lawyer. And then, as a thought flashed like a running snake across his mind: "And as a matter of fact, I'm not so sure that I would even see Mary Wilson. On second thought, I would not see her or any one else. I would not speak to a human being in this town, my lad, but keep all secrets to yourself. And, in the meantime, I'll look up the absolute law in my books. There *are* lawyers, John, who pretend to have all law on the tips of their tongues, but I am sufficiently honest to admit that I must lean upon these dear and unfailing companions!"



Here he waved his hand toward the shelves of his books. Afterwards he went on:

"I want to make perfectly sure that I am right in feeling that you should surrender this money. But if I find in my books the least scruple of a rightful claim that you

may exert upon the fortune which now lies on my desk, then you may be sure that I shall use all my wits to establish the justice of that claim in the eye of the law. John Saxon, leave me now to my work, and return at this same time to-morrow night!"

To be continued in next week's issue.

In Next Week's Issue of Street & Smith's  
**WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE**

A Complete Novel

# A Four-eyed Maverick

By **ROBERT ORMOND CASE**

"Loco but harmless," was Lodgepole's opinion of Professor Billingsworth, when the bug hunter arrived in the hard-bitten cow town. But events thereafter disproved this initial judgment.

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# Crazy Cow Thief

By **GUTHRIE BROWN**

Yates Reardon was one of the ugliest devils that ever wore shoe leather. And there was only one thing in the world for which he had a real respect.

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Also Features by

**Max Brand**

**John Briggs**

And Others

15c A COPY

AT ALL NEWS STANDS



# COWBOY LINGO

By RAMON F. ADAMS

*(Continued from last week's issue)*

## HORSES.

Without horses there would be no cowboys, and naturally an animal so closely associated with him and his work receives many of his slang names.

The slang name for a good cutting horse is "whittler." Because apt to cling closely to its quarry's route and because sensitive to the worth of fine gradations in the angles of its dodging, a horse with such talents is said to be a "good whittler." Such a horse is also called a "carving horse," "cutter," or a "chopping horse." A saddle horse, which, when galloping in one direction, could stop short in its tracks and change its direction, and instantly bound off on a new course is a "peg pony." Such a mount is highly valued by the cowboy, especially for "cutting" work, and is also called a "pegger." The cowboy, in bragging of such an animal in his "string," will be apt to tell you that "he could turn on a quarter an' give you back fifteen cents in change."

He calls his privately owned horse his "individual," or "private," and what he calls his "Sunday hoss" is one with an easy gait, usually a single-footer with style. His humorous name for his night horse is "night mare," and his reference to the horses of long-legged punchers is "walkin' sticks."

A horse, usually a mare, which carries a loose, long, coarse, heavy tail is a "willowtail"; also called a "broomtail" or "broomie," "fuzz-

tail" or "fuzzy," while one whose tail has but little hair is said to be "rat-tailed." Range horses which live on bunch grass are "bunch grassers," and those which have the habit of leaving the remuda and pulling for the home ranch or to parts unknown are dubbed "bunch quitters."

The "rough string" is composed of horses which fight every time they are ridden. These bad horses are variously referred to as "oily broncs," or "salty broncs," and are said to be "spooky," "snaky," or to have "snake blood" or "snake eyes." A horse that has a lack of intelligence and has to be pulled around considerably before it is made to understand what is wanted is called a "jug head," "crock head," or "churn head." The horse that secretly forages the camp kitchen to indulge its acquired tastes is a "pie biter," while a "stump sucker" is a horse having the vice of biting or getting its teeth against something and "sucking wind."

A horse's physical defects also furnish slang expressions. It "paddles" when it wings out its front feet; "falls out of bed" means pulling back on the halter rope; "hog-backed" is a roached back or the opposite of swaybacked; a horse with a torn lips where the bridle bit rests is said to "smoke his pipe"; and "forging" is when a horse struck its front shoes with the toe of its hind one. It is said to be "coon-footed" when it has long and very low pasterns, and "clear-footed" when it is



able to dodge gopher holes, et cetera. "Cold-jawed" means that a horse has a hard mouth, while "smooth mouth" is the reference to an aged horse.

A broken-down horse is a "plug," and if one is in poor condition, it is "shad-bellied," "slab-sided," "crow bait," and has "bed-slat ribs." In speaking of such a horse, a cowboy once remarked to us that "that ole hoss was dead but jes' wouldn't lay down." One bloated on grass is "grass-bellied" or "pot-gutted."

To overrun a horse is to "jigger" it, and to overheat it is to "bake" it. To ride a horse until its back becomes sore is to "beefsteak" or "gimlet" him, and such sores are called "set fasts." The catarrhal disease common among horses and known as distemper is called "epizootic" by the cowboy.

Colors in horses also have their

slang names, such as "flea-bitten" for a white horse whose hide is covered with small brown freckles, "paint" for pinto or a spotted color, and many others.

In speaking of horses, the cowboy is very apt in his figures of speech. Any one who has been around horses has heard them snort, but it took a cowboy to express it as "he snorts like he had rollers in his nose." One cowboy, in speaking of the speed of a certain horse, said it was "as fast a hoss as ever looked through a bridle." In speaking of a horse's gentleness, he is apt to express it as "this hoss is so gentle y'u could stake him to a hairpin." A very fitting description of a horse shaking itself was uttered by "Tex" Coleman when he said: "This hoss shakes hisself like a dog leavin' water, an' the saddle pops an' cracks."

To be continued in next week's issue.

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## DIES WITH SECRETS

**L**ITTLE DANCE has gone to a better teepee, taking with him hundreds of Ponca Indian secrets known to no one else alive.

He was the last of the Ponca medicine men, and he lived to become the sole keeper of ceremonial mysteries that ranged from the mixing of paints to the ritual of the forbidden sun dance, and included the key to the rites of the seven tribal bands.

Little Dance, reputedly wealthy, died recently at the Ponca reservation in Oklahoma. He did not know when he was born, but it was more than one hundred years ago, for he recalled the great meteor shower of November, 1833.

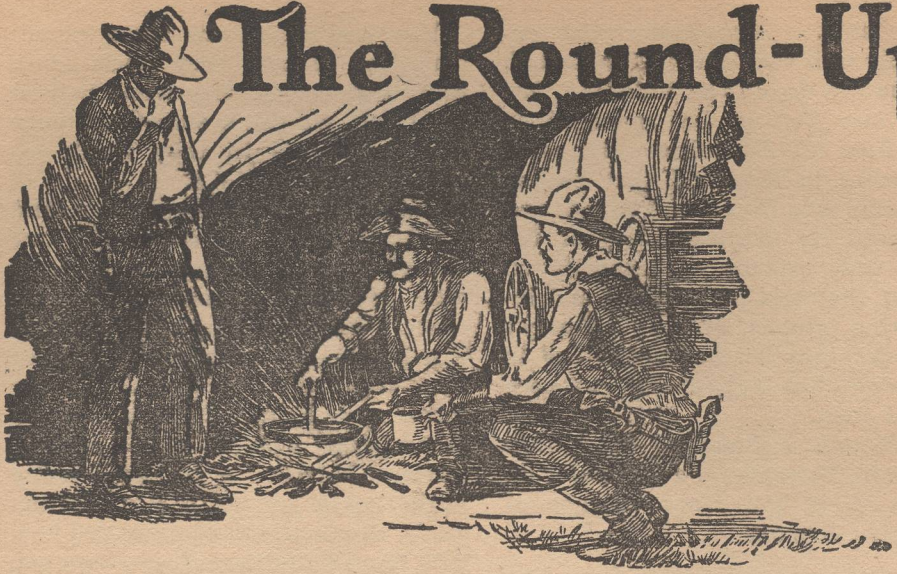
Much of his unwritten knowledge was of the sort that one medicine man entrusts only to another medicine man. Little Dance was the last, and the ancients who, through participation in the sacred dances, knew some of the ritual, died before him.

The young Indians were more interested in the ways of the white man, and Little Dance never talked to white men.

So he kept his secrets.



# The Round-Up



**F**OLKS, because so much favorable comment has come in as to the work the artist Eggenhofer is doing on his headings in *Western Story Magazine*, and because these comments about Artist Eggenhofer's work have been coupled with a request for information regarding him, we have decided to tell you something about him.

As a boy in Bavaria, Eggenhofer's entire literary diet consisted of *Street & Smith's old Buffalo Bill Weekly*, which, by the way, was the father of the magazine you hold in your hand. In 1912 Eggenhofer decided that he would visit the land of "Buffalo Bill," so he took boat and arrived alone in this country. He was fourteen years old. Eggenhofer had no knowledge of our language or of our customs, only a desire to go to Buffalo, New York, and "look over the Indians." This boy of fourteen assumed that if a place was named Buffalo, there must be buffalo and Indians to hunt 'em all over the prairie. But though he discovered that he was mistaken in this, Eggenhofer started in to learn

our language, and to-day does better at it than most of us. Eggenhofer didn't confine all his linguistic efforts to English. He knows some Spanish, and can make himself understood in the language of the American Indian.

He finally worked with a lithographer and found that he had talent for drawing. It was not until then that he had the remotest idea that he could draw. At night Eggenhofer went to art classes and, while still a student and apprentice of the lithographer, he brought samples of his work to *Street & Smith*. These were purchased, and this gave him a start.

His insatiable interest in all things that had to do with the West increased with Eggenhofer, and to-day he is considered an authority by all artists and many writers on things Western. During the years that he has been doing headings for *Western Story Magazine*, there has never been a complaint about the accuracy of his portrayals.

Eggenhofer has made many trips to the West, and in later years has always taken with him a movie camera. His films of the West are



remarkable. Eggenhofer is extremely well read and well educated, and he has done it all himself. The very fact that he has managed to surmount all difficulties that were presented to him, and that he has made his way in a strange land, and mastered its language, and at the same time become an authority on one of the most picturesque and interesting phases of this country's life, can only be accounted for in one way—that Eggenhofer is a very gifted man.

Although a lover of all things Western, Eggenhofer's particular interest is in the Hopi villages of northern Arizona.

A kind word for poetry from Fay L. Snyder, of Austin, Minnesota:

"BOSS AND FOLKS: Comment pro and con regarding the talent of our story and article writers has regularly been made, but never a word concerning the merits of those who write poetry for Western Story Magazine. I note with much satisfaction that after a day off, or several weeks, another classic came in the Christmas number. I am speaking up in an attempt to place some credit where it properly belongs, namely with Hallock and Keller, those architects who so ably build with 'ornaments of rhyme.'

"A rising vote on this sentiment. Everybody's up, Mr. Chairman; count 'em. An official O. K. on this, 'cause it's unanimous: The poem's the thing. Yours for each little lyrical, grave, or satirical poetical miracle."

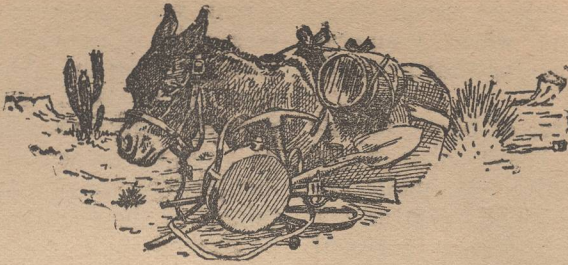
Folks, every once in so often a reader writes in and accuses our authors of nature fakin', nature fakin' bein' drawin' too long a bow when it comes to animals and the things they do.

You see, there are some people who just because they don't see a thing themselves, they won't believe it. Gosh, we think sometimes even if they do see it, they won't believe it.

We've owned a pile of dogs, and a pile of horses. We just had one experience when a dog and a horse were abnormally devoted to each other. The dog was a bull terrier. The horse—the mare, as a matter of fact—was a big drafter. This big sorrel mare named Dolly had a fine broad back. The dog was a pit bull terrier. He took a powerful fancy to that mare, and she to him. When you'd chuck the feed into the box, he'd jump up in the manger—we had false bottoms in these mangers—and he'd stand in the false bottom and eat some of the ground feed out of the box. This was when he was only a pup. When it came fall, we'd go out in the morning and find that dog curled up on the mare's back sleeping, as warm and as cozy as could be. We never saw him get up on the mare's back in the barn. We suppose he must have done it when she was down, but we're not sure of this.

Sometimes we'd ride that mare up to a fenced pasture lot we had on a hill. We patted the mare on the back one time and called to the dog to get up, and he did it with one leap. The dog sat right there, and we jogged the mare. That dog would never leave that mare after we turned her out, would never go more than ten or fifteen feet away from her all day long. Well, when we'd go up to get the mare on another horse, we'd put the dog up on the mare's back. He'd sit there and ride as nice as you please. He enjoyed it. Of course we've seen things like that in the circus, but the dogs were trained to do it. This dog did it because he loved to do it.





# 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.

**W**HAT to take on a prospecting trip often resolves itself into a question of what you can leave behind.

Carry with you only what is necessary, or will be useful to you. Don't burden yourself with too many fancy gadgets, or too much "foofuraw."

Charles W., of Burlington, Vermont, is camper enough to realize this but he wants to know just what is necessary.

"Mr. Thompson," he writes, "my brother and I are planning a prospecting trip to the West. We want to go out to some of the gold regions in Arizona or New Mexico. I have camped a little locally on short hunting trips and on summer vacations, and I don't believe in burdening myself with stuff that isn't necessary. Still there are some things a fellow must have—tent or shelter of some sort, cooking utensils, and so forth. Anything you can tell me

about the essentials including prospecting equipment will be greatly appreciated."

In general there are several important factors to be considered in planning a prospecting outfit. For instance, locality, season, climate, proposed length of trip, distance from any town or supply point, and the means of transportation one intends to use.

A chap using a car to get him through the back trails can readily take in more than a man with a pack animal. And an hombre toting his outfit on his shoulders is still more restricted. Fellows with Alaska in mind would probably figure to a nicety the quantity of oatmeal to be included in the grub allowance. To the desert prospector working beneath a blazing sun in a region where water was scarce anyhow, oatmeal would be just so much excess baggage.

Charlie W., however, says his des-



ination is Arizona or New Mexico which for the most part means semi-arid country and warm temperatures. We are keeping that in mind, Charlie.

Take the matter of boots, for instance. Stout, heavy-soled boots are always in order. Hobnails are an advantage. The matter of height is more or less a personal question. Some prefer the full calf-length. Others like a nine-inch boot, and claim the higher length has a tendency to bind on the calf muscles. But remember there are rattlesnakes in the Southwest. Even if you have heretofore been a low-boot addict, it is best to be desertwise and wear the calf-length boot in snake country.

As far as general equipment is concerned, you will need first of all shelter of some description—usually a tent. For a semipermanent camp the wall-style tent is perhaps the more roomy and comfortable. They run in sizes from five by seven to fourteen by sixteen feet and range in weight from twenty-four pounds up to around seventy-five depending on size and the quality of the canvas. A ten by twelve makes a roomy camp home for two or three men.

A further list will include of course tent pins—take the steel variety along for desert camping—lengths of rope, a small canteen for each member of the party and a large one for general use.

Also a hammer, saw, and plenty of assorted nails will come in mighty handy. For more comfortable sleeping, take your favorite folding cot. It'll keep your bed off the ground. Even in the desert don't forget your blankets; nights are apt to be cold in spite of days that are

burning hot. Then, too, you'll want a pail, soap, lantern, matches, good jackknife, a canvas duffel bag to stow clothing in. And don't forget your shaving kit. For desert prospecting a few five-gallon "gas" cans, or a ten-gallon water keg better be included for base camp water containers as the chances are you won't be parked right alongside of a well.

Take along mercurochrome, or iodine for stray cuts that do happen, and to be on the safe side a small first-aid kit. It's worth having even if you never use it.

For cooking better have at least two stew pans, a large and a smaller one, an iron grill, a frying pan, a large mixing and stirring spoon, a good carving knife, Dutch oven, sufficient knives, forks, spoons, and tin, aluminum, or agateware cups, plates, and so forth. Don't forget a coffeepot—or the can opener.

Clothes are almost wholly a matter of personal taste. But be sure and have them serviceable, suitable for rough wear. Whipcord breeches, khaki shirts are a popular costume.

Since a list of essential tools for placer prospecting has already appeared in this department, we are not repeating it here. Instead we have mailed Charlie W. the list direct. We shall be glad to do the same for other readers who want to know just what constitutes the necessary prospecting equipment that should be included in any gold search regardless of where you contemplate prospecting for the yellow metal.

To obtain a copy, simply inclose a stamped, self-addressed return envelope with your request and send it in to the Mines and Mining Department.

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TUCSON, ARIZONA, is the only walled city in the United States.



# 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.

**A** LONG the Mother Lode of California, from the Kern country northward to Nevada City, there are thousands of pick-and-shovel prospectors, panning gold by the old '49 methods. "Prospector Slim" has a little advice to offer the chechahco.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

You will find fifteen or sixteen thousand pick-and-shovel prospectors and amateur placer miners in the hills of the Mother Lode country of California, scratching and panning by old methods for a meager existence, and always hoping to turn over that

hidden nugget with the next turn of the shovel. Most of these boys are without a grubstake, for one *can* start with overalls, pick, shovel, and pan. But it is hard to start any kind of a business without some small capital, and mining *is* a business. More than five million dollars have been invested in new gold equipment this year, and the aim of all the big companies, as well as the little snipers, is to try and find the one billion five hundred million dollars' worth of gold believed to be hidden in California's gold-mining sections. The State has produced one billion eight hundred million dollars' worth of gold since 1849, and about or approximately one billion of that was obtained from the surface by placer mining. In comparison with the way the surface has been scraped and



washed, lode mining has barely been touched. So most of the gold remaining nowadays in California will have to be *dug* for, as the old stream placers are quickly becoming a thing of the past, even when one packs back miles to the source.

Yet there is quite a little chance to prospect in dry gulches where the old-timers did not think it worth the time to dig out. For in those days flour, bacon, and beans were more costly than they are to-day, and the ground was left untouched by the old-timers if it was not considered rich enough for them. Yes, you will find old-timers out nowadays in the poorest sections, for they need only half as much to make beans and bacon.

I found much activity in the south, about Kern and Mariposa counties. These counties always were best as pocket-hunting sections, for the country was considered too dry for placer. But nowadays, with the new gold-recovery units and the up-to-date methods of saving flour gold, one can work these dry sections to advantage without a great deal of grubstake. One can also bring ditches around the mountains into these dry gulches.

But remember that gold is a gamble—you will not pick it up like prunes. It's the hardest kind of labor, and the biggest chances are taken of losing. In rough sections you may have to crawl one thousand feet down into a canyon—and also remember that you must crawl back up some time for chuck. So, if you come gold hunting, come prepared for hardships and be sure you are tough enough to rough it. Also be sure that you can live on about twenty-five cents a day if you have to. Even with the steady climb of gold, and it may reach forty dollars in the near future, I would not advise any chechahcos to make a grand rush into California—especially you of the pick-and-shovel variety—unless you come here with a grubstake to carry yourself through in case you do not make a strike the first month.

In the spring of the year, or even in the winter months, one can try his luck in central California—on the Feather, Yuba, American, Mokelumne, Stanislaus, and Tuolumne rivers. I would advise novices nowadays to try the adjacent banks, overturn big boulders, et cetera, and even follow up dry gulches. And, if possible, try to obtain other methods than mere shovel and pan or old wooden sluicé box. Also leave your car in some garage and then pack back as far as you can go, and then follow up some small creek that flows into

these larger rivers. Don't just look for gold, but pitch camp and get down to real hard work and give your section a good scraping over and prospecting.

Folks, if you want any other information or want to know where to obtain pamphlets as well as books on gold mining,



Prospector Slim has a word to say to the pick-and-shovel chechahco who is planning to trek into the Mother Lode gold country of California. Wear your friend-maker membership badges, folks, and speak up right pronto to this old-timer of the West.

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.

I will gladly comply. For you should know other methods of mining besides pan and shovel, rocker, and sluice box. I will also give you data on mining in any other section on the Pacific coast. But kindly inclose a stamped envelope, folks, addressed to yourself.

PROSPECTOR SLIM.

Care of The Tree.

Folks, here is your chance to corral a Pen Pal, together with some fine snaps.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a soldier boy stationed at Fort F. E. Warren, Wyoming. I was born in the State of Missouri, but I have spent most of my time in the United States army in foreign service. I have soldiered in China, Philippines, Hawaiian Islands, and Panama.

I am twenty-eight years old, and am very fond of all outdoor sports, especially football and basket ball. I will exchange yarns with any one who cares to write to me. And I have snapshots of many foreign countries that I will exchange with any one.

CORPORAL JOHN W. SCOTT.

A Company, First Infantry, Fort F. E. Warren, Wyoming.



This Canadian, a would-be homesteader, is looking for a straight-shooting pardner.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Yep, it is like this—I have all my plans made for taking up a homestead here in Canada. I have maps of suitable areas, government forms, and all the necessary information. I have a small stake, too, without which, of course, it would be useless to start. Now all I want is a pard—some one to go shares with me in the work of clearing and building a home; some one who also has a small stake. If there is any one who is interested in my proposition, I'd like to hear from him at once, as I intend to start out first thing this spring. The pard must be honest, willing, and have a desire to make a home in the wilderness—then he will share fortunes with me.

And now to tell a little about myself, since a prospective pard would, of course, want to know as much concerning me as possible. I am an Englishman, though I have been in Canada since an early age. I am twenty-two years old, strong and healthy, and of a good build to stand the strain. I've traveled all over Canada from coast to coast, both north and south, and also have been quite a little in the United States. I have worked at all sorts of jobs from lumbering and trapping to working in the cities, and for a time I was even a sailor. They say self-praise is no recommendation, but I want to tell you right now that I am considered a straight-shooter by every one.

Any one who cares to write will get an answer from me, and all are welcome, but especially those who might be interested in homesteading here in Canada.

VICTOR HALDEN.

131 Page Street,  
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada.

Here's a mighty good offer that some of you folks will want to consider.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I have a fine, large pressure canner and can sealer for use in putting up food in tin cans. In other words I have a complete canning outfit. Of course, I can get all the vegetables and such as that right around me, but I have a yen for canning some venison and bear steak! Is there any one among you folks who is in a place

where bear hunting is good? Where there is plenty of deer and wild turkey, to say nothing of quail and squirrel? I want to get in contact with some one who has a place where I could stay. I will furnish all the cans and equipment, the other party to produce the meat to can, and we will go shares on the whole.

I'm a widow, healthy and strong, and I know how to camp and rough it. I can handle a gun. Now please speak up, folks, and let's hear from all sides. I am unencumbered and can go anywhere I choose. Surely there are families who live on the outskirts of civilization who would take me in. I don't care a hoot how far away from a town you are. In fact I should like to get deep into some mountainous section that is wild, and where game is plentiful.

EVELYN.

Box 110, Route 1, Limona, Florida.

Alaskan, you are urged to speak up.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I would like to correspond with some one in Alaska—preferably in or around Fairbanks. I am twenty-one, and a lover of the great outdoors and all things pertaining to it. It is my desire to some day make an extended visit to that much discussed Northland, and therefore would like to receive some first-hand information concerning America's frontier. CHARLES SWETT.

29 Florence Street,  
Medford, Massachusetts.

Another hombre is looking to corral some Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

When I was sixteen, I graduated from high school and went to Chicago to seek my fortune. I got a job playing in a dance band and as dancing instructor in an academy. I made enough to work my way through four years of college. I am now twenty-two, and am giving instrumental lessons. During the past six years I have traveled a great deal in the West and in the Northern States. As leader of a dance band I've traveled in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and the Dakotas. I spent last summer in California.

I have quite a lot of leisure time on my hands and would like to get some Pen Pals from most anywhere in the United States.

AL ARENDS.

Cedar, Iowa.





# 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.

SOME time ago we had considerable to say in this department about the Lower Yellowstone Project out in Montana, and since then we have received many inquiries from readers interested in this section of the Treasure State. This week Dean P., of Cleveland, Ohio, is asking for more facts.

"As I am looking for a farm home on one of Uncle Sam's Western irrigation projects, Mr. North, I was

very much interested in your remarks about the Lower Yellowstone Project in Montana. Would it be possible for you to persuade one of your readers who knows that section personally to come across with some first-hand facts?"

Yes, sir-ree, Dean P., it is quite possible, for one of the most outstanding characteristics of Westerners is their willingness to oblige folks. We feel sure that the following letter from F. B. J., of the Lone



Star State, will give you all the information you are looking for.

"I'm mighty glad to send Dean P. some additional facts about the Lower Yellowstone Project, Mr. North. The project begins about twenty miles north of Glendive on the Northern Pacific Railroad, and extends sixty-six miles to the Missouri River. In width it varies from one half mile to fourteen miles. There are sixty-six thousand acres under the ditch and about twelve thousand acres above the ditch. The government buildings and project manager are located at Savage, thirty-three miles north of Glendive and a like distance south of Sidney.

"The growing season out there averages one hundred and twenty-five days, between killing frosts. But here is a thought for Dean to bear in mind. Without

definitely knowing, I would say that they have at least two hours more sunlight per day than we have during the summer. Likewise they have two hours less than we have during the winter season. As for the quality of the root crops grown there, it is equaled by very few places and surpassed by none.

"There is no getting out of the fact that the winters are long and cold, but nature has provided several compensations. An abundance of wood grows along the river, and just across the river are countless millions of tons of a high-grade lig-

nite coal, mostly free for the digging, and in many places the river does that for you. It is not uncommon for one man to spade out fifteen or twenty tons in one day. But, of course, this has to be done when the river is frozen over, and it takes about twenty degrees below zero to do this, so one usually looks ahead and has several tons on hand with which to start the winter.

"The average precipitation for the Lower Yellowstone district is thirteen inches, and that includes snow moisture. While there is plenty of snow, it is a rare thing for it to be moist enough to make a snowball. Most of it resembles granulated sugar or salt. It rarely rains after June twentieth until the first of October, and the first fall of rain generally winds up in a snow and the beginning of winter.

"Among other compensations, there are no weevils, so beans, flour, corn, and such things can be kept indefinitely. Also there are no rats or mice except a few field mice that never take up residence in buildings.

"Settlers out that way are more than fifty per cent Scandinavian and they are mighty fine neighbors. Cattle is usually marketed in St. Paul or Chicago, hogs in Portland or Spokane, and wheat in Minneapolis.

"While the winters are cold, forty degrees below being common, the dry air nullifies this until one hardly notices it. And I ought to know

## SPECIAL NOTICE

### THE LAS VEGAS COUNTRY OF NEW MEXICO

The Las Vegas country of New Mexico, where the prairies meet the mountains, and cow ranches dot the plains, invites one to go Western. With plenty of trout streams at hand, big-game hunting to be had in the near-by Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and many ideal camping spots to choose from, outdoor life offers a variety of thrilling adventures. For the address from which detailed information and a free map of the Las Vegas section may be procured, write John North, in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



because I put in twelve winters there and have seen it fifty-eight below twice and sixty-two below once. If a man likes to trap, he can pick up a good many extra dollars during the long winters on a trap line, for pelts from that section command a premium. On the whole I can honestly say that the Lower Yellowstone is, in my opinion, one of the garden spots of the world."

Well, that's what many of us are looking for, and Alex G., of Washington, D. C., is going to carry his search down to New Mexico.

"I'm planning a summer of camping, hunting, and fishing, Mr. North, and am thinking of going down to Las Vegas, New Mexico. I'm looking for a truly Western atmosphere, with cowboys, mountains, trout streams, and all the other fix-in's. What have you to say about this section?"

We'll say you'd look long before finding a more ideal summer playground, Alex. The Las Vegas section is the real West where the prairies meet the mountains and cow ranches dot the plains. You'll meet plenty of cowboys, too, and if you are wise, you'll time your visit to take in the annual Cowboys' Reunion, which is a rodeo worth seeing.

No mountain area in the West offers a greater variety of interest for those who crave the outdoors than the great Sangre de Cristo range of the New Mexico Rockies located in the Las Vegas country. With their towering peaks, tumbling streams, enchanting valleys, rugged canyons, mountain meadows, and colorful mesas they offer the maximum in scenic beauty.

It would be difficult also to choose a section with more abundant wild

life, for within a few miles' drive from Las Vegas one may find big or small game. As for fishing, more than fifty well-stocked lakes and streams within a short drive from Las Vegas afford the angler the realization of his fondest dreams.

Certain it is that New Mexico has much to offer the Western-minded hombre, whether his object is to camp, hunt, fish, or try his luck at prospecting. It is with this latter idea in mind that Will D., of Louisville, Kentucky, is hitting the trail for the Sunshine State.

"I've had some experience prospecting in my life, Mr. North, and am now in the mood to try my luck again. New Mexico is the State I have picked, and I know that the areas most favorable for new discoveries are those which have yielded placer gold in the past. Can you tell me where the known mineralized portion of New Mexico lies?"

We're mighty glad to oblige you, Will D. This area you are inquiring about is a broad zone which extends from the north to the south boundary and includes Taos, eastern Rio Arriba, western San Miguel, Santa Fe, Sandoval, eastern Bernalillo, eastern Valencia, western Torrance, western Lincoln, Socorro, southern Catron, Sierra, Otera, Doña Ana, Luna, Grant, and Hidalgo counties. The north-central part of Valencia County, although not in this zone, is also mineralized.

Dwindling space forbids our going into any details, but we are telling Will D. where a bulletin giving all the facts about gold mining and gold deposits in New Mexico may be procured, and shall be glad to send the same address to any other readers who want to try their luck down in the Sunshine State.

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THE badger has the curious faculty of walking or trotting backward.



# 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 any letters regarding firearms if accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope. Address your letters to Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**B**ROKEN shell extractors are loaded into a rifle in the same manner as a cartridge. They slip inside the broken shell, grab it by the nose, and then the usual motion of extraction removes at one effort both the shell extractor and the broken cartridge case. These devices cost about one dollar each. If you do not have one, you can obtain almost as good results by wetting an ordinary cartridge, rubbing the bullet end in sand, and then performing the action of loading and unloading as with the shell extractor. If this fails, a ramrod may be used to advantage.

Another accessory that sometimes helps the shooter is the "semirib" for a ribless shotgun, which is merely

a short section of rib attached with a band to the shotgun barrel. If the shooter wishes, he may paste paper on top of the semirib to give it more height.

"Gadgets" of various types exist in abundance. Our advice is to buy nothing unless you are certain that you need it, and then only from reputable dealers who allow a return of unsatisfactory merchandise. Otherwise you may find yourself in the position of the autoist in the kerosene-lamp era who paid more for attachments than he did for the car.

Skeet and trap shooting.

H. F. GOWANS, Wellsville, Ohio: Age has nothing to do with success in breaking the clay pigeons with a



shotgun. At a recent Grand American Handicap some of the best scores were made by seventy-seven-year-old F. D. Kelsey, and Ned Lilly, sixteen years old. Even a twelve-year-old, Homer Clark, Jr., was 'way up on the list.

Keep your shot shells dry.

N. B. CAWSTON, Sedan, Kansas: Shotgun shells exposed to the sun lose their efficiency because the wax and oil in the paper tube and wads melt and thus allow moisture to enter through the resultant cracks. For this reason, keep your shells where they will not be subject to extremes of either temperature or humidity.

Dense powder.

"Dense" is really a contraction of the word "condensed" in reference to Ballistite and similar smokeless powders which occupy less space than powders of the same explosive force.

Praise for Peacock.

JAMES PEACOCK, a Chicago meat-market manager, faced a twenty-seven-year-old robber who demanded money and shot the merchant through the hand by way of emphasis. Peacock then grabbed his own revolver, fired three shots at the now-retreating bad man, and

received the praise of the coroner's jury three days later when the intruder died from his wounds. Give us more Peacocks!

Vance advances.

LAWRENCE VANCE, a gasoline service station attendant in Portland, Oregon, was held up by a robber who started to pocket the contents of the till. Vance grabbed his pistol and killed the criminal. No comment necessary.

Tuchi Tasa trims them.

TUCHI TASA, a Cleveland, Ohio, restaurant owner became touchy about robbers. When two tried to touch his safe, Tuchi Tasa killed one and seriously wounded the other.

Tell us the story.

We are glad to print true accounts of men who have beaten the bandits at their own game. Send us a clipping or, better, write us a letter about your local gun heroes.

Mosby's guns.

J. B. STEDMAN, Canton, Mississippi: Mosby's Guerillas, in the Civil War, carried two revolvers in saddle holsters, and two in waist belts.

Peters's and Colt's have resumed sending free booklets to our readers. If you have not received these interesting pamphlets, write us now, and we will put your name on the mailing list.

The government supply of Krag and Russian rifles is exhausted, but the U. S. Rifle (Enfield), Model 1917, Caliber .30, is sold to *citizens of the United States* for \$8.85, under certain restrictions which will be explained to readers who send us a stamped and addressed envelope.



# 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 for 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.

**KEANE, JACK and STEPHEN.**—They are brothers. They were born in Liverpool, England, and were last heard of in Camden, New Jersey, twenty-three years ago. Information concerning them is requested by a nephew, Thomas Robinson, 103-54 One Hundred and Thirty-third Street, Richmond Hill, Long Island, New York.

**ERVIN, HOWARD W.**—Please write. Dama W. Ervin, 1282 North Fourth Street, Apartment 1, Columbus, Ohio.

**LEW.**—I understand and everything will be all right. Write to home address. May.

**LEONARD, JOSEPH.**—He left home on December 12, 1932, seeking work. He was unable to find any and was taken sick. He was sent from Columbus, Ohio, to the Soldiers and Sailors Home in Sandusky, Ohio. He is twenty-four years of age. Has brown hair and eyes. Is five feet eleven inches tall. Any one knowing his present whereabouts, please write to his mother, Mrs. Lona Runyon, Worth, West Virginia.

**RUNYON, J. L.**—Generally called Jack. Was three years in service of government. Is twenty-four years old. Left his home and has sent no word since. His mother is asking news of him. She is Mrs. Lona Runyon, Worth, West Virginia.

**RUNYON, ANTHONY.**—Has brown hair and eyes. Is five feet five inches tall. Eyes and hair are brown. He is nineteen years of age. In June, 1932, he left home, and his mother has only heard from him once since. At that time he was in Washington. Any information regarding him would be gratefully received by his mother. Address Mrs. Lona Runyon, Worth, West Virginia.

**RADER, CHARLES.**—Of North Baltimore, Ohio. When he left home he was driving a Ford roadster and had a police dog with him. Was wearing a brown corduroy suit. He is tall, has red hair, and is twenty-three years of age. His mother is sick with worry at his absence. Any one knowing anything concerning him, please write to his wife, Mrs. Charles Rader, R. T. D. 2, North Baltimore, Ohio.

**WIGGINS, SIDNEY.**—Usually called Sidde. She is the daughter of Jesse and Florence Wiggins. Was an old school chum of mine in Covington County, Alabama. I haven't heard from her in twenty years, and it is very possible that she is married. She may be in vicinity of Pensacola, Florida. I am very anxious to get in touch with her again. Any one knowing her address, kindly write to J. R. W., care of Western Story Magazine.

**JOYCE, FREDERICK.**—He grew up in the Salvation Army Orphanage, Lytton, California. Would be nineteen years old now. Any one knowing this boy, please ask him to write to Howard Parcher, Muir, Michigan.

**KINMON, GORDON.**—In 1931 he was in Florida. I have not heard from him since that date. He is my younger brother, but I have only seen him twice, so I cannot describe him. He was adopted from an orphan's home in 1923. Any one knowing his present whereabouts, kindly notify Charles Bond, care of B. T. S., Milledgeville, Georgia.

**INFORMATION WANTED.**—Concerning relatives of Francis Cornelia Burke. She lived in or near Georgetown or Washington, D. C., and was married in 1858 or 1862 in either of those places to a soldier in the regular army. She died in St. Louis, Missouri, and was buried there in September, 1875. Please send any information regarding her to H. H. M., care of Western Story Magazine.

**ATTENTION, ROCHESTER, NEW YORK, READERS.**—I would like to get in communication with my cousin, Marie Shehe, or any one who knew P. J. McGee, of that city forty-five years ago. Or any of the James McGee family who are there now. Please address Johnnie McGee, Glendale, California.

**MANKIE, MRS. MATTIE.**—She was last heard from in 1899. At that time she was living in Boelus, Nebraska. Her brother is asking the readers for help in locating her. Address Charles Smith, 804 North Main Street, St. Joseph, Missouri.

**BUSIC, THELMA.**—Was last heard of at Lukefodder, Oklahoma. She and her brother are supposed to be living with John Loagacre. She would be about eighteen years of age. Any one knowing her whereabouts, please get in touch with Evert Gess, 216 Davis Avenue, Bend, Oregon.

**MOORE, ERNEST.**—In 1914 and 1915 he worked for a Walter Carter who lived alongside the Diamond Hill Furniture Co. He left Carter's and went to Virginia, traveling over Highway 97. He is probably around thirty-nine or forty years of age. He is one of several brothers whom I have never seen. Our mother's name is Lulu Moore. She gave me in adoption to Mr. and Mrs. Henry C. Kunkle when I was sixteen years old. My maiden name was Lola Kunkle. I am thirty-five years old. When mother was in Statesville she stayed with a family named Kirkman. In 1914 I married Raymond W. Woodward. We had two children. One died, and the other I have with me. I am now married for the second time. Ernest, if you see this, write to your sister. She loves you so much and wants to get the family together. Address Mrs. Fred Gibson, 903 Gates Street, Columbia, South Carolina.

**GUTHRIE, HERSCHEL WILEY.**—He is slightly under six feet tall and of medium weight. Has brown hair and light-brown eyes. One eye is slightly crossed, and he wears glasses. A scar runs over and through one eyebrow. Was born November 4, 1900. He served in the medical department of the United States army from 1924 to 1927. Was stationed at Walter Reed Hospital, Washington, D. C. When last heard from was just about to leave El Dorado, Arkansas, for some place in Texas. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please write to his sister, Mrs. Hugh Smith, R. 2, Box 112, Wellston, Oklahoma.

**THORNTON, L. MITCHELL.**—I want to hear from you. Sent twenty dollars, but it came back. I am going into business for myself now. Please let me hear from you real soon. Address Jerry Kirkman, Fifth Avenue Cafe, 121 Fifth Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa.

**CAROLINE.**—If you see this, please write. I lost your address that you sent me from Eau Claire. Have thought of you so much. I am still in Rapid City. Have lots of news for you. Address M. N., care of Western Story Magazine.

**NOTICE.**—Somewhere in Oregon is a dear friend with whom I have lost touch. He is a doctor. Is a little over five feet tall and of medium-light complexion. Any one knowing any one who answers to this description, please communicate with M. N., care of Western Story Magazine.

**BERKELO, THEODORE.**—Usually known as Slim or Ted. Was last heard from on September 26, 1931. On that date he was in Bakersfield, California. Was well acquainted around Upline, Oregon. Would be between thirty-three and thirty-five years of age. Is six feet tall and has brown hair and gray eyes. Please write, Ted. I need your help now. Write to the same old address, or to C. C. F. N., care of Western Story Magazine.

**MATLOCK, RUBY.**—She was last heard of in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1928. She lived at 2225 Seventh Avenue and Twenty-second Street. Please write to your old friend Roland. Any one knowing her whereabouts, please write to Roland Burnett, Company A, Fourth Engineers, Fort Benning, Georgia.

**DOUGHTY, H. A.**—He was last heard of in Toronto, Canada. Red, if you see this, write to Blondie. P. and I have changed address. Write to Blondie, care of Western Story Magazine.

**KENDALL, MRS. SOPHRONIE.**—In 1913 and 1919 she worked in the cotton mills at West Warren, Massachusetts. I was in the army at the time. The last address I had for her was 15 Lake Street, Spencer, Massachusetts. Will she, or any one knowing where she is now located, kindly communicate with Frederick Coleman, 8 Carhart Avenue, Binghamton, New York.

**BEUMAN, THOMAS.**—A veteran of the Spanish-American War. He left his home many years ago for the West. He worked on a ranch. The last we heard from him, sixteen years ago, he had married the ranch owner's daughter and she had died. He was broken-hearted after her death. A friend of his out there was a Mr. Crow. Won't some one help us to find our dear brother? We so want to know whether he is living or dead. Address Margaret Beuman, 2707 Glenwood Road, Brooklyn, New York.

**SMITH, MISS MAE A.**—She is the daughter of Margaret and John Smith, Grants Pass, Oregon. When last heard from she was in Seattle, Washington. There is an exact awaiting her. Address Elizabeth Baker, 963 Neilson Street, Berkeley, California.



**SMITH, WILLIAM J.**—Known as Rube. He formerly lived in Walla Walla, Washington. For information regarding an estate get in touch with Elizabeth Baker, 963 Neilson Street, Berkeley, California.

**SUMMEISELL, RAPHAEL.**—He is twenty-seven years of age. Was of husky build. Has light-brown hair and blue eyes. Please write to me immediately. It is very important. Address Oak Grove, Alabama, Mobile Co. Mother.

**NOTICE.**—Want to get in touch with descendants of Jerry (Jerome) Hamann, brother of P. J. Hamann, who settled in Iowa. Address D. Larsen, care of this magazine.

**WIMBLENY, MRS. LILLIAN.**—She is my sister and would be between thirty and thirty-four years of age. The last heard from she was employed as a graduate nurse in a hospital in Chicago, Illinois. That was in 1926. She is nearly six feet tall and has brown curly hair. Her husband's name was Jules Wimbleny. There was one son, John Edger. Lillian, if you see this, won't you please write to your lonely sister? Any information as to her whereabouts will be gratefully received by Mrs. Vidah Anderson, Laurel, Mississippi, R. 5, Box 84.

**ARCHEY, ALVIN.**—Usually known as Curly. His father was Albert Archey. His sister would like to get in touch with him and would be grateful for any word concerning him. Address Mrs. Roy Morizeau Arlee, Montana.

**NOTICE.**—Any one having the name of Payson and living in Mason City, Iowa, or its vicinity, in 1883 or 1884, and who may be related to William H. Payson, who died at Nellisville, Wisconsin, in the fall of 1888, please write to Box 12, Quilcene, Washington.

**WHITNEY, G. ROBERT and ROBERT E.**—Please write to your wife and mother. Our home burned. Insurance is all settled. I need both of your signatures on a deed and to draw money from a New York City savings bank. Love, Ethel C. Whitney. Address me care of this magazine.

**GILLILAND, HOMER.**—Was last heard of at Shawnee, Oklahoma. That was in 1929. Is five feet five inches tall. Has brown hair and blue eyes. Is twenty-four years of age. Any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly communicate with Clyde Gilliland, R. 5, Anadarko, Oklahoma.

**SZUKET, MRS. PAUL.**—Nee Barbara Peto. Sister of Elizabeth and Steve Peto. She was born in Hungary. Moved to Youngstown, Ohio, from Cleveland, Ohio, twenty years ago. Right after the death of my husband, John Szako, fifteen years ago, I heard that they were still in Youngstown. Will be very thankful for any information concerning them. Address Mrs. Elizabeth Molner, 193 Elm Street, Berea, Ohio.

**HONEY GIRL OF ARLINGTON, ILLINOIS.**—You wrote to my sister, Marie (Boots) Vetter, when she lived at Varnes, Montana, in 1933. Marie is dead now. We haven't your address or name, and I would be obliged if you, or any one who knows you, will please write to me at once. Harriet Vetter, Virginia City, Montana.

**HUSH, WILL U.**—Please write. We are heartbroken. Don't you know that we love you more than life itself and will be always waiting? We couldn't do anything rash. Write to us care of Western Story Magazine. L. H.

**HAMILTON, JOE.**—Reginald has asked me to find you and tell you that there is some money of his which, if you get it, you may keep half of. The other half he wants, his father to have. Send me a good description of yourself so that I may know that you are the right Joe Hamilton. Information from any one in Virginia concerning the present whereabouts of this man would be much 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 his 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 knew of them was when they moved to Missouri from Cutler, Ohio. Mother was just a baby when her father died. After his death the family moved back to Cutler. Mother was Elizabeth Quinn, and she was an only child. Both my mother and father have been dead for a number of years. 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 Reedsport, 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 at the base of the nail. Both arms are tattooed. He is of Danish descent. His nature is very genial, and he is usually whistling or singing. 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 regarding him, kindly 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 at that time. In 1923 or 1924 the hotel was destroyed and 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 don't want to blame only myself. Everything is all right. Please come or write at once. Mildred.

**ASHLEY, TIMOTHY.**—Generally called Tim or Red. Would be about forty-nine or fifty years of age. Is six feet tall and has in the right leg. Has red hair. He is a barber. Plays the banjo quite well. Is very fond of horses. Was last heard of in either Horner or Cortland, New York, where he drove a horse at a fair. The horse was called "Little Peet." This man is my father, and I would like to know if he is still living. 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 would be very happy to 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, please notify Miss Hilda Curtis, Box 280, Dorris, California.

**JOHNSON, CAROLINE GARNET.**—When last heard from, in 1918, she was living in Lynn, Massachusetts. Her daughter Lillian is very anxious for some word of her. Any one knowing where she can be located, please communicate with William B. Nelson, Greenaway Station, Tucson, Arizona.

**NOTICE.**—I would like to hear from any of the boys who served with me in Battery E, First United States Field Artillery, from 1921 to 1924, and stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Address Edward Brown, 746 School Street, Los Angeles, California.

**GRISSON, 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 Grisson, Box 25, 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 carrying him, and from further word from the independent man who was supposed to have in the West. Any one concerning him from the company, who informed us that Harry had left their employ on November 2, 1932, 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, 1339 L Street, Reddy, California.

**FORD, EVELYNA.**—She would be about eighteen years of age. Was born at Paul's Valley, Oklahoma. When last heard from she was at Guyton, Oklahoma. She moved from there to Amarillo, Texas. Her mother's name was Vera Nation. She has an aunt named Betty; also an uncle, Strider Nation. Evelyne, if you should see this and care to get in touch with your father, write at once. Any one knowing this young lady, please communicate with Bill, care of Western Story Magazine.

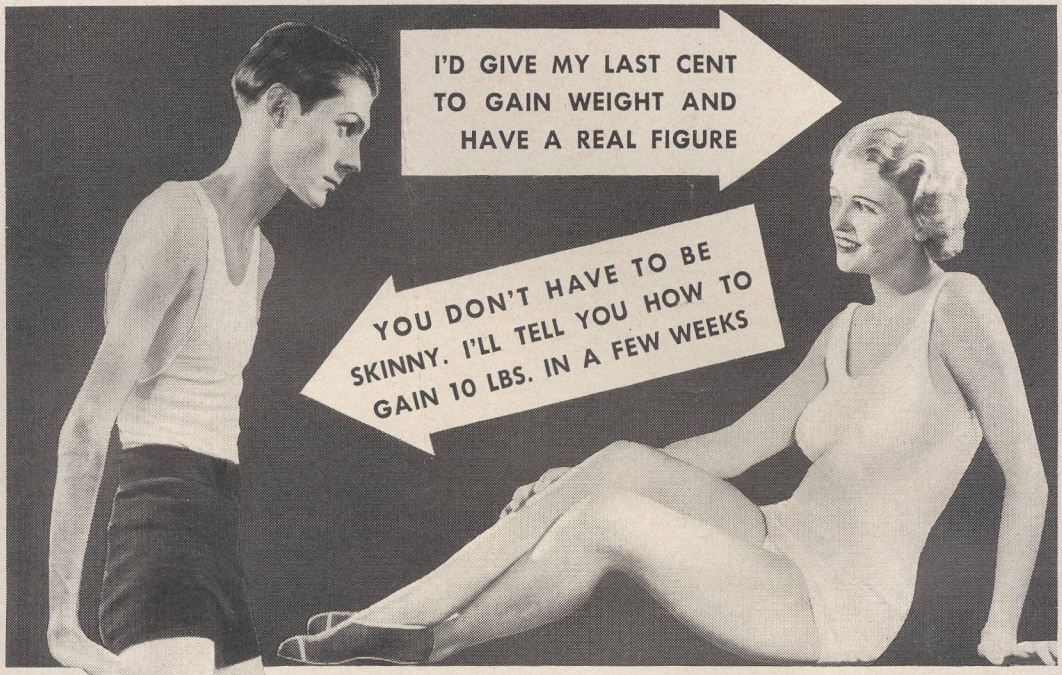
**JOHNSON, RICHARD.**—About fourteen years ago Richard, with his brothers and sisters, was placed in the Miami or Lucas County home in Maumee, Ohio, by his father, Richard has dark hair and is of medium height. Seven or eight years ago he left the home to work for an elderly man who was supposed to live in the West. Any one knowing him, please ask him to write to his sister Ruth, 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 get in touch with J. K., 47 Mader Street, Schenectady, New York.

**OAKES, CHARLIE or JACK.**—Please write to your sister, Jessie E. Oakes. I am the granddaughter of Mattie Jane Canary, better known in history as Calamity Jane. I know this woman as your Aunt Mattie. I am also related to James Butler Hickok, famous in history. He is the West as Wild Bill Hickok. Address me care of Western Story Magazine.

**SALTERS, AUGUST.**—Generally called Peaches. He was last heard from in 1934 when he was a member of Headquarters Company, Thirtieth United States Infantry. Any one knowing his present whereabouts, please write to Mrs. Margaret Hogan, Box 151, Bisbee, Arizona.





I'D GIVE MY LAST CENT  
TO GAIN WEIGHT AND  
HAVE A REAL FIGURE

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE  
SKINNY. I'LL TELL YOU HOW TO  
GAIN 10 LBS. IN A FEW WEEKS

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*Astonishing gains in a few weeks with sensational new double tonic. Richest imported brewers' ale yeast, concentrated 7 times and combined with iron. Adds 5 to 15 lbs.—quick!*

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As you know, doctors for years have prescribed yeast to build up health. But now this new discovery gives you far greater tonic results than ordinary yeast—builds health, and also puts on pounds of firm flesh—and in a much shorter time. And brings other benefits, too. Blemished skin changes to a fresh, glowing, radiantly clear complexion. Constipation, poor appetite, lack of pep vanish. Life becomes a thrilling adventure.

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This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is in pleasant tablet form. It is made from specially cultured brewers' ale yeast imported from Europe—the richest yeast ever known—which through a new process has been concentrated 7 times—made 7 times more powerful.

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Day after day, as you take Ironized Yeast, watch ugly angles fill out, hollow chest develop, arms and legs round out pleasingly. Complexion becomes lovely, indigestion disappears—new vitality comes.

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No matter how skinny and weak you may be, this marvelous new Ironized Yeast should build you up in a few short weeks as it has thousands of others. If you are not delighted with the results of the very first package, your money will be instantly refunded.

Only be sure you get *genuine* Ironized Yeast and not some imitation that cannot give the same results. Insist on the *genuine*, with "IY" stamped on each tablet.

<p><b>8 Lbs. in 3 Weeks</b> "In one week I gained 4 lbs., in 3 weeks 8 lbs. with Ironized Yeast. Tired feeling and constipation are gone, too." Roy H. Tinney, Oklahoma City, Okla.</p> <p><b>15 Lbs. in Month</b> "I gained 15 lbs. in a month with Ironized Yeast." Louise Adams, Friars Point, Miss.</p>
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NEVER GET ON YOUR NERVES... NEVER TIRE YOUR TASTE