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STREET & SMITH'S

MAR. 30

Western Story

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Magazine
EVERY WEEK

A BABE WADE NOVEL by H. BEDFORD-JONES



New Invention

3 TO 7 MILES MORE PER GALLON

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Provides Faster Pick-Up—More Power—
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Agents and Salesmen

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The VACU-MATIC Co., Wauwatosa, Wis.

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CHRYSLER

Have tried the Vacu-matic and it sure is fine. Better pick-up with a 30% gas saving.—John C. Martin, Pa.

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I am amazed at Vacu-matic performance. It's giving me 5 more miles per gallon.—Walter Zielinski, Ill.

FRANKLIN

With Vacu-matic I have increased my mileage from 10.1 to 14.2 miles per gallon. I figure I save over \$75.00 a year in gasoline.—R. K. Radtke, Wis.

ALL WELL PLEASED

Enclosed find order for 12 more. Everyone I have sold is giving from 4 to 6 more miles per gallon. I have 3 more orders for V8 Ford. Everybody is well pleased.—J. O. Carll, Texas.

NASH

On my Advanced 6 Nash gained 17 1/2% in mileage. The car will idle down to 3 miles an hour and then take gas without complaint.—J. Swolter, Mo.

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V-8 FORD

I installed both Vacu-matics and they work excellent. On my own V8 Ford I notice wonderful performance in pickup, get-away and gas saving.—Burt Burnett, Mich.

BUICK

Everything you claim about Vacu-matic is true. I now get 20 miles to the gallon. Before I was only averaging 15 1/2 miles.—C. Constantino, Fla.

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Please send me a Vacu-matic for a Model A. The mileage on my 1933 Chevrolet jumped from 18 to 22 miles per gal. with Vacu-matic.—Paul P. Haas, Mass.

MODEL A FORD

Have been using the Vacu-matic for a month. I used to get 20 to 22 miles per gal. Now I get 30 to 33 miles. It makes—James W. Barr, Canada.

OLDSMOBILE

I am well pleased with Vacu-matic on our Oldsmobile. A test proved it gave 18 miles per gal. before we considered 13 good.—Arthur Williams, N. Y.

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to the
Superintendent



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Dr. W. R. GEORGE

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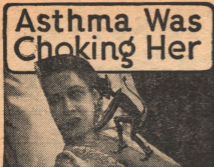
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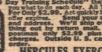
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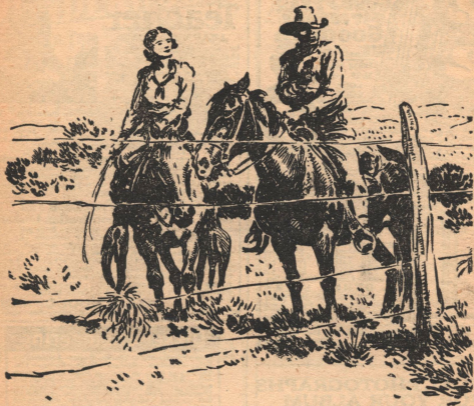
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A SIX-GUN JOB



By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "Pawnee Joe, Gunman," etc.

CHAPTER I. THE XV RANCH.

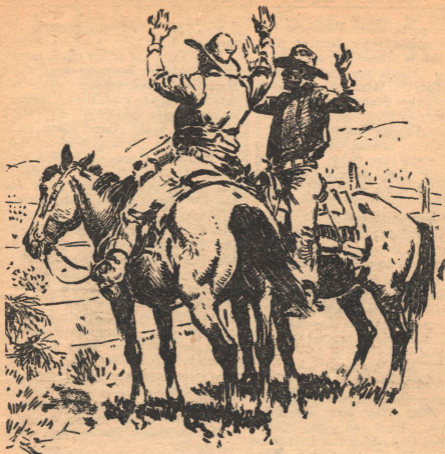
THE morning stage rattled into Miles City, which was considerably less of a city than the name indicated. A young woman got out and went into the hotel. Two traveling men followed, looking very red in the face and flustered. The stage driver winked at the crowd on the sidewalk.

"Boy, oh, boy!" he observed to

the world in general, and smacked his lips. "Did she give them city fellers a tongue-whipping? Did she? I bet they don't get fresh no more around these parts. And believe it or not, she talked cowboy talk. I looked for her to pull a gun, by gosh!"

And, grinning, he heaved out the mail sack.

The young woman, at the hotel desk, registered as Nina Vail. The proprietor looked at the name, then at her, with open admiration.



"Welcome, ma'am. You make two hundred fifty-one."

"What?" she exclaimed.

"Population. Yes'm. And I bet a dollar, if you stay here a month, we'll climb over five hundred." The proprietor grinned. "You want a room? How long?"

"I'm not sure," she rejoined. "Do you know where the XV Ranch is? How far from town, I mean?"

The hotel man bit hard at the stem of his corncob pipe, and stared. He had some excuse for staring, it is true. Nina Vail was trim and alluring to the eye; what was more to the point, she looked capable. Her hair was sunny brown, with a gold-red cast, and her eyes

were deep-blue flecked with gold. They were extraordinary eyes, spelling energy and self-control; in this they backed up her very lovely features, which were almost too strong and vigorous for beauty—almost, but not quite. Nina Vail was small in build, but the eye of man did not pass her over without an admiring pause.

"XV Ranch? Never heard of it," said the hotel proprietor, shaking his head.

"But you must have!" exclaimed Miss Vail in surprise. "It's quite a ways from town, I know, but it's a large ranch. A real big spread, with about a dozen hands."

"Sounds good, miss, but it ain't

in these parts, sure. Who runs it?"

"My uncle, Isaac Newton Vail. Why, this is Miles City, isn't it?"

"Yep. Maybe you was aiming for Miles City in Montana or Nevada or some other State?" suggested the proprietor.

The girl's eyes flashed.

"Don't be absurd. My uncle is well known here; why, there was some talk of making him sheriff last year! He wrote me about it himself."

The hotel man looked alarmed.

"Miss, I didn't go for to contrary you none," he said earnestly. "If you say he's here, it's my mistake, that's all."

"There's something queer about all this," said Nina Vail. "Did you ever hear of the Circle K outfit? My uncle's place is just beyond that, on the creek."

"Oh!" said the hotel man, and swallowed hard. A light of dawning comprehension came into his face. "Oh! Why, sure, sure; I got you now. I bet you mean the feller called Chihuahua Ike, that come up from Mexico three, four years back?"

She nodded. "I suppose so. At least, he was in Mexico."

"Well, you take the north road about fourteen mile and go straight past the turnout for the Circle K," said the hotel man. "About three mile farther you'll come to the markings. They's a road goes to the left; ain't but a track. If you foller that too far, it'll take you out on the Devil's Playground, it being the old Painted Well Road, a wagon track out acrost the desert. They's a turnout from it, which I reckon goes to the place you want. If I was you, I'd wait till to-morrow to go."

She nodded brightly. "Thanks,

I will. My uncle may come in to meet me to-day."

Miss Vail went to her room, came down again for her noon meal, and then took a look around town. It was not much to greet the eye, being either adobe buildings or frame shacks. A bank, a dozen stores, and perhaps forty dwellings made up the picture, with Hogan's saloon in the center, the mountains in back, and the rolling valley sloping away to the low desert hills on the horizon. Like many Western towns, however, Miles City might not look like much but did a heavy business, since it was fed by a wide expanse of territory.

Later in the day, she visited the post office. She inquired as to mail for Vail; upon identifying herself, she was given a large batch of it, some of which was hers, most of which belonged to her uncle. Among this latter were the letters she herself had written him, advising him of her arrival. She was aghast and dismayed. Evidently he had not called for mail within the past week or ten days.

She inquired here and there. The XV brand was unknown; at the name of such a ranch, men shook their heads vaguely. She went to the livery stable and smithy, and the smith, who also kept the livery, rubbed his sooty face in perplexity.

"Miss, you got me. Sandy Kerr runs the Circle K outfit. It's a big spread, and Kerr has took in a sight of gov'ment land besides. He's a hard jigger, Sandy is. But I never heard of this other. Chihuahua Ike? Yeah, I've seen him around, sure," and the smith relapsed into the vagueness which seemed to lay hold on every one as soon as the name of "Chihuahua Ike" Vail was mentioned.

As a matter of fact, nobody

wanted to tell this girl the truth. Everybody in town knew Chihuahua Ike. No one knew anything very bad about him. No one knew anything good of him, either. He spent more time hunting or drifting around the desert than he did working his range; and he had undertaken to buck the Circle K, which was his bad luck. Any no-account jasper who had the gall to go up against "Sandy" Kerr would have small joy of it.

Exasperated by the mystery she could sense but could not unravel, Nina Vail hired a horse to take out early next morning.

WHILE these things were happening in town, an apparently unrelated incident was taking place at the Circle K outfit. A desert rat, bound for town to renew his supplies, wandered in toward dusk with his burros and was made welcome for the night. Sandy Kerr had just returned from a two-day hunt for coyotes and wolves. There were no women on the Circle K, and all hands constituted one big more or less happy family. Sitting in at the supper table, the prospector was garrulous and opinionated.

"You fellers seen anything of Ol' Man Slosson, Siskiyou Slosson?" he asked. "I done met up with him last month, and he was headed this way. Nope? Say, by gosh, I seen a funny thing to-day. A feller that was plumb locoed."

"Where?" asked somebody.

"Well," said the desert rat, "early this morning I broke camp and headed in acrost the corner of the Devil's Playground, past where that there old track cuts over for Painted Well. The wind, she was sure blowing, and the sand was durned bad."

"Sure is bad over in them parts," observed a puncher. "When that there wind blows, she blows. I come through there once in a sand storm, and durned if my rig wa'n't all scoured like by sandpaper."

The prospector surveyed him with scorn.

"You never seen nothing, rider. Las' time I come through there, the wind was a-blowing, and when I got to the other side, them burros of mine was scoured clean of hair on all of one side. Yes, sir. Like they'd been clipped to the skin!"

Amid the laughter, Sandy Kerr's deep voice cut in, with an inquiry.

"Oh, the locoed feller!" said the desert rat. "Yeah. I met up with him, and he was headed for Painted Well——"

"What!" ejaculated Sandy Kerr quickly. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. He says so. He was plumb loco. He had a wagon and two hosses, and danged if the wagon wasn't scoured clean of paint by the sand; he must ha' been through a bad storm up beyond. He had a ridin' hoss, a black, and I never seen a finer one than him. Reg'lar circus hoss, that's what he was."

"Who was this jigger?" demanded Kerr, his bushy brows down-drawn.

"I dunno. I tell you, he was loco. Heading slap acrost the Devil's Playground with that there wind blowing and the sand devils whirling. I tried to argue some sense into him, and he just sets and looks at me like he didn't see me. Young feller, he was, awful hard around the jaw. Finally he says he didn't turn back for man, devil, or sand, and didn't give a durn if he did die. I tells him the water at Painted Well was mighty slim and none too good, anyhow, and to foller that old track would be a danged long ways around to reach anywhere. He growls he

didn't aim to reach anywhere, anyhow. He was as sociable as a she-holf with cubs. And off he went, slap among them sand hummocks toward the flats beyond, with the wind a-whooping it up. I never seen the Devil's Playground look worse, neither."

"The fool will be dead by this time," growled Sandy Kerr, an uneasy, scowling look in his pale-blue eyes.

"Don't matter about him none," said a rider. "What about his hosses? Maybe some of us had ought to ride out to Painted Well and——"

"No!" exploded Kerr, almost angrily, and his hand smacked down on the table. "You boys got work to do. Nobody's going chasing around out there looking for a lo-coed jigger that maybe don't exist. This old liar would as soon make up a story as not."

"Who, me?" shrilled the prospector indignantly. "You calling me a liar?"

"You're the dangedest liar that ever mooched along with a burro," said Kerr bluntly. "And that's saying a whole lot."

"Why, darn your hide!" cried the desert rat. "You got no call to throw names, Sandy Kerr. You got a whitewashed record your own self!"

"Get to the devil out of here, and get quick!" snapped Kerr, and his hand slipped down. "Get!"

THE desert rat scuttled out, cursing under his breath. Sandy Kerr's pale eyes stabbed at the men about the table, and no one dared voice disapproval of this breach of hospitality. After all, the desert rat had been pretty free with his talk. Any one who

opened his mouth too wide around Sandy Kerr was taking chances.

"To-morrow, or maybe next day," said Kerr abruptly, "me and a couple of you boys are going to ride over and get rid of that danged nester. I've stood him long enough."

"What d'you mean, get rid of him?" asked somebody.

Kerr laughed harshly.

"Just that. Oh, don't worry! He ain't the fighting kind. He's done a lot of talking, and he don't scare worth a darn; but when I get down to business, he'll go on the jump. We're going to need that water and range, and need it bad. The creeks are drying up, and there ain't no more drainage from them desert hills than from this tablecloth. That's what I been finding out, the past two days. I didn't get no coyotes, but I got a lot of information, and this here is going to be a dry year and a bad year, and the whole north range will be dry as a barn, in a month from now. The creek ain't much more'n a dry wash right now, since that danged nester has cut off the spring supply. When he done that, he hanged himself. I've put up with a lot from him these two years, but that's the finish."

"Yeah," said somebody. "You're right, Sandy; a feller can't cut off the water and get away with it. That ain't right. We got too danged many cows who got to have that water, if it's a dry season."

"They'll get it, and no mistake," said Kerr savagely. "We might go over day after to-morrow. Come to think of it, we might's well make a clean sweep of him, his shack, his fences, and everything else. We'll all go."

There was a hum of approval. Any one who cut off the water that

belonged to the Circle K was in for trouble, and this didn't mean maybe.

"Hey, Sandy!" The cook shoved his head in at the door, with a grin. "When you go to sweeping Chihuahua Ike off the face of the earth, I'll mosey out to Painted Well and maybe get me that there black hoss."

"You tend to business and leave Painted Well alone," snapped Kerr angrily.

"Oh, all right, all right!" rejoined the cook. "What I started to say was that I just hung up your rig, to show what a good feller I am. Any gent what has a silver-mounted rig had ought to take good care of it."

"Calling me down, are you?" growled Kerr.

The cook, who was a privileged character, grinned at him.

"Nope. Only you done lost one o' them tapaderas. That's what comes of having a Californy rig, Sandy. One o' these days you'll up and lose the whole danged rig."

Kerr laughed. "You don't like my rig, huh?"

"It ain't so bad, nor so good," the cook declared. "A feller raised to take his dallies can't throw a rope with a tie man. If I was back in my prime, I'd go up against that there center-fire rig and rawhide rope of yours any day with my old maguey. Know where you lost that there tapadera?"

"No," said Kerr, and frowned. "Let it go. Don't matter, anyhow."

Which, as all agreed, was a rather odd way to take such a loss, the tapaderas being silver-mounted like the very handsome rig. However, Sandy Kerr could afford to throw away the whole thing if he liked, and go buy himself another, so it was nobody's business.

"When you get time," said Kerr,

gulping down his coffee, "s'pose you throw that there rig over a hook in the storeroom and leave her be. I'm aiming to use my Santy Fe rig for a spell, anyhow. That old saddle fits around my shank bones a heap better."

CHAPTER II.

MURDER.

OUT on the Devil's Playground, the wind could blow and no mistake. The wind struck down the gap from the San Jacinto shoulders and howled like a thousand imps across the sand hummocks and up the valley flats, and in the course of centuries had raised a vast line of enormous dunes against the farther hills.

It never came from one quarter alone, either. It took a twist and a curl, and the blown sand with it, and to any one afoot, or even riding, this rotary motion was plain torture. When the air was hazy and sand devils were dancing across the flats, any incautious traveler did well to leave the old Painted Well Road severely alone.

So Dave Wade discovered to his cost, after sullenly ignoring the warnings of the desert rat he had encountered.

Not that he cared a whit. He was in a savage mood that demanded a fight; with man or nature or anything that cropped up. Behind him lay his past—a closed book, the pages wiped blank. The girl whom he had loved was dead.

In his wagon he had papers, money, provisions. Nothing mattered any more. He had no plans, no aim, no end; for a month he had wandered by desert and bad lands, alone, careless whither he went. He had no interest left in life. Young, as his brown eyes and the lines of his face showed, but the

shaggy, untended beard and hair hid all else. He was unkempt, dirty as any desert rat, and the glint in his eyes might well lead any one to suppose him locoed.

Not that his horses had suffered. His team was well cared for. The magnificent black horse following his wagon was carefully brushed, curried, combed, and in the pink of condition.

If the animals did not suffer from him, they certainly did from the sand storm. As Wade proceeded, hour after hour, the driving bite of the sand became intolerable. What paint still remained on his wagon was scoured off as by a brush. Closed tightly as the back end of the wagon was, tight as were its walls and top, Wade knew that the whole interior of his traveling home must be thick with the fine, thin sand which was like a fog in the air.

Luckily he had plenty of water. Wet handkerchief about his nostrils and mouth, he could get along. For the three horses, he contrived nose bags of burlap, which he wet from time to time. Nothing could prevent the stinging lash of the tiny particles, however. He himself took a fierce delight in the whole thing, but the suffering of the horses drew his pity. Twice he halted for an hour to let swooping bursts of wind lessen in violence.

He opened up the back end for more water, and laughed at sight of the interior. Bunk, cabinets, floor, blankets—inch-deep with impalpable sand. The guns were covered, nor was he wearing one at the moment; they were protected. Nothing else mattered, so far as Dave Wade was concerned.

The afternoon dragged on, the sun hidden behind the drear dun sky, until at length low, sweeping sand hills appeared around. Little

of the landscape could be seen, except at far intervals between sand gusts. The horses had followed the old track largely by instinct. With the sand hills around, Wade knew he must be somewhere near Painted Well.

As sunset approached, the wind decreased. Finally it was coming only in occasional roaring sweeps, and the sky was fairly clear of sand, though all about the sand devils still danced and whirled and rotated like yellow ghosts. Then the horses quickened their pace, toiled over a long rise, and ahead appeared the depression which held the water hole.

Dave Wade rubbed his eyes and stared.

THERE was no shelter; none was now needed. At one side of the pool showed a heap of blown sand from which protruded one hoof of a horse, obviously dead. Beside the pool, his legs covered over with sand but his upper body free, half sat and half lay a man. His hat, beside him, showed that he had dipped water from the pool. He was naked to the waist. His shirt had been converted into a rude bandage about his body, all smeared red by water slopping from the hat as he drank. His eyes were wide open, and as Wade hurriedly dismounted, he thought the man dead. Then a voice reached him.

"You'd better hurry, feller."

Wade reached under the wagon seat, drew out a flask of liquor, and ran to the man's side.

"Alive, are you? Here, drink a swallow of this. Let me look at your wound."

"Leave it be." The man gulped down a swig of whisky, and his hand fell. "Listen to me, feller. I want you should do something important.

Let that wound be. I'm passing out fast. Yes or no?"

"Of course," said Wade, supporting the man's head. A head shaggy and unshaven as his own; a man of forty, he estimated, with hard-lined features and weak mouth.

"Take my rig off the hoss yonder. My will's in a pocket of the saddle. I had a hunch something like this was coming, and had it made proper. Take the rig with you. Foller this track till you come to the upper range. You'll see a turnout with a sign there. XV outfit. That's me; Ike Vail. Leave the rig at my shack. Look out for my two hosses——"

The man sagged a little in Wade's arms. His eyes drooped; then they came open again, and his voice lifted anew, but faintly.

"There's some money buried just inside the doorsill of the shack. Send it to—to Nina Vail. She's my niece. Teaches school down to Las Aguas, New Mexico. Don't let on to her what the outfit's like, partner. I—I been lying to her so's she won't be ashamed of me, savvy? Lying my head off like a good un. I bought out a homesteader, see? A nester. I got the gov'ment deed to the place now. Been holding off Kerr, blast him! Water—water rights mine, all mine. Don't let on to her, mind! She thinks it's a fine big spread. I only got two forty acres—let on it was a couple thousand—fine hosses——"

"Who shot you?" demanded Wade. "Was it an accident?"

"Accident! Me and my hoss both?"

Vail looked up at him and broke into a laugh—and died upon the laugh. The breath fled out of him, and his head sagged down, and after a startled instant, Wade lowered him to the sand.

WS—2F

"Looks like we camp here, Ramon," he said to the black grimly.

Camp he did. The storm had blown itself out by dark, and as he ate his evening meal, Dave Wade pondered the words of the man whom he had just buried.

"Lying to his niece so she wouldn't be ashamed of him!" he reflected. "Bought out some nester and evidently has been fighting off somebody on account of water rights. Hm-m-m! A weak sort, but probably stubborn as the devil, like many weak chaps. Lying to his niece, eh? School-teacher; wanted her to be proud of him. Well, if that will of his leaves her the property, she'll soon enough find out what it's like. Looks like I have a job on my hands now, sure enough."

Vail had been shot with a rifle, twice; probably, as near as Wade could judge, this same day. When he dug down to the horse, he found the animal had been shot, likewise. He went to work getting off the saddle, and after a time had it done. In a crude pocket stitched to the girth, he found a couple of old receipts, a five-dollar bill, and a sealed envelope on which was written "Will." He left them as they were and put the saddle into the back end of his wagon.

MORNING found him up and about at an early hour. He was watering his horses at the pool when his foot kicked up something in the sand. It was a tapadera, worn and cracked across. A recent break, plainly. A fancy tapadera of stamped leather with a splash of silver work in the shape of a sun. It did not go with Vail's rig at all, for his was a fairly new and plain saddle.

Wade tucked it away. He got

out his own saddle, which was ornate enough to have glittered in any array of rodeo prizes, and slapped it on Ramon.

"Riding you to-day for a change, mister." Wade stroked the sleek, thin muzzle as the horse nosed him affectionately. "You and me together, old-timer; all we got is each other, I reckon. And life. At least, we've maybe got more to be thankful about than this poor devil under the sand. Sure does look like, when a feller thinks his troubles are the biggest ever, he finds the gent alongside him has got worse ones. Nope, I guess we wouldn't trade with anybody, Ramon. You and me can go a long ways yet."

For the first time, he was jerked out of his own affairs and given an interest in outside things. This errand the dead man had laid upon him was a sacred thing. And to his mind kept recurring the singular touch of Vail lying to his niece so she wouldn't be ashamed of him.

Wade was off with daylight, figuring that he had a long trail ahead. He was right in this. The old, disused wagon track wound among the sand hills and gradually lifted out of the desert into scrub country, and over toward the wider valley beyond. Wade was keeping a sharp watch for the turnout mentioned by Vail, when he sighted a mounted man and a dog approaching.

He did not like the looks of either. The man was reddish of hair, pale-blue of eye, perhaps forty years of age; a masterful, hard-jawed, steel-eyed man who clearly did not wear his gun for looks. The dog had a savagely inquiring air, a look in its eye which matched the aggressive mien of its master. Wade very well knew that a dog might be judged like a man, by its looks.

The rider growled a curt order at

the dog, which halted and eyed Wade.

"Morning," said the man abruptly. "I'm Sandy Kerr. Heading for my place?"

"Not that I know of," Wade responded, and gave his name.

Kerr eyed him like the dog, suspiciously.

"Oh! You're the feller that desert rat met up with, huh? Told us about it. So you pulled through the sand storm."

"Yeah," said Wade.

"Sure look like you needed a clean-up." Kerr smiled frostily. "Reach Painted Well all right?"

"Yeah."

"Talk a lot, don't you?"

"When it's necessary." Wade's eyes narrowed on Kerr. Vail had named this man. Was it possible that—

"I'm lookin' for a couple hosses that run off," said Kerr. "See 'em around the water hole? Circle K brand."

"Not a thing there," Wade said slowly, "except a dead hoss and a dead man. You ain't lost a tapadera, by any chance?"

Kerr's pale eyes lightened for an instant, then he looked down at his stirrup.

"Nope. Found one?"

"Real fancy one." And Wade looked the man in the eyes. He was ready for anything, and showed it.

Kerr straightened in the saddle.

"One o' my riders might ha' lost it," he said. "Let's have a look at it."

"No," said Wade.

Just the one word. It held challenge, and Kerr flushed slightly.

"Meaning what?" he demanded harshly.

At his tone, the dog moved forward.

"What you like," answered Wade.

Kerr met the steady brown eyes for a moment, then shrugged.

"Suit yourself. You got quite an outfit here."

THE dog had crouched, its eyes fastened on Wade. The animal was huge in size, black in hue; its lips were drawn back in a silent snarl. Ramon pricked up his ears and moved uneasily.

"You got quite a dog," said Wade. "He don't seem to like me any more'n you do."

"Maybe that's your fault," Kerr snapped. "He's friendly enough. Back, Wolf!"

"Yeah, he looks real friendly. Only thing I got against this breed o' dogs," said Wade reflectively, "is that they'll mate with coyotes. Same as——"

"Listen, Wade. Are you looking for trouble?" demanded Kerr angrily.

"Not me," Wade replied. "But I usually know when the other feller is, and I can meet it halfway every time. Otherwise, I ain't on the prowl."

Despite his words, his tone was not conciliatory. Kerr met his glittering eyes for an instant, then reined his horse back.

"Durned if that desert rat wasn't right! You're plumb locoed," he growled, and with a word to Wolf, who followed him, rode on.

Dave Wade continued his way. He liked dogs, and dogs liked him; but he did not like this dog or man, either. Was it possible that Kerr had lost that tapadera, that Kerr was the slayer of Vail? He shrugged at the mental query. Anything was possible; he was in strange country; and Kerr, by his looks, was no ordinary cow-puncher. Just as well to avoid trouble, of course. But Ra-

mon had not liked that dog, either, and Ramon usually liked dogs.

"Which makes it unanimous," muttered Wade.

The disused road he was following ended at a turnout ahead, and was more of a road beyond; so was the turnout. A sign, burned into a board that was nailed to a tree, indicated the XV.

Wade obeyed the sign. The road wound among rather heavy timber. It was a crudely made road, barely wide enough for the wagon to follow him. It struck over a slight rise and then down the other side. Emerging from the trees, Dave Wade drew rein in surprise and appreciation.

He had come out at the upper end of a little valley, fairly narrow at this point but widening out rapidly. Except for a few piñons along the hillsides, there were no more trees, though stumps showed that a few had been here, along the creek.

To the left was a spring that gushed from the hillside, forming the creek that meandered down the valley. Directly ahead, Wade saw a log shack of fair size, with a lean-to stable. Just beyond this, the stream had been dammed. The dam was opened, letting the water run out freely; but when the sluice was shut, quite a pond could be formed, and the water run into acequias that ran to right and left.

The purpose of these was obvious enough—irrigation. The lower valley was one large stand of alfalfa, just coming up. A hillside to the right had been terraced and set out to potatoes. Back of the house showed a good-sized corral, with a couple of horses in it and some farming machinery under canvas covers near by. All in all, a most surpris-

ing and delightful place to find, instead of bare grazing land.

Except for the horses in the corral, no living thing was in sight.

Wade took in everything at one glance, and sent Ramon along. The team followed. By this time it was long past noon, and not having eaten since morning, he was more than ready to break out some grub. Might as well camp here till morning, he reflected, and give the horses a rest as well.

Also, Kerr's remark on his appearance rankled deeply. His pride was dead; but the sun was hot, and after that sand storm his whole body was raw. The creek looked highly inviting. And his beard itched.

He muttered, as he drew near the house: "I might's well take time off, shave and so forth. Maybe tomorrow. Right now, I got to wash and eat. Looks like those hosses need water and feed, too."

They obviously did. A water trough ran into the corral, fed by a sluice from the creek; but the sluice was closed. There was feed under the lean-to. By the time Wade had unhitched, turned his three horses into the corral, attended to the wants of all, and broken out some grub, he was ravenous.

HE looked into the shack. It was untidy, uninviting, and he turned away. Then he halted. Inside was a large stock of supplies and tinned goods. Fancy grub of all kinds, far better than his own. Wade reached down a tin of meat, another of pineapple, and some packaged biscuit. No use going to work cooking—and first, better get cleaned up. A bar of soap gave him the hint, and he pocketed it.

He carried out a small table, a slab stool, and eating utensils. Pil-

ing all these on the table, he found a water bucket and started for the creek.

The deepest water here was a pool amid a yearling growth of sycamore saplings and brush which completely closed it in. Wade stripped and plunged into the water, then went to work with the soap. The water was cold, but the brush shut out all wind, and the sun poured down its warmth. He relaxed and paddled about luxuriantly, his desert-parched skin eagerly drinking in the water.

At length, dripping, he sunned himself for a little, then gathered up his clothes over his arm, picked up his boots, and started for the shack. As he emerged from the brush, he came to a startled and painful halt, and blinked for one dismayed instant. A horse was standing near the shack, and at the table, investigating its burden, was a woman. A woman! Despite the riding breeches, Wade knew it was a woman.

He drew back among the brush and hastily dressed. Then, by no means in a merry humor, he strode out and approached the shack and this unwelcome visitor. She was opening the tins on the table as though the food belonged to her.

"Hey! What do you want around here?" called Wade angrily.

She looked up and stared at him.

"Oh! What are you doing here yourself?" she demanded.

Wade stopped short.

"Sorry, miss!" he exclaimed confusedly. "I thought Vail lived here alone. My name's Wade."

"I'm Nina Vail," she said.

"What?" cried Wade. "You? Nina Vail? None of that, ma'am. She's teaching school down to Las Aguas in New Mexico. You ain't her."

His tone was brusque enough. The girl's eyes drove at him.

"How dare you talk like that?" she exclaimed. "What you need is a touch of good manners, besides a shave. Don't come at me with any of your backwoods impudence. I was range-raised myself and I'm used to politeness."

"You talk like it," snapped Wade. He had come closer now, and his first dismay over the presence of a woman was mollified by her astonishing level gaze and her cool command. Also, perhaps, by her loveliness. "My gosh, you sure have a tongue!" he went on, more mildly. "I didn't go to rile you up, but you sort of took me by surprise."

"Is that so?" she said. "Where's Mr. Vail? I suppose you work for him?"

"No, I don't," said Wade. "He's dead, if you want to know."

The can opener fell from her hand. Her deep eyes dilated.

"Dead!" she breathed. "Dead!"

Suddenly it struck Wade that she might have been telling the truth.

"Good gosh!" he broke out. "Are you really his niece? Are you Nina Vail?"

She groped for the table and lowered herself to the stool.

"Dead! Why—why—oh, of course. Yes, I'm Nina Vail. I told you that once. I came up to see him—I've never been here before, you know. Where is he?"

"Why, he's dead, like I said. I found him at the water hole and came on here. He told me to see that you got everything. For gosh sake, don't faint, now," he added.

The girl collected herself and flashed him a look of disdain.

"I don't intend to faint, silly," she rejoined. "I—well, it's just a shock, that's all. And I'm pretty hungry, too."

"That goes double," said Wade, who was famished. "I dunno the rights of all this, but I'm starving. So here goes. You pitch in if you like."

He suited action to words. The girl sat there staring straight before her. She tried to eat something and could not. Wade could, and did.

"I'm sorry," he said, between bites, "but right now eating is important to me. You can go on back to town if you like. I buried him in the desert, where he was shot. I'll fetch along his money and——"

"What's the matter with you, anyway?" she exclaimed, wakening from her trance. "Haven't you got a spark of politeness?"

"Durned little," said Wade. "I'm trying to make it easier for you. Head on back to town, and I'll be along to-morrow. I don't want company."

"You certainly talk like it," she retorted angrily. "Back to town? I'll do nothing of the kind. I intend to stay right here. You say my uncle was shot?"

"Yeah." Wade dipped water from the bucket, which he had brought along. "Well, stay here, then. I'll give you the will and tell you where the money is, and you can hoe your own row. You look like you could, all right," he said, surveying her critically. "And you'd better turn your hoss into the corral, unless you want him to swell himself up on alfalfa."

She flashed him one angry glance and rose.

"I'll get a bite to eat after you're gone," she said.

Going to her horse, she unsaddled with expert hand, as Wade idly noted, and led the animal off toward the corral, and for a little Wade saw nothing more of her.

This was rotten luck, he reflected gloomily. If she had only held off another day! This place appealed strongly to him; there were a number of things he had resolved to do here, such as getting his wagon cleaned up and put in shape, and mending that broken harness and so forth. But now? Nothing doing. Better attend to his errand here, then hitch up and mosey along.

She was pretty, no denying that. Right nice name, too. Nina Vail! It sort of fitted her properly. Sure was a hell-cat, though. Not like Kathleen. At the thought, Dave Wade dropped his head and stared moodily at the ground. This was the first time he had talked with a girl since he had heard of Kathleen's death. The memory stung.

Suddenly Wade heard a crash, a *thud-thud* like a double drumbeat, a wild cry from the girl. He leaped up, circled the corner of the shack, and broke into a run for the corral. She was hanging desperately to her horse, despite its rearing and striking. The animal had tangled with Ramon. The two horses were fighting furiously.

Wade hurled himself into the *mêlée*, shouting, hitting out with both fists. At his voice and presence, Ramon drew back. The girl's horse, lifting her off the ground, pressed in. More biting, flying hoofs, dust.

That was all Wade remembered. Something hit him, and he went down.

CHAPTER III.

KERR'S THREAT.

WHEN Dave Wade came to himself, much time had elapsed. This, however, did not account for the sense of strangeness that was upon him.

He lay quiet, staring around. It

took him some time to realize that he was in a bunk, in Vail's one-room shack. He swung his legs to the floor and sat up; the consequent pain in his head reminded him of a few things. His hand explored. A bandage, yes; but that was not all. Astounded, he rose and went to a cracked mirror across on the opposite wall, and stared at himself.

His hair was cut short. So was his ragged beard—clipped close. He blinked at his reflection, the first time he had looked into a mirror for uncounted days. Was this ragged, hawk-faced creature really Dave Wade? This bearded, wolfish-looking man with the queer glitter in his eyes?

Sight of himself gave him an abrupt shock.

Then he turned slowly and looked around. Why, she must have dragged him in here, clear from the corral, and done the job? He felt his head through the bandage and grunted disdainfully. Nothing but a flying hoof. His eyes fell on the razor, soap, and brush on a shelf beneath the mirror. A basin of soapy water was there, too.

Dave Wade took the hint.

When Nina Vail came back into the shack, she stopped short, staring. A stranger was sitting there looking at her. The bandage was gone. So was the beard. Here was Dave Wade, years younger, his face very pink and white—that same pinkness which refused to tan or sunburn, which had once given him the nickname of "Babe."

"Oh, I didn't know you!" she exclaimed abruptly. "Where's the bandage?"

"Took it off; thanks," said Wade. "It was durned good of you to go to all that trouble, Miss Vail. But a puncher is tough. A bat over the

ear don't call for any fancy trimmings. What about the hosses?"

"They're all right now," she rejoined, looking hard at him. "Mercy, you look like a different person! Well, I must get back to work. I'm cleaning out that wagon of my uncle's. It's a wonderful wagon——"

"Hey, for gosh sake!" cried Wade hurriedly. "Leave that there wagon alone, will you? It ain't his. It's mine."

He started up. A spasm of pain shot through his head, and wincing, he closed his eyes for a minute. Then he found her beside him, found her hands pressing him back on the stool, found her voice soothing and tender in his ears.

"Oh, please take it easy! I had so much work cleaning and bandaging that hurt, and it was all my fault because that glorious black horse shied at me. Don't take me for an enemy, please. I don't mean to keep you all riled up, honest I don't. What is it that's hurting you so and makes you want to fly out at every one?"

Dave Wade dropped his head in his hands.

"Oh, leave me alone," he groaned. "I'm just ornery and no-account."

"I won't." She was leaning over him, touching his hurt head with tender fingers. "The scalp isn't cut; but you got a bad clip just the same. Now tell me about my uncle, will you? And about yourself. Is that beautiful horse yours, too?"

DAVE WADE lifted his head, looked up at her; he saw her suddenly as though for the first time, a touch of pity in her dark-blue eyes, an appeal, a sympathy in her features that went through him like a knife.

"I'm sorry for everything," he

said simply. "I've played in hard luck, that's all, and it's sort of soured me."

A tremulous smile touched her lips.

"I haven't played in such terribly good luck myself. I've been a school-teacher, you know, and I came here thinking that Uncle Ike had a grand place—and look what I've run into. I don't understand it all."

"I do." Wade straightened up. "He told me before he died. He hadn't wanted you to be ashamed of him, and he had lied about having a swell spread and so forth. Yeah, I guess you're worse off than I am, at that. And you take it like a man, and I take it like an ornery skunk."

His voice was bitter. Her fingers touched his head again, gently.

"I knew there must be something that had gone deep, to give you that look. Well, let it lie; you just didn't care about anything, and quit trying, eh? I've felt the same way, lots of times, but I had to keep going. After my folks died in the influenza epidemic, I felt that way. Still, I managed somehow. So will you."

Wade came to his feet, and patted her hand.

"Thanks. I guess you win," he said. "Wait till I get into some decent clothes, and then we'll talk business. You sure make me ashamed of myself."

He strode out of the shack.

Once in the wagon, which was half cleaned out, he discarded his rags and got into corduroys, buckled his gun belt about his waist, and regarded himself in the mirror with an oath of disgust. He had acted like a churl. Those few words from the girl had shown him, as nothing else could have done, the folly of

his whole mental attitude. Instead of taking a blow on the chin, he had let himself be floored and had stayed down.

"Just to make up," he growled at himself, "you lend this girl a hand. She's up against something dirty here, and most likely that gent Kerr had something to do with it. So get to work."

It did not occur to him that, in letting Kerr know he had found the lost tapadera, he might have stored up trouble for himself.

Picking up Vail's rig, he lugged it around to the front of the shack and dropped it. Nina Vail surveyed him with a quick smile.

"Hello! You look a lot different. What did you say your name was?"

"Dave Wade."

"Well, sit down and tell me about my uncle, first. Then about you."

"I ain't in the picture, thanks." Wade rolled a cigarette and described his meeting with the dying Vail. "Now," he concluded, "looks to me like we'd better see his will, then make sure just what this here outfit comprises, and dig up that money. Is this here town, Miles City, the county seat?"

"No; that's down in Las Cruces," she replied. "We can get some lawyer in town to arrange about the will and so forth, though. Where's the pocket?"

Wade turned over the rig and pointed it out. Nina Vail emptied the pocket and opened the envelope. She nodded quickly.

"Leaves his estate to me, and I'm appointed executor." She went on: "Poor uncle—I haven't seen him since I was a child. He's always been a wanderer. I wrote him last year about coming to visit him, but he wouldn't permit it at all and said he would come down and see me. This time, I just made up my mind

and wrote I was coming, and came. And—it was a shock finding you, and learning so suddenly that he was dead."

"Let me get something to dig with." Wade examined the earthen floor, inside the door. "That hunting knife on the wall will do. Say, you've got this place looking real smart already!"

He glanced around admiringly. Within a few minutes, indeed, the girl's deft touch had transformed the place. She laughed softly.

"Oh, I've just started, Dave. Wait until I really get to work on it."

"You're not going to stay here?"

She nodded. "I think so. Why not? I've no place else, now."

TAKING an old hunting knife from its sheath, on the log wall, Dave Wade fell to work on the earth of the floor. Nina Vail joined him, and after a moment he struck something. This turned out to be a small tin box.

Once exhumed, it came open without trouble. The hoard thus brought to light was no great one. It consisted of a hundred dollars in cash, a credit from the general store in town of forty dollars, and papers regarding the XV outfit, as it was named. These Wade examined frowningly.

"By gosh, this may amount to something," he said. "Your uncle got the property off a homesteader, then he proved up and got title. It's been verified, and the water rights go with it. That means something, see? I dunno where this gent Kerr comes in; his name don't show. These papers are pretty recent, too. What we'd better do is consult somebody who knows the lay of the land around here. Shall we ride into town to-morrow?"

She nodded brightly, her face flushed with eager interest. "Yes, by all means! Just where does the ranch extend, anyway?"

"Search me; can't tell by this legal description," said Wade. "I noticed it's all fenced. Suppose we saddle up and go look for ourselves?"

"Good! Then we can get back and clean up before dark. I want to tackle that wagon of yours and finish it, too."

"Aren't you going back to town?"

"To-day? I should say not. I'll return that horse I rented, to-morrow, and take along these two horses here. Then I can ride one back, and pack my things on the other. I've no trunk; I stored that in Las Aguas until I found out whether I'd stay here or not. I can send for it later."

"Oh, all right," said Wade. "Looks like you've got money enough to cover the lawyer's fee, so when we ride over the place, I'll pull out and meet you to-morrow."

"What?" she exclaimed, with a startled look. "You're not leaving?"

"I reckon I am. You and me staying here together would look pretty——"

"Now, you listen to me, Dave Wade," she said quickly. "I'm the one to worry about how things look, I guess. I was raised in the cow country, and probably you were, too, and you know good and well that your nonsense is a lot of absurdity. You're going to stay right here, because I need you, and nobody's going to think twice about it."

"Oh, all right." Dave Wade laughed. Then, to his own astonishment, he realized what had happened. It was his first laugh in a long time. He turned away. "I'll saddle up, and we'll look over the place."

In ten minutes they were riding down the valley together.

Vail had fenced his domain. Beyond the stands of alfalfa he had run a cross fence, and a dozen cows were lazily occupying the farther acreage. Wade surveyed the entire spread with an appraising eye.

"This ain't so bad for a small outfit," he observed. "About forty acres or less in alfalfa; seems like he traded in his first crop to the general store, which will give you a chance to lay in supplies without handing out money. Close to two hundred acres down in the spread of the fan. And the water rights. Ain't many cows, but this ain't a cow outfit. You might sell 'em off and put in some hosses. Any one who could raise some cutting hosses in this country might find it a good thing."

"That would take some money, I'm afraid," said Nina Vail.

"Well, a couple thousand dollars or so might help," Wade agreed dryly. "You'd need a man or two and——"

He broke off. They had come to the fence at the end of the XV range, and over the hill beyond, coming down toward their position by the creek, appeared two riders.

"You're a magician." The girl laughed. "Speak of two men, and they're here."

"Yeah," said Wade, unsmiling. "Neighbors, most likely. Punchers, by their looks, which ain't any too promising."

THE two riders, sighting them, paused and exchanged a few words, then rode on. Wade anticipated cheery greetings, but he was mistaken in the event. As they came up to the fence, the two men checked their horses. Circle K, Wade perceived.

"Ike Vail around anywheres?" demanded one of them abruptly.

"No," said Wade, resenting the tone. "Friends of his?"

"Not hardly," came the response. "You working for him?"

"Yeah."

"Then tell him to clear off Circle K land and do it quick, if he wants to avoid trouble. And by quick, we mean quick."

"Yeah," said Wade. Despite curious glances, they had addressed him and not Nina Vail. "You fellers mind telling me something? I'm a stranger in these parts," he added apologetically. "I done found a tapadera yesterday, silver-mounted, that must have come from some danged smart rig. Know who it might belong to?"

The two looked at each other, then back at Wade.

"Why, sure," said one. "That must be the one our boss lost off his rig. The cook was talkin' about it only yesterday. Got it handy?"

Suddenly Wade smiled, and his smile was frosty and mirthless.

"I got it handy, but not for you gents," he said in a voice that bit. "So Kerr lost that there tapadera, did he? And he aims to take over this outfit, huh? Well, you can tell him a message, just to be obliging. This here is Miss Vail, who owns this outfit—lock, stock, barrel, and water rights. And she ain't quitting. And if Kerr wants to put a couple bullets through her, like he done through Ike Vail, he'll lose more than a tapadera trying it. Got the message?"

The two men stared at him, half angry, half in surprise.

"What's that?" asked one. "You say he shot Vail?"

"Twice. Through the back," said Wade. "And you'll notice this fence ain't cut. Any gent who goes

to work on it is committing suicide. Tell that to your boss and your outfit."

"Talking biggity, ain't you?" said one, with a move of his hand.

Wade's gun flashed out.

"Up!" he snarled, and both men reached. "You fools don't want to do any more reaching for a gun—without you pull the gun. Get out."

His cold voice, his deadly look, and above all the swiftness with which his gun had leaped up at them, held the two Circle K riders speechless. Without a word, they turned their horses and rode away. When they were gone, Wade found the girl at his stirrup.

"Dave Wade! Do you know who killed my uncle?"

"You heard me," he said shortly.

"But—but what business had they ordering us off?"

Wade met her gaze, and drew a deep breath. He laughed softly.

"Looks to me," he said, "like your uncle slipped something over when he got those water rights confirmed. Prob'ly some nester had this place; gov'ment land that Kerr fenced in. Your uncle took it over, held off Kerr, got everything squared away—and kept quiet about it. We'd better ride into town to-morrow morning and start the ball rolling. We'll learn something definite then."

THEY rode back toward the shack. At the corral, Nina Vail lost her abstracted frown, put up her own horse, then walked toward the wagon with Wade.

"If Kerr really killed my uncle—well, let that wait till to-morrow," she said. "Now tell me about yourself. I'll finish my house-cleaning job here, and you can lend a hand. Where did you get this wagon?"

What do you do with it? Where are you going?"

"You're asking a lot," said Wade. "I inherited the wagon from a medicine man, Pawnee Joe Likely. There's a whole lot to this here wagon that don't appear on the surface. Me the same. I'll tell you about it later. There's Pawnee Joe's buckskin outfit hanging up—mostly sand right now. Where am I going? Well, that's for you to say, ma'am."

"How do you mean?" she demanded, meeting his steady gaze.

"I'll tell you. I been wandering, aiming at nowhere and nothing. Now I've got some interest in things, all of a sudden. You're in a jam here, looks to me. I met up with Kerr this morning, and he's bad medicine. If things are the way they look, you're going to have a fight on your hands to stick it out here."

"I'm beginning to realize that," she said slowly. "And I'll stick it out. I've got to. I've nothing to go back for, I've got mighty little money, and if this means to get shoved out or fight for my rights—well, I'm not getting shoved out."

Wade nodded. "That's the way I sized you up. Here. Let me show you something."

From a hiding place that none would suspect, he produced a flat little box of steel which would endure fire. From this he took out money and papers and a check book. The money he counted over to her; it came to two thousand dollars.

"It's no good to me; it's what you need, so take it," he said. "As a loan or in any way that seems good to you."

"But I can't take it!" she exclaimed, staring at the money, then at him. "Why, who would have thought—"

She checked herself. But Dave Wade smiled thinly.

"Who'd have thought that a bum like me would have money, eh?"

"I didn't say that."

"You thought it. Why not? It's honestly come by; I collected debts due to me or to my dad before he died."

"It'll mean, then, that we're partners in this place."

Wade shook his head.

"No. I ain't staying here any longer than just to get you free of worry. I'm only a tramp; I dunno if I'll ever settle down or amount to anything. You take this and turn it to good use. The best way to fight a man like Kerr is to have money in the bank, but don't let him know it."

"Well—"

Wade met her hesitant eyes and smiled.

"I'll be real happy if you'll take it."

"All right. But it means a partnership."

"Let that wait. I'm riding into town."

She started.

"What? Now? You don't mean that you're leaving?"

"Only long enough to find out a few things we've got to know. Listen now."

Wade set forth the case as it struck him. His meeting with Kerr, the visit from the two Circle K riders, and what had been said, lingered with him. He had been thinking uneasily about it all. If he were in Kerr's place, and ignorant that Vail held full legal title to the XV, he would throw these intruders out in a hurry. In this country possession meant law, for courts were few, enforcement was a joke, and as the murder of Vail showed, might mean right.

"I ain't so sure that we'd ought to be away from here to-morrow,"

concluded Wade shrewdly. "This jigger Kerr is salty, take it from me, and the worst mistake anybody can make in a range war is to waste time, or to run a blazer he can't back up. We know he killed your uncle. Why? That's what I want to find out. We've no direct proof. That tapadera don't mean much, when it comes down to law. But, believe me, Kerr ain't the man to let any grass grow between his steps. I reckon you're safe enough here today, and I'll get back sometime to-night. Suit you?"

She nodded. "I suppose you're right about it."

"I'll do some inquiring about the right party to handle things, too," added Wade. "We don't want to get double-crossed by some law shark that's a friend of Kerr. By the way, have you a gun?"

"A gun? No," she said, her brows coming down. "You don't think I need one?"

"I sure do. Here, I got an extra one in the wagon." He produced the handsome, silver-mounted gun that was part of "Pawnee Joe" Likely's outfit, twirled the cylinder, and handed it over. "Keep this where you can grab it, just in case. I don't expect any one would start gun play with a woman, but it's just as well not to take things for granted. Can you use it?"

She smiled. "I hope so. Thanks a lot."

Wade nodded and saddled up, for by this time the sun was westering fast and he was anxious to get as far toward town as possible before darkness fell. His hurt head had already ceased to bother him, except for a dull ache.

"I'll be back sometime to-night," he said, "and I'll bunk in the wagon, so leave her open. And thanks for

cleaning her out. You ain't sore at me for all I said?"

"Do I act like it?" She laughed softly.

Wade grinned, and swung up to the saddle.

"So long and good luck, then."

SO Dave Wade fared forth alone to Miles City, reaching there long after darkness, despite the speed of Ramon; and went about his business without incident. But Nina Vail fell to work on the wagon that had once belonged to Pawnee Joe Likely, and hummed a gay tune as she cleaned. Much had happened in one day, and more was to happen; and as so often befalls, the thought of her almost unknown uncle faded and was cast far into the background by the rush of new events.

In the cabinets of the wagon she came upon all manner of jars, and their labels intrigued her. So did the make-up box with its contents. She could guess easily that the medicine man had used all these in his act, with the wigs and other paraphernalia. The gaudily beaded buckskin garments, the Mexican sombrero with its snake-skin band, the scattered articles, all showed that Dave Wade had inherited some strange property. She remembered that his rig was of ornately tooled leather, mounted with silver, like the gun and belt he had left with her.

When she had finished with the wagon, there was still an hour or more of daylight left, and she turned her attention to the shack, cleaning the lamp and cookstove and clearing out a lot of truck. The gun she laid on the bench outside the door.

With sunset, she made a trip to the creek for water. She was nearly back to the shack when she saw the lean black shape coming.

For one startled split second, she could not believe her eyes. The beast was coming with terrific speed from the nearest brush, covering the ground in low, long leaps, and coming straight for her. The ferocity of the intent gaze, the half-open jaws, the whole manner of the brute, left no doubt of its attack. She had no time to think, to escape, even to dart into the shack.

Like a flash, she dropped the bucket and plucked up the heavy .45. The savage animal was almost upon her. The weapon was scarcely in her hand when the beast launched itself. Desperate, terrified, she pulled trigger again and again—even as the huge black shape crashed into her. The heavy reports thundered out. She was sent sprawling, knocked head-first by the smashing impact; but that first bullet had driven the brute's jaws askew, another bullet had smashed to its brain.

Nina Vail sat up, still clutching the revolver. Almost beside her, the black beast had relaxed in death.

She came to her feet, her breath coming fast. A quick patter of hoofbeats, and she looked up to see Sandy Kerr spurring down upon the scene. Only then did she recall what Wade had said about Kerr and his black brute of a dog. With a storm of oaths, Kerr pounded up, flung himself from his horse, and after one brief examination of the dog, swung around on her.

"You've killed him!" he cried out furiously.

His hand went to his gun. Almost involuntarily, the girl, white-faced, threw up her weapon. Then Kerr realized that she was no man, became aware of what he was doing. His hand fell, but the angry storm in his face did not change.

"You'll pay for this," he said slowly.

"Nothing of the sort," snapped Nina Vail. "The brute was coming at me—if I hadn't shot him, he'd have killed me. Pay for killing him? Not much. You'll pay if you don't keep your pets where they belong."

"Smart trick, ain't you?" he observed. "What are you doing here?"

"None of your business," she replied. "This is my property, and the sooner you get off it the better. I suppose you'd like to murder me like you did my uncle."

Kerr went livid. For a moment he stood staring at her, his light-blue eyes filled with wild dismay and startled wonder.

"What d'you mean by that?" he asked.

"None of your business. Get out of here, and get quick," she said, and drew back the hammer of the .45. Kerr took a step toward her, read the desperate resolve in her face, and checked himself again.

"I believe you would!" he shot out.

She said nothing, but her eyes were eloquent. He looked down at the dead dog, then turned to his horse and caught the reins. The horse fought away from approaching the beast, but Kerr savagely and cruelly mastered his mount. After a sharp fight, he got the body of the dog behind the saddle, swung up himself, and gave Nina Vail one look.

"Your uncle, huh? We'll see about that," he said grimly. "And you'll get off this land or be put off before another day's past."

Then he rode away. Not until he was out of sight did Nina Vail move; then the weapon fell from her hand, and she collapsed.

CHAPTER IV.

FLAMING GUNS.

DAVE WADE came back to the XV in the early-morning hours, but with no lack of light, for the moon was a bit past the full and high in the sky all night.

To avoid waking the girl, he hobbled Ramon and left him, and crawled into the wagon, with scarcely a sound. He was asleep in five minutes.

With morning, he was up and about early, and Nina Vail likewise. Wade was more cheerful than for many a day, and greeted her with a smile and hearty reassurance, as he recounted what he had done in town.

"The very man for you is the lawyer, Powell, an old man and a good lawyer, and he's no great friend of Kerr, either," he said. "What's more, I've learned the nub of the trouble here. It's a bad year for water, which is growing low everywhere, and your uncle, in taking this place, secured most of the Circle K water supply. Kerr had simply fenced the land and grabbed it, thinking to keep out all nesters."

"Why didn't he put my uncle off, then?" asked the girl.

"Your uncle Ike was a smart jigger. He played Kerr along, made no effort to use much water, and was so shiftless that Kerr let him stay here rather than have to do with a better man. But Ike Vail tricked him neatly, got the deed to the land and the water rights as well, then set in to use the water. And we know the end of that. So you have only to get Lawyer Powell at work— Why, what's the matter with you this morning?"

"Matter enough," she said. "You'd better clean that gun you lent me."

Wade eyed her for a moment.

"Well? Did something happen?"

She told him all about the dog, and Kerr's visit. Dave Wade lost his pink freshness, went white with anger; but she caught his arm.

"Don't look like that! He didn't lift a hand against me, honestly. He didn't dare; I'd have shot him, I think."

"You see what happened?" said Wade in a low voice. "He sent the dog ahead of him. He had seen the wagon tracks turning in here and thought I was alone. He told the brute to go ahead and take me. The dog obeyed. Kerr would have been technically clear of any responsibility. And you killed the beast! Good for you, Nina—good! Now let's rush breakfast. You get off to town. Tell Powell about it, tell any one else you see. Spread the news around town. Kerr and that dog of his aren't liked—at least, the dog wasn't. Kerr is thought a hard man, but he has friends enough. Setting the dog on a woman will cause a change of heart in many, or I miss my guess."

"He threatened that he'd put me off this place," she said slowly. "I don't want to leave you alone here, Dave. It wouldn't be safe. Besides, I don't like the look in your face, to be honest about it. I don't want you to start anything. Kerr is punished enough, for there's no doubt he loved the dog."

"I'll start nothing," said Wade.

"And you won't leave the place? Promise?"

He nodded, and his face cleared. "Promise. No, I'm not going to start any war; I've had enough of that in the past. Whatever I do, won't be done on impulse."

So the talk ended, and when they had breakfasted, Nina Vail rode

away, with her uncle's two horses following her.

Wade spent the morning getting his house in order after weeks of shameful neglect. Desert sands had scoured the wagon as clean as a whistle, down to the bare wood; the gayly painted legend of "Pawnee Joe, The Medicine Man," was quite gone, and he was just as glad of it.

"Doesn't look as though I'd ever be Pawnee Joe Likely again," he reflected. "No more need of it. Well, I guess I'll have a good bath—no surprises this time, either!"

HE visited the creek, returned, shaved, and decided to get a bite to eat; it was close to high noon. Then, remembering his rifle and shotgun laid out for oiling and cleaning, he decided to finish with them first. He climbed into the wagon, sat down on his bunk, and fell to work.

So Nina Vail had shot that dog, and downed Kerr face to face! He whistled to himself at the thought. What a girl she was! Any woman who could carry off a job like that was worth while. She had something to her, by gosh!

Wade craned forward suddenly, shotgun across his knees. A rider had come in sight—a man who was approaching the shack. No puncher, this. A hulking, round-shouldered man, heavy and dark of feature, with drooping black mustache, shabby clothes, a rifle in a boot by his leg. He came to the shack, did not dismount, then circled around it. Wade waited in silence, grimly, until the stranger came almost to the wagon. Then his voice shot out.

"Well? Who you looking for?"

The other started violently, peered into the wagon, and saw Wade there. His hands lifted on the instant.

"Don't shoot!" he exclaimed in alarm. "Let's talk this here thing over peaceable."

Wade chuckled, perceiving that the stranger had mistaken his attitude.

"All right," he said. "You name the play, pilgrim."

"Yeah, I guess you're him, all right, by the pictures," the other responded. "Dave Wade, ain't it?"

"What's it to you?" said Wade.

The other swallowed hard.

"I'm Black, deputy sheriff in Miles City. I heard you was around here. No offense, Wade, but you're wanted for murder, manslaughter, robbery, and a dozen more things over the line in—"

Sudden light broke on Wade. "Holy smoke! You come out here to arrest me?"

"Yeah," admitted the other cautiously. "But I ain't arguing that," he added in haste. "I got another errand or two besides, that don't concern you."

"And you sure run your head in the hole, huh?" said Wade cheerfully. "Glad to meet you, Black. I expect Sandy Kerr tipped you off, huh?"

"I didn't say that——"

"You don't need to. Get off your hoss and step into the wagon here. Come on, I ain't going after a gun until you do."

"I ain't talking war talk," stated the deputy in some concern.

He dismounted and climbed into the wagon. Wade laid aside his shotgun and, as the other sat down, handed him a couple of letters.

"Full pardon from the governor. Appointment as a Ranger in the next State west of here. Look 'em over."

The bewildered deputy did so, and whistled aloud.

"My gosh, this is something else

again," he said. "Looks O. K. to me. But you been on the 'wanted' list for quite a spell. The town's all worked up over you being in these parts, what with talk of reward and so forth. You got any objection if I wire to the governor about this here pardon?"

"None whatever," Wade rejoined. "And I'm staying around here a while, so you don't need to lose any sleep about it. Town's all worked up, huh? I expect Kerr sent in word about me last night or early this morning."

The deputy hesitated. "I got more'n that to talk about," he said slowly. "You don't look like you'd fly off the handle——"

"And I got you where you don't dast go for your gun, so spit it out," said Wade brusquely. "What is it?"

"Murder of Ike Vail. His body was found at Painted Well yesterday. He'd been shot twice, his hoss shot likewise. Feller who found it picked up a tapadera there that come from a fancy rig, silver-mounted and so forth. I see just such a rig there by the corral. Kerr met you coming from there."

Wade broke into a laugh, then it passed into a frown, as he stared at Black.

WADE knew instantly what had taken place. When he met Kerr and mentioned that tapadera, when he mentioned it again to the Circle K riders, he had opened his mouth far too wide. Kerr had simply gone home and removed the other tapadera from his rig, then had made up this yarn, depending on gun play to keep the whole thing from ever coming into court. Thus far, the word of a rancher would go against that of a wanderer.

"Looks to me like Kerr is a smart

jigger," Wade said slowly. "He noticed my rig yesterday, huh? And he figured I'd probably put a bullet into you, and then there'd be no more discussion of the point at issue. By the way, look at this here and see if you know it."

He produced the one he had found. The deputy looked it over carefully.

"I could pretty near swear that belongs to Kerr," he said. "Many's the time I've noticed the silver work on that there fancy rig of his; it's got the same design all over it."

"Yeah. And you go look at my rig," said Wade, "and you'll see it ain't got no tapaderas and never had none. Yeah, Kerr is right smart, but he ain't smart enough; he needs filin' down a bit. And you, I reckon, are a good friend of his."

The deputy drew down his shaggy black brows.

"If I was as good a friend as you seem to think, Wade, I'd have put a bullet into you before I done any talking."

Wade laughed a little. "You looked like doing it. You spoke of other errands. Just what are they?"

"I got to serve an eviction notice that Ike Vail, his heirs, and so forth are to get off Circle K property at once. This is Circle K land."

"Got a court order to that effect, have you?"

Black hesitated. "No. Kerr allowed it would save a lot o' trouble if I done served the notice on whoever was here."

"My gosh! You're a fine deputy sheriff," said Wade. "You working for the county or for Kerr?"

"You needn't insult me," Black said sturdily. "I've met you fair and square."

Wade nodded, and squinted out at the noonday sunlight. He began to understand this surprising visit a

little more clearly, having probed his man.

This deputy was no great shakes as an officer—a stubborn, decent, easy-going sort of man, with no brains whatever. Nothing wrong in him and nothing right, either. The sort of fellow who could be used—

Wade's eyes lighted up suddenly. Why not? Already he could figure just about what was in the air. Kerr had been in a hurry to get this deputy here by noon. Why? Because after that visit one Dave Wade would be gone to town as a prisoner, or else there would have been a gun fight and probably a dead deputy, with Wade a consequent outlaw. And the threats from Kerr and his riders both pointed to the same thing.

Wade suddenly jerked out his gun and drew back the hammer.

"Up!" he said crisply.

The astonished deputy lifted his arms. Wade took his gun, then put his own away.

"I'm keeping this temporarily, Black; you can have it again when you go. Ain't had any dinner, I reckon? Then suppose you and me waste a lot of time eating."

"Oh!" Black exclaimed, with a sigh of relief. "By gosh, I thought maybe you'd got your mad up. That's right, I ain't et since breakfast. I got to be back in town by the middle of the afternoon, though."

"You won't be. You're not going back till I tell you; you're my prisoner, durn you!" Dave Wade's eyes twinkled.

Black grinned at him.

"Oh, all right. I'd better turn my hoss loose, huh?"

"Nope; you're going to need him. Now listen here; let's understand each other. You got no right serving any eviction notice without a

court order. Go back to town and talk to Lawyer Powell. You'll find that a government deed to this property is being recorded by Miss Vail, Ike Vail's niece, and the water rights go with it. Kerr was just putting you in a hole. Now, about this murder charge against me. Take up the matter with the sheriff, and I'll tell you who really killed Vail, and maybe give you proof. Ride out here hotfoot with a posse, and you'll stop hot lead. Take your choice."

"You're a fair-minded, jigger," said the deputy slowly. "I ain't starting no war over the carcass of a dead man. The law ain't so durned strong up in this part of the State, anyhow. We let things sift themselves out, and it saves a lot of trouble. I'll take up this thing with the sheriff down to Las Cruces, and let it ride till then."

"That's fine," said Wade, and rose. "Now, let's you and me fix up some water and grub, and go down the creek a ways and eat."

"Why not eat here?" asked Black in surprise.

"I got a notion to eat out in the open," said Wade. "It sets better on my stomach. And besides, we might maybe find us a wolf down in the lower flat. I seen a couple there yesterday. I'm running this show, so let's dig out some of Ike Vail's fancy grub and take our time to it. Leave your rifle in the boot unless we need it."

His own rifle he took along, with a box of cartridges.

THE deputy, Black, revealed himself as an earnest, stupid sort of chap, but something of a hero worshiper. He was thrilled over being in company with Dave Wade, the killer, as he expressed it. He told Wade very frankly that trouble might be ex-

pected with the sheriff, who was a great personal friend of Sandy Kerr's; whereat Wade smiled grimly and said nothing.

Down in the lower flat past the alfalfa stand, they settled down among the brush that fringed the creek, Wade leaving the two rifles close to hand but hobbling the horses well out of sight in the cover. Beyond, the canyon widened into a valley that lost itself in the Circle K range, where the creek meandered along and presently petered out.

Over their meal the two men lingered, unhurried, talking and smoking lazily. The afternoon drew on slowly.

Far down on the south rise, over the hill to the left, appeared a wagon and team. It clattered and rumbled down toward the creek and the XV fence. Wade heard it, and after a look out, came back with a grin.

"Black, looks to me like our wolves are on the prowl."

The deputy leaped up, took a look through the brush, and frowned at Wade.

"Huh? That's a couple o' Kerr's riders, with a wagon."

"Exactly. Keep out of sight and see what happens." Wade picked up his rifle.

"Hey! You're not goin' to start no killing?"

"Start nothing," snapped Wade. "My guess is that a bunch of riders will be along to raid this place. I don't aim to kill any one, but if you spoil the party, I sure will. Lay low, now, and leave things to me."

Uncertainly Black obeyed.

Wade found himself a good position a dozen feet from the deputy, and settled down to wait. The two punchers with the wagon drew up by the creek, near where the XV fence crossed. They unloaded two

five-gallon tins of kerosene, some tools, and then a small sack. They were not over two hundred feet from the brush that concealed Wade and Black, but their talk did not carry.

From the sack they produced some white cylinders, and, while the one took the team and wagon back down the creek a few hundred yards, the other puncher fell to work. Black came cautiously over to where Wade lay, and his eyes were bulging.

"My gosh, he's cappin' dynamite sticks! I've seen that done too often, Wade. We got to look out."

"You go back and keep quiet till I sing out at you," ordered Wade softly. "They aim to blow up Vail's dam, most likely."

The Circle K puncher finished his work, put the sticks in a pile on the two cans of kerosene, then stretched out lazily at one side and rolled a smoke. Presently his companion joined him in this arduous labor.

Perhaps ten minutes passed. A rider came into sight over the rise, then another, then four more. Sandy Kerr and five of his punchers. Kerr and two of the men had rifles. Wade cocked his rifle and waited, immobile.

After a brief conference with his men, Kerr dismounted, took up a long pair of wire cutters, and advanced to the fence. He fell to work on the wire, close to a post. Wade sighted carefully; at this distance, it was hardly possible to miss. He pressed the trigger.

Splinters flew from the post, six inches from Kerr's face.

Sandy Kerr went a foot into the air; his men scattered. Dave Wade turned and saw Black crouching, peering out. He spoke softly.

"All right, Black. Warn 'em off. That's your job."

WITHOUT hesitation, the deputy parted the brush and stepped out into the open. At sight of him, Kerr and his men stood transfixed.

"Lay off or you'll have trouble," shouted Black, in too much haste to think about the effect of his words. "I'm warning you to keep off this land until she's legally——"

With a roar of fury, Kerr caught his rifle and swung it up. He fired, and Black ducked. Others of his men fired; bullets cut the brush. Black hastily leaped for shelter, cursing hotly.

"Cut the wire, boys," sang out Kerr. "I'll cover you. You fellers with rifles, let him have it if he shows up."

"Gimme my rifle, darn it!"

The deputy hurled himself on his weapon. Wade paid no attention. One of the punchers caught up the wire cutters and advanced on the fence. He fell to work. Wade grimly pressed the trigger. With a yell of agony, the rider grabbed at his right arm, spun around, then headed for the horses.

Black opened fire, as bullets whistled through the brush. Wade opened on the kerosene tins, and a bullet plumped through one of them. A wild yell of dismay pealed up, as the Circle K men realized that there were two rifles in the brush, and the kerosene spurted in the sunlight.

"Look out for that dynamite!" yelled somebody, and there was a rush to the rear.

Lucky for them, too. At Wade's next shot there was a roar, a spout of dirt, and the ground shook. The kerosene was sent in a flaming radius. Next instant horses, men, and team were sweeping back over the rise in wild panic.

Black broke into a roar of laughter and stepped forth.

"My gosh, we made a hole in the ground, anyhow, Wade! And nobody killed. That's pretty darned good, if you ask me."

"Yeah? If I was you, I'd head for town right now," said Wade, chuckling to himself. "Kerr is liable to take this personal."

For an instant, consternation swept Black's heavy face, then he swore heartily.

"Let him, by gosh! They opened fire on a deputy, and that ain't no joke, lemme tell you. I warned 'em good and plenty. They're gone for good, right enough. Yeah, I guess I'll be heading back. Say, I wouldn't ha' missed this for a farm!"

"Neither would I," agreed Wade complacently. "They were so darned anxious to get detonators on that there dynamite that it worked fine for us. Well, good luck!"

The deputy mounted and took his departure.

Wade rode back to the shack, confident that for the present Kerr was blocked. He had scarcely unsaddled Ramon when Nina Vail made her appearance, her lead horse piled high with luggage. Wade went to help with the unloading.

"All fine in town?" he asked.

She nodded brightly.

"Elegant! That lawyer is a fine old chap. He says we're all clear and nothing to worry about, legally. Who was that man with the black mustache riding back toward town? He spoke as though he knew me."

"He does, by reputation." Wade grinned. "Deputy sheriff. Girl, for once Dave Wade used his head! Tell you about it when we get these hosses where they belong."

When she had heard all the story, she looked at Wade, her blue eyes growing deeper and darker in hue

under the stress of anger. But when she spoke, it was coolly enough.

"I guess that evens up, Dave; you and me both. Well, this means that either we must use a tight check rein, or else start a private war that'll end up in jail for all concerned. So we'll call a halt on this whole affair, and we'll do it to-morrow. You and I must ride into town, anyway. If I don't see Kerr there, I'll stop out at the Circle K on the way back."

"You'll what?"

"See him and have a straight talk with him," she said firmly. "He's got to know the exact situation right away and realize he hasn't a legal leg to stand on. That's only fair to him, and to ourselves. And you're staying out of it. I can deal with him, for he won't dare start anything with a woman; if he does, I'll handle him."

"Well, maybe you're right," admitted Wade. "But why do we have to ride into town? You just came from there."

"We both have to sign certain papers about that loan you made me. The lawyer will have them ready for us in the morning."

"I don't want any note, if that's what you mean, or mortgage."

"I'm making none," she rejoined tartly. "Either you meet me half-way or we split up, Dave Wade. None of your surly independence around me, do you understand?"

"Yes'm." Wade's eyes twinkled. "Have it your own way, then."

"That's better." Her quick smile flashed out. "Now, I want to sit down with you and map out a complete plan for working this place, and get all details clear. I've been inquiring around, and with the present price of hay what it is in these parts, we can put this whole place into alfalfa and do well by it. We'll

get three crops a year here—but we can't do much by talking about it and looking at it. Suit you?"

"Yes'm," said Wade, meekly, and laughed a little as he met her flushed, eager gaze.

CHAPTER V.

PARTNERS.

THAT evening, Dave Wade sketched, very briefly, the story of his wanderings and background, for Nina Vail. "You might's well know the truth now as later, and you'll get it straight from me," he declared, as they sat on the bench outside the shack door and waited for the moon to come up above the trees. "That's only square to you."

He touched lightly on the girl who had died, said little of Pawnee Joe, the Medicine Man, or of the matters concerning the wagon, but in short space told of his past misadventures with the law.

"So, you see, I'm a pretty poor one to get connected with in the public eye," he concluded. "You're able to run your own place without my help, I reckon, so think it over to-night. I can stick around for a spell, or move on, just as may seem best. The fact that they're heard of me in these parts shows pretty well—"

"Never mind that sort of talk," she broke in quietly. "I like you, and that's enough. You've learned in a hard school to keep down your impulsive desire to fight it out; don't go to the other extreme and get down on yourself. And don't get me wrong, either. I'm no *he*-woman, able to rope a cow and cuss with any puncher. I can throw a good bluff, and that's all. After that mix-up with Kerr, I was limp as a rag—went all to pieces and cried

myself to sleep. I need somebody around who's good to lean on."

"Hm-m-m!" grunted Dave Wade. "But——"

"Dry up. You're pardoned; so forget the past entirely, except to learn by your mistakes, same as I'm doing all the time. You know, Dave, the only fellow worth a darn is the one who's got the backbone to make mistakes, do something wrong, and keep on! If there's anything I hate, it's the man who's afraid to get his foot out of line. Doesn't matter if you do a thing wrong—so long as you're doing something. Right?"

"Yeah, just about," admitted Wade. "Only I can't help feeling that if I stick around, I'll fetch trouble along with me."

"Try it and discover that maybe you're wrong," she said. "I'm alone, and you're alone. You have to buck up against the effects of the past sometime and somewhere, so why not do it here, where you have one friend, anyhow?"

"Right. I'm supposed to be a killer, which I ain't; and everybody jumps on a killer to get the credit of rubbing him out. Well, you're right. I'll stick."

"Promise, partner?" she demanded.

"Till you kick me out."

"Fair enough." She laughed in the darkness, a delicious, silvery laugh like the chime of bells far away. "You're a whole lot more human than when we first met—why, it seems like a week ago! Just keep on."

Dave Wade grunted to himself.

With morning, they were off at sunrise, and rode into Miles City with mid-morning. As they came down the main street, two Circle K horses were standing outside the

store that housed the post office. Nina Vail drew rein.

"Go on up to the lawyer's office and get started with those papers, Dave," she said. "That's the horse Kerr was riding the other day. He's inside, and I'm going to have things out with him here and now. No, I don't want you around; he'll be a lot easier to handle if I'm all alone."

Dave Wade nodded, realizing the justice of her argument. He rode on to the corner, left Ramon at the rack, and mounted to the lawyer's office, which was upstairs, above the bank. When he walked in, the lawyer was alone, a shrewd man with gray hair.

"I'm Dave Wade. Miss Vail said there were some papers I had to sign."

"Oh, sure! Glad to meet you, Wade. Set down, and I'll rake 'em out."

WADE shook hands and took the chair indicated. Lawyer Powell set certain papers out before him and marked the lines for his signature. Wade glanced over the papers, and drew back.

"What's this?" he demanded sharply. "Articles of partnership? Some mistake here. I ain't going in partners with her."

"I think you are," said the lawyer, regarding him shrewdly. "She said——"

"Nonsense!" broke in Wade. "Just because I turned over some money for her to use, is no indication that I'm riding it. Forget it."

He half rose, when the other checked him.

"Are you afraid to listen to me for a minute?"

"Of course not. What's on your mind?"

"Fairness to this young woman,"

said the other slowly. "Just two counts, Wade. First, you supply money on a personal basis, which puts her under an obligation and in a false light; that isn't fair to her. Second, the fact that she's alone here. I reckon you know she ain't going to have an easy time of it with Sandy Kerr. He's plain ornery. What's more, I happen to know that, right now, the water she controls means a tremendous lot to him."

"She seen his hoss by the store," said Wade, frowning. "She's settling matters with him right now. And when she gets done, they'll be settled."

"Possibly, for the moment," the lawyer said dryly. "Apparently you think you settled them yesterday, too."

"How d'you know about that?" shot out Wade.

"Black spread it all over town inside of an hour after he got back. Let me tell you something: There's two things Sandy Kerr don't put up with. One is to get his toes stepped on. The other is interference with that ranch of his. He's built it up from nothing, and he hasn't boggled at anything doing it, let me tell you," the lawyer added significantly. "Miss Vail told me about her uncle, and all. From what I know of the matter, it's something that'll never be proved up. Well, Chihuahua Ike ain't the first man to go under so's the Circle K could get on its feet."

"She's got her legal rights, ain't she?" demanded Wade.

"Certainly. Wade, I talked to that young woman yesterday, and I can tell you she counts more on your backing than she'd want to let on to you, I guess. Don't get me wrong; I mean nothing personal, except that you're not scared to stand

up to Kerr. Now, she couldn't get any one around these parts who'd do that. Kerr knows 'em all, and they know him, but you're a stranger."

"And a bad un," said Wade bitterly. "All right. I ain't skipping out. But I ain't going into no partnership with her. Durn it, the thing wouldn't look right."

"You seem to be more of a fool than you look," snapped the lawyer with asperity. "Look right, indeed! This is range country, not the city. Besides which I'll warn you that you're liable to stop lead if you monkey with the Circle K. Suppose you do? Then she inherits the property, and there's no question of a loan for some relative of yours to bob up and grab, and get her drawn into a legal fight."

"I've got no relatives," growled Wade.

"Well, dog-gone it, man! I don't give a continental cuss for you, but she's a fine, upstanding young woman, and I say this is the only fair thing for her sake. Take it or leave it."

WADE bit his lip. He stared at the lawyer for a moment, then his face cleared. Without a word he picked up the pen and signed the papers.

"Satisfied now?" he demanded.

The other nodded, and was about to speak, when the quick, light step of the girl sounded on the stairs, and she came in.

"Good morning, Mr. Powell!" she exclaimed brightly. "Well, everything's settled with Sandy Kerr. He's apologized to me—"

"He—what?" demanded the lawyer.

"Oh"—she laughed—"he was real nice about it, too! I was all set for trouble, but there were quite a few

men around, and he probably wanted to have things pleasant on general principles. As soon as he understood the situation——”

“Did you explain it fully?” the lawyer cut in.

“With no lost motion.” Again she laughed. “He came around handsomely, and everything is all right. I’m going to let him use a certain amount of water, you see.”

“Yeah, I see,” mused the lawyer. “All right. Told him you and Wade were partners?”

“Yes.” Her eyes flashed to Wade happily. “We are, aren’t we?”

Wade nodded.

“You look out for Kerr,” said the lawyer thoughtfully. “I know him pretty well, and a sidewinder is an innocent gentleman alongside him. Sign nothing, and don’t trust him for a minute. I’ll bet my bottom dollar that right now he’s cooking up something that’ll burn your fingers if you don’t watch out. Now, if you’ll sign this batch of documents, I’ll send everything down for recording and probate to Las Cruces on the noon stage.”

When she had finished, the girl turned to Wade.

“Everything squared off, partner?”

“Too much so,” he responded. “His nibs, here, argued me into it. You probably figured he would when you said to come on here, huh?”

“Of course I did.” She laughed merrily. “Fine! Well, come along.”

“Where to?”

“Grub, curtains, and a few other things I forgot yesterday. Or don’t you want to run around doing any shopping?”

“Not particularly. I’m going to the post office, and will meet you at the store in twenty minutes. Suit you?”

“Eminently.”

Wade betook himself to the store and post office, and as he entered, Kerr was just leaving. Kerr halted, eyed him for a second, then nodded.

“Howdy, Wade. Carrying any grudges?”

“Not me,” said Wade.

Kerr put out his hand, and they shook. Then Kerr went on, but Wade remembered those pale-blue eyes of his with an uneasy sharpness.

He inquired for mail, found none, and sent off a couple of post cards. He had sold out Pawnee Joe’s stock of medicines and the formula for same, and was expecting some deferred payments before long; probably the druggist who had bought him out was awaiting his address. Until now, Wade had taken no interest in anything; but, as he regained the street, he was suddenly conscious that, after all, life was good. Yes, he had changed within the past day or two. He owed Ike Vail a debt.

“And I owe him better’n to leave him lay out in the sand,” he thought.

He realized that he was a subject of curiosity on the part of every one in town, but their glances and muttered comments made no impression. The truce with Kerr had altered things—if it were kept. That Kerr meant tamely to abandon the XV water was open to doubt, however. The man’s handshake had held more threat than conciliation.

SUDDENLY, as he was crossing the street, he was halted midway. A desert rat, who was loading his two burros, swung around with a yell.

“Dog my cats! If it ain’t you, partner! And I wouldn’t have knowed it if them fellers hadn’t been talking about you. Remember me?”

Wade broke into a laugh, and gripped the extended hand.

"Sure. I met up with you the other day. So you thought I was locoed, huh?"

"Well, you talked powerful like it, pilgrim; you sure did! As ol' Siskiyou Slosson says to me one time that——"

Wade started.

"Who? Who did you say?"

"Siskiyou."

"For the love of Pete! Do you know him?" burst out Wade eagerly. "Seen him lately, have you? Where is he now?"

"You know him?"

"Of course. Haven't seen him for some time. Where is he?"

"Headin' for here, I reckon," said the prospector. "I met up with him a month ago in the Skeletons, and he allows he's on the tail of a rich strike, as per usual. He figured to meet me here, but he ain't showed up. If you want to locate him, send him a letter here. He'll get mail here this trip."

Presently they parted. Wade went back to the post office and addressed a card to old "Siskiyou." He had known the old fellow well, and, in fact, had grubstaked him at their last meeting; but Siskiyou, like everything else, had dropped out of his life.

When he rejoined Nina Vail, she eyed him curiously as he took her parcels and led the way out to the horses.

"Dave Wade, do you know that you're a different man?" she commented. "You've changed completely."

He laughed up at her. "You're a good doctor, I guess. Say, you ain't got the sugar, have you?"

"Heavens! I knew I'd forgotten something!" she exclaimed.

"Well, you take this truck," said

Wade. "I'll get a fifty-pound sack; I guess Ramon won't kick at that much, and it'll hold us for a spell. Go ahead, and I'll pick you up outside town."

She nodded and, loaded down, rode on. Wade turned back into the store and got the sugar. He was adjusting the sack behind his saddle when two punchers sauntered up, both of them strangers. One had his arm in a sling. Neither man was armed, apparently.

"So this is the feller, huh?" said the unhurt man, eyeing Wade. "Real bad, huh?"

Wade turned.

"Hello, boys. Ain't talking about me, by any chance?"

"Just looking you over," was the response. "You don't look so danged salty to me, feller. My gosh, if you ain't got a real baby complexion!"

Wade looked at the man, met the hostile, jeering eyes, and reddened.

"You trying to start something?" he asked softly.

The other grinned.

"With a bad man like you that wears a gun? Say, listen! I don't pack no gun, see? If I wanted to make a hit with a girl, now, I'd wear me one. If I wanted to get in with her in a nice little valley out on the range——"

Right there talking ended.

THE rapidity with which the crowd gathered showed that all this was no accident. Wade went down twice, to yells of applause; then he fell to work grimly, and his fists began to drive home. His opponent staggered, took a crack under the ear, and went to his knees. He came up like a flash. There was a yell, and the crowd scattered—the man's hand had

whipped a gun from beneath his shirt.

Wade was already coming in at him, had no chance to stop his rush. The gun exploded and missed. Wade's gun came out. Struck twice over the head, his scalp bleeding, the other man sank down in the dust.

"Gun-whipped him, by gosh!" rose the delighted yell of the old desert rat.

Wade turned, put up his gun, and climbed to his saddle. Without a word more, he sent Ramon up the street and away.

When he overtook Nina Vail, a mile outside town, she looked him over critically.

"Hello! Did Ramon throw you?" she asked. "That's how you got all dusty and got that bruise on your cheek?"

Wade met her eyes and broke into a laugh.

"That'd be a good story, all right. No; some feller got personal, and we tangled. Dunno who he was. Then he drew a gun."

"What?" She drew rein sharply. "I thought I heard a shot. Do you mean——"

"Oh, no harm done," said Wade. "He missed, and I lammed him over the head a couple times."

"Enjoy yourself?" she asked coldly.

"Oh, yeah. And you needn't turn sour about it, neither," retorted Wade. "There's times, young lady, when it's right hard not to shoot."

"I'm sorry." She flashed him a quick's penitent smile. "I guess there's nothing worse than a sour partner, is there? Forget it, Dave."

"Right. By the way, we didn't do anything about hiring a man. Did you attend to selling those cows?"

"Yes. Clarkson, who owns the

Frying Pan outfit, is taking them over. He'll send for them to-morrow; we're making a trade for some colts. We'll ride over there in a couple of days and pick 'em out. Yes, we'll need another man, I expect. All that lower spread must be plowed and broken; I've got alfalfa seed ordered, but it won't be in for a week or two. You didn't have your fight with Kerr, by any chance?"

"Him? No," replied Wade. "Met him, though; he shook hands like it hurt him. Well, soon's we get back, I'll start taking out that fence between the alfalfa and the grazing range. Might shut off about ten of them upper acres for the hosses, huh?"

So, with plans a-borning, they headed homeward. Once there, Dave Wade began to work up blisters with a will.

On the following morning, two Frying Pan riders came along and removed the few XV cows in sight, and Wade continued with his fence work. Noon was past when Nina Vail came riding down to the lower flat, where he was hard at work. Wade straightened up in surprise as she approached.

"Hello! Where bound?"

"Circle K," she said. "I made a date with Kerr to meet him there to-day. Lawyer Powell will be on hand, too. It's about the water."

"And you didn't tell me, huh?"

She met his look with level gaze.

"No. I thought maybe you'd have trouble if you were there, Dave. If you object to giving Kerr any water, of course, I'll not do it. Maybe I was wrong not to mention it——"

"Nonsense! Forget it." Wade forced a smile. "I ain't running the place. You go along and make

peace with Kerr, and it's all right with me. Only look out what you sign over."

"I'm signing nothing. It'll be a verbal agreement only."

Dave Wade nodded and looked after her as she rode away. When he returned to his work, his face was bitter. So she thought he would run her into trouble, and perhaps provoke a scrap with Kerr!

Well, her attitude was natural enough, perhaps, after what had happened in town. She was not sure of him. He had told her far too much about his aptness at getting into trouble, and far too little in his own behalf. Yet it stung to think that she had not told him about this meeting with Kerr. Even though she was more or less right about it, the thing stung.

"So she made me a partner, huh?" he muttered, savagely sinking the post-hole digger and wrenching it out again. "A partner who ain't worth a darn, who ain't to be trusted. A partner, sure, but she's running the outfit. Got a woman boss, have I? Not me. So danged scairt I'll get into a scrap with somebody—well, I guess that just about settles it."

He jabbed down the tool spitefully. *Spang!* Something struck it and tore it out of his grasp. Something whipped between his arm and his side, burning the skin of his ribs. He knew what had happened, even before he caught the metallic report of two rifles. His brain worked like a flash. He was caught, out here in the open. If he ran for cover of the brush by the creek, he would be brought down or searched out by bullets.

Even as the realization flashed through his mind, even as those two reports came down from the hillside,

he drooped forward and let himself go. It was taking a big chance; but a murderer, before the sight of his act, is apt to get away quickly.

Wade struck the ground, rolled over, and lay in a huddle, arms out-flung. And this took will power, determination. It was not easy to lie quiet, a perfect mark, and to know that any instant another bullet might come tearing into him.

After the first moment, however, he realized that the gamble was won. Whoever was there on the hillside, on the Circle K range, must have mounted and ridden away after seeing him fall and lie still. He did not move for a little, just to make sure.

Two of them, eh? And nothing to prove it. Sandy Kerr would indignantly deny the killing had been done with his knowledge; he had a perfect alibi himself, being, no doubt, talking with the lawyer or with Nina Vail at this moment. Too perfect, in fact. He had arranged it all beforehand.

"That settles it!"

Wade sat up, came to his feet, and gained cover on the run. Once in the brush, he knew himself safe; no shots had rung out. He headed for the shack. His mind was made up now for good and all.

"Dave Wade just can't keep out of trouble," he muttered. "I'll bring it down on her sure as shooting. And she's too durned fine a girl to get mixed up in killings on account of me. I'm quitting here and now."

Once at the shack, he took pen and ink, and wrote Nina Vail a brief note of farewell, and pinned it on the door. Then he went to his own wagon, packed up the few things he wanted, put them with his rig at one side, and fell to work.

CHAPTER VI.

INTRODUCING PETE HOSKINS.

WADE'S work was curious. He could not pass for Pawnee Joe, the Medicine Man, as in the past; in fact, he did not want to do so. The flamboyant medicine man, with his beaded buckskins and general get-up to attract attention, was no more. Like his painted signs on the wagon, he was wiped out of Dave Wade's life.

Having shaved, with his mustache trimmed close, Wade opened up his cabinets and settled down before the mirror. Now he was bringing into play all the lore of make-up he had learned from the real Pawnee Joe—not stage make-up, but that gentleman's private concoctions designed to throw the law off the trail.

The jar marked "Mexican Tan, Light," gave his pink-and-white skin an entirely new look; the exact effect of sun and weather. Like all these preparations, it was permanent enough, but could be washed off with soap and water. He applied the stuff to ears and lids, cheeks, throat, and chest. His skin, which refused to sunburn, was now a healthy, vigorous brown. He eyed himself with a grin, then gave his attention to the fair, wavy hair and brows.

Already trimmed by Nina Vail, under his hands the fair hair was quickly cut short. The black dye was carefully applied; then he attacked brows and mustache, even his eyelids, with tiny brushes from the make-up box. The scarcely visible lines of his face, the wrinkles and shadows, he touched with a deeper tan, and then regarded the effect.

It was incredible. He had aged ten years, and become a different man. That short black hair, the

trimmed mustache, the black brows, and the tan—yes, Dave Wade was gone completely, except for the features and the brown eyes. About his head, Wade now strung a black eye patch. This was the finishing touch. It lent him a slightly sinister expression; it drew attention to itself, so that the beholder looked carelessly at the other features.

His hands and forearms tanned, his nails blackened, Wade dipped into the store of garments at hand, tucking away his corduroys. He picked out a worn red flannel shirt, a beaded buckskin vest, his own ancient leather batwing chaps, and blue jeans. Gun belt and Pawnee Joe's silver-mounted gun completed his costume, with a battered hat he had long since discarded. He looked at his reflection in the glass and laughed.

"Howdy, stranger!" he observed cheerfully. "I guess you can take your wagon and get to moving elsewhere. Paint up the wagon a bit, and you're all set. And Nina Vail? Well, she can take care of herself all right without you around. That was all hooey about needing a partner. And she's so danged pretty, so danged fine and lovely—"

He turned away with a catch in his throat. Only now, when he was fully resolved to part from her, did he begin to appreciate just how fine, how lovely, this partner of his really was. All the more reason to be gone, he told himself angrily.

Out in the sunlight again, he brought his team from the corral and began to hitch them up to the wagon. He was just finishing this task when he caught a wild drumming of hoofs, and swung around to see a rider coming in from the road at a mad gallop and heading for the shack. It proved to be Black,

the deputy sheriff, his horse in a lather of foam.

Black drew rein but did not dismount. At sight of the changed Wade, he stared in sudden, acute dismay.

"Who the devil are you? Where's Wade?"

"I'm a friend of his. He went down the canyon to work on fences. Why?"

The deputy hesitated, then swore heartily in desperation. "My gosh, I got to get out of here. You tell Wade to saddle up and vamose, and do it quick. The sheriff and a posse are on the way here to grab him."

WADE was startled. None the less, he kept to the slow Texan drawl of Pawnee Joe, so vastly different from his usual crisp, alert speech.

"That don't worry him none, partner. He's done been pardoned."

"You don't get it!" exclaimed Black urgently. "The sheriff is after him for new stuff. A Circle K rider he gun-whipped in town has swore out charges of attempted murder. Besides, there's the murder charge about Vail, if you know about it. What's more, the sheriff done picked his posse. Pardon or no pardon, Wade won't get to town alive."

Wade whistled. "That's a hoss of another color, all right. It don't hardly seem possible, though—"

"Man, I'm telling you! The sheriff and Kerr are first cousins."

"Hello! That's different, too. Want me to tell Wade, huh?"

"Yeah. He's a square feller," went on Black earnestly. "I rode across the range and cut in ahead of 'em to get here, but there's no time to lose. Warn him to skip out and do it sudden. I'd help him if I could, but that danged sheriff is

crooked and hand in glove with Kerr. Let him know right away, will you?"

"You're durned right I will," said Wade. "You're a white man, all right! Who'll I tell him fetched the word?"

"The deputy sheriff. He'll know. So long!" And with this brief farewell, Black turned his horse and spurred away. Obviously he was in haste to get beyond sight or sound before the sheriff and posse arrived.

Wade's anger leaped up hotly at this information, then cooled again. Black had not recognized him in the least. In this new guise of his, he was perfectly safe. But—what did all this mean to his new plans?

In a flash, he saw that this development changed everything for him. He was under fire from fraud and trickery. Never reach town alive, eh? That made it plain enough. Even if Dave Wade yielded to arrest, he would be goaded into fighting—at best. And at worst, he would be murdered. Kerr had got the sheriff up here on the jump; crooked, eh? All sorts of false charges could be sworn out against Wade, because there was no intention of ever going to trial with them.

A thin smile curved the lips of the tanned, black-haired man who stood there in the sunlight.

"All right; that settles it," he said softly. "Kerr probly figured I was laying dead, anyhow, and if not, the sheriff would finish me off. And am I going to run out on a thing like that? Not me. I'm fighting, by thunder! From this time on, I'm out to fight. And I can do it. So this sheriff and Kerr are cousins, eh? That looks fine."

He swiftly surveyed the situation in his mind, then strode off to the shack. There, he tore up the note to Nina Vail, and wrote another,

saying that he had gone on a hunting trip and might be back in a day or two. This he pinned up in sight on the door.

HE wrote a further note, introducing his friend, Pete Hoskins, made out a bill of sale for Ramon to said Pete Hoskins, and tucked these into a pocket. Then, returning to the team, he drove the wagon on down near the creek, left it, and replaced the team in the corral. Ramon he saddled and tied to the wagon wheel, much to the indignation of the black, which was not used to being tied.

"Got to make the best of it, old-timer," said Dave Wade, alias Pete Hoskins. His voice was deep and drawling. "Same as me. Good thing Kerr ain't got that dog of his now, huh? He'd smell out your friend Wade quick enough! Now let's see. When it comes to war, looks like the best scheme is to confuse the enemy and attack 'em real sharp. We'll do it. Kerr and this sheriff—"

His reflections were sharply broken off. Looking up past the shack, he saw five riders coming in by the road. The sheriff and a posse of four men. He smiled grimly. The sheriff didn't want too many witnesses to do his dirty work, obviously.

Pete Hoskins lounged against the wagon and waited.

The five riders swooped down upon the shack. A brief pause as they read the note fastened to the door. Then, sighting the wagon and the figure of Hoskins there, they bore down upon it. Pete Hoskins, languidly rolling a cigarette, eyed them sharply from beneath his hat brim.

Four of them were obviously punchers, two riding Circle K horses.

One of these last was the burly scrapper with whom Dave Wade had tangled in town; a bandage showed beneath his hat. It was the sheriff, however, who drew the particular attention of Pete Hoskins. A cousin of Kerr, eh? He looked it.

He was a massive, shrewd man of thirty-odd, with a heavy jaw, an aggressive mien, blue eyes that glittered craftily, and bright-red hair and mustache. A vigorous, forceful man who would stand no fooling, obviously. His trousers were tucked inside his boot tops, he wore a fancy hat, and his star of office glittered on his vest. Altogether, a handsome, energetic officer and proud of it.

He drew rein in front of Hoskins and dismounted.

"Where's Wade?" he demanded curtly.

The one eye of Hoskins dwelt upon him with reflective scrutiny.

"That's his business, I reckon."

"Come, talk up!" snapped the other. "I'm Sheriff Gibbs and I've a warrant for Wade. Where is he?"

"Gone," said Hoskins, and licked his cigarette. "Got a match?"

"Blast you, where is he?"

"Search me," said Hoskins. "After I shot him up, he sort of allowed he'd drift along out of this country."

The sheriff's eyes opened wider. The four listening punchers gawked.

"After you shot him up? What d'ye mean by that?"

"The cuss was camped out here on my prop'ty," Hoskins declared. "Got a match?"

With a subdued oath, the sheriff produced a match. Hoskins took it with a word of thanks and lighted his cigarette.

"Who are you, anyhow?" demanded the officer. "This ain't your property. Tell me what hap-

pened, and where Wade is. Who are you?"

"Pete Hoskins, from Nevada City and other places." Hoskins inhaled deeply and surveyed the five visitors with beaming cordiality. His one eye twinkled. "My gosh, you look sort of surprised! Yeah, I come along here last year and stayed a while with Vail, and he done sold me a half interest in this here place. And to-day, when I showed up, this here feller Wade claimed he owned it. We done tangled, that's all. I didn't go to kill him, and only give him a couple hunks of lead, but that turned him mighty sick, you bet. So we made a dicker, and I took over his outfit, and he rode off."

"When was all this?" snapped the sheriff.

"Long about noon."

"Where's Miss Vail?"

"Ain't seen no female around here, sheriff."

"Hey! This is Wade's hoss, all right," sang out one of the punchers, eying Ramon. "Ain't he a wonder, sheriff? And look at that rig, would you?"

The sheriff had cast more than one glance at the black. Now he nodded shortly.

"Yeah. We'll take along the hoss and——"

"Wait a minute." With a slight movement, Pete Hoskins changed position. Into his hand leaped his silver-mounted gun, with such speed that the sheriff blinked. "Sheriff or not, you ain't stealing my hoss, feller. Think twice about it."

THE weapon pointed straight for the sheriff's stomach, and the thumb of Hoskins had drawn back the hammer. The tanned, sinister features were suddenly wolfish.

"My gosh!" Involuntarily the sheriff lifted his hands. "You pulling a gun on me?"

"Suit yourself. I got a bill o' sale for that hoss and rig."

"Let's see it."

Hoskins produced the bill of sale. The sheriff read it and handed it back.

"Right you are, Pete. So he's skipped out on us, huh?"

The one eye of Hoskins fluttered in a wink. "Your posse might take a look over the place, sheriff," said the drawing voice. "And I dunno but what, if you and me went through this here wagon I bought off of Wade, we might turn up something."

Catching the wink, Sheriff Gibbs slowly nodded, and turned to his posse.

"All right, boys, take a look down the creek and make sure he ain't hiding out on us. I'll glance over this wagon with Hoskins."

The other four men went spurting away down the valley. Gibbs came up to Pete Hoskins.

"Well?" he demanded. "What's the idea?"

Hoskins puffed again at his cigarette, then snipped it away.

"S'posing," he said coolly, "I told you I was workin' for Kerr?"

"He didn't say nothing about it to me," returned the sheriff warily.

"And I didn't say anything to you about his men coming over and shooting up Wade, neither." Pete Hoskins grinned. "As a matter o' fact, they did. Two of 'em, and thought they'd done for him. They hadn't, but he was ready enough to skip out when I took him in hand. You'll be seeing Kerr to-night, maybe?"

"No," said the sheriff.

"Well, you got to think up a better one than arresting Wade and

then planting some lead in him," said Hoskins bluntly, and the other started. "Yeah, I know about it, and what's more, I know where he's heading for."

"Where?" snapped the sheriff.

Hoskins grinned at him.

"Wait till I see Kerr and find out what's in it for me."

"Talk up, blast you!" the sheriff growled. "Do you know you're liable to arrest if you don't tell what you know?"

"Lay off of that stuff; it don't pan out none whatever with me," Hoskins retorted easily. "Now talk turkey. I'll be seein' Kerr to-night. Where you going to be?"

"I'm staying in town for a couple of days," said the sheriff, and this tacit admission of everything rejoiced the heart of Pete Hoskins mightily. "At the hotel."

"Then, if I let you know to-night where to find Wade, you and your deputy could go along and grab him?"

"Yeah. But not my deputy. That feller Black is losing his star," snapped the sheriff. "Danged fool, that's what he is."

"So Sandy Kerr allowed," Hoskins said, "but he's got a notion about making Black the goat in this here game. S'pose you let things ride till to-night. I'll be along kind o' late, see? Wait up. Maybe Kerr will come, too."

"Not him," said Sheriff Gibbs positively. "Him and me are stayin' apart. We don't want no talk about us workin' together. Now, how much of that yarn you told us first, when my men were here, was a lie?"

"Most of it," admitted Hoskins, with a grin. "I didn't shoot up Wade at all. I ain't got no claim to this place. Wade was all set to shoot, and I played him careful.

Right now, he thinks I'm a friend of his. Get the picture?"

"Yeah. So Kerr planted you, huh? Durn it, Sandy allus did have a couple strings to his bow!"

The lone brown eye of Mr. Hoskins twinkled merrily at this statement. Now he was sure of his ground.

"All right, then," he said, with a quick nod, as the four riders returned from their fruitless search. "This feller Wade don't know I'm working for Kerr, savvy? I'm to take him out a load o' grub tomorrow, so I'll know where to find him. He ain't bad hurt, neither; he can use a rifle."

"He won't get no chance, durn it," growled the sheriff, and turned. "Any luck, boys?"

"Nary a bit," rejoined one. All four came crowding in, eying Pete Hoskins. They had plainly been discussing him, and their looks were hostile. "How about taking this feller along to town, sheriff?"

"Lay off, you durned idiots!" snapped the sheriff. "I'll answer for Hoskins; he's all right. Miss Vail ain't here, huh? Well, let her wait till later. So long, Pete. See you to-night."

"You bet," said Hoskins.

This evidence of intimacy caused the four riders to swallow hard. The sheriff swung up to his saddle, and with a wave of the hand led his forces away. Pete Hoskins watched them depart, grinned to himself, then went to the shack.

THEY had carried away his note to Nina Vail. He now penned another merely saying that he might be away for a few days, but was leaving his friend, Pete Hoskins, to keep an eye on things, and Mr. Hoskins would be along to-night or in the morning.

Then, having no immediate desire to meet Nina Vail on the road, Hoskins mounted Ramon, rode to the boundary fence, and was presently heading out across the Circle K range in the level sunlight. It was close to sunset; he figured he would not reach Kerr's outfit before dark, and wanted all the daylight he could get to find his way thither.

In this, however, he had reckoned without his hostess. Nina Vail, to shorten the ride, had resolved to come home across the range.

Hoskins did not see her until it was too late to avoid her. She came riding over the brow of a hill, as he walked Ramon up, following a fairly well-defined trail that had seen quite a little use. She halted her horse and stared. Hoskins touched his hat, with a word of greeting, and was riding on past her, when she suddenly flung a sharp word at him.

"Who are you? Where did you get that horse?"

She had recognized Ramon, of course. For an instant, Pete Hoskins lost his head. He struck in his spurs, and Ramon went ahead and over the rise with a leap and a long, steady run. Glancing back, Hoskins was dismayed to see her whip her horse around and come after him, shouting vainly for him to wait. Instead, he sent Ramon on, and indignant at the touch of the spur, the black stretched out his neck and ran like the wind. The girl was soon outdistanced and lost to sight.

"Durn it all!" thought Hoskins uneasily. "I should ha' waited, maybe, and had a word with her. Well, it don't signify. As long as she keeps her nose out of it, I'll be satisfied. And I've run her under, all right."

He kept going at a fast clip, none the less.

Dusk fell, darkness gathered, and the lights of the Circle K beckoned him on. He reached there to find supper just getting under way. The cook heard him ride up and bade him welcome heartily, stared at Ramon, and after getting Hoskins's name, took him in before the assembled company.

"Meet Pete Hoskins, everybody," he sang out. "He's got a black hoss that sure beats the world! Pete, this is Sandy Kerr, the big boss."

Kerr shook hands, and everybody made room. Pete Hoskins sat down, and nothing loath, pitched in to the grub provided. No questions were asked, and momentarily he gave all his attention to eating. Suddenly there was a disturbance outside, the cook was heard protesting volubly but vainly, and Kerr came to his feet as the door flew open and Nina Vail appeared, breathless.

"Why, if it ain't Miss Vail back!" Kerr exclaimed. "Come in and set down, ma'am. You're just in time to——"

"Thanks, I didn't come for supper," she said, and strode forward, facing Hoskins. "That man is a horse thief! I saw him heading this way, and he ran away from me—he's riding Mr. Wade's horse. Come on, speak up! Who are you? Where'd you get that horse?"

Every eye went to Hoskins. His one eye glittered up at the girl.

"Yes'm," he said mildly. "I got a bill o' sale for that hoss, ma'am."

"That's a lie!" she flamed out angrily. "Dave Wade wouldn't sell that horse for love or money!"

"Well, he lent him to me, anyhow, and give me a bill o' sale in case questions were asked," said Hoskins, and fished in his pocket. "Here it is."

HE handed out the bill of sale, also the note from Wade. The girl took them, glanced over them, then stared hard at him as she returned the bill of sale.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in dismay. The one eyelid of Hoskins fluttered slightly. "I—well, it seems all right. Why didn't you stop when I shouted at you?"

"I was scared, ma'am," said Hoskins awkward. "I didn't know what a woman would be shouting at me for."

There was a rustle of laughter.

"Where's Dave Wade?" demanded the girl.

"Why, ma'am, he done went on a trip," Hoskins said. "He allowed he was leaving a note for you."

Nina Vail, refusing Kerr's urgent invitation to stay and have supper, turned and departed. Grins were exchanged among the men. When Kerr came back inside after seeing her off, he gave Hoskins a hard look.

"Mind telling us who you are, Pete?" he asked significantly.

Hoskins nodded.

"Yeah. When I can see you alone. I got a message for you from a feller down in Las Cruces."

"Oh!" said Kerr, and sat down again in silence.

The conversation languished after this. Hoskins, quite oblivious, devoted himself to making an excellent meal. When it was finished, Kerr invited him into the office, a room to itself at one end of the building. He followed, and said nothing until Kerr shut the door and swung on him.

"Well, what's all the mystery about?"

"Just playing safe," said Hoskins calmly. "Gibbs said to be durned careful what I said before any of your hands."

"Oh! Gibbs, eh?" Kerr went to

his desk, opened a box of cigars, took one, and shoved the box at Hoskins, who accepted. "You a friend of his?"

Hoskins nodded. "Yeah. Two of your riders come over to the XV to-day and tried to shoot up that feller Wade. They bungled it. He wasn't hurt to speak of. I come along, meaning to meet Gibbs and the posse there, but they was behind time. Well, this here Wade judged it was too warm for him around these parts. I bought some of his outfit, and agreed to stay on the place and take a job with this here Miss Vail. Then he skipped. An hour or two later, Gibbs come along——"

He paused. There was a knock, and one of the men put his head in at the door.

"Hey, boss! Ike and Slim just come in. Want to see 'em before they eat?"

"Not now," said Kerr, and the man departed.

"Say, are them the two Circle K riders with the sheriff?" asked Hoskins. "Well, if you want, you can ask them about me. Gibbs told 'em plain enough, when they got curious. Now, here's the layout: I know where this Wade has gone, savvy? In fact, I've agreed to take him out a load of grub to-morrow. If you say the word, I'll tip off Sheriff Gibbs to-night. He can trail with me. If you say yes, better let us have them two riders who tried to rub him out to-day. Let them fellers finish their job."

Kerr grunted approval and chewed his cigar, his pale-blue eyes reflective.

"Why didn't you send the sheriff on after Wade?"

Hoskins grinned. "Say, that jigger is loaded for bear, believe me! The time to nip him is when he ain't

suspecting, and not when he's all primed for a scrap. Besides, Gibbs figured maybe I had better stay at the XV a while, on the job."

"Huh! Might be a good thing. When are you going to see Gibbs?"

"If you say the word, I'm starting right now with them two fellers. I'll see him to-night in town. And, by the way"—Hoskins felt under his shirt and drew out the tapadera he had found at Painted Well—"I dunno what this is, but that jigger Wade had wrapped it up careful. I snuck it out of his roll when he was gone for water, thinking maybe it meant something."

Kerr seized on the bit of leather with avidity.

"By gosh, good for you!" he exclaimed.

"Something of yours?" queried Hoskins.

"Yeah. Ain't of much importance except to me, but I'm glad to get it back. Maybe I'd better call in them two boys, huh?"

PETE HOSKINS nodded. He understood that, to be quite certain of him, Kerr wanted a word with the two men just returned from the sheriff's posse. Kerr strode out of the room and slammed the door.

Instantly Hoskins was at the desk.

He had been eying the old roll-top desk against the center wall with keen interest. The top drawer on the right hand had been fitted with a lock, an unusual thing; but, also, it stood a trifle open, as though Kerr had lately used it and neglected to quite shut it. Hoskins jerked at it, and the drawer came open.

At the rear, letters and accounts neatly filed in bundles. In front, bank books and check stubs, with half a dozen letters. Most of them

appeared to be bills. Two, however, bore the letterhead of the sheriff's office at Las Cruces in the upper left corner of each envelope. These Hoskins seized and thrust under his shirt. Then he caught up a pencil and a sheet of paper and scrawled rapidly:

Thanks for the letters from your cousin.
I'll be seeing you.

DAVE WADE.

He dropped the paper into the drawer and shoved it shut, then returned to his chair. He was just puffing his cigar alight when the door opened and in walked Kerr, followed by two of the riders who had been at the table.

"Bill, you and Frenchy know Hoskins—he's all right, but you ain't," snapped Kerr. "You two birds made a mess of that job today."

The two men hesitated, glanced at Pete Hoskins, swallowed hard. Hoskins grinned.

"I know all about it, boys," he said, "so don't get uneasy. Yeah, you didn't kill that jigger, after all."

"Huh?" exclaimed "Frenchy."

"Why, darn it, we seen him drop!" "And then you legged it for home, I reckon," Hoskins went on. "You should ha' waited, or else put a couple more bullets into him."

"Well, the job's got to be finished," Kerr said positively. "You boys saddle up and go to town with Hoskins, and see Sheriff Gibbs. He's got a notion where to find Wade, and wants you as deputies."

"Suits me," said Bill, a stolid, heavy-eyed man, and Frenchy assented. "Now?"

"Right now. Hoskins is ridin' with you."

The two men departed. Kerr gave Pete Hoskins a swift, hard glance.

"Who's paying you? Gibbs?"

Hoskins nodded. "Yeah. You might tell them two jaspers that I'm working for you. They ain't none too sure of me."

"All right. I'll go out to the horse with you and have a word with them. Now, where is it you're aiming to meet up with Wade?"

Hoskins surveyed him reflectively. "Meaning what? This is a job to be handled careful. If you go riding in on him, it's all off. Besides, Gibbs allows he don't want to be seen with you, none whatever, in this here business."

Kerr exploded in an oath. "That's all right, but he's too danged careful. This time, I want that jigger taken care of."

Hoskins leaned forward and spoke rapidly under his breath. Kerr listened; a glitter grew in his light-blue eyes, a cruel, delighted glitter. Then he clapped Hoskins on the shoulder, heartily.

"Good work!" he exclaimed. "I'll do it."

CHAPTER VII.

A PRISONER.

WHERE the Circle K road came into the highway, or rather slightly beyond it, was a small crossroads store, an integral part of Pete Hoskins's plans. As the three drew near, its lights winked invitingly at them. The moon was not yet up; the evening was still very early. Hoskins drew rein.

"Look here," he said. "There ain't no use of you boys riding all the way to town and on back here. Why don't you set around the corner store, here, till I come back with the sheriff? We got to come back this way, anyhow."

The two riders received this proposal with enthusiasm. The more

so, as they knew liquor could be obtained here.

No sooner said than done. Pete Hoskins rode on alone, and now urged Ramon into speed. The black stallion ate up the miles with his splendid, untiring pace. It was only a little past moonrise when the lights of Miles City glittered ahead. Then Hoskins drew rein, struck a match, and hastily examined the two letters he had abstracted from Kerr's desk.

Then, with a chuckle of satisfaction, he pocketed them and rode on into town.

He went straight to the hotel. Gibbs was not there, but had left word for any callers to come to the deputy's office. This was a small two-room building behind the bank, on the side street. When Hoskins got there, he found the sheriff alone in the front room, working over reports. Gibbs looked up at his entrance.

"Oh, it's you! Come on in. Black's snoring in the back room, but I reckon we won't wake him up. Well, what do you know?"

"Quite a little, thanks." Hoskins took the proffered chair, but refused a cigar. "Nope; had one of Kerr's, and it danged near choked me. Say, Kerr sent you a couple of telegrams when this Dave Wade business come on, and you wrote letters back to him about it, remember? Well, he's lost them letters."

Gibbs started up in his chair.

"What? He's lost them?"

"Yeah. He's got some fool notion that Wade got hold of 'em."

"Wade!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Why, those letters would ruin me!"

"Well, I reckon you'll get 'em back to-morrow," said Hoskins easily. "Yeah, Kerr was sort of upset about losing 'em. He said they'd show him and you was in cahoots.

But let it pass. We got things figured out. Gimme a county map, will you?"

Scowling uneasily, the sheriff spread out a map on the desk. Hoskins bent over it, tracing with his finger the highway running north.

"Here's the Circle K turnout. On farther is where the old road cuts over to the XV, and then goes on to the desert and the Devil's Playground. And out here is Painted Well. Get it? Well, that's where I'm to take the grub out to Wade. He'll be at Painted Well, savvy! Now, we figure——"

"Who's 'we'?" interjected the sheriff sharply.

"Me and Kerr. He's dead set on being in on this thing his own self. I'm going on back to the XV and stay there. You come along this here old road about noon to-morrow. I'll be waiting where the road goes in to the XV. Kerr will cut across the range and meet us farther on. He says for you to come alone. He'll bring a couple of his best riders."

"All right, so far," said the sheriff. "But about Wade——"

"Hold on, now!" exclaimed Hoskins, with cheery good humor. "Kerr has fixed things up with Miss Vail, see? This feller Wade ain't no kin to her, and after finding out about him being a killer and so forth, she's glad enough to be rid of him. With him out of the way, she and Kerr can get together fine on water rights and so forth."

"Glad to hear that," said the sheriff. "Yes, sir, I sure am! It don't hardly pay to go up against a woman, somehow. Not in this country. And she'll be better off without a jigger like that hanging around."

"So she figures," assented Hoskins.

"Is Kerr paying you for this job?" demanded the sheriff abruptly.

"Yeah. Five hundred, cash."

"Whew! He must want it done bad. But how you aim to get Wade, anyhow?"

"Shucks, that's easy enough!" Hoskins exclaimed confidently. "When we get close to Painted Well, I'll go on alone. Wade won't suspicion nothing. I'll get the drop on him and hold him till you come up."

Gibbs eyed him sharply.

"Why not shoot him and have done with it?"

"Kerr can do his own dirty work," said Hoskins. "Gimme a pair of handcuffs, while I think about it, if the program suits you."

"It's great," said the sheriff. He produced a pair of handcuffs and a key, and Hoskins pocketed them. "Yes, sir, it's great! We got to get that feller plumb out of the way. He's bad, too; a killer. Even if he has been pardoned."

"And if I got to shoot him——"

"So much the better." The sheriff grinned nastily. "It'll save me work on the way home."

"Fine; that's all I wanted to be sure about," said Hoskins, and rose. "Well, I got to be going. Say, if anything happened to you, who'd be sheriff?"

The sheriff jerked a thumb toward the back room.

"This feller Black would be acting sheriff, anyhow," he said. "Soon's we get this other business out the way, I'm appointing a new deputy up here. You and me might have a talk about that, Hoskins."

"All right." Hoskins chuckled. "We'll see later. So long!"

HE departed, mounted Ramon, and rode out of town, highly pleased with himself. With one pair of handcuffs in his pocket, and two more pairs in the

wagon, he had all he needed. And those two letters had suddenly given a whole new direction to his half-formed plans.

The two Circle K riders were having an excellent and somewhat uproarious time at the corner store when Pete Hoskins strode in and summoned them abruptly. More or less under the influence, they staggered out to their waiting horses and mounted. After ten minutes, Frenchy took the notion that his girth needed tightening, and drew rein. Pete Hoskins and Bill rode on.

When Frenchy caught up with them, Bill was sitting his horse in a constrained attitude with something dark about his face. Frenchy drew rein in surprise. Hoskins came alongside, and his voice leaped out:

"Up! Up with 'em!"

The business end of a silver-mounted gun poked Frenchy in the ribs, and up went the rider's hands. Hoskins, heedless of his profane queries, disarmed him, brought Bill alongside, and handcuffed them together. Then he wound Frenchy's neckerchief about his mouth and surveyed the two grimly.

"Make all the noises you want," he said, "but mind how you ride. You got a balancing act to do, and that ain't all."

Deaf to growls and indistinct oaths, he took the reins of their horses and sent Ramon ahead.

It was late, very late, when he led his prisoners past the shack of Nina Vail toward the corral. The moon was high, would be high all night. As he passed the shack, there came a slight but significant click, then the girl's voice drove out:

"Who are you men? Speak up, quickly!"

"It's me, Pete Hoskins." And Hoskins chuckled to himself. "I'll

be back in a couple minutes, soon's I get rid of these gents."

He rode on down toward the creek and the wagon. Presently the two hapless and coldly sobered Circle K riders were seated on opposite sides of a small tree, their wrists handcuffed to each other. Hoskins threw them a couple of blankets obtained from the wagon.

"You ain't going to be comfortable, but that's all right with me," he said. "If you want to cuss and holler, go right ahead. See you later."

Then, with the three horses, he rode back to the corral, turned in the animals, and strode toward the shack. Nina Vail, dressed, had lighted the lamp. As he paused in the doorway, she surveyed him, anger in her face.

"Come in, come in," she said after a moment. "Make yourself at home."

"Thanks," rejoined Hoskins, and obeyed. "By golly, a chair feels good! I been riding so danged much——"

"Cut it short," said Nina Vail. She meant business and looked it. "Who are you? What were you doing at Kerr's ranch? Where's Wade? Come on and talk, and do it fast."

"Yes'm," responded Hoskins. "Never mind explanations. Let's look at results. I got two of Kerr's riders handcuffed around a tree down by the creek. Them jiggers come over to kill Wade to-day; they thought they'd done it, too. When I get around to it, they'll confess the whole thing, and that Kerr hired 'em to do it."

Her deep-blue eyes dilated.

"What! You mean—why, it must have been when I was talking with Sandy Kerr!"

"Of course. He had a perfect

alibi. And that ain't all. The sheriff was here to grab Wade, too, but found me instead. Black, the deputy, brought warning. That's why Wade skipped out. What's more, I got a couple of letters the sheriff wrote Kerr, which pretty well give away the whole business. So you can get easy." Hoskins rose and stifled a yawn. "Say, I can't hardly keep awake. Sometime in the morning, come down to the wagon and call me, will you? I got to get some sleep."

"But hold on!" she exclaimed. "You haven't told me who you are, where Wade is——"

Hoskins waved his hand. "That'll come to-morrow, ma'am. I'm too dog-tired to set talking any more. Wake me up in the morning, but not too early, and we'll straighten everything out. Good night."

"Good night," she faltered, looking after him with a frown, uneasy and yet not willing to force him into further explanation.

Hoskins chuckled to himself as he sought the wagon. So his make-up had fooled her, too, even at close quarters! That was pretty good.

AFTER a glance at his helpless prisoners, Hoskins climbed into the wagon. He drew off his boots and then stretched out on the bunk, supremely happy for once—far happier than he had been for many a long day, despite his stiffness and weariness.

The game was now entirely in his own hands. The two letters, and the confession he was confident of getting from the two Circle K punchers, gave him what he wanted. He would handle the sheriff and Kerr separately on the morrow. Without a shot being fired, his triumph was complete. The sheriff

would be only too glad to resign. Black, as acting sheriff, would take Kerr to jail—he would go under bonds, perhaps even to the penitentiary if he remained obdurate. Yes, it was a complete victory.

"Durn it, I didn't get hold of Black to prime him up," Hoskins thought sleepily. "But time enough for that. To-morrow——"

And, with a sigh, he was asleep.

With morning, Nina Vail did not waken very early herself. She came to the door of the shack, looked down toward the wagon, and caught sight of the two Circle X riders by the creek. For a moment she stared at them, then turned inside again.

A little later, with a mug and a pitcher of hot coffee, she came to where they sat, glaring hopelessly at her from above their gags.

"I guess you men deserved all you're getting," she said sharply, "but that's no reason for starving you. Promise to be good, and I'll give you some coffee."

They both made pleading sounds, and with a smile, Nina Vail loosed one gag, then the other. Neither man spoke, until the coffee was gone, then Bill ventured a word.

"What's this all about, ma'am?"

"You'll find out when Dave Wade talks to you," she said, and departed.

The two looked at one another, eyed their handcuffs, and cursed heartily.

Scarcely had Nina Vail reached the shack, than she was aware of a horseman riding in from the road. One glance showed him to be a stranger, and by no means prepossessing of looks. She reached inside the door and caught up Wade's rifle, which she had brought to the shack, and waited. The stranger rode up and dismounted.

"This is Miss Vail, I reckon?" he said with a grimly intent air. "My name's Black. Deputy sheriff." He displayed his deputy's badge.

"Oh!" She relaxed, and leaned the rifle against the shack wall. "You see, I didn't know just who it was. You're the one who warned Wade yesterday, aren't you?"

"Yes'm. Told you about that, did he?" said Black.

He was unshaven, his eyes were bloodshot, and so wildly hostile was the look he bent upon her that she reached out uneasily for the weapon. With a sweep of his hand, he knocked it aside.

"None o' that! Where's Hoskins?"

"He's asleep, down there in the wagon," said the startled and surprised girl.

"All right. You get back in that shack and stay there."

"What do you mean? Are you drunk?"

"Not much," the deputy snarled at her. "I'm on to your game, that's all." He whipped out his gun as he spoke. "I ain't never shot a woman yet, but I'm all primed to put a bullet into you—and if you get a .45 slug in the foot, you'll limp for a long while. Git into that shack, hear me? If you wasn't a woman, by gosh, I'd have plugged you without no talk, you danged Judas sister! Turn him in, would you? Make up with Kerr, huh? Git inside there and shut your durned trap!"

"Why, you're crazy, crazy!" she cried out in alarm.

Black looked it, indeed. He thrust forward suddenly, and with a shove sent her headlong into the shack. Then he slammed the door shut.

PUTTING away his gun, he wrenched free an ax that stood in one of the logs, and with a swing drove it deep into the jamb of the door, so that the latter could not well be opened against it.

"Bust out after I'm gone," he growled, with an oath. "Do it before, and I'll shoot you. Shut your trap, you hear me?"

He turned to his horse, after hurling the rifle beyond reach, and mounted. Then he rode down toward the wagon. Halfway there were the two Circle K punchers. He eyed them in grim astonishment, and they eyed him uncertainly, not at all sure what to expect. With a mutter of bewilderment, the deputy rode on. He dismounted at the wagon.

Drawing his gun, he climbed grimly into the wagon.

Pete Hoskins was having an unwontedly bad dream. It seemed that Kerr and the sheriff and a couple more men had caught him unawares and were roping him tightly. He struggled frantically against them; then Kerr got him by the throat and was choking him to death—when he woke up.

The sunlight drifting into the wagon showed him the deputy sheriff standing over him.

"Black!" he exclaimed, trying to sit up, but failing. "Say, I have been—"

"Shut up!" snarled Black viciously. "Lemme tell you some thing, you danged skunk! I was in the back room of the office last night, but I wasn't asleep, savvy? I heard all you said. Sell out a feller to be murdered, will you? For five hundred dollars? Not if I know it, by gosh! I aim to spoil your danged dirty work!"

"Hey! Listen a minute!"

The deputy struck down with his

gun. Hit over the head, Hoskins collapsed.

"Yeah! Needn't work your slick tongue on me no more," spat out Black. "I'll fix you, durn your hide."

Presently he emerged from the wagon, hauling after him the senseless figure of Hoskins, tied and securely gagged beyond the point of anything but inarticulate noises. He lifted the senseless man and laid him face down over his saddle, where the booted rifle held him well enough. Then he led the horse toward the two staring, wondering Circle K riders.

Throwing a glance at the shack, Black saw Nina Vail desperately trying to get out of the one window, which faced on this side. He deliberately jerked out his gun and put a bullet so close to the window that the girl disappeared hurriedly. Then, with a sour grin, he turned to the two men.

"What's this here mean, anyhow?" he demanded.

"That feller Hoskins went crazy last night," said Frenchy. "He got drunk and says he'd have some fun with us, and he done so. For gosh sake, Black, turn us loose!"

The deputy went through the pockets of Hoskins, found a handcuff key, and with it managed to free the two riders.

"Them your hosses in the corral?" he asked. "I seen a couple Circle K hosses as I come past. Saddle a hoss for me to put this feller on, will you?"

"You bet," chorused the two men, and broke for the corral on a run.

From the shack window, Nina Vail screamed frantically at Black. He swung around and sent another bullet slap into the logs. At that, she quit trying.

Ten minutes later he rode away

with Hoskins lashed in place on the extra horse, and the two Circle K men went spurring for home with their amazing story.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT PAINTED WELL.

IT was a frayed and worn saddle cinch that made all the difference in the world. Not that this appeared at once. Pete Hoskins found his senses returning to the slow and steady jolting of a horse. The morning sun, now almost directly overhead, blazed down with an intense white heat. It was hot, here where the old trail ran between the hills of sand. Far behind lay the uplands and the trees and the green sage. Here was only sand, with scattered clumps of mesquite and lines of smoke trees running along the dip of a wash. Out ahead lay the sun-smitten miles to Painted Well.

Hoskins jerked up his head; it hurt abominably, though the scalp was unbroken. He had no hat. He had gone to sleep with his eye patch still in place; by a miracle, it still hung there over his eye. His wrists were lashed about with a rawhide line, a couple of turns of it; the reata went on, holding them to the saddle horn, and went down to his ankles, tying them to the stirrups and under the horse's belly. A handkerchief was wrapped and knotted about his mouth, the knots shoved between his teeth. He was efficiently gagged. Thirst consumed him, and his tongue was like leather.

Leading his horse, and preceding him, rode the deputy sheriff, Black.

Memory of the man's words flashed into his brain. Hoskins felt a spasmodic horror, an utter and terrible dismay, at the recollection. How all this could have happened,

where he was, what Black intended—this was blank. He remembered only what the man had said in that one frightful moment.

And now he was helpless to explain.

Hoskins writhed in the saddle, uttered incoherent sounds. Black lifted his head and looked back, and grinned as he drew rein. It was an ugly, vicious grin.

"You skunk, I hope you squirm to death!" said Black slowly. "Yeah, I heard you and Gibbs planning it out. Fooled me, did you? Tricked me with your sly tongue, huh? Why you warned Wade and let him get off, I dunno; maybe that was accident. Five hundred dollars for letting him be murdered and poking a gun into his back until they grab him, huh? Well, yuh won't never see that money. But you're agoing to see Wade. Yeah, I'm taking you right to him, mister!"

Desperately, frantically, Hoskins strove to utter a coherent word. His one eye strained in agonized imploration; a helpless groan came from him. The deputy watched him and laughed, then turned his horse around. He swayed suddenly in the saddle, and with an oath drew rein again. Gingerly he dismounted.

"For gosh sake! That danged cinch has busted again—now, of all times!"

Hoskins bowed his head, trying to get his fingers at the gag. Useless. A turn of the reata held his hands and fingers down. Until he was rid of the rawhide, he could not pluck out the gag. He stared at the line. An old, frayed reata, stiff, uncoiled for ages, and cruelly efficient. Yet there was a little give to it, and his heart leaped. A little, only a little. If he could but plunge his arms into water! That would stretch the

rawhide. Water? There was none. Black had a canteen, and took a swallow from it, but taunted his captive with a harsh laugh.

"You'll get water in hell before you get it from me, you Judas!" he said.

Then he ignored Hoskins. There was a long wait in the sun, as he tried to repair his cinch. Time passed.

The bitter irony of the whole situation was like gall to Pete Hoskins. Obviously Black had flung all caution overboard, in his wild indignation and fury over the plot to betray Wade. And he never dreamed that it was Wade whom he had struck down, that it was Wade whom he was taking out to face Wade—oh, it was mad, pitifully mad, horribly mad and impossible! Yet it was true. The man was stubborn, once aroused; he was like iron. Two words would have explained everything, but they could not be uttered.

HOSKINS felt his head reeling with the burning sunlight, as the moments passed, dragged out to half an hour, then longer. He had told Sheriff Gibbs to meet him at noon; it was past that now. And somewhere along this trail, Sandy Kerr would come in to intercept the two and join them—unless those two riders of his told him otherwise. Had Black turned them loose? The thought made him writhe in uncontrollable, frantic determination to get loose. He could not.

Black mounted, and the cinch snapped out; his flimsy repairs would not hold. He cursed hotly. Then he swung around to the captive.

"I reckon you can ride bareback—a saddle's too durned good for you,

anyhow," he said, and came to the side of Hoskins.

His fingers were stubby, powerful, deft, as he freed his captive's feet. He had put on the boots of Hoskins before tying him up; the rope held better thus. When he came to freeing the bound hands from the saddle horn, he looked at them and laughed. They were puffed and swollen, dark with restricted circulation.

"You won't pull no gun on Wade in a hurry," he gibed harshly. "Get down. You can set in the sand a spell, till I change saddles."

Trying stiffly to dismount, Hoskins lost balance. He not only sat in the sand, he fell in it. Black gave him a narrow-eyed glance.

"Stay there, durn you! And whimper all ye durned please."

The deputy fell to work changing the saddle from the horse Hoskins had ridden, which was one of the XV animals, to his own mount, and shifting over the rifle boot. His own rig, he abandoned beside the trail until his return.

The thoughts of Hoskins dwelt, with growing alarm, upon Sandy Kerr. If those two riders had been set free, their story would make Kerr think real hard. He might put two and two together, and decide that Hoskins had run a blazer on him the previous evening, had possibly stolen those two letters. It all depended—depended on a dozen things. And why had Nina Vail let Black tie him up and carry him off like this? She must have known better than to believe what the too credulous deputy might say.

A groan of helpless despair burst from Hoskins. It was all past his understanding. If only he could get away from this confounded deputy who was so desperately determined to save Dave Wade!

"All right, you danged Judas." Black turned to him with a gesture, standing beside the unsaddled horse. "Come on, and I'll lend you a hand up, and tie your heels under his belly. You won't need no saddle long, anyhow. Lay hold of his mane, put your foot in my hand, and up you go!"

It all happened in a split second of time—the gesture, the stooping man, the flashing chance. On sheer impulse, Hoskins acted. His boot flew up and took the deputy squarely under the chin, rocking back his head. It was a cruel, merciless blow, that might have killed a less powerful man.

With a gasping grunt, Black toppled over and fell on his back in the sand. He made a convulsive movement, rolled over, then his head dropped, his hands clawed at the sand, and he lay senseless.

A whistling breath of relief escaped the still-gagged Hoskins. Then he moved to get the canteen slung at the saddle of the deputy's horse. As he clutched vainly for it with his bound hands, there came the crack of a rifle and a terrible scream from the unsaddled animal.

HOSKINS gave one startled glance around. Two riders were on the crest of a sand hill to the rear, three hundred yards away. He recognized the silhouette of Sandy Kerr against the sky, and stayed for nothing else. As the wounded horse sank down, Hoskins was up with one frantic, incredible leap—up and scrambling into the saddle as the horse moved into life. Somehow, his legs got the stirrups, his fingers clenched on the reins. Another rifle crack. The bullet creased the rump of the horse, and after that it was mad, wild flight toward

the desert, with Hoskins grimly hanging on.

It was ten minutes before the snorting, pain-goaded animal slackened pace and Hoskins got it to a brief halt. Behind, the undulating sand hills hid the pursuit, if there were any; ahead, the old wagon track struck out across the Devil's Playground toward Painted Well, somewhere under the heat shimmer.

Hoskins seized the precious moment. He managed to get the canteen unhooked and up in his arms, and unscrewed it. Water splashed over the rawhide that constricted his nearly useless hands. Then, looking back, he saw two riders come into sight. He started the horse on.

From time to time, he tried to get more water on the thirsty rawhide. It splashed over his numbed hands and arms, but enough got on the rawhide to help a bit. The reata was trailing out behind, and he was in acute fear lest the animal step on it and drag him from the saddle. Little by little he got it gathered up and looped about his body. How he did all this, while he rode, he never knew.

The pursuers were wasting no more bullets, nor were they spurring hard; they had him now, and knew it. Glancing back from time to time, he made out the two of them and, far behind, two more. Kerr and three men! Or two men and the sheriff? No telling; anything was possible. That blundering deputy had knocked his whole scheme awry, and now, if he got clear with his life, he would be more than lucky.

Cursing desperately, vainly, he strained at the thongs lashed about his hands. Again and again he splashed the water on them. His swollen tongue and dry mouth were

clamoring for a drop of that precious water, but with the gag in place this was out of the question. Suddenly, to his wild delight, the loop of thong about his hands gave a little. He bent his head over, got his teeth in it. The wet rawhide was stretching. It slithered; it was off one hand, off the other. His fingers were free! Only the lashed loops about his wrists remained, and they, too, had given a bit.

His heart hammered with fresh hope. As soon as a little life came into his fingers, he tore at the handkerchief, got the knots out of his mouth, twisted the thing down over his chin. Free! A few drops of water remained. He drained them thankfully and let the canteen fall. The blessed water gave him fresh life, new energy. He looked back. They were riding hard enough but unhurried; steadily, doggedly persistent. Ahead, the level desert floor stretched out. No hills, nothing to give cover. Painted Well was miles away.

A bullet whistled overhead. Another plumped into the sand. No more; merely long, desperate chance shots. He strained hard at the thongs. They were still wet, were still giving a little. He could move one hand about, could feel the life coming back into it.

He got his teeth on the rawhide again, and chewed at it. Not only did this help assuage his renewed thirst, but the saliva kept the thong wet. His teeth gradually bit into it, slowly but surely ate the fibers away.

His hands were free.

"Thank Heaven!" muttered Hoskins devoutly. He rid himself of the looped reata, and began rubbing his hands, restoring the circulation.

EXULTATION seized upon him; the reaction was swift and tremendous. He was free, mounted, armed! True, he had no revolver, but here under his hand was Black's booted rifle. A laugh broke from him. A chance for life, after all! If he could reach Painted Well, he would have water, he could stand them off—and water meant life in that place.

Deliberately he reined in, sparing his horse; the animal was none too good at best. After a little he halted at a slight rise, rested the horse, took out the rifle, and waited. All four of the pursuers were now together. As they drew nearer, they opened up and scattered. Four hundred yards or so—a long shot. None the less, he calmly shot twice, saw one of the horses jump. Then, as a bullet sang overhead, he sent his horse on again at better speed. They knew now he had teeth!

The miles dropped behind. Ahead grew the depression and the surrounding sand hills of Painted Well. Peering at it, Hoskins fancied that he could see moving figures there. After a little he looked again and found none. The heat haze was playing tricks on him, for all the distant sand danced and shimmered; or perhaps, he reflected, the sun was reaching his unprotected skull. Perhaps Vail's hat would still be around the well somewhere, he thought.

The four pursuers were gaining now; his bullet had not crippled one of the horses, at all events. Two of them were following along the track; the other two had ridden out, one on either hand, to circle him. Ahead, the sand hills about the water hole promised protection.

But Kerr knew this, also. Suddenly Hoskins realized that the four pursuers were picking up speed, were closing in upon him. All had

spread out now; they were spurring in an evident endeavor to cut him off before he would be able to reach the well.

He dismounted, rested his arm a moment, heard a bullet whistle. They were riding hard, and accurate fire was impossible. Yes, he thought he could recognize the sheriff in one of the four. He pressed the trigger—one shot. It brought down a man. Not Kerr, unfortunately. One of the others.

All three of the remaining men halted instantly, dismounted, and began to fire. Hoskins climbed into the saddle, drove in his spurs, and settled down to ride. Three of them left. Enough to finish him, if they brought down his horse. He put the animal at full speed. A scant mile remained.

Again he thought he saw moving figures there at the well, but presently they had disappeared. Bullets were singing around him now. The three were after him, firing as they rode. The sun-white sand fled behind him rapidly. A few hundred yards more—

His horse leaped, staggered, uttered a long, whistling breath. A hit.

Desperately Hoskins urged his mount on. The race was almost run now. Yet he could feel the animal faltering under him, staggering. He loosened his feet from the stirrups. A moment later the poor brute stumbled and went headlong. Hoskins was pitched off, went rolling in the sand with his rifle.

Unhurt, except for a stabbing pain in his head, he gained his feet and went forward at a run. There ahead of him was the depression. The body of Vail's horse had been farther buried by sand and, being fairly close to the water hole, made

an admirable breastwork. From this, he could shoot any one who came over the rise.

Panting, he came down to it on the dead run. He had one moment of swift surprise. Some one had been here, and very recently. At one side were a couple of opened tins; there were signs of a camp. Some passing prospector, no doubt. For one brief instant Hoskins flung himself down by the water, gulped down some, splashed some over his head and face; then he turned and threw himself down by the pile of sand that covered the horse. His rifle went up. Let them come now!

SHOUTS reached him. They might surround him—he had not thought of that. Well, let them try! Something moved, beyond the rise of sand. It was Kerr—Kerr himself, coming on afoot, rifle ready. The figure rose up before him, and grimly, Hoskins pressed the trigger.

Nothing happened. That fall in the sand had jammed the rifle.

Frantically he worked at the weapon. No use; it was jammed. Kerr stood there, bringing up his own rifle, sighting. With an oath, Hoskins knew himself lost. He crouched and waited. Kerr was facing him, in full sight.

From the rise of sand behind him rang out the blast of a shot.

Kerr toppled forward, a bullet hole between his eyes.

Another shot and another rang out. Then a fourth, followed by a whoop of triumph. Hoskins, twisting around, staring incredulously, saw a tattered, bewhiskered figure rise up, waving a hat and rifle exultantly, yelling boisterously at him.

"Hey! Pawnee Joe, dog-gone your hide!"

"Siskiyou!" gasped Hoskins. "Siskiyou Slosson!"

"Yeah, it's me all right. Old Siskiyou Slosson came sliding down the sand. "Seen you coming and a-shooting a long ways off, so I got my burros out o' sight and laid low. Didn't recognize you till you got real close. Shake!"

Hoskins gripped hands with the old prospector, who was grinning widely. Then Siskiyou clapped him on the back, hard.

"By gosh, feller, I got great news for you! I struck it; by gosh, I've struck it rich at last, and half of it's yours! Hold on, though. Wait a bit. I got to go see them other two fellers. I plumb had to stop this first one dead, but them others——"

Thrusting on his hat, Siskiyou went rushing away.

Pete Hoskins climbed up the sand rise to where Kerr lay sprawled, found him dead, and straightened up. The horses of his pursuers were wandering aimlessly. One of the Circle K riders whom he had captured the previous night was dancing round and gripping an arm that was splattered with blood. Beyond, Sheriff Gibbs was seated, stripping off his boot. He put up his hands as Siskiyou approached and disarmed him, then the prospector knelt and began to bandage the hurt leg.

Hoskins drew a deep breath. He could imagine what old Siskiyou would say about it all—that the Lord had sent him along just at the right time. But there was more to it than all this. Hoskins forgot about the strike of the old man whom he had grubstaked. He forgot the scene before him.

He looked back up the shimmering heat haze of the desert. In his mind's eye he could see Black, the

new sheriff, waiting for a horse; he could picture Gibbs resigning his star, perforce; the XV blossoming out in untroubled peace, Nina Vail in full charge of the place and competent to run it. And he himself—

"Shucks!" he thought, glancing down at the water hole. "A bit of soap and I'll be myself again. Dave Wade—Babe Wade—yeah, she can get along without me, all right. I'll pick up that wagon and Ramon, and go places. Me and Siskiyou together, huh? That's right. No call for me to hang around here any more. She's a darned fine girl, but—well, she ain't the one to take

Kathleen's place. No one can do that. Yeah, I'll clear out now, and then—"

He smiled suddenly. His mind was made up. Then he caught sight of a dot far away up the desert rim. A moving dot. Something about it suggested Ramon, the effortless ease of the black stallion. A touch of color in it—a girl's dress, perhaps. Was Nina Vail coming here?

"It'll sure save a lot o' trouble," murmured Wade, and stood watching with that same confident, happy smile on his lips and in his eyes.

It would save a lot of trouble, yes. His job here was done.

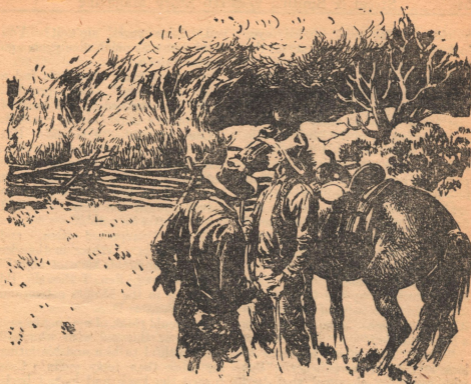
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HOT-HEAD

By GUTHRIE BROWN

Author of "The Sander," etc.

THE outside door slammed with a force that shook the walls. The big body of Ben Toland sank back into his chair, and he stared at the closed door with a puzzled, weary scowl. His good-looking, rather florid face reflected the heaviness of his heart. Something seemed also to have closed inside of him. He muttered, "I can't believe it!"

Though Ben was only thirty-five, the lamplight shone on hair that had begun to gray about the temples

and his broad shoulders carried the hint of a stoop. It was ten years ago that his father had been crippled by a horse, and upon Ben had fallen the care of the wide-flung cattle interests of the Tolands. A week ago the father had died, and to-day the two sons, Ben and Dan, had learned the conditions of their father's will.

An inner door of the big room closed softly. At the edge of the lamplight stood an old man. Cass Jones was not quite seventy, but his hair was white, and his weathered brown face was a crisscross of tiny

wrinkles. His mild, faded eyes looked at the bowed head across the room, and he said gently:

"It ain't as bad as all that, Ben."

Ben Toland did not lift his head. "It's as bad as it can be, Cass. Do you know what he said? He said he was going up to the Moffitt cabin and live alone and feed cattle there this fall. He told me that I could pay him cowhand wages and that he—he never wanted to see me again as long as he lived. It's finished, Cass. I can take a good deal, and I have taken a good deal off of him, but he said some things that——"

"Nothin's finished," said Cass Jones, standing by the table, twisting an old hat slowly on his fist, "till it's finished right. Dan always was a hot-head, Ben."

"Yes." Ben raised his eyes to look at the old cowpuncher. "But who would 'a' dreamed that he'd take it like that? I've been carrying on all this time. What's more natural than for dad to leave me in charge? Dan's always had his share—always had a little the best of it. You know that, Cass."

Cass nodded. "I know it. I guess Dan had some idee' the property'd be divided, and he could set up for himself."

Ben's expression was somewhat grim. "He'd go through his share in a year. Dad knew it. He was just protecting him when he made that will. I tried to tell Dan that he'd never lose a thing, that he would gain in the long run, by us sticking together. But he said— Oh, where's the use, going into what he said?" Ben cried impatiently. "He—Cass, he looked as if he wanted to kill me—my own brother!"

"Don't take on about it, Ben. Dan's considerable younger than

you. Nine years, ain't it? You didn't know as much nine years ago as you do now."

"I hope I knew enough to feel a little gratitude," Ben growled. Anger was succeeding the hurt of his brother's unreasonable conduct.

Cass agreed: "You did. But don't take it too serious, Ben. Dan's all right underneath, a mite bullheaded, mebbe, but he's got good stuff in him." The old man moved toward the door. "Well, I guess I better be goin'."

"Going?" repeated Ben, and stared at him. "Where in thunder are you going, this time of night?"

"Well—well, Ben, I thought I'd go on up to the Moffitt cabin, and sorta look after Dan."

Ben could think of nothing to say, looking at this old man who had been faithful to him and his father for more than forty years. Cass turned the knob and looked back. Ben made a gesture, helpless, grateful. There was a new respect in his eyes. Cass Jones walked out into the November night, satisfied. Ben understood.

THE Moffitt cabin, four miles from the home ranch, was one of the numerous places which Toland had added to his holdings in the early days. For convenience, the cowboys still referred to it by its original name. It comprised a good two hundred acres of hay land, and here were kept most of the cattle that had to be carried through the winter on feed.

Cass pushed open the cabin door, and stopped on the threshold. Dan Toland had flung up his handsome dark head to glare across a flickering candle set in the middle of a rough pine table.

"What are you doing here?" he growled.

"I just thought I'd come along," Cass told him mildly. He laid his hat on the table and poked up the fire in the wood heating stove. "You know, Dan," he added conversationally, "I'm a pretty to'able cook."

"I don't want you here! I don't want anybody here!" Dan stood up suddenly, savage, in the candle-light. "Get out, will you?" he shouted.

The unafraid eyes of Cass took in the towering figure with a brief survey. Then he turned away to explore the cupboard.

"Next time we go to town," he said, "we better lay in a good supply of flour and sugar."

One word in that sentence was unfortunate.

"Town!" cried Dan Toland, his eyes lighting wickedly. "You bet your life! Town is just where I am going."

Cass crossed the room quickly and stood between the young man and the door.

"Don't, Dan! Don't go to town, to-night. Wait till to-morrow, and I'll go with you, and we'll take the buckboard and bring back—"

"Buckboard's too slow for me," declared Dan, yanking his coat off a chair.

"But, kid," pleaded the old man, "you ain't in any fit humor to be hangin' around town. Dan, listen to an old man! Don't go and do anything you'll be sorry for. You been on the wagon for two years now."

Dan glowered at him, then grinned mirthlessly. "How'd you guess what I had in mind? Now, shut up, and get out of my way! I'm going to town, to-night. And if you try to stop me, Cass, I'll knock you down, old man or not."

Cass knew dangerous unreason

when he saw it. He stepped aside. Once more a door banged behind Dan Toland.

Cass stood staring at the candle flame, his skinny throat twitching. He'd come over here to take care of Dan, and here he'd fallen down on the very first move.

"I hadn't oughta mentioned town, not to-night, when he was so worked up. He'll get in with that bunch o' toughs down there and come home drunk, sure. Mebbe I oughtn't to've come to-night, when he was screwed up so tight and apt to fly off at anything. Well"—he looked around him—"there's a plenty to do here, 'fore he gets back."

As he cleaned the two rooms the next day and brought a measure of order out of the accumulated chaos which passed for housekeeping with the average cowboy, the mind of Cass was filled with memories. Memories of Dan. A curly-headed kid astride his shoulders, squalling excitedly, "Get up, you old brone!" A gulping boy of six, astride his first pony, too happy to talk. A striding youth, with dark eyes blazing their first rebellion at authority.

And Cass was remembering, too, the long patience of Ben—Ben defending the boy to their father, encouraging Dan to hold his temper, do his part.

IT was three days before the young man came back, and he did not come alone. Cass was dismayed. "Slim" Harker! Slim Harker, of all men in the world for Dan Toland to hook up with! Loafer and gambler! Harker was also a first-class cowhand, but he was usually out of a job. No crew would tolerate him long, and there was more than a little suspicion abroad that he was good at the illegal use of a branding iron.

For this man the mild-tempered Cass felt as near hate as he could feel. He looked at him across the supper table that night—slender frame, olive skin, twisted smile, coolly cynical eyes. Slim Harker sensed the antagonism of the old man, and treated him with a lazy contempt. He made sly, taunting remarks that drove Cass into a guarded silence.

Dan, who had been drinking heavily, growled: "You needn't be so cagy. Slim is gonna stay here with me, and you can take it and like it, or leave. I don't give a continental which."

Cass cleared away the dishes while the other two played cards and drank from the bottles that they had brought from town with them. Dan's temper grew more uncertain and ugly as the days went by. He never had a decent word for Cass; but the old man went serenely on, cooking and washing clothes, and sweeping floors and carrying water from the spring above the cabin.

Slim helped Dan with the feeding each day. When that was over, the two sat and played cards or rolled dice, always with a bottle between them. Sometimes they stood outside by the corral, and talked in low tones. Cass could see that Slim was urging Dan to something and that as time went on, Dan was listening more favorably to the suggestions of Slim. But there was nothing that Cass could do about it, except occasionally to sneak out a full bottle of liquor and smash and bury it behind the cabin.

One night the old cow-puncher was wakened out of sound sleep by a brilliant light shining in his window. Dan and Slim had gone to town that day, and had not come back.

Cass jerked on his clothes while his horrified gaze took in the scene. A group of hay stacks, half a mile from the cabin, were afire. The leaping flames made a beautiful and terrible sight against the black night sky. The fire must have been burning some time. One stack was nearly consumed, and the other three were ablaze.

Stumbling, he ran across the field toward them. There was nothing he could do, but he had to go. A hundred tons of good feed, going up in smoke!

Then, out of the dark, he heard Ben's voice.

"Hello, Cass."

Ben's tone was quiet, too quiet. He stood on the edge of the light, the reins of a saddled horse in his hand, watching the conflagration. Cass looked at his set face.

"Ben, how on earth could the thing've got started?"

"I hope I don't know," said Ben, not taking his gaze from the fire.

He looked gigantic, standing there between the light and the dark. The startled eyes of the old man fixed on him.

"Ben! Dan—Dan wouldn't never have——"

"Where is he?" asked Ben in a dead tone.

"Why, him and Slim went to town to-day," Cass explained eagerly. "They ain't even back yet. So, you see, he couldn't 've had anything to do with it."

Ben looked at him.

"Do you *know* where he is now?"

"No-o."

"Won't be hard to find out whether he was in town, when this started."

"But, Ben——"

Ben had turned to his horse. He swung into the saddle and looked

down at Cass. His eyes appeared nearly as black as Dan's.

"Cass," he said, "there's a limit, you know. Tell Dan there's a limit."

But Cass could not tell Dan. No bear with a sore head, thought the old man, could be less approachable than Dan Toland was these days. He never spoke to Cass except to fling him an occasional word of savage complaint about the coffee or the biscuits. He was scarcely civil, even to Slim. Cass could not make it out. Several times Slim did the feeding by himself, while Dan sat in the cabin and brooded.

Then, suddenly, he shoved the bottle aside and refused to touch it. But Cass got no comfort from that. A hard, calculating look had come into Dan's face, a cold gleam of determination that was almost ferocious. If ever the old cow-puncher had seen a man hell-bent for the dogs, Dan was the man.

His manner toward Slim was friendly once more, and the two were, as Cass put it, thick as thieves. Both treated the third member of the queer household with deliberate contempt.

Cass guessed that he was an old fool to put up with it. But he could not seem to get out of his mind the yelling, laughing youngster who had ridden on his shoulders.

IT was a starless night, with clouds hanging low over the earth, and a steady wind. But it was not the wind that awakened Cass. It was the sound of cattle moving past the cabin. He started up and listened, then called softly: "Dan, do you hear that?"

There was no answer. Cass got out of bed and struck a match. The bunks of both Slim and Dan were empty. Cass began to shiver. He

tried not to think what those empty bunks might mean, or that there was any possible connection between them and the sounds outside. He looked at the time. Two o'clock!

Presently Dan came in, alone. He came very quietly. The old man heard him curse softly as his foot struck something. Then he heard him undressing and getting into bed.

Slim was not there in the morning and did not reappear for two days. And the expression on Dan's face was one of grim satisfaction.

A week later the thing was repeated. Only Cass heard them go out this time. He could not see the point of the business. If they were running off cattle, and Slim was disposing of them for Dan somewhere, where did that get Dan? He was taking only what belonged partly to himself.

Cass came in from hunting rabbits one afternoon and saw that Dan and Slim had returned earlier than usual from a visit to town. Their sweaty saddle horses were eating at a feed rack in the corral.

Cass walked around to the back of the cabin to clean his rabbits, and heard the voice of Slim arguing in a low tone. The words were not distinct. The old man crept up under the window. He hated this sort of business, but he hated Slim Harker worse. If he could just get something on that fellow, in some way break his hold on Dan!

"It's a cinch!" Slim was saying, "if we can only get away with a hundred or so more. You can go to the judge then and make it look like Ben's holding out on you—after he sent you up here all by yourself to feed cattle!"

"We got enough now," said Dan's voice. "We took too long a chance with the last bunch we ran off, to

suit me. I can raise Cain with him plenty, the way things stand. He doesn't know yet, even, that there's any stock gone. That's how he looks after things!"

"But don't you see," coaxed Slim, "that we wanta make it *big*? I got an idea, Dan! Let's snag us a bunch o' those saddle horses he's gettin' ready to sell to the army. That'd make a splash. Besides, I know where I can get good coin for 'em."

Dan grunted. "I don't care a hang about the money. Haven't I told you that? All I want is my half of the property, to do what I please with." There was a pause. "I don't know, though, but what it's a good idea about the horses. Only it'll be ticklish business. You can't move horses as quiet as cattle, and we'll have to take 'em out the east way, and leave tracks. It's been fixing to storm for a week now. If we could hit it just right——"

Two days later it began raining in the afternoon. Dan and Slim at once made preparations to "go to town." Cass busied himself piling wood in the lean-to next the cabin, careful not to let them guess that he was watching them. Maybe it took extra lariat ropes to go to town, and maybe Slim needed a bed roll for the six-mile journey, and maybe he had to have a horse shod for the same purpose, but Cass hardly thought so.

The heart of the old man was heavy. He wished that he dared talk to Dan, tell him what a fool he was making of himself, what a dupe of Slim Harker he was.

THEY rode away in the early darkness, and Cass turned wearily back into the cabin to wash the dishes. He wanted to warn Ben. But he was a little afraid of Ben now. It took a good deal to

rouse Ben Toland, but once it was done, he was dangerous. If Ben was to find this out, catch Dan in the act—maybe a fight—maybe a killing!

No! Never that! Cass left the dishes where they stood. He whipped out boots, hat, slicker. A few minutes later he was in the saddle, making straight for the home ranch through the inky darkness.

He left his horse tied to a fence post and stalked the barns and corrals as carefully as if he intended to rob the place. That, in fact, was his intention. He did his robbing in the blacksmith shop. He came out of there carrying something under his slicker.

The rain was coming down harder now. A fine night for rustling. By morning there would not be a track to show which way the thieves had gone. Cass urged his horse through the mud at a lope. He hoped that Dan had not turned back on the road to town, yet. It would be tough luck to run into him.

The old puncher knew the pastures and the fences on the Toland place like the back of his hand. He found the two east gates to the horse pasture, and worked for a few minutes at each one. Then he returned to the third gate, near the ranch buildings, and settled himself to wait.

He waited for two hours, shivering in the cold rain. At intervals, he would ride a short distance, to exercise his horse, then dismount and stamp about in the mud to get up his own circulation. He called himself a doddering old fool. Why wasn't he at home in bed? Because he was afraid of what Ben might do, because he could not forget a curly-headed kid, because there was still a chance to stop this mad business without Ben ever knowing.

When Dan found those gates, he would guess he was being watched, he might come to his senses. Cass knew that he was bolstering himself with hopes that had little foundation, in fact.

Here they came!

Dan's voice said softly: "Sure that one is closed tight?"

And Slim responded, "You bet!"

Cass thought that he detected a subtle note of triumph in the tone of the answer.

He followed at a safe distance. The night was as black as a pocket. He heard Dan say:

"We'll likely find the horses over in the draw by the south line. That's where they go when it storms."

Dan seemed as careless of detection as if he had any proper business in that pasture this time of night.

"Bankin' too much on Ben bein' thick-headed," thought Cass, and wondered in disgust why he hadn't thought of that draw. He could have had those horses scattered by this time. However, he did his best. He rode among the animals as they came out of the draw, Dan and Slim urging them from behind; and, with a well-directed boot toe and a knotted rope end, sent them running and snorting into the dark in all directions.

He heard Dan wondering audibly:

"What has got into the brutes to make 'em act so spooky? We'll take out a few at a time, Slim, and turn 'em along the fence. They won't go far while we get the others."

The two men herded the few head so close that Cass had no chance to interfere. He stayed behind to scatter more thoroughly the remainder, then followed. He heard Dan again, cursing fluently.

"Some one's wired this gate shut!

And with barbed wire! You got anything on you that would cut it, Slim?"

"Not a thing," was the response. "Didn't you say there was another gate?"

"Yeah. Let's hustle."

DAN didn't say so much about the second gate. He seemed to pause there in the velvet darkness, then his voice came, low and dangerous.

"Somebody has smelt a rat."

"Looks that way," Slim agreed.

"Well, we gotta——"

Suddenly, out of the blackness, there came the sound of approaching horses. A voice said coldly:

"You birds come along peaceable, and there won't be any trouble. Start something, and you're gonna get hurt." It was the voice of Ben Toland.

There was a dead silence of seconds. Cass was close enough to the gates to hear Dan get back on his horse, then turn quietly to the right, behind Cass.

Ben roared, "Stop! Stop, or I shoot!"

Dan's horse struck into a lope, and Cass heard Ben's start in pursuit. But he did not shoot, as he had threatened. Did he guess the truth?

Cass spurred his horse between the two brothers in the darkness. He collided with Ben and dropped to the side of his horse; to dodge the reaching hand of his boss. The horse slipped in the mud, and Ben caught the bridle reins. Cass dropped them, to slide to the ground and run for it. Dan would be safe by this time.

But the old man was not quick enough. Ben's powerful arm dragged him back into the saddle

and held him there. The horses were turned and headed for the house, and Ben called out:

"I got one of 'em, boys! You bring in the other!"

Cass never understood how he got through those first awful minutes in the lamp-lighted living room. He took one look at Ben's face, and fastened his gaze to the floor.

Ben stared at him, trying to find words, and choked on them when he did find them.

"Cass! *You!* Dan put you up to this."

"No, Ben! Honest, he never!"

"I don't believe it!" cried Ben. "Who was out there with you, then?"

"Nobody."

"You lie," said Ben Toland deliberately.

Two cowboys came in. They stared from the dripping figure of Ben to the dripping figure of Cass. Their mouths opened for speech, but closed promptly when Ben looked at them.

"Where's your man?" he asked.

"We—he got away from us, boss."

"Go on to bed," he told them.

They went.

They had hardly got out of the house when the front door flew open. Dan stood in the opening, water running from his hat brim and shoulders. His eyes swept the room, passed Ben, and settled on Cass with a look of blank astonishment. Slowly he stepped inside and closed the door, his gaze still clinging to the old man.

Cass guessed that Dan thought it was Slim who was captured, and had come to help him out. But he had found Cass instead.

A strange expression came into the eyes of Dan Toland, as he met

the patient gaze of the old man. Dan saw the love and loyalty that had stood by him, even to—even to this. The knowledge seemed to daze him for the moment.

THE door behind him opened again. Slim Harker walked into the room. He shook the water from his clothing upon the floor, chose a chair, and sat down with a half smile on his face. His conduct appeared quite as mystifying to Dan as to the other two. At the bewilderment of their faces, Slim's satisfaction seemed to increase.

"Well, Toland," he addressed Ben, "what's it worth to you? Of course, this ain't just the way I'd planned on bringin' it up, but this'll do all right."

Ben made no answer, his dislike of the man plain in his face.

"It oughta be worth considerable," Slim went on, smiling with lazy contempt, "to keep this country from knowin' that your brother is a cattle thief."

For a dumfounded second Dan stared at him, then took a step forward.

"Why, you dirty little——"

Slim held up a hand.

"Take it easy; take it easy, Dan," he advised in a level tone. "What did you think I was foolin' along with you for, night ridin', and losin' my sleep, and livin' in that filthy shack o' yours, and eatin' your bum grub"—he looked at Cass—"and takin' your lip all this time? For my health? For the few measly dollars we got outta stolen cattle? For your promise of a job, when you got on your own, and shook Ben? Guess again, dim-wit. I ain't lookin' for a job. What I'm after is coin. And Ben Toland'll pay it,

and pay plenty, to keep his name outta court. He can't send me up without sendin' you along."

"Oh, yes, he can!"

All three men turned startled eyes on Cass. The old cow-puncher walked across the room to Slim, his thin white hair plastered to his head, his face sagging in lines of weariness, his soaked hat still in his hand. But his eyes were gleaming like live coals.

"Yes, he can, Slim. Better think again, you rat! There's three of us to swear that you're lyin', Slim. Three of us with good reputations in this country, against you—with a rep that's pretty slimy. Think it over, Slim."

Slim's face had changed, but he tried to bluff it out.

"Huh! You don't know Dan! Think he'd stick by you? Why, that yellow pup'd double-cross anybody on earth—"

Slim Harker never got to finish the sentence. Dan was on him before he could get out of his chair. Dan swung the struggling body up, arm length above his head, to hurl it across the room.

But before he could let go, Ben was there. Ben caught Dan's wrists in a steel grip. They looked at each

other between their raised arms, their faces not a foot apart.

"He isn't worth it, bud," Ben said quietly. Then he took Harker from Dan's suddenly weak hands. He set the fellow on his feet and moved him toward the door.

"Get out, Slim," said Ben. "Get out of this house and out of this country. And if you ever mention Dan's name, Slim"—Ben's tone was ominous—"he'll catch you and he'll manhandle you, and you'll very likely die."

The last glimpse which Cass had of Slim Harker reminded the old man of a scared rabbit, streaking through the rain.

"Ben," Dan choked, "I deserve killing! I'm a blame sight worse than Slim. I don't know what in God's world got into me!"

"Forget it, bud. We go from here."

"I'll make it up to you, Ben." Dan turned. "And as for you, Cass—can you ever forgive such a dithering fool as I've been?"

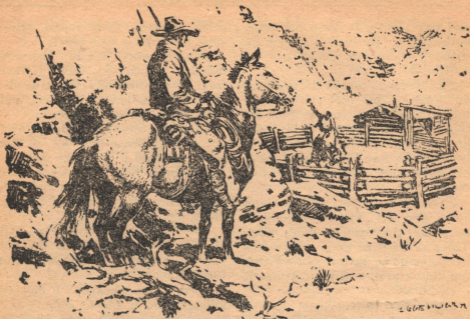
"Yes, Cass," Ben agreed. "I, too, owe you—"

Cass waved them aside. "All squared up, now that I can come home. Because I hate like thunder to cook!"

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OLD LONESOME

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

Author of "Trail Treachery," etc.

ON a wide sage flat, where the Laramie Plains meet the juniper-spattered foothills of the Medicine Bow Range, Al Bradley, world's champion bronc rider, drew up his blood-bay gelding and rolled a smoke. His intelligent gray eyes, set wide from a thin, straight nose, lifted from the brownish-green hills folded one upon the other and rising gently against the timbered breast of the back range.

Al was looking for the grulla outlaw that had not come in with the spring round-up of the Bottle Neck range horses. The owner of the Bottle Neck had received an offer of a hundred and fifty dollars for

this horse from Ryan & Murphy, whose business was the supplying of bucking stock to most of the big rodeos. After having crippled two riders and killed a third, the grulla had graduated from the rough string into an outlaw. A biting, striking, fighting hunk of dynamite, his reputation as a bucker had traveled far.

The tall, lean-waisted cowboy was in no hurry to find the grulla. All winter he had worked hard, snapping out broncs for the Bottle Neck. The other cowboys were off on calf round-up. Nothing much for him to do until the opening of the rodeo season. Besides, it was May. The air was warm and lazy, pulsing with the eternal mystery of things com-

ing alive. The bright sun streamed down on a boundless expanse of tender green, splashed here and there with patches of primroses and sand lilies. From a gnarled old sage bush dripped the flutelike notes of a lark. Spring had come to the cow country.

Al swelled his chest with a deep breath, and grinned.

"Boy, howdy!" he said aloud, starting his horse in motion. "That air feels soft as a young calf's ear. An' just look at all the grass shootin' up everywhere. Looks so good I could eat it!"

Then he thought of Steve Yeager. Queer, that on this fine morning, he should think of the one thing that never failed to cause him vague uneasiness. But human nature is like that. Ever since he had taken to following rodeos, the rider that Al usually had to beat was Steve Yeager. On more than one occasion Yeager had taken first money from him with a ride that had brought the grand-stand crowds to their feet in wild applause.

Last year at Buckskin, Steve had looked like certain winner of the title Al now held until, in the finals, he had drawn a horse which refused to perform. After the show there had been a hot dispute, then a fist fight between the rival top riders, adherents of each side pitching in. Black of face, Steve Yeager had left the corrals, swearing that never again would Al Bradley be in the money.

In little more than a month the big rodeo at Twin Buttes would open. Al's pulse quickened at the thought. He knew that, in order to keep his title, he would have to out-ride Steve Yeager. And Yeager, despite what else he might be, was as good a rider as ever came out of a chute.

TOWARD the middle of the morning Al forded a little draw down which tumbled a torrent of snow run-off, and came up the flank of the main range. The grulla had been seen in this region by the cowboys who brought in the saddle stock. He should not be hard to find, and Al had all the time there was.

Up here drifts lay deep in the hollows and on shady slopes. But the red buds of scrub maples were swelling, and windflowers pushed furry petals through the carpet of pine needles. Al's lips puckered in a low whistle as he headed south along a timbered hogback. After eight months of snow and ice and marrow-piercing wind, these green hills looked mighty good to him.

Crossing a little meadow that lay in the dip between two ridges, he saw, atop a butte toward the west, a sight that never fails to make the heart of a cowboy quicken its beat. A wild horse it was, head erect, nose into the wind, plumelike tail lifted. Al knew this horse. It was the paint stallion known as Old Lonesome, because he never ranged with any of the bands of mustangs that roamed this part of Wyoming. Once the leader of his own band, he had been fought out of it by younger stallions. Now he was an outcast.

"I feel kinda sorry for you, old boy," Al told himself. "Up there all by yoreself. You ain't got no friends on either side."

He rode on, searching for the grulla outlaw. The country grew wilder. Deep gulches twisted through the tumbled mountains, to cleave the granite wall of some gloomy, wind-plowed canyon. Timber became thicker, snowdrifts more frequent. Skirting one of these wide, curving sheets of glittering

white, Al came upon a grassy bench that overhung a narrow, densely wooded box canyon. Near the head of this canyon, he recalled, there was an old deserted cabin. He would go there and cook up a bait of lunch.

Before he reached the cabin, he heard the angry squeals of a horse, the swift, savage pound of bunching hoofs. Puzzled, he hit into a trot. Coming past a projecting spur, he jerked his horse to a stop, staring in utter amazement.

Beside the cabin there was a small pole corral, recently built. In the corral, bucking high, wide, and crooked was the grulla outlaw. And in the middle of him, straight up from boot tip to tousled black hair, sat Steve Yeager!

Steve Yeager, left hand holding the hackamore rein according to association rules, the other lifted high above the mouse-colored devil gripped between his knees. Scratching with taped rowels both ways from the cinch strap as though he were performing before a crowd of thousands, instead of alone here in the secluded canyon. Riding like the top hand that he was.

Al watched, thrilled to the depths of him. Never had he seen horse and rider put up a prettier fight. The grulla was a high roller, leaping three or four feet into the air with every buck, often swapping ends. Each crack of his hoofs against the hard-packed ground was accompanied by the vicious shoulder whip that had been the doom of every man who tried to ride him. Cat-backed, stiff-legged, he walked beam and sunfished. Grunting, squealing, ears back and eyes rolling, the grulla "broke in two."

But the long-legged cowboy up there in the heaving saddle was riding him to a frazzle. On his square-jawed bronze face was a grim smile

of triumph. He was master of every trick that the canny brain of the outlaw could devise. It was only when the grulla's bucks died to crow hops and Yeager slid from the saddle that Al's admiration turned to white-hot anger.

"Well," he called, riding into the clearing, "I see you're playin' safe."

Yeager whirled round. A moment he stared at Al, in stark surprise.

"Oh, hello there, Bradley," he said, with quickly recovered composure. "Didn't know who you was, for a minute."

Al stepped from his blood bay and came to the corral.

"I said you was playin' safe," he repeated.

"Playin' safe? What you mean by that?"

Yeager threw his saddle across the fence and faced Al. Though both men were outwardly calm, any one watching them would instantly have detected the undercurrent of enmity that swirled between them.

"Yeager, they say some things about you that don't listen good. But in spite of them things, I always figured you for a man. I see I been wrong. This here is the low-downdest trick I ever run across."

Though some of the dark tan left Yeager's cheek, his snapping black eyes met Al's defiantly.

"What you talkin' about?" he demanded. "Reckon I can practice up if I want to."

"You ain't good at lyin', Yeager," Al said slowly. "You heard about Ryan & Murphy wantin' to buy this here grulla for their buckin' string. You had a purty good idea that whoever could set him had a good chance of bein' in the money at all the rodeos this year. So you thought you'd pull a whizzer an' get plumb full of savvy on his style of buckin'."

"What if I did?" Yeager burst out angrily. "I got beat out of first money at Buckskin last year, didn't I? You——"

"You lost fair an' square. Anybody else might 'a' rawed that crow hopper. Don't go makin' that excuse again."

"The drawin' was crooked, I tell you! I can prove it by a dozen men." Yeager shut the corral gate and came belligerently up to Al. Raw challenge sparkled from his black eyes. "I can outride you, Bradley. Any time, anywhere."

Al met his look.

"If you're so all-fired good," he said, "how come you wasn't willin' to take yore chances on that grulla with the rest of us?"

"Gettin' even for what you an' the rest of 'em done to me at Buckskin last year, that's why. One ain't any crookeder than the other. Fight snakes with snakes, I say." Yeager's voice dropped to a menacing pur. "I ain't scared to go up against you on anything that's got four feet, Bradley. I can outride you, like I say. I done it at Pendleton last year an' the year before. An' at Cheyenne an' Monte Vista."

"How about all the times I left you clean out of the runnin'?" Al asked coldly.

"I can outride you, all the same." The intensity of his feeling lent to Yeager's voice an unnaturally bitter ring. "I'll go up against you on anything you say. Right now, or any other time."

"On the grulla, I suppose."

Yeager's dull flush told that the shot hurt.

"I tell you what," he said, with a sudden tightening of his features. "We'll settle this argument for good an' all. There's a wild paint stud ranges round here. We'll ride it out on him!"

Al said nothing.

"Whoever rides him out is the best man. What you say?" Yeager's eyes, a trifle wild now, glittered into Al's.

"It's a go." Al instantly accepted the dare.

"Good!" Yeager glanced from his saddle to Al's. Both were of the finest make, beautifully hand-tooled and silver mounted, trophies won in bucking contests. "Bet you my riggin' against yours."

"That's a bet. An' a hundred dollars on the side."

"Ain't got that much," said Yeager, "but I'll pay if I lose."

Al nodded.

KNEE to knee, saying little, the rival bronc peelers headed out toward the butte where Al had seen the paint stallion. No ordinary riders, these two. Conquering bucking horses was to them not only a means of livelihood; it was a passion, a path to that glory which is the dream of the most humble cowboy. Star performers by right of sheer ability to ride and to outthink the smartest horse, whose names were known throughout cow land, they were as careful of their rein hands as a marksman is of his eyes, or a dancer of her feet.

Now, on a dare, they were headed toward a venture that would almost certainly cripple them for the rodeos so close at hand. For the wild stallion, sure to be a vicious fighter, had never been saddled or even roped. And he would be ridden in the open, far from hazer, ten-second gun, and ambulance. But Al knew it had to come, this final settling of the old argument as to whether he or Steve Yeager were the better rider. He welcomed the coming test as much as Yeager could have.

Twenty miles of coulee, flat, and

timbered slope passed behind them before they saw Old Lonesome. The red-splotted white stallion, alone as always, was sunning himself in the lee of an outcropping that crowned a gaunt peak, to the west of them. He gave no indication of having seen the men, who immediately slid their horses into a gulch. Near the base of the peak they halted for a brief council.

"We got to get our ropes on him up here," Al said. "If he ever got out on the flats, we'd be a week runnin' him down."

Steve nodded. "I'll go up this side," he said. "You can take the other—an' keep out of sight."

They separated, Al threading a thicket of newly leaved buckbrush and willows toward the opposite foot of the mountain. When only about a third of the way up, he heard a crashing of brush, over to the right. Thinking that the stallion had caught sight or wind of Yeager, Al streaked diagonally down the mountainside.

Soon he reached a gulch that cleft the slope in a dark, jagged line. Listening a second, he assured himself that the wild horse was coming down this gulch, and coming fast. But the gulch here was too narrow to permit of swinging a loop. He raced down the slope until he came to a spot where the walls rolled back, to form a small pocket. He rode into the gulch.

Already he had taken down his rope and built his loop. Pulling in behind a projecting shoulder, he expertly gauged the probable length of the throw. Then, moving out a little in order to allow more arm room, he set the loop spinning in a gradually widening circle above his head. He had no time to lose. With crackle of brush and clatter of stone, the stallion was coming swiftly

down the gulch. Far up the mountain sounded Steve Yeager's shrill whoop. Aquiver with excitement, Al risked a look up the gulch.

Like a streak of spotted flame came the paint stallion, beautiful head erect, small ears pointed forward, hoofs twinkling. With streaming mane and flowing tail he came, straight toward the swiftly circling noose. Fascinated by the splendid sight, Al turned hot and cold by turns. He wondered if he would be able to hold that cyclone, even if he could get his rope on it. He drew back behind the rock.

"Steady, old-timer," he muttered to the nervous bay, gently pressing in his knees. "Easy does it."

Then the wild horse shot into the opening. With a whine Al's spinning loop left his hand, aimed straight at the outstretched head. The cast was true. Swoping over the mustang's head, the rope settled around his neck. The stallion snorted in sudden terror, swerved off at a right angle and flashed past. The next instant the rope snapped taut, and he whirled over in the air, striking the earth on his back.

"Hold him, boy! We got him!" In feverish haste Al took down his second rope, leaped from the saddle.

But he did not yet have Old Lonesome. Already the stallion was on his feet. Bulging an angry peal, with flattened ears and bared teeth he rushed upon the hated human. Al leaped aside, narrowly avoiding the sharp, flashing hoofs. Another lunge, and the enraged stallion struck the bay, slamming it against the wall.

THE game cow horse bounded up, fighting back with gnashing teeth and slashing hoofs. Deafening were the squeals, unearthly. As Al dodged and twisted,

trying to get in a throw with his rope, the horses reared upright, striking at each other's chest like boxers. Beneath the furious onslaught the bay was beaten back in glorious defeat, its neck gripped between the stallion's powerful jaws.

Seeing that he could not snare those lashing forefeet, Al seized the rope that was around the stallion's neck and swung back. Digging his heels into the earth, he swung back until the veins in his neck became corded and his face grew purple.

"Turn loose!" he gasped between clenched teeth. "I'll choke—yore heart out—you paint devil!"

It seemed as if the mustang would kill the bay, regardless of the noose eating into his throat. But his attack gradually became less violent, and the cow horse broke away. The rope was jerked from Al's hands as it twanged taut. The stallion, panting in anguish, suddenly turned and lunged at Al. The saddle rope snatched him backward. Rearing to full height, he flung himself in destroying frenzy upon this, the only enemy of which he stood in fear.

Al leaped back, his loop hissing through the air. He snared both of those lashing feet. A hard, quick jerk and the stallion crashed squealing to earth. Making the rope fast, Al unloosened the neck rope, snapped it free. He stood looking down at the noble animal futilely threshing the ground.

"Old Lonesome," he said softly, "I sure hate to treat you this way. I savvy some how a critter that's lived free up here, all by yoreself, must feel to be tied up. Well, it ain't for long, pardner." He added whimsically, "I hope you don't take it all out on me. 'Cause I got to ride you, Old Lonesome—got to!"

While Al was calming his horse, Steve Yeager loped up. He glanced

at the captured wild stallion and the torn-up ground, then swung from the saddle.

"Good catch," he commented.

Al shook his head. "I orter front-footed him, but the brush was too high to risk it. Might 'a' broke his neck, ropin' him like I did."

Steve laughed shortly. "Don't you wish you had?"

"You mean, that's what you wish," Al retorted, with a cold smile.

"Ready?"

"You bet. Where'll we take him?"

"Right here is good enough for me."

Steve looked around him. The pocket was about fifty feet from wall to wall and twice that in length. It was littered with loose rock and sagebrush, and cut up by tiny washes.

"Suits me," he said. "We can drag a tree across the upper openin'. The one that ain't ridin' can head him off at the lower end. He ain't liable to go up the bank."

"You're talkin' about after he's thrown you."

Steve's grin was as icy as Al's. "No. After he's thrown you."

There would be no time limit, both agreed. The stallion would be bucked out, or the rider bucked off. In the manner of men casting lots for position on a dueling field, they flipped a coin for first ride. Al won, if it could be called that. They built a hackamore and fastened it on the snorting, wall-eyed stallion. Then he was blindfolded, hobbled, and made to get up. Al threw his saddle across the flinching back, pulling the broad cinch strap almost out of sight in the long, shaggy belly hair. He came quickly into the saddle, caught firm grip on the hackamore rein.

"Ready?" asked Steve.

"Let 'er go," Al answered, tight-lipped.

STEVE removed the rope hobbles, jerked off the blind. He vaulted on his horse and rode to the mouth of the opening. But when he turned, he saw that the stallion had not yet moved. He stood there in the gulch like a red-and-white statue, head down, legs wide apart, as though unconscious of the rowels raking his sides from withers to hips.

Then Steve swore softly. Old Lonesome had boiled over! Burying his head between his legs, he straightened out in a kick that shot the saddle four inches forward. Scarcely had the roofs struck earth, when Steve saw them again shoot stright out, and again. But Al, scratching as only a champion can, had not yet even lost his hat.

Now Old Lonesome was bucking. Cat-backed, he soared into the air, came down stiff-legged, all four feet close together. Almost Steve could hear the jarring of Al's teeth, as the pounding hoofs drove fetlock-deep into the earth. It was as if the wild horse were ripping to pulp some kill he had made. And though some of those rib-rattling bucks bounced Al from the saddle, he was always set for the next trip skyward.

"He's a ridin' fool," Steve said softly. In his voice was no grudge.

Suddenly he caught his breath. The stallion was spinning, whirling round and round at a speed so dizzy that he could not follow the motions. And as he spun, the stallion reached far back, trying to sink his bared teeth in Al's leg. Steve saw Al lose his marvelous balance, sag sidewise. His throat became suddenly dry. He knew Al was gone.

The stallion seemed to know it, too. He spun even faster.

But, no! Al was sitting straight in the dizzily whirling saddle. Neither foot had lost the stirrup, both hands were clear. As though thinking that never would he be able to get this man off his back, Old Lonesome gathered his muscles for a supreme effort.

Stopping his spin with a jerk so sudden and swift that Al shot half out of the saddle, he reared to his full height, then came down with the speed of a rocket. As his front hoofs drove into the earth, his hind legs stretched out in a kick of tremendous sweep. Steve caught his breath. Al Bradley was thrown! Wide-armed, he pitched over the stallion's head, arched through the air in a dizzy somersault, to strike the earth on his head.

Before Al could get to his feet, the stallion, screaming now with fury, lunged toward him. Steve turned cold. He knew what was going to happen, but he seemed unable to move.

"Watch out, Al!"

The loud cry burst unconsciously from him, as he fed his horse the steel. His stricken eyes saw the stallion's forefeet strike Al in the chest, saw Al crumple backward. At full speed he drove into the infuriated stallion. Knocked six feet by the impact, the stallion went down, Steve's horse on top of him.

Out of the maelstrom of striking hoofs hurtled Steve, swinging to the paint stallion's rein. Somehow he dodged the murderous forefeet long enough to tie his bandanna over the horse's eyes. He turned to Al, who was sitting up, staring dazedly at a splotch of crimson between his feet. He bled at the nose and ears. His face was gray, drawn. His torn

shirt front was soggy with blood, and one arm hung queerly.

"Hurt?"

"Not much. Shook up some. Much obliged for what you done."

Steve stared at the queerly hanging arm.

"Your arm's broke, ain't it?"

"Believe she is." Al forced a smile. "He busted me, Steve. Yore pot." He added, as if to himself; "No rodeos for me this year. You can win all the first money, far as I'm concerned."

"What's rodeos got to do with it?" Steve asked shortly. "You an' me are settlin' an argument, an' I ain't rid yet."

"Listen here, Steve. Ain't no use on yore runnin' a risk of gettin' crippled, too. That stallion is bad. He's just as liable to fall back on you, as not. I'll concede the bet."

Steve looked hard at his old rival. Plainly he did not know just what to think.

"Ain't no use in yore gettin' all banged up, too," Al continued. "You win the bet. An' I won't say anything about the grulla, in the bargain."

But Steve made the only answer that Al knew he could make.

"Al," he said slowly, "you're plumb white. But that bet ain't settled till I make my ride." He paused, his face granite-hard. "I'm ridin' him. An' you can keep your saddle; I don't want it."

"I don't want it either—if you ride him."

WITH a stab of pain that sucked his breath, Al pulled himself up and went toward his horse. A queer grating inside him warned of broken ribs. And the big bone in his upper arm had snapped in two. No, he would ride in no rodeos for a while.

Steve swung quickly up, settled himself in the saddle, then reached over and tore off the blind. As he had done with Al, Old Lonesome did not move. Even with Steve's rowels digging into his flanks, he still moved not a muscle.

"See!" Steve yelled angrily. "He ain't goin' to buck! Same luck I always draw!"

It was as though the stallion comprehended the taunt. Like a Fourth of July pinwheel to which a match had just been set, he began to spin. So swift were the revolutions that Al could not follow them. But Steve was riding it out. In grim admiration, Al watched him equal his own great ride. Then came the breathlessly sudden stop that shook Steve half out of the saddle. As if struck between the ears with a sledge hammer, the stallion dived downward, his hind legs straightening out in that awful kick. But the strategy that had defeated Al left Steve still in the saddle.

With a piercing squeal, the stallion reared upright. Al saw, with a numbing rush of fear, that the horse was deliberately throwing himself over backward. From his tight lips came a stifled moan. Beneath the stab of his rowels the blood bay spurted forward.

"Jump, Steve—jump!" he yelled. "You rode him—*jump!*"

Steve did not jump. As he raced up, Al caught a glimpse of Steve's face. Stern as death, that face—except for the smile that rode the grim lips. Al had no time to think. Reaching up as he swept past the tottering horse, he caught a hand in the hackamore. The swift jerk all but tore his arm from its socket, lifted him out of the saddle. But he pulled the stallion downward. Steve stepped from the saddle, as Old Lonesome crow-hopped away.

"You rode him," said Al. "But why didn't you jump? If he'd fell on you, he might 'a' crippled you for life, even killed you."

"Why did you stop him?" Steve asked, almost harshly. "I wanted him to fall on me—for that trick I played on you with that grulla." He hesitated. "I promise you one thing, Al: I won't set in another buckin' contest till you're all right again."

Somehow the two old rivals found themselves gripping hands, and looking into eyes that were a bit misty. Eying the bronc twisters, Old Lonesome lifted his head and sent a mighty peal of triumph rolling across the mountain.

Steve grinned. "Wise old devil, ain't he?"

"Wise as a tree full of owls," Al agreed. "Roll me a smoke, will you, Steve?"

HOPES OF RICH GOLD STRIKE FADE

HOPES of an amazing strike of almost virgin gold in the recesses of the ghostly Superstition Mountains, near Phoenix, Arizona, were shattered recently upon the discovery that "nuggets" found by Charles Williams, amateur prospector, were "dental gold."

Sheriff J. R. McFadden believed the gold had been cached, though not for long. He said he expected to learn soon where the gold came from.

Williams, who staggered back with a quantity of the gold after a three-days absence, was unable to lead officials to the "flat rock" where he said he had hidden twenty more pounds of the gleaming metal.

Both Sheriff McFadden and Sheriff Walter Laveen of Pinal County, who had led a search for Williams when he was feared missing, expressed disbelief in the prospector's story.

Hundreds of persons, some of them prospectors, flocked to the mountain range on the heels of first reports of Williams's gold strike.

Assayers said the nuggets brought out by Williams were twenty-two carat gold and worth about four hundred dollars.

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LOST CALF

By HARRY R. KELLER

Author of "Double Deceit," etc.

HIGH above the swirling murmur of Fisher Creek, above the soft song the wind crooned in the pines, that other sound came—a long-drawn animal cry of grief, of dolorous loss. Nell Thornycroft shivered a little, and raised dark eyes to the man's face, looming above her there in the long shadows of late afternoon.

"Hear that, Bud? Know what it means?"

"Bud" Bailey, crack ranger of the Pend Oreille Forest Service, nodded somberly.

"It means," he said heavily, "that another Tumbling T calf has been lost to rustlers."

WS-6F

The girl touched her roan pony's flank with a light heel, forcing her way through the hillside chaparral toward the spot from which the sound had come. At the roan's heels Bud Bailey rode, erect on his tall sorrel. Presently they pushed through to a little clearing, carpeted with rank, sweet grass. From the opposite edge of the clearing a red cow whirled to face them, horns lowered, bawling truculently.

"See," Bud said, "here is where she left her calf, to go down to the creek, maybe, for water. And when she came back, the calf was gone."

Nell nodded, drooping wearily in her saddle. She knew what had happened in the brush at the edge of

this clearing, knew that a range cow always goes back to the place where she has last seen her calf. There would be tracks in the trampled earth over there, tracks that tallied with those of "Kootenay Ike" Coons and his rascally brother Ralph, the notorious pair that had become the bane of this section of the Selkirks. But of what use would it be to go over there and search for sign? Even the best trailers of the back country, seasoned mountain men like Bud Bailey, had failed time and again to track the rustlers to their cleverly concealed hide-out. What chance had slim Nell Thornycroft, fighting alone now to hang on to the Tumbling T, against men like these diabolical thieves?

"If only we could catch them!" Bud was going on. "That would stop the drain on your herd, and the reward money would be enough to put the Tumbling T back on its feet. Kootenay Ike and Ralph Coons are wanted in three States, charged with every crime in the calendar—from rustling and murder to bank robbery. Dead or alive, each of the skunks would bring around two thousand bucks! I'm a fine ranger, not to be able to track 'em down!"

The girl laid a small hand over his bronzed one, clenched on the saddle horn.

"Don't blame yourself, Bud. We all meet our match, sooner or later." She smiled wryly. "At least, there's one fortunate angle to this. Dad has been asking for milk of late. He can have it now. I'll take the red cow home, and turn milkmaid!"

The ranger caught eagerly at her hand.

"How is your father, Nell?" he asked soberly. "How is old Shad?"

"Bad." Nell shook a despairing head. "It's that old bullet in his

chest, you know. Doc Garner says if we could take him to Spokane, for an operation— Oh, what's the use?" She blinked rapidly, red lip caught between her even white teeth. "I've got to be going, Bud. Dad will be needing me. If you'll help me get a rope on this red cow, now——"

WITHOUT a word the ranger dismounted, walking warily toward the spot where the bawling cow had backed into the brush. There was a blurred streak of red hide as the grief-crazed animal, bellowing, charged from cover. Then Nell's loop settled snugly over the lowered horns; the roan pony braced its sturdy legs, and at the rope's end the red cow flopped ignominiously to the ground. After a moment Nell slacked the rope, and the cow struggled to its feet, breathing heavily, all the fight knocked out of it.

"She'll lead now," Nell opined. "I'll tie her short in the barn and feed her hay until she tames down a little. Thanks, Bud. I'll be going now."

The ranger was at the roan's side, looking up into her troubled eyes.

"Marry me, Nell!" he pleaded. "It's man's work you're having to do. You know how I'm craving to work with you, to help you. And I love you!"

She smiled down at him, her gaze suddenly tender. "Good boy, Bud! I love you, too. But we'll have to wait—until we know for sure, about dad." She bent swiftly, kissing him. "So long, ranger! Maybe I can meet you here Thursday!"

And, trying to achieve a jaunty set to her shoulders, she wheeled the roan pony and led the protesting cow off down the mountainside.

But long before she reached the

Tumbling T ranch house, surrounded by its ramshackle outbuildings and sagging pole corrals, the tired droop had settled upon her again. She rode the roan into the barn, dragging the stiff-legged red cow after her at the end of the taut rope. Tying the cow securely to a manger, she hurriedly gave the two animals the necessary care. Then she slipped out and across the shadowed barnyard, to the old log house looming darkly in the dusk.

A querulous voice greeted her as she set foot upon the crumbling porch.

"That you, Nell?"

"Yes, dad."

Hastily lighting the smoky kerosene lamp on the living-room table, she lifted it and carried it through the door into the small bedroom where old Shad Thornycroft lay, a gaunt, angular figure beneath the thin blanket. From their cavernous sockets, his faded eyes blinked feverishly at her.

"Did I hear a cow bawlin' jest now, girl?"

"Yes." She smiled cheerfully. "Haven't you been begging for milk, you blessed infant?"

He shook his head dolefully at her bantering tone. "Careful if you got an old mossyhorn, Nell. They're more'n half wild, and they don't tame worth a cent." He stirred restlessly on the hated bed. "Gosh, but some milk will taste good, though!"

She made him comfortable, administered some of the medicine old Doctor Garner had left to ease the agony in his chest. Then she went to the kitchen, caught up a pail, and moved resolutely toward the barn.

It was heartbreaking, that first tussle with the wild red cow. From it she emerged with hair disheveled, two barked shins, a bloody nose—and about a pint of milk in the badly

battered pail. But old Shad drank the milk gratefully, when she had strained it and carried it to his bedside in a glass; and Nell Thornycroft counted the cost none too great.

SHE blew out the light when old Shad had finished, and undressed quickly in the chill dark. Her bed was in the room with her father's, so that she might be at hand if he should need her in the night. How luxurious the soft feather tick felt to her slight, weary body! She closed her eyes drowsily, trying not to think of the problems she had been forced to meet daily since old Shad's illness; not to think of dwindling herds, of rotting ranch buildings, of the vast burden that was giving an age-old stoop to her young shoulders. Even to think of Bud Bailey, straight and clean, with his honest blue eyes holding a longing that must be denied, brought a pain that was almost physical. In sleep, she could forget all that.

But there was little sleep for Nell that night. All through the long hours of the misty dark the red cow kept bawling, deep notes of sorrow, of longing for her lost calf. In that sound was embodied all the loneliness, all the sense of futility, of the fate that was bowing Nell Thornycroft down. The sick man muttered feverishly from time to time, there in the brooding dark. Twice the girl had to get up and administer a portion of the anodyne old Doctor Garner had left. And when the dawn came at last, she knew that old Shad's condition was worse.

He would have no breakfast, only milk. So once again Nell trudged to the barn, where the red cow was tied close against a manger. She was more successful this time, returning with more than a quart of warm, nourishing milk, which Shad

drank as eagerly as before. But he soon sank into a fearful apathy, his dull eyes fixed on the ceiling; and Nell moved softly about her work, indoors and out, wishing that this was the day when old Doctor Garner would be making his regular visit from Bonners Ferry. The doctor was not due until Thursday; and the girl's heart was heavy with an apprehensive dread that Thursday would be too late.

The day dragged through, with little apparent change in the suffering man's condition. At dusk Nell milked again, straining the white fluid into a tall pitcher—more than old Shad could drink. The red cow was repending to gentle treatment, but the cobwebby rafters of the old barn still echoed mournfully to the deep sounds of her lament. When supper was done, Nell sat tensely for a time in the dimly lighted living room, praying for some alien sound to break the monotony—some sound other than the melancholy lowing of the cow, the harsh rasp of her father's labored breathing.

Then, with startling abruptness, it came—a step on the sagging porch. Nell's heart leaped into her throat. Could it be Bud Bailey, coming to see how she was getting along? But Bud, she knew, would be nearing the southern end of his forest patrol, miles away, to-night. Was it, then, Doctor Garner, making his accustomed round of the countryside, two days earlier than usual? With the birth of that hope, Nell leaped to her feet and flung open the door, a word of glad greeting on her lips.

But the welcoming word died unuttered, and the girl, suddenly pale-faced, shrank back into the room, away from what she saw revealed in the light of the kerosene lamp. It wasn't old Doctor Garner who

stepped across the threshold. It was a younger man, heavier, wild of hair and beard, unkempt of dress, who staggered across the sill, bearing a great burden over his broad shoulder. That burden was the inert body of another man, almost as large as the first, and even wilder in appearance. For his hanging head lolled limply between the erect giant's shoulder blades; and from his bearded lips blood seeped in a crimson froth.

WITHOUT a word the big man crossed the room and eased his burden down on the narrow cot that stood against the wall. The wounded one stirred, moaning faintly, and Nell saw that his breast was soaked with blood. Then the big man turned deliberately to face her, and instantly she knew that these were the sinister eyes that had looked out at her from countless reward posters scattered over the countryside.

"You—you're Kootenay Ike!" she gasped involuntarily.

The burly outlaw bowed with exaggerated courtesy. "At your service, ma'am. And this"—a sweep of his huge hand indicated the wounded man on the cot—"is my brother, Ralph. You'll have to excuse him for not bein' able to acknowledge the introduction."

"But why are you here?" Nell cried out, then bit her lip as she recalled that her father was in the next room. Whatever happened, she must meet the situation in such a way as not to excite the old man. In his condition, a shock might easily prove fatal.

"Why?" Kootenay Ike echoed. "Because my brother needs attention, ma'am. There was the little business of a bank robbery over at the Ferry this mornin', and Ralph

got plugged. I blasted the brains out of the pasty clerk that shot him," he grated in remembered rage, "and got Ralph out of town. Then, happenin' to know there was a saw-bones visitin' this place regular, I brought him here. I propose waitin' here till the medico comes."

"But that's madness!" she protested. "They'll find you here!"

"Who'll find us?" he challenged. "Who would think of lookin' for us here—in the home of a man whose dogies we've rustled?" He chuckled evilly at the irony of it. "I spooked our horses off into the brush, so they won't give us away. And I covered my tracks to this joint. There ain't no use argyin', sister. We're waitin' for the doctor. And while we're waitin', you'd best give me a hand with Ralph, here."

He turned abruptly to the wounded man, stripping the crimsoned shirt from his uncouth chest. Feeling faint, Nell went to the kitchen, returning with a basin of hot water, a wash cloth, towels. However unwelcome the presence of the outlaws here, humanity demanded that she at least do what she could to alleviate the wounded one's suffering. And it would be best, for her father's sake, to avoid friction by following Kootenay Ike's instructions, in so far as possible.

They bathed Ralph Coons's wound—a ragged bullet hole that went clean through, Nell knew, to the lungs. While they were bandaging it tightly, the outlaw's eyes opened and his lips moved in a dumb request. Kootenay Ike saw the pitcher of milk on the table, poured a grass brim-full, and held it to Ralph's lips. The outlaw took a few gulps and lurched forward, coughing, bringing bloody foam to his lips. Then his body went limp, and they laid him back, unconscious again.

"He's bad hit," breathed Kootenay Ike. "When will that saw-bones be here, sister?"

"Thursday," Nell told him, through tight lips. "Day after tomorrow."

Kootenay Ike cursed. "Too damn long to wait. Ain't there any way of gettin' him here sooner?"

"Not unless you go to town after him," Nell said. "Or let me go."

He peered at her narrowly.

"Don't like either of your plans, sister. Too risky. Mebbe Ralph can hold out. Anyway, we stay here." He came to his feet restlessly. "How about a bit to eat, sister? And a smile!"

He chuckled her boorishly under the chin. Flushing hotly, she turned once more toward the kitchen. From the tail of her eye she saw the renegade pour himself a glass of milk and gulp it down greedily.

WHEN she returned with a cold snack to set before the famished outlaw, she heard a stir of movement from the darkened bedroom. Old Shad was calling throatily.

"Nell!"

"Who's that?" The outlaw's voice was a suspicious hiss, his hand on the butt of his gun.

"My father," said Nell softly. "He's helpless—and harmless to you. Do nothing to excite him, please! He couldn't stand it."

With a surly grunt, Kootenay Ike sank into a chair at the table and poured himself another glass of milk. But his gaze never left Nell Thornycroft until the darkness of the other room blotted out her form.

The girl found old Shad half sitting in his bed, his hollow eyes straining toward the lighted doorway of the living room.

"Who's in there, Nell?" he whispered hoarsely. Evidently he had been asleep when the outlaws had come; but, waking subsequently, had realized that there was something amiss.

To spare him, Nell lied swiftly. "A pair of greenhorn deer hunters, dad. One of 'em got careless and shot himself in the leg. I've told them they could stay here till Doc Garner comes."

"Lot of extry work for you," the old man fretted. Groaning, he settled back among the covers. "Gimme some more of that medicine, girl. This pain in my chest is plain hell."

She gave him the medicine, her face a mask of sorrow and pity. Old Shad seemed to sink into a deep sleep. Softly the girl stepped back into the other room. Kootenay Ike looked quickly up from the food he was wolfing.

"I'm going to bed," Nell announced. "If you need anything for your brother, just knock." She moved to close the door.

But Kootenay Ike was on his feet.

"Wait a minute, sister," he commanded gruffly.

Snatching up the lamp, he brushed past her, into the little bedroom. His shifting glance probed the walls, the ceiling. Satisfied that there was no door opening to the outside, he nodded.

"O. K., sister. Don't try sneakin' out any windows. I'll be listenin'. Well—sweet dreams!"

He lurched toward her suddenly, and she shrank away from the feel of his breath on her face. Kootenay Ike gave her a curious glance, shrugged his massive shoulders, blood-stained where the wounded man had lain, and swaggered on into the living room. Nell Thornycroft whisked the door shut behind him,

and leaned against it, half sobbing. There was no key.

No further sound came from the living room. After a while Nell, somewhat quieter, moved softly across the room to her bed. She did not undress, but lay down fully clothed, pulling a single blanket over her, staring with wide eyes into the darkness. From the tumble-down barn came the dismal sound of the red cow's bawling. Nell pressed tight palms against her ears. Almost she wished she had never brought the red brute home. But old Shad did enjoy the milk; and it seemed as if this pair of outlaws appreciated it, too. Milk from the cow whose calf they had stolen! Odd, that. She sank into a fitful doze.

ALMOST instantly, it seemed, she was awake. The door to the living room was opening softly, letting in a shaft of yellow light. She lay motionless, feigning sleep. Through half-closed lids she saw the shaft of light broaden, become a rectangle; and in that lighted space Kootenay Ike's burly figure loomed, statuesque. She felt his eyes upon her, gripped herself to suppress a scream. It seemed that she held her breath for an eternity, while Kootenay Ike stood there like some horrible creature in a dream. Then the door closed again silently, and Nell heard the sound of the outlaw's heavy body settling into a chair by his wounded brother's bedside. Her breath came then, in a long-drawn, quivering sigh.

After that she lay sleepless, waiting dumbly for the dawn. She was out of bed at the first hint of daylight, slipping into the living room after a tentative knock on the door. Kootenay Ike stirred drowsily in his chair; the wounded outlaw's chest was still heaving faintly beneath the

blanket Nell had thrown over him the night before. She passed on into the kitchen, catching up the milk pail there.

Kootenay Ike had moved noiselessly to the door. His voice halted her.

"Where you goin', sister?"

"To milk," she informed him shortly. "Any objections?"

The renegade wagged his shaggy head. "None whatever. Only—don't try goin' any farther than the barn. I'll be watchin' from the window. We don't want you visitin' any neighbors for a few days yet."

"We haven't any neighbors." Nell spoke the bitter truth. "Besides, do you think I'd leave my father? He's at the point of death. He needs me every minute. Don't worry. You're holding the cards."

She went on to the barn, without further protest from the outlaw. But she knew he would be watching, watching every moment. Even if there were any one to fly to for help, she would have no chance to escape that surveillance. There were hopeless tears in her eyes as she pressed her face against the red cow's flank.

Kootenay Ike drank hungrily of the fresh warm milk when she returned, and forced some of it between his brother's feverish lips. Nell slipped into the bedroom to care for old Shad, noting with fresh alarm how hollow his cheeks were, how spare was his bony frame. But he, too, drank avidly of the milk, and thanked her dumbly with his leaden eyes.

The rest of that day was a nightmare to Nell. It seemed to her that both her father and Ralph Coons were sinking, slipping farther and farther over the inevitable brink of death. And with the ebbing of the life tide, her fear of Kootenay Ike increased. The bearded giant

stalked restlessly about the three small rooms of the ranch house, cursing much, an insane light kindling in his eyes. Twice he strode into the bedroom where Nell sat at her father's side, his roving gaze seeming to drink in every detail of the room and of the two in it. Always he ended his impetuous pacing at his brother's bedside, cursing because the doctor did not come.

The doctor would be there tomorrow, but there was little comfort for Nell in the thought. She doubted that there could be any help for her father, and all the white-haired little physician could do would not lessen the menace of Kootenay Ike's presence. For with the shaggy outlaw in the house, Nell was afraid—afraid.

IF only Bud Bailey would come! Bud, who loved her. Bud, with his forest man's clean muscles and nimble wits. With a sudden surge of pride, she knew that the tall young ranger could make himself master of this situation, of any situation. If he were only here! And to-morrow Bud's patrol route would bring him back to their rendezvous, a scant five miles from the Tumbling T.

But that five miles, Nell knew, might as well be five hundred. Bud would be disappointed not to find her at their wonted trysting place, but he would not be alarmed. She had not promised definitely that she would meet him; often it happened that she could not get away from her father's bedside, from her duties at the ranch house. Bud would wait for her to-morrow for an hour, perhaps; then, filled with regret at not having seen her, he would push on to the cabin on Fisher Peak to spend the night, rounding out his patrol. And five miles away Nell would be

a virtual prisoner in her own home, with two dying men to care for and another, all too dangerously alive, to guard against—with no aid save, perhaps, a white-haired little wilderness doctor, himself as helpless as she.

The first sharp yelping of the coyote chorus heralded the coming of dusk. For the hundredth time Nell's eyes roamed dully about the room, her mind vainly groping for some way out of this cul-de-sac. Her glance passed over her father's motionless body, lying so much like a dead man's on the bed; over the little table by the bedside, where lay the paper slip on which Doctor Garner had written directions for administering the medicines he had left; over the medicines themselves—the short green bottle, the tall brown one, the little vial of strychnine tablets that must be given so cautiously, when old Shad's heart threatened to fail. Nell's eyes focused on that little table array, and a sudden wild scheme unfolded in her mind. There might yet be a way!

She tiptoed to the door, making certain that Kootenay Ike had, for the moment, stepped outside. Then breathlessly she went about her preparations. In a very little while she was through. Her lips curved in the ghost of a smile as she heard the plaintive lowing of the red cow, out there in the barn. When, a few minutes later, she stepped out the kitchen door, milk pail in her hand, one of the medicine bottles was hidden in the bosom of her dress.

Nell was a little longer than usual at her milking that night. Perhaps that was because the red cow was giving more and more at each milking. There was better than a gallon of the foaming fluid in the battered pail when Nell made her way back

to the ranch house. But the medicine bottle was no longer in her bosom.

She was startled to see that Kootenay Ike was waiting for her, there in the dimly lighted kitchen. He followed her movements with an intent gaze; his venomous, slitted eyes were fathomless, inscrutable. With a little nervous gesture, she set the milk pail on the kitchen table, and turned to face the menacing outlaw.

And in that instant Kootenay Ike's six-gun leaped to his hand, and the pots on the rickety sheet-iron stove rattled to the reverberations of three thundering shots. Nell shrank back with a stifed cry, wondering what had caused this demoniac outburst. Slowly the gun smoke cleared away, and in the silence Nell heard an unexpected trickling, as of water. Then she saw that Kootenay Ike's three shots had riddled the pail on the table. From six round holes milk was spurting in a white cascade to the floor.

"Slick, ain't ye?" Kootenay Ike snarled. "But not quite slick enough. Thought you'd poison us, eh? Knowin' that me and Ralph drinks milk, you thought you'd poison us!"

His heavy hand caught Nell's shoulder, hurled her back against the wall. Her wide eyes never left his face. How had he suspected that?

"Thought you'd poison us!" the raging outlaw repeated. "But I was too smart for you. I noticed that there was three medicine bottles on the old coot's table before you went to the barn. There's only two now! You'd poison the milk for us, eh? I'd ought to pour it down your gullet!"

He glared about wildly, as if to carry out his threat. But the last of the milk had seeped out of the

punctured pail and was running in a soiled stream across the floor.

NELL knew that it would be useless to deny the charge. Dully she reached for the mop and cleaned up the mess. Then, under the renegade's glowering gaze, she prepared a supper of potato broth for the two suffering patients.

She did not attempt to sleep that night, but sat huddled disconsolately at her father's bedside. Old Shad seemed to have sunk into a coma; evidently he had not even heard the shots. Kootenay Ike kept close to his brother's side, as if fearing that Nell might seize some furtive opportunity to do him harm. For a time the red cow still belated her grief for her lost calf; but after a while even that sound ceased, and the silence of death settled over the house.

When the wan dawn came, Kootenay Ike, with a dire warning to Nell, snatched up a kettle and strode toward the barn. He would do the milking himself this morning, to make sure no murderous tricks were played. But he returned shortly, empty-handed, in a towering rage. The red cow had broken her rope sometime in the night, and, crashing through a weak place in the crumbling barn corral, had escaped to the hills. She was gone.

The morning passed slowly, a seemingly interminable age. In the early afternoon, Doctor Garner came. Nell let him in without a word, knowing that his keen little eyes under their gray thatch would take in the situation at a glance. Kootenay Ike met his gaze brazenly, in spite of the recognition that he knew to be inevitable.

"Wounded man here, doc," he said curtly. "Come have a look at him."

But Doctor Garner only gave the scowling outlaw a casual glance, and turned immediately toward old Shad's room. Nell followed him in, watched anxiously while he made his examination. He rose presently, his kindly eyes beaming; and with a sudden glad leap of her heart, Nell knew that her father was better.

A violent hand fell on the doctor's shoulder, and Kootenay Ike's voice boomed.

"You half-pint pill packer, get in here and do somethin' for my brother! If you don't, you'll have a sudden case of lead poisonin'—in your own carcass!"

Doctor Garner met the blazing malevolence of Kootenay Ike's eyes without flinching. Then, deftly shrugging the hand off his shoulder, he turned toward the living room.

His examination of Ralph Coons was brief but comprehensive. From it he rose to confront Kootenay Ike.

"My friend," he said quietly, "there isn't a chance. Your brother will be dead before night."

Kootenay Ike's face paled. Then the livid color came back with a rush. His unkempt beard bristled truculently as muscles knotted on his bulging jaw.

"Sawbones," he grated icily, "you keep him alive. If he passes out, before sundown or after, he won't go alone!"

The muzzle of Kootenay Ike's black gun came in line with Doctor Garner's heart. Watching from the bedroom door, Nell realized with a surge of horror that her old friend was doomed. Whether Ralph Coons lived or died, Doctor Garner would never leave that house alive. He knew too much now; all of them knew too much. What her own fate would be she could only conjecture.

But the white-haired little doctor, seemingly unperturbed, shrugged his

shoulders again and turned back to the wounded man. His bony old fingers moved deftly, cleansing the wound, probing for the bullet, applying sterilized dressings. From time to time Coons moaned faintly.

KOOTENAY IKE'S eyes were always on the little doctor's face as the afternoon wore on; the black gun lay balanced on his corded knee. Not for a moment did Nell doubt that, should Ralph's faint breathing cease, there would be two corpses rather than one in that room in the next instant.

Shadows grew longer as the slow sun dropped. Serrated shadows of the pines, the blunt, engulfing shadows of the crags, crept ominously closer, like the inexorable approach of death. The afternoon was going, going. And Doctor Garner had said that before the dusk, Ralph Coons would die.

Unable to bear inaction, Nell rose and went to the window, raising her eyes in mute supplication to the darkening peaks. Miles away up there, lost to her sight in the brooding forest, Bud Bailey was perhaps sitting his tall sorrel even now, waiting for her at their trysting place. Was it possible that he could ride on, unknowing, and leave her to an unguessed fate? Her eyes closed tightly, and tears ran down her wan cheeks. If Bud would only come—if he would only come quickly!

Into the last notch between the craggy peaks the sun dropped. Dusk poured down the draws like a tangible tide. Half afraid to look, Nell turned slowly back toward the cot where Ralph Coons lay. Dusk had come. Would the wounded outlaw still be alive?

With a quick catching of her breath, she saw that his chest was heaving faintly. Kootenay Ike

hitched his chair forward, closer to his brother, closer to the gray doctor whose finger tips were on the failing pulse. The outlaw's eyes glittered in the fading light; the black gun was gripped now in his hairy hand. With a shudder, Nell brought her eyes back to the wounded man's form. Then a clammy grip tightened about her heart.

Ralph Coons was no longer breathing.

Wildly she stared, then, at Kootenay Ike. But the burly outlaw did not know; he did not know, yet. His eyes were still glued on Doctor Garner's face, watching craftily for any telltale sign. But it was a good poker face, the doctor's. He sat calm, impassive, holding that limp wrist lightly, as if the lifeblood still coursed through the clogging veins beneath his finger tips. Doctor Garner could be a good actor, when his life, and more, were at stake.

Nell Thornycroft's nerves snapped then. She screamed; she could not help it. Kootenay Ike gave her one swift glance, and Doctor Garner, knowing the game was up, lunged across the dead man's body, striking at the outlaw's gun hand.

But the doctor hadn't a chance. With a choking bellow of rage, Kootenay Ike lurched backward, got to his feet. There was a dull gleam of lethal steel as his gun jerked back in line.

But he didn't shoot. Another gun flamed first, from outside, from the shadows. A windowpane shattered with a harsh jangling sound, and Kootenay Ike's gun hand wavered. Then something immensely larger than a bullet hurled itself at the window, crashed through to the inside. Nell Thornycroft cried a name wildly, as a man, her man, picked himself up groggily from the floor. Bud Bailey had come!

Faced with this real menace, Kootenay Ike tried desperately to raise his gun. But something was the matter with his gun hand. He couldn't realize that Bud Bailey's snap shot through the window had smashed his right elbow. He tried, then, to shift the gun to his left hand. And in that instant Bud's hurtling body struck him.

IT was like a battle of giants, that fight in the dusk. Nell and Doctor Garner flattened themselves against the wall, straining their eyes toward that dimly flailing tangle of arms and legs, not daring to intervene for fear of inflicting injury upon the wrong man in the confusion. There were breathtaking moments when it seemed that Bud had the upper hand, that he might end the desperate combat with a single devastating blow; other moments, fraught with dread, when Kootenay Ike was top man, savagely striving to crush the life from Bud's wiry form with his superior weight and brute strength. Both men seemed to have lost or forgotten their guns. It was man to man, a struggle to the death.

But the fierce strife came to an end presently, as all things must do. And it was Bud Bailey who came to his feet at last, and Kootenay Ike who lay still, his great body a formless blot on the murky floor.

Nell Thornycroft made her way blindly to Bud's arms then, and sobbed against his breast. After an interval, Doctor Garner said:

"Lucky thing you happened in, Bailey."

Bud managed a shaky chuckle. "Wrong, doc. It wasn't luck; it was headwork on the part of Nell. I didn't just happen in, you see. She sent for me!"

"Eh? Sent for you?" Doctor

Garner suspected he was being "joshed." "And whom did she send? A little bird?"

"No," Bud denied. "She sent a cow!"

It was too much for Doctor Garner. He sat down abruptly, in the most convenient chair.

"Oh, Bud!" Nell was saying. "It worked! It worked! I knew that if the red cow ever got loose, she'd go back to the clearing where she last saw her calf. And I knew that you'd be near that spot this very day! So I wrote you a note saying that Kootenay Ike was here, and I emptied one of dad's medicine bottles, and I stuffed the note in the bottle. Then when I went to milk last night, I tied the bottle around the red cow's neck with binder twine. And I fixed it so that she could escape!"

"And when I rode up to our rendezvous to-day, I heard the cow bawling," Bud took up the tale. "Investigating, I found her there with the bottle containing your note around her neck. I caught her, read the message, and came as quickly as I could. If you hadn't screamed just when you did, Nell, I might not have acted swiftly enough. Thank Heaven you did!"

"Kootenay Ike never suspected," gloated Nell. "He thought I poured the medicine in the milk to poison him. Now we've got them—he and Ralph, too. And dad is better! And—and——"

"And we can be married!" Bud Bailey fairly lifted her from her feet, smothering any further words with a masterful kiss.

Chuckling softly, Doctor Garner tiptoed away, into the bedroom, where old Shad Thornycroft was stirring wakefully on the bed that he would soon be leaving—to go to Spokane, and renewed health.

Interesting And True

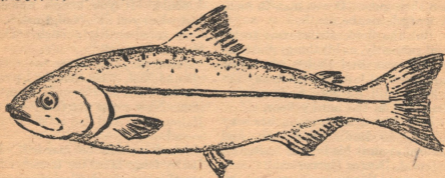
By H. FREDRIC YOUNG



THE FOOT OF THE SNOWSHOE RABBIT GROWS AN ABUNDANT AMOUNT OF HAIR IN WINTER, ENABLING THE ALREADY ENORMOUS FOOT TO PASS OVER SOFT SNOW WITHOUT SINKING DOWN. FOOT OF ORDINARY RABBIT AT UPPER RIGHT.



E. C. DOWDEN, FARMER OF WHITING, IOWA, STILL FOLLOWS THE ANCIENT CUSTOM OF PLOWING, PLANTING, AND DELIVERING HIS CROPS WITH A TEAM OF YOKED OXEN.



A PINT WHISKY FLASK (EMPTY!) WAS RECENTLY FOUND IN THE STOMACH OF A SALMON. KELSE, WASHINGTON.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar for any usable Western "Interesting and True" features which readers may send him in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Return postage must be included for suggestions found unsuitable.



A Serial

MAN COUNTRY

By GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

HAMILTON, self-styled boss of the camp of Granite Buttes, is beating up a sick youth, Will Decker, when June Talbot and Don Morrison interfere. June nurses the young man at a rooming house kept by a woman known as "Sage-hen," and Decker gives June an interest in a rich claim he has discovered in Big Horn Basin. While he goes to the outside for the winter, June plans to stay on the claim, at an isolated spot in the woods.

Morrison packs in supplies for the girl, on the way to the prospect being worked by himself and a partner, Scotty MacDougal. The cabin stocked with supplies is discovered by Rough Red Sanders, who returns

to Granite Buttes, where Hamilton schemes with him to jump Decker's claim. Learning of Rough Red's return, Morrison's suspicions are aroused. He takes the girl to Decker's cabin, saying that he will return to bring her to his place to spend Thanksgiving Day.

CHAPTER VII.

ROUGH RED LEARNS SOMETHING.

ROUGH RED had not forgotten how Hamilton had taken the cream of the Big Horn Basin placer ground and for that reason he told his employer only what he thought best to divulge regarding Decker's cabin or the things that

had been placed in there, which unquestionably belonged to June.

Hamilton's eyes blazed with wrath.

"You mean that Decker has sold out to the girl and that she's going to try to hold the claim against me?" he asked.

"That's it," Red replied, "but if you want me to help you, don't say anything to stop her. I have my own ideas."

Hamilton nodded understandingly. "I see; you think you'd like the girl for yourself."

"I ain't sayin' what I want yet," Red answered sullenly, "but if you want me to help, you keep out of it for the present. A week will be long enough."

To this Hamilton agreed, but he did not neglect to learn all he could about June's plans to spend the winter in holding possession of Decker's claim. This he accomplished by leaving Red's companion, Sorghum, at Sage-hen's with instructions to remember every bit of conversation he heard between June and either Decker or Morrison.

In order to placate Sorghum and to keep him away from the Pick And Gad, where Red feared he might talk too much, a quart of whisky was left beside Sorghum's bed. The result was that Hamilton was unable to place utter confidence in all of Sorghum's story. Of one thing Sorghum was very sure, and that was that June and Decker were in love with each other and that they were to be married when the robins came back in the spring.

This news Rough Red considered to be important to his plans, since, if Decker and June were going to marry, then Don Morrison might not take too great an interest in protecting June. Morrison was likely to prove troublesome when

aroused, and while Red was not averse to a fight, still he was not hunting for a scrap with Don, backed, as he was sure to be, by the keen-eyed old Scotch rifleman, Mac-Dougal. Not that Red thought the matter of jumping Decker's claim and frightening June out of the Basin as anything more than a mere pastime.

He had sized up the cabin carefully and already knew what he would do in order to get possession of it. The whole thing would be a mere lark, and the price Hamilton had agreed to pay for possession of the claim was sufficient to guarantee that Rough Red would not be easily discouraged. He and Sorghum used the credit Hamilton had arranged for them at the store to the full extent and were four days in hauling their winter supplies to the spot Red had chosen for a camp, about a mile from the Decker cabin, to the heart of the heavy spruce forest.

"We'll not build a house," Red told Sorghum. "A week or two will be all we'll be usin' this place, then we'll be movin' over to the cabin and livin' on the fat of the land until the snow goes off. Once inside the cabin, even if Morrison should decide to help the gal, we can laugh at him, as we needn't go outside unless we want to, and the logs are big enough to stop a rifle bullet."

For the reason that he did not expect to use the place long, the camp erected by the claim jumpers was a flimsy affair made by sticking four posts in the snow, lashing a framework of slender poles to them, and covering the skeleton with spruce branches. The snow inside the room was then removed and piled up on the outside against the brush, a blanket hung over a hole left for the doorway, and the camp was finished.

It was a gloomy place, no better than the den in which a bear hibernates, but Rough Red had no intention of staying here long, and so wasted little energy on comforts. As soon as their stuff was moved in, he and Sorghum scouted the country around Decker's in order to learn what preparations June had made for her protection.

IT was near sundown of the day before Thanksgiving when they munched silently through the forest and reconnoitered from the top of a hill about two hundred yards from June's home and fifty yards from the beaver pond, the unfrozen surface of which had assured Don that the spring would not freeze during the winter and shut off June's supply of water.

The two claim jumpers hid behind a dense thicket of small balsam fir and peered over into the clearing. At the moment June was splitting wood to be later carried into the cabin for the night. Rough Red watched her swing the gleaming ax freely over her shoulder and send it through a block of straight-grained aspen.

"Huh," he grunted. "She handles that ax like a timberjack. She's no tenderfoot."

"Purty, ain't she?" Sorghum added. "I sort of hate to bust up her fun like we're goin' to."

Rough Red glared at his partner.

"Don't you get soft now, or I'll throw you over a cliff and cash in on the deal myself."

"I ain't gettin' soft any," denied Sorghum. "Just because she's purty ain't goin' to stop me from bustin' her plans when the time comes."

Rough Red grunted his approval of Sorghum's sentiment and watched June curiously as she gathered up the wood she had split and

carried it into the cabin. At that moment the attention of both men was attracted to the long sides of a V in the blue above the forest. A faint *yonk-yonk* came to them. That June, too, had heard the geese was shown by her appearance in the dooryard, shading her eyes against the light reflected from the snow.

Rough Red divided his attention between the circling geese and the girl. There was no question but that the flock had been attracted by the open water of the beaver pond, and were going to alight there.

"I wish we'd brought a gun," Red remarked regretfully. "A fat goose would look good roasting in front of our fire."

"I could go back to camp and get my pistol," Sorghum proposed. "Them geese will settle on the beaver pond for the night."

"Wait a minute," Red ordered. "Now, what does the gal think she's goin' to do?"

June had disappeared inside the cabin and was now coming out, rifle in hand. Red laughed derisively.

"She thinks she can kill her a goose. Ain't that a joke?"

"Let's watch this. It's likely to be good," Sorghum proposed.

By this time the leader of the flock had satisfied himself that no danger lurked near the coveted water, and the geese were settling on curved wings over the tops of the spruce. June stood in the protection of the doorway watching. When the birds had settled on the water, June strapped on her snowshoes and slipped silently into the forest above the pond. Because of their greater elevation the claim jumpers could see every detail of the scene. The great black and gray birds were churning the water as they fed noisily on whatever the pond offered. The slender girl in boy's clothing,

moving silently from tree to tree, was keeping well out of sight of the game.

With the skill of an experienced hunter, June worked her way to within easy range of the feeding geese. The watchers heard a softly whistled note. Instantly every black head was up as high as the outstretched necks would permit. There came the sharp crack of a rifle, then the clicking of the locks as the lever worked, and a second report. Two enormous geese were flopping on the surface of the pond! Again June worked the lever, and as the leader of the flock steadied himself for a moment over the water, she fired again. The bird dropped in the snow by the water's edge.

Rough Red's eyes bulged. He swore under his breath.

"Three dead-center shots, one of 'em at a movin' target!"

Sorghum grinned. "Purty, ain't she?" he insisted.

Red made no answer. He was watching June as the girl broke a long, dry willow from a near-by clump and drew the two floating birds to the edge of the snow where she could reach them. He did not move or speak again until June had gathered up her game and carried it to the dooryard. Then he turned to Sorghum.

"Maybe we'd better build us a cabin after all," he proposed. "Something tells me that kid won't scare worth a darn."

UTTERLY unconscious that she had been spied upon, June carried her prizes into the cabin and laid them on the table. The joy of the true sportsman who has outwitted the craftiest of all feathered game gripped her. She danced a few steps, came

back and smoothed the soft, gray feathers on the breasts of the birds, examined the black heads with their pure-white markings, and then arranged the three, belly up, on her table. She had just stepped back to get a better view of the geese when a shadow darkened the door and she turned to see Don Morrison gazing anxiously at her.

"Are you all right?" he demanded. "What was the fast shooting about?"

June sprang toward the door, grabbed one of Don's hands impetuously, and led him into the room.

"See," she said, "my first game of the season!"

Don saw that one of the geese had been shot through the head, the second through the neck, and the third through the body.

"Three perfect shots," he praised. "Well, I guess you're too happy to care about my present."

"Your present?" asked June.

Don pointed outside to where a huge, shaggy dog sat in the dooryard, its pink tongue lolling out, while its brown eyes pleaded for admission to the cabin. June ran out and knelt beside the dog, taking it in her arms and burying her face in the silken fur.

"Oh, you blessed puppy," she cried. "You're the one thing I needed to make my outfit perfect." She turned to Don. "How did you know that I wanted a dog?" she demanded.

"Well, I just thought Mike would fit in here about right. A friend of mine raised him, and as he had two others, he sold me Mike."

June was so happy she couldn't think of words with which to thank Morrison. She was unconscious of again taking Don's hand and leading him inside, while Mike, having decided that his welcome was assured,

walked calmly in and stretched himself comfortably in front of the fireplace.

This time Don had brought his shelter tent and sleeping bag so that he could be comfortable outside, and early the next morning he guided June up the mountain and over the ridge. Mike was supremely happy. The crusted snow supported his weight, so that he could go where he pleased. He chased two snowshoe rabbits into a hollow log and kept June laughing at his foolish antics.

"Mike is perfect," she told Don. "I think he's the prettiest dog I have ever seen."

"He's smart all right," Don told her, "and at least no one can come around your cabin without his letting you know."

"Let's forget Hamilton and his men," June coaxed. "This is Thanksgiving Day and I never knew what it was to be really thankful before."

They were standing on top of the highest point of the ridge at the time. On either side swept the long white slopes stretching down to the dark-green blankets of spruce. Don yielded to the spirit of freedom inspired by the beauty of the wild land at their feet and pointed his skis down the long, gentle slope toward the Little Big Horn.

"All right," he agreed. "We've got a mile of perfect snow before us. A race—we'll play Mike is a wolf and that our lives are at stake."

Away they went with the frost crystals curving back from the points of their skis and the air rushing past them, causing their cheeks to purple and their hearts to beat faster. Don, because of his heavier weight, gained on June from the first. Behind them Mike yelped a call for them to wait, which caused

them both to yell laughing words of encouragement back to the dog. Down the slope and around the point of snow-laden spruce they sped like eagles dropping from the sky until they came out upon the level surface of the valley. Here they lost their momentum and slowed down to an easy stop.

June turned to wave encouragement to Mike, then back to smile up into Don's face.

"Oh, that was glorious!" she shouted. "Of all the sports, give me a pair of well-polished skis and miles of unbroken snow."

Morrison's eyes sparkled in sympathy with the girl's excitement.

"You're pretty near right," he said. "Folks that pass up the mountains in the wintertime miss a heap of fun."

Mike came up puffing, to throw himself on the snow and cast reproving glances at his friends, which brought forth more laughter. June went to him and knelt down.

"Forgive me, boy," she pleaded. "I'll not do such a trick as that again."

CHAPTER VIII.

AN EXCITING THANKSGIVING.

SCOTTY was waiting at the door of the cabin to meet June. "Welcome, lassie," he greeted cordially. "It's nae necessary to wait for an introduction. I've heard enuch about you from yon landlouser to make a book."

June shook hands, laughing at the same time back over her shoulder at Morrison who had followed her across the well-kept dooryard.

"You mustn't take Scotty too seriously, June," Don cautioned. "He's an awful liar."

"I can't believe that," June defended the older man, "but I hope the things you have said about me

did not include my playing out and having to be carried like a baby. I prefer to tell that myself."

"What's that?" Scotty inquired, then turning to Don, he asked: "Have you been holding out on me?"

Don colored slightly. "Oh, well, there's some things that are not necessary to tell."

June then told Scotty as much of the happenings of the trip as she thought best and was praised by the Scot as a "braw lassie," and when Don showed him two of the geese June had shot with a rifle, Scotty's heart was fully won.

"It's a great weepion, but how did you learn to use it?"

A sad smile twisted June's mouth, and hot tears sprang to her eyes which she made no attempt to conceal.

"My father taught me. We were pals," she explained. "I had no brothers or sisters, and he treated me as though I were a boy. I learned to shoot with a .22-caliber target rifle, first with a rest, then offhand, finally at moving targets, cans tossed into the air. I can snowshoe, ski, and throw a diamond hitch over a pack and cast a dry fly.

"It was because I knew how to live in the wilderness that I had the courage to tackle a winter's campaign in a mining camp. Don, here, was skeptical at first, but I believe he is beginning to admit that girls can do some things almost as well as a man."

The Scotchman's keen blue eyes glistened sympathetically. "That they can, dearie, and a girl that can bring down a gander like that one from the air with a rifle has little to fear from Hamilton or his men. But come in and sit while I get these fine bir-r-ds ready to roast. We'll have such a Thanksgiving dinner as no

city dweller in all the wor-ld could buy with money—fat bear steaks, roast goose, and a skink of whisky for an appetizer. Do you like apple dumplings?"

"I adore them," June answered him.

"Then you and Don visit while I get things started."

June was astonished at the permanency of the buildings and the care with which they had been constructed. The carefully selected logs had been peeled and fitted so neatly as hardly to require any chinking of the cracks between them. Sleeping quarters had been partitioned off from the main living room, a large, well-lighted kitchen had been added on the back side of the building, and beyond that was a shop and work-bench, above which many well-conditioned tools were neatly kept in loops of deerskin tacked to the wall.

Don saw that June was interested in the house, and took pride in showing her about.

"Come and see my barn," he proposed, and led the way through the shop to a long, low building capable of housing comfortably twenty head of stock. There were mangers made of straight, peeled spruce poles, and feed boxes hewed from solid blocks of wood. "Next summer," Don told her, "we will pipe the water from the spring into the house and put in a bathroom."

June praised the many conveniences about the place. "I don't understand," she ejaculated, "why you should build such a grand home. Prospectors usually build a one-man cabin like the one where I'm living. Never before have I seen a place like this for a temporary home."

"Well," Don explained, "it's like this. Scotty and I have both learned that money alone doesn't bring happiness. We have put down

several pits and know that there is an inexhaustible bar of fairly rich gravel on our claim. The country hereabouts is full of game, and the streams are well stocked with trout. We are making a permanent home. We will use the money we work out of the placer to improve the place.

"There will never be a road built in here on account of the narrow box canyon between here and the Big Horn, so we will always have to keep a pack string to bring stuff in to our home. In the summer my mules will fatten on the rich mountain grasses, and in the winter I will take them out to the Animas Valley haystacks."

"It's perfect," sighed June. "You should be the happiest man in the world."

Don made no reply to this remark. He feared to tell June that until two weeks ago he had placed that valuation upon himself, but that to-day he began to feel himself very poor.

They returned to the house and sat by the bright fire until Scotty announced that dinner was ready. The meal was all that he had promised it should be, and Scotty kept the young people laughing with his quaint remarks and well-digested philosophy of life. Toward evening Don escorted June back to her cabin and left her there, happier than she had been since the disaster that had robbed her of her beloved father and mother.

BECAUSE of the exhibition of marksmanship that Rough Red had witnessed, he hesitated to start the fight which he was convinced would follow any action on his part toward jumping the claims. He had sat in the smoke-filled brush hut most of Thanksgiving Day trying to think up some

plan by which he might secure possession of the Decker cabin. That some one was going to get hurt, Red was convinced, and with a fast and accurate rifle shot behind the walls of the cabin it was not difficult to figure out who it was likely to be.

Like most men who depend upon their physical strength for defense, Red was almost superstitiously afraid of firearms. Had he known of June's absence at Don's camp, he would not have hesitated to take possession of the place and defy her and her helpers to get him out.

Among stampedeers occupancy of a claim was considered to be more than the legal nine points, and with Hamilton's power behind him Red had little fear of being ousted, once he had gained possession of the claim and driven June away. His plan up to the moment when he had seen June's prowess with a rifle had been to frighten the girl into deserting the cabin, and when she went for help, calmly to move in and laugh at her attempts to dislodge him.

Hamilton would see to it that the miners' committee gave June no assistance, and by the time spring came, Rough Red would be so well established in ownership of the claim that Decker and the girl must see the uselessness of any further attempt to regain their stolen property.

Rough Red knew nothing of Don having brought a dog to June's camp, and as the evening shadows fell on Thanksgiving Day, he began preparations to try the only plan in which he had any confidence, that of frightening June by means of uncanny sounds about the cabin. Red was by no means sure that this would work, but he had not been able to think up any safe way of gaining possession of the cabin, and at least there was no danger in go-

ing to the ridge beyond the beaver pond and making unearthly noises on the horse fiddle he had constructed out of an oil can and baling wire.

June sat by the fireplace late that night thinking of the many things she had learned during the day about the life and character of Don Morrison and Scotty. Mike slept beside her snoring lustily.

The cheap nickel clock on the mantelpiece pointed to ten o'clock, and June was about to undress when she heard a low, sighing wail like that of some person in distress. She went to the door and peered out along the open spaces between the trees. The moon was nearly full, and every detail of the forest could be seen as clearly as in broad daylight. Mike partly raised up and twisted his head to watch his mistress, as if wondering why she should go to the door at this time of night.

Again came that low, tremulous wail, ending with a shriek as if some one were in terrible pain. Mike sprang up and rushed out into the moonlight. June ran after him and grabbed him by the collar.

"You mustn't go, Mike," the girl commanded. "That might be a panther."

Mike growled fiercely and looked off toward the ridge. He did not act scared, as he would have had the noise come from one of the big cats. June understood dogs. When again the sonorous noise sounded, she caught a slight metallic clink at the end of the note. "A horse fiddle," she thought, suppressing a giggle. "Some of the miners from the camp have learned that a woman is here alone and have planned a serenade calculated to scare me into fits."

She held on to Mike's collar and led the dog back into the house and

shut the door. Again came the mournful wail, now only funny to her. The spirit of mischief, always ready to burst forth with June, seized her. She reached for her snow pacs. "I wonder if some practical joker hasn't overplayed his hand," she thought. "I'm something of a kidder myself."

Hastily donning her outdoor clothes, June crammed the magazine of her rifle full of cartridges, tied a rope into Mike's collar and put on her snowshoes. Then she went out, turning quickly around the corner of the cabin and thus escaping unseen to the forest at the rear.

"You sound like a lovesick moose," scoffed June at the intruder. "You'll sing another tune in a minute."

She crept noiselessly among the trees, keeping well out of sight until she reached the ridge about a hundred yards to the east of where Rough Red squatted behind the screen of balsam. Here she stopped for a moment to rest, then turned Mike loose and a moment later sent a bullet screeching through the tops of the small trees. The effect was immediate and most satisfying to June.

A huge figure sprang from behind the balsams and went leaping off like a gigantic kangaroo, dodging behind the trunks of the trees, with Mike yelping behind him. Bullet after bullet June sent into the trees above the fleeing man, clipping twigs and small branches from the trees to fall on Red's shoulders, and still further increase his difficulties.

When Mike's howls had ceased, June sat down in the snow and laughed till the tears rolled down her cheeks, never dreaming that the affair was anything more than a rather poorly executed practical joke. She waited until Mike came

back, out of breath, from his chase, and the two returned to the cabin.

Rough Red burst into his own camp bleeding from a dozen cuts and bruises incurred in his mad rush to avoid being bitten by Mike. Had he stopped and spoken to the dog, he would have soon learned that Mike was nothing more than a good-natured, playful puppy.

"What happened?" demanded Sorghum.

"Plenty," snapped Red. "Get up and heat some water. I'm shot full of holes. I'll have to go to Granite Buttes and get stuff to rub on 'em."

Sorghum immediately got up, rebuilt the fire, and put water in the blackened camp kettle.

"Who was there?" he asked.

"I don't know how many there was of 'em," Red answered, "but from the number of shots I'd say there was a gang, and they've got a pack of hounds. This job is gettin' tougher the farther we go."

Whatever Red's estimate of June's defense might have been, he actually did leave for Granite Buttes next morning, glad of an excuse to visit the Pick And Gad and purchase a fresh supply of liquor. The jug they had brought in on the last trip had in some unaccountable manner disappeared. Half an hour after Red left, Sorghum produced the missing jug from its hiding place in a hollow log and proceeded to get gloriously drunk.

CHAPTER IX.

DISASTER.

WHEN June awoke next morning, she no longer looked upon the affair of the night before as a joke. The more she thought of Don's warnings that Hamilton would not give up his efforts to get possession of

Decker's claim without a fight, the more certain she became that there had been an attempt to frighten her into deserting her post. She pondered the matter while she cooked breakfast and tidied up her cabin, finally reaching the decision that she must let Don know of the adventure at once and obtain his counsel.

Shortly after sunup she took her rifle and climbed the trail leading over the mountain to the camp of her friends. Mike, happy over a second trip so soon, scouted the country industriously on either side of the trail. It was nearly noon when June reached Don's place. Her heart sank with disappointment and growing apprehension when she found the house locked up and neither of the miners to be found in the shaft on the bar below.

June searched for paper on which she might write a note to Don, but could find none. With her sheath knife she smoothed off a piece of white aspen wood and printed on it with the lead of a soft-nosed bullet:

DON: Please come quick. JUNE.

This message she stuck in the latch of the front door where any one entering the room would be sure to see it, and where an inquisitive pack rat discovered it ten minutes after June had hurried back up the trail toward her own camp. A smooth piece of wood, anything of an unusual shape has attractions for pack rats. This one ran up the corner between the door and the jamb, seized the bit of wood, and carried it away to his nest in the loft over the barn.

A feeling of impending trouble was borne in upon June as she skied into the clearing in front of Decker's cabin. The door stood open. She distinctly remembered having closed

it and fastened the latchstring securely, thinking at the time that no porcupine or other forest marauder could get in to injure her things. Mike had already run across the doorward and was sniffing suspiciously about the room when June entered.

For a moment the magnitude of the disaster that had befallen her caused her to stagger as though she had received a physical blow. The cabin was empty! Not one article of June's outfit or a scrap of food remained on the shelves. She looked upward at the ridgepoles and saw that the sacks which had hung there had been taken.

June sat down on a block of wood near the doorway. What was she to do? To stay here without food or blankets was out of the question. She might go back to Don's cabin, but there was no certainty that the men would return that night. June had no way of knowing where they had gone or how long a time might elapse before they returned. Don had said nothing the day before about a contemplated trip, so whatever had caused them to be absent from the cabin must have come up unexpectedly. Seek as she would for some refuge, June could see none except to mush out to Granite Buttes. She had eaten nothing since breakfast and she doubted if she would be able to cross the barrens without food.

Her attention was attracted to Mike who had discovered the tracks of the man who had committed this outrage and, remembering the experience of the night before, was working out the back trail. The sight gave June renewed energy. She would follow this man and make him bring back her outfit. Mike could trail him, and she had her rifle. That the wrecker of her camp

and the player of the horse fiddle were not the same man did not occur to June. She had bluffed this man once, she could do it again, only this time it was far from a joking matter.

STEALING an outfit in midwinter is a crime punishable by death among forest dwellers, and June set out, following Mike, determined to shoot the marauder, if necessary, in order to regain her property. Mike led her down past the beaver pond, where she found the plain, well-broken trail made by Rough Red and Sorghum on their several trips to the ridge. June at once read the story told by the tracks.

"The dirty sneak," she muttered, "he has been spying on me for days, watching for a chance to do this trick. Probably he had it figured out last night that I would go over the ridge this morning to consult with Don about that affair of the horse fiddle and give him the chance he has been waiting for."

The farther June went along the trail the angrier she became, and when at last she reached the hut where the two men had camped, she was fully prepared to do battle. She stooped down and peered into the evil-smelling place.

"Hey," she called.

No answer. A pile of fat pitch pine lay beside the door. June lighted a highly inflammable stick of the wood and tossed it as far to the rear as she could, expecting to see her enemy asleep on the bunk. She was astonished at the result. The spruce boughs of which the hut had been built were now dry and full of turpentine. There was a flash of flame and a burst of smoke. In ten seconds the interior of Rough Red's camp was a furnace, smoke rolling

up through an opening at the back, and flames reaching hungrily toward the branches of overhanging trees.

June stood paralyzed with horror at the thought of a forest fire, actually missing a heartbeat or two as her mind grasped the enormity of the disaster.

"Oh, oh, the forest," she screamed. "Help, help!"

She started to run, caught the toe of her snowshoe, and sprawled in the snow. Mike came to her, licking her face in the only manner he knew by which to offer comfort. As she struggled to untangle her rackets, the heat from the fire was causing chunks of snow to fall from the branches and extinguish the flames. But Rough Red's camp was doomed, and the girl had suddenly laid the foundation for the reputation of having whipped Rough Red at his own game, driven him to Granite Buttes for medicine to dress his wounds and then burned him out.

Now that she could think, June realized how foolish she had been not to have secured what food was in the boxes in the hut. She tried to go toward the camp, but the fierce heat drove her away. Defeated by her own lack of self-control, June turned away. She didn't know what to do. She had her rifle and might find a snowshoe rabbit which she could roast. Fortunately there was plenty of wood cut and piled against the side of her cabin. She could build a big fire and sit by it through the long, dreary hours of the night.

Perhaps Don might find the message she had left for him and come. Anyway, there was nothing else to do but go back to her looted cabin. Weary and sick at heart, she stumbled up the trail to the lower end of the beaver pond. Mike had run

on before her. Suddenly he began to bark furiously, and June hurried forward, hoping the dog had treed some game that she might kill for food. A flock of bighorn sheep sometimes came to the spring for water. Perhaps Mike had cornered one.

June rushed through the snow toward the spot where she could see Mike circling about a place where the wind had whipped the snow from around the base of a tree. There was something on the ground, something that lay huddled in a horrible, ungainly shape. June stopped and slipped the safety from her rifle. The dark object was the body of a man.

CHAPTER X.

SORGHUM'S STORY.

PANIC seized June for a moment, then her courage gained the ascendancy, and she walked closer to the dread object. A saying of her father came to her memory. "I'm not afraid of a dead killer," he had told June; "it is the live ones that are dangerous."

As she came nearer to the tree beside which the man lay, June saw something which sent her hopes mounting. At the edge of the bare ground stood her own toboggan, on which had been piled a heterogeneous mass of blankets, dishes, cooking utensils and sacks.

"My things!" ejaculated June. "Now, what happened to the thief?"

Emboldened by the sight of her outfit, she approached more coolly until she stood beside the man.

"Mike, shut up," June ordered. "You are making the echoes ring with your barking."

The old felt hat pulled down over the man's face looked familiar. June lifted it with the muzzle of her rifle and tipped it over. The terror

in her heart faded into disgust mingled with sympathy.

"Sorghum, drunk as a lord!" she ejaculated. "Well, if you stole my things, you may just lie there and freeze. I won't disturb you."

June picked up the drag rope on the toboggan and threw her weight on it. Mike, more in play than from any desire to help, grabbed hold and pulled, too. The toboggan moved a little. June exerted all her strength and was able to work it out into the broken path, and in a few minutes was unloading it in front of the cabin. She had seen a pile of boxes and sacks near the spruce and decided to get all her stuff moved to the cabin while Sorghum was unconscious.

It was hard, back-breaking work, but June was determined not to give up. If she could recover all her supplies as well as her outfit, she might barricade herself inside the cabin and stand a considerable siege. She kept her rifle near her and was constantly on the alert, expecting every moment to see a companion of Sorghum's come into the clearing in search of the intoxicated man. By sundown June had reestablished herself inside the cabin, carried in sufficient wood to last several days, and felt comparatively safe.

Sorghum still slept. As far as June could judge, he had not changed his position during the afternoon. A nearly empty jug stood within reach of his hand. This June decided she would take, since, if Sorghum continued drunk, he would freeze to death before morning. Just before dark she went out again to where the man lay.

"It's nothing less than murder to leave him here," she thought, "but what can I do with him? I certainly do not want a drunken man in my cabin, especially one who has shown

that he came here to force me to leave."

The temperature had fallen rapidly since sundown, and June was well aware that a man in Sorghum's condition would die from exposure before morning. She walked slowly back to the cabin over the trail she had packed down by her repeated trips with the toboggan. It had been a hard day, and June was about exhausted from fatigue and mental strain.

"Anybody would say that I'm a fool," she told Mike, "but I'm going to roll Sorghum onto the toboggan and bring him over here. I've got a gun and if he tries to make trouble, I'll shoot him. Anything would be easier than letting him die out here."

IT was quite a job to roll the limp body over upon the toboggan and even a harder one to drag him into the dooryard. Here an insurmountable obstacle presented itself. June could not pull the toboggan up the one step leading into the cabin, and it was equally impossible to roll Sorghum through the door.

"I can't drag him in, and he won't go sideways, nor end over end, so there's nothing to do but wake him up."

The girl suited her action to her decision and threw a bucketful of icy water over Sorghum's head and neck. He raised up, coughing and gasping.

"Whizzer matter? Who turned the river onto me?" Sorghum demanded.

"I did," June replied, standing with her rifle in hand ready to defend herself in case Sorghum should show fight.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" Sorghum

sighed and settled back on the cold ground.

June was out of patience. She had known Sorghum when he roomed at Sage-hen's. She suddenly lost all fear of the man and, walking up, she placed a sharp kick in his ribs.

Sorghum grunted. "Hey, I'm no mule."

"You're worse than a mule," June stormed angrily, "getting drunk and stealing my outfit. What did you do that for?"

Sorghum opened his eyes and stared at June, his eyelids flecking humorously.

"Did I do that?" he asked.

"You know perfectly well you did. You're not so drunk that you can't remember."

"Musht be some mishtake," Sorghum grumbled thickly. "Maybe it was somebody else, Don Morrison or Rough Red or——"

"Don't be silly. You know very well you did it, and then you drank a whole lot of whisky and went to sleep with your head pillowed on my war bag."

Sorghum felt of the frozen ground under his head.

"Where's the battle sack now?" he asked.

June turned away so that Sorghum should not see her laughing. It was impossible to remain angry with a man who persisted in acting like a clown. June took Sorghum by the hand and pulled him into a sitting posture.

"Now you get up and go in the house. I'll make you a strong cup of coffee, and as soon as you can think straight, you can start for town."

"I've got a camp out here," Sorghum explained.

"You mean you did have a camp," June corrected. "I burnt

you out and I could have killed you or left you to freeze. Now, come on; get up."

"I'll tell you," Sorghum proposed. "I'll sit here and catch the house as it comes by."

"Sorghum, if you don't get up, I'll throw another bucket of water on you," June threatened.

After several comical failures Sorghum managed to get into the cabin and sprawl on a box. He leaned against the wall and eyed June as she put coffee in the pot and set the vessel on the coals. She realized he was no more to be feared than Mike.

June decided to worm the information that she desired out of him, but she knew enough about drunken men to realize that sometimes it was more difficult to draw a secret from a man in Sorghum's condition than from a sober man. She watched her guest closely and saw that the smell of the coffee intrigued him. She remembered that Sorghum had mentioned Rough Red.

"I'll call Rough Red to come to supper," she suggested.

"He couldn't hear you," Sorghum gave the very explanation she wanted. "He went to Granite Buttes this morning. You shot him up last night, so he had to have medical 'tensh. He went after some rub-on."

"Oh, I see." June's manner was very friendly. She held a cup of coffee near Sorghum while she ladled sugar into the cup. She had figured out why he had been nicknamed "Sorghum." "Say when," she ordered.

"I take a heap of sugar," the man admitted.

"When will Rough Red be back?" she asked, putting more sugar into the cup.

"I dunno, day after to-morrow,

nex' week, maybe not till Christmas."

"You are working for Hamilton?" June held the coffee close to Sorghum's nose and dipped a spoon into the syrupy mass.

"How'd you know that? Did Red tell you?"

"Taste this and see if it's sweet enough."

"M-m, jus' right. Say, you're a swell cook."

"I'll broil you a fine venison steak," June bribed him, "if you'll tell me all about what you intended to do—to me."

The comfort of the warm room, the sweetened coffee, and the prospect of a good meal mellowed Sorghum.

"Sure, I'll tell you," he began. "Hamilton is goin' to jump this claim. You can't stop him. He figures that Morrison and MacDougal will help you, but he's fixed it so they'll have all they can do to defend their own place. He hired me and Red to come up here and scare you so that he could get possession and take the claim without any trouble—but he'll get it one way or another. Hamilton is the whole thing in the Basin, that's why Red and me were goin' to go away in the first place."

An idea came to June. Already she had learned enough so she could piece together Hamilton's scheme.

"You needn't tell me any more to-night, Sorghum. I'll fix you a bed here before the fire. To-morrow we'll talk more about this deal."

That night June did not sleep confidently as she had on the night Don had remained at the camp, but sat up in the bunk fully dressed, Mike cuddled close beside her and her loaded rifle within easy reach. What sleep she got was by reclining against the wall at her back. The events

of the day had awakened her to the determination of Hamilton and the extremes to which he would go to carry his point.

The part of Sorghum's story that alarmed her most was the statement that Hamilton intended to attack Morrison and his partner also in order to keep them from helping June.

"Well, anyway," she thought as she stretched herself wearily on the blankets, "I've won the first and second rounds with Hamilton and while he's getting a bite, I'll get a mouthful."

CHAPTER XI.

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG.

THE explanation of Don's absence from his camp on the morning of June's trip there was that when he had returned Thanksgiving evening, after taking June to her own cabin, he had found Scotty greatly disturbed by a letter that had been sent by a special runner from Russell & Russell, Morrison's attorneys, informing him that the immediate presence in town of both the partners was imperative.

"A man by the name of Jabe Jenkins, of whom we have never heard, has filed a contest against the recording of your claim," their lawyer had written. "I believe we will be able to substantiate your claim, that the ground is more valuable for placer purposes than for the timber on it, but the time to head off an adverse ruling by the land office is in the beginning. Otherwise a great deal of time and expense would be required in order to have the decision set aside. I strongly urge you to come to Durango at once. In all probability you can attend to the matter in a few hours, but it must not be neglected."

Morrison's first thought was for June. He hesitated to go away without letting her know, and yet at the same time she would be better content and feel less anxiety if she supposed that he and Scotty were at their camp. He decided that they should leave at once, travel at night and catch the early stage from Granite Buttes in the morning. Scotty was strongly in favor of this action, and as soon as supper was eaten, the partners made the cabin secure against visitors and left in company with the runner who had brought the letter from the lawyer.

Such contests as this are common in new camps, where placer gold has been discovered, after the timber and stock interests have become established, and are usually quickly settled—the ability to produce gold dust or nuggets, accompanied by an affidavit of the prospectors that the metal had been extracted from the land in question being sufficient proof.

With nearly five hundred dollars' worth of gold that had been washed from their bar, Scotty and Morrison had little worry about being able to prove the worth of their claim. The main annoyance was in being forced to make the trip, which would require a week's absence. Scotty rather welcomed the opportunity to visit old cronies in the town, but Don was becoming more and more interested in June, and his thoughts were upon her as he pointed his skis down through the moonlit spaces between the spruce and shot away at high speed, with Scotty and the messenger following close behind him.

The three reached Granite Buttes before daylight and went into the restaurant for their breakfasts. In spite of the hour Hamilton was

seated at one of the tables at the rear. Don wondered why Hamilton should be up so early, but quickly concluded that he, too, was going to the outside on the same stage. A mild suspicion came to the miner that Hamilton was in some way connected with this attack on the title. He leaned over and spoke to Scotty in a low voice.

"Do you suppose that Hamilton is behind this scheme?"

Scotty shook his head. "No," he answered dogmatically, "not a chance. Hamilton has his hands full in the Big Horn, he'd nae be likely to bother with sma' fish like us."

"All the same," Don argued, "I've a hunch that he had something to do with the contest being filed against us."

"You're a wee bit tired and look-in' for trouble where none is," Scotty insisted. "You'll feel better when you get your breakfast under your belt."

FOR once Scotty's judgment was at fault, and Don's suspicions did not quiet. All day, as the sleigh slipped down the broad valley leading to the river, Don tried to think of some reason for Hamilton being up so early. The theory that he was going on the stage was exploded when the vehicle pulled out with but three passengers. Don had seen Hamilton standing just inside the Pick And Gad and felt certain he had been watching to make sure that Scotty and Morrison were actually leaving Granite Buttes.

The feeling that he had in some manner neglected a plain duty annoyed Don, but, search as he would, he was unable to discover the cause for this uneasiness. To get his mind off the growing anxiety, he turned his thoughts to the memory of the happy Thanksgiving Day that June

had spent with them. It was strange how clearly he could recall every detail of each successive picture—the color in June's cheeks as she and Don had climbed the mountain together, the mischief in her eyes as she outran Mike on the slope, the very curve of the breath rising from her lips into the frosty air as she laughed at the antics of the dog, her interest in Don's camp and his plans for the future.

Don sighed and wondered if he would find Decker in Durango. Decker had said he had a job there and would work until spring. He would return with the robins to his claim and to June. Don thought that if he had a girl like June, that nothing would tempt him to leave her, not all the gold in the world.

They were going up the only steep grade on the way to the outside; half a mile farther and the road would wind down the gentle slopes into the valley of the Animas. A sharp snap startled the passengers. The sleigh stopped with a jerk, while the horses plunged ahead, almost dragging the driver over the dashboard. The doubletrees had broken where the bolt fastened them to the tongue of the sleigh. There was nothing to be done but to fashion a new doubletree out of a piece of green wood. Because of his skill with an ax this job fell upon Scotty, and as Don had nothing to do in the meantime, he picked up the broken doubletree and examined the two ends. On the under side he found the marks of a hacksaw which had been used to cut through the iron plate that reinforced the wood. The timber itself had been cut nearly through by means of a thin, fine-toothed saw.

Don said nothing to the driver, but when, after an hour's delay, the repairs had been made and they

were again on their way, he showed the Scott the weakened doubletree.

"Huh," grunted Scotty. "We've been delayed just about long enough so that the land office will be closed and we can't do any business tonight."

"Which means that we'll have to stay over another day," Don remarked. "I tell you, Scotty," he argued, "the more I think of this thing the more convinced I become that this was a scheme to get us away from our claim, and that Hamilton is behind it—and I think I know why."

At the very moment when Don was voicing this suspicion to Scotty, the man he accused of plotting against them was sitting in the card room at the Pick And Gad listening to Rough Red's explanation of his failure to get possession of Decker's cabin. Hamilton's face was purple with suppressed rage.

"Do you, Rough Red, supposed to be the toughest two-fisted scrapper in the San Juan, expect me to believe that you have been bluffed by a slip of a girl that you could knock unconscious with a slap? Bah, there's some other reason; come across with the truth."

"Slappin' that girl would be like lightin' your pipe with nitro," Red answered. "I tell you, she's the slickest rifle shot I ever saw, and the only reason I'm here to tell you about what happened is that the trees were so thick that she couldn't get a bead on me, and even then she cut the branches so close to my head that I could feel the wind from the bullets. I've got gashes an inch deep where the dry limbs cut me as I was gettin' away from there."

"You've balled things up in nice shape," Hamilton stormed. "Here I've gone to all this trouble to get that interfering Morrison out of the

country for three days, and here you've let the girl chase you around like you were a cottontail rabbit. When are you going back?"

"Not until I get my cuts and bruises fixed up," Red answered sullenly. "I'm not stuck on the job anyhow. Sorghum is still up there at our camp. If you want to tackle the job of running her off yourself, there's nothing holding you."

"You know I can't do that," Hamilton went on. "The proper play is for you to jump Decker's claim and then for me to come in and settle the quarrel against him in your favor. Otherwise the independent miners won't support me in case Decker should take it into the courts. The thing might have been done by this time if you had acted as I supposed you would when I hired you."

"Well, that's how it is, and I won't go back before to-morrow or next day," Red insisted stubbornly. "That will be plenty of time, anyway. When did Morrison and his partner go to Durango?"

"On this morning's stage. I fixed it so they won't get into town in time to do any business at the land office to-day. If you will go back not later than day after to-morrow, I'll see to it that something else happens to delay them another day, but I don't want any more failures."

CHAPTER XII.

SINGLE-HANDED.

WHEN June awakened the morning after the ordeal of finding her camp robbed, she heard Sorghum breathing heavily, indicating that he was still under the effects of yesterday's spree.

In spite of her intention to keep on guard all night, sheer fatigue had

overpowered June's resolution and forced her into utter unconsciousness. She moved her body into a more comfortable position and went over in detail her experiences of the day before, the reason for Don's continued absence being uppermost in her mind.

June was convinced that neither Don nor Scotty had returned to their camp the night before. "If they had," she reasoned, "they would have found the message I left for them and would have come here during the night. I wonder what trick Hamilton used to toll them away from the country, and why they didn't come by this way. Don might at least have let me know. Well, if I'm on my lonely, I might as well plan to fight my own battles single-handed, as I expected to do when I decided to come to Big Horn Basin."

She put one hand affectionately on Mike's head.

"At least I have you," she whispered gratefully, "and dogs are more dependable than men."

June arose and rebuilt the fire. The water bucket was empty. She picked it up, intending to go to the spring. She stopped with one hand resting on the latch of the door.

"I guess not," she thought. "From now on I don't leave this cabin except when I need to, and not then unless I am certain I can return."

She went back and shook Sorghum roughly. The man grunted, moved stiffly, and put one hand to his head. June noticed the movement.

"I expect you've got a head that feels like a barrel this morning," she told him, "but I'll fix you up if you'll bring me a bucket of water from the spring."

Sorghum sat up, a silly grin on his face.

"I'd give a year's wages for a drink."

An idea struck June, one that she now realized had been formulating in her head since she had first rescued Sorghum.

"You go get a pail of water, wash your face, and rub your head in the snow. When you come back, we'll see about a drink."

This hint brought Sorghum to his feet.

"Have you got any whisky?" he demanded belligerently.

June laid her hand on her ever-ready rifle.

"Yes, I rescued what was left in the jug yesterday, but you will get only what I give you, and not a drop unless you do as I say. There's the water bucket; now hurry up."

Sorghum walked away, grumbling to himself something about "bustin' that little devil sometime soon." June, however, sensed a change in Sorghum's attitude toward her. She knew that while men of his type might commit a major crime in the heat of excitement or anger, given sufficient time in which to consider, they were rarely brutal.

"If the way to a man's heart lies through his stomach, I've got a chance to win an ally who might be a wonderful help," June remarked to Mike.

The dog thumped his tail on the floor, signifying that no matter what June meant, he agreed perfectly.

Sorghum came back, drops of water glistening upon his dark beard. There was a humorous twist about his mouth which encouraged June. She offered him a tin cup containing a generous portion of whisky.

"You need a bracer this morning after such a spree as you had yes-

terday," she told him. "Then I'm going to give you a fine breakfast. After that, what happens depends entirely upon your own idea of decency."

TOSSING off the drink with one motion of his arm, Sorghum smacked his lips and walked over to a box beside the fireplace. He watched June narrowly as she made biscuits and cut thick steaks of fat venison from the hind quarter Don had brought her. In a very short time the two sat down to a breakfast that would have made any woods dweller envious.

When the meal was finished and Sorghum was tamping the bowl of his pipe full of tobacco, June sprang her surprise.

"How would you like to work for me instead of Hamilton?" she asked.

Sorghum looked at June as though he thought he must still be suffering from one of his drunken dreams.

"Huh?" he demanded.

June repeated the question.

"Why, I dunno. I don't suppose you'd want me around, not after what I did—and my gettin' drunk, and all."

"I certainly won't have you around if you drink," June warned him, "but you've had your drunk now, and that ought to be enough to last you until spring. You are not a bad fellow, Sorghum, only weak, and you've been letting Rough Red lead you into all sorts of trouble. I don't know how much Hamilton agreed to pay you." June paused a moment, her voice rising questioningly.

"Hamilton ain't overgenerous," Sorghum admitted. "In fact, all we're to get is our grub, unless we run you out of the Basin. Then we're to get a hundred dollars

apiece, and a chance to locate one of the claims you lose."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Sorghum," the girl proposed. "If you'll do just as I say, I'll pay you miner's wages until spring. I won't have any money until then, but you needn't worry but that I'll do as I say."

Sorghum took a big drink of the black coffee which June had sweetened generously, and handed to him. He was looking at her seriously now, with eyes that were losing some of their nervous shiftiness.

"What do you want me to do?" he inquired.

"First, I want you to go to Granite Buttes and find out what Hamilton did to make Don Morrison and Scotty MacDougal leave their claim. You may tell Hamilton that I chased Rough Red out and burned your camp. Probably he will get mad and discharge you. Take a note I will give you to Sage-hen, and she will buy blankets for you, and anything you need. Come back here and build another room on the end of this cabin. Then I want you to shovel off the snow from a place I saw yesterday and sink a hole to bed rock."

Sorghum's face was a study as he listened to June's proposition. Once or twice a chuckle shook his huge frame, and now he pounded on the table with his fist.

"By thunder, I'll do it," he agreed. "Write your letter, and I'll start this morning. Won't Hamilton and Red storm when they hear about the camp bein' burned?"

June breathed a sigh of relief. "Remember now, no drinking while you're in Granite Buttes, and not a word about what you're going to do to any one except Sage-hen."

Sorghum's big voice roared until the noise caused Mike to come to

June and lay his head in her lap, looking up into her face with questioning eyes.

"It's the greatest joke anybody ever played," Sorghum howled gleefully. "Chased Rough Red—burned our camp—took your outfit away from me after I'd robbed you! It will make a story that will turn the country upside down, and Hamilton will go crazy mad."

"I don't care what you tell him," June consented, "so long as he does not know that you are going to work for me. Once we get a shaft down to bed rock, I'll hold this claim at the point of my rifle, if need be."

Sorghum began tightening the lacing on his snow pacs.

"Get busy and write that letter," he said with a grunt. "The quicker I get started the better."

THE effect of Sorghum's story was exactly what he and June had foreseen. Hamilton flew into a rage and fired both Rough Red and Sorghum. Twenty-four hours after Sorghum left June's cabin he was back, sober, his eyes clear, his appetite insatiable, and a new dignity about him that June rejoiced to see. Sorghum had adopted June, and would serve her as loyally and faithfully as would Mike. He hardly waited for daylight to filter through the frost-laden trees next morning before he was at work clearing the ground of snow and slashing logs for the addition he was to build to the cabin.

With wisdom born of her knowledge of miners, June had won a friend whose insight into Hamilton's plans might prove of great benefit to her. That she would need all the aids that she could muster was borne in upon her with terrible force within a short time.

Sorghum had been unable to learn

anything about Don Morrison and Scotty, or why they had gone to the outside so suddenly. Sage-hen had seen the partners on the stage, but had not spoken to either of them, so that June had no way of knowing when her friends would return, if at all. She would have made the trip over the divide to Don's camp willingly enough if she could have been sure that she would find either of the men there, but since her experience in losing her outfit, she hesitated to leave the claim for even the time required to cross the divide.

Sorghum had brought the disquieting news that Hamilton was hiring a band of notorious lumberjacks and was about to establish a camp in the forest adjoining June's claim on the south, this land being on the opposite side of the placer ground from the village of Big Horn. Hamilton's men would be certain to pass over June's land on their trips to and from the mining camp. For this reason June began to patrol the boundaries of her claim night and morning in order to make sure that when the timberjacks arrived, they did not prospect along the stream on her land.

The third morning after Sorghum's return, as he was putting the finishing touches on the addition to June's cabin, she was making her trip alone, as usual, around her property when she saw where several heavily loaded toboggans had been dragged from the main road down through the snow into the forest. Quickly scouting around to the east, June came up on a high point above the stream, and gazed anxiously down upon a band of twenty men engaged in slashing timber, clearing a space for a permanent winter's camp. Standing to one side, directing the work of his men, she recognized Hamilton himself.

CHAPTER XIII.

ROUGH RED'S RETURN.

FOR a moment, when June saw the extent of the work and the number employed, she was too stunned to think. What could she hope to do against a small army of such ruffians as she knew these men to be? She could raise no legal objection to Hamilton cutting logs here. Doubtless he had a permit to do it on the pretext of installing a mill the following summer. Of course it was a trick for the purpose of harassing her and making the neighborhood so intolerable that no decent woman would dare to stay there.

June realized that no one, neither the independent miners nor the government officials, could offer the slightest objection to this crew camping here. Hamilton was perfectly within his rights, and there was no power by which he might be prevented from keeping his timber cutters here as long as he wished. Of course, if any of them made the mistake of digging a hole or cutting a tree within the boundaries of June's claim, she could stop them, but it would be impossible for her to watch the place day and night, and sooner or later some of the men would be put to work near the boundary with instructions to sink a shaft to bed rock and then drift back underground into her land.

It was all so heartlessly simple and June's defeat was so certain that she for the first time gave way to utter helplessness. Of what use was it to have gained such friends as Morrison and MacDougal, or to have won the loyalty of Sorghum if nothing was to be done which any of her supporters might criticize? June watched the timber cutters for a long time, trying to figure out

some way in which she might find some weak spot in Hamilton's plans. Finally she was forced to admit there was no possible chink through which she might insert the power of public opinion.

"Money can do most anything, I guess," she concluded as she turned away and walked disconsolately back toward her own cabin. Mike trailed faithfully behind the clicking tails of her snowshoes. Even the dog seemed to sense that this was no time for play or joyful adventures chasing rabbits and grouse.

When June came to the edge of the little clearing, she stopped for a moment to look at the place where, in spite of hardships, she had been so happy. Sorghum stood near one corner of the cabin, talking to some one whom June could not see. Her heart throbbed excitedly. "Don must have returned," she thought as she hurried forward, Mike now rushing on before, barking excitedly.

June had now reached the doorway and could see one huge shoulder of a man just beyond the new cabin. The partial glimpse she had was enough to cause her rising hopes to fall. Already June knew the outline of Don's shoulders and instantly realized that the visitor was a stranger. Sorghum turned around when he heard the dog. June thought she detected a startled, guilty expression on his face. The suspicion became absolute conviction a moment later when she stood near Sorghum and saw Rough Red stepping hurriedly on his skis and pointing them toward the protection of the forest behind the cabin.

June's nerves, already shattered by the discovery of the danger that threatened her property, were in no condition to stand such a shock as possible collusion between Sorghum and his former partner, who had

doubtless been reemployed by Hamilton. She swung her body into a belligerent attitude, the little rifle in both hands, while she coolly estimated the speed of the man who dashed across the opening. There was not the slightest doubt but that June intended at least to cripple Rough Red, and so rid herself of one of her tormentors.

Her legs were braced in a position to withstand the recoil from the weapon, raising to her shoulder when Sorghum made a sudden grab and caught the barrel.

"Don't do that, Miss June," he begged. "Red ain't done nothing."

JUNE attempted to wrench the rifle out of Sorghum's hands, but it was held as firmly as though the barrel were between the steel jaws of a blacksmith's vise.

"Oh, no," she scoffed angrily, "Red hasn't done a thing but guide Hamilton's outfit to a camping place just outside of my lines. You admitted that you and Red came up here in the first place to scare me off so that Hamilton could get my placer. If you intend to help me as you promised, why didn't you let me wing him and at least teach him not to venture near my camp?"

By this time Rough Red had disappeared among the spruce. Mike, who had bounded after him, was returning.

Sorghum let go of the rifle.

"Shooting a man is serious business," he told her. "If you'd wanted to play into Hamilton's hands, you couldn't have done it better than to have shot Red, even though you had only wounded him."

June sat down on a block of wood and began to untie her snowshoes. In her heart she was already grateful to Sorghum for having caught

the rifle barrel. The more June thought of how near she had come to shooting Red the more kindly she felt toward Sorghum who had prevented her from doing something that would have cast a cloud over her life.

She got up and went into the cabin, her anxiety for the moment forgotten in her relief. Again Mike began to bark, but this time June did not pick up the rifle. She merely looked out through the open door. Coming down the Granite Buttes' trail she saw Will Decker. The unexpected presence of one whom she could trust sent June joyfully out to meet Decker at the edge of the packed snow.

"How in the world did you get here?" she greeted him warmly. "I didn't expect to see you before next spring."

"Well, I had some good luck," Decker explained. "Don Morrison came to Durango on business. He looked me up and told me he had reason to believe that Hamilton was getting ready to start something. Morrison offered to loan us five hundred dollars with which to sink a shaft to bed rock and prove the value of this claim as placer ground. I quit my job and hurried to Granite Buttes as fast as I could come, but I guess Morrison was wrong, because the storekeeper told me that Hamilton has stopped mining operations for the winter and has gone into the timber with an outfit to cut logs. He's going to build a saw-mill next spring, so I heard."

June's face turned white and then red as she listened to Decker's explanation. She was trying to look below the surface and discover the reason for Morrison's generosity. She knew from what Don had told her that he was no longer a rich man. Five hundred dollars seemed

like an immense sum at such a time as this. Was this the explanation of Don's sudden disappearance? Was he doing this for her? These were the thoughts that filled June's mind as she went about getting supper for Decker and Sorghum, who had at once entered into a discussion of the best place to start the contemplated work.

Decker had not said anything about Don having returned to his cabin, nor whether Scotty had been in Durango with him. There were many questions she would have liked to ask Decker, but no opportunity offered that night, as the two men spent the entire evening in fixing up the new room for a bedroom. June sat in the cabin alone, going over the events of the day and trying to work out the best plan for the future—for in spite of Decker's return she had no intention of giving up her part in the work of acquiring title to the placer.

Next morning Decker was preparing to start a shaft near the cabin in a spot he had selected the fall before. To this June objected.

"I've had some experience in placering," she told her partner. "As I told you, my father was a miner, and I have been with him in various places. I have studied the pitch of the bed rock on both sides of the claim, and I think I know where the old channel should be."

Decker was at first surprised by June's knowledge of geology, but he readily consented to look at the place she had indicated as the most likely one to contain gold-bearing gravel. Sorghum supported June's judgment, and Decker at once agreed to start the shaft at the point June had decided upon. It was not until late that evening that an opportunity to inquire about Don and Scotty occurred. Sorghum was cut-

ting balsam boughs for his bed, and Decker and June were alone.

"Were both Morrison and Mac-Dougal in Durango?" June asked.

"Yes, they came back on the same stage I did," Decker replied.

June then told Decker of the message she had left in the door of Don's cabin. Decker's face sobered.

"I can't understand why he hasn't come over," he replied. "He was very kind to me and told me how gritty you were, and that I ought to get back here as quickly as I could. Was there any date on the message you left?"

"No. I was in such a hurry that I just scratched the words, 'Please come quick,' and signed my name."

"Something must have happened to it then, for Don Morrison isn't the man to desert a friend—he has proved that."

"Yes," June repeated with parrot-like exactitude, "he has proved that."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Decker proposed. "If you don't hear from him soon, we'll go over there some night after I get through work."

June shook her head. "No, Will, one of us stays here always."

CHAPTER XIV.

HIRED TO KILL.

IN his plan to put a camp of quarrelsome lumberjacks near the boundary of the Decker claim, Hamilton had been actuated by the passion that has ever driven men to steal lands, bribe officials, and even bring about the murder of their own kind—an insatiable lust for gold.

Hamilton's disappointment because of what he had considered to be merely beginner's luck on June's part, aided by the unwillingness of

Rough Red and Sorghum to be rough with a girl, made him furious. Of course June should be crushed. He had intended that from the first, but his love for gold had even more to do with his plans than did his desire for revenge.

Already the effect of the president's order regarding the free sale of gold was being felt throughout the West. In offices of long-dormant mining companies in Denver and Colorado Springs men were active. Engineers were being hastily summoned to explain faded maps. Scouts were hastening into the mountains. In the mining camps and ghost towns old prospectors re-thinked abandoned cabins and shoveled snow from the dumps at the entrances to the caved-in tunnels. The very air was electric with an excitement similar to the one that had sent men across the plains in '49, into the Rockies in the '60s, and over Chilkoot Pass in '98.

Hamilton knew that a rush was sure to come with the spring, and that next only to gold-bearing gravel, timber would be the most valuable property, and so he had plotted with craftiness and skill to get control of the forest along the Big Horn. In one of his trips along the stream Hamilton had seen from a distance the pile of yellow dirt that Decker and Sorghum were taking from their shaft, and suspected the cause for it. He had given strict orders to his men that no one was to venture on the placer claim to the north, because he was especially anxious that June should not be disturbed during the winter. It would be easier to drive June off the land when the right time came than it would be to fight men. When the snow went off in the spring, he intended to be all ready to strike swiftly and surely.

The evidence of a shaft being sunk to bed rock, however, made him nervous. How had this girl got men to work for her? She had no money and no credit. Hamilton had himself seen to it that she should not get supplies at the store in Granite Buttes or the smaller trading post in the Basin, and yet that pile of dirt was very convincing evidence that some one was at work on the placer. An examination was absolutely necessary to the protection of Hamilton's plans, but he had seen Mike following June every day as the girl patrolled the boundary of her claim, and knew that he could not go near the shaft without Mike giving warning.

That night Hamilton made a five-mile trip on snowshoes to the camp of Pierre Blauvette, a half-breed trapper yet farther south on the Big Horn. He had employed Blauvette before and, in fact, had hinted to the trapper that it would be a good idea for him to extend his trap line up the Big Horn toward the Basin so that he might be near, in case Hamilton should have need of his services.

Blauvette was in high spirits when Hamilton arrived. He had just brought in a prime silver-gray fox, and was stripping off the hide, gloating over work that most men dislike. Hamilton watched the process for a moment before he revealed the reason for his visit.

"Pierre, have you any strychnine?" he asked.

"Sure, I always keep a little bit. Why?" answered Pierre.

"There is a dog—" Hamilton began.

"Oh, yes, I know," Pierre broke in; "I have seen him with the girl. He is a ver' fine dog."

"Well, just now he happens to be in my way," Hamilton explained.

Blauvette snapped his fingers with an expressive gesture. "Pouf, it is easy. I will fix some meat for you to drop on the trail near the cabin."

Hamilton shook his head. "I prefer that you attend to this matter yourself. I do not want any mistakes. When I pay a man to do anything, I want him to finish the job without my assistance."

The eyes of the breed narrowed craftily. "In that case it will cost more. If you want to use the poison yourself, it is to be had for—twenty-five cents, but to go near the doorway of the girl and leave snowshoe tracks—hm-m-m—" His voice faded expressively, giving the impression that he considered the risk one that was worth a large fee.

"Never mind the bargaining, Pierre," Hamilton remarked. "I expect to pay." He drew out a roll of bills. "How much to kill the dog?"

THE trapper gazed on the bank roll. He would have liked to know just what Hamilton was up to. If he wanted to go to the girl's cabin and was afraid because of the dog, he might be willing to pay a big price—much larger than Pierre had ever yet received for a job.

"It ees a dangerous thing. The girl shoot ver' well," he sparred for a hint as to how much he dared to ask.

"Nonsense," said Hamilton. "You are all alike, scared to death of a girl just because she accidentally hit a wild goose on the wing."

"Hm-m-m," speculated Pierre again. "Accidents like that don't happen often. I have seen the girl shoot the head from a grouse. No, it ees no accident."

"Well," Hamilton asked impatiently, "what do you say, twenty-five dollars?"

Blauvette shook his head vigorously. "No, I could make more at my traps, and take no risks."

"Fifty, then," Hamilton offered.

"Make it one hundred, and I'll take the job," Pierre proposed.

Hamilton growled considerably but finally agreed to the terms, after stipulating that the trapper was to stay in the neighborhood of June's cabin until he had actually seen the effects of the poison and made sure that Mike was dead. Hamilton was shrewd enough to pay only half the money down, however, the balance to be forthcoming on sufficient proof that the job had been successfully accomplished.

"I don't want any delays," he admonished. "The sooner you get this done the better."

Blauvette pocketed the bills Hamilton had given him and resumed his work of removing the pelt from the fox. He said not a word as to when he would commit the crime. Hamilton, realizing that he would get no more information from the breed and that the poisoned meat would be scattered at the time Blauvette considered he could do it with the least possible danger to himself, hurried back through the darkening woods to his own camp.

The lumberjacks, ignorant of the real reason for their presence here, were working with the vigor of their kind, and had already put up a comfortable log cabin for a cook house and were now clearing away the snow for the bunk house under the orders of Rough Red, who had been reemployed by Hamilton in spite of Red's failure to drive June from the claim. The reason for Hamilton's change of front was that he dared not go into the forest alone with the gang he had hired, and the reputation of Rough Red was valuable to him in maintaining some

sort of discipline among the members of the crew.

As Hamilton entered the clearing on his return from the camp of the trapper, he heard a sullen roar coming from the open space that had been cleared for the new building. Wondering if the men had mutinied, he drew his revolver and walked stealthily to the rear of the cook house and peered around the corner. On the frozen ground two men stood toe to toe, flailing each other with terrific blows. One of them was Rough Red and the other a dark-faced giant by the name of Crawford, who Hamilton supposed had been selected by the timberjacks for the purpose of testing out their new foreman.

An evil smile twisted Hamilton's mouth as he saw Crawford beaten down by the gorilla fists of Rough Red.

"Crawford has been asking for that for a week," Hamilton muttered. "I'm glad I went away and gave them a chance to have it out."

He turned away as he saw Crawford, a battered hulk, sink to the ground, and walked unconcernedly to his own tent. He was not the sort of employer to interfere with any form of brutality, so long as it did not bear on his own plans or bank roll. He had hired Rough Red to boss this job. How he did it was his own affair. Had either of the men been killed, it would not have caused Hamilton the least worry.

A little later he saw Red drive the men to their own quarters, threatening them with a heavy peavey which he swung over his head with as much ease as if it had been a walking stick.

"I guess I didn't make any mistake in rehiring Rough Red," Hamilton told Dick Nevil, his time-

keeper. "He's living up to his reputation."

"It's a wild mob, sir," Nevil answered. "I only hope we don't have trouble with them before spring."

"What started the trouble today?" Hamilton asked.

"It seems like Crawford made some remark about a young lady," the clerk explained, "and Red objected to it."

"That's funny." There was incredulity in Hamilton's voice. "I never heard of his kind defending a woman's name before."

"It wasn't her name, sir, it was her shooting. Crawford said he didn't think this young lady who is camped on the claim up the creek would shoot a man, and it seems like Rough Red took it as a personal matter. That's what caused the fight."

"I see," Hamilton remarked as though he had made an important discovery.

He sat thinking. At last he got up and walked out toward the cook house.

"In case Blauvette, the trapper, should come to see me," he told the timekeeper, "be sure and tell him I want to see him."

Nevil's bow indicated that he understood perfectly.

CHAPTER XV.

TRAGEDY.

FOR a week the work in the shaft progressed uninterruptedly. Sorghum, when sober, was a good miner and an industrious laborer. By that time the hole was deep enough so that Sorghum filled the bucket with dirt while Decker pulled it to the surface by means of a crude windlass they had made of a round log to which was fastened a wooden handle.

June cooked for the men, shot an occasional rabbit or grouse, and made her daily trip around the boundaries of the claim. Still Don Morrison had not come to the cabin, and as the days passed, June felt more and more the hurt because of his apparent neglect. When she thought of Don's friendliness and apparent pleasure in the adventures they had enjoyed together, she could not understand why he should not at least have come to learn whether she had been all right at the time of Decker's arrival. June knew nothing of the activities of the pack rat and in spite of Decker's theory, she believed that Don must have found the piece of wood on which she had written her message.

Had she left a note written on paper she might have felt less certain of Don's finding it. Paper could be blown away or have been eaten by mice, but the aspen block on which she had written with a soft-nosed bullet should have been permanent for months, and the heavy markings discernible. June was pondering over the possible loss of Don's friendship one morning as she completed the rounds of her patrol. She had just entered the dooryard and was in the act of taking off her snowshoes when Mike rushed past her, gave a yelp of terror, and leaped high in the air to fall in convulsions on the hard-packed snow.

One glance at the frothing mouth and gnashing teeth of the dog, and the word, "Strychnine!" faltered to the whitened lips of the girl. Only a person who has seen such a loved companion and sharer of dangers writhing under the tortures of muscle-tearing spasms can understand the terror which gripped June's heart. She was trying to force her numbed brain to think of

the antidotes for poison when a man darted past her and into the cabin.

June's whole thought was centered upon the dog, and she only vaguely realized that Morrison had come at last. In a moment Don was out again with a can of condensed milk, had opened it with one blow of an ax, and was kneeling beside Mike, who had passed through the first convulsion and was now relaxed, apparently limp in death.

"Blow up some live coals," Don ordered. "Heat a panful of lard as quickly as you can." He had caught Mike up in his arms and was pouring the milk down the throat of the dog.

June flew to obey. Fortunately she had thrown a large chunk on the fire before she had left that morning. She jerked a frying pan from its place on the wall and set it on the coals, sprang upon a stool to get an unopened bucket of lard from her stock on the shelf, and quickly ladled the contents into the pan. She went to the door.

"The lard is commencing to melt," she said.

Don was sitting on a stump, holding Mike in his arms.

"Bring what you have," he commanded.

June hurried out with the pan and while Don held Mike's mouth open, June poured the liquid down. Don laid the dog on the snow and pushed June back.

"He'll have another convulsion in a minute or two," he warned, "but I don't believe it will be as hard as the first one. Look out; there it comes."

AGAIN Mike fought with death, but his struggle was not so severe, and lasted but a short time. The moment the dog's muscles relaxed, Don took him up

again, and June poured more lard down Mike's throat. The end of Mike's tail wagged faintly. June sobbed aloud when she saw the animal's feeble attempt to express gratitude.

"You precious doggie," she pleaded. "You just mustn't die; we won't let you."

Once more Don felt the muscles under his hands grow rigid with spasmodic contraction. He laid Mike down and stepped back to watch. The convulsions became lighter, and in a little while Don gave June the comforting assurance that Mike would probably live.

"Who in the world could have done such a thing as to put poison where Mike could get it?" he asked.

June told him of her daily trips to patrol the claim. "I suppose that Hamilton or some of his men have seen me," she explained, "and figured that I might be afraid to keep on making the trip if something happened to Mike. That's the only motive I can give for such a dastardly act."

"Any man who will cause a dumb animal to suffer," Don stormed, "is too low to live, and one who would scatter poisoned meat for a dog like Mike deserves hanging. That dog is almost human."

"Don't I know it?" June agreed. "He not only understands everything I say to him, but he actually can tell when I'm unhappy or worried."

Mike undoubtedly felt better. He attempted to stand but fell with a piteous yelp.

"Never mind, old chap," Don comforted. "I'll carry you." He picked the dog up gently in his arms. "He'll feel better in the house by the fireplace where he is in the habit of sleeping. Dogs are crea-

tures of habit as much as we are. They like to be in a familiar spot."

June ran ahead and taking a quilt from her own bunk, folded it to make a bed for Mike. Don laid the dog down gently and stepped back.

"There, he'll be as good as ever in a day or two, and I don't believe anything would tempt him to eat anything again except what he kills himself or some one he trusts gives him."

"How did you happen to come just in the nick of time?" June asked.

Don took from the pocket of his coat the piece of wood on which June had written her appeal for aid. "I climbed up in the loft over the stable this morning to get a pelt that Scotty had put up there to dry," he explained. "I saw some spoons we had missed lying at the edge of a pack rat's nest. When I went to get them, I found this."

The sudden realization that her fears of a misunderstanding with Don were groundless brought tears to June's eyes. The nervous shock she had just experienced caused her to be a bit hysterical. She sat down, covering her face with her hands. Don's ever-ready sympathy was manifested in his efforts to comfort her. He laid a hand gently on June's shoulder.

"You've been having a tough time of it," he said gently, "but things will be easier, now that Decker is here."

June put one hand over Don's and pressed his warmly.

"Thank you for what you did for us. It was a grand, unselfish act."

"I heard some news while I was in Durango that may have a far-reaching effect on all of us." Don's voice was a bit husky. He cleared it with an effort. "Owing to the

president's order permitting miners to sell newly mined gold in foreign markets, the price of gold has jumped from twenty dollars an ounce to thirty. The camps are filling up rapidly with all sorts of prospectors, boomers, and the worst type of gambler who always follow up a mining excitement. In a week or two these hills will be full of men. That's why I insisted on Decker coming back at once. Where is he now?"

June told Morrison of her adventure with Rough Red and how Sorghum had robbed her camp and then later quit Hamilton and gone to work for her. "He and Will are over in the shaft we are sinking now," she explained. "I wish you would go and see if you think they are digging in the right place. I'd go with you, but some one must stay with Mike."

Don went out and in a short time June heard voices on the trail, Decker's loud and excited; Don apparently attempting to quiet him. June went to the door. All three of the men were coming along the trail.

Decker had a gold pan in his hand. He waved it at June.

"You're a wizard, June," he praised. "Our shaft hit squarely in the center of the channel. Look!" He ran his finger through a mass of coarse gold dust and small nuggets. "We've proved the value of our placer. All we have to do now is to file our certificate of location and we will be rich."

"You're talkin' too loud, son," Sorghum warned. "Remember, your voice will carry a long distance on such a day as this."

"Don't be a crape-hanger, Sorghum," Decker retorted. "We don't care now who knows we've struck pay."

Morrison shook his head disap-

provingly. "You are mistaken, Decker," he said. "Public knowledge of your discovery would certainly result in a wild stampede for the lower end of the Basin. Remember, you have no title in the land office until your filing has been made, and even then you may have to prove that this land is more valuable for placer than for the timber that is on it. There is more than a coincidence in Hamilton having started logging operations so near your lines."

"Then why delay?" June interrupted. "You must hurry to Durango with the papers at once, Will."

"And leave you here alone again," Decker objected. "Nothing doing."

Don broke in with advice. "June is safer here with Sorghum to help her guard your claim than she would be in attempting to go out over the trail in the face of the gold-crazy horde that will be on the way in here, especially if any of Hamilton's men have been spying on you and overheard what you said just now. Hamilton would not stop at anything in order to get control of a rich placer. My advice is that you lose no time in securing legal title. June is right; you have no time to waste. I will write a note to Russell & Russell, my lawyers, asking them to help you."

"Please, Will," June pleaded. "We have so much at stake, you know."

Decker looked at her searchingly for a moment while Sorghum and Don watched the tableau.

"I'll start to-day," he agreed. "Make a copy of the description from the deed I gave you, while I shave and change my clothes."

Half an hour later June stood in the doorway and watched Will Decker as the youth turned at the

edge of the forest, took off his hat and waved it before he turned the points of his skis toward Granite Buttes.

CHAPTER XVI.

HAMILTON MANEUVERS QUICKLY.

A FEW seconds after Decker disappeared, Pierre Blauvette rose from the bushes behind which he had been concealed for more than an hour and made one last survey of the trail and clearing. He saw June talking with Don Morrison in the dooryard near her cabin and knowing he possessed important news, he hurried off toward Hamilton's camp. He passed the timber cutters without the usual greeting and went to the tent, above the flaps of which was a small sign, "Office."

"Where ees Meester Hamilton?" he demanded of the clerk.

"He is out in the forest," the man answered, "but you are to wait. He wants to see you."

Blauvette fidgeted impatiently with the fold of canvas he had grabbed as he stooped over to look into the tent. He glanced back over his shoulder to where Rough Red was bossing some men who were skidding logs up onto the wall.

"There ees not much time," he said. "Somet'ing beeg, she happen; Hamilton must know right off. Who ees the foreman?"

The clerk indicated Rough Red by jerking his arm in the direction of the new building.

"That big red-headed fellow is the man you want."

Blauvette was excited. Something must be done, just what he was not sure. He called Red to one side.

"The girl, she has struck it rich," he told the foreman.

"How do you know?" Red demanded.

"Me, I was on some work for Meester Hamilton. I went to see if it ees done properly. Pretty soon the man who drives the mule train and a young man and another came from the shaft by the creek. They are much excite', 'specially the young man. He yell: 'We will be rich.' He held up a gold pan and let nuggets and dust run through his fingers. There was a hundred dollars in the pan."

"Calm down," Red advised. "You're crazy. There's nobody at that cabin except a friend of mine we call Sorghum, and the girl and her dog. Morrison is in Durango. He hasn't come back yet."

The half-breed became more persistent. He talked French, Indian, and broken English in a gibberish that was unintelligible, gesticulating with his hands and rolling his eyes as he attempted to convey to Red the immeasurable riches that must exist in the channel of the Big Horn.

"Well, anyhow," Red interrupted, "you can find Hamilton easy enough. He is just over that ridge, not a hundred yards away, looking at some fellows split shakes out of a log. Go tell him your yarn."

Blauvette hurried off over the snow with the stride of a woods runner.

Hamilton saw him coming and came to meet him.

"What's the matter?" Hamilton demanded roughly. "Did you fall down on the job you set out to do?"

"No, I fix the dog, but that can wait. There's something more important."

His run up the ridge had quieted Blauvette's hysteria so that he could talk more coherently. He gave Hamilton a fairly accurate account of what had happened to which Hamilton listened intently.

"You say the young man left

right away on the Granite Buttes trail?" he asked.

"Yes. He was ver' much excited."

Hamilton's face became lurid with rage and chagrin.

"That young man you saw with the gold pan was Decker. He has started for Durango to have his claim recorded. He must never reach Granite Buttes."

"A-a-ah," gasped Blauvette, "I begin to understand why the dog was in the way. You would like to see the bottom of that shaft? So would I."

"See here," snapped Hamilton, "the Granite Buttes trail bends around over the barrens and comes back onto the creek about ten miles below here. There's an old cut-off. If you went down the creek past your camp—I suppose your rifle is there?"

Blauvette nodded.

"You could reach the point where the trail crosses before dark."

"It might be done."

"Would a thousand dollars be enough to make sure that Decker does not reach Granite Buttes?" Hamilton drew out the bank roll again. "Here is the balance due on the dog, and here is two hundred on account. The rest will be ready for you in case Decker does not reach Granite Buttes."

Blauvette started to explain that the dog had been saved. Hamilton interrupted him by pointing up at the sun.

"Never mind about what you wanted to tell me now," he said. "Get this job over with to-night and come back here to-morrow. I'm likely to have another one for you to——"

"But I wanted to tell you——"

Hamilton waved him off.

"Never mind now, you haven't any time to waste!"

BLAUVETTE disappeared in the forest. Hamilton went back past the cabins where the men were at work, and on up to the boundary of June and Decker's land. He could see the smoke curling up above the trees in the direction of June's cabin. He estimated as closely as he could the position of the discovery shaft and then located a suitable place to duplicate it on his own land.

Next morning Hamilton called Red into his office tent.

"I've concluded to find out if there is any placer gold on my timberlands," he told his foreman. "Take your pick of the crew and come with me. Four men will be enough for the present."

The corners of Rough Red's mouth contracted in a sneer, but he said nothing to Hamilton about Blauvette having told him of the bonanza in June's shaft. Red had learned the value of not talking to Hamilton. He called four men, gave them shovels, and followed Hamilton to the place decided upon for the shaft, which was in a small park screened from view by a dense circle of bushy spruce and balsam. Red understood the reason for the selection and noted that the trail June had made in the snow on her daily trips was just a short distance on the other side of the thicket.

Hamilton pointed at a stake set in the snow.

"Clear off a space twenty feet square and start a prospect shaft," he ordered. "Don't make it any larger than you have to in order to handle your tools. Four by six feet is plenty big. Work eight hours. I'll have another crew ready to take your places when you quit, and I'll

pay double wages to the men who sink the hole the deepest in each twenty-four hours."

Rough Red motioned toward the peaks above timber line. A filmy veil of wind-driven mist hung along the crest.

"We're goin' to have a storm within a few hours; maybe we'd better put up some sort of a shack over our work."

"Don't be soft," Hamilton advised. "We won't waste time on comforts. The thing is to put a hole to bed rock in the shortest possible time. When that is done, you'll have plenty of time to get warm."

He turned and went back toward the camp, leaving Rough Red and his men to begin the work, which Hamilton had not expected to start until spring, but which the discovery in the other shaft had made imperative. Before Hamilton got back to his office tent, a dark figure moved stealthily to the edge of the forest and stood close to the trunk of a tree waiting. Hamilton recognized Blauvette and turned toward him.

"Well?" he inquired.

Blauvette glanced furtively about him.

"Don't talk so loud," he cautioned.

Hamilton came closer. He lowered his voice.

"Have you finished your job?"

The breed nodded. "Decker had an accident," he explained facetiously. "He is laid up in a deserted cabin on the old cut-off. He tried to save time by going that way and is a mile from the main-traveled road. His leg is broken. His yells can't be heard by any one passing along on their way to Granite Buttes."

Hamilton's face clouded.

"You knew what I meant when I sent you out on this job," he upbraided Blauvette. "I can't afford to take any chances on Decker reaching Durango. You should have——"

"No?" Blauvette countered. "And me, I can take no chances either. I did as you said and followed Decker. When I saw him take the cut-off, I raced around to head him off. He did not come, so I back-trailed and then cut across until I found his trail. I came to a place where he had fallen over a small cliff. From there to the cabin the track showed that he had dragged one leg. I crept up close and saw him inside the cabin. He has only a little wood."

Blauvette, too, looked up toward the filmy clouds about the tops of the peaks.

"We will have a storm soon," he prophesied.

CHAPTER XVII.

JUNE PLAYS A HUNCH.

AFTER watching Decker disappear on the trail toward the outside, June beckoned to Morrison to follow her inside the cabin.

"It just came to me that this deed that Will gave me should be recorded, too." She noted the surprise in Don's eyes and hastened to explain. "Not that I have any doubt about Will's honesty, of course, but when he records the placer location and submits proof of its value, the title will rest in him. I don't like to think of such a contingency, but suppose Hamilton should discover that we have struck pay dirt, which he is bound to do soon, and should set a trap for Will. You see what I mean?"

Morrison's expression became thoughtfully sober.

"Hm-m-m," he mumbled speculatively. "You think Hamilton might go so far as to capture Decker and torture him into signing a quit-claim deed or a relinquishment?"

"Something like that," June admitted. "Of course it is only a hunch, but I've learned to heed thoughts that come to me in this way. This deed from Will conveys the entire claim to me. I believe it would be safer in my name than in his. Hamilton would hardly suspect that Decker would deed his entire interest to me, and therefore would be less likely to bother me than Will."

Morrison smiled. "Your hunch is worthy of Scotty MacDougal," he told her. "I see what you mean. If the deed to you is recorded and the proof of gold discovery is filed, then the title will be safe, no matter what happens to Decker."

June smiled wanly. "It's awful to talk about it so cold-bloodedly, but one has to be heartless in dealing with a man like Hamilton."

"I agree with you," Don answered, "and if you will give me the deed and some of the nuggets, I will see that my lawyer gets them within a day or two, even if Scotty or I have to make a special trip to Granite Buttes in order to send the proof out to him."

Having decided upon this plan, Don took the package. After giving June a few parting directions as to caring for Mike, who was recovering rapidly, he prepared to leave for his own cabin.

"You're bound to win now," he assured June at parting. "By this time to-morrow Decker will reach Durango, and you will have your title to the claim perfected. Then I suppose you will be leaving the Big Horn country for good."

June's eyes clouded.

"I don't like to think of that," she replied. "In spite of the hardships of this life I am happier here than I ever could be in a city, no matter how rich I might be."

A smile lighted Morrison's face. "Then at least we will always be neighbors," he remarked.

June's eyes sought his questioningly.

"Ye-es," she answered hesitatingly, then with a queer little laugh: "I guess we will."

June stood in the doorway and watched Don climb the mountain toward the ridge. A not unfamiliar sense of impending disaster gripped her heart. She tried in vain to throw it off. She went to where Mike lay and spoke to the dog. Mike was almost himself by this time. He got up and stretched his muscles, as much as to say, "Well, come on; let's go."

June laughed at the dog's actions. "Nothing doing," she told him; "not to-day. You just keep quiet and get strong; I may need you. I'm going out for a little while, but don't worry."

MIKE lay down obediently, and June picked up her rifle, smiled back at the dog, who was watching her every move closely, then stepped out into the dooryard.

Sorghum was splitting wood. He stopped with his ax raised in the air.

"Which way?" he asked.

"I'm just going the rounds of the property," she answered. "Somehow I feel nervous."

"I can't see anything to be fidgety about now," Sorghum told her. "You are sitting pretty—there's a good-sized bar of gravel on your claim, and it's rich; all you have to do is to attend to the recovering of

it and then let the U. S. government protect your title."

"Perhaps that's the very reason I'm worried," June suggested. "I'm satisfied that Hamilton had Mike poisoned so that the dog would not give warning in case any one came near our shaft. Now I have to be my own watchdog."

She put on her snowshoes and made the usual rounds, stopping for a few minutes at the shaft, to peer down at the gravel that had been disclosed.

Until now the fact that she was likely to be rich had been but faintly realized by June, but as she saw the thickness of the gravel bed on either side of the channel for a considerable distance, and thought that as she walked over the surface, untold wealth lay hidden beneath, something of the thrill that beckons prospectors into the wilderness came to her.

She knelt down and took up some of the gravel from which Decker had washed the gold. One clay-covered piece was much heavier than the rest. June put the chunk in water and watched the clay dissolve. A dull yellow appeared on the edges. The girl's fingers trembled with excitement as she washed out a nugget of native gold much larger than any that Decker had found. Her heart throbbed violently. She began to search for more likely looking pieces and found several.

June became expert in detecting the clay-covered nuggets, her fingers quickly learning to discard the worthless ones because of their lighter weight. The value of gold took form with her in the things she might purchase with it. She hefted the gold she had washed, speculating as to its weight.

"There must be four ounces," she thought; "worth more than a hun-

dred dollars under the new ruling. Why, I have picked up enough money in a few minutes to buy that coat I saw in the store window."

June left the dump reluctantly. She would have enjoyed spending the afternoon in picking up bits of the clay-covered gold, but her sense of impending trouble had not been quieted by her discovery. In fact, the more the value of the find became apparent the greater was her fear that something would deprive her of the wealth she had fought so valiantly to secure. She went on around the accustomed patrol, stopping frequently in a sheltered spot to study the surface of the snow for tracks. She remained for some time on the elevation from which she had first seen Hamilton's camp. A man was walking in the forest coming directly toward her.

June knew that, owing to the contour of the ground, her body was hidden from view, only her cap showing above the top of the ridge. Because of the greater elevation on the point June could look over the screen of trees in the little park. She recognized Hamilton and saw him place a stake in the snow, walk a short distance to the north, and look off in the direction of the smoke which hung above the tops of the trees around June's cabin. Then he went back and moved the stake a short distance.

Again Hamilton went back to the line he had evidently taken as a base for his calculations. Any novice would have known the meaning of such actions, and June was no novice. She could easily read what was in the man's mind by his actions.

"Already he has found out in some way about our bonanza," she thought. "Perhaps he was spying upon us and heard Will shouting to me. Anyhow, he is trying to decide

on the best spot to put down a prospect shaft on his own land, and then drift back into ours. But if nothing happens to Will, Hamilton's schemes will fall through."

June's fear increased. She realized that if Hamilton had been near enough to the cabin to hear Will's exultation, there would have been nothing to interfere with his remaining there and watching until he saw Decker leave for Granite Buttes. Under the circumstances Hamilton could not fail to suspect the errand that had caused Decker to leave in such a hurry, if he had in reality seen him go. June waited until she saw Hamilton start back to his own camp, then she went on to her cabin.

Next morning June left immediately after breakfast and went directly to her lookout point. She felt that her worst fears were confirmed when she saw the men under Rough Red clearing the snow from around the stake she had seen Hamilton set up the day before.

"He wouldn't be doing that," she said decisively, "unless he had taken steps to prevent Will from getting through. There would be nothing gained by sinking a shaft now. He could wait till spring to prospect his ground just as well as to work under difficulties." As she turned away to go home, she saw the clouds on the peak. "Whatever I do must be done before that storm breaks," she muttered as she sped over the well-packed trail.

Having made a decision, June lost no time in putting it into action. She stopped at her cabin only long enough to tell Sorghum that she was going to the outside. Remembering how she had been overcome by fatigue on the way in, she made up a light shoulder pack containing food, sugar, coffee, matches, and a flask of brandy and a compact camp

kit. Under the straps which fastened the canvas she tied a small hand ax securely. With a parting hug for Mike and a few words of instruction to Sorghum, she was off, walking up the trail, dragging her skis behind her.

At the edge of the clearing she turned to look back. Sorghum stood disconsolately in the doorway. Mike was beside him, pleading for permission to follow. June debated for a moment; her heart yearned for the companionship of the dog on the lonely trip, but she loved Mike too much to allow him to over-exert himself so soon after his terrible experience.

"You better keep Mike shut up in the house," she advised Sorghum. "Don't let him out before night; otherwise he might try to follow me."

"All right, Miss June," Sorghum answered.

With a wave of her hand, the girl disappeared into the forest.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MIKE DOES HIS BIT.

SCOTTY sat by the fire and listened to Don's story of the discovery on the Decker placer claim. He held the gold Don had brought as evidence in the palm of one hand and poked it about speculatively.

"There'll be big doin's now in the Basin," he told his partner.

"There's no doubt about that," Don agreed, "but there's yet another important matter." He then told Scotty about the deed and June's fear that Hamilton might interfere with Decker either on his way out or back from Durango.

The Scotchman listened intently until Don had finished what he had to say. After a while he poured

the gold he had been examining back into the little sack and looked at Don searchingly.

"You say the lassie is a wee bit fearfu' that this deed might be no good unless it's recorded right off?"

Don repeated what June had said.

"Then," Scotty remarked with a finality that permitted of no argument, "I'll be on my way at day-break to make sure that the paper reaches Durango in time."

When he left the cabin next morning, Scotty sniffed the air, glanced up at the peaks, and then turned back to the door of the cabin.

"There's a storm brewin' on the peaks. If it's bad, I'll stay at the Buttes until the new snow settles. I might be gone several days."

"That's good judgment," Don replied. "I'll probably go over to June's soon, just to make sure everything is as it should be."

Scotty nodded acquiescence and disappeared into the forest.

Don spent the day working in the shop. He was glad that Scotty was gone. It would save a lot of explanations about something he was making. He selected the best boards from some well-seasoned lumber and began dressing the wood carefully. Several times during the day he went out to look up at the heavy clouds which were now gathering along the range. He smiled as a flake of snow fell on his hand and melted.

"Scotty will be hung up in Granite Buttes for a week, which will give me plenty of time in which to finish what I am making."

By mid-afternoon snow was falling in a dense, opaque mass. There was little wind, and the air felt warm and soft. Don split up a big pile of wood and after supper sat down for a comfortable evening's reading beside a roaring fire.

"There'll be a foot of new snow before morning," he speculated, "which isn't going to help Hamilton's timber cutters a bit. He won't have time to bother June much if this keeps up."

Suddenly Don raised up, listening intently. He had caught a sound that startled him, the more because his thoughts at the moment were centered upon June and her environment. "It sounded like the whine of a dog," he told himself, "and Mike is the only——"

Again came the sound of a dog in distress, this time unmistakably clear. Don sprang to the door and opened it. Mike came in, shook himself free of the snow which clung to his long fur, and then raised up, resting his front paws against Morrison, who petted him, talking all the time, as was his habit with animals.

"What in the world caused you to come out in the storm?" Don asked.

MIKE gave a yelp of anxiety and, dropping down on all fours, trotted to the door as if he had delivered a message and was now ready to return. Morrison's mind worked fast. That the dog would never have left June and come across the ridge alone in a storm he was convinced. June might have sent him, but, if so, a note would have been tied to the collar around his neck. Don looked for a broken string or some other evidence that Mike had been intrusted with a message.

"No, the dog has come on his own responsibility," he remarked decisively, "and that means that something unusual has occurred."

As he talked, Morrison was getting into his outdoor clothing. When he was ready to start, he went to the gun rack over the fireplace and selected a .303 Savage rifle, buckled

on a well-filled belt, and stuck an extra box of cartridges into his pocket. Mike sat by the door watching him, with eyes that showed keen approval and understanding.

Ten minutes after Mike's arrival Morrison was out breaking a trail through several inches of new snow, following Mike, who trotted along the half-filled trail, leading the way. The more Morrison thought about Mike's action the greater became his alarm for June. He did not realize how fast he was walking until sweat trickled into his eyes. For the first time he felt the pounding of his heart and moderated his gait slightly. "I'll play myself out before I get to the ridge if I keep this up," he muttered as he shifted the skis he carried to the other shoulder.

The break in his thoughts was only momentary, however. A minute later and he was again charging up the hill like a moose, his breath coming in convulsive gasps between set teeth. At times Mike looked back, but did not slacken his steady trot. Each time he turned his head, Morrison imagined the dog pleaded with him to hurry faster. By the time Don reached the top of the ridge, perspiration ran in streams down his cheeks and dripped from his chin. He wiped it off on his coat sleeve and stuck his toe into the straps on his skis. Mike had not stopped, but had broken into a run and vanished like a ghost absorbed by the mist.

Because of the new snow which clung to his skis, Don's progress down the mountain was slow as compared with his usual speed in crossing the ridge, and he did not overtake the dog until he reached the clearing in front of June's cabin. Mike was already at the door,

scratching for admittance. Don felt momentary relief when he saw sparks from the chimney of the fireplace. The chill which came a second later cut like a whip.

In answer to Mike's signal Sorghum had opened the door, and Don looked past him to see Rough Red seated on a box near the fireplace smoking his pipe. Sorghum held the door open for Don to enter.

"I thought maybe Mike had gone for you," he told Don. "I missed him about dark and I went out to see if he had found Miss June's trail and followed her, but he hadn't."

"June's trail?" Don questioned. "Where did she go?"

"She started for the Buttes this morning."

"What for?" demanded Don.

"Well, you see, she's keener than a new ax, that girl, and this morning when she saw Rough Red and some men starting to sink a hole near the boundary line of her claim, she figures that Hamilton has heard about the gold in our shaft. Right off she decides that Hamilton wouldn't be sinking a shaft now in midwinter unless he hoped to prevent Decker from reaching Durango. We know now that her idea was correct, 'cause Red overheard a talk between Hamilton and a trapper by the name of Blauvette this evening. Decker never got to Granite Buttes."

Morrison turned to Rough Red.

"I thought you were in Hamilton's employ."

"I'm still on his pay roll," Red replied. "I've been there for a purpose. You see, me and Sorghum thought that a girl who is gritty enough to chase us out of the Basin, burn our camp, and then take care of Sorghum and save his life just to show she bore us no ill will, is worth helping; so we made it up for Sor-

ghum to come back here and take the work she had offered him. I was to get my job back from Hamilton so as to keep an eye on him and let Sorghum know of any schemes that Hamilton might be brewin'. And it was a good thing I did, 'cause things are goin' to pop to-morrow."

"What do you mean—pop? Hurry up, Red, tell me. Does any danger threaten June?"

"No-o," Red drawled his answer speculatively, "I don't think so, that is, not in the way you mean. In fact, I think it's good luck that she left for the outside this morning. Hamilton don't know that she's gone and he's figuring to raid this place to-morrow and fill up the shaft where the gold was found, smooth the place over, and burn some logs on it so that nobody can swear to the spot where the gold came from."

"How do you know this?" Morrison asked.

Rough Red stood up, yawned, and stretched his gigantic arms above his head.

"'Cause when Hamilton told me to do it, I refused," he answered. Putting one hand inside his shirt, he poked his finger out through a hole near the shoulder and wagged it humorously at Morrison. "You see, Hamilton had already got suspicious of me when he heard that I whipped one of the crew who talked too much about Miss June, and he was havin' me watched.

"I guess he thought that maybe I'd balk on this job, so he had the breed I told you about hid in another tent. Blauvette's aim was a little poor, owing to the light, and the bullet cut between my arm and my body. I knocked Hamilton down with one hand and the lamp over with the other, lambasted the two men that had been planted to

take my body out and stick it under the snow, and then, as I had quit workin' for Hamilton, I thought I might as well come over here and help Sorghum and June to-morrow."

"Then you think Hamilton intends to go through with his plan to wreck the shaft?" Morrison inquired.

"Sure he will. What do you suppose he hired the toughest bunch he could get hold of and bring 'em in here for? Hamilton was out to get this placer when he only thought there might be gold here. He hired us to scare June off so's he could get possession easy. She didn't scare, so he organized this timber camp. All this he did on theory. Now that

he knows the facts, nothin' will stop him."

Sorghum was seated by the fire oiling and cleaning an old .40-90 Sharps rifle. On the table in front of him lay a pile of shiny bullets that had been molded that day. Don took off his coat and hung it on the wall, wiped the moisture from the rifle he had brought with him, and sat down. Mike came and laid his head on Morrison's knee, looking up into the man's face with questioning eyes. Don stroked the dog's head and pulled the silken ears gently.

"Well, old fellow," he praised, "if June keeps her property, she'll have you to thank for it."

To be concluded in next week's issue.

In Next Week's Issue

A Complete Novel

HAWK'S PREY

By Frank Richardson Pierce

Bulldog Carney, alias Hawk McClure, uses his gold-mounted guns for his friend, Catamount Larrabee.

A New Serial

HEREFORD HERITAGE

By George Gilbert

A girl and her uncle and a young puncher oppose a rustling band, with the possession of a hidden herd at stake.

Also Features by

ROLAND KREBS

GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

KENNETH GILBERT

And Others

15c a Copy

At All News Stands



COMES first among us to-night at The Round-up, H. Fredric Young, who contributes the "Interesting And True" page feature to our magazine. Young wants to "borrow a little time," as he puts it, here to-night. So, seein' as how his page is so popular, and as how he's such a good writer and a good fellow, we'll let him do it. Cut loose, Young:

"**FOLKS:** I'd like to caution you who contribute suggestions for consideration for the 'Interesting And True' page, not to send clippings or ideas from contemporary features such as mine. I've got to be original if possible. Certainly, I don't want deliberately to take anything that some one else has used.

"Also, I'd like to say that you must be sure to inclose the proper address. I have had returned to me a few letters which I mailed out to those who sent me suggestions for consideration. And, by the way, almost all those who contribute sug-

gestions are only too inclined to neglect the return postage when suggestions for consideration are rejected for one reason or another.

"I pay promptly each week for any contributions that I accept, and I return promptly unavailable suggestions, but I do ask that return postage be inclosed and that, as I have said, you are careful to give your name and address. Thank you."

John A. Niemczyk, of 5207 Hutchinson Street, Chicago, Illinois, will now take Young's place in the saddle and tell 'em as follows. Let go, John:

"**BOSS AND FOLKS:** Being a constant reader of your magazine for several years, one gets what might be termed 'Western conscious.' When the yen gets too strong and a fellow, tied down in a city, can't bust out in the open spaces, he resorts to literature to satisfy his craving.

"Consequently, may I offer a

humble suggestion: To be more practical, rather than always offer the fictitious, why not run a continuous treatise on ranching, or horse training, et cetera, in the magazine; but without sacrificing any of the existing departments?

"Also, are portfolios of 'A Cowboy's Day' still available, and at what price?"

"Have you any other pictures or literature relative to Western life that are available?"

We'd be glad indeed, John, to follow out your suggestion, but you know first and foremost Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine is a fiction publication. It's true that from its very beginning we have run informative articles and departments, but fiction as fiction, based on fact, is the slogan. We're afraid that if we went cutting into the fiction any more with articles, the boys would rear up and complain.

Of course, as you know, if there's one thing we're hipped on, it's horses, and we could yarn along and hear others yarn along about man's best friend. There's nothing we like better than to talk horses—how to feed, groom, ride, train, shoe, and on and on.

Yes, there are a few more portfolios of "A Cowboy's Day" still available. They are mailed, postage free, for fifty cents, or they are given away with every year's subscription to the magazine, whether you subscribe yourself, or whether you give a subscription to the magazine to a friend.

Just now we spoke of the stories being based on facts. Of course some of the authors take liberties once in a while, but we haven't an author that we know of who doesn't either live in the West now, or hasn't lived

there and been mighty close to the ground.

Take Cherry Wilson, for instance—married to a cowboy and living now in Republic, Washington. Many of her stories, too, have been written from a little cabin 'way up in the mountains. Frank Richardson Pierce some time ago worked his way up to that cabin when Cherry and her husband, Bob, were holed in there. He sent us a photograph of the place, and you could hardly see it for snow. No, you wouldn't have known it was a house had it not been for the door, but the door showed. It just looked like a big drift.

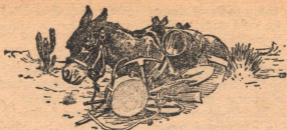
Then there's Kenneth Gilbert, who has a good story, by the way, in next week's issue. Well, Kenneth, he and his family, they've got a cabin 'way back in the woods near Issaquah, Washington. Guns and dogs and the open for Gilbert all the time the year round.

Frank Pierce lives in Seattle, Washington. But Frank can't stand living on the outskirts of a big city very long; he has to get 'way off in the mountains and the frozen places. Wish we could print some of the photographs that he sent us. They show the wilderness, and very often it's a wilderness without trees—he's got up beyond where they grow.

Robert Ormond Case lives in Portland, Oregon. Like Pierce, he has to make pilgrimages into the wilds. They often go along together.

H. Fredric Young, as you know, lives down in Borger, Texas. Glenn H. Wichman and Charles L. McNichols both live in Los Angeles, and that old rancher, George Cory Franklin, is now holed in in Glendale, California.

Well, having located these Westerners for you, we'll let it be continued as to authors' residences until another week.



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.

IDAHO, one of the richest of the Western States in the possibilities it offers the modern gold prospector, ranks high in the minds of many of our mining fans. In search of good hard-rock gold-prospecting areas, Joseph Ramey, of Hoboken, New Jersey, wants to know just what equipment, and how much of it is necessary for such a trip, with Idaho as his destination.

Remember, Ramey, much of Idaho's mineralized country is rugged, mountainous, and considerably high up. You're apt to get snow in midsummer in the upper altitudes, and most certainly you'll run into frequent cold.

That means at the outset that clothing should be warm, and durable. Good weight chambray work shirts, whipcord breeches, stout boots. Boots are perhaps one of the most important items. If you must save, save on something else. A prospector's feet are mighty

important. Give them a square deal. Don't pinch the toes in cheap, ill-fitting, or uncomfortable boots. Regardless of the means of transportation used to get in and establish your camp headquarters, there'll be plenty of rough mountain climbing afoot ahead of you. Water-tight high-cuts, hobnailed for mountain climbing, are perhaps the best footgear. And don't forget heavy socks to go with them.

On account of the rains, better have at least one complete change of clothing. A slicker is a help in wet weather, but a good soaking is not very harmful to a regular outdoor hombre, if he sheds the wet duds and puts on dry ones when he returns to camp.

For Idaho the shelter tent should be of canvas heavy enough to keep out driving mountain rains, and to hold the heat of a stove in cold weather. Yep, a knock-down sheet-iron stove with sufficient pipe, and a sleeve to protect the tent roof, is

a mighty handy thing to have along in that country for cold days, chilly nights—and for drying wet clothing. For permanent camp headquarters another small camp cookstove is close to essential.

Good maps, of course, must not be forgotten. A hundred-foot surveyor's tape will help in laying down end and side lines of a claim more accurately than can usually be done by the pacing system.

A small first-aid kit is a good thing to have along. It will prove many times worth its cost if you should need it in an emergency.

Hard-rock prospecting requires more strictly "mining" tools than are needed by the elementary placer-gold hunter. For the gold-vein seeker, however, the Idaho Bureau of Mines has compiled the following list of tools and camp equipment, "desirable" for one man:

"One gold pan, mortar and pestle, one good ax, one timber saw, a round-pointed shovel, medium-sized miner's pick, heavy jackknife, portable forge and fuel, combined anvil and vise, blacksmith's hammer and tongs, some 10-penny nails (74 per lb.), and a few 20-penny nails (27 per lb.), a claw hammer, whetstone, file, water-tight match box, lantern with five gallons of kerosene, or acetylene miner's lamp with five-pound can of carbide; and one box of blasting powder (40 per cent gelatin), one box of caps, one package of fuse."

So much for mining. Then come the camp items. "Two frying pans, coffeepot, can opener, two baking pans, two water buckets, small galvanized washtub, tin plates and cups, knives, forks, and spoons, soap, towels, two large canvas sacks for transporting perishable supplies when it rains, a reliable antiseptic, and roll of gauze bandage. Fifty or

seventy-five feet of 5/8-inch manila rope is a handy thing for climbing in difficult places and for other uses."

There you have it, Ramey. One other point, it may make good reading to tell about cutting spruce boughs for a bed, and the same may undoubtedly, be a life-saver in times of necessity. But take along a good folding cot, anyhow. Particularly up in Idaho where the nights are a little too cold to sleep on the ground. The extra rest you get from a comfortable night's sleep is an important factor in preserving your daytime energy. And don't forget plenty of bedding—to put under you as well as over you up in those minerally rich Idaho mountains.

Also interested in hard rock is James K., of Oakland, California, who wants to know how the position of a vein of ore is described.

James, the technical terms used by prospectors and miners are the "strike" and the "dip" of the vein. The "strike" is the compass direction the vein takes horizontally, or on a level. That is, the "strike" may lie north and south, or east and west, or along any of the intermediate points of the compass.

The "dip" is the slope or inclination of the vein downward into the earth, measured by the angle the vein makes with a horizontal plane. The "dip" is expressed in degrees. For instance, a vein cutting straight into the earth vertically would be said to have a 90-degree "dip." A perfectly level vein of course, would have a "dip" of zero. The more common "dip" angles lie between these extremes.

The correct "dip" and "strike" of a vein will afford a pretty good identifying description of it in any locality when combined with accurate geographical placement.

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.

THERE is a great stretch of range land for the trekker who takes the trail from southern California northward into Idaho. "West Coast Range Hombre" is here to tell you—all about life in the back country of the range lands.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I can cook anything from frogs' legs to Irish stew over anything from a camp fire to the largest army range. I have a camp outfit and an income that will allow for bacon and beans for two, so I am on the lookout for a good pard who doesn't mind

to pal up with an old-timer who is still young at fifty-six. I would like to find a good pard who has a car, and who would like to go prospecting. I know the mountain ranges from southern California up to Idaho, but I like California for placer mining. I understand how to locate the blind gulches where the large pockets of gold are found, and also understand locating water in the mountain ranges. I am acquainted with most all kinds of Indian remedies, and first-aid nursing. So maybe I could do my share toward being a good, all-round pard.

Well, hombres, what do you say? I don't mind answering letters!

WEST COAST RANGE HOMBRE.
Care of The Tree.

These lonely women want your suggestions and your advice, folks.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

We are two widows—mother and daughter—and are planning to make a trip up the coast next summer and find, if we can, a little cabin somewhere between San Francisco and Seattle where we can spend a lazy summer and plan what is the thing to do in the future. There is a boy of twelve and also a girl of seven. A summer of loafing must be as inexpensive as is possible, and then we must buckle down to the serious business of making our living, and we would like to find a small town where a small store selling notions, art goods, et cetera, would make expenses. You see, we have been thrown on our own so suddenly that as yet our plans are very vague. We do know, however, that we are leaving here in the early spring, and we would like to hear from different localities and will visit those that sound interesting.

We are very lonely, too, and will enjoy your letters, folks. EDITH VAN DOREN.

842 Elizabeth Street,
San Francisco, California.

This older member is seeking friendship, folks.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I have recently lost my wife, and—it seems—all interest in life. I am fifty-eight years old, a home-loving hombre with no home to love, old, broken, poor, and alone. I need friends who understand.

A. T. SMITH.

Route 1, Lexington, Tennessee.

A North Carolinian is interested in Colorado.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I wish to get in touch with some one who lives in the State of Colorado who will furnish me with accurate information concerning business opportunities there. I am forty years old and have some knowledge of watchmaking and repairing. However, I am not in perfect health, and I desire a change of climate.

I will gladly furnish any information about North Carolina and all other Southern States, as I have been in every Southern State as well as in the East and Middle West.

RUSSELL P. CLEVE.

Box 4, Vanceboro, North Carolina.

You folks interested in amateur radio, speak right up.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I wonder if some of you folks are interested in amateur radio. If so, I would greatly appreciate it if you would drop me



West Coast Range Hombre is very well acquainted with the back trails of the West coast country. Wear your friend-maker membership badges, folks, and speak right up to this old-time Westerner who is looking for a pard.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

a line. I have a transmitter, just built, and I am waiting for my license to operate it. I would also appreciate any mail from commercial radio operators.

I am twenty-three years old, folks.

CURLEY.

81 Sherwood Road,
Medford, Massachusetts.

This Oregon miss is here to corral Pen Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I could tell quite a bit about large steamships and ocean liners to girls who are interested. I am sixteen. I will be pleased to exchange snapshots with any one.

JULIA EASTMAN.

Box 65, Marcola, Oregon.

These folks would like to run a farm or ranch on shares.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Is there a rancher or a widow or an elderly couple who find it hard to pay wages for hired help? Would any one be willing to give a middle-aged couple and daughter a chance to work on shares? We are Westerners, but through illness and loss

during hard times we have had to come East to visit. We find ourselves practically stranded here, and we would like to get back West again.

My husband is not a rider, but he can look after the farming part on a ranch and he is well educated for any business part. If some one needs help on shares, or if any one has a store and would like it run on shares, you may obtain references and find that we are honest, sincere folks.

We would like to go back to Colorado or States west of the Mississippi.

HOMESICK WESTERNERS.

Care of The Tree.

Mary hails from Pennsylvania.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I would like very much to hear from girls who are interested in quilt making, flowers, good books, poetry, and everything else that girls like. I'm twenty. Come on, girls; let's be friends.

MARY N. BIAWELL.

36 Parsonage Street,
Pittston, Pennsylvania.

A Canadian member is here to yarn with you-all.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I would like the old Holla to corral me some Pen Pals from all over the world—Pals between the ages of twenty and thirty. I am very interested in horseback riding, tennis, basket ball, hockey, and dancing—both professional and ballroom.

MAZEL KEPNER.

Sovereign, Saskatchewan, Canada.

Here comes a girl from Missouri.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

My hobby is collecting songs. I have over six hundred old-time songs—including cowboy ballads, hobo and mountain songs. I should like to exchange some of my songs for some I do not have. I am twenty-six years old, and very lonely.

GEORGIA McMASTER.

1730 Missouri Street,
St. Louis, Missouri.

A junior member is waiting for your letters, girls.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a little girl twelve years old. I'd love to have Pen Pals from anywhere in

the United States, but especially from California and New York. I'd like to get letters from Canada, too. I love to sing, read, coast, roller skate, dance, and collect movie-star pictures. I can play a "uke" pretty fair, too. I will exchange snaps and post cards. LOUISE LEMIRE.

26 Howard Street,
Lowell, Massachusetts.

An Oregon miss is out to corral Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a lonely sixteen-year-old girl who would like to hear from Pen Pals. I will exchange snapshots with any one who wishes to do so. So come on, Pen Pals, and write to me. MILDRED "BOBBIE" COLE.

Box 54, Marcola, Oregon.

Every one will want to drop a line to this old-time Westerner.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am an old man, eighty-three years old, and I like to receive letters and would like to hear from every one, everywhere. I live on a ranch in east-central Montana, not far from the Fort Peck Dam. I am especially interested in stock raising, horses, and cattle. Here is hoping for some letters. I do not get about much, as I am paralyzed from the waist down. OTTO ANDERSON.

Benzien, Montana.

From Alabama comes this twelve-year-old junior.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a very lonesome boy down here in the State of Alabama, and I would like to have lots of Pen Pals. I would especially like letters from the Western States, although I would like to get letters from all over the world. I am twelve years old. I would like to correspond with boys from ten to sixteen years of age.

CHARLES BOYD.

Duncanville, Alabama.

Aileen hails from Missouri.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I'm a fourteen-year-old girl from Missouri. I will exchange snaps and tell about Missouri, New Mexico, and other interesting places where I've been.

EILEEN BOYTS.

120 Davidson Avenue, Chaffee, Missouri.



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.

AMONG the most interesting sections of the Far West are those remaining virgin territories, which appeal especially to the hombre with the pioneer spirit. Such a reader is Fred P., of Cincinnati, Ohio.

"A little later in the spring, Mr. North, I'm hitting the trail for Oregon to look that State over, with the idea of settling down there permanently. The part I'm particularly interested in is Lake County, which

I am told is sparsely settled and mostly undeveloped. Now you may think I'm plumb goofy to be considering such a region, but frankly, that's the sort of proposition I'm keen about, and you'll prove yourself a real friend if you'll give me the low-down on this section."

We're certainly going to do our level best to meet that friendship test, Fred, so be prepared for an earful. Lake County is in the southern part of central Oregon, east of the Cascade Mountains. Out in the

Far West it's commonly called "The Last Frontier of the Beaver State." And it live up to this name for this vast domain of seven thousand nine hundred and twenty square miles, has a population of only three thousand nine hundred and ninety-one, and is practically, as you have heard, all undeveloped virgin territory.

Of this enormous acreage, over one half is unappropriated, consisting largely of desert, bunch-grass land. Approximately a million acres are in the national forest land, which is utilized for summer grazing for cattle and sheep. About four hundred thousand acres is privately owned timberland, while two hundred and fifty thousand acres are tillable.

At the present time live stock is the principal industry in Lake County, and about two hundred thousand sheep and forty thousand cattle are supported by the farm and range land. Diversified farming is growing in importance, however, the agricultural sections consisting largely of meadow lands watered by the streams, dry-farming lands, and irrigated projects. The Goose Lake Valley project covers approximately forty thousand acres; the Silver Lake project covers eight thousand acres, and the Summer Lake project will irrigate about six thousand acres.

Practically all the agricultural land lies at an elevation of between

forty-one hundred and forty-five hundred feet. As you will savvy, this makes a rather short growing season, but crops mature rapidly, and almost any of the hardier field and truck crops may be grown successfully. In the more protected sections of these valleys, the hardier varieties of tree and bush fruits are produced.

There are also lumbering and mineral interests in this county. The largest town is Lakeview, the county seat, with a population of

approximately seven hundred people. Land values are low, and many opportunities are offered the home-seeker on the irrigated projects. There is little opportunity to engage in the live-stock business in a large way, due to the fact that practically all the range lands are now occupied to their utmost capacity.

SPECIAL NOTICE

HOMESTEAD LANDS IN ALASKAN VALLEYS

At the present time there are two districts in Alaska that have been opened to the homesteader and are particularly attractive to the prospective settler—the Matanuska Valley near Anchorage in southern Alaska, and the Tanana Valley in the interior of the Territory, adjacent to Fairbanks. Both these valleys are situated on the line of the Alaska Railroad. For additional information about these homestead lands write John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Speaking of range lands reminds us of the questions which George S., of Providence, Rhode Island, is asking about a certain part of the Lone Star State.

"Ever since I was old enough to read about the West, which is my favorite part of the map, I've seen many references to the Texas Panhandle. Now, Mr. North, won't you kindly tell me just what is meant by this term and something about that particular region?"

With the greatest of pleasure, George. The Panhandle is the upper Texas portion of the Great Plains

region. It is a high, level plateau, traversed by the deep, narrow valley of the Canadian River, and deeply indented by the gorges along the upper reaches of the several branches of the Red River. There is no native tree growth except the cottonwoods along the breaks, but the prairies are covered with buffalo, grama, and other excellent grasses.

Although one of the leading oil fields of the country lies in this territory, the Panhandle Plains are celebrated as a large-scale cattle-raising country. It has been demonstrated, however, that the soils here are adapted to crop growing, and farming is increasing. Wheat is the leading agricultural product, and in addition a variety of feed crops are grown.

There is still a large ranching industry, especially along the western border and in the breaks, and there is a large stock-farming and dairying industry. Folks down that way say this section is destined to great future development both as a producer of wheat and feedstuffs, and as a stock-farming country.

Lake County, Oregon, has an area of 7,920 square miles and is practically all undeveloped virgin territory. Land values in this section are low, and many opportunities are offered the home seeker on the irrigated projects. John North will gladly tell interested readers where additional information may be procured about this last frontier of Oregon.

Well, it's a great future that Larry W., of Louisville, Kentucky, is looking forward to, for he's bound for that fascinating region, the Apache State.

"Principally for my health's sake, Mr. North, but also for fun, I'm

trekking out to Arizona soon. Although a bit under the weather I'm not too sick by a long shot to enjoy all the advantages that the Apache State has to offer. My goal is Prescott, and I'd surely welcome information about this city and its vicinity."

The Panhandle of Texas has long been a famous large-scale cattle-raising country. Recently, in addition to ranching, farming has been on the increase, and some of America's finest wheat is now grown in this section. For an address from which additional facts about the Texas Panhandle may be obtained write John North.

You're on your way to a mighty fine spot, Larry, for Prescott, the mile-high city, is hard to beat. Situated in a beautiful mountain district of Yavapai County, it is the mecca of many health seekers, tourists, and summer vacationists. With an altitude of five thousand three hundred and forty-seven feet, an ideal year-round climate, and a supply of fine mountain water, this town of eight thousand population has much to offer its visitors.

The mountain country near this Arizona town is rich in scenic attractions, and you'll revel in its rugged beauty and the opportunities it offers for healthful outdoor life. You'll also have some thrills in store in the way of typical Western outdoor celebrations, for Prescott is famous throughout the country for the picturesque ceremonials of the Smoki Indians, the chief feature of which is a weird snake dance. This town is also noted as the "Cowboy Capital of the World," and its annual rodeo takes its place along with the most outstanding round-ups and cowboy's contests of the entire West.

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.

THE first successful automatic machine gun in the world, known at its birth in 1884 as the "Maxim Gun," was invented and developed by Hiram Stevens Maxim, an American. For many years it was manufactured by the English firm of Vickers Sons & Maxim, now known as Vickers, Limited, so the modern edition of the old Maxim is called the "Vickers." Interestingly enough, the inventor was knighted for his efforts and is recorded in history as Sir Hiram. Let's hear what the great gun genius has said, himself, about his discovery:

"In 1881," explained Sir Hiram,

"I visited the Electrical Exhibition in Paris, and was made a chevalier of the Legion of Honor on account of some electrical and chemical work I had done; and about a year later I was in Vienna where I met an American whom I had known in the States. He said: 'Hang your chemistry and electricity! If you wish to make a pile of money, invent something that will enable these Europeans to cut each other's throats with greater facility.'

"This made me think of the time when I was about fourteen years of age and was making drawings for my father of a hand-worked machine gun. I also thought of the powerful kick I got the first time I fired a

United States military rifle. On my return to Paris I made a highly finished drawing of an automatic rifle. Happening to meet a Scotchman in Paris whom I had known in the States, I showed him my drawings. He invited me to come to London. I did so; and shortly after I started an experimental shop at 57 Hatton Garden."

Next week we shall tell you more about the Maxim gun, but here are answers to a few of this week's letters.

Rose was rifled.

Harry Rose was working in his Philadelphia delicatessen store when four bandits entered and ordered Rose to stay quiet while they ransacked the place. Although one of the robbers pointed a loaded gun at his head, Rose ducked under the counter, drew a pistol, and killed the gang leader at the first shot. The robbery was not accomplished.

No sniping courses.

FRANCIS H. FANE, South Chicago, Illinois: No, there are no courses for snipers in the United States, to the best of our knowledge, although you are correct in stating that there should be a close tie-up between range work and battle conditions to properly train military shooters.

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.

Don't swap bolts.

L. C. SANDERSON, Columbia, Missouri: About once each year we advise readers against changing bolts from one rifle to another without checking head space, and yet accidents from this cause continue to be reported. Head space, as you know, is the distance from the face of the bolt to the base of the cartridge. If it is not correct, the resultant gas pressure from discharge of a cartridge may blow out the bolt and injure the shooter.

No belts on aviation guns.

P. C. B., Buffalo, New York: Machine guns for ground troops use cotton belts, but belts flying in the wind beside an airplane would cause trouble, so the modern method is to hold cartridges together by links that drop off as the cartridges are fired.

Rim versus rimless cartridges.

THOMAS R. EDMONDS, Ogden, Utah: The rimless cartridge is more expensive to make, but packs, feeds, and extracts without catching in the rims or projections of other cartridges. The rim cartridge avoids failures due to wear of the chamber or short-length cartridge cases by bedding its rim against the face of the barrel. Compromise types are called the semirimless and the belted cartridges.

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.

CHRISTIANSON, ELMER JAMES.—His last known address was care of Mr. Conrad, Oakville, Connecticut. He is a farmer. Has brown eyes and light hair. Is five feet eight inches tall and weighed about one hundred and fifty-eight pounds. Would like to hear from him or any one knowing his whereabouts. Address Robert Christianson, Box H, Winnebago, Wisconsin.

CHEVES, HUBERT.—Generally known as Greets. Please write to the girl who thought lots of you and the Honeymoon Hotel. Do you remember? I hope you do. Marian.

RAYMOND or PARNELL, CLYDE.—Who used to go to the Catholic school in Tacoma. At one time he lived in Calboose, B. C. His stepfather was a resident of Victoria. His mother is German. It is possible that Raymond may be living in Kansas City or in the State of Kansas. He was thirty-one years of age on November 1, 1934. Clyde, I would like so much to hear from you; so would my mother. Do you remember living with us on Salt Spring Island? We still live there. Write to Ivy Campbell or Akerman, care of Western Story Magazine.

CAREY, LEE.—When last heard from he was in Mitchell, South Dakota. I am a widow now and working in Rapid. Would love to hear from you. Write to your Old Pal, care of Western Story Magazine.

ROBINS, LESLIE.—Usually called Red. Formerly of the U. S. M. C. Was last seen in Washington, D. C., in March of 1930. Red, if you see this, won't you please write to your old pal? I'll go anywhere you are. Any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly advise J. C. Brath, Box 159, Togus, Maine.

WHEELER, DATUS ENSIGN.—Any one knowing his present whereabouts, kindly notify V. W. Jones, 265 North Fourth Street, East Logan, Utah.

PIERCE.—I am trying to locate my father's brothers and sisters. One brother was John Pierce, but I do not know the names of the others. Father grew up in Unionville, Iowa. At one time he farmed near Adams, Oregon. Would be glad to hear from any of my uncles and aunts, and would be grateful for any help in locating them. Please address Joseph E. Pierce, Hotel Ideal, 1005 West Madison Street, Chicago, Illinois.

PELTS, C. L.—Cherie wrote you at New York address. Please write again and send address. Mande.

COLEMAN.—Would like to get in touch with either Dewitt or Winfield Coleman, or their sister Margaret, whose married name is unknown to me. Or Minnie Coleman, their mother and the widow of Byron Coleman. Dewitt and Winfield formerly lived in Rochester, New York. It was also their mother's home. It is possible that Margaret is living in Washington, D. C. A cousin would like to get in touch with them in order to clear up some genealogical data. Please address Spencer Coleman, 208 North Fifth Avenue, Mechanicsville, New York.

COLEMAN.—I am trying to compile a genealogy of the Coleman family and would like to hear from Colemans of the white race who know anything about their ancestry. Kindly address Spencer Coleman, 208 North Fifth Avenue, Mechanicsville, New York.

LANE, MR. and MRS. BERT.—Mrs. Lane's given name is Stella. Bert is said to be somewhere in California. They have two children, Bert and Stella. The undersigned will pay a reward for information leading to their whereabouts. Kindly address Mrs. O. H. Larson, Blue Earth, Minnesota.

CARROL, A. E.—Was last heard of in Jackson, Amador County, California. Would be about thirty-one years of age. Has light-brown curly hair. Any news would be appreciated by W. A. Clendenen, Brownsville, Oregon.

MALTBE, PHILIP.—He is six feet three inches tall and blond. Was last seen at Battery F dance club in Sylvania one night in December. He accompanied me when my father was in an accident. Any one knowing where he is now located, please write to Virginia Fisher, R. R. 9, Box 557, West Toledo, Ohio.

KENT, CHARLES SPURGEON.—He was born in Alabama on May 27, 1897. When he left he was living on a house boat in Barataria, Louisiana. His wife is very sick and needs him. Any one seeing him, kindly bring this notice to his attention. Any information concerning him would be gratefully received by Mrs. Charles Kent, P. O. Box 260, Marrero, Louisiana.

MORROW, HATTIE and TOMMY MAY.—When Hattie was five years old and Tommy May three, they were taken from Huchurst, Georgia, to Jacksonville, Florida. That was fourteen years ago. Their mother's maiden name was Sally Smith. Hattie had red hair, and Tommy had dark-brown skin and coarse black hair. I would be pleased to hear from them at any time. Address Thomas Morrow, Shelby, North Carolina.

NOTICE.—The following persons are requested to communicate with Lawrence B. Hixicker, Lock Box 56, Hammondspont, New York:

Gerdiner, Grant or Garlen, formerly of Buhl and Barber, Idaho. Was in Yakima, Washington, four years ago.

Feres, Joe or Jose. Four years ago he was in Laurel, Montana, and Sacramento, California.

Baumgartner, Arthur. In 1929 he was known to have been in Kansas and Ohio.

Berkley, Jack. Was in Kansas in 1929.

Estes, Cecil. In 1932 he was in California and Washington.

WEAVER, ZELBA O.—His last known address was Eldorado, Arkansas, where he was employed in the near-by oil fields. That was in 1925 or 1926. Zelba, if you see this, get in touch with me. Any information as to his whereabouts would be appreciated. Address Eugene B. Weaver, P. O. Box 62, Milledgeville, Georgia.

JOHNSON, MRS. HAZEL.—She is thirty-four years of age. Has very beautiful hair. Cataract on right eye shows very plainly. Is five feet six inches tall and weighs one hundred and thirty-five pounds. Has one son, fifteen years old. Her husband's given name is Art. When last heard of she was in Kuna, Idaho. Any news of either Hazel or her son would be gratefully received by Painter, care of Western Story Magazine.

PETERSON, ELSIE.—Who used to live on South Second Street. She had blue eyes and brown hair. Weighed about one hundred and ten pounds. She should remember me from one time when I walked down the street with her and we met her father who took me to task for being with his daughter because of the difference in our ages. He told me to get a high-school girl my own age. Would surely be glad for news of her. Address Robert M. Worth, 1061 South First Street, Frankfort, Indiana.

MANTO, ROSS.—Sometimes known as Russel Manto. Seven years ago he left his home for Chicago, Illinois, taking his three children with him. The children were Sam, Lelan, and Larry.

Helen would be now thirteen years old. She had dark curly hair and brown eyes. Lelan and Larry were twins and would be ten years of age. They had medium-brown wavy hair and light-brown eyes. The mother of these children and other relatives in Montana are very anxious to locate them. Any one having any information regarding them, kindly advise Mrs. Earl Charlton, Box 54, Camas, Montana.

SOARS, M. J., MARY, JOE, JOHN, and ROSE.—M. J. is my father, and Mary is my mother. The others are my brothers and sister. In 1914 I left home in Loma Linda, California, at the age of twelve. I never saw any of my family since then except my father. In 1947 he came to see me at Hollywood, California. Since that time have had no communication with any of my people. Father and mother had separated prior to 1917. Father was a Seventh Day Adventist. He would be about fifty-three years of age. I was born on March 1, 1902. Any one knowing any of my family, please communicate with Thomas M. Soars, 517 Gladys Avenue, Los Angeles, California.

ROBINSON, JOHN WILLIAM, SARAH, ROBERT, and JOE.—Their brother Harry is anxious to locate them. Thirty years ago John, William, and Sarah were in Saratoga Springs, New York. Robert and Joe had left for Alaska. Any news of any members of the family would be deeply appreciated. Address Mrs. C. B. Friel, 1613 East Thirty-first Street, Kansas City, Missouri.

BELSKY, JOE.—Frequently known as Gypsy, the Wanderer. Please get in touch with your old buddy, Bob. Want to know how things are going with you. Address Meyer Strausberg, care of Tarmo Club, 2036 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York.

ATTENTION.—Will Dr. Williams, Nurse Murphy, Dr. Bell, Herman Mall, or any other doctors, nurses or patients that were in U. S. P. H. S. Hospital No. 25, Houston, Texas, in Wards 12—22 during June, July, August, and September, of 1921, kindly communicate with A. L. Tomison, 1510 North Third Street, Albuquerque, New Mexico?

MCALLISTER, HARRY, FRANK, and HAZEL.—They were all born in Buffalo, New York. Later they moved to Ithaca, where their father died in 1905 and the family separated at that time. Any one able to offer any information concerning them, please write to Mrs. Nina McAllister Guest, 140 Chautauqua Street, Fredonia, New York.

BARTLETT, WILLIAM CLYDE.—Your old pal is anxious to hear from you. Just write a nice long letter and address it to Bill, care of Western Story Magazine.

ATTENTION.—Any of the boys who were on duty in C, D, or E galleys, or the sick boy on Mare Island, California, from July 1, 1918, to February 1, 1919, are requested to communicate with A. L. Tomison, 1510 North Third Street, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

MCGRATH, GERARD.—Usually called Jerry. He visited his sister in the fall of 1930 and has not been heard from since. Any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly advise his sister Marie, care of Western Story Magazine.

NOTICE.—Marie O'Neill was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1910, and was placed in a foundling home in New York City when she was eighteen months old. When she was three years and two months she was taken with some other children to Kansas. There she was taken in adoption by a family named Gehlitz. Her mother was Mrs. Elizabeth O'Neill, and it is thought that she is still living in New York City. Any one knowing her, kindly get in touch with Marie, care of Western Story Magazine.

MOREN, CLARENCE.—Please write at once. Junior and I need you. Everything is O. K. Still. Address me 511 West 169th Street, care of R. W. Peck, New York, New York.

DILLON, JOE, and son, EARL.—They were last heard of in La Grand, Oregon. Any one knowing their whereabouts, kindly notify Mrs. Josephine Schroeder, 1214 East Park Street, Enid, Oklahoma.

RUSTENBACK, MR. and MRS. HARRY.—They are relatives of mine, and I would appreciate hearing from any one who may know where they are now located. Address Estella Gruber, Summit, California.

PERENTI, ANGELINA.—She is my mother, and I have neither seen nor heard from her in years. She would be about sixty-five years of age. I have been told that she lives somewhere around One Hundred and Sixteenth Street in New York City. Any news would be thankfully received. Address Mrs. Florence Calfora, 34 East Washington Avenue, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

TROUT, GEORGE A.—A native of Ohio. Would be about sixty-two years of age. When last heard from, around ten years ago, he was in California. Is thought to have been engaged in the automobile business in either Oakland or San Francisco. An old pal who worked with him in San Louis Votos, Mexico, market houses would like to get in touch with him. Any one able to furnish any information concerning him, please address Box 203, Mercedes, Texas.

BUSH, JOE.—Is believed to be living somewhere in Pickaway County, Ohio. His wife's name is Marie. They have two children, Robert and Lloyd. In 1920 they lived at Farmdale, Ohio. Any news of them would be greatly appreciated by William McGillis, Farmdale, Ohio.



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