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WESTERN

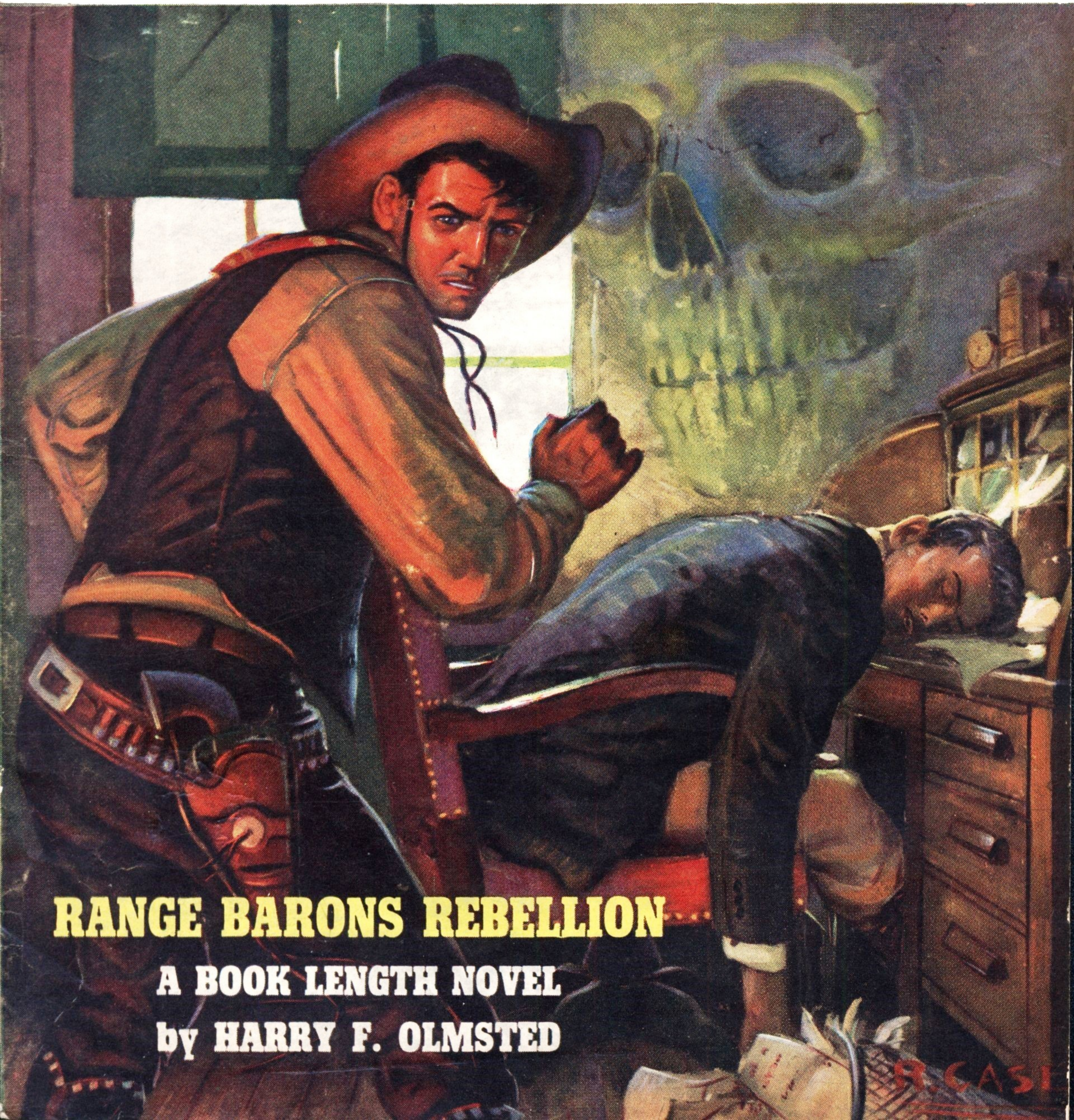
STORY

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CENTS

SEPT. 7, '40

VOL. 185 • No. 2

SEPTEMBER 7, 1940



RANGE BARONS REBELLION

A BOOK LENGTH NOVEL

by HARRY F. OLMSTED

"Boys, in 1 minute through that door will come our new star salesman—"

JUST when we had got to thinking our sales were doing extra all right, J. P., the sales manager, whammed home the old body punch at the first-of-the-month meeting.

"Boys," he said, "in just one minute, through that door will come our new star salesman . . . and I expect every man to cooperate with him to the fullest."

No kiddin', a pin dropping would have sounded like an exploding bombshell. Jim Smith looked at me, I stared at Ed Johnson. What was going on? Who was this newcomer? What kind of a bird would he be? Who was going to be "fired"? J. P. sure had us in a dither—and I mean dither!

And then, through the door staggered the office boy carrying a tray as big as a cart wheel. On top of it stood twelve big, gleaming bottles of Listerine Antiseptic.

J. P. grabbed the nearest one off the tray and slammed it down on the desk.

"Here he is," he bellowed, "and none of you guys had better laugh, either. For a long time I've noticed that some of you men—and I'm not mentioning any names, all too frequently have a breath that would knock a cow down. It all adds up to this: *If I've noticed it, customers must have noticed it, too.* And that's bound to be bad for business. After coming up against a case of halitosis a couple of times, a customer is entitled to close the door on you—for keeps."

We all stirred uneasily.

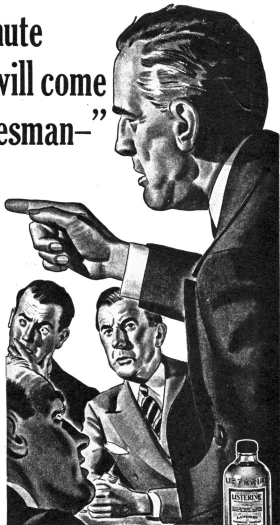
"From now on," J. P. continued, "this is an order: take a swig of Listerine Antiseptic every morning before you hit the street. Get that? Not now and then after a big night . . . but every morning. Step up, gentlemen, and get your bottle."

Maybe J. P. was right, and maybe it's only coincidence, but I'm doggoned if the sales for the next six months weren't better, in spite of a lot of tricky stuff from our competitors.

How's Your Breath?

In business, it's just common sense to take precautions that your breath doesn't offend. Odor seldom gets an order . . . often loses one.

More and more smart salesmen recognize this and



start the business day with Listerine. Notable for its anti-septic and deodorant power, Listerine renders the breath sweeter, fresher, purer.

Why not get in the habit of using Listerine Antiseptic yourself? It makes your mouth feel so wonderfully fresh and clean. The moment Listerine enters the oral cavity, it begins to halt the fermentation of tiny food particles which, some authorities say, is the principal cause of bad breath, then overcomes the odors that fermentation causes.

Keep Listerine Antiseptic handy at home and in the office, and tuck a bottle in your bag when you travel. Rinse the mouth with it before every business and social engagement. It really pays! Lambert Pharmacal Co., St. Louis, Mo.

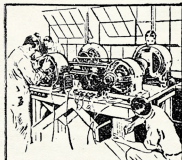
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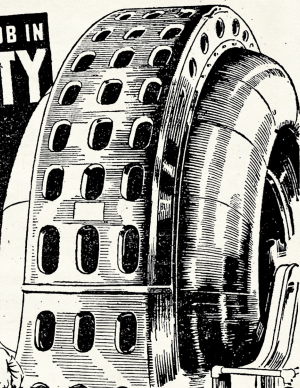
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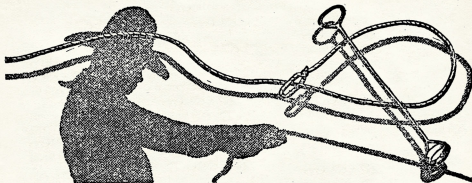
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The Roundup

We heard from L. L. Foreman, the creator of the ever-popular Preacher Devlin, the other day. L. L. got himself a homestead out New Mexico way last year, but he's been spending a lot of time down in Florida, where, when he's not tangling with our friend, The Preacher, he's tangling with the big ones—for as everyone knows, Florida fishing is fishing with a capital F.

"However," writes L. L., "I still get reports from my homestead up in the Cebolla Valley in New Mexico. That million-dollar rancho I mentioned before is about to be turned into a boys' camp. And the State is working to create a fish-stocked lake within two miles of my place. Also, there's some talk of improving what is now a natural ski slope, for winter sports, right along my valley. And my nearest neighbor, believing that the valley is about to blossom out as a popular playground, now that it has been discovered by tired businessmen of Santa Fe and Albuquerque, is building a small store and eatin' shack. I guess I'll have to move up

even higher back into the mountains if I want peace and quiet.

"A fella wants to buy my grand piano—remember my orphan grand piano? But I've taken an obstinate fondness for the blamed thing, at long distance. Besides, my friends up there won't let me sell it—threaten to run off anybody who tries to take it, and they've moved it into their house. It took every male in the valley, and a few volunteers from outside, to carry that piano from where it was to where it is, a distance of some three miles. Now they're trying to coax a piano tuner to go up and work on it. With true Western generosity, they assure me that they won't even send me the tuning bill."

Friend Foreman sure sounds like a right versatile hombre—we told you some time ago that he'd sent us a photograph of an oil painting he'd done of Preacher Devlin, and a mighty fine piece of work it was, too! We wonder if he can make music on that little old "orphan grand piano," which compares with the six-gun music Preacher Devlin puts out?

"Just want to assure you," says S. Omar Barker in connection with BOBCAT BOOMERANG, which you'll find on Page 59, "that all the incidents in this bobcat yarn are based

directly upon the personal experience and observation either of myself or of my woodsman brother Elliott, now State game warden of New Mexico.

"The bobcat on the saddle was his hard luck, not mine. What he actually did, however, was to get a choke hold on the cat with one hand, a similar grasp on the saddlehorn with the other and choke the cat to death. But I've simply written it the way it might have happened to me on a bronc under such circumstances.

"Even the dog in the story is a pretty fair prototype of the dog, Rip, that I have now, who finally did tree me a couple of bobcats this past winter."

From the deep South, Birmingham, Alabama, to be exact, comes a compliment which sure makes us right proud. "It's been quite some time since I wrote you," writes Carl B. Pollard, "but I'd like to take this opportunity to say that Western Story continues to become better and better reading matter.

"Congratulations to W. Ryerson Johnson. His serial SOUTH TO SONORA was one of the best I have ever read in any publication. It was a story for my money any time. Let's have more like it."

Thanks for writing, Mr. Pollard, and we know you, as well as the legion of Johnson's fans, will be pleased to know that we've just bought another story by this fine writer—a thrilling drama of those exciting days when the pony express was riding "high, wide and handsome."

And from Henry W. Fillman, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, comes the hope that we will publish more of the Three C stories by Seth

Ranger in future issues. "It is a most vital necessity," writes Mr. Fillman, "that these interesting and instructive stories be published from time to time. Our young men particularly should read stories of this type."

We feel, as Mr. Fillman does, that these stories of modern American youth have much to recommend them. This has been proven by their immense popularity not only with the boys who are in the CCC camps throughout the country but the many other readers who have found these yarns enjoyable. We call Mr. Fillman's attention to our issue of August 24th, in which appears Seth Ranger's latest story about the conservation boys—THE THREE C TRAIL BREAKERS.

In next week's issue—

When Kenneth Gilbert spins a yarn, you can bet dollars to doughnuts it's the goods. TRAIL OF DOOM, his latest full-length novel, is the hair-raising story of an hombre who stowed away on a schooner manned by the deadliest crew of cutthroats that ever sailed the seven seas. Rich treasure was the lure that drew the *Bluefeather* to northern waters, and you can share in the dividends, too, by joining Shark Flynn in his dare-devil adventure.

Ray Nafziger contributes a dramatic and unusual short story, BOOMERANG BRAND, and Pete, the Circle J's famous longhorn steer, pays W. S. another welcome visit—but that's only a sample of the good things in store for you in next week's big issue, so be sure to get your copy hot off the griddle.



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**Here's how
I did it**

by **S. J. E.**
(NAME AND ADDRESS
SENT UPON REQUEST)



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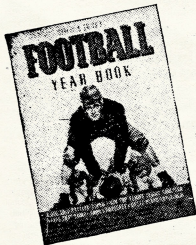
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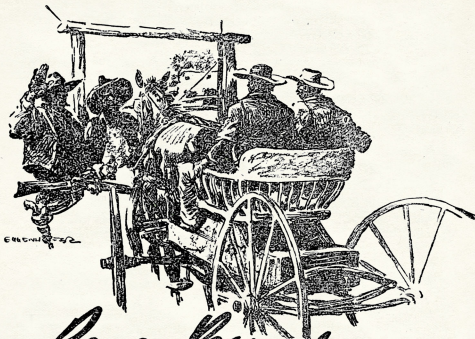
The most informed work on gridiron strength available during this football season.

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FOOTBALL YEAR BOOK

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25



Range Riders **REBELLION**

BY HARRY F. OLMSTED

CHAPTER I

A DISCOVERY

Russ Newhall lifted weary eyes from the page of the record book, turned them longingly out the window where the sun lay warm and bright over Santa Fe. For long, trying days, he had been checking his own records against those of the Land Office, an onerous task for a man used to the wide outdoors. He was about finished, and out of his brain-wearying efforts had come one certain satisfaction. The settlers he had located were on the proper par-

rels. He'd bet his last dollar on that now.

Two hundred miles away, Fiddle Valley homesteaders were waiting and praying. Gaunt, bitter men and their weary, toilworn wives, drawn to the desert country at the height of the dry-land craze. Things had not gone well with them. Their first crops had been failures just as subsequent ones must be. They were defying nature's immutable laws and a sense of defeat was driving them to compete with their more fortunate neighbors—cattlemen owning more favored locations, grants

handed down from the Kings of Spain and vast upland holdings purchased long ago with Civil War script.

The cattle overlords of Fiddle Valley had laughed at farmers tilling the dry floor of the basin, laughter that had turned to rage when those farmers switched to cattle. The cattlemen were jealous of their sway, just as the homesteaders were jealous of those who hogged precious streams, springs and waterholes behind gun-guarded barb wire. Here were the seeds of trouble. Homesteaders had come to pale at the drone of a hornet, where the hornet might be a leaden slug. Night riders were juggling section corners, throwing grave doubts into the minds of the settlers.

Things had come to a head when Abe Simmons, located by Russ Newhall in section fifteen, found himself in section nineteen. Burgess McKelvey, boss of the Rafter MK and owner of the ornate Capitol Saloon, in Chimney Butte, had called attention to Russ' error. Russ had countered by calling for a resurvey. And now, for the twenty days that the lean, bronzed surveyors had been at work, he had been searching government records.

Russ sighed wearily, turned his eyes back to the page. He moistened his finger, turned a leaf. And suddenly his weariness was gone as words leaped out at him—the most astounding words. Here, misplaced among dry surveyor's reports, was a presidential order, bearing the great seal and the scrawled hand of Ulysses S. Grant. The order denied the right of freehold to the owners of many Spanish grants, among them Rancho Ojos Azules in Fiddle Valley, restoring same to the public domain.

For long minutes, Russ Newhall

stared at the evidence of this amazing discovery. He started to call to one of the drowsy clerks, then changed his mind. This was the same as finding money. On Ojos Azules were live streams, lush meadows where grain grew waist high and a wealth of springs. All these waters, so essential in Fiddle Valley, sank into the sands before leaving the grant. Now all this was open to public entry.

Aside from the rich fees it promised him, Russ was pleased. Ojos Azules had been owned by arrogant Dan Travers, slain from ambush only three months ago by one of his many enemies. Perhaps, Russ thought, the man had known the worthlessness of his title all along. That could account for his ill temper and unfriendliness. Russ closed the book, kicked back his chair. As he rose, one of the clerks came over.

"How you coming, Newhall?" he asked.

"Finished," said Russ, suddenly afraid of his knowledge. "I'm going home."

OUTSIDE, on the street, he stood awed by the possibilities of his discovery. What should he do? First, there must be secrecy. He'd have to return to Chimney Butte and initiate a private survey. He knew the Mexican major-domo of Ojos Azules and might somehow get him to agree to the survey without rousing suspicion. Then once the stakes were set, he could locate the whole area.

On his way to the hotel, it seemed men stared at him, as if reading his secret. And when he was in the stage, bound west, his tight nerves made him fancy he could hear the hoofbeats of thousands of riders, stampeding to get in on this land bonanza. This would make the val-

ley, and put an end to the empire Dan Travers had ruled for a lifetime. It would be a bombshell loosed in Fiddle Valley.

Darkness fell soon after the stage left Santa Fe. And through the night the vehicle rattled and bumped along, stopping at relay stations to change teams and provide refreshments for the passengers. Russ was tired, but there was no sleep for him, thanks to four drunken miners bound for Mesa Grande. High water in the Animas caused a five-hour delay in the early morning, setting the passengers down in Mesa Grande—on the El Paso Northern, at daylight.

It gave Russ four hours to wait before the departure of the Chimney Butte stage. So, after eating at the station house, he bought his ticket, handed it to the hostler at the stable and entered the coach. He was asleep at once.

He was awakened by the bumping and swaying of the stage, the cracking of a whip and the plaintive yells of Pop Ainsley, the driver, at the straining teams. Russ opened his eyes and straightened, suddenly embarrassed, ill at ease. There was one other passenger—a girl.

Russ was uncomfortably conscious of the unattractive picture he had made, long legs sprawled, snoring maybe. The girl was looking at him, a tired smile on her lips. Russ nodded, lifted his hat. She ignored the courtesy, to his annoyance. But when he rubbed his stubbled jaws, he didn't blame her. He must look pretty rough and uncouth. Yet his pride told him that his youth, his physical fitness and bearing should have outweighed his appearance.

The girl was pretty, sitting there so poised and completely at ease. Seemingly, she was so wrapped in her own thoughts as to be quite im-

mune to the details of the flashing landscape. Once Russ caught her smiling slyly. Again he saw sadness cloud her lovely features, draw down the corners of her full, warm mouth. He wondered what she was thinking, and debated the question of starting the conversation.

Reluctantly he decided not to try to penetrate her aloofness. But when the coach topped the summit and she still took no interest in the breathless panorama of Fiddle Valley, spread out to the west, he broke the long silence. This was his land and he was jealous of its beauty. What ailed this girl?

"Fiddle Valley," he announced. "Prettiest scope of land in God's outdoors."

Eagerness touched her face. "Are . . . are we there now?"

"Not by ten miles," he said, surprised by her vagueness. "We're at the head of Thirsty Gulch that leads right into the valley. Those blue peaks are the Organs. Over yonder rise the Gunsight Hills." He pointed out landmarks, conscious that she stared fixedly, her strange sadness more pronounced.

"You make it sound exciting," she said, wistfully. "I . . . I wish I could see it."

Russ knew then, and was shocked. "You're blind!" he gasped, and felt shame for condemning her aloofness. She hadn't known he was there. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't know—"

"Don't pity me," she said. "I have learned to make mental pictures, imagine beauty. I'm pleased my eyes didn't betray my blindness. That is my only hope, doctors tell me."

"Then they can do something?"

"Certain doctors can," she admitted. "But they're far away and very costly. Too costly—yet."

"How did it happen?" asked Russ.

"It was a horse," she explained. "One I had been warned against. He pitched me into a snubbing post and my head was injured. When I recovered I . . . I couldn't see. But enough of me. Tell me about your valley. It's mine too, now. I'm Danette Travers."

"Travers!" repeated Russ Newhall. "Not—"

"Niece of the late Dan Travers. He . . . he willed me his Ojos Azules grant. Perhaps some day I'll realize enough from the ranch to help me see again."

RUSS felt cold fingers grip his nerves, remembering the murder of Dan Travers, by parties unknown. Remembering too the certain fate of the Ojos Azules, this girl's one hope.

"I'm Russ Newhall," he said slowly.

The girl's brows knitted. "Newhall. I've heard of you. You're the land agent who furnished the alibi for that suspected nester. The one who had quarreled with Uncle Dan over a slaughtered beef."

"Abe Simmons," acknowledged Russ. "I located him on a quarter section near the Ojos Azules. I know him and his family well. I was out with him at the time of the murder, looking up the corners of an adjoining section of grazing land for his son who had just come of age. Abe Simmons couldn't have killed your uncle."

The girl nodded an acceptance of the facts and Russ went on: "Dan Travers fought with most of the settlers about stolen beef. He made lots of enemies, came to hate them all alike and to put too much pressure on them. The poor devils, doomed to failure in dry farming, turned to cattle. Your uncle and

the other cattlemen resented that and hammered at them all the harder." He drew a long breath. "I located most of the homesteaders and I'd be a poor sort if I didn't take their part."

She nodded. "I understand." Then, with increased thoughtfulness: "They will hate me, I suppose. How will it all end?"

"Their feelings toward you will depend upon yourself," Russ said. "But things are coming to a head. Somebody has been scrambling section corners, frightening the homesteaders into thinking they have built their homes on the wrong land. They came back at me for locating them. I went to Uncle Sam. A resurvey was ordered and is almost complete. Some cattleman will sweat, and rightly so, for I'm sure of my locations. For three weeks I've been searching the records in Santa Fe, digging up information that will bring in a lot of new people. Senseless warring never halted progress yet."

Danette seemed excited. "Progress! A person is a fool to try to halt it. Anyone should realize that. The free range will pass and the only big holdings will be the grants. I'm human enough to be glad I own one. When I was born, my father had to ride a hundred miles for the doctor. I grew up without once seeing the smoke of a neighbor's fire." She bowed her head, plucked idly at her gloves.

"I'll do all I can to smooth things out," she said at last. "Please drop the word that if a settler needs beef, he can get it at Ojos Azules by asking—not stealing. Will you?"

"Yes," Russ answered huskily, wondering why his words ran so contrary to his thoughts. "I doubt if the homesteaders have been stealing beef. But I'll tell them. They'll

be pleased, if only to know they have one friend among the big outfits. They'll love you."

He reached out, took her hand. And suddenly was plunged almost into her lap as the brakes set and the coach shuddered to a stop. Harsh voices reached them. Then the door was jerked open by a slender, masked man and Russ found himself looking into the black muzzle of a .45.

CHAPTER II

GALLANT OUTLAW

HOLDIN' hands, eh?" the road agent chuckled. "Ain't that touchin'. Break it up! Help the lady out, feller—an' move fast!"

Carefully, Russ helped Danette alight. "Holdup!" he whispered. "Don't be afraid." He could not help noticing and admiring her calm courage.

The bandit backed away before them, well-disguised by his scarf mask and a buttoned slicker. Another man, huge, snarling and similarly clad, stood by the box, his gun on the driver.

"All right, mustanger!" he rapped. "Toss down your scattergun! Easy now." He caught the piece. "Now hand down the lady's grips. She's goin' with us."

"Hold on," cried Russ. "You can't—"

"Shut up!" The little man jammed his weapon into Russ' ribs, removed the gun from his shoulder holster. "A stinger, eh?" he taunted. "Who'd have thunk the land shark of Chimney Butte toted a hide-out. Tough, ain't yuh?"

"Tough enough," said Russ quietly. "As you'll find out if you try to take this girl off the stage."

He jumped and the girl shuddered as the big road agent's gun exploded.

Grizzled Pop Ainsley cried faintly, slid from the box, thudded into the road and lay still. The big man spat.

"Payoff, you stubborn ol' fool," he raged, and turned wild eyes to his partner. "Lay off augerin' with that shorthorn, pard. Get the gal's stuff off the deck."

"Wait!" ordered the smaller man. "There's somethin' here—" He waved his hand before Danette's eyes. She stood quietly, her eyes unblinking. "No dice, feller. This gal's blind. I want no part of this business."

"Blind?" Those yellow-edged eyes widened. "What of it? All the better; she can't see so much. Get her stuff."

The little man held stubbornly to his refusal. His partner glared, cursed, then lifted off the girl's two carpetbags himself. For one brief moment, the smaller outlaw's attention was diverted. Russ sprang at him. But the little man whirled, struck swiftly, his gun barrel crashing off Russ' head and his words dinning Russ' flickering consciousness. "You crazy fool!"

RUSS rolled, shook his buzzing head and dived for the smaller outlaw's legs. He missed, crashed heavily and lay groaning. Objects blanked, spun crazily in his vision. Then suddenly his mind cleared. But he was weak as a kitten and numbed with despair. For he was alone with the dead driver of the stalled coach.

Pulling himself erect, Russ reeled to the coach. A canteen hung from the seat rail. A long drink and a gushing baptism cleared his pounding head. Looking down at Pop Ainsley's lifeless body, his anger surged.

Tracks of the outlaw's ponies led

south into a tumbled wilderness. Russ steeled his trembling muscles, cut a wagon pony loose and took the trail, gripping a rifle taken from the interior of the coach.

He had followed those tracks a mile when he heard the echoes of the shot. It came from his right. He kicked his mount in the ribs, the beating of his heart an agony inside him. They had slain Danette, he was certain. But why? What was back of all this?

Crazed with rage and fear, he hurtled into an arroyo, his gun level. He pounded along the wash, hoof-beats muffled by the sand. Sweeping around a bend, he came upon a scene, dreamlike and unreal. Smoke wisping from his gun, the smaller road agent stood there, looking down at his partner, who was sprawled out on the ground dead. The girl was not to be seen.

The killer turned snapping eyes on Russ, his gun ready. And Russ dared the man's mania as he drew rein, yelling: "Where is she? What have you done with that girl? His weapon was cocked and leveled and he would have shot the man dead save that he had to know the answer to his questions.

They faced each other over their guns as Russ dismounted.

"Well I'm damned," the bandit said huskily. "I'll say you've got guts, feller—"

"Where is she?" Russ demanded again.

"Don't beller so loud," warned the masked man. "She's all right. I wanted her out of this. I'd took about all of Rufe Chastain I could stummick."

"Chastain?" Russ started, stepped over to rip the mask from the fallen man's face. It was true. The dead outlaw was Rufe Chastain, one of

the settlers he himself had located in Fiddle Valley.

Shocked, Russ straightened to face the watchful figure with the leveled pistol. Trying to pierce the man's disguise, he decided that he could be any one of four men he had placed on quarter sections in the valley. Pete Colfax, Bill Suters, Waspy Bawn, or even Abe Simmons, whom he had saved from complicity in the Travers murder. But he didn't sound like Simmons, whom Russ knew better than the others. In fact there was nothing recognizable in his strained, emotion-husked voice.

"Damn you!" Russ started toward the man. "Get off that mask. Who are you? Don't you know you've thrown a shadow over every settler in Fiddle Valley with this fool play? What's the idea? Where's the girl?"

"Back up, feller!" the outlaw said warningly. "Don't come near me. This was Rufe's idea an' he figured to have it his way if it killed him. It did. I wanted none of this job, wanted it less when Rufe plugged Pop Ainsley. Listen, I'll make a swap with you."

"You're Waspy Bawn!" said Russ, with conviction.

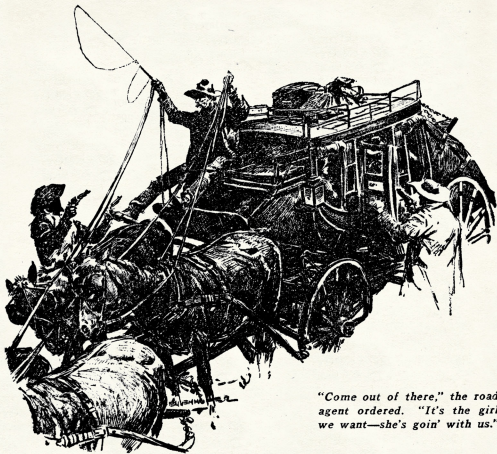
"You're a liar!" the little man snarled.

"Let it go," said Russ. "What do you mean by a swap?"

"You take the blind gal to Chimney Butte an' tell the sheriff you killed Rufe after he shot Pop Ainsley. An' just don't know nothin' about me, savvy? Agree to that an' I'll take you to her. Refuse an' we'll shoot it out."

Russ stared at him for a long time. "It's a deal," he said finally.

The outlaw grunted, tossed Russ the pistol he had taken from him. "Double-cross me," he warned, "an'



"Come out of there," the road agent ordered. "It's the girl we want—she's goin' with us."

"I'll sure look you up, mister. Come on." He rose in the stirrups, led the way to the ridge, where he drew rein, a grim and deadly little figure. Bitterness edged his tones.

"I've never made a success of anything, Newhall, not even of being bad. The gal's down yonder, where you see that pony. Take care of her, 'cause she's gonna need it. McKelvey's whittlin' Ojos Azules down to a two-bit cow spread. Burgess McKelvey, he's the one. Hidin' his dirty work behind gents posin' as settlers. Yeah—gents you located yourself. Even the killin' of Dan Travers, the boldest of his schemes."

"Man alive!" cried Russ. "Do you realize what you're saying? That

testimony will hang McKelvey higher than a kite."

The cold eyes above the mask narrowed to slits. "Yeah, an' me too, Newhall. I'm not that big a fool. I'm puttin' you wise for your own good. Use what I've told you to protect yourself and that blind gal. But turn it against her and the settlers and I'll kill you. That's a promise." He raised his hand suddenly, spurred away.

RUSS stared after him, as profoundly stirred as when he had discovered the title of Ojos Azules to be worthless. Danette Travers had affected this little outlaw strangely, just as she had him.

Slowly he rode down the slope to find the girl.

The spare pony waited there, Danette's valises tied at the cante. But the girl was gone. He had let himself be tricked, Russ feared.

Nevertheless he called her name. Over and over. After a while, he walked to the edge of a cutbank and looked over. And there the girl lay, still and white and pitiful. He leaped into the bottom, certain they had slain her and thrown her body into the dry gulch. He was swearing to find the second killer and settle for her murder as he knelt beside her.

But there was no wound and she was breathing. Gently Russ lifted her, brushed back her hair. An ugly bruise flamed on her forehead, and then he knew she had tried to escape and had fallen into the gulch, a distance of about ten feet. Horror touched him. Elsewhere she might easily have fallen a hundred feet to her death. Danette stirred in his arms, moaned.

"Danette!" he called insistently. "It's Russ Newhall. You're all right!"

"Newhall!" She roused, her lips making his name. "Those men?"

"They're gone. Everything's all right."

"Thank God!" she breathed, and clung to him like a child. "I ran when they quarreled and left me. I fell—"

"You might have killed yourself," he said gravely.

"Perhaps," she admitted. "But they would have killed me anyway, sooner or later."

"Why?" demanded Russ. "What were they up to?"

"They were taking me to their boss—who I don't know, to be forced to sign over Ojos Azules to him. They couldn't have let me live after

that, could they?" She pressed against him, trembling. "I thought they had killed you, Russ. I heard them strike you and, when we had ridden away, they quarreled about killing the driver and letting you live. One went back and when I heard the shot, I felt sure they had killed you. How did you escape, Russ?"

"Luck, Danette," said Russ, knowing then the little outlaw had spared him. "A lot of luck. I'll carry you back to the horses." He lifted her, made the climb. And when he put her in the saddle, Danette seemed troubled.

"I heard you shoot, Russ. You killed them? Who were they?"

Russ corrected her. "I only killed one. Rufe Chastain, a homesteader I located on Cow Creek, near your south line."

She caught her breath and her face tensed.

"I see," she said tightly. "A nice neighbor. For him and his kind, the murder of my uncle would have been all in the day's work."

Her scorn stung Russ. He burned to defend himself, but he restrained the urge and held his tongue. How could he support anything he might tell her about Burgess McKelvey? It would sound fantastic if he repeated the charge of an outlaw who had taken her off the stage. And even if she believed him, it would only terrify her needlessly.

Never before had Russ fully realized the futility of mere words. Her confidence in him was shaken and argument would be in vain. He rose to the saddle, conscious of an oppressiveness, of some sinister shadow, of some evil force threatening to destroy him. Gone was the elation engendered by his discovery in Santa Fe. Gone was his dream of seeing Ojos Azules dotted with home-

steadier houses, fences and fields. Even if he could bring himself to dispossess this girl, he knew he would have that crazy outlaw to deal with. Torturing cross currents surged in his brain. All he could see ahead was chaos, hopelessness and defeat.

CHAPTER III

SCENT OF TROUBLE SMOKE

NIGHT had shrouded Fiddle Valley when Russ brought the stage into Chimney Butte, three hours late. The arrival drew a throng and excitement ran in a strong tide through the town with the news that death had struck on the stage road.

Russ set the brakes at the stage station, brushed aside a fusillade of questions and climbed from the box, shouting for the sheriff.

"Here I am, Newhall! What's up? Towering Tom Steptoe, the law in Fiddle Valley, elbowed his way to the stage. There was no excitement in this emotionless lawman. He did things in a calm way, without haste and his results by this method set him fairly above politics.

Russ ignored him for the moment, watching willing hands lift Pop Ainsley's body from the boot, listening to their arguments as to whom should break the news to the old mustanger's widow. The stage agent had opened the coach door and was helping Danette out.

"Just a minute, sheriff," Russ said and stepped to a waiting buckboard ringed by mounted cowpunchers. At the ribbons was a lean oldster whose snow-white hair and mustache accentuated the swarthinness of his face.

"Juan," Russ laid a hand on the old man's shoulder and, keeping his voice purposely low, "I've brought

in your new boss. She's been knocked around some and should get home. You know she's blind?"

"Blind?" The old man cringed. "Seguro que no! No eyes, señor?"

"Blind," Russ repeated. "She must be looked after and guarded, Juan. Let her never be alone. And keep Burgess McKelvey off the place, you understand, Juan. Keep him away!"

The man looked startled. "Por-que, señor? Why? Señor McKelvey was the good friend of the Señor Travers. He—"

Russ dug his fingers deep into the man's arm. "You'll have to trust me, Juan. Until I can learn more, do as I say. If you don't . . . if anything happens, I'll hold you to strict account. And say nothing of this to the lady. Sabe?"

Alarm flickered in the old major-domo's eyes. Then the station agent led the girl over.

"Danette," said Russ. "Here is your major-domo—Juan Bojorquez. He's brought your cowboys here to take you home. Juan, this is Miss Travers."

"Thank you," murmured the girl, as Russ handed her into the seat. "You've been kind."

Russ could find no answer. Bojorquez and his men were staring at her with awe and respect. Russ jerked his head at Juan, staring hard into his eyes. The old man gulped, nodded. Then he was loosing the ponies.

Russ stared after the rig until the night blotted it out. He was wondering at the undercurrents the girl stirred in him, wondering too what she was thinking about him and his relationship to the growing trouble of Fiddle Valley. With clouded eyes, he turned to the waiting sheriff.

He told the story of the holdup, detail by detail, without violating his

promise to the strange little outlaw, killer of Rufe Chastain. "The man who got away?" he echoed the sheriff's query. "No, I didn't recognize him, sheriff. He was slickered and masked."

"No chance it was Abe Simmons, eh, Newhall?"

THE cold, sarcastic query drew Russ around, instantly aroused. An arrogant, thick-necked man glowered at him, rolling his cigar aggressively. Russ recognized Burgess McKelvey, boss of the Rafter MK and proprietor of Chimney Butte's ornate Capitol Saloon.

For a long minute, Russ stared at the man, fighting back the impulse to smash the tilted cigar into that taunting mouth. Here, according to the bitter little outlaw, stood the man responsible for the sore spots in this fine valley. A man committed to greed and utterly ruthless. A murderer. Unfortunately, Russ reflected, there was nothing he could do about it—yet.

"McKelvey," he said, his voice strong with anger, "as usual, you're shooting off your mouth. Without knowledge of this, why should you bring Simmons' name into it?"

The boss of Chimney Butte spat on the ground. "You have the reputation of fighting for those you locate, Newhall. You can't make a liar out of yourself after painting Simmons as a saint, can you? Chastain was one of your men, and it's a cinch the other one was too. Riff-raff. The kind I kick out of my place when they want to be located!"

A murmur ran through the listening crowd. Ever a convincing talker, McKelvey's subtle attack on Russ carried many men with him. Russ could feel the impact of their swift resentment and it fired him. He clenched his hands into fists to

keep from springing at McKelvey.

"You don't kick anybody out of your saloon as long as they have money to buy your liquor, McKelvey," he retorted. "Everybody knows hell raising comes out of a bottle, not from the sweat of honest work. Since I located Chastain, he's spent more time drinking at your bar than pushing a plow. I found him a piece of ground; you've kept him drunk. Folks can judge which is worst. Before you start bearing down on me, suppose you get your own house in order. You criticize me again and it will bring us together, man to man. Understand?"

Russ was hoping the man's patent savagery would burst its bonds, give him the opening to humble him. But McKelvey remained cool, scornfully controlled.

"I think I understand," he said icily. "I'll criticize whomever I choose, in the interests of law and order. If that brings us together, so be it. Remember, Newhall,"—he slapped the big gun at his hip—"I'm no rough and tumble street fighter."

"Nor me," said Russ curtly. "When the time comes, your way is mine."

He turned back to the waiting sheriff. "That's all I can think of to tell you now, Tom. If you need me, you know where to find me."

"I've heard enough to worry me for one night, Russ," was Steptoe's slow rejoinder. "Better go home and cool off."

Russ pushed on through the crowd, his anger now against himself. He had played the fool, flaring up like that. Far better to have taken McKelvey's slurs and let the man think him cowed; keep the man off guard until he had gnawed to the kernel of the nut. All he had done was to forewarn McKelvey that his

motives were under suspicion. But one thing Russ knew: Some day he would have to kill Burgess McKelvey—or be killed.

Nerves on edge, Russ was fumbling at the lock of his office door when a man stepped from the shadows to touch his arm. Russ spun about to face a spidery little man who had come to Fiddle Valley with the government survey crew.

"Hello!" Russ greeted, a little surprised. "What you want?"

"A talk," the man said briefly. "Name of Jim Alhorn—U. S. Marshal's office." He flashed a badge.

Russ's stomach contracted and the smell of trouble was in his nostrils. "Come on in," he invited, entered and made a light.

Alhorn sat, eying him owlishly as he chewed a frayed cigar. "The resurvey is finished, Newhall," he announced. "It proves two things sure."

"What?" Russ asked curiously.

"You were right about the corners. And you sure know this country. How?"

"My dad commanded Fort Outpost," Russ told him. "Part of his job was to protect the men who originally surveyed this scope of country. I knew every corner by heart. Why?"

"You've done a good job locating, Newhall, despite the shuffled stakes," Alhorn told him. "We can't find a flaw in your locations. But I have found three men who played checkers with the monuments. I jailed them an hour ago."

Russ stiffened. "Who?"

"The foreman and two cowboys of McKelvey's MK."

Russ settled back in his chair, disappointment written in his face. "They're small fry. Why don't you jail McKelvey? They're only earning his pay, following his orders."

Alhorn squinted. "Prove that, can you?"

"No." Russ confessed wearily.

"Neither can I, Newhall. Those boys swear they did the job, assume full responsibility for the crime and maintain McKelvey knew nothing about it. He abused them shamefully when I brought them in to-night."

"He would," Russ said bitterly. "Paying for every curse while he walks free. Nothing is gained by jailing them."

"It's hard to gain against the McKelvey's of this world," murmured the marshal. "All we can do is the best we know how to. I'll be pulling out in the morning, Newhall. If you learn anything, let me know, in Santa Fe. Here's my card—and watch yourself. If McKelvey's behind this, he may walk soft for a while. But he won't forget you started things."

He left that thought behind for Russ to mull over, along with his other problems. All together, it made a pattern little conducive to sleep. Rolling in his bed, Russ debated the matter of telling Danette Travers of her worthless title, in order that she might at least use her land rights to conserve a tiny part of her uncle's empire. The truth could not keep forever, and once it was out there would be such a rush as Fiddle Valley had never seen. Madmen, fighting for the choicest locations. But it would take nerve, Russ decided, to tell her, more nerve than he could muster. Tomorrow, maybe, he could face it.

In the morning, he was glad for a lull in business. His mind was too full to cope with the whims of finicky, prospective settlers. An hour after noon, a heavy step on the threshold lifted his frowning gaze. And Burgess McKelvey stood there

rolling his cigar. As always, he was dressed in the height of fashion, and surprisingly his arrogant face wore a pleasant expression.

"Howdy, Newhall. Busy?"

"Busy," Russ agreed curtly. "What is it this time?"

McKelvey dropped his leg over the corner of the desk. "Newhall," he said, "we acted like kids last night. I apologize. We're grown men, with too much sense to fight. I bucked you when you came because I was dabbling in the locating business myself. You took it away from me, more power to you. I have no hard feelings."

"That's decent of you, McKelvey," said Russ, surprised at this change of front. "What's on your mind?"

McKelvey's smile broadened. "I'm sorry my men scrambled the corners, Newhall. Can't figure what got into them. Hope they get the limit. If I'd been locating, I would have been at sea—which proves you know your business. Hereafter I'll send you all my prospects. Now I've got a job for you."

Russ stared at him. "Me? What do you mean, McKelvey?"

"I want you to represent me in a deal. Acting as my agent, I want you to buy Ojos Azules. Danette Travers can't hope to run the place. She ought to be glad to get rid of it. I'll go as high as fifty thousand dollars. Five percent to you, beside what you can get from her. Interested?"

CHAPTER IV

SNAKE TRACKS

FOR long moments, Russ only stared at Burgess McKelvey, his brain busy with grim thoughts. Here, if his information was correct, was the boss rustler of Fiddle Valley.

The one who had ordered Dan Travers' murder, who beyond a doubt had hired Rufe Chastain and his soft-hearted gun partner to take Danette Travers off the stage, hoping thus to acquire Ojos Azules from the helpless girl. Balked in that, he was offering to buy it for fifty thousand dollars—a fortune.

Knowing the man and his place in this pattern, Russ gave way to the pleasure of rare opportunity. McKelvey was putting a double-edged weapon into his hands. Danette had little to sell for the huge sum that would insure the high-priced treatments to restore her sight. By right of eminent domain, she could demand title to the quarter section embracing the home place—but no more. McKelvey could buy that for his fifty thousand. The rest—more than thirty thousand acres—would be open to public entry. That would break McKelvey, wring payment from him for his crookedness.

"Interested!" Russ echoed. "Sure I'm interested, McKelvey. But after all, I'm only a land locator, not a realty agent."

"Nonsense, my boy!" McKelvey said patronizingly. "You're in the land business for profit. Profit you've earned because of the trouble those devils of mine caused you. From my angle, you're the one to handle the deal. You see, you can do business where I can't."

Russ was puzzled. "What do you mean by that?"

"Frankly, I can't get near Ojos Azules, Newhall. Those fool Mexicans turned me back at the gate with guns. They're guarding that girl like she was a queen."

"She is," said Russ.

McKelvey smiled thinly. "My idea exactly. I don't blame you, Russ. If I was twenty years

younger, I'd give you some competition. But when you marry her, I don't want you owning the ground I aim to have for my own. I'm offering hard money that she can handle you better than she can the grant. You're the fair-haired boy who saved her life, and I'm depending on you to persuade her to sell. Can you do it?"

Russ considered it, suddenly frightened by the thought that if the sale went through and McKelvey found he had bought a pig in a poke, he could turn the law against Danette, alleging fraud and pressing action for recovery. He cast the fear from him. Fraud involved intent to cheat. Danette didn't know the facts; nobody knew except himself. And, as for recovery, Danette would leave with her money. He, Russ, would give her time before cracking down on McKelvey by loosing the news that would rock Fiddle Valley. He rose to face McKelvey.

"I'll act as your agent and try to induce Miss Travers to sell," he agreed.

"Fine!" cried McKelvey, pumping Russ' hand enthusiastically. "Great! I knew I could depend on you. I'll have my lawyer draw up a contract of sale and deliver it before noon. Gideon Burns, the bank attorney; you know him. You take him to the Travers girl and get her to sign the contract. Then I'll send out for the money. You know fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money. When I get it, we'll meet at the bank and complete the deal. Satisfactory?"

"Satisfactory," said Russ with a smile as bland and unreadable as McKelvey's own. "Providing you give Danette thirty days to get off the grant."

"Anything you say," grinned McKelvey. "I'm surprised you

don't ask for more time. See you later."

Russ watched him go, his mind racing over the legal aspects of the deal. He felt sure of Danette's willingness to sell for that amount of money, but he was anything but sure of her right to the money, once the invalidity of the grant became known. He would have to stand in the breach, he knew that. And it would bring him squarely against McKelvey—with guns. That would be the only way.

TWO hours later, Gideon Burns came to the office in his red-wheeled buggy. He was young, well-groomed, suave, with nervous, birdlike movements. All business, he opened his brief case and allowed Russ to read the contract. It was all in order, penned in neat script and worded in heavy legal phraseology. Satisfied, Russ handed it back. Moments later, he was beside Burns in the rig—headed for Ojos Azules.

The lawyer, who seemed nervous and taciturn, maintained silence during the trip. Russ tried to interest him in various subjects of conversation, but finally gave up. The man only grunted, slapped his horse with the lines and stared straight ahead. As McKelvey had said, guards were posted at the ranch gate. Here there was a delay, while they sent for old Juan Bojorquez.

The major-domo heard Russ' explanation, nodded and led the way to the big adobe house in its setting of outbuildings, where a lone hill rose from the valley floor to turn Fiddle Creek sharply. They found Danette sitting in a flower bordered patio. Color heightened her beauty and her white teeth flashed as Juan identified her visitors.

"I'm glad you've come, Mr. New-

hall," she said cordially, and gestured. "Isn't this a beautiful place? Juan has pictured it for me, and Maria, the housekeeper. Everyone is so kind."

The two men sat down. "Did Juan tell you about the condition of the ranch, Danette?" Russ asked.

The question touched her face with soberness. "He has told me the worst, Russ. It's pretty bad, isn't it? There have been heavy cattle losses. It looks as though I won't be able to make money here for several years." She sighed. "Oh well, I'll build back. I'll make it."

Russ cleared his throat. "Would you be interested in selling, Danette?"

She started. "Selling? Why—"

"I have a client who will pay fifty thousand dollars—cash. You can use that, Danette."

"Fifty thousand!" The proposition seemed to stun her.

"Fifty thousand," repeated Russ. "Enough to hire the best doctors in the world, with enough left over to see this world with your restored sight. It's a rare chance, Danette. What do you say?"

Her eyes were sightless, but they could weep, and did now. "What can I say but yes, Russ? It's a dream come true."

"I'm glad," said Russ. He explained the routine which must be followed. "I've brought Mr. Burns, McKelvey's lawyer with a contract of sale. I've examined it and found it all in order. Would you like to have Mr. Burns read it aloud?"

She nodded and the lawyer fumbled in his brief case, drew out the document and droned through it. When he had finished reading, Danette was smiling like an excited child.

"Fifty thousand dollars—I can hardly believe it. Can you have the

deed drawn, Russ? I'll come in day after tomorrow to sign at the bank."

"I'll take care of it, Danette."

She called to the housekeeper for pen and ink, signed her name to the contract. Russ affixed his name as witness, then took his leave, the girl's thanks ringing in his ears.

TWO mornings later Juan Bojorquez brought Danette to the bank. She seemed a little nervous and so dependent on Russ as to frighten him. She clung to his arm as he led her into the bank, and Russ smiled with pride at the look of envy on the faces of the watching townsmen. But, for him, there was one fly in the ointment.

"Under the contract, Danette," he said, "you have thirty days. How soon will you leave?"

Her lips trembled. "Very soon, Russ. I'm very tired of living in the dark."

"And when you see again?" he asked, a catch in his voice.

She turned her face toward him. "I'll want to see the man who saved my life," she said softly. "Who knows, I may even decide to live here—if I find it as lovely as your description."

The half promise of that excited him strangely. Then they were in the bank president's private office, meeting George Houston, the lean, dry banker, and the beaming Burgess McKelvey.

"I'm pleased that you decided to sell, Miss Travers," McKelvey said with bluff heartiness. "Not that I wouldn't be proud to have so lovely a lady as a neighbor, but I'd been dealing for years with Dan Travers to acquire his Ojos Azules. Just before his . . . er . . . death, we came to an understanding. I'm happy you can carry out his wishes."

"So am I," the girl assured him.

"You can't know how much this means to me. Where is the deed?"

"Here," put in the banker. "I have Mister McKelvey's check, subject to your signature."

He pushed over the deed. Russ dipped a pen, placed it in Danette's hand and guided it to the proper line. For a moment, she hesitated, then signed her name. Russ' hand trembled as he blotted it and handed it to the banker, who gave it to McKelvey. In exchange, he passed Russ a sealed envelope.

"You'll find the amount right, I'm sure. And there's money to cover."

McKelvey was smiling as Russ opened the envelope. "I'm ashamed to do this, Newhall," he said, with a sudden cutting edge to his voice. "But it's your deal. I made it in two checks, Miss Travers', and your commission." He tucked the deed in his pocket and smiled tauntingly.

Russ' senses were suddenly keen, swift-moving. One glance at McKelvey and he knew something was wrong. Hurriedly, he withdrew the checks, staring at the impossible evidence in his hands. One check, in favor of Danette Travers, was for five hundred dollars. The other, made out to him, was for a like amount. A gasp escaped him and his eyes swiveled to McKelvey. The man's glance slid across Russ' face triumphantly. Utter silence held the office and Danette, sensing the tension, laid her hand on Russ' arm.

"What . . . what is it, Russ?"

Russ ignored her question, his eyes burning McKelvey. "Start talking, McKelvey. Explain this!"

"You should kick, Newhall," the rancher sneered. "I kept my word and gave you half."

Russ leaped at him, upsetting a chair. "You double-crossing crook!" he raged. "Give me that deed! Give it up, damn you, or I'll—"

He halted, looking into the muzzle of the gun that had flashed from McKelvey's shoulder holster.

"Stand back, Newhall!" McKelvey warned. "You made a deal to swindle this little lady and you're going through with it. Try anything with me and I'll kill you. Five hundred was the deal and five hundred it is."

"Five hundred!" breathed Danette, shock and incredulity in her tone.

"Liar!" Russ pressed close to McKelvey's gun and the man gave back. "The contract called for fifty thousand—"

"Fifty thousand!" McKelvey repeated. "You're crazy. Who'd pay fifty thousand for empty acres without cattle or improvements?"

The banker was on his feet. "Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" he exhorted them. "What is the matter?"

Russ' first swift, destroying impulse dissolved. "I'm sorry for flying off the handle, Houston," he apologized. "But this man has swindled Miss Travers. He won't get away with it. There's a contract of sale that states the conditions, and I'll see that he meets them or returns the deed. Danette—" he swung to the girl. "Don't worry, Danette. McKelvey can't hurt you."

Her face was white. "The contract said fifty thousand," she said in a small faint voice. "The lawyer read it."

"What is the contract?" demanded the banker, troubled. "McKelvey, if you're involving this bank in some sharp practice—"

"Not at all, Mr. Houston." McKelvey whipped a paper from his pocket, without shifting his drop. "This deal is all regular. Newhall is pulling a grandstand play, trying to back out of the bargain. Gideon Burns took the contract to Ojos



Azules and Miss Travers signed it, with Newhall as witness. Read it."

THE banker reached for the sheet, but Russ was first. One glance was enough. The document was like the one Danette and he had signed, except for the amount—five hundred dollars instead of fifty thousand. He knew then that Gideon Burns had switched sheets on Danette. And he, Russ Newhall, had failed her. Prey to such anger as he had never known, he said harshly:

"McKelvey, I'm going to see Gid-

eon Burns. He switched contracts on us at Ojos Azules. It's my fault and I'm going to correct it. I'll wring the truth from that crooked shyster if I have to kill him. And when he talks, you better be far away."

He strode from the office, a red haze before his eyes. He could see nothing except his own carelessness and a picture of Danette cheated of her heritage, turned out into a dark world, without money, roof or hope.

He remembered nothing of climbing the outside staircase or coming



Russ toiled the stage in and wild excitement ran through the town at the news that death had struck on the stage road.

to a door marked: "Gideon Burns, Atty." Nor did he bother to knock. He burst into the lawyer's office like a one-man cyclone. And then he

had halted, his rage turning to horror.

Gideon Burns sat with his arms hanging, with his head on his desk

and a knife buried to the hilt in his back. Sometimes death is not easily ascertained. But there was no doubt here. Gideon Burns was dead—murdered!

How long Russ stood there staring, he never knew. At last he walked over to the lawyer, touching him gingerly. No need to ask who had killed the man; Russ knew that—just as he knew who had killed Dan Travers. And still it was something he could not prove. Shaken, helpless and without constructive aim, he was standing beside the body when the footfall roused him. Sheriff Tom Steptoe stood in the doorway, hand on his gun, a long-drawn: "A-a-a-ah!" falling from his lips. He came in, grim and purposeful.

"Well, Russ, I see I'm too late."

"For what?" asked Russ dully.

"To save Burns," snapped the lawman. "McKelvey came to warn me that you were on your way to kill him. I hurried, but—"

Russ stared. "You—you think I killed Burns?"

Boots pounded the hallway and curious men milled at the door, awed in the presence of death. A queer, strained look held the sheriff's face as he searched Russ' eyes. And then, as if he had settled some puzzling problem, he turned away, lifted Burns' head and let it down again. Under the chair a pool of blood showed. The sheriff stabbed it with his forefinger, wiped the stain on his bandanna.

"Newhall," he said with finality. "You come with me. Mack—" he signaled a man in the doorway. "You stay here with the body till the coroner comes. The rest of you clear out. Git!"

Pushing their way through the crowd, Russ and the sheriff went down to the street. Burgess McKelvey awaited them, a chill smile on

his broad face, his unlighted cigar in his mouth.

"I heard what happened, Tom," he said, ignoring Russ. "I'm sorry I couldn't get to you fast enough to save poor Gideon."

Tom Steptoe pulled his lank jaw. "You'd have had to get up before breakfast, Burgess. Burns has been dead for two or three hours!"

"No!" McKelvey threw up his head. "Then Newhall—"

"Couldn't have killed him," finished the sheriff. "By your own words Russ had no reason to be aroused until he came to the bank at eleven. And to kill Burns would have been to do away with the one man who could testify regarding the truth of this Ojos Azules deal."

McKelvey went white around the lips. "I trust," he said stiffly, "you're not trying to involve me, Steptoe. Burns was my lawyer, my friend. And I can account for every minute of my time since breakfast."

"Don't play me for a fool, McKelvey," said the sheriff. "You ain't the type that does its own dirty work. I don't know who killed Burns, or why. But when I find out the killer, the man who hired him better get scarce."

McKelvey gulped, laughed unconvincingly and turned away. Steptoe laid his hand on Russ' arm.

"Don't worry, son," he cautioned. "I think you're in the clear on this. I think I savvy what happened and can understand your feelings. But take my advice and swallow them. McKelvey ain't worth riskin' the gallops for. Nor even a stretch in prison. If you have to meet him, then make him come to you."

Russ watched him stride away, strangely stirred by that last injunction. He was still thinking of it when the buckboard flashed past, Juan Bojorquez at the ribbons, Dan-

ette Travers sat beside him, sad-faced and pitiful. Bojorquez shot Russ one fleeting glance, a look charged with hate.

But Russ could accept that—now. The sheriff had said: "Make him come to you." And Russ saw his way, suddenly, startlingly. "He'll come to me," he muttered, fiercely. "He'll get the first, fair shot and then I'll drop the crook in his tracks, so help me!"

He walked blindly toward his office. Tom Steptoe, watching from a distance, shuddered at the change in the young land locator. And smiled grimly as he spotted Burgess McKelvey on his saloon porch, unchanged save for being more powerful, more ruthless, more self-satisfied.

"In my book, you're as good as dead, Burgess," Top Steptoe said, to no one in particular. "You're standin' there on the brink of a bottomless pit. But there'll be a fall, an' nobody will mourn you when you're gone. May the Lord have mercy on your soul!"

CHAPTER V

FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE!

UPON his return to his office, Russ dropped into his chair and buried his face in his hands. He was dejected, torn with self-recriminations, utterly discouraged. Hours passed while he tried to think of some way to undo the terrible wrong he had helped to fasten upon Danette. Hours during which men of the town laughed, lauded him and damned him, depending on their sympathies.

Physical appetite was stifled in Russ. Thought of food gagged him. The afternoon wore away and evening came. Dusk crept into the office, but Russ didn't stir. His

mind wouldn't function and nothing seemed to matter.

"Newhall!"

Russ came up, startled, staring at the door where a figure stood planted—a small man who had crossed the threshold soundlessly. In this gloom, the visitor's face swam crazily—a strange twisted face, weak, yet with a certain fanatical strength.

"Bawn!" Russ ground out the name, knowing now he was looking at the slayer of Rufe Chastain. "You've got a nerve to come here." Chuckling sinisterly, the little man edged closer. The same eyes that had glared at Russ over a mask, lanced him now, and they were no whit less deadly. Russ braced himself for trouble, recalling Bawn's pointed promise of payment if he, Russ, didn't look out for Danette.

"Nerve?" Waspy Bawn laughed. "Gall, you mean, eh? You've got the gall, letting McKelvey pull that trick on the Travers girl. Relax, feller! Take it easy. I ain't holdin' it against you that McKelvey got the best of you. I know him. You ain't the first. Question is, what you going to do about it?"

"What can I do?" Russ threw his hands wide to show his helplessness.

"Givin' up, eh?" snarled Bawn. "An' you're the gent who was holdin' hands with that girl, makin' up to her."

"McKelvey will pay," said Russ, writhing under the other's scorn. "In full."

"Pay who? You? But where does that poor gal come out, Newhall? It won't do. We've got to fight fire with fire. McKelvey stole the deed from her so we steal it back. What could be sweeter?"

Russ stiffened. "I'm no robber, Bawn."

"Neither am I, Newhall. I'm a

jack of no trade and master of none. But that won't stop me here. That deed is in McKelvey's big safe, at the Capitol Saloon, until he can record it at the county seat. He posts a guard over that safe every night. Tonight it's me. I can just see his face when he finds it gone."

"I can see him looking for you, Bawn," Russ said somberly.

"And you too, Newhall. Don't waste time worrying about me. I'm playin' out my string for that girl. An' you're doin' the same." And seeing Russ standing there, still unconvinced, he exploded. "Too honest, eh? Well, get crooked for a change and meet McKelvey on his own ground. It's your only chance to lick him. Get hold of that deed and swear he gave it back, claimin' he didn't have the heart to rob a helpless gal. Couldn't deny it, could he? Not without admitting that he skinned her."

Russ had to smile at Waspy's reasoning. "You've got something, Bawn. But McKelvey won't give up Ojos Azules without a fight. And that fight would be against Danette."

"Fightin's my dish, feller. You helpin' me get that deed tonight?"

Russ could not dispell suspicion. "You're McKelvey's man. I don't trust you."

"I know." Bawn shrugged. "Fair thinkin', too." His voice changed, rising sharply. "You think I'd tell you or any other gent under McKelvey's guns? Well—mebbe I would once. But since seein' that gal—"

He halted as if self-conscious. And Russ said: "It's no good, Bawn. You don't persuade me by playing on my sympathy. You can't put it over."

It seemed as if the little outlaw would explode again. Then something went out of him. "Can't put

anything over," he said dejectedly. "Never could. But I'm going to for that gal, mister. You hear me? I know what she's up against." His voice broke. "She's a woman, feller, the kind I'd have chose if I ever could've rose to her level. But I can work for her, can't I? Sure. I'm quittin' McKelvey now. How about that deed? You helpin' me take it?"

His fervor stirred Russ, weakened his caution. "I'll help," he heard himself say. "And when we get the deed, I'll see that you get honest work on the Ojos Azules."

"Me?" Bawn was his snarling self again. "Honest work? Nix. It ain't in the cards. Before that happens, I'll be six feet under, with lead in the guts. Listen, the Capitol will be dark by three o'clock. Three soft knocks at the back door, you savvy?"

RUSS nodded and Waspy seemed to fade from the room. It was as if he hadn't been there, that Russ had dreamed it all. Then boot steps were clumping along the walk, turning in to Russ' office. Sheriff Tom Steptoe's tall form darkened the doorway. The lawman moved inside, draped his long body into a chair. In his hard, blunt way, he came to the point immediately.

"Waspy Bawn just left, eh?"

"Yes," said Russ, and felt the chill of impending trouble run along his nerves.

"I've had my eye on that cricket for some time, Russ," Steptoe declared. "Good a time as any, right now, to speak my mind. You got any idea he might be the one who got away in that stage stick-up?"

"Listen, sheriff," Russ said evasively, "how can you be sure of a man in a yellow slicker, with a red bandanna pulled up over his face. I've already told you that road

agent could be any one of four men that I know—Bawn one of them.”

“Uh-huh.” Steptoe grunted acknowledgment. “Looks funny, Russ, you an’ McKelvey feudin’ around the Fiddle Valley, an’ both of you makin’ truck with Waspy Bawn. If it’s a fair question, what’s his business with you?”

“Land,” said Russ. “I located him.”

“A plant, Russ. That buzzard’s no farmer. He’s made no move to improve his claim, an’ he won’t. A rotten egg, that’s what he is, doin’ McKelvey’s dirty work for blood money. Was I to jail him, I’d come pretty close to havin’ the killer of Dan Travers and Gideon Burns.” He rose ponderously. “I aim to keep pretty close watch of that little gent—an’ everybody he smears with his brand of skunk oil,” he said significantly and left the office.

Russ followed him to the door, stood there a long time gulping down deep draughts of the night air. Just as if there was not much breathing left for him to do and he must get it done in a hurry.

Common sense told him he should warn Waspy Bawn of Tom Steptoe’s suspicions. But to enter the Capitol Saloon would be to make himself the target of hostile, suspicious eyes. The sheriff would be certain to sense the play and McKelvey might take the opportunity by the horns to force a gun showdown. The time was not ripe for that.

Russ scowled over his problem. It seemed as though any effort he made to help Danette Travers involved lurking danger, with someone waiting to balk him. Even the law was against him.

Russ forced himself to eat supper, then went to his hotel room to wait out the dragging hours. Never had time passed so slowly. He tried to

sleep, dozed, only to wake with a start, thinking he had slept past Waspy’s deadline. Exactly five minutes had elapsed. Tight-nerved and worried, he pulled a chair to his darkened window and sat down to watch the night life of Chimney Butte flow to its peak, ebb and die.

One by one, the town lights went out. Little by little, the wonted sounds of the night died away. After what seemed an age, the lamps of the Capitol Saloon dimmed. The house gambler’s tall form parted the doors and moved across to the hotel. A little while later, Burgess McKelvey came out with three of his gun riders, talked to them briefly and watched them ride. Then he too vanished in the darkness.

Then it was three o’clock and the Capitol was dark. The time had come. Russ rose and stretched, discarded his shoulder holster in favor of a gun belt. He looked to his weapon, checked the loads and quit the room.

Quietly he let himself out the rear end of the hall, pausing at the head of the outside staircase, hand on his gun, listening. A faint sound filtered up to him, like the scrape of a boot. There was no repetition of the sound, but the night had an ugly feel—as though it shrouded some hidden menace.

Nervous, high-strung, Russ lowered himself, a step at a time, cursing the faint creaking of the stairs. Waspy would be waiting. He’d have to hurry. Caution fell away as he hit the alley. He strode away. A voice whispered harshly: “*Ahora . . . now!*” Russ spun about. A shadow loomed at his flank. A man’s hot breath fanned his neck and, before he could move, his senses went out in a livid burst of fire.

He awoke to pain and thirst and the jolting motion of a horse be-

neath him. Vainly he tried to move his hands and feet. He was tied fast. Anger surged through him in bitter waves. Waspy had betrayed him.

RUSS shook his head to clear away the numbness and opened his eyes. By the doubtful light of a crescent moon, he regarded the half dozen riders ringing him, swarthy men with cone hats and wary, friendless eyes. It seemed like the figment of an impossible dream, even to the soft, menacing voice at his right side.

"You come awake, eh, Señor Newhall? I begin to theenk I heet you too hard."

Russ looked into the eyes of Juan Bojorquez.

"Juan!" he cried. "You mean it was you, not McKelvey, who jumped me? Why?"

The old paisano shrugged. "You told me, señor, to look after the señorita. Remember? That I am doing. You tricked her, robbed her of her home and mine. Now you pay up—no?"

"Damn you!" raged Russ. "When you jumped me, you fool, I was on my way to get that deed from McKelvey. I didn't trick Danette. It was McKelvey, who tricked me—all of us."

Juan laughed harshly. "I am old, amigo, but not so childish I believe such lies. *Silencio!* At Ojos Azules you will be heard and judged. If guilty, you weel die."

It was past arguing. Russ could sense absolute determination in Juan's tone, and in the grim attitude of his men. And in his utter helplessness, he gave himself fully to bitterness. Juan, whose problem was his, had played him right into McKelvey's hands. How the gun boss would laugh when he heard.

The leisurely pace was a torture

to Russ. But the old major-domo seemed to find more pleasure in contemplation than in execution. It seemed to Russ that hours passed before they topped the rise to find the darkened buildings of Ojos Azules directly below them. Here, on the ridge top, among the stocky junipers, Juan called a halt.

"There, señor," he said, pointing, "ees the rancho you steal for that diablo, McKelvey. Look well, for eet ees your last. And pray for your soul. Hilario, go down and bring our people."

A swarthy rider flung up his hand, spurred away. Minutes built up the awful suspense. And then they were coming—men, women and children, straggling up the trail like a company of grim ghosts. People born to Ojos Azules, and their fathers before them, as much a part of the grant as the rocks, the trees and the springs. Hurrying to pass judgment on one who had sold them out, cheated them of their birthright.

In pairs they reached the top to form a ring, panting, lancing Russ with bitter, condemning eyes. A dozen more than a score in all, silent and grim. And, when they were all assembled, Juan addressed them.

"Brothers, here is the coyote who betrayed our *patrona*, who sold Ojos Azules out from under her and us. Señorita Danette must soon go out into the world, penniless. We must leave the homes we love, to go among strangers and reflect upon the treachery that has driven us from the homes of our fathers. I would have killed him, but I wanted you to hear his defense and to pass the judgment of our whole people. Señor Newhall, speak!"

"Why do you leave Danette out?" asked Russ. "She too should be allowed to judge."

"Once she listened to your words

and was fooled," said Juan. "She is a woman and you are the man she could have loved. We can not chance her sympathy. If you have excuses, speak them. If not—"

One of the newcomers spoke sharply. "Juan, hark! Horses!"

Silence fell over the gathering. From afar off came a growing tauto of hoofs. Then, as they listened, a sudden startling shot split the night, followed by a ragged volley of gunfire which sent echoes smashing against the hills. Hoofbeats died and silence fell again.

"Hilario!" Juan's voice rang out. "You guard this hombre well. Enrique, you and Pablo come with me. *Vamonas!*"

The three spurred away, leaving Russ alone with the awed gathering. The pause, he knew, was only a brief reprieve. What the gunplay meant, he couldn't even guess. But it was plainly over and it could hardly concern him. He stared down at Ojos Azules, where Danette would be sleeping. And he was suddenly glad for her blindness, so she could not see the swaying, dangling corpse on the hill. Then, strangely, he was worrying about his broken obligation to Waspy Bawn, sorry for the little man's hard thoughts of him.

CHAPTER VI

GALLANT STAND

IF passing time had been an agony for Russ, Waspy Bawn's wait for the land locator had been fraught with restlessness, suspicion and unrestrained recrimination. Where Russ had strength and patience, Waspy was ruled by inner weakness and a nature knowing only the outlet of explosive violence.

Watching McKelvey's expansive overlordship of the Capitol patrons, as the evening advanced, Waspy

gave full rein to his inner hatred of the man. It was hard for him to mask his ever-heightening feelings as he moved about the bar-room, passing the hours. He smoked endless cigarettes, downed drink after drink, cursing inwardly because they did nothing to relax his tenseness.

He stood with a group at a poker table, his glance occasionally shutting from Burgess McKelvey to the big iron safe, then back again. Sheriff Tom Steptoe, after having a drink at the bar, came over to the table. A tremor shook the little gunman, and he shot a look at the lawyer. Steptoe was eying him probingly as if he had already guessed his plans.

"You knew Rufe Chastain pretty well, didn't you, Bawn," Steptoe said bluntly. "Russ Newhall killed Chastain. Tonight you visited Newhall—after dark. What did you two talk about?"

Waspy glowered, an angry answer boiling to his tongue. But some inner cell of his brain warned him, held him silent. His nocturnal mind suggested the thought that Steptoe might have braced Russ Newhall too. Any answer now was dangerous. It gave Waspy a bad moment while his mind reached out for something to fit the case.

"I'll tell you, sheriff," he said mildly. "Russ Newhall pulled a fast one on that gal at Ojos Azules. An' I got to worryin' about him havin' mebbe slickered me somewhere, when he located me. You know, with all this business of jumblin' section corners—"

"You're clever as hell, ain't you, Bawn?" drawled the sheriff. "Well, watch your step. I'm watching Newhall and all his mates from here out."

He turned away and Waspy went

to the bar for a needed drink. "Damn the law," he raged inwardly. "It's everlastin'ly doggin' a man—good or bad. I oughta tip Newhall off so he won't open his mouth and put his foot in it. But how the devil can I, with Steptoe watchdoggin' us both?"

He swung suddenly, his animal instinct telling him hidden eyes were raking him. He caught Burgess McKelvey tearing his glance away, and turned back to the bar, scowling thoughtfully.

The peak of business passed and one by one the patrons drifted out. Gamblers closed their games, went home to bed. A sleepy bartender poured drinks on the house for the late trade and announced the end of business. When some protested that they wanted to stay on, McKelvey's suave geniality turned to brusque impatience.

"Get to hell out of here, you night owls!" he clipped. "Didn't you hear the man? Waspy, get them doors closed." And when all the lights were out but one, McKelvey paused for one last admonition: "Eyes open and no sleep tonight, Waspy. Understand? I've got papers in the safe worth more than all the gold that's been packed in it. And there's gents who would like to glauum what's in there."

Waspy smiled crookedly. "Gotcha, boss. Depend on it, that paper'll be where it belongs in the morning."

MCKELVEY nodded and went out with his gun-toting bodyguard of three men. Just outside the door, all three laughed harshly. Just as if they were taunting him, Waspy thought. Nerves play havoc with a man. Waspy locked the door, turned out the lamp and slumped into a chair to wait Russ' signal. Darkness pressed in around him, and

the cloying smells of the place. Minutes ticked away endlessly until at last the clock on the back bar struck three. But where was Russ? On edge, Waspy went to the back door, peered out. No sign of his man.

Suspicion took easy root in the mind of a man like Waspy Bawn. Having long traveled dim trails himself, he knew there was scant honor among crooks. Could Newhall be playing in with McKelvey? Conviction came that he was being drawn into a trap.

"To hell with him!" he growled. "If that's the kind he is, he can whistle for that deed!" Then, as he thought of Danette, he was shaken by an emotion that no other woman had ever stirred in him. "While he's baitin' the trap," he mused, "I'll nab that paper an' take it to the gal myself. An' next time I meet him, I'll pay Newhall off."

Like a ghost, he glided behind the bar, knelt before the iron safe. Long ago he had deliberately set out to learn the combination, for a man never knew when he might have reason to lay hands on a quick get-away stake.

Shielding a match behind his big hat, he twirled the dial, heard the tumblers fall, one by one. The match burned his fingers, went out. He tried the knob, swung the ponderous door wide.

Another match flame was licking his calloused fingers when he found the deed and contract and slipped them inside his shirt. He closed the safe, straightened, freezing as a sound came from the door. Then he relaxed. So Newhall had come finally. But suddenly the panel burst inward and the darting shaft of a bulls-eye lantern fell squarely upon him.

"I was right about Waspy, boys!" Burgess McKelvey's harsh voice

bawled. "Down the sneakin' son!"

Men came barging into the room, men Waspy had drunk with less than an hour ago. The little gunman swerved quickly as a gun blazed. He felt lead bite his neck and reeled against the safe. His own gun snaked out, hammering a shot at that damning lantern beam. The light failed in a crash of glass and metal, and a roar of pain echoed over the gun blasts.

Sick, shaken with pain, Waspy edged along the bar, his gun spitting across the counter, driving lead at the flashes.

"Come on!" he croaked. "Make your fight, you murderin' sons!"

Lead beat around him. The back-bar mirror came down in shards. Bottles blew up as winging slugs touched them. Somewhere McKelvey was bawling, urging his killers on.

"Down him! Down him, you fools! Don't let him get away!"

Gun empty, Waspy darted for the rear. A slug smashed into his left shoulder blade, staggering him, driving him against the wall. Agony poured through him. If only Newhall hadn't double-crossed him. If only he had someone to give the papers to so Danette could get them.

His horse was behind a shed fronting the alley. Reeling like a drunken man, reloading as he ran, he stumbled to the beast, drew himself into the saddle. Behind him, McKelvey was flogging his men to the chase. The town was rousing. Lights were flashing on. As Waspy broke his animal into a gallop along the alley, a sleet of lead droned after him. A bullet took him in the back, dumping him over the withers of the pony. And thus, with senses wavering, he was whirled from Chimney Butte, with pursuit forming swiftly behind him.

Racked with pain and nausea, fighting back a sinking weakness and holding desperately to the tag ends of his consciousness, Waspy somehow got through the first awful minutes of his flight. Then his mind cleared and his wiry body released the reserve strength to scourge the horse along the axis of the valley toward Ojos Azules. If only he could keep ahead of the roaring death on his tail. If only he could get the deed into the hands of Danette Travers!

A mile—two. Pursuit was closing, slowly but surely, and despite all he could do. Waspy beat a tattoo against the pony's ribs, bent low in the saddle, his left hand holding a tight rein, his right hand locked about the horn.

Visions swam before his eyes. Images of a violent past. Faces. Voices. He saw Russ Newhall riding beside him, grinningly taunting him. Burgess McKelvey's face danced before him, framed in powder smoke, the man's hard eyes squinting along the barrel of a .45. And always he saw the pitiful blank eyes of Danette Travers on him, pleading tragically. Weakness ran through him in sickening waves. Blood soaked his clothes. And McKelvey was gaining.

Shaken by the nearness of doom, Waspy risked a fall by reaching for the papers, blood-soaked now, which he had taken from the safe. He knew little of them save that they constituted Burgess McKelvey's claim to Ojos Azules. He half turned, threw a plaintive look backward.

"You devil!" he cried, with the full acceptance of failure. "If she can't have them, you can't neither."

Unable to release his desperate grip on the horn, he let the pony have its head, raised the papers to his



"There, señor," Juan said to Russ, "ees the ranch you would steal. Look well, for eet ees your last look."

mouth. He bit into the documents, tearing them with his teeth and chewing the fragments to a pulp, which he spat into the wind. Again and again, he bit off pieces and clawed them until he had destroyed the evidence that bound Danette Travers to a bargain won in treachery. Horribly weary then, he caught the horn with both hands and hung on. He was drowsy, prey to creeping paralysis. And the darkness was deepening.

The hoofbeats of his horse rose to a roar. He knew pursuit was closing in on him. He flogged his body into a turning motion, squinted back and saw the six shadows debouch from the night, hardly a hundred yards behind. Swaying precariously, he got his gun out of its leather, heaved it level. How heavy it was. How it shook in his hand. He ground his teeth as he eased back the hammer and jerked the prong.

He felt the recoil of the weapon, heard the bellow of his gun, saw the swift spurt of flame—and knew he had missed. Failed again. He had always failed. He tried to lift the gun again. Muzzle bursts lashed at him and something seemed to lift him from his saddle, turn him slowly in mid-air and smash him to the ground.

Following the shock of his fall, he rallied momentarily to feel men pawing at him, ripping away his clothes. He heard McKelvey's voice, seemingly far away, damning him, ordering men to search again, to search the back trail. Then they had quit tormenting him and were gone.

But presently they were back again, lifting him, making words that stirred no meaning in his vast drowsiness. He heard one of them say something about Russ Newhall, and

it stirred a dying flare of rage in him.

"Newhall!" he croaked. "Damn his yellow-bellied soul to hell!" It took all his strength and unconsciousness claimed him again.

Juan Bojorquez held the limp form in his arms, lifting his eyes to his two companions. "This one," he muttered, "is Waspy Bawn, a gunfighter for that *malo hombre*, McKelvey. A *compadre* of Newhall, whose name he now curses. Help me lift him onto your horse, Pablo. If we can get him to our people before he dies, his words may condemn Newhall. Hurry."

"Si," murmured Pablo, and all three loaded the broken, bloody figure of Waspy Bawn.

RUSS' nerves, stretched tight by the silence of his captors and by the aching suspense, were near the breaking point when Bojorquez and his men came with their grisly burden. He stared, fascinated, as they pulled the slumped body from the saddle, lay it out upon the ground.

"Waspy!" The cry was torn from him as moonlight fell across the gunman's pallid face.

Juan smiled coldly. "Your good amigo, eh, señor? Your friend. Dying from many bullets, he curses you." He scowled around the circle of staring faces. "José—Manuel! You have some wine?"

A man shuffled forward, proffered a flask. Juan raised Waspy's head, let the liquor trickle down his throat. The gunman choked, moaned and fought back to a dazed consciousness.

For a breathless moment, he stared around him, twisting his head, trying to comprehend the change of scene. His roving glance passed Russ, halted with a widening of eyes. Eyes that writhed with hate, then

sharpened with surprise as he noted the locator's bonds.

"Newhall!" he demanded weakly. "Is this why you didn't show? These Mexes grabbed you?"

"Back of the hotel when I came to join you," said Russ, sickened at the wreckage of flesh and blood. "But you, Waspy? What happened?"

"You didn't tip off McKelvey?"

"Me?" Russ was dumfounded.

"And crucify Danette?"

"Let it go," Waspy gasped. "I damned you as a rat, Russ, thinkin' you'd squealed. Went it alone—an' got caught. McKelvey, the devil, shot me to doll rags after I got the deed. He's finished me." He swung his eyes to Juan. "You played hell, Bojorquez, when you jumped Newhall."

Juan stared at him. "We brought Señor Newhall here, thinking he robbed our *patrona*," he said, with uncertain dignity. "You are dying, hombre. Is it with the lie on your lips?"

"A lie?" Waspy gave a grim laugh. "I've lied all my life, but now my chips are on the truth. What blundering fools you are. Russ Newhall has worked for Danette ever since he met her on the stage. Loves her, you hear me. Loves her, and I could have killed him for it. He's the only help she's had—only hope she has—"

His head sagged and Juan again tipped the bottle to his lips. "You are dying, señor," the major-domo repeated with greater courtesy. "Your words are what we want to hear. Swear them on the cross."

In Waspy's chilling hand, he placed a small, silver crucifix. Waspy clutched it, pressed it to his blue lips. "Sure," he murmured eagerly. "Sure. So help me God, I'm giving you the truth. Newhall's

your friend. You—you'll never know—a better one. Without him—you're done. Like me—rubbed out by McKelvey." The cross spilled from his grasp and he stared at Russ, who watched with a lump in his throat. The gunman smiled faintly.

"I—I failed again, feller. Never could do a thing right. Sorry—an' good huntin'—" He sighed. His eyes closed and he lay still.

Juan looked down at him. "Señor, you have not failed. It will be recorded that you have saved your friend." His knife came out, flashed twice and Russ slid free from the pony. Russ went over to kneel beside Waspy, who smiled as if at some vast easing of misery.

"So long, feller," Russ managed, after a while. "Maybe you didn't get the deed for Danette, but I'll take up where you left off. We'll give McKelvey hell—pardner."

Russ rose with a feeling of loss. Waspy had been hard, yet he had died like a hero, having espoused the cause of another with no thought of gain for himself. Russ felt the eyes of the silent, awed gathering upon him, as if they expected something from him. Nor did he fail them. He turned his face toward Chimney Butte.

"McKelvey!" he cried, with a bitter fury in his voice. "I'll pay you off for this! I'll see you dead!"

CHAPTER VII

STACKED DECK

RUSS was not surprised when his search of Waspy Bawn failed to turn up the deed. Reviewing the little gunman's words, it appeared Waspy had been caught taking the papers, had run the gantlet of guns and raced for Ojos Azules only to fall to McKelvey's bullets when within pistol shot of the ranch. The

deed must still be in McKelvey's possession.

"Señor," old Juan was plucking at Russ' sleeve, his face working. "I—"

He could not seem to drag out words, so great was his emotion. Russ laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Forget it, Juan. You gave me a bad moment, but I wouldn't think as much of you if you hadn't acted for Danette according to your lights. McKelvey has the deed back and we'll have to work fast."

"What shall we do, señor?" Juan broke in. "Keel that evil peeg?"

Russ shook his head. "No. Just stand ready for the next few days and wait for word from me. I'll need you, but I can't say when."

Juan bowed his head. "Command us, amigo. We weel all die to save Ojos Azules."

The rest growled their allegiance and Russ nodded. At least in losing his strange little ally, he had gained many others. Such was Waspy's bequest to him.

"We must leave guns to the last," he told them, "and exhaust the last hope of a lawful solution. Bury Bawn with the others who have died for Ojos Azules. Then send your people for their relatives who are citizens. Fifty at least—a hundred if you can get them. Not fighting men, but men willing to file on a piece of land, you understand?"

"No, señor." Juan was puzzled. "No *comprende*, but I weel do as you say. Eef you say it weel help our *pobrecita* Danette."

Russ gripped his hand. "It's our only chance. And"—he was grim—"it will bring McKelvey to us." He rose to the saddle of Waspy's pony and loped away toward Chimney Butte. And as he rode, he blamed himself for Waspy's death. If he had not tried to trick McKel-

vey, if he had just gone ahead to protect Danette's rights, and those of her servitors, Waspy need not have given his life. That was the extent of the loss. Now he was back to his original idea of filing loyal claimants on as much of Ojos Azules as possible, before the true facts of the faulty title to the grant were known.

Dawn was flushing the east when he stabled his horse in Chimney Butte and went to bed. And though he felt exhausted, his busy mind refused to give him more than a few hours of sleep. Having bathed and changed his clothes, he had his breakfast. It was about ten o'clock when he appeared on the street. His appearance seemed a signal for Tom Steptoe to emerge from the Capitol Saloon, Burgess McKelvey right behind him. The sheriff's command rolled across the street.

"I want a talk with you, Newhall! Come toward me, and move almighty straight."

Angered, but hiding his humiliation behind a bleak face, Russ obeyed. Tom Steptoe was scowling, but McKelvey's features were frozen. Russ looked them over scornfully.

"What's the idea of the hard talk, sheriff? What's on your mind?"

"You wouldn't know that two men robbed McKelvey's safe last night, would you, Newhall?" Steptoe asked sarcastically.

"No!" Russ lifted surprised brows. "That's news to me."

"And you wouldn't know anything about that contract and deed to the Ojos Azules, would you? Both were taken."

"You don't tell me," murmured Russ, wondering what McKelvey's game was. "Who were the robbers?"

"Waspy Bawn," said the sheriff. "McKelvey killed him, but his mate got away, plumb clean. You

wouldn't know who that was, would you? Not seeing that you and Waspy was thick as thieves last night."

"Wouldnt' have any idea, sheriff."

"You're a liar as well as a thief!" rasped McKelvey. "It's no dice, Newhall. When we got Waspy, he forked over the deed and a mess of information."

"Yeah?" Russ kept his temper, knowing part of that was false. "In writing?"

"No," growled the boss. "If I had, we'd put you away."

"I don't doubt you'd try, McKelvey. One day you'll crowd your luck too far."

"Enough of that," the sheriff warned. "The man who got away answers to your description, Russ, which makes it look bad. Two dead men are lying in the morgue, downed by Waspy and his gun mate. I went to your room and found you out. Where were you?"

RUSS felt the chill of it along his nerves. McKelvey and his men would lie a man into the pen without turning a hair, he was sure of that. Here was the moment to play his hole card, and pray it was good enough.

"As a matter of fact, sheriff," he said, trying to make his voice casual, "McKelvey's as crooked about my description as he was about that contract of sale—"

"Fighting talk, Newhall!" Rage was convulsing McKelvey. "You better be prepared to prove those words."

"I will—easier than you think," Russ said. "Sheriff, I left my room at three, this morning, heading out the back way to help Waspy search the Capitol safe for the deed and contract McKelvey used to steal Ojos Azules from Danette Travers."

He grinned at the way they stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Yeah," he went on. "Only I didn't get to help poor Waspy. When I hit the bottom of the stairs . . ." He went on to tell them of his capture by Juan and what had happened afterward. "You lost, my friend," he taunted McKelvey, "when you left Waspy alive. He lived long enough to save my life, by telling what he knew about this business. Bojorquez turned me loose when it was plain where you stand in this, McKelvey."

McKelvey went white to the lips. "Lies!" he rasped. "He lies through his teeth, Tom. And that Ojos Azules crowd will swear to his alibi."

Step-toe stared at one, then the other. And Russ smiled coldly. "It's the truth this time, Tom. Waspy was with Rufe, when they stopped the stage. Rufe killed the driver and Waspy, not me, paid him off. He couldn't stomach Rufe's savagery and the kind of a job McKelvey paid them to do. Waspy told me plenty about McKelvey rustling Ojos Azules dry, ordering Dan Travers killed and Danette taken off the stage so she could be tortured into deeding Ojos Azules—"

Russ cut off, swerving aside and dropping his hand to his holster as McKelvey drove for his gun. But the Chimney Butte boss was too smart. He caught himself, choosing words instead of guns until his edge was greater.

"Lies!" he roared again. "Slander from the lips of a cheap crook trying to discredit me. You going to stand there and let him blacken me, Tom?"

"How about proof?" asked Step-toe.

"Most of it is buried with Waspy," admitted Russ ruefully. "Bojorquez will prove my alibi. McKelvey lied about me being in the Capitol;

Waspy was alone there, so you can draw your own conclusions about his honesty. Think it over, McKelvey. And, remember, I've just begun on you."

He turned away and strode down the street. Nor did he look back until he reached the combined office-living quarters of Porter Niles, a private surveyor. McKelvey and the sheriff stood as he had left them, the gun boss staring after him, Step-toe's gaze fixed on McKelvey. A bitter smile twisted Russ' lips as he opened the door and stepped into the survey office. From this moment on, he could expect no peace, waking or sleeping. Eternal vigilance would be the price he must pay if he wanted to go on living. And live he must, if Danette was to save anything out of the wreckage.

Old Porter Niles lifted a bulbous nose from his drafting table, his watery eyes swimming behind thick lenses. Long the town's horrible example, he worked little, and then only to pay his liquor bills. Strangely enough, he was an excellent surveyor. Russ had used him many times, marveling that the only signs the man showed of drunkenness was when he was on a job and out of whiskey.

"Hullo, Porter," Russ greeted him. "I've got some lines to run. When can you do it?"

The man wiped his glasses, pondering as if on some momentous problem. He shook his tousled head. "Sorry, Newhall," he said heavily. "Don't think I'll do any more work for you. Now if you'll depart and let me get on—"

Russ was mystified. "What's wrong, Porter? What's the matter with my money?"

"Matter?" Niles bristled. "It's tainted, Newhall. And so are you. Your money came in a deal to rob Danette Travers. Lousy business."

Russ sighed, suddenly realizing the light McKelvey had put him in. "I don't hold your feelings against you, Porter, but you're wrong. McKelvey put over a fast one and I'm here to slap him in the face with it. If you refuse to help, you're helping him get away with it. I didn't think that of you."

The surveyor blinked. "How's that? Come again, Newhall."

"I want you to survey Ojos Azules, carrying the section lines right through the whole grant. And make me a map."

"Ojos Azules!" Niles stared. "For Burgess McKelvey? Hod dang it, I wouldn't unbox my transit to run a foot of line for that sidewinder."

"McKelvey don't own Ojos Azules," Russ explained. "He—"

"Does so," countered Niles. "He paid the Travers girl five hundred dollars—"

"She didn't own it," Russ argued, knowing he must convince the man. "Never did. I knew that when I tried to swing the deal for her. Dan Travers never owned the grant. Fact is, there is no grant. The title was voided years ago and the order lost in the records. It's open land and my only chance of licking McKelvey is to get the corners and make the filings. Will you help?"

For long minutes, the old surveyor stroked his stubble chin. "Son," he said finally, "I reckon I spoke out of turn. I've let McKelvey's poison into my gizzard, looks like. Have to wash it out with good whiskey. Sure, I'll help. When do we start?"

"I'll take you out tonight," Russ said, relieved. "You'll stay at the ranch and pick out a choice spot for yourself. I'll supply what you need to drink. But don't talk, Porter. If McKelvey gets word of this—"

"Me tell that rat?" Niles swore

fervently. "Not in a million years."

Russ went out, warmed by his first real encouragement. His hole card was a good one—if only McKelvey didn't tap him before he built his hand.

RUSS saw Porter Niles start his work at sunrise next morning, assisted by Ojos Azules men. Then he got Juan to take him to Danette. As before, he found her in the patio. This time her attitude was one of utter dejection. When Juan announced Russ, her body stiffened and she raised her head proudly.

"Sit down, Mr. Newhall." Her tone was cool. "I understand you have surveyors at work in the grant. Does that mean you and McKelvey are together, after your hard words? If so, what does he propose doing with the survey?"

"We're not together and he doesn't know about the survey, Danette," Russ told her. "It will help if you don't tell him anything. He expects to take this over in a month, but he's going to be fooled. He stole that deed to Ojos Azules. But it won't do him any good. For there is no Rancho Ojos Azules."

She gasped. "What do you mean?"

Russ took her hand. She tried to withdraw it, but he was insistent. He explained the whole thing, slowly, patiently. He told it from the very beginning, omitting nothing. His voice was eloquent when he described Waspy's gallant efforts to save her from McKelvey.

"I knew you didn't own Ojos Azules the day I met you on the stage," he finished. "It was your desperate need for money that decided me to bring you McKelvey's offer of fifty thousand dollars. Believe me, that was my only interest.

And when he fooled me, as well as you, I—"

"Russ!" Her fingers trembled. "It put you in such a terrible position—one man against McKelvey and his killers. The thoughts I've had about you make me feel so small and mean now. And I can do nothing to help. If this is public land, all I'll ever have from Ojos Azules is five hundred dollars. And these poor people who call this home—"

"They're our only hope to save the outfit," Russ told her. "I aim to file them all, just as soon as we get corners. I've had Juan send for their relatives too. With luck, we'll have homesteads plastered over the best part of Ojos Azules. This is their home and they're loyal to you. The outfit can continue, with each one sharing. Do you like the idea?"

Smiling and weeping, she thanked him, begging forgiveness for having doubted him and avoiding any mention of the plan's failure to include money for her eye operation. Russ brought that up, begging her to be patient. A few good cattle years would show profits ample for the purpose. It brought a flush to her cheeks and filled Russ with a determination that even surpassed what he had felt before. He had to beat McKelvey now.

He remained at Ojos Azules until Porter Niles had his survey well under way. As long as there was daylight, the surveyor labored, pausing occasionally to take a pull at his flask. Every night he toiled late at his records.

"Don't worry about me," he told Russ. "Gotta go easy on whiskey for a while, but I'll make up for it in one grand celebration, when the fireworks blow up in McKelvey's face."

Before Russ took his leave for

town, Juan's relatives began arriving in droves, each one anxious to do his bit for Ojos Azules, in many cases the place of his birth. Upon Russ' suggestion, Juan threw a gun ring around the grant to insure secrecy.

"Think I'll head for town," Russ told Danette, the third morning, "to ease suspicion. From now on, I'll come and go, carrying on business as usual."

But there proved to be little business. Word of his connection with the Travers swindle had spread, turning everyone against him. Even Russ' friends, Abe Simmons and other homesteaders, avoided him when they came to town.

A week went past. Two. Russ never went unarmed, even sleeping with a gun at hand. But McKelvey made no move against him. In fact the gun boss seemed to avoid public places, shunning the spotlight.

One morning, three weeks after his start, Porter Niles lifted his head from the drafting board he had moved out to the ranch and grinned at Russ who had come in to find out what progress he had made.

"Lines are run, son," Niles announced. "An' knowing your rush, I've got a rough map drawn. Good enough to file from. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to go to town and get some medicine for my nerves."

Russ grinned knowingly, examined the plat. Excitement gripped him. Niles had earned a spree. Now it was up to him, Russ. Carefully he made out the blanks for filing, choosing the sites according to their relation to the flat land, water courses, springs and tule bogs—all spotted in the survey notes. He had Juan call the men so each could affix his name to a blank. Danette signed

for the last claim, the one including the buildings. When it was done, homesteads, desert claims and grazing sections had accounted for two-thirds of the Ojos Azules acreage—all in one great block.

Darkness came and Porter Niles rode for town, disclaiming any desire to file for himself. Russ didn't argue. Nothing could stop him now. A good night's sleep and they would all ride to Santa Fe.

"We'll start at dawn," he told Juan. "An early breakfast and a good horse for every man, with food for a two-hundred-mile ride. And now we better get to bed."

EXCITEMENT ruled the Ojos Azules and from the talk that continued long after Russ crawled between blankets, he knew there would be little sleep. He was growing drowsy when the roar of hoofbeats roused him. He heard heavy voices, then Maria calling his name. He rose, dressed and came into the great living room to find Burgess McKelvey and two bodyguards waiting with Danette. Russ halted, frozen with a sense of impending trouble.

"What's on your mind, McKelvey?" he asked, with scant courtesy.

McKelvey was his most genial self. "I just came to pay my respects to the lady," he chuckled, pointing to the nervous girl. "And to let her know your mistake."

"Mistake?" Russ scowled.

"Newhall, all men make mistakes—even me. Worst one I ever made was in trusting Bawn. That treacherous little snake got away with my deed and contract that night. Only thing I ever found was a paper wad he spit out where we dropped him. He ate those papers."

It was an astounding admission, but it had no meaning now. Russ

said so, but McKelvey only laughed.

"True, Newhall. Miss Travers sold me something she didn't own, and of course I shall sue her when I have taken advantage of your mistake."

The man's mirth sent chills along Russ' nerves. "What mistake, McKelvey?"

"Not keeping that drunken Porter Niles tight and close until this business was finished. I've been on the watch for him ever since I learned you were running section lines across Ojos Azules. I couldn't figure it out until I caught Niles in town tonight, and talked to him." McKelvey's eyes glittered. "He came clean, told the whole story."

Russ faced the gun boss' taunting smile, hating him more for the beating he knew Porter Niles had taken before he told. "What of it?" he asked. "I've got the plat and I'm leading a hundred men to Santa Fe, filing twenty thousand acres for the Ojos Azules people."

Surprisingly, McKelvey only laughed. "Fine, Newhall. Go ahead. I've got twenty-five men waiting down at the forks of the road. I'll join them and we'll file mineral claims along the bed of Machado Creek. It's crawling with gold, worth millions. The claims were all



Russ was in so deep, horse stealing couldn't make things any worse—he quickly roped out a horse to take the place of his jaded mount.

spotted months ago—despite the objections of Dan Travers.”

“You killed him!” charged Russ, sick inside with the knowledge that the mineral claims would take precedence over the homestead claims, regardless of the priority of filing.

“I take that unkindly, Newhall,” McKelvey said mockingly. “I wanted him alive and convinced that he should sell me Ojos Azules.”

“And dead if he wouldn’t, is that it?”

McKelvey grinned, bowed. “Good night, all,” he said ironically. “Though you’d like to know.”

He strode out, followed by his two hard-faced bodyguards. And Russ was left alone with Danette Travers.

CHAPTER VIII

RIDE TO SANTA FE

DANETTE’S pitiful attempt at a smile cut Russ to the quick. And the full weight of McKelvey’s arraignment struck him a crushing blow. Every step he had taken to help this fine girl had been a mistake, leading her to ruin. His house of cards had collapsed. McKelvey had licked him. Hopeless, unseeing, he hardly felt the girl’s hand on his arm.

“Don’t worry, Russ,” she consoled him. “You did your best. That’s all any man can do.”

Her words reminded him that he had stopped trying, had given up all hope. It startled him, cleared his



mind. Why concede defeat? McKelvey was not immune to mistakes and, in his arrogance, he had made a serious one in coming here to make his brags.

"Better go to bed, Danette," Russ said, in a harsh, strained voice. "We've got to beat that man to Santa Fe." Then he was sprinting outside, his voice uplifted. "Juan! Juan! Get horses, pronto!"

No answer. Juan and the men were sleeping. Through the silence, Russ ran down to the long line of mud houses and ramadas stretching beneath the cottonwoods along the creek. There were no lights and Russ beat on Juan's door, rousing the inmates. Doors squealed open and voices rang through the settlement. Women showed in their night attire. Señora Bojorquez opened for Russ.

"Where's Juan?" he demanded.

"*Quien sabe, señor?*" the woman shrugged. "Who knows? They took horses, rode away!"

"Where? When?"

"*Quien sabe?*" It came again, the stock Mexican answer. "I do not know where, señor."

Convinced of her sincerity, Russ hurried back to the house. Danette knew nothing of the absence of Juan and his army of relatives. Russ groaned. "Here we are," he complained, "with every chance of winning, and Juan is away on some fool's errand. Don't you see, Danette! McKelvey is leaving tonight for Santa Fe. He'll reach there tomorrow night, with the Land Office closed. We can be there easily before it opens, day after tomorrow morning and make our own mineral filings on Machado Creek. One claim there may be worth all of this grant and more. But where are Juan and the rest?"

She shook her head and he went

out to fire his pistol and call them. When no answer came, he knew they were far away—in Chimney Butte, perhaps. Or maybe taking the law into their own hands, making some fool play to halt McKelvey.

The former seemed most likely, and Russ cursed them. Then, thinking more clearly, he saw how useless it was to fret. One claim, he had told Danette, would provide the money she needed. And he could file that claim. Calling to Maria to pack him some food in a sack, he ran to the corral, roped out a leggy horse with all the marks of endurance on it. He screwed on a saddle to his liking, using double blankets, and rode back to the house for his map. In his pockets he had his savings, withdrawn from the bank to provide filing fees for the men of Ojos Azules. He would not need it now except perhaps to buy a relief pony at some ranch on the way. He took the food from Maria, tied it to his cante, pressed Danette's hand.

"Wish me luck, Danette," he said.

"Good luck to you, Russ!" she cried. "God go with you."

He rose to the saddle and pounded away, Danette staring after him. Sounds of his going died out. And, like an echo from another direction, came a renewed and growing beat of hoofs. Riding like the wind, loosing coyote yells, horsemen flashed into the dooryard. Juan Bojorquez and his company of excited *paisanos*.

"*Patrona!*" Juan cried, quitting his animal on the run. "You are reech! Look!" He held out cupped hands and the lamplight, striking through the open door, struck dull fire from virgin gold. "Andreas, my *primo hermano*, found it on Machado Creek. Gold! You are *muy rico*, *señorita*—reech!"

Danette smiled faintly. "Not rich, Juan. McKelvey wanted Ojos

Azules because he knew all about the gold. He is on his way to Santa Fe now, with many men, to file the length of Machado Creek."

For a stunned moment, Juan stared. Then he slapped his own face, exploding. "Bah! What a fool thees gold make of a man!" He flung the nuggets down, stamped upon them. Then he was swinging to saddle, commanding his waiting men. "All ees lost eef Señor Newhall meets McKelvey. Come, compadres."

FIVE hours out of Ojos Azules, Russ began fully to appreciate his undertaking. Born to the saddle, before this he had found only pleasure in horsemanship. But hunting rides and running section lines for settlers were child's play compared with the cruel rigors of this two-hundred-mile race. He knew horses, and how to get the most from them. But by all the rules, he knew he would need a change of mounts, maybe two, before he reached Santa Fe.

Dawn found him swinging along a dusty, rutted wood road, paralleling the fenced line of the XSX Ranch forty miles along his way. His pony still traveled strongly, but its pace was slower, more labored. And every hour would see it less swift. When the country sloped sharply into the sunrise, Russ halted to scan the valley ahead. No sign of McKelvey and his riders. No tell-tale dust bomb to reveal their lead. Ten miles farther on, green cottonwoods marked the headquarters ranch of the XSX.

With his pony favoring one forefoot, Russ turned in the gate and rode into the ranchyard. The foreman was just leading his men from the cook shack.

"Just in time, stranger," the man called cheerily. "Light off, rest your

saddle an' take on a bait of breakfast."

"Thanks," acknowledged Russ. "But it's a horse I need worst."

"A horse?" The man scowled.

"Mine's stove up. I'll swap you and pay boot. I've got to reach Santa Fe in a hurry."

The foreman shook his head. "Sorry. No can do."

Russ bridled. "Why not? Ain't my money good? You've got horses and I'm willing to pay. Why can't we deal?"

"We could," the XSX man said significantly, "if you wasn't in a hurry to make Santa Fe. That's the way it is, stranger."

Russ' glance went to the fenced pasture, behind the corrals, where more than a score of beasts stood wearily, nibbling at a haystack. He knew then. Without a word he reined around, heading toward the gate.

Once more he took the road, following the fence which seemed endless. The sun was pouring straight down when he hit the hills, and he knew he was losing ground to McKelvey, every minute.

Two hours later, Russ came upon some ponies feeding along the margin of a creek. A black gelding, showing saddle marks, took his eye, and he put his string on it. The beast plunged and reared and fought, taking valuable minutes dragging Russ' tired mount around. But when some of that first fire was spent, Russ walked down the rope, ran his palm along its neck and crooned. It took him half an hour to change his rig. Five minutes of violent misunderstanding ensued when he had stepped to its back. Then he was splitting the breeze for Santa Fe.

That black carried him willingly and Russ didn't spare it. Weariness settled into his bones and he

ate part of the lunch Maria had prepared. It served only to make him drowsy. He needed hot coffee, whiskey, any stimulant that would pick up his lagging muscles.

THE sun sank and night hung out its beacons. The black horse began to fail and Russ made for a light gleaming in the distance. It proved to be an adobe house, set at the edge of fragrant cornfields. His knock brought a whiskery oldster to the door with a rifle in his hands and two burly men, his sons apparently, at his back.

"Well," the old-timer demanded, "what in tarnation do you want?"

"I need a horse," said Russ. "One that will take me to Santa Fe. I'll pay your price."

"Yeah?" sneered the farmer. "Hell of a lot of travel toward Santa Fe, seems like. An' a plumb scand'lous demand for hawsses. A big crew rode in while me an' my boys was away an' taken every good hawss we had. Left some foundered brutes in exchange."

"I'm out to cheat that same crew," said Russ wearily. "But it doesn't look like it's in the cards."

"So you're after them thieves, eh?" The old man looked interested. "Come in! Le's see the cut of your leather."

Russ slid down, reeled stiffly inside. They sat him down, plied him with questions and home-made liquor. A coffeepot bubbled on the stove and Russ just about drained it.

"You're plumb tuckered, son," said the oldster, when he had heard the story. "How far you rode?"

"Around a hundred and fifty miles—without stopping."

"Right smart of a jaunt, stranger," said the old man. "Too good to waste for lack of a bronc." He turned

to his boys. "Saddle that rawboned jughead in the pasture an' knock some meanness out of him." And then to Russ: "This cayuse ain't much, account of he's treacherous as a snake. Gimme your horse an' turn mine loose when you're finished with him. That ought to be fair."

"Fair enough," acknowledged Russ. "And I'll throw in the price of the animals you lost—if I win."

DAWN was tinting the eastern sky when Russ flogged his beast along the silent streets of Santa Fe, toward the Land Office. His body ached and his brain was numb with fatigue. But he had three hours before office opening time and a sense of triumph rode with him. The marks of his ride were plainly visible in his sunken eyes and lined face. He needed food, coffee, rest, but those must wait. His place now was at the Land Office door, where Burgess McKelvey would find him set to file on a fifteen-hundred-foot length of Machado Creek, below the narrows, which must be the source of the gold. Then too, he had the advantage of being able to file by section corners, against McKelvey's doubtfully established metes and bounds.

His spirits were soaring until he swung a corner to find a scene of confusion before the Land Office. A queue of men, twenty-six in all, stretched along the walk from the doorway. The sheriff stood by to maintain order. Scores of early-rising townsmen milled about, curious as to the new gold strike and eager to join the rush at the first hint of its location.

A great roar of mirth rose from the McKelvey faction as Russ stiffly dismounted. The gun boss led the laughter.

"Look what the wind blew in!"

he bellowed. "Our best little land locator. Howdy, Newhall! Nice riding, my friend. A little too early, it seems, but if you get on the end of the line, your time will come. Your time will come. That's good, ain't it?"

It sent them off into new gales of laughter and Russ could only take it. He stood there, weary, worn, baffled and prey to his first urge to do murder. And one of the men watching him must have read his struggle against the impulse. A hand fell on his arm and he looked into the eyes of Jim Alhorn, the little U. S. marshal who had investigated the lawless shifting of section corners in the Fiddle Valley.

"Hello, Newhall," said the lawman, his face a poker mask. "Bucking another of McKelvey's bright schemes, eh? He goes on, bold and infernally lucky, but his shadow will catch up with him some fine day. I don't know much about this, except that I can't help you here. Better take a place in the line."

"Thanks, marshal, I reckon I won't," Russ refused wearily, knowing there were already enough men in line to stake every foot of Machada Creek—and more too. He was licked. McKelvey had made no mistake in this, his master stroke. The mineral claims would override everything. He turned away from the little lawman, stumbled across the street and let his tired body down on a saloon porch, steeling himself to watch this final triumph of McKelvey's to the bitter end.

CHAPTER IX

THE BATTLE OF SANTA FE

WAITING there for the opening of the Land Office, Russ stared apathetically at the growing crowd. McKelvey and his men

showed the effects of their hard ride, some leaning heavily against the building fronts, some hunkered on the walk, their heads nodding. Only McKelvey himself, held by a boundless store of energy, seemed alert, eager. His tigerlike eyes played over his men constantly and his voice crackled as he kept rousing them.

One excited townsman tried to slip into the center of the line. Only then did their fury become apparent. They caught him, hurled him bodily into the street where the sheriff picked him up with a warning. The incident served to arouse them and they made a sudden company as they waited, with hands close to their guns.

Jim Alhorn, the U. S. marshal, stood aloof, his glance roving from McKelvey to Russ and back again. The crowd on the street grew, the sun rose and dispelled the night chill. Russ dozed and suddenly awakened with a cry ringing in his ears.

"Here they come, boys! Here's the clerks."

Two men came hurrying along the walk, their eyes filled with surprise as they weighed the suddenly expectant crowd. Their steps quickened as they reacted to the air of excitement. Then the oldest of the pair—a wizened man all skin and bones and grizzled hair—unlocked the door and led the way inside. McKelvey waved his hand mockingly at Russ and followed the clerks. The queue began to move through the entryway and Russ groaned. As the building swallowed them it gulped in the last of his hopes. He let his head fall on his arms.

He must have slept a little, for suddenly he was roused by an angry clash of voices. He stood up, staring. Men were pouring from the Land

Office, angry and excited, plainly baffled. Russ heard one curse.

"Dammit! All that killing ride for nothing!"

What did it mean? Strangely excited, Russ elbowed through the crush. What had happened in the Land Office? Struggling toward the jammed door, he saw McKelvey emerge, red-faced and savage, saw his eyes flick to where Russ had sat, up until a moment ago. Then McKelvey had swerved aside, missing Russ who entered the doorway the boss had just quitted.

At the long counter, Russ found the two clerks cooling after the argument, smiling thinly at one another. The younger of the two turned as Russ came up.

"Oh, hello, Newhall. Don't tell me you fell for the Ojos Azules joke too."

"Joke?" questioned Russ. "What do you mean, joke? You turned McKelvey down?"

The clerk snorted. "Of course. You've been in the business long enough to know you can't file mineral claims on a Spanish grant."

All Russ' weariness, all his hopelessness fled. With a croak, he bounded over the counter, whipped a book of reports from its rack and opened it to President Grant's order vacating certain Spanish titles.

"Read that!" he challenged. "Then take the filings I've ridden two hundred miles to make."

The clerk scanned the order, the older man coming to peer over his shoulder. They laughed and the younger clerk said:

"You've had your ride for your pains, Newhall. This order is only half the story. Ulysses S. Grant signed it, then rescinded his action—under pressure. Look." He withdrew another book, laid it open for Russ to read.

"You . . . you mean the Ojos Azules title is good?"

"Good as the gold McKelvey says he found on it, Newhall."

LONG-DENIED emotion gave birth to the wild whoop that shrilled from Russ' lungs. He whirled, went rocketing outside. McKelvey and his men stood by their ponies, utterly dejected and resentful. It was Russ' turn now and he was too human not to make the most of it. On the walk he paused, directing his words to where McKelvey stood with his men.

"How do you feel now, McKelvey? Like the ride, did you? And speaking of your mistakes, it looks like little Waspy Bawn really paid you off, you big four-flusher. And you bragging that you had the Fiddle Valley by the tail, with a downhill pull. The joke's on you, McKelvey!"

He laughed in McKelvey's face and the boss went dark with rage. Murder lurked in his eyes as he ground out:

"You take this pot, Newhall. But there's another deal coming up."

He jerked his head at his men, turned away. Fingers fastened Russ' arm and he swung to find Jim Alhorn looking at him soberly.

"The man's right, Newhall. There will be another deal. His shadow's across your trail and you two will never leave Santa Fe without locking horns."

And as if to attest the accuracy of his judgment, patience broke its dams in Burgess McKelvey. A roar guttered from his lips and he was whirling, his gun flashing free, his body slanting forward as he drove lead at Russ.

Russ kept his promise to give McKelvey the first fair shot. More than that, he gave him two. The first went wild, ripping through the

marshal's sleeve. The second plowed dust at Russ' feet, spraying his face. Russ drew, took deliberate aim, and fired three times. McKelvey stiffened, rose to tiptoe and fell face forward, as only a dead man falls.

It awed the watching crowd to silence. But not McKelvey's rene-gade crew. They had lived by McKelvey's bounty and, roaring, they tried to play his cards now. Their guns came out, leveling. Then they were freezing, whirling as a deadly stop order halted them.

"Stop, you sons of mismated goats! Stop or I keel you all!"

The townsmen scattered, revealing Juan Bojorquez and a score of his dusty, weary men. Their faces were contorted, their guns cocked and leveled and ready. McKelvey's men, recognizing only arguments of force, were suddenly willing to accept the showdown and quit the game. Beside Russ, Jim Alhorn let a long breath gust out of him.

"Whew-e-ew! Newhall, you're a mighty patient man, or damned slow to start. Luck or design, my friend, you did a fine job and I'll so attest."

Russ walked over to stare at the wreckage of the implacable, bloody man whose passing would release many he had tricked and beaten and ruined. All Russ' earlier feeling of triumph was gone. He had killed a man. He was about used up. His knees shook and his body trembled.

RUSS felt fully as shaky, a year later, standing on the station platform in the town of Mesa Grande. He had just started a wagon of supplies and equipment toward the rich placers of Ojos Azules, where a hundred men worked at the rockers. And now he awaited the arrival of his boss.

The Limited whirled in from the

north, its shrieking whistle blasting the silence of the sleepy desert town. The train shuddered to a halt. A porter leaped down, lifted out two bags, assisted a slender, graceful girl to alight. Drivers spun and the cars clicked past, leaving Danette Travers standing there.

Russ stood rooted, prey to panic, watching her search faces. He looked for change, saw none, unless it was an absence of a tragic something that but added to her beauty. Her eyes came to him, halted. And Russ knew a heightening of his fear. She was seeing him for the first time. What would she think?

She came hurrying toward him, smiling, confident, certain of her steps. She paused before him, her lips making an eager statement.

"You . . . you're Russ Newhall!"

Russ swallowed the lump in his throat. "Yes ma'am," he managed. "Though how you could possibly know—"

Her eyes looked just the same, but now they were carrying images to her brain, images that seemed to please her. "Russ," she said softly, "you led me through one long year of blackness. My image of you is the man I'm looking at now. The darkness is gone, Russ, thanks to you. And I have come back, not for Ojos Azules and its gold, but to have you lead me—always."

"You make me mighty proud, Danette," Russ said, and took her into his arms. Presently he released her, all his panic gone as he grinned at those who gaped and chuckled at them. What did he care what they thought of the spectacle? What did he care if Ojos Azules and the placers dried up and blew away? Nothing could dull the promise Danette Travers had just whispered. Nothing this side of death.

Chuck and Joe had the smugglers trapped when suddenly a gun roared behind the pair!



RIO JUMPERS

BY JOHN G. PEARSON

CHUCK WADE, lean and powerful, strode down Rio City's dusty street beside Joe Brady. Both men wore twin guns at their belts, had the silver river-guard badges of the United States Immigration Service pinned to their shirts. Chuck cuffed his wide-brimmed hat to a cocky angle as they stopped near the door of the Rio City Hotel.

"The big bad wolf is in here?" he asked his partner.

Joe nodded. "He acted like he had something important on his mind," he remarked.

"We'll see what it is," said Chuck.

Inside, they climbed the stairs, tapped on the door to which the desk clerk had directed them. A lean,

swarthy-skinned man opened it, fixing his black eyes on Chuck Wade with enigmatic speculation.

"Come in," he said. "You're Chuck Wade, I suppose." He kept watching Chuck with an unblinking steadiness.

"I might as well get to the point," he said as Chuck nodded. "I'm Charley Willis, the new assistant chief immigration officer from El Paso. The chief sent me up here. You're fired, Wade."

Chuck stared at Willis in amazement. His gray-blue eyes widened. "Fired!" he repeated. "What for?"

"Because we've had so many complaints about you," Willis said di-

rectly. "You're so tough you can't keep your guns in your holsters. According to the folks around here, you barge along through this section as though you owned it. You're always socking somebody on the jaw or getting into some fracas. You shoot smugglers, invariably; you never capture one alive. We can't have the public form the opinion that our men are bloodthirsty killers operating under the protection of a badge!"

Even under its weathered tan, Chuck's face went white.

"The chief told you to say that to me?" he asked, incredulity in his voice.

Willis nodded. "That's it, Wade," he said crisply. "Let me have your badge. Your pay is being sent from El Paso."

Mechanically Chuck unpinned his badge, handed it to Willis.

"The district is turned over to Brady here until we can send him another man," Willis said. "That's all."

CHUCK and Joe turned, went down the stairs and outside. Neither spoke. Chuck's face was grim, tight.

Up at the corral behind the dobe shack in the little, lawless town that fringed the twisting Rio Grande, the two men opened the gate, roped two horses.

Chuck broke the strained silence. "To hell with him," he said belligerently as he saddled a long-legged roan. "You don't need a badge to ride the river, do you?"

Joe Brady grinned.

"It's a free country," he admitted. "If you want to ride the river, that's your business. But don't come along just because you think I'll need help. I'll manage, Chuck."

"I reckon I've got the habit,"

Chuck said. "It's hard to stop right quick, like drinkin' whiskey."

He grinned and they rode away toward the river, into the dusk that was settling down over the flats. The tall salt cedar, spreading back from the river's edge, became high and dense. They pushed their horses into it and stopped, sat there and waited, their eyes on a crossing that led from Mexico.

The moon came up and sent silver light down onto the water, making it look like a silver ribbon. The silence was deep, and into it the splash of a horse's hoofs in water came to them. Four dark figures emerged cautiously from the brush across the river, slow, wary, their horses splashing tiny plumes of silver spray up about their nervously moving legs as they entered the water.

Suddenly a gun flamed behind Chuck and Joe. Somebody yelled. The smugglers whirled. Their guns began to bark and roar. Bullets ripped through the salt cedar, singing eerily off into space. The rifle behind Chuck still barked and he whirled, thundered toward it, his gun in his hand, his lean face savage.

Then the gun stopped. In the darkness it was suddenly quiet. Chuck circled, but couldn't find the hidden rifleman. Back where he had left Joe he stopped, stared down at his friend's sprawled form. He knelt beside him, examined the wound in Joe's breast. Joe opened his eyes and grinned up at him.

Somebody was behind us?" he asked weakly.

Chuck nodded. "Yes," he said. "I'll take you to town now, Joe. I'll have to carry you. You can't ride."

Joe shook his head.

"As soon as we leave they'll come back again. Move me up on that rock where I can rest a rifle on it.

You go down to the other crossing. I'll go in at daylight."

Chuck studied him closely. Joe grinned cockily at him.

"It ain't bad, Chuck," he said earnestly. "Honest. Just a scratch."

"O. K.," Chuck said finally. "I'll carry you up to the rock."

Lifting Joe in his arms, he carried him up through the salt cedar to a rocky ledge commanding a view of this crossing. Hurriedly, he bound a compress on the wound, handed Joe a rifle. He noticed worriedly that Joe's lips were a grim line across his whitened face.

"Now you watch the other crossing, Chuck," Joe said. He had difficulty in speaking clearly. "We'll get them jaspers tonight."

"Sure, Joe," Chuck said. "We'll get 'em."

MOUNTING, back down near the river, Chuck spurred his horse away, but instead of heading for the crossing, he roared straight to town. Thundering into the main street, he leaped from his horse in front of the doctor's office.

"Listen, Doc," he told Doc Davis, Rio City's bespectacled old medico, "Joe Brady is shot bad. He wouldn't let me bring him in. He's layin' out there on the river with a rifle, tryin' to snag a bunch of dope runners. We got to hurry. Get a buckboard. You'll have to bring him in."

Doc Davis ran back into the office. Chuck went up the street, stopped at the blacksmith shop where Big Tim Nealy, the smithy, was sitting out in front, a bulky dim figure in the night.

"Joe's shot, Tim," Chuck told him. "These blasted dope runners are working hard to get some stuff across. They've got somebody in town here working with them. Joe

and me were shot at from behind when we tried to stop them. They might try again tonight at the same place, or they might try the south crossing. I wonder if you'd take a hand and help me out while Joe is laid up?"

Big Tim nearly rose, nodded.

"Sure," he said, readily. "Count on me. But I thought you was fired, Chuck."

Chuck smiled grimly.

"They can't fire me from bein' Joe Brady's friend, can they?" he retorted. "They can't keep me from hating the lowdown skunks that run dope across the river. Joe's up on that rock ledge above the north crossing. Soon as you get ready come out there, will you?"

"I'll be right there," Tim Nealy promised.

Chuck hurried down past Flash Tipton's saloon. Tipton and his gunmen, Atwell, Stir Riley and Slade, were out in front, and the sight of them made Chuck wonder if one of them had been behind him and Joe out there on the river. Then Doc Davis came out into the street with his buckboard. Chuck mounted, rode up beside him, and told him where Joe Brady was lying.

"I'll hurry on," he finished.

Spurring out of town, he kept thinking of Flash Tipton and his gunmen, and of Charley Willis coming here to fire him. He could keep a grin on his lean, battle-scarred face in town when anybody spoke of that, but alone, speeding through the night toward Joe Brady, he knew he was cut by this humiliation. He'd given all he had to give to the service. Sure, he'd been tough. But you had to be tough to ride the river. You couldn't slap a smuggler on the wrist and tell him to be good. You couldn't get the respect of a bunch

of killers unless you were tougher than they were. And Rio City was all tough. Of all the citizens there, Chuck reckoned he could trust only Big Tim Nealy. The rest were killers, thieves, men who had to stay near the border.

Spearing through the scrub growth of the flats, Chuck climbed his horse near the ledge where Joe lay. Joe's face was ghastly. He'd rolled over on his stomach, snuggled his rifle up against his cheek. When he saw Chuck he summoned a weak grin.

"I think they're gettin' ready to cross again," he whispered. "It's hard to see from here. If you could get down there—"

Chuck eased down through the brush, his gun in his hand. Silently, fervently, he cursed the sort of men he was having to fight now; the sort or gents who would murder cold-bloodedly to get their rotten contraband across the river. In the silent night there was no sound but that of the sluggish water crushing the reeds fringing the river's edge. Pushing through the brush, Chuck stopped as a splash in the water came to his ears. Two horsemen came into sight, riding slowly. Chuck crouched low in the brush, their voices coming to him as they neared the bank.

"I think they're gone," one of them said. "The boss got one. The other one took him to town. I don't see—"

CHUCK stepped out into the trail, his leveled gun glittering in the pale light of the moon.

"Put up your hands!" he ordered.

Their guns made streaks of light as they whipped upward. A pistol flamed. A bullet slashed through Chuck's side. His own gun roared as another bullet tugged imperiously at his shirt sleeve. The leader of the two riders pitched out of the

saddle. The other whirled, roared away, Chuck blazing away at him. Joe Brady's rifle began to chatter up on the rock, but the fleeing rider reached the shadows and vanished.

Chuck paced forward and peered down at the man on the ground, a lean, hawk-nosed gent. His face convulsed in pain, the outlaw clutched at his belly with both hands.

"O. K., you murderin' law dog!" he cursed viciously. "You got me. Take me to a doctor. Do . . . something . . . about this pain in my belly! For—"

"Who's the boss you mentioned?" Chuck asked him, pressing a hand to the torn place in his side.

The wounded smuggler's face sobered as he studied Chuck's stony features, his icy eyes, his tightened lips.

"So . . . so that's it," he managed hoarsely. "I talk or . . . I lay here an' die?"

"That's it," Chuck told him coldly. "You fellers dish it out, so you oughta be able to take it. Who's the boss? Who's behind the smuggling? Why are they so anxious to make it tonight?"

The smuggler's hand tightened convulsively as he held his stomach.

"I don't know the boss," he said huskily. "That's . . . that's the truth, so help me. They want to make it tonight because we was tipped off it . . . it would be . . . easy tonight. We got the biggest shipment ever. Everything the boss has . . . is tied up in this. They sent me across just now to see if the . . . coast was clear. If not they'll try the south crossing after a while. They—"

A spasm of pain convulsed his features. He moaned, clawed at his stomach, then relaxed and lay there unmoving. He was dead. Chuck rose and moved tiredly through the

brush up to where Joe Brady lay. Joe's eyes were closed now, his finger still curved about the trigger of the rifle. He lay on his face. Chuck turned him over, relieved to feel the faint beat of Joe's heart as he placed a finger at his pulse.

THE brush crashed as Doc Davis pushed up through it. He opened his bag and took out some instruments. Then he examined Joe. Behind the medico was Charley Willis. The latter wore a stiff-brimmed Stetson, a business suit and a gun about his waist. There was a rifle in the saddle boot on the horse he led into the clearing.

"I'll have to get Joe into town right away, Chuck," the doctor announced hurriedly. "Help me carry him down to the buckboard."

His side throbbing, his head spinning, Chuck helped Doc Davis load the wounded river guard into the flat back of the rig.

"As soon as you get to town, Doc," Chuck told him, "ask Tim Nealy to hurry out to the south crossing. I shot a smuggler just before you got here. He talked, told me they're planning to use the south crossing tonight. If you know anybody else you can trust, send them too. If any of the punchers from Red Conlin's outfit are in town, send them. I want to guard both crossings. I want to blast hell out of the gents that did this to Joe!"

Doc Davis turned at the utter savagery in Chuck's voice, studied his face.

"I know how you feel," he said, sympathy in his voice. "I'll dig up enough men to help you."

"You'll do nothing of the kind, doctor," Willis spoke up severely. "I'll manage this. I've fired Chuck Wade. He has nothing to say. He'll

stay away from the crossings tonight!"

Chuck smiled grimly.

"To the devil with you, mister," he said defiantly. "You got my badge, but that's all you get. The government don't boss me now. I'll be wherever I damn please. I'll shoot a smuggler if I see one and you can prefer charges of murder against me if you know I did it. Doc, will you send some help?"

Doc Davis stared coolly at the fuming Willis.

"I never turn down my friends, Chuck," he said quietly. "I don't reckon the government has a mortgage on my tongue!"

He climbed into the buckboard. Willis mounted and raced away. Chuck, putting a hand against his bleeding side and leaning back against a rock for support, watched the immigration man thunder out of sight. He wondered what the cocky fool thought he was going to do about Chuck Wade staying at the crossing. There was no law against his trying to get a shot at the gents who had put a bullet into Joe Brady. All this brass hat from El Paso could do was to rave and rant and waggle his tongue.

Slipping carefully through the brush after he dismounted at the south crossing, Chuck hunkered down behind a rock nest of boulders. He slipped his guns into his hands and his narrowed eyes watched the moon-silvered water. He prayed the dying smuggler hadn't lied. He prayed he'd get a few good shots at the jaspers who had put a bullet into his pard. That was all he wanted. He told himself he didn't give a tinker's damn for his job, but he felt a little empty, a little sick inside, when he recalled that it was gone. From now on Chuck Wade would have to go to punching cows or being

an express guard or maybe a deputy sheriff. He reckoned he could get a job, but it wouldn't be like the one he'd had for so long here, riding the river with Joe.

A SOFT sound stirring the night's dead silence turned Joe's head. Big Tim Nealy rode toward the river, a giant figure, dimly discernible in the moon's silver rays, a rifle across his saddlehorn. He dismounted downriver from Chuck and crouched in the brush. The night was silent and empty, and Chuck's wounded side throbbed and ached. A giddy weakness assailed him and he had to grit his teeth against it. A feverish impatience was consuming him, making him wish the smugglers would hurry.

Then—that familiar splash, horses' hoofs in the shallow water of the crossing. Four black shadows appeared against the silvery whiteness of the water as they rode across the river. Chuck's lips tightened in a grim smile as he waited, his palms sweaty against the smooth butts of his guns.

Then the smugglers were there, their horses in front of Chuck. He rose from behind a rock, his guns sweeping up, a harsh command on his lips. A gun flamed in his face, but his own lead downed the man who had shot at him. Suddenly all hell broke loose. All the guns in the world, it seemed, were barking, snarling, bellowing. The rifle from the rock where Tim Nealy crouched began its spiteful, thin-voiced bark. Bullets began to whine and scream about Chuck, but he laughed as he watched another smuggler fall. A bullet struck his shoulder, spun him about and he knelt down behind the rock again, still able to shoot from there at the two remaining smugglers. Another fell. The bullets from

the rifle were smashing against the rock where Chuck crouched and he realized very abruptly that Big Tim was shooting at him! He yelled at Tim to let him know who he was, but his voice was lost in the crashing thunder of guns. He kept on shooting at the one fleeing smuggler, saw him sway perilously in his saddle as he vanished in the night.

The rifle from Nealy's rock still clattered.

"Tim!" Chuck yelled between shots. "It's me! For the love o' Pete, let up! It's Chuck!"

The gun stopped. Chuck thrust his head up over the rock. Tim Nealy was standing up, his rifle in his hands, peering cautiously over to where Chuck was crawling from behind the rock.

Chuck laughed a little weakly as he shuffled over to where Big Tim stood.

"Holy mackerel," Chuck laughed again shakily. "You was shooting at me all the time! Did you think I meant for you to be here alone? Boy, you shot at everything in sight!"

CONTRITION spread over the blacksmith's big-boned face. "I didn't hit you, did I, Chuck?" he asked anxiously.

Chuck shook his head. He knew that the bullet which had smashed through the fleshy part of his left shoulder had come from Nealy's rifle, but he didn't want to make the big fellow feel bad about it.

"No," he said. "You missed me, Tim."

"It's lucky I'm the rottenest shot in the world," Tim said in a relieved voice. "But one of them gents got away. Maybe we better ride toward town."

Chuck got his horse. They rode slowly through the brush. Big Tim,

in the lead, stopped suddenly, dismounted and stared at a man laying on the trail. Chuck slipped down and extracted a flat package that showed under the dead man's shirt front.

The thunder of hoofs on the trail made Chuck and Big Tim lift their eyes. Willis came tearing up. He stopped his horse and stared at them. Chuck handed him a package.

"Here's your dope," he said coolly. He waved a hand at the dead man at his feet and back toward the river. "And here and back there along the river are your dope runners. They're all dead."

Bitterly, he was thinking that Willis would probably have tried to talk the dope out of these gents instead of shooting it out of them.

The gray of dawn was in the sky. The first streaks of light from a new sun were painting the horizon with rosy color. Chuck climbed onto his horse again.

"Thanks," said Willis, putting the package in his pocket. "I . . . I got to thinking after I left the crossing back there. I figured that fellow you shot had lied to you. I stayed at the other crossing, thinking he'd misled you on purpose. I couldn't see why he'd tell you the truth. I hurried here as soon as I heard the shooting."

Riding along slowly, that giddy weakness coming to him again, Chuck recalled that the dying smuggler had mentioned a "boss." That would be the gent who had been behind Joe and him at the other crossing.

They rode into town, Willis stopping at the saloon. Big Tim Nealy looked at the blood on Chuck's shirt.

"You're shot, Chuck," he said, concerned. "You oughta get the Doc right away."

Up at Doc Davis' office, Red Conlin, the owner of the Circle C Ranch up in the hills, came to the door as Chuck slid off his horse.

"They'll both be O. K., Chuck," Red said reassuringly. "But you better not go in now. They're asleep."

"They?" Chuck's eyes narrowed.

"Joe and the Doc," Red Conlin said, surprised. "We found 'em both out on the flats in the buckboard. Doc was shot and so was Joe. Joe told us before he lost consciousness that somebody started to shoot at them with a rifle. Whoever it was got Doc, but Joe drove him off. We carted 'em in and have patched 'em up. They'll both live, Chuck."

Chuck Wade stood there for a minute. He turned and looked at Big Tim Nealy. Willis was coming up the street, and he stopped there in front of the doctor's office when Chuck's eyes fastened onto him.

"You still got that badge you took from me, Willis?" Chuck asked him suddenly.

Willis nodded. "It's in my pocket. I'll—"

"Take it out of your pocket and show it to me," Chuck interrupted. "I'd like a look at it."

Willis looked puzzled, but he pulled the badge from his pocket and showed it cupped in his palm. Chuck grinned wickedly, a certain subtle savagery in his expression.

"Thanks," he said coldly. "Don't put it back again. I want it handy so I don't have to touch your rotten carrion after I kill you!"

WILLIS' face went white. Big Tim Nealy's eyes took on a peculiar shine. Chuck Wade took them both in with his flashing eyes.

"You're both a pair of dirty snakes!" he said coldly. "A pair of

murdering skunks! But you didn't have the teamwork it takes to get along in a game like this. I told Doc to send Tim out to the south crossing. When I saw Tim there I figured that was why he came. But Doc didn't get to talk to him. Doc was stopped. He was shot because Willis heard me tell him to send any honest man he could find. Willis, you didn't want that, so you shot Doc!"

The pair of them were quiet, tense, their eyes alight with something akin to fear as they stared at the utter ruthlessness on Chuck Wade's face.

"So the only one who could have told Tim to come to the south crossing," Chuck went on, "would be you, Willis, because you were the only other man who knew I'd be there. You told Tim to come, then hurried out to stop Doc. I know you're a crook because you lied. You said you stayed at the north crossing. But you didn't. You came here to send Tim to the south crossing to get me. You're the only one who could have done it. You're no immigration man! You're a fake! You thought up this stunt to get rid of me for a day or so. You—"

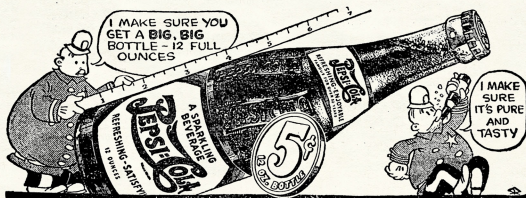
Swiftly, Chuck's guns came into his hands as they both moved, as

Big Tim Nealy tried to swing up his rifle. Chuck's gun exploded almost in Big Tim's face, knocked the blacksmith back as if a horse had kicked him. Chuck's other gun licked vicious flame at Willis as Willis' hand streaked toward the revolver at his hip. Behind him, Chuck heard the muttered exclamations of Red Conlin. But he didn't turn. He watched Willis fall, to lay sprawled near the twisted form of Big Tim Nealy. He moved slowly forward and picked up the badge the fake immigration man had dropped, pinned it back on the darkened spot on the left side of his faded shirt. There was a hard grin on his face as he started toward the office door.

"I reckon you better let me wake Joe up," he told Conlin. "I've got some awful good news for him."

And besides, he wanted to get in where he could sit down. For a gent who was supposed to be tough, his pins were getting mighty wobbly. Those two bullet holes in him were giving him hell. But he didn't let on. He cuffed his wide-brimmed hat to a cocky angle as he went in the door. In this game you had to make 'em think you were pretty tough, tougher than you really were.

THE END.



RANGE SAVVY

by H. FREDRIC YOUNG

Oddly enough, the word "tenderfoot" was first applied to a cow, not to an Easterner visiting the West. When the shorthorn Herefords were first shipped



west, instead of the lush grass of soft meadows they found the rockiest, hardest plains they had ever seen! What happened? They got sore feet before they reached the Texas ranches, far south. The word tenderfoot started right there. Since then anyone from the East unused to the hardness of the wild West, is dubbed a tenderfoot.

It took some three hundred years for nature to develop four of the West's most colorful animals. Long after the discovery of America, Cortez, Coronado and other Spaniards brought to this country



horses, cattle, burros and hogs. Some of these animals got separated from their herds and grew up wild. Over a period of three hundred years these animals multiplied until they roved in great numbers. They were the progenitors of the West's wild mustang, the Texas longhorn, the Rocky Mountain canary or just plain wild burro, and the razor-back hog.

Down through the centuries has come the little shuffling, stubborn, braying beast of burden we of the West call the burro, or Rocky Mountains canary. This beast has done tricks new and old to strain the temper and whet the admiration of man, but leave it to Jim Butler to attest its real worth.



One night in May, 1900, Butler's burro wandered from camp. Next morning he traced it to a shelter behind a ledge, and while waiting there for a slight sand storm to subside, Butler pecked idly at a ledge. The chippings looked good to him, and a later assay proved him right. That was the spot that began the mad days of Tonapah, Nevada, and over two hundred million dollars' worth of gold.

When you see a Mexican or Indian woman wade out into a stream and begin flailing laundry against a flat rock with a lusty club, don't waste your sympathy on the amount of soap she seems to be using. The "soap" is made of the roots of the very plentiful yucca plant.



The women gather the yucca roots and pound them with a stone until the fibers are separated, bringing out the oozy, soapy substance. This they spread on the dampened garments and beat into the material with their clubs. Later rinsed, the clothing is surprisingly clean. Yucca plant roots will wash anything from wool to silk in an efficient way.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

BOBCAT BOOMERANG

BY S. OMAR BARKER

If there are any of the so-called "woodland gods" whose special duty it is to lay out the crisscross trails of four-footed destiny for creatures of the wild, they must be kept pretty busy. Had Tuft-ear, the bobcat, been gifted with human speech and logic, most probably he would have scoffed at this fate business. Certainly he would have ridiculed the idea that his own destiny might be vitally interwoven with that of a long-tailed mountain lion and a short-tailed dog—not to mention a man and a maid.

"Bobcat life," I can imagine Tuft-ear wise-cracking, "is just one dang thing after another. If it's a rat, rabbit, grouse, turkey, fawn or chipmunk, we're after it; if it's a wolf or one of those silly coyotes, it's liable to be after us. The difference is that what us bobcats are after we generally ketch, but when some ol' blunt claw takes after us, all we got to do is scoot up a tree and there ain't no critter in creation can reach us."

Tuft-ear was a handsome four-year-old tom, weight twenty-six pounds and proud of his spots, before he began to learn that "life for us bobcats" wasn't always quite so safe and simple. Altogether, that was a year of hard-learned lessons for Tuft-ear. It was as if the gods of four-footed destiny, if such there be, suddenly decided to bear down on him.

To begin with, late that spring, Tuft-ear encountered his first porcupine. Until the white man built bridges for him to cross on, the Indians say Sa-ma-na, the quill bearer, was as scarce in the New Mexico



Unknown to Tuft-ear another mountain lion was closing in from the rear.

mountains east of the Rio Grande as snakes on a snowbank. Whatever the reason, Tuft-ear had prowled the Palo Tumbado country all the four years of his life without running into one.

Instead of trying to run away from Tuft-ear, Sa-ma-na humped his back to show thousands of white-shafted, black-tipped needles beneath wispy pale-yellow hair. Instinct warned Tuft-ear to approach this strange creature with caution. But because a lady-inspired feud with another tom had kept him too occupied for hunting during most of the last twenty-four hours, Tuft-ear was feeling hungry. And because he had finally licked the socks off a rival tom, he was also feeling pretty sprouty.

Disregarding the warning of the porky's raised spear-laden tail, Tuft-ear reached out a fur-tufted paw to investigate. The porky looked sluggish, but his tail slap was lightning swift. The bobcat drew back with a spitting snarl, his right paw and forearm bristling with quills. The surprise and shock of sudden and unfamiliar pain was too much for him, and he turned and limped away into the underbrush.

IT was this encounter, really, that brought about Tuft-ear's second sample of the seamy side of bobcat life. Unable to hunt successfully because of the pain in his foreleg as a dozen or more porcupine quills festered its flesh, the gnawing urge of an empty gut caused him to act against his better judgment. The lure was venison, freshly killed only a few hours before by one of Tuft-ear's distant cousins, a long-tailed female mountain lion. He had feasted on lion-butchered venison before, but only when his nose told him that the tawny killer was no-

where about. This time stroug, musky cat scent on the air told him definitely that the mountain lioness was still close by. But hunger gave him courage.

Hardly had Tuft-ear gulped his first mouthful, however, when a half-grown lion cub left his mother and sister sunning on a nearby cliff rim and came strolling back to the kill. Tuft-ear had no intention of standing his ground to fight a lion—even a half-grown one. But it is cat nature to put up at least a momentary bluff before flight. The bobcat's tufted ears flattened to his head, the big roundness of his green eyes narrowed to mere slits, a low, snarling growl formed in his throat.

Instantly the young tom lion's long tail stiffened, then began to switch. His answering snarl was louder, more confident than the bobcat's, and his mother heard it. Stiff-legged, the young tom began to circle the intruder. Tuft-ear's valor suddenly vanished. As he turned to run, the she-lion came bounding toward him from the rear. She did not pause to snarl, but her tail was switching and it was plain enough she meant business. Encouraged by his mother's arrival, the young tom lion sprang to intercept Tuft-ear as the latter changed his course.

There was only one thing left for Tuft-ear to do, and the most unflinching of cat instincts told him what it was. He sprang for the nearest tree, and despite his swollen foreleg, he went up it fast.

Then the tricky gods of woodland destiny sprang another surprise. The young tom lion rushed swiftly up after Tuft-ear. With the courage of desperation, the bobcat crouched on a branch, flattened his ears and spat snarling defiance. But for his disabled foreleg, he would even have reached down to slap at

the young tom lion's whiskers. As it was, the first ripping cuff of the young long-tail's big forepaw knocked the bobcat galley-west out of the tree. But, despite the bleeding claw rips on his shoulder, despite his quill-festered leg, despite the jar of his fall, Tuft-ear managed to bounce instantly into a long-bounding run.

Already busy re-covering her disturbed kill with sticks and leaves, the lioness made no move to follow. The young she-cub crouched and switched her tail, but nothing came of it. The young tom perched superciliously on a handy limb and began washing his face.

Half a mile away, Tuft-ear limped into the shelter of a dark overhang of cliff and lay down to lick his wounds.

For the next few months the bobcat committee of the gods of wild-wood destiny must have decided to give Tuft-ear a breathing spell. The quills finally worked through and out of his leg, the festered muscles healed, rabbits were plentiful, he was successful both in war and love, the fat of good living built a comfortable lump between his flanks, his fur acquired a rich, buff thickness. Altogether, there was no denying that Tuft-ear was once more handsome, happy and proud of his spots.

Then fate began pulling the strings again.

IN the Los Trigos Valley, some ten miles north of Tuft-ear's home range, a man named Jeff Larch bought the old Trujillo place and moved in with a small herd of cattle to make a ranch of it. Jeff Larch was a bachelor, and he came from Colorado. Also, as Pearl Huxtable observed from two or three different windows as he drove his cattle past

her father's ranchhouse on Barranca Creek, Jeff Larch was young, tall, an easy man in the saddle, probably dark-haired and good-looking—and he had two dogs. Which was another point in his favor, for Adam Huxtable's daughter liked dogs.

The one fact that would have concerned Tuft-ear most of all had he been sizing up the newcomer, was something the girl did not learn until considerably later when she met Jeff Larch in person. That meeting seems also to have been somehow interwoven with Tuft-ear's destiny.

This fact was that Jeff Larch's venerable half-breed Airdale hounds were not mere pets; they were hunters, and so was their master. One day after the big snow in February, Tuft-ear found it out.

Tuft-ear was growling over a fresh, warm-blooded meal of snowshoe rabbit when he first heard the yelp of Jeff Larch's dogs. Tuft-ear had been cruising with another tom when he made the kill, but he had had no intention of sharing the meat. That's why he growled as he ate.

Thus, as the two toms fled up the north Palo Tumbado Ridge, it was Tuft-ear who lagged, short-winded now because of his full belly. The empty tom's bounding leaps were swifter and longer. He was already a quarter of a mile away and still running when the terror of two dogs yelping at his very heels sent Tuft-ear scurrying up a tree. Winded, he paused on a low branch, then, perceiving that the dogs could not reach him even there, he crouched without bothering to climb higher.

At first the wild barking of the dogs alarmed him, but after ten minutes of it he began to feel more secure. Let 'em bark. After a while they would give it up and go away.

All he had to do was wait. He did not realize that what he was waiting for was a bullet.

Suddenly one of the dogs—Queenie—quit barking, raised her brown nose to quest a light breeze drifting down the ridge. Her anxious whine caught Booger's attention. He, too, sniffed the breeze.

In their years of cat hunting with Jeff Larch, both Queenie and Booger had learned that while treeing one of these short-tailed little wild cats was good, putting up a big long tail was better. The strong, musky scent of the old she-lion whom their barking had disturbed somewhere on up the ridge was a temptation ol' Booger could not resist. With a whining yelp, he took out. Queenie whined, too, but until she saw Jeff Larch's horse come breasting across a snowdrift a few yards down the ridge, she stayed with the tree. Then she ran a few steps toward her master, barked, ran back and cut a few didoes under the tree. Tuft-ear was in, barked again and took out up the ridge.

To her master the old dog's meaning was as plain as if she had said, "Here, you 'tend to this bobcat, I'm goin' on after a lion!" Sudden spurs kicked a grunt of surprise out of Jeff Larch's horse as the man hurried him up to the cat tree.

With the winter sun already nearly down and a lion chase in prospect, there was no time to waste. Jeff Larch didn't take time to draw the rifle from its scabbard under his leg, nor even to dismount. He yanked his six-shooter out, raised it swiftly and fired.

Tuft-ear tumbled out of the tree, kicked a time or two and lay still. Still without dismounting, Jeff swung his long-reach down and slung the limp body across behind the cante. The prod of his spurs

sent the pony straining on through the deep snow. He'd have to hurry. Both Queenie and Booger were getting old now. They couldn't work a track as fast as they used to, he reflected. He'd better start training him another pup or two pretty soon, or one of these days he'd find himself plumb out of hunting dogs. With Queenie and ol' Booger for parents, he ought to be able to raise a couple of good hunters.

A hundred yards up the ridge Jeff Larch's cold-numbered fingers were still fumbling with the saddle strings, trying back-handedly to tie the bobcat onto the saddle without stopping, when suddenly his reflections on pups were startled out of his mind by the nip of sharp teeth in the seat of his pants. Then, before he could really realize what was happening or do anything about it, his pony snorted and let in to buck as the "dead" bobcat's claws dug into his flank.

JEFF LARCH admitted later that he made a mistake, at that moment, in grabbing for the reviving bobcat instead of the saddlehorn. For the next instant he landed wrong end up in a snowbank, out of which he clawed his way just in time to see his horse, with a spitting, clawing bobcat joggling at one flank, disappear over the ridge rim.

When he heard the pony still brush-crashing a quarter of a mile or more away down the steep slope, Jeff Larch realized at once the fix he was in. If he followed the horse he might catch him again and he might not. Being caught afoot in the snow, miles from home was bad enough, but there were also his dogs to consider. Whenever Queenie and Booger took out on a track, they trusted him to follow and shoot whatever game they treed. It was a

faith he had never yet betrayed, and he wasn't going to betray it now.

Within twenty minutes he heard them barking "treed," but thanks to loggy thickets and steep, cliffy slopes, all deep with snow, it was almost dark when he got there. Lacking his rifle, what he should have done, Jeff Larch admitted later, was to build up a fire and wait the night out so he could shoot by daylight. What he did was skylight the treed lioness and take as careful aim as he could at its head.

Maybe it was the fuzziness of dusk, maybe it was because Jeff was fagged out, maybe it was the unseen hand of certain woodland gods that caused his gun hand to joggle ever so slightly as he squeezed the trigger. Anyway his bullet missed the big cat's brain by less than an inch—close enough to kill her within a minute, but not within a second. That minute of life after the cougar dropped to the ground, unfortunately, was long enough for her great rear claws to rip Booger's entrails out, and badly maul Queenie.

It was sunup the next morning when Jeff Larch's aching legs finally brought him, with only one dog and a sad heart, to the nearest ranch-house on Barranca Creek.

When Pearl Huxtable came to the door, Jeff Larch introduced himself, intending only to ask for the loan of a horse. But the girl made him come in for breakfast, and the taste of it after his all-night ordeal was something to remember. So, for that matter, was Pearl—her friendly gray eyes, her warm smile, her concern over Queenie's wounds.

Adam Huxtable loaned Jeff a horse and he rode on home to find his own pony nickering anxiously at the gate. The animal's flanks and rump were badly scratched, there was blood on the saddle and the sad-

dle strings were broken. The bobcat was gone.

Queenie's wounds healed so slowly that there was no more cat hunting for Jeff Larch that winter.

That spring Queenie's pups were born—all but one of them dead and that one plenty puny. Jeff Larch named the surviving pup Booger Junior, called him Jooney, and set out to raise him anyhow.

It's a funny thing about dogs. According to his breeding Jooney should have taken to cat hunting like a duck to water, but he didn't. He grew out of his runthood all right, took on plenty of size and pep, but when Jeff Larch took him out that following winter to teach him to hunt cats, Jooney preferred rabbits.

"Just won't show no interest in a cat track," Jeff told Pearl Huxtable. "An' Queenie's too feeble now to go out with me to help learn him."

"But he's just a pup, Jeff!" Pearl protested, rubbing the young dog's ears affectionately.

"An' acts like he always will be! Why, when ol' Booger was nine months' old he'd put a cat up a tree so fast his tail smoked! If I can't cure Jooney of this rabbit fever by the time he gits a little older, I reckon I'll have to shoot him an' git me a hound to hunt with."

To that the girl did not say anything, but she pulled the pup's bristle-haired head close against her. Jooney's big brown eyes looked up at her adoringly.

"One thing," grumbled Jeff Larch, "he's too much of a lady's pet to ever amount to anything in the woods."

"Why, Jeff! I thought you liked dogs—the way I do!"

"Sure. I do. But a dog of mine's got to be a hunter or—"

"Or you'll shoot him!" Pearl's

tone was indignant. "Why do men have to be so cruel?"

"It ain't cruel. I'd hate it as bad as you would. But . . . well, I been figgerin' on fur an' bounty money from cat-huntin' to sorter fix up my cabin . . . maybe build onto it, make more room so—"

"Why, I wouldn't think you'd need any more room," Pearl hastened to interrupt. "Just you there alone!"

It had been urgent in Jeff Larch's mind to tell her that he hoped not to live there alone much longer, but there was something in the tone of her voice now that stopped him. It was as if some intangible barrier had risen between them.

Manlike, he did not realize that this unspoken barrier was a small, newborn doubt in Pearl's heart about marrying a man who would shoot his own dog just because he wouldn't learn to hunt bobcats.

Thus, by a long and devious trail, the destiny of Tuft-ear, the bobcat, had become involved with that of a man, a maid, a rabbit-chasing pup, and incidentally, the same tom lion that had so unceremoniously cuffed him out of a tree.

WHEN Tuft-ear came to life on Jeff Larch's saddle, it was because the bullet of Jeff's hasty shot had only grazed his skull, knocking him out cold, but not killing him. In the hunter's haste to get on after the lion, Tuft-ear's feeble breathing had not been noticed.

Also, in his hurry, Jeff had gotten only one of the saddle strings tied, and it so loosely that presently it broke, and Tuft-ear was free again. Free—but so badly hurt that he was barely able to drag himself into the shelter of a thicket, there to lie for two nights and days, while the woodland gods dangled death on a

string so near that time and again its cold claws all but seized him.

Yet he did survive, with the sight of one eye gone forever and a certain stiffness of spine that sorely hampered his hunting. Rabbits, he found, were strangely hard to catch. Even young grouse evaded him. Life was no longer easy, but it was precious, still.

In December of the second winter after Tuft-ear's narrow escape there came a heavy snow and Jeff Larch rode into the woods to give Jooney his last chance to prove whether he would ever tree a cat or not.

So once more the woodland gods' special committee got busy with their strings.

Tuft-ear had hunted all night, but his gut was still empty around mid-morning when the wind brought faintly to his ears the sharp yelping of Jooney running a rabbit, followed by Jeff Larch shouting to call him back. Tuft-ear walked a high log and listened.

Except for the plop of wet snow falling from the trees, the woods were silent again. Had Tuft-ear known it, silence was more ominous than the yelping. It meant that for the moment, at least, Jeff had succeeded in getting Jooney to run on a cat track—and it was Tuft-ear's track, made early the night before.

Presently, like a shadow across the snow, Tuft-ear left the log and hurried away. He was cruising another thicket for rabbits when he heard the yelping again, this time a little closer. Memory nudged the bobcat with an irresistible fear, stronger than his hunger. In long, reaching bounds he quit the rabbit runs and traveled. Presently he doubled back to listen again, uneasy at the silence, uneasy still when once more he heard the dog.

Half a dozen times that day Tuft-ear heard it, each time with a growing fear that drove him finally clear on over to unfamiliar cliffs beyond the big main ridge. There he crawled into a nook of rocks to rest. Presently there came on the wind a strong, musky scent that he had feared ever since that young tom lion had followed him up the tree. Once more Tuft-ear moved out, circling back toward more familiar range.

Following Tuft-ear's devious trail, Jeff Larch took turns cursing his dog and his luck. Stubbornly he fought thicket and log fall to stay on the cat track so that he could try again to make Jooney take it far enough ahead of him to tree the cat. One moment he would feel encouraged. The pup would run the track all right for a few hundred yards. Then he would yield again to rabbit chasing.

WHAT both puzzled and exasperated Jeff Larch was that this cat track seemed to go on and on forever, zigzagging all over creation without getting any fresher. Normally, he knew, a cruising bobcat would sooner or later catch a rabbit, gorge itself on it and hunt a cozy spot to lay up in for the day. That way it would soon be caught up with, and a man could find out whether his dog did or didn't have the stuff to tree it. But this dang cat, though a big un, by the track, seemed to be on a world cruise, with never a kill. Jeff even found where Tuft-ear had come onto a porcupine, followed it for a while and then gone on without tackling it. It was a strange bobcat that couldn't even flop over a porky, especially as hungry as this cat ought to be by now! And precious little chance it gave him really to try out his dog!

Those scheming woodland gods, however, knew what memory it was that prevented Tuft-ear from tackling the porcupine. They were also aware that Tuft-ear's failure to catch a rabbit was due to the effects of one of Jeff Larch's own bullets. Perhaps they grinned a little—as they pulled another string.

About mid-afternoon Jeff Larch heard Jooney barking "treed." When he nearly busted both his own and his pony's neck to get there, only to find that Jooney had a rabbit "treed" in a hallow log, Jeff Larch decided he might as well get the job done now as later. Plainly the pup would never be worth a damn. He dismounted, took his rifle from the scabbard. He was just lining the sights on Jooney's head when the disturbed snow on a nearby log caught his eye. He lowered the gun to look. The cat tracks, where Tuft-ear had doubled back to listen, were the freshest Jeff had seen. He decided to give it another try.

It was a tough climb up through jagged cliff gaps and Jeff Larch called himself a damn fool for risking his horse's and his own neck to do it.

Topping out on the big main ridge, he called the pup to him and shoved his nose down into the bobcat track.

"Now go git 'im, you no-count little whelp!" he said sternly.

Agreeably, as if this were some pleasant, whimsical game his master liked to play, Jooney looped leisurely out on the track, keeping one eye peeled for any good rabbit thicket that might happen along.

Sweat-soaked and panting, Jeff Larch stood a moment before mounting, to breathe his horse. At this moment Tuft-ear was no more than a quarter of a mile away. At this moment, also, the gods' destiny

committee must have decided to pull together a few scattered strings.

Three hundred yards over the ridge out of Jeff Larch's sight a big tom lion's tail-twitching crouch broke into a thirty-foot leap. As his great teeth bit through the neck of his victim, the deer blatted. Jooney heard it, caught strong musky lion scent on the air for the first time and came on the run.

Normally the tom lion would have fled, but with the taste of fresh blood in his mouth, the deer still kicking out its life in his clutches, he turned with a snarl to face the dog. Cat trailer or not, the Airdale in Jooney's blood had never refused a fight. Like a bolt he shot straight at the lion. One of the big tom's paws reached out and slapped him rolling. But when he got up, and with an eager yelp, came rushing back for more, the strong dog-fear instinct in the big cat came to life. Tail up and swinging, in long, bounding leaps he fled. But not far. When Jooney got too close on his heels he leaped swiftly up a tree, spitting and snarling down from a high limb at the wildly barking dog below.

When Jeff Larch heard that barking he socked the spurs to his horse.

"No rabbit this time!" he grunted, and his face broke into a grin. "That's treed-cat talk or I'm a Dutchman!"

THE Huxtable house was dark when Jeff led his horse into the yard that night, with a big mountain lion roped across the saddle and a tired but mighty proud dog at his heels. Late as it was, he hallooed. When Pearl and her father had dressed, they came out to look at the lion, and the girl was as happy and proud of the pup as Jeff was.

"If that ol' bobcat I was trailin' hadn't been such a dang poor hunter that he led us all over seven counties," Jeff explained, "we never would of come onto this lion, an' Jooney might never of got his chance to show me what he really can do! Y'see, once he's treed him a job like this, I know he'll—"

"Then you . . . you won't have to shoot him, after all?"

"Shoot him? Why, wait till this pup gits him a little more experience an' he'll—"

"I'm glad, Jeff!" The girl spoke softly, her hand on his arm, and Jeff Larch realized suddenly that the strange unseen barrier between them had vanished.

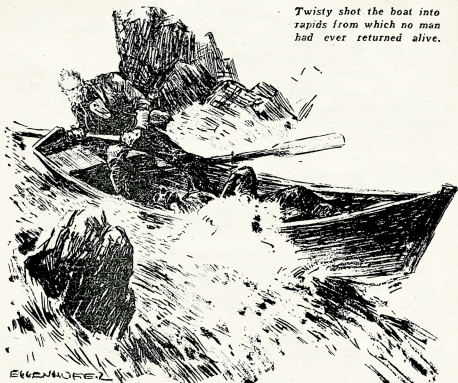
NOW, let's see," one can imagine the so-called woodland gods chuckling about then, "that takes care of Jeff Larch's pooch for the present. Also his gal. And cross out the tom lion that knocked Tuft-ear out of the tree. Hm-m-m! We've left that pore ol' bobcat with an empty gut, haven't we? One of you boys yank a string and change the breeze for him, huh?"

With the shift of wind there came to Tuft-ear the luscious scent of fresh blood. There was some scent of lion, too, but the devil with it!

Presently the bobcat found the deer carcass, still warmish and undisturbed where it had fallen under the tom lion's deadly attack. As he gorged himself, he growled, but now no hated cousin long tail came to disturb him.

Full-bellied once more, Tuft-ear scratched out a bed in the dry leaves under a nearby cliff. He yawned and stretched luxuriously; not young any more, perhaps, and battered some—but still alive—and proud of his spots.

Twisty shot the boat into rapids from which no man had ever returned alive.



WHITEWATER GAMBLE

BY RAY PALMER TRACY

DURING his week at the wild placer-gold camp of Jigsaw, deep in the Tortuous Jigsaw Mountains, Twisty Ike made no real effort to locate a claim to work. He spent most of his time in Chris Dugan's River House Saloon.

Yet Twisty was not idle. He was waiting—waiting, purposefully, for the go-ahead signal to "borrow" the boat Dugan kept tied to the platform back of the River House for the convenience of patrons who wished to cross the river. That signal had not come yet.

Twisty was standing, back to the wall, between the crap table and

roulette wheel, where the shadows of the lamplighted saloon were deepest, when Boomer Joe came striding through the batwing doors.

The rugged face of the big, young miner was exultant. Despite his mud-plastered clothes he walked with a lordly air. Behind him trailed a retinue of camp hangers-on—from swampers to miners down on their luck—sticking close to the Santa Claus of the hour. For Boomer Joe had made a rich strike and was bringing the good news on the wings of a celebration.

Boomer shouldered to the bar and slammed down a poke. A few dully

gleaming nuggets of unusual size, even for Jigsaw, spilled out. Boomer let them lay. In the lamplight, they threw off a sheen of fascinating richness.

"All hands to the bar!" roared Boomer. "The drinks is on me!"

Excitement stirred Twisty. None of it showed in his face. No emotion would ever show there again. The angry red scars had faded to fish-belly white, but no one could have guessed what his mangled features had once looked like. Damaged lids gave the effect of age to the bright, youthful blue of his eyes, harmonizing them with his prematurely white hair and brows. He glanced down the big room.

Chris Dugan had left his usual place at the far end of the saloon, where he could keep his cold little eyes on the games as well as on the bar. He was hurrying to serve Boomer in person.

Twisty's excitement stepped up a notch. The tall, spare saloon man with his well-tailored frock coat, which fit just loosely enough to prevent his shoulder holster from showing in a bulge, did not go behind the bar to serve except on special occasions. And this must be extra special, for Dugan set out his private bottle.

"Your sort o' luck calls for a real drink, Boomer," he said. "Help yourself." He stepped back, rubbing his hands.

"You bet it does!" roared Boomer, taking the attention as his due. He slopped his glass full. "Richest damn strike since the one Whitewater Jake made before my time here! You was lucky, Chris, to get your hooks on that claim. Wonder what become of Whitewater? A man don't just walk off and leave claims like mine and his."

Dugan shrugged. "Don't look

like a man would, for a fact," he said. "Whitewater was a queer duck, though. Who knows what idears is in the other fella's head? Maybe the law put him on the run. Well!"—he waved his hand in a generous gesture—"just keep the bottle, Boomer." He went back to his post with Twisty's eyes following him.

TWISTY had not surged to the bar with the general rush. He remained where he was, a conspicuous figure in his solitude. Boomer turned, his eyes sweeping the room. "Hey! You! There by the wall! I said the drinks is on me!"

Twisty nodded and moved forward. He was even bigger than Boomer, but he walked with the bent, shuffling gait of age. He made directly for Boomer, the crowd shoving over to let him to the bar.

"Reckon I was dreamin'," he said, his lips moving stiffly.

Boomer stared at him. Everyone stared the first time they looked on Twisty's scarred face.

"That's all right, ol'-timer." A little of the roar went out of Boomer's voice. "You been a hard-rock miner?"

"Not no more. I've been cured." Twisty's smile pulled his contorted face muscles into a twisted leer.

"I don't blame you, ol'-timer!" Boomer turned his eyes away a little. "You sure must've had one hell of a close call in that there blast! But you can still taste, can't you? Here, step up and have a drink out o' my bottle!" He poured the drink for Twisty himself.

Twisty downed the drink and smacked his stiff lips. "Who's your lucky partner?" His blank face concealed the interest behind the question.

"My pick and shovel is all the

partner I team up with!" chuckled Boomer. "They're up at the diggin's now, holdin' down my title." That last referred to the sacred law of the miner. As long as his pick and shovel were in his diggings, it was all the title necessary until the need came for a survey.

"I've always played that way, too," approved Twisty, obeying Boomer's gestured invitation to help himself to another drink out of the bottle.

Boomer turned from the bar and roared his way up and down the room, bucking the games against the back wall. He lost and won, remaining about even.

Twisty trailed along, but his interest was centered on Chris Dugan. Dugan was watching Boomer coldly, apparently weighing and estimating the celebrating miner's moods. At just the right minute, the saloon owner came and touched Boomer's arm.

"How'd you like a little game of stud with me and a couple claim buyers who've been hangin' around here for a month?" he asked casually. "Reckon you know 'em—Brick Williams and Slim Perkins." He glanced around and lowered his voice to a confidential note. "Maybe me and you can cut ourselves a chunk of outside money, eh?"

Boomer beamed. "Sure! I want a little action!" It was a mark of importance to be invited to play for the reputed high stakes of Dugan's stud game.

Twisty watched the four men vanish into the back room. He had discovered that the stocky, red-headed Brick Williams and his supposed competitor, the dark, slender Slim Perkins, were confederates—and that both were working for Chris Dugan.

When the door closed on Boomer,

the retinue that had followed him into River House, drifted out. Twisty went with them. Methodically, he made the rounds. It was a part of his plan, for he had received the go-ahead signal to "borrow" Chris Dugan's boat.

IT was nearly midnight when Twisty started up the street, headed for his camp above town. Soon as he was out of sight of the boisterous street with its tinny music, yells and occasional pistol shots by celebrating miners, he circled back to the river. Carefully he made his way between the buildings backed up to the river and the polished black surface of the stream reflecting gleam of starlight.

The night was clear and Twisty needed all the light he could get. Yet light had its drawbacks. Even with the steep, forested slopes of the canyon sweeping skyward, narrowing the strip of visible sky, there was a dim glow on the water that would make a boat easy to see. And Twisty did not want to be seen. But a man couldn't have everything, he thought, shrugging his big shoulders philosophically.

He approached the platform back of River House with caution. There were windows in the back room where the game of stud was in swing, but the shades were drawn.

Feeling the ground for dried sticks, Twisty crawled under the back room and felt up in the braces until he located the oars of the boat. Chairs scraped on the thin floor above his head. Under cover of the noise, he removed the oars. He heard Brick Williams' husky voice boasting:

"You ain't havin' all the luck to-day, Boomer! Another hand like that last and I'll clean out that poke of yours!"

"Plenty more where that comes from, Brick!" Boomer answered unconcernedly.

Quiet settled and Twisty slid from under the house with the oars. The twisted leer that served him as a smile was on his face. He had timed himself well.

He put the oars in the boat which was tied to the upper end of the platform, so the boat would float under it and keep out of the sun. Then he crawled in himself, untied the painter and let the boat drift clear.

The way the current ran, it carried the boat toward the center of the river, as well as downstream. When he was fifty yards away from the platform, he shipped the oars and dug in. The noise he made was covered by the rapids just below and the muffled roar of the mile-long gorge into which the rapids poured.

Instead of rowing across the stream in the safe water back of River House, Twisty headed the boat back to the bank he had just left and shot it under a clump of overhanging willows. Screened from sight from above, he tied the painter with a slipknot to a willow root. Then he lay back, waiting. Apparently, his peculiar maneuver had not been seen. At least no one came to investigate.

His eyes went downriver, measuring distances and judging the speed of the water. Sixty yards below him, the river shallowed into swift rapids that gathered momentum with every foot until, lashed to white, they dashed into the portals of the gorge.

It was just a recheck for Twisty. He was familiar with swift water in many streams and there was nothing new for him to see here. From the top of the south wall of

the gorge, where the Jigsaw trail ran, he had studied every inch of the boulder strewn stream below.

At the minute, Twisty's interest lay upstream. For the next hour, watching through the willows, he kept his eye on the platform back of River House.

Somewhere at the upper end of the street, a miner whooped and several shots cut through the sullen roar of the gorge. Twisty started. Then he smiled his twisted leer.

"I'm gettin' jumpy," he muttered. "Well, it won't be long now—if I'm right."

From under the willows, he could see about halfway up the stairs leading from the platform to the door in the back of River House. Suddenly, the stairs were occupied. There was a movement of feet and legs, an indistinct blur in the darkness.

Not until the owners of the feet and legs reached the platform, and Twisty got the mass between him and the glow on the river, was he able to make out that two men were dragging a third between them—a big, limp man. They marched across the platform to the edge over the water and lowered the limp man into the river, feet first. Twisty heard the splash as they let him go.

HAND on the slipknot, Twisty strained his eyes along where the current ran—the course his "borrowed" boat had drifted. A shadow appeared in the water as the limp body came to the surface and then vanished again. Twisty gave the rope a yank, garbed the oars and drove the boat for the spot where he expected the man to reappear.

Upstream, on the platform, he heard a muffled curse. Then the night was laced with pistol fire.

Twisty's gun was under his shirt in a shoulder holster and tied in. He was too busy to worry about his danger. While lead buzzed about him, he rowed with his head turned over his shoulder, searching the water.

A bullet cut a groove in the boat's strake. It was perilously close, but Twisty was getting farther from the platform. Every drive of the oars made him a more difficult target. Right ahead of him, rolling over and over, already in the first pull of the rapids, he glimpsed the man he sought.

Twisty gave a mighty heave on the oars and unshipped them. The boat raced beside the figure in the water. Twisty leaned over and grabbed a handful of soggy shirt. The effort it took to lift the limp figure into the boat nearly upset the little craft. It righted, rocking crazily, as he dropped the man on the floor boards.

The boat was now hurtling down the rapids, irrevocably committed to the gorge. Twisty grabbed one of the oars and thrust it into the oarlock on the stern.

He barely had time to steady the boat. The portal of the gorge loomed and the boat shot into the narrow passage with express speed.

Twisty swung on the oar to keep the boat from smashing into a giant boulder. His memory of what he had seen from the top of the wall and his skill was all that stood between him and certain destruction.

A needle-pointed rock stood in mid-stream, dark and dangerous, parting foaming water. Twisty swung to the right of it, close in. A channel was there, and nowhere else.

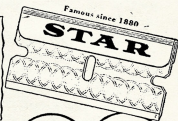
The gorge turned. Water surged high against the obstructing north wall and rebounded. Twisty sent the boat rubbing against the south wall and then flung into the turn. He felt the boat scrape. A close escape, that. Then the rebounding water caught them, shot them on their course down a boiling incline.

On they went, still riding the whitewater. Sweat rained down Twisty's face. Diagonally, he sent the boat across the narrow gorge, hurtling between two huge boulders. The boat shipped a little water there, but Twisty was exultant. He had been worried about that spot. Fortunately he had guessed right.

He barely realized that the boulders were well beyond the halfway mark in the gorge. He remembered when the water slackened its speed enough to turn spots into treacherous black, and he could hear the



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hammering thunder of the falls just below, where the south wall of the gorge broke and turned into a steep, wooded, mountain slope.

The falls did not drop from a great height, but they fed a great whirlpool that seldom gave up the things it sucked down. The drum of the dropping water was getting plainer by the second. The real test was just ahead.

HUGGING the north wall, Twisty avoided the points of spray-washed ledges. Then the south wall was gone. But he did not swing the boat over. That would be useless. He headed for a spot where the north wall cupped out like a wing.

Twisty was not sure just what was going to happen. He did know that there lay the only chance to escape dropping over the falls into the whirlpool.

The water was not so white here and he couldn't see well. He cursed the darkness that seemed about to rob him of the split-second action he had to take to win.

Almost a full second late, he glimpsed the curling wave of the backwash from the winged wall. He swung on the oar with all his power. The strain was too great. The oar snapped, nearly spilling him overboard. His frantic struggle to hold his balance all but capsized the boat.

But the thrust of the oar before it snapped had partly turned the craft. The wave caught it quartering. The extra surface exposed by the near upset compensated for the bad timing. The boat plunged for the south shore as though thrown from a catapult. It bumped into the bank. As it hit, Twisty grabbed the man from the floor boards and leaped.

He landed in water up to his knees and flowing with such force it nearly

dragged him down. Bracing himself, he staggered ashore and dropped to the solid bank with his helpless burden.

There was no time to examine the man he had brought through the gorge. As soon as he caught his breath, he hoisted the big hulk to his shoulders. Powerfully, he made his way up the slope over a course he had already charted.

He reached the trail. Stepping over it so as to leave no tracks, he went up a brushy gulch for a few yards. Turning to the right, he laid his burden in a fir thicket. For a minute he lay on the ground gasping air into his tortured lungs. Then he rose to his knees, found the unconscious man's wrist and felt his pulse. It was beating.

He turned the man on his face, knelt over him and began artificial respiration, counting slowly. The man responded to the treatment and began to breathe jerkily. Methodically, Twisty continued his efforts until he heard feet pounding on the trail. Then he stopped to listen.

The footsteps stopped at the gulch. "Be reasonable, man!" panted the husky voice of Brick Williams. "They never made it down the gorge. It ain't possible. They're over the falls and sucked into the whirlpool by now!"

"We can't afford to take chances. We'll take a look here. This is the only spot they could get out." That was Slim Perkins. "Wonder who that crazy galoot in the boat was, and how he happened to be on hand?"

"Somethin' funny about that!" Brick sounded worried. "Still, like I said, it ain't possible for them to come through the gorge alive. Just the same, we better take a good look! Chris is wild!"

Twisty heard the pair start to

scramble down to the water. Then the thunder of the falls covered their movements. They were gone a long time. At last he heard them coming back to the trail.

"I reckon you're right, Brick," said Perkins as they paused in the trail to rest a minute. "If a boat got this far it sure would keep goin', on over the falls. That broken oar we found drove into the bank tells the story, I figger. The boat must have been kindling wood long before it got here. Them two in the boat sure ain't comin' back!"

"We better take the broken oar to Chris for evidence," declared Williams. "Anyway, it's all he'll ever see of his boat. But I figger he can stand the loss!" He chuckled. "It ain't turned out bad a-tall. This boat business will give us a good story to tell. And now Chris's got Boomer Joe's claim to add to White-water Jake's.

Brick and Slim started up the trail, their footsteps receding toward Jigsaw.

TWISTY waited a safe space of time before he lighted a match. He looked down on the relaxed features of Boomer Joe. The miner was showing signs of recovering. His face was flushed and he was mumbling.

However, the sun had climbed to a point where it shone into the canyon before Boomer sat up. His dazed eyes fell on Twisty.

"What the devil!" he growled.

"Take it easy, Boomer," advised Twisty, "you've had a close call."

Boomer's hand dived into his shirt and came out empty.

"Here's your gun, Boomer. I've been dryin' the water out o' it. You took it for a swim in the river." Twisty handed the weapon to Boomer.

Surprise flashed over Boomer's face.

"I was in the water? Is them the falls above the whirlpool I hear?" he asked.

Twisty nodded.

"Well, I've got no idea how I landed here," admitted Boomer.

"Think back, Boomer. You was in Dugan's River House celebrating your gold strike."

Boomer scrambled to his feet and stood swaying and turning his head from side to side, completely baffled.

"I remember now," he said. "I was playin' stud with Dugan and a couple claim buyers—Brick Williams and Slim Perkins. I took a drink and all of a sudden, I was sleepy. That's the last I remember."

"I happened to be out on the river in Dugan's boat," said Twisty. "You come floatin' right into my hands."

Boomer's bewildered eyes glanced down at his soggy clothing. "I've been in the water all right," he admitted. "But that don't explain how I got clear down here."

"We got caught in the rapids," explained Twisty. "Me and you run the gorge in Dugan's boat!"

Boomer's lips curled into a derisive grin. "Come again," he said incredulously. "You can't run a whizzer like that on me!"

"It ain't a whizzer," denied Twisty. "You'll believe it, and so will Chris Dugan before I'm through. Now to get back to the drink that put you to sleep. Just before that, you didn't happen to lose all the gold you had in your poke, did you? It can't be that you put up gold you was goin' to mine out of your claim to keep the game goin', can it? Didn't happen to sign a paper to that effect?"

"I dunno how you found it out,

but you called the turn all the way," Boomer admitted. "Anyway, there's plenty gold in my claim to cover my losses a hundred times over. I can take out that much in a day!"

"You mean you could, if you happened to be alive," said Twisty. "If somethin' dropped on you, the hombre holdin' that paper you signed could join up with your pick and shovel partner and mine out a million—if it was claimed you lost that much. It's been done before."

Comprehension dawned on Boomer Joe. "So that's where I got this funny taste in my mouth!" he exclaimed. "I was drugged and thrown in the river!" Anger and the effects of the drug narrowed his pupils to pin points of light. "Lemme get this straight! You actually run the gorge with me in the boat?"

"That's right."

"I'll take your word for it, ol'-timer. I dunno how you done it, but there it 'is! Now I've got to be goin'. I've got a date with a fella!"

"I'm goin' with you."

Boomer shook his head. "You've done enough. No use you gettin' into more trouble on my account."

"Nope. Now that I've gone this far, I'm curious about the rest. I'll trail along."

Boomer's head was clearing rapidly. He took a long look at Twisty.

"Just why was you out on the river?" he demanded. "Just why you goin' with me now?"

Twisty was ready for that question.

"It ain't every man who's hit it rich who will share his gift bottle with an ol' wreck. Put it down to that."

Boomer shrugged his big shoulders. "All right—if that's your story!" he said. He plunged down

to the trail and turned toward Jigsaw with Twisty at his heels.

USUALLY, Jigsaw was quite in the morning, slowly picking up speed as the day wore on. It boomed forth in boisterous gaiety when night brought the miners from their diggings. This day, there was activity even at this hour, well before noon. Knots of miners were gathered in the different saloons discussing Boomer Joe's tragic end.

In River House, Brick Williams and Slim Perkins were telling the story over and over, improving it with practice.

"Boomer was pretty well lit and didn't play cagy poker," Williams explained in his husky voice to a new group of inquirers. "Chris tried to get him to quit the stud game and come back some other time for his revenge." He stopped and turned to Chris Dugan for confirmation.

"That's right," nodded Dugan. "But Boomer wouldn't let us quit. When his poke was empty, he signed up gold in his claim to keep on. See! Here 'tis!" He exhibited the paper for all to look at. Finally, he got in so deep, I quit him. Looks like I'd have to put a miner to work to collect what's comin' to me."

"Yeah," Slim Perkins backed up Dugan, "Chris quit the game. Boomer was drunk and got sore about it. Me and Brick tried to calm him down. When we wouldn't play no more stud with him, he wanted to bet more gold out o' his claim that he could row across the river and back quicker'n Brick. We thought that might sober him so Brick pretended to take him up."

"I'll always blame myself." Williams picked up the story, eyes and voice remorseful. "He's a strong man, Boomer is—was," he corrected himself. "He got across the river

all right and was halfway back when he broke an oar. Of course the boat was swept into the gorge. Me and Slim run down the trail all the way to the falls. We never seen a thing of the boat. We couldn't catch it no more than we could catch a comet. Probably it was knocked to kindlin' wood before it got a hundred yards. We found this here broken oar drove into the bank above the falls." He passed the recovered blade around for inspection.

It was all very reasonable. A man with sudden riches, and drunk to boot, might do anything, as they all knew.

"Anyone know what Boomer Joe's last name was, or if he had any folks?" asked Dugan. "There might be somethin' left in his claim after I get what's comin' to me."

No one knew who Boomer was. He was just one of the miners who followed the rushes from strike to strike until his back trail was lost. He was as unknown as Whitewater Jake had been. As unknown as many others in many other camps who had vanished in one way or another. Tomorrow, Boomer Joe would only be remembered for his strike and the brief splurge he had made.

It was during the finish of these comments and the already fading interest that Boomer Joe and Twisty Ike barged into River House through the swinging doors. Boomer's gun was in his hand.

"So you figger there might be somethin' left after you get what's comin' to you!" Boomer roared at Chris Dugan. "You bet there'll be somethin' left! Your buzzard carcass!"

There was a stunned silence. Slim Perkins gasped unbelievably; "Lookout, Chris! It's Boomer Joe!"

THE men of Jigsaw knew a shooting rage when they saw one. As one man, they ducked for cover, leaving Williams, Perkins and Dugan alone at the bar. Dugan managed to look pleasantly surprised.

"So you didn't go down the gorge after you broke the oar, Boomer!" He sounded tremendously interested. "How'd you get out? I'm sure glad you made it!"

Twisty pushed forward. "Boomer didn't break the oar," he said. "I broke it, just as we come out the gorge above the falls! The game is up, Chris Dugan! Up for you and your two hired men, Brick and Slim! I knew you'd drug Boomer and throw him in the river after gettin' him to practically sign his claim over to you! I was waitin' for him in the boat! You're right, Brick, there was somethin' funny about my bein' out there!"

"I've always known you was crazy, Twisty!" snarled Dugan.

"Don't call me Twisty! Take a good look at me, boys! I'm what's left of Whitewater Jake! I knew what was goin' to happen to Boomer because it happened to me! I went into the river, down the gorge, over the falls and through the whirlpool! The whirlpool don't always keep what it takes, Dugan. An Indian fished me out. You can see what it done to me!" He touched his mangled face. "I was young as Boomer; when I went in a few months ago. I was old when I come out!"

"He is Whitewater Jake!" The admission was stamped out of Brick Williams. "He must be Whitewater Jake! No one but him could run the gorge in a boat!"

"Shut up, you fool!" snarled Dugan. "Of course he ain't Whitewater Jake! He's just a crazy old has-been! Who's goin' to believe he

went through the whirlpool—and lived!”

“I do!” Boomer’s voice was deep with conviction. “He sure as hell took me through the gorge in a boat!”

“I knew there was a channel because I must have followed it when you sweet-scented buzzards threw me in the river so you could steal my claim!” Twisty went on. “So I took a chance with a boat.”

“You’re both crazy!” declared Dugan.

“You notice, though, that we’re both here!” Boomer’s roar was ominous. “And this much I know. I was drugged and this fella took me through the gorge! Now is squarin’ up time!” His gun came up.

The three men at the bar could not stall this off and they must have realized it. They went for their guns.

“Dugan is mine!” came out of Twisty’s stiff lips.

“Take him! You got the right!” roared Boomer, cutting down on Williams.

River House rocked to the blast of gunfire. Williams was the first to go down. His knees buckled and the gun dropped from his hand.

Boomer Joe staggered under the shock of lead, caught himself and kept on firing. Slim was on the floor, snarling and using the last of his strength to trigger a shot that went into the ceiling.

Twisty was paying no attention to Brick, Slim or even Boomer. He was walking toward Chris Dugan.

Chris Dugan was considered a deadly gunman. But facing Twisty’s mangled features and blazing eyes as the big miner moved toward him, holding his fire, the saloon man’s nerve broke. He triggered his weapon wildly but only one shot

of the three he sent touched the big target, scorching a streak of fire across Twisty’s thigh.

At three paces, Twisty fired one shot. Chris Dugan dropped with a bullet squarely in the center of his forehead.

Men came out from behind tables and gambling paraphernalia. They gazed down on the three dead men who had been proven guilty in the minds of all and had paid for their crimes at the tribunal of Judge Colt.

“Say, are you really Whitewater Jake?” asked a small, wiry miner with two fingers missing.

Boomer Joe, tenderly feeling the crease along his scalp which was stinging painfully, and had nearly put him down, turned on the speaker.

“Listen, you!” he roared with his old vigor. “If he says he’s the king of Juke, that’s who he is! And you remember it!”

“Wait, Boomer.” Twisty grinned his stiff leer. He turned to the man who had addressed him. “Yes,” he said, “I’m Whitewater Jake! Know anyone else who can run the gorge in a skiff!” At least he still had his pride in his white-water ability.

“Then why didn’t you make yourself known before Chris Dugan worked his trick on Boomer Joe?” a man asked.

“You answered your own question just a minute ago. With this face, who would have believed I was Whitewater Jake? I had to run the gorge to prove it! Now, I’m goin’ to collect what Dugan stole off me and go work what’s left of my claim!”

“An’ if you ever need a pard to side,” Boomer Joe declared, “I’ll be as handy as you were on the river last night!”



KILLER IN THE HILLS

BY NORMAN A. FOX

DEATH was liable to be banging at the back door of this Bowstring country any time now, and the certainty of that knowledge left young Chick Tully weak with worry. Not

for himself. Chick Tully was six feet one and panther-lean, and three years of brass pounding as station agent at Bowstring town hadn't softened his saddle-hardened muscles

or slowed his range-gotten gun swiftness. But the sign said that the best friend Chick Tully ever had was helpless in the path of a ravening wolf.

A ravening wolf! There was no better name for Tat Strunk, killer and desperado. The man was as wily and ruthless as the shaggy raiders of the mountain country. Chick Tully knew a lot about Tat Strunk. For two weeks past, the clicking tongue of the telegraph key had spoken of little else as the law utilized the railroad's wire. Sheriff signaled to sheriff. Posse called to posse. Through four counties the net had been spread and now it was closing in. That's why anxiety gnawed at Chick Tully.

Only routine stuff was coming over the restless instrument now. Beckoning to his relief operator, Chick shouldered into his Mackinaw, stepped out of his box-car office and started up to the sheriff's office. Bowstring had grown on a mountainside. Its single street was steep, but Chick had made that ascent many times lately. A few minutes later he faced Sheriff Opie Vigus across the lawman's desk.

"Another message from Sheriff Chad Urich down at Vigilant," Chick said and extended a slip of paper.

Dour old Opie Vigus read laboriously, a frown on his weathered face.

"They're laying Strunk right in your lap, looks like," Chick said. "And if he's heading into the Bowstring, he'll likely come over Tincup Pass. You'll be sending a posse up there?"

Vigus shook his grizzled head. "Tat Strunk's too smart to do the thing Chad Urich figgers he'll do," he argued. "I ain't puttin' all my aigs in one basket. I'm spreadin' the boys out through the hills.

"But what about old Yance Huber?" demanded Chick, some of his concern edging his voice. "He's all alone in his cabin up there in Tincup. Supposing Strunk's on the prowl for food or shelter! You've got to post a couple deputies with Yance!"

Opie Vigus examined his gun, and then wormed into his jumper. "No can do," he said emphatically. "They's ten places for every man to watch. You think I can spare a couple boys just to keep that squaw man company?"

"Nobody gives a damn about Yance," Chick flared accusingly. "But he's worth a dozen men. He's educated and he's smart. But just because he married a Salish squaw—and a mighty good woman at that—a lot of folks looked down their noses at him, practically drove him into the hills. Hell, his wife's been dead ten years—"

"Now steady yourself, son," Opie Vigus said not unkindly. "I know you owe a heap to ol' Yance and I know how you feel about him. But most folks never did give a hoot whether he was a squaw man or not. It's his own stubbornness that's kept him in the hills. If you gotta know, I rode out to his place yesterday. I figgered Strunk might head this way and I told Yance so, asked him to come to town till the hunt was over."

"I . . . I'm sorry, Opie," Chick said, and his face lighted. "What did Yance say?"

Opie Vigus laid a friendly hand on Chick's arm. "I didn't want to tell you this, son," he said, "but I'm thinkin' the old coot's gettin' batty from living by hisself. He wouldn't listen to me a-tall. Told me a couple times, though, to have you bring him out some salt and some pipe cleaners."

The lawman started for the door. "I hate to think of him bein' alone there and Strunk maybe barging in on him," he added. "But I jist can't spare no deputies. Maybe you could talk him into comin' to town, Chick."

CHICK TULLY nodded and headed down the street to the livery stable. Ten minutes later he was astride a horse, heading for Tincup Pass. He had no business going, he knew. The relief operator, a youngster Chick was breaking in, was fine for routine work, but he was apt to become rattled under pressure. And there was likely to be plenty of pressure with the man hunt growing hotter every hour. But Chick had no choice. He had to talk Yance Huber into returning to town and safety.

That wouldn't be easy. Chick knew the sensitive pride of the scholarly exile, the pride that others deemed to be sheer obstinacy. Why couldn't folks savvy the true worth of Yance Huber? Why couldn't they realize that Bowstring needed Yance's kind if it was to become a progressive community?

Chick didn't know the answer to that, but he did know that death lurked somewhere in the hills, death in the squat shape of Tat Strunk. And Chick found himself hurrying the horse up the twisted, pine-shadowed trail. Low, sullen clouds banked above the peak, a leaden hint that the season's first snow-storm was coming. Chick read such signs readily, for he knew this land well. Beyond yonder ridge was the lush valley that sheltered the great Fiddleback spread where he had once ridden as a cowhand.

It came to Chick that it had been six months since he'd visited Yance Huber. He'd been so busy he had

neglected the old fellow. He'd be more thoughtful in the future, he promised himself, as he finally sat his horse before the thickest-shrouded cabin and shouted: "Hallo, the cabin!"

The door opened a few inches and Yance Huber grinned vacuously at him. "Lo, Chick," the one-time squaw man said. "You bring my salt and pipe cleaners?"

Only then did Chick recall that he'd completely forgotten the simple request. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered but the revolting change that had come over Yance Huber. For the oldster, once so meticulous about his appearance, had changed unbelievably. His scholarly, aristocratic face was blue with a two days' beard, his hair unkept and matted. It stunned Chick.

"I forgot your stuff," he said dazedly and, dismounting, stepped into the cabin. He knew the room well for he'd spent many hours within these walls. The compact cooking range was still there, and the built-in clothes closet and pine table and chairs and bunk. One wall was covered with bookshelves, tier upon tier of them, rising to the ceiling.

Chick stared at the room in dismayed astonishment. For Opie Vigus had only hinted of the change that had come over Yance Huber. Once the oldster had been pin-neat. Now clothes were strewn about, dirty dishes stacked upon the table. The place looked as though it hadn't been swept for days. Slumping into a chair, Chick turned miserable eyes upon Yance.

"You might have brought the pipe cleaners anyway," old Yance said petulantly. "A man's pipe goes sour 'less it's cleaned regular." He poked tobacco into his pipe as he spoke,

lighted it and the discarded match sizzled in a cup of stagnant, left-over coffee.

And suddenly Chick Tully wanted to fight somebody! He wanted to hit and smash and tear things apart. He wanted to do damage to make amends for the damage that had been done Yance Huber. The oldster was bushed! He had cracked under the strain of his exile, turned childish. And this was the man who might have to match wits with a relentless killer.

He felt he had to penetrate to the man Yance Huber used to be. "Forget about pipe cleaners," Chick said patiently. "Opie Vigus saw you yesterday. He told it to you scary, but he wasn't lyin'. You've got to come to town till Tat Strunk's caught!"

Yance's faded old eyes gleamed. "No!" he said and somehow that one word sounded more rational than anything he had said since Chick's arrival.

Chick leaned forward. "Listen, Yance," he urged. "I'm your friend. You've got to savvy that. Shucks, if it wasn't for you, I'd still be a forty-a-month saddle whacker. Don't think I've forgotten that, so believe me, I want to do what's best for you. Folks in town don't hold anything against you. And you've been to blame yourself for climbing

on your high hoss. But that makes no never mind. You've got to come to town till the danger's past."

IT was like arguing with a willful child, talking to a mountainside. Chick suddenly realized that Yance wasn't even listening. The oldster's pipe had gone out and Yance was digging into the bowl with his fingernail.

Chick had an urge to jump the old fellow, tie him up, take him to town by force. But would that work? Would Yance stay in town or would he hightail it back to the timber at the first opportunity?

Yance tapped his pipe upon the table, spilling dottle and unburned tobacco in an untidy heap. "Just about tore my broom to pieces, using the straws for cleaners," he said petulantly. "When it gets plugged it won't draw right. A man's gotta treat his pipe right."

Chick drew a sleeve across his forehead, a feeling of nausea tugging at his stomach's pit. He was listening to Yance Huber who'd had the finest brain in the mountain country. He was witnessing tragedy and was impotent to do anything about it.

Old Yance drummed upon the table top with the pipe, a staccato, nerve-rasping tattoo. Then he



loaded the pipe again and got it aglow.

Chick's eyes narrowed before he spoke again. "Now listen," he said. "I haven't got all the time in the world to spend out here. You coming back to town or not?"

"Reckon not," Yance said absently. "You think I should get me a new pipe?"

Pity and disgust mingled in Chick's face. "I could tie you up and drag you in," he said impatiently, "but it ain't worth it. A man that won't help himself ain't worth helping. For the last time, will you come to town?"

Yance sucked furiously on the pipe, his cheeks dimpling inward. "Dang it all, it's out again," he complained. "It just won't draw no more." He tamped it against the heel of his hand, then hammered upon the table's edge again.

Shrugging, Chick wheeled toward the door, opened it.

"You'll bring me out some pipe cleaners?" Yance asked, the vacuous grin spreading across his face again.

"No!" Chick exploded. "I'm never coming out here again. Never! You savvy that?"

He slammed the door behind him, but when he piled into the saddle his shoulders were bowed and he looked like a man who'd been doubly beaten by the knowledge that the fight's odds had been too great from the beginning. But that was a perfect bit of play acting for his eyes were bright with a shaping scheme. And at the first turn of the trail, Chick Tully discarded his apathy as a man discards an old coat.

Sliding from the saddle, he dug a .45 from his Mackinaw pocket and eased into the brush. Indian fashion, he skulked toward the cabin, taking a tortuous way that always kept him out of sight. It was a good

quarter hour later before he crouched beneath the cabin's window. Inside a gruff voice was raised in wrath.

"Yuh tried to get him to come back, just like yuh tried to get that lawdog to come back!" the voice snarled. "But it didn't work, did it? Now pack some grub in a sack. I'm gettin' out o' here before I get snowed in or before I get bushed by being around a crazy old coot like you. Hurry, damn yuh, or I'll lay this gun barrel across yore head!"

The walls muted the sound of knuckles cracking against flesh, and the moan of protest and pain that came from Yance Huber. But it was enough to send Chick Tully racing toward the door, lunging inside, his fury unleashed.

The interior of the cabin was almost as he'd left it. But now the door of the built-in clothes closet swung wide. And in the center of the room, a gun dangling in his hand, was a squat, simianlike man with blazing eyes—Tat Strunk.

WITH a roar of rage, Strunk fired and the bullet burned Chick's shoulder. But it didn't stop Chick. Like a careening boulder, he charged forward, firing as he came. The cabin's walls echoed gun thunder as he triggered, stiff-arming Yance out of peril's way. Then Tat Strunk was clutching at his chest, pitching to the floor. His gun arced through the air and clattered into a far corner.

Yance Huber picked himself from the floor, and felt over Chick feverishly. "Boy! Boy!" he moaned. "You might have been killed!"

"I know," said Chick. "But I wasn't. How long's he been here?"

Yance Huber stood soldier-straight now and somehow he looked dignified in spite of his beard stubble and unkempt mane.

"He came night before last," he

explained. "He hid in the closet while Opie Vigus was here yesterday, hid with a gun in his hand and his eye to a knot hole. He did the same today. I'd been strewing things around, letting myself look seedy, figuring that would arouse the suspicion of anybody who came who knew me. But Vigus didn't seem to tumble. I honestly believe he thought I'd gone out of my head. And when you left, Chick, I wasn't sure whether you understood."

"I know," said Chick. "I was talkin' for Strunk's benefit then."

On the floor Tat Strunk opened pain-glazed eyes. "Damn yuh!" he snarled weakly. "Yuh . . . yuh out-foxed me. But I'm still wondering how yuh did it."

Chick Tully smiled. "Old Yance here is the best friend I ever had," he said. "When I rode for the Fiddleback I used to spend my evenings visiting him. I was just another saddle whacker to most folks, but he figured differently. He talked me into improvin' myself, and he taught me what I needed to get my railroad job. Taught me from them books yonder."

"Taught—yuh?" Tat Strunk said faintly.

"The Morse code. We learned it

together. When Yance tapped his pipe on the table, he signaled in Morse. First time he tapped out 'danger,' the second time the pipe said, 'closet.' Then—"

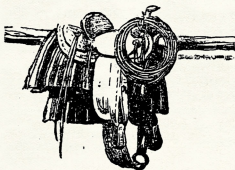
There was a wide, staring look in the outlaw's eyes, and suddenly Chick Tully realized he was talking to a dead man. Pulling a blanket from a bunk, Yance Huber spread it over the prone figure.

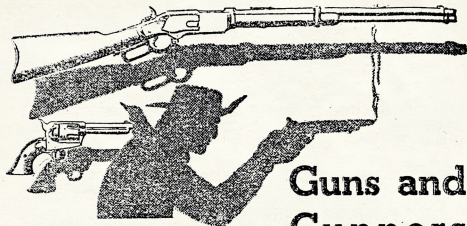
"Take me to town, Chick," he said wearily. "Yes, I know the danger is past out here, but I want to go anyway. I've been a stubborn old fool. It isn't right for a man to live aloof. Men need each other in this rough old cow pasture of a world. I'm an old man, Chick, but I just learned the truth of that in the last day or two—"

Chick grinned broadly. "Of course I'm taking you to town," he assured the old man. "The law of four counties has been hunting yon hombre and it was *you* that trapped him, even if it was me who did the shooting. Shucks, Yance, don't you reckon Bowstring will want its hero handy for speeches and such?"

And by the sudden light in Yance Huber's eyes, Chick knew the old squaw man of Tincup Pass was happy that his long exile had ended.

THE END.





Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

A FEW months ago we told you of a new game known as Mo-Skeet-O in which a special smoothbore .22 rifle, either in single shot or repeater, was used with a portable miniature version of the standard skeet trap. Special tiny targets were used and the .22 long rifle-shot cartridges were employed to break these birds in the air. Now comes the first announcement of another aerial target shooting game, a product of the genius of those Mossberg boys.

This new game to be known as Targo is strictly a one-man proposition in that no assistance is necessary to enjoy the full sport of it.

Early in February of this year your firearms editor was called down to the Mossberg factory to examine and try out an experimental gun such as now is available. Shooting on a special indoor range, we tossed hundreds of targets into the air at various angles and enjoyed the sport of breaking them. Now the equipment is ready.

The Targo gun is a bolt-action, clip magazine repeater using a stand-

ard .22 long rifle clip which holds eight cartridges. Attached to the barrel in front of the forearm is a unique little trap mechanism operated by a trigger controlled by the left forefinger. Thus one merely cocks the trap, inserts the lightweight target in the holder, tosses the gun to the shoulder and points it wherever desired, then shoots as the bird is released. The trap can be readily adjusted to throw targets from thirty-five to seventy-five feet, though, generally speaking, the .22-shot cartridge is not very effective at ranges beyond fifty feet.

One of the beauties of this new game is that you can shoot at any angle you desire. You can throw the bird straight up or out level. When thrown into the air to alight on soft grass, targets which are not broken can be readily recovered. The targets themselves are so inexpensive that one can enjoy a great deal of

Special circulars will soon be available on Targo. If you would like to receive one, write to Mr. Sharpe, inclosing a three-cent stamp with your request. Be sure to print your name clearly.

sport without the investment of a great deal of money.

Tests show that the tiny pellets in the .22 long rifle-shot cartridges have a maximum range of only about 200 feet so the gun can be used safely in any reasonably sized field. Bear in mind, however, that in a great many cities and towns laws prevent the discharge of firearms within city limits, so govern yourself accordingly.

The gun is unique in a great many ways. The smoothbore barrel is twenty inches long, converted at the end to receive a special tube seven and three-fourth inches long. This tube actually makes the over-all length of the barrel twenty-six inches. It is overbored to approximately .41 caliber and gives perfect control of the patterns.

A very unique feature of this gun is that the tube can be removed and a special rifled tube five inches long replaced to adapt the gun to shoot standard bullets. All theories to the contrary, some four and one-fourth inches of rifling twenty inches from the breech should not permit any reasonable accuracy whatever. Yet, in actual tests it seems to do a good job, thus adapting the rifle to hunting with standard .22 short, long, and long-rifle cartridges when desired. This in itself is an innovation since it is the first time that a combination smoothbore and rifled barrel has ever been offered to any shooter.

Here, at last, is a new game that can be purchased at an unbelievably low figure, and anyone shooting .22s

will find that the cost of enjoying this aerial sport is well within reach.

Recently we mentioned the new semiautomatic Garand rifle in this department. Here are a few notes which will contradict reports you may have read.

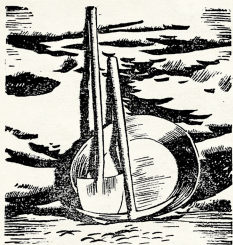
Contrary to published information, the Garand rifle is expensive to manufacture only because of the tremendous expense involved in tooling up for it.

When production is well under way, manufacturing technicians at Springfield Armory are certain that the Garand can be produced more economically than the present service Springfield.

Rumors have indicated that a weak point in the design of the new rifle was the fact that the barrel and receiver were welded together and thus when a barrel wore out the most expensive parts of the gun would have to be replaced at a cost of more than ninety dollars. This is incorrect. The entire rifle does not cost ninety dollars to manufacture and the barrel is screwed into the receiver with the exact same thread used in the service Springfield. A worn-out barrel can be replaced at the armory for slightly more than five dollars including labor and fitting charges.

Some writers have stated that Garand rifle barrels have about one half the usual life of the Springfield. Government-test figures show fifty percent greater life and a barrel seeing normal service is still in fair condition after ten thousand rounds.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

ONE of the greatest attractions that hunting placer gold holds for the individual prospector is that once a workable pay streak has been discovered, the gold can be recovered cheaply. Small-scale and remarkably efficient gold-saving devices such as rockers, sluice boxes, long toms and even dry washers are easy to build out of light lumber, and cost but little. Moreover such devices can be operated by hand.

Outside of the necessary gold pan for prospecting and testing stream gravels for placer (and these can be bought in most any mining center for about a dollar), a shovel and a pick are usually the only tools the placer-gold prospector has to purchase outright to start in business for himself—the business of finding, digging and recovering his own yellow metal from the widely scattered gold mineralized sections not only of the West, but of the world itself.

"I am a novice at the game, but intensely interested in making my first trip to the Southwest as a ten-foot placer gold prospector," says H. M., of St. Louis, Missouri. "Is recovering the actual gold out of pay streak very expensive? How can it be done on a small scale? While I will have a car and enough grubstake to take care of myself in the field, my finances are comparatively slim and there would be nothing left over for any expensive machinery."

The chances are you won't need any machinery for the type of placer-gold prospecting and mining that you will first engage in while learning the game, H. M. A sluice box, a rocker, or a homemade dry washer will probably do the trick; the sluice box, if plenty of water is available. A rocker where there is some water, but the water is scarce, and a dry washer for handling out and out absolutely dry desert sands.

One man can handle a rocker, or a short sluice, or a small dry washer. But in practical work two partners who will both pitch in, each doing his fair share of the labor, results in smoother operation and the combined output of the two is usually more than would be the total of their separate efforts. A partner, however, is not necessary. There are many individual prospectors who have placer-mined for years alone and on their own. They prefer to work that way.

The first search for placer gold is usually along stream beds and up tributary gulches, since it is the streams and their tributaries that are the principal agencies in the actual formation of paying placers, concentrations of gold particles, flakes and occasional nuggets in the sand and gravel that go to make up the bottom of the stream or creek bed.

When such a concentration or pay streak has been found by actually recovering some of the gold through panning samples of the gravel, it is easy enough to build your rocker, or set up a small sluice box for much faster handling and consequently greater returns per day than could be obtained from the same gravel simply by panning it.

A rocker is just a stubby sluice box about four feet long and sixteen inches deep at the upper end, at the head of which a metal-bottomed sieve about four inches deep is set, the sieve being perforated with half-inch holes and fitted in a frame on the box which is shaken by a handle. A load of gravel is placed on the sieve and water poured over it, generally from a tin-can dipper fastened on a long handle. Simultaneously the box is shaken. The finer dirt washes through the sieve holes onto a sloping, diagonal canvas-covered frame or apron which has a sag in it. Most of the heavy gold catches in this sag and the rest of the material and some finer gold washes out of the apron onto a sloping bottom board comprising the bottom of the rocker. The bottom board is fitted with two or three riffles cleated in, and the gold that escapes the apron is caught in front of these low obstructions while the worthless sand is washed down and out the lower end of the rocker.

When all the sand and gravel from one sieve load has been washed through the holes, the pebbles and larger stones left are searched for

any large nest-egg nugget that may have been too big to go through the rocker. Then the pebbles are thrown out, the sieve recharged with fresh gravel and the whole operation repeated. Now and then if the sag in the apron and the riffles clog up with gold, and perhaps some black sand, the canvas frame should be lifted out and washed in a tub of water. The gold behind the riffles should be similarly washed. This is what is known as the "cleanup."

If you save your gold (well-stoppered bottles, pickle jars and cover-fitted tins such as some brands of coffee come in have largely replaced the traditional moleskin poke of the old-time Alaskan sourdough) until you have several ounces of the clean, yellow metal, such amounts can then be shipped direct to the nearest United States Mint. The mint will return you the gold's value in currency, remittance being sent you in the form of a treasury check.

Smaller quantities, less than ounce amounts of gold can generally be exchanged for goods in local stores in gold-placer mining centers. Placer gold can also be sold to banks, licensed buyers in such centers, smelters or nearby big mining operations that handle their own bullion. It may even be disposed of to itinerant licensed gold buyers who periodically visit the different camps and will purchase your gold right at the "diggings." Be sure, however, that buyers in this last category are licensed to buy raw gold.

● We desire to be of real help to our 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, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



Here's a note sent us by Dorothy Vian whose letter appeared in the Hollow Tree a short time ago. She says: "I've just received a very interesting letter from Grand Canyon, Arizona, but no matter how much I want to answer it, I can't because the writer forgot to sign his name and address. Now, Miss Rivers, will you please remind all those who write to members of the Tree to be sure they include their name and address so that we can answer their friendly letters?"

And so we pass the word along to you and sure hope you heed Dorothy's word of advice. Start things going by writing to this Pal from Tennessee whose letter appears below.

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonesome fellow down in the old Volunteer State and I wish to join the Hollow Tree gang. I would like to have Pen Pals of all ages from everywhere write to me. I am thirty-three years old, a naturalist by profession, and I have traveled in thirteen of the forty-eight States. My hobby is writing poetry and short stories and I enjoy all outdoor sports. I will try to answer all letters and hope I am swamped with mail from everywhere.—D. B. Wadley, Rt. No. 1, Lexington, Tennessee

Eloise knows how to use her spare time—

Dear Miss Rivers:

It was such fun to get an answer to a letter I wrote a Pen Pal that now I would like to get a mailbox full. My typewriter is all oiled and ready to go, and I have saved up a few pennies for extra postage stamps. Although my special Pen Pal says that she has already received fifty answers to her appeal for correspondence, I'll take a chance and say that I will answer all letters and will send a little souvenir of my town to the first three who write. For the benefit of would-be correspondents, I will say that I am an office worker, nearer forty than thirty,

am building a camp on a small island in a lake for a hobby, and I love to read and write letters. I'm waiting!—Eloise Abbott, Rumford, Maine

Keep Joe's postman busy—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an eighteen-year-old boy who would like to have Pen Pals from all over the world. My hobbies are collecting stamps and post cards, and photography. I am also a great lover of the outdoors. I am willing to exchange photographs, post cards, et cetera. Here's hoping that you will keep the postman busy. I will answer all letters.—Joe Chasteen, Jr., 410 — 24 Street North, St. Petersburg, Florida

Western Story is tops with Christine—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am interested in getting some Pen Pals, so won't someone please write to a lonesome girl from Texas? I am seventeen years old and want to hear from Pen Pals all over the world of all ages. I read every issue of *Western Story* and think it is tops.—Christine Dee, 2399 Radcliff, Houston, Texas

Friends out West wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty years old and have been brought up in the hills of New Hampshire. I would like to hear from anyone out West, but especially from those who are interested in prospecting, hunting, trapping and ranch life. I am heading out West in a few months and would like to make a few friends out there. I hope you will write and maybe someone would like to have me for a partner.—Kenneth Davis, Clarendale Farm, Contoocook, New Hampshire

Write to this lonely Pal—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I wonder if there are any other women who read *Western Story* and enjoy it as much as I

do. I am a mountain woman and have three children, but as my health is very bad I can't go about and enjoy myself as others do, so I wonder if some nice, friendly, middle-aged woman would write to me? Perhaps there is someone as lonely as I who would like a true friend. I have read lots about the West and have often wondered what ranch life is really like. Perhaps someone who lives on a ranch will tell me.—Mrs. L. A. Brown, Rt. No. 1, Box 41, Shoups, Tennessee

Delbert has a proposition for you—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Having been a steady reader of Western Story for a number of years, and at one time having secured valuable assistance through your column in a mining expedition, I am again writing, asking that you publish this request. I have a valuable camp and a high-grade gold mine in the mountains of the Colorado Desert on the California side with water, tools, equipment, an auto and good roads traveling to it. Limited capital is required for proper and speedy development. Engineer's reports, assay sheets, shipping returns, maps and complete data are available to any bona fide interested party. Can use associates with some cash. References exchanged.—Delbert B. Mills, Box 52, Amboy, California

Pauline will exchange cards and snaps—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eighteen years old and like the outdoors very much. My favorite sports are horseback riding, swimming, hiking and skating. I like to take snapshots and collect wild flowers and post cards for a hobby. I will exchange cards and snaps with those who wish to. Please write to me, all you folks between fourteen and twenty-five, especially cowboys, cowgirls, farm boys and girls, and those living in foreign countries.—Pauline La Bell, R. F. D. No. 1, Caribou, Maine

Don't let Harlan down again—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I will be very grateful if you will publish my request for Pen Pals. I have written to a number of Pals whose letters have appeared in the Hollow Tree, but I find too many of them don't keep their promise to answer. I am twenty-one years old and a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps. My interests are many, one being music, but my main interest now is making Pen Pals all over the world. To all who write I will assure an answer, so come on, Pals, and cheer up this CCC lad.—Harlan Hall, Company 1708, Locke, Arkansas

Florence's postman only rings twice a week—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Reading the many requests in the Hollow Tree for Pen Pals has made me wish for some, too. Would some of your readers take pity on a lonely person who loves to write and receive letters? I would like Pals who will write nice friendly letters and remain friends all through the years. I am thirty-one years old, married, and am living on a mountain. Until recently I lived in the city. Here there is nowhere to go and nothing to see and we have only two mail days a week, so do, please, those of you who read this, help to make my mail days big ones and earn my everlasting gratitude.—Florence

Fitzgerald, c/o Post Office, Stratipine, Queensland, Australia

Coral wants mail from all over the world—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have read many of the letters published in the Hollow Tree and enjoyed them very much. I am a girl nineteen years old and a junior in high school. My hobbies are painting, sewing and collecting pictures. I would appreciate being a member of the Hollow Tree and enjoy receiving letters from all over the world.—Coral Gillette, Rt. No. 1, Westville, Oklahoma

Writing is Rainer's hobby—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I've read Western Story for so long I'm beginning to feel like a Westerner. I would like to join the Hollow Tree. I am twenty-four years old and writing is my hobby. I would like to hear from both the young and old from anywhere.—Rainer Palngren, Box 1, Georgetown, Connecticut

This soldier wants to renew acquaintances—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world. I am a soldier in the Philippine Islands. My age is nineteen and I have seen a little of Panama, Hawaii and Guam. I would appreciate it very much if my Pals who were left at those points would get in touch with me if they read this.—Private Joseph Viterna, 60 C Battery, Fort Mills, Philippine Islands

From Colorado comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please find a corner for me in the Hollow Tree? I am a lonely widow looking for some friends. I will answer letters from anyone and anywhere, so come on and drop me a line.—Kathrine Barnard, 530 North Nevada Avenue, Colorado Springs, Colorado

Dolores and Dorothy are as alike as twins—

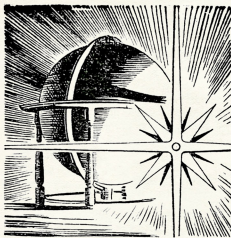
Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two lonely West Virginia girls who would like to make friends from all over the world. We would like to have Pen Pals from all countries, especially Mexico. Dolores is fifteen and likes all sports, especially swimming and softball. Her hobbies are collecting snapshots and songs. Dorothy likes sports, especially softball, and her hobbies are collecting snapshots, songs and post cards. Here's hoping we hear from all between nine and ninety.—Dolores Cerrillo and Dorothy Whitehair, Box 5, Hoult, West Virginia

Roy wants to hear from far-off places—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have several Pen Pals in all parts of the world, but would still like to hear from the following countries: Africa, Central and South America, parts of Asia, and some British and American islands.—Roy Breitweiser, Park Rapids, Minnesota



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

"LET'S vacation in colorful Colorado!" is a grand suggestion. One that more and more people are following every year when they start to solve their annual "where to go" holiday problem. J. B. of Kansas City, Kansas, and his family have already decided on Colorado's mountain vacationland for their forthcoming holiday auto trip.

"But," states J. B.'s recent letter, "before we start there are some questions I would like to ask. Having heard so much about the Pike's Peak region, we are choosing Colorado Springs as our destination. Can you tell us about other attractions in the area? How far is Colorado Springs from Kansas City? What highway do I take? Last but not least, it will be early November before we start. How about the climate at that time of year?"

Taking that last item first because

climate and weather are such important considerations in any vacationer's plans, fall, usually right through December, is one of the very best times to visit the Pike's Peak country. Barring a short period of overcast skies with some rain in the first part of September, the rest of the fall season is almost invariably one continuous stretch of bright, sunny days ideal for zestful living in the high, dry, tremendously stimulating mountain air that is one of the region's greatest single assets.

There is a crisp tang outdoor in the fall. Along the mountain slopes scarlet sumach flashes brilliantly against the cool, fresh green of pine and spruce, and groves of aspen turn to leafy gold. There's plenty to do on days like these, and lots to see that is definitely different for every hour of your stay.

First there is the wide, safe, free Pike's Peak auto highway that will whisk you through eighteen miles of thrilling zigzag climb to the cloud-grabbing summit of the snow-capped Peak itself. The trip can easily be made by car; and the view from the new, glassed-in observation room in the Summit House is breathtaking. Yet this is the towering peak that Lieutenant Zebulon Pike, who discovered it and for whom it was named, said would never be scaled by white men. He himself tried several times to reach the top of this high sentinel of the Rockies—and failed.

Today, through a marvelous feat of road engineering, tourists make the *fourteen-thousand-foot* ascent constantly in their own cars. There is a cog railway that also climbs to the top. In addition, the summit can be negotiated by burros, or afoot by hardened hikers accustomed to scaling mountain heights.

So much for the "Peak." Colorado

Springs, nestling in the shadow of the big mountain itself, is a friendly, cosmopolitan city, the shopping center of the area and cordial Western host to thousands of visitors annually. You'll like Colorado Springs. Everybody does. In fact every year a goodly number of the visitors like it so well they decide to stay on and make it their permanent home.

The city is ringed with many richly scenic parks that take in thousands of acres of the surrounding hillsides and deep, tree-shaded valleys. Included in this park system is the famous Garden of the Gods, a region of freak and picturesque geological formations carved by wind and weather into all sorts of fantastic shapes. Among the better known semblances are the Kissing Camels, the Seal, and the Cathedral Spires.

Picnicking at Austin Bluffs from which one can survey the magnificent panorama of fifty miles of the Rampart Range of the Rockies is another easy-to-do pastime popular alike with visitors and year-round residents of Colorado Springs. Six miles away is Manitou Springs, named for the old Indian god who was supposed to have breathed his healing spirit into the mineral springs for which the place is noted. Aside from the springs themselves, there is a fascinating Cave of the Winds up there that is well worth visiting.

For a "different" type of holiday trip but one that will be remembered for years to come, take the forty-

mile drive from Colorado Springs out to Cripple Creek and see for yourself one of the most famous gold bonanza camps in the history of the West. Though the hectic, feverish excitement of the early boom days when a poor man today might be a millionaire tomorrow has long since subsided, Cripple Creek is still a rich and active gold-mining center. So is Victor, another important gold-mining town in the same general neighborhood.

Colorado Springs is accessible by paved highway from all parts of the county and is about six hundred and fifty miles from your home in Kansas City, J. B. Take Route 40 west through Topeka. At Manhattan you can choose either 40 on through Salina to Limon, Colorado, or Route 24 to Limon via Clay Center, Beloit and Stockton. From Limon it is a little over seventy miles southwest to Colorado Springs.

To H. K., Albany, New York: Open season on trapping in New Hampshire is from November 1st to February 15th. No open season on beaver, fisher or marten unless locally by special order of the Fish and Game Commission. Cost of non-resident trapping license is \$50. Best general trapping is in Coos, Sullivan, Merrimack and Grafton Counties. Also in the country bordering the White Mountains. Much of the White Mountains themselves are a National Forest Reserve with attendant restrictions on both hunting and trapping within the forest confines.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



Missing Department

SCOTT, JOHN RIDDLE—He was last heard of in Wallaceburg, Ontario, Canada. Anyone knowing his whereabouts please notify me.—Harold Christopherson, Lloydminster, Saskatchewan, Canada

MATHEWS, EDWARD JOHN and **HAROLD PAYTON HAREHELRODE**—Edward is our brother, and Harold is a friend of his. We haven't heard from them in two years. At that time they were working on a government project in Washington, D. C. They are about thirty-five years old. If anyone knows their whereabouts, write to us.—Margaret and Clara Mathews, Patricia Club, Room 311, 2393 Maypole Avenue, Chicago, Illinois

VILLARINO, JOHNNIE—He is my brother and when last heard from in 1941 he was working in Opelika, Alabama. He left Cuba in 1905 at the age of twelve. He is a graduate of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and, after leaving there, worked for some time with R. A. Coleman's Dairy, The Belair, five miles from Lebanon Pike. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Joaquin Villarino, Calle Estrella No. 153, Havana, Cuba

ERNEST, CECIL and **MRS. MAE**—When last heard of in November, 1933, they were living near Holland, Missouri. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please write to me.—Arthur Nolen, R. F. D. No. 2, Box 32, Waterloo, Alabama

NOTICE—I would like some information concerning the following: The McGinney family who lived in Colorado many years ago. Mrs. McGinney's maiden name was Saunders and she died leaving several small children. Also members of the Tobin family who lived in the mountains of Colorado in the '90s, and Bill Sublett and his children. His wife and mother were killed in an accident in Greenfield, New Mexico. If anyone can give me any information as to the whereabouts of these people, I'd appreciate it.—Mrs. Francis Echols, 700 S. Bowie Avenue, San Benito, Cameron County, Texas

HUFF, CLAUDE W.—He is my husband and has been missing for about two months. I fear he may be suffering from amnesia. He is thirty years old, five feet ten inches tall, weighs one hundred and fifty pounds, has a ruddy complexion, blue-gray eyes and light-brown curly hair. He speaks with a Southern accent. He is mechanically inclined and has often spoken of a desire to go to California and work in an airplane factory. If anyone knows his whereabouts please write to me.—Mrs. Claude Huff, 1239 Seventh, Apt. 1, New Orleans, Louisiana

• There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, 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.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone 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.

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GRINGO

BY HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

The Story So Far:

Rainbow Ripley and Grumpy Gibbs, range detectives, go to Sonora to investigate a hoax which has resulted in the swindling of large sums of money from Americans. Link Adams, one of the men duped by this hoax, had sent ten thousand dollars in answer to a letter from a supposed prisoner who claimed that before his incarceration,

he discovered a cache of gold hidden by Dominican priests fleeing the country, and promising to share it with anyone who would help him bribe his jailers. Receiving no answer, Adams had gone down to Sonora, where he vanished.

Rainbow and Grumpy pick up Adams' trail on the great Calderon ranch and find his body buried in an obscure spot. They



Caballero

Part Two

CHAPTER V

STRANGE MEETING

present themselves to the owner of the ranch, Don Porfirio de Calderon, pretending that they are investigating rustling, and he invites them to make his home their headquarters. Their suspicions are aroused by Don Porfirio's son-in-law and ranch manager, Ramon Gonzales, whom they know has had dealings with Santos Salazar, a Sonoran bandit. Rainbow's suspicions seem to be confirmed when he checks a letter Link Adams had received with Gonzales' ranch records and finds the handwriting identical.

Now that Ramon Gonzales stood revealed as one of the chief conspirators in the Spanish Prisoner hoax, Rainbow and Grumpy were sorely tried to pretend an interest in the roundup that had been ordered by Don Porfirio.

"We got bigger game than this roundup," Grumpy argued. "We know what the Don is goin' to find out. In the meantime, we're wastin' three or four days."

"I wouldn't call keeping Ramon under surveillance a waste of time," Rainbow told him. "Sooner or later his trail will lead us to the rest of his gang. We're going to sit tight and give up any idea of taking him into custody now."

The results of the roundup were fully as discouraging as Rainbow had predicted, revealing the fact that there were only slightly over twenty thousand head of steers on the Calderon ranch.

Don Porfirio was dazed when he learned that his situation was even more grave than he had supposed. He shook his head wonderingly. "I don't understand," he managed. "More than half of my great herds gone!"

Rainbow realized the old grandee's pathetic helplessness in the face of threatening penury, if not actual ruin. Nothing in his past experience had fitted him for anything like this. For generations the Calderon family had been fabulously wealthy. Grumpy, too, was looking at Don Porfirio sympathetically. Both were brought up short by the sound of Ramon's suave tones.

"We need not repeat yesterday's carelessness today," young Gonzales said crisply. "The news is bad, but now that we know the worst, let us repair the damage."

Rainbow glanced at him sharply, wondering what Ramon was up to now.

"*Seguro*—to be sure," Don Porfirio assented mechanically. "What do you suggest, Ramon?"

"The range must be restocked, of course," Ramon declared firmly, "and without any avoidable delay." His reasoning was sound; Rainbow could find no fault with it thus far. He waited for what was to come.

"But that will take money, much money," Don Porfirio objected

quickly, unconsciously revealing all too plainly how matters stood with him. Ramon disposed of the obstacle with an airy wave of his hand. For the moment, he seemed to have taken command here.

"It must be found somewhere," he stated flatly, his black eyes darting from face to face with a challenge he found unanswerable. "Certainly we cannot make more money without having sufficient steers to raise. I must go on a cattle-buying trip at once. I will start for Mexico tomorrow morning."

"But I . . . I—" Don Porfirio's bewilderment and uncertainty was evident. "You are right, Ramon," he amended with a sigh. "You must go, as you say; and I must raise the money somehow if we are to save the rancho from utter ruin."

Rainbow forebore to mention the possibility of obtaining cattle to raise on shares, knowing the old man's stiff pride, which would effectually prevent the Don's consent to any such arrangement. For fifty years no stock, save that bearing his own brand, the double-barred Spanish Cross, had grazed on his acres. The necessity to replenish his herds with steers from across the line was bad enough in itself.

At the same time, in Ramon's announcement that he was going into Mexico to buy cattle, Rainbow believed he had found what he sought. He discussed it later with Grumpy in their room.

"That gent never loses an opportunity to head south for Sonora," he declared. "I'll admit he's found a sound excuse this time. All the same, I'm willing to stake my life that's only a part of his reason."

"Mebby he's figgerin' to visit El Conejo," the little man suggested shrewdly. "Ever since that note yuh spotted bein' passed in the can-

tina, we've been satisfied there's somethin' between him an' that brush-poppin' bandit."

Rainbow nodded. "There's no doubt of it," he admitted. "But I'm not leaving it to guesswork. When Gonzales starts south in the morning, we're going to tail him."

"That's the stuff," Grumpy approved heartily. "This time mebbey we'll git somethin' definite on who he's meetin'."

RAMON had already gone when they descended for breakfast the following morning, early as they were. None of the Calderons had risen as yet. A question put to one of the servants elicited the information that Gonzales had a good ten minutes' start on them. Making for the corrals, they lost no time in saddling up and striking out. At Rainbow's suggestion, they had taken the precaution to prepare for several days' absence.

They had no difficulty in picking up Ramon's trail. He was heading south at a rapid pace. Rainbow and Grumpy made even better time until, several miles beyond the Sonora line, they fetched up with the knowledge that the sign they were following had faded out completely. Reining back, Rainbow was not long in discovering the cause.

"He's doubled on us, Grumpy," he said, a note of gravity in the words. "He must have figured we'd take his trail. I wonder if he's spotted us already."

From Gonzales' course of procedure thereafter, they could only conclude that he had spotted them. He deliberately sought the roughest going he could find, and once they lost his trail for half an hour in an extensive malpais. It was Grumpy who picked it up again.

"We better keep our eyes peeled,"

he said dourly as they pushed on. "That nice, gentle, tender-hearted wolf is jest waitin' fer a chance to bushwhack us. Shufflin' us into the discard permanent would solve a good many of his problems at one lick."

They were driving steadily deeper into wild desert country. To the south, barren Sierra del Muerto etched the sky with its starkly ragged outline. There were no cattle ranches for a hundred miles in this direction. No more was needed to confirm their belief that Ramon was bound on a secret mission in no way connected with the reasons he had given Don Porfirio de Calderon for his trip.

Obtaining no glimpse that day of the man they were trailing, they persisted until halted by darkness. The first streaks of light in the eastern sky saw them on their way once more. Today, Gonzales appeared even more determined to throw them off the scent. The ruses he employed would have defeated any but the most experienced tracker; but each time the two detectives patiently unraveled the puzzle. Late in the afternoon, finding that the trail had petered out once more, Grumpy, in his usual pessimistic grumble, was despairing of ever coming up with the quarry, when Rainbow, climbing a nearby cactus-studded ridge to look about, halted abruptly just before reaching its crest. Grumpy was watching him at the moment. An imperative gesture of Rainbow's arm commanded him to come forward.

The fact that his companion maintained silence was not lost on Grumpy. Losing no time in complying, he had his cautious look down the far side of the ridge. A broad, barren *vega* stretched out below. Picking his way through the jumbled rocks cluttering its floor,

rode Ramon Gonzales. Watching the man's progress for a moment, Grumpy suddenly stiffened to alertness.

"There's three or four other gents workin' down that far slope," he muttered tensely. "They're due fer a surprise when they meet Ramon."

Rainbow's nod held a reservation. "I spotted those men myself," he assented. "But I'm not so sure about the surprise in store for them."

"What yuh mean by that?" Grumpy demanded.

"Take another look at that man in the lead." Rainbow's tone was grim. A curious hardness had come into his lean features. "Grumpy, that's Captain Alvar Herrera! This is a rendezvous!"

Grumpy stared, his surprise only momentary. "Danged if yuh ain't right!" he exclaimed under his breath. "He fits into young Gonzales' activities somehow, anyway." He was watching the men below in the valley. "There they are; they're meetin' now. Don't neither one of 'em seem to be much startled, an' that's a fact. Them's Herrera's Yaqui rurales he's got with him. They're drawin' off a little ways . . . Rainbow," he proceeded after a moment, "we got to git down there somehow."

Rainbow had been already canvassing the possibility. He shook his head decisively. "We couldn't avoid being seen the second we stepped into the open. And it would take us an hour to swing north and work back through the rocks. With those Yaquis down there, it isn't even worth a try." Glancing into the west, where the sun had already sunk below the horizon in a blaze of scarlet, he added: "I'd give plenty to know what Ramon and Herrera are saying, but I won't risk losing them to find out. It'll be dusk in twenty

minutes. We're sticking here till then."

HE would have been not only startled, but forced to confess himself completely mistaken where Herrera was concerned had he been able to read the thoughts passing through the captain's alert mind at that moment. This meeting with young Gonzales, deep in the desert, had been unexpected to say the least; and one which, because of his keen interest in Ramon's affairs, the captain would have avoided at all costs had that been possible, believing that to watch a man without his knowledge was always the most satisfactory way.

Herrera was under no illusions whatever where this young caballero was concerned. He knew all about Ramon's gambling and his attachment to Carmen Sanchez, in Tequila. He had long been aware that Gonzales was wringing money out of Don Porfirio de Calderon by devious means, and even suspected him of friendship with El Conejo. The redoubtable Salazar's accomplishments and reputation were at Herrera's fingertips to the last detail. Of all this he breathed not a word now, however.

"But Ramon!" he exclaimed in a solicitous tone, pretending alarm. "Cannot you see? It will soon be dark, and you are far from the haunts of men." Gonzales had just explained to him the object of his trip in a perfectly artless way. "You are carrying valuables for which some unprincipled scoundrel would slit your throat in a second—that jeweled knife, and such trinkets. Sonora is assuredly unsafe at night for such as you!"

No less chagrined than Herrera by this sudden meeting, Gonzales, nevertheless, managed to maintain a

bland exterior. He even summoned a show of good-natured surprise at the other's vehemence.

"Is it as bad as that?" he said lightly, turning the question off the next moment with a characteristic shrug. "Perhaps you are right. But I am well prepared to look after myself, captain." He patted the brace of heavy pistols in their tooled-leather saddle holsters. "You need entertain no fears on my account."

"But I must," Herrera insisted, with a suavity that matched Gonzales'. "You understand that I am in a way responsible for what occurs in this pitiless desert, particularly to the members of one of our most illustrious families. Come, I have it!" His flashing smile broke through. "I will escort you to safety, and no more need be said about it."

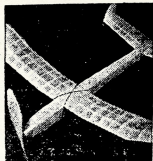
"And meanwhile you will keep an eye on my slightest movement, you miserable dog!" Ramon told himself, inwardly boiling with anger at the chance which had thrown the captain of rurales into his way just at this time. Not for an instant was he deceived by the other's pretense of concern for his safety. Aloud, he said merely: "As you will, my captain. But where is this safety to be found?"

"I was thinking of Juan Fuca's tavern, several miles to the south. You know the place?"

"I have heard of it," Ramon evaded, secretly elated. "I repeat that you trouble yourself about me unduly, captain. Surely some mission more important than my safety has brought you and your men into the desert?" When Herrera neglected to rise to the bait at once, he proceeded philosophically, "However. I submit, of course, if your peace of mind depends on it."

"Some more important mission," Herrera mused seemingly to himself, as they set out in the thicken-

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ing dusk. He sighed. "Undoubtedly you are right, señor. The men whom we seek—bandits, murderers." He managed by the tone of his voice to suggest a secret and mysterious purpose beyond that implicit in the words. "Much as I would enjoy a pleasant evening over Juan Fuca's excellent brandy, with congenial company, there are some things which cannot wait."

Ramon's assurance increased. If the captain intended to escort him to Fuca's isolated tavern and leave him there, then matters were not so bad, after all. Unconsciously, he straightened in the saddle. Herrera noticed his relief, and it confirmed his suspicion.

But his wits were no busier than Rainbow's as the latter set off with Grumpy on a course paralleling that of Gonzales, the captain, and the rurales. Rainbow had expected them to slip up after their conference, or at least to remain here, as they thought, unobserved. He jumped to the conclusion that they were heading for El Conejo's stronghold.

IT was not easy to keep the little party in sight without giving themselves away, but somehow Rainbow and Grumpy managed it. When Herrera led the way to the lonely tavern several miles south in the *rincon*, Rainbow was puzzled.

There was enough light around the tavern for them to watch Gonzales and the others dismount and enter. The rurales re-emerged almost at once, and waited with the horses. But it was ten minutes before Herrera appeared. He swung into the saddle, and he and his men struck into the west. A stableboy led Ramon's mount toward the shadowy corrals.

"What's the meanin' of that?" Grumpy muttered. Rainbow was

unable to tell him; but after a brief delay, during which nothing was seen of the captain, he declared:

"We're going down there, Grumpy, and walk into that tavern. I intend to make sure of Gonzales."

A murmur of voices sounded from the tavern as they approached. They stepped to the ground in deep shadow, and left their mounts with the reins trailing. Rainbow was first through the door.

There were a dozen men in the place, all Mexicans. Rainbow singled out Juan Fuca. The proprietor, a stout, placid individual with snapping black eyes, waddled forward.

"Welcome, señores. You weesh somet'ing?"

Rainbow's first sweeping glance had told him that Ramon Gonzales was not in the room. He lost no time beating about the bush. "You have a man here to spend the night, a caballero, who just came," he said in Spanish. "Where is he?"

He caught the slight flicker of Fuca's eyes, before they grew opaque. The Mexican hesitated, and when he spoke his voice was bland.

"Men come and go, señor. I know of no such man. Perhaps you have been meestake—"

Rainbow shot a comprehensive glance at Grumpy. His face hardened. "All right, Fuca: stand aside. We'll have a look for ourselves."

When the man started to argue, they cut his protests short. There were mutters from some of the others, but no one attempted to interfere as they pushed through. A stairway led to the upper floor. Catching Grumpy's eye, Rainbow jerked his chin toward the stairway, and waited watchfully while the other mounted to the second floor. Then he himself followed quickly.

"Which'll be Gonzales' room?"

Grumpy queried, looking along the hall.

Rainbow had caught a flicker of light from an upper window as they approached the place. Going now to the door of the room, he paused. Was a crashing of guns the reception that awaited them here? A thin line of light showed under the door. Perhaps even now Gonzales might be waiting, gun in hand; or it was equally possible that this was a trap.

It was almost a confirmation of this when, instead of meeting a locked or barred door, Rainbow found the knob turning easily in his hand. Flinging it wide, he froze on the threshold in surprise. Whatever he had expected, it had not been this. The chamber was small. A bed occupied one corner, untouched; a battered chair and a table, on which a candle burned, were the only other furnishings. And except for these things, and a crucifix on the cracked and stained wall, the room was empty.

Rainbow was the first to recover from his surprise. "He's given us the slip, Grumpy!" he whipped out. "He was here, all right. Here's his scrape on the chair. He can't be far!"

They made a hasty search of the other rooms, without finding Gonzales. Rainbow confessed to bewilderment when they met again in the chamber Gonzales had occupied.

"I'd have sworn he didn't leave with Herrera," he growled.

"Unless he switched hats with one of them rurales," Grumpy suggested grimly.

THEY were staring at each other, asking themselves what the answer could be, when there came to their ears the sharp sound of driving hoofs approaching the inn. When

Grumpy started for the window, Rainbow hauled him back.

"That may be Gonzales returning," he warned. "If it is, we'll have a welcome waiting for him."

A man ran into the inn. They heard quick voices below, and then the clatter of boots on the stairs. Rainbow and Grumpy waited behind the door. It burst open with a bang. Ready as they were for anything that might come, they were unprepared to find themselves face to face with Captain Herrera.

The latter stopped in his tracks and his black eyes widened. He was not long in grasping the situation, however. "What are you doing here?" he demanded with flat hostility. "Where is Ramon? What have you done with him?"

"I might ask you that, Captain Herrera," Rainbow said thinly. "But since you're here, maybe you'll do just as well for the moment."

Herrera's nostrils flared. "What do you mean by that, señor?"

Rainbow's hand hovered near his gun. "Herrera," he said, "you are using your position as a captain of rurales as a blind! I watched your meeting with young Gonzales in the desert. You are working hand in glove with him!"

Herrera's jaw dropped in utter amazement at the words. For a moment it seemed that anything might happen. Then his laugh rang out, deep and hearty. There could be no mistaking its genuineness.

"But this is magnificent!" he cried, when he found his voice. "You accuse me of complicity in that young caballero's affairs. Señor, I am flattered! You do me too much honor!"

Rainbow experienced chagrin at the richness of his mockery. Something was wrong here. If this was a ruse, it was a masterly one.

Grumpy scratched his head in his perplexity.

"I don't git this," he grumbled suspiciously. "Yuh got the gall to stand there an' tell us yuh ain't been takin' a hand in young Gonzales' game?"

"Of a certainty!" the captain exclaimed, indignation boiling up in him. He turned to Rainbow. "Señor Ripley, I met Ramon tonight, true. Believe me, the meeting was unexpected! I have been keeping an eye on that young scoundrel for a long time. He gambles, he keeps bad company. Moreover, I suspect he profits by the rustling of Don Porfirio's cattle. It was a black day for the Calderons when Ramon Gonzales entered the family." Rainbow knew he was thinking of Consuelo. "I did not know you suspected him. Perhaps we should both lay our cards on the table."

This was plain speaking. With every word, Rainbow's conviction grew that they had misjudged Captain Herrera badly.

"By all means," was his sober answer. "My concern for the Calderons is even greater than yours. When I tell you that Ramon Gonzales is a swindler and murderer, you will be able to appreciate why."

Herrera's amazement grew as Rainbow explained that his and Grumpy's true purpose in the country had no connection with cattle rustling; how they had found Link Adams' body, what they had learned thus far of Ramon, and of El Conejo's possible connection with him.

"The treacherous blackguard! A knife in the ribs would be too good for him!" the captain cried fiercely. "As for Salazar, he is capable of anything. For months I have been trying to prove his connection with these crimes."

It was Rainbow and Grumpy's turn to be surprised.

"This prisoner hoax has been a profitable business for years," Herrera continued. "It seems incredible that men can be found, foolish enough to part so easily with their money. It has brought ruin and misery not only to many Americans but to some of my own people as well. Many complaints come to my office in Magdalena. There is an American there now who has been bilked. The facts are plain, but unfortunately, here in Mexico it is necessary to catch a man in the commission of certain felonies to convict him."

"That's exactly what I propose to do," Rainbow told him. "When you left Gonzales here, was it your intention to return and watch him?"

"Of course. But as soon as my back was turned, he fled. If he is intent on a meeting with El Conejo he can have gone only one way into Sierra del Muerto. If you would ride after him, señores, come! I place myself and my men at your command!"

CHAPTER VI

A PRISONER AT SAN LORENZO

THE wan light of a late moon guided Ramon Gonzales to the gates of San Lorenzo. This time he had made sure there was no one trailing him. The guard received him, acknowledged his signal, and let him pass. A very few minutes after he had given the order to have Santos Salazar awakened, they were facing each other.

"What now?" the big Mexican demanded with thinly veiled impatience.

"Santos, we are getting into deep water with these Americans," Gonzales began seriously. He plunged into an account of all that had taken

place during the fiesta at the Rancho de Calderon. "It was bad enough to have Don Porfirio discover my little trick; I managed to wriggle out of that. But when Carmen, the little fool, appeared at the gate, demanding to be admitted, this Ripley surprised us together. I am sure he recognized her. Whatever he may have overheard, who knows?"

"But you were not fool enough to talk, there in that place?" El Conejo began angrily.

"It was Carmen," Ramon inserted hurriedly. "She spoke foolishly. Sometimes she drives me to distraction!" He failed to note the sudden blaze in Salazar's hooded eyes, continuing, "This knife of mine! I realized how foolish I had been to throw it, the instant it left my hand. Luckily I got it back. But it struck me that Ripley was altogether too ready to blame the whole business on the rustling, when it was spoken of afterward. Captain Herrera is a chory; he swallowed the story whole. But as for Ripley—I am not so sure."

Salazar let him run on, pondering heavily. He was slow-witted, but sure. At length he said, "These Americans must be disposed of, Ramon, that is certain. If they are stock detectives, as they claim, it should be easy to arrange something to—"

Gonzales understood him at once. "True, it would be easy." Hope leaped alive in his eyes. A moment later, he burst out, "I have it, Santos! Don Porfirio has asked that pair to stay and help him. We will arrange a rustling on the ranch, lead Ripley and his partner into some suitable trap, perhaps Devil's Canyon, and—" He made a significant cut with the side of his hand.

Salazar nodded thoughtfully. "It will be possible also to make a few

pesos on the business," he commented. Ramon brushed this aside in his concentration on the two men whom he hated and feared. For half an hour they discussed the matter in low tones, planning every detail of their plot with care. They were still thus occupied when a man suddenly appeared in the door. El Conejo swung toward him. It was one of his men.

"Pablo Martinez, from Magdalena, is here," the latter announced. "He has a man with him, and demands to see you at once."

"Send him here," Salazar ordered.

Martinez entered a moment later. He was a thin, slouching man, dressed in the soiled cotton clothes of the country, his pants legs thrust into cowhide boots, a sombrero in his dark-skinned hand.

"Well, Pablo, what are you doing here?" asked Salazar.

Giving them both a keen look, the messenger said, "Santos, you have undoubtedly been told that I came with another man?"

"Yes?"

"It is Iliff, the American from Kansas City."

That Ramon and Salazar recognized the name at once was made clear by the sober looks they exchanged.

"*Caramba!* Does that gringo think to make us trouble?" Salazar exclaimed.

"He found me at Magdalena yesterday," Pablo ran on. "He was spitting fire, and still is. He demands the return of his five thousand dollars. When I confessed myself unable to help him, swearing I was only handling correspondence for a friend, he complained to the authorities. I thought it best to bring him here."

El Conejo frowned. "And you told him what?"

"He believes he is about to be taken to see the man who wrote the letters."

Ramon's smile was thin. He had been momentarily taken back by this sudden appearance of one of their victims; but he had himself in hand once more. "Then perhaps you had better accommodate him, Pablo. Bring him in."

LEN ILIFF, when he appeared, proved unexpectedly impressive. He was a thickset, red-faced man in his middle fifties, with a dangerous glint in his steel-gray eyes. He advanced into the room like an angry bull, raked them with a look.

"Where is this José Valdez hombre?" he demanded in a belligerent tone. "Neither one of you is him. His letter said he was old an' sick. Are you the gents that's holdin' him prisoner?"

Ramon had got to his feet at the other's arrival, his expression smugly indulgent. "Ah, señor, you are impatient!" he said suavely. "Pray sit down. It is true that Señor Valdez is here. But we must talk this over—"

"Sit down, hell!" Iliff exploded wrathfully. A trap had been concealed in his questions. "I want my money back, and I want it in a hurry! You sound like you're the gent who got it!" He advanced on Gonzales menacingly.

"Your money?" Ramon echoed. There was a dangerous edge to his smooth voice. "I know nothing whatever about that, señor. You will do well to calm yourself."

Iliff was just sane enough to recognize evasion, and no more. He no longer had any illusions as to the game being played on him. With a bellow of fury, he snatched a revolver out of his pocket and started to bring it up.

The next moment Ramon would have been stretched at his feet with a bullet in his heart, but for the fact that Iliff had forgotten El Conejo completely. The latter had not spoken once since Iliff's arrival; he and Gonzales had been sitting some distance apart. The reason for this now became clear.

With a remarkably quick movement, Salazar rose from the chair in which he had been sitting and lifted it in his two hands. It went hurtling at Len Iliff, knocking the gun out of his fist and sending him crashing to the floor.

"Quick work, Santos," Ramon complimented him coolly. "He would have it this way; there was no other choice."

El Conejo said nothing. He was dragging Iliff roughly to his feet. Dazed as he was, the American started to struggle. Salazar planted a huge fist in his face with a grunt. Iliff could not have avoided the blow had he tried. He groaned and went limp. Dropping him, Salazar turned to a man who appeared in the door. It was Martinez.

"Call the others, Pablo," El Conejo ordered. "Take this man down and throw him in a cell."

In common with the rest of the gang, Pablo knew San Lorenzo thoroughly. With the help of two men, he carried Iliff down into the black bowels of the monastery. A number of dank, airless cells opened on a narrow passage, in which the padres of old had done voluntary penance. Rusty iron gates had been put into the doors of some of them. Iliff was tossed into one of these, and the gate closed and fastened.

Ramon remained on his feet, moving about restlessly, when Iliff was taken away. Salazar, unmoved by it all, shot him a shrewd look.

"There is something on your mind,

jovencito," he suggested with thin satire. Ramon whirled on him in a flash.

"There would be something on your mind, Santos, if you were less of an ox!" he cried. "I have told you I met Captain Herrera last evening before dark. And now this stupid American, who has complained to the authorities, appears here! Was it because of him that Herrera was out scouring the desert? What if he discovers that I did not remain at Fucca's inn, after all!" He added venomously, "I think I've reason to have plenty on my mind!"

AT that moment, squatting on their heels beside a desert campfire, blowing on their morning coffee to cool it, Rainbow, Grumpy, and Captain Herrera were forced to admit that they had lost Ramon's trail. Even Herrera's Yaqui trackers were at a loss to say which way their quarry had gone. The captain made no attempt to conceal his exasperation.

Rainbow rebuked himself for his suspicions of the man. It was only when he mentioned Consuelo's name that he caught an echo of the hostility Herrera had shown him at the rancho.

When Rainbow voiced his conviction that Ramon Gonzales had been responsible for Elena's death, Herrera leaped to his feet and glared at him accusingly.

"How could you think such things and not arrest the man at once?" he demanded. "Consuelo's life may be in danger at his hands!"

Rainbow shook his head. "It is the ranch, and not her, that is in danger. I can promise you that I'll stop him before he gets that far . . . We're stopped cold here. Let's ride in to Magdalena. I'd like to have a talk with that man Iliff."

The captain gave guttural orders

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to his Yaquis, who brought in the horses. Rainbow surreptitiously looked them over while saddling up. All were splendid physical specimens, with jet-black stringy hair and bleak eyes set in stony faces. Their rure uniforms were powerless to hide the free, lithé savagery in their every movement.

Grumpy was eying them, too. "Tough bunch to stack up against, I'd say," he muttered in an aside to Rainbow, who nodded agreement.

Arriving at Magdalena, Rainbow and Grumpy had their look at the town. It was almost a city, with ancient pepper trees shading the wide streets, which were lined with the homes of the better class. Captain Herrera's headquarters faced on the sandy plaza, with its chipped statue of Benito Juarez.

"I asked Señor Iliff to give me the name of the inn at which he was staying," Herrera said. "We will go there."

Leaving the office on foot, Rainbow and Grumpy followed his lead into a side street, where they entered a small but comfortable tavern. The captain asked the proprietor where Len Iliff was. To his surprise, the man shrugged expressively.

"*Quién sabe, señor?*" was his reply. Not unmindful of the importance of a captain of rurales, he added voluble regrets, but he did not know where the Señor Iliff was. In answer to questions, he said the American had gone into the desert on some errand or other—or so he had heard.

"How long has he been gone?" Rainbow struck in.

"He left yesterday at the hour of siesta, señor," the Mexican said.

"Alone?"

The answer was a headshake. "I think he took some guide with him," the innkeeper said doubtfully. "But I could not say who."

THEIR queries elicited no further information, nor were they more fortunate in other directions. They returned to the captain's office at length, with the disappointed conviction that Len Iliff had vanished completely. Herrera found something decidedly ominous in the circumstance.

"The letters Señor Iliff received from the supposed prisoner were postmarked from Magdalena," he said. "That would be explained by the fact that the swindlers use various Sonoran cities for the purpose. But that one of their victims who protested should disappear under my very nose in so short a time can only mean that those cutthroats are much nearer than I supposed."

"Did Iliff show you the letters he got?" Rainbow asked.

Herrera said yes. Not only had he seen them, but they were in his possession.

"Get them out," Rainbow suggested. "We'll check them with the letter to Link Adams that we know Gonzales wrote."

Herrera complied, bringing the papers from a small iron safe in which they had been put for safekeeping. The handwriting in Iliff's letters, and in that received by Adams, was compared. As Rainbow had expected it was identical. The captain's eyes flashed dangerously as he made sure of this.

"I recognize Ramon's hand," he said curtly. "He sends me a note occasionally. There can be no mistake."

"Iliff must be located without delay, or he'll go the same way Adams went," Rainbow pointed out flatly.

Even while Herrera agreed heartily, he caught the note of reservation in this. "You appear undecided, señor," he suggested.

"I'm thinking of how it will look

if Grumpy and I stay too long down here in the desert," Rainbow said slowly. "We are supposed to be stock detectives, interested only in cattle. I have given my promise to help Don Porfirio de Calderon. The slightest hint that we are not what we seem will kill our chance of accomplishing anything."

"Would not the best plan be to seize Ramon at once?" the captain asked. "Perhaps we can force out of him where Señor Iliff has been taken."

Rainbow shook a decisive negative. "It wouldn't work," he declared. "To grab him now would only spoil everything. Our game is to watch him without giving ourselves away."

Herrera conceded the good sense of that. "But some means of giving you greater freedom of movement must be devised," he insisted.

"I've thought of that, too," admitted Rainbow. "The only thing I can hit on is the lost Dominican treasure. Everybody seems to hunt for it."

He was speaking of the buried wealth of the old Dominican padres, reputedly hidden somewhere in the Sierra del Muerto. For a century legend had been active about this treasure. Composed of heavy gold bars and vessels, religious plate incrustated with jewels, and the like, it was supposed to have been cached at the time the order had been driven from Mexico. The story was that the good padres had been waylaid on their way to the coast and murdered by fierce Yaquis, but not before they had managed to secrete their valuables. Thus it was that none had remained alive with knowledge of where the cache was situated. It has been sought persistently through the years without success,

but remained still a bright lodestar for the adventurous.

"The very thing!" Herrera exclaimed. "I will procure a government permit for you to hunt for buried treasure, señores, and you will be able to go where you wish. It will take two or three days for the permit to come through."

At Rainbow's suggestion he agreed to bring the permit to the rancho. "And when you come, pretend to know nothing about it, or Ramon will be suspicious," Rainbow added.

Later, as they rode out of Magdalena, he said to Grumpy: "If there's anything to this buried treasure business, we may be able to kill two birds with one stone."

"Yeah," said Grumpy sourly. "An' the two birds may be us!"

CHAPTER VII

TREACHERY TRAIL

SEVERAL days later Rainbow sat with Consuelo de Calderon in the main patio discussing various tales concerning the lost Dominican treasure. There was indubitable appeal in the mystery and promise of these hoary legends, but Rainbow was more concerned at the moment with the dancing lights in Consuelo's dark eyes and the friendliness of her merry laugh.

"Yes, I am firmly convinced of the existence of the treasure," she declared, in answer to his question. "Whether it will ever be found, though, I am not so sure. Even these stories we are discussing are matters of hearsay only. I have been fascinated by them from childhood. Am I to understand that you, too, are interested in the treasure?"

"Very much so," Rainbow confessed. They were still on the same subject a few minutes later, when a mestizo burst into the patio as

though in search of someone. Seeing them together, the man would have retired, but Consuelo called to him.

"What is it, Hilario?" she asked. "You seek my father?"

"*Si, señorita,*" he assented, snatching off his sombrero and speaking rapidly. Rainbow sensed the excitement which rode him. "It is the cattle. More have been stolen!"

Don Porfirio stepped into the patio in time to overhear him. "What's this about the stock?" he demanded.

Rainbow had got to his feet at the man's first words. He waited for the reply.

"Perez sent me to inform you," the mestizo said, "that the steers Señor Ramon had us use as a bait have disappeared. The guard saw nothing. Perez and the others are searching now."

Don Porfirio threw up his hands. "This is too much!" he cried. "Wait!" Stamping into the house, he raised his voice, "Ramon! Ramon! Come here! *Inmediatamente!*"

In a few short moments, the old Don re-appeared. Gonzales was with him. Rainbow's keen glance darted to the latter's face.

"What is all the excitement about?" Gonzales demanded coolly. The story was quickly repeated by the mestizo, who added such details as he possessed. The steers had disappeared from a small *vega* which had been watched.

Gonzales evinced as much surprise as the others. He railed against the rustlers for a moment before cooling down. But inwardly he was exultant that his plan was already working. Watching him, Rainbow was reminded of Grumpy's remark that Gonzales was a cool one. It was true enough. Once more he had struck.

"This is a task made to order for

you, Señor Ripley," Ramon said to him, secretly relishing his own irony. Rainbow's nod told nothing. Before he could speak, Grumpy and Dona Luz entered the patio. Consuelo informed them of what was afoot.

"Dang their hides!" Grumpy growled, not at all pleased by the threatened interruption to his and Rainbow's real purpose. "We'll find the answer to this in short order." Don Porfirio heard him. He looked expectantly at Rainbow. Ramon was obviously waiting also.

"We'll push out there at once, of course," Rainbow said. "If the sign is fresh, Perez may have located the steers."

HE broke off as a rapidly driven horse pulled up at the main gate. A silence fell, in which Don Porfirio commanded a servant to throw the gate open. To their surprise, Captain Herrera hurried in with his usual dashing air. His eyes fell on Consuelo, and he swept her a bow, which somehow managed to include them all.

"I find you all together," he said lightly. "Surely this is not a welcome for me?" His frown was swift when Don Porfirio acquainted him with the news he had just received. His brilliant eyes went again to Consuelo. "May I express my regret that you must be involved in such things, señorita," he said earnestly.

"Damn him and his airs!" Rainbow found himself thinking impatiently. It did not make him feel any easier to note the color in Consuelo's cheeks and the smile she gave Herrera. No one, he reflected grimly, need concern himself about that girl's courage.

"But what brings you here, *mi Capitan?*" Ramon inquired lightly, masking his real curiosity, but not being able to stifle it altogether.

Herrera read him accurately enough.

"A letter from my government for Señor Ripley," the captain answered indifferently. He drew a folded document from his coat pocket. "He has evidently requested a permit to seek buried treasure in Sonora. It falls to my lot to deliver it."

"What is this?" Don Porfirio demanded in perplexity, turning to Rainbow. "I understood you were stock detectives, señor? What is your real business here?"

"I owe you an explanation if not an apology," Rainbow replied. "You have seen our credentials. If I have said nothing of my interest in the lost cache of the Dominicans, it was only to avoid ridicule. So many have tried to find it and failed."

A few words served to convince the old Don that no deception had been practiced on him.

"But this is incredible!" He burst into a laugh. "You, señor—a sensible man of the world! And yet, who could be better fitted for such a search than a range detective? Perhaps there is something in it, after all—" He would have run on, had not Consuelo broke in:

"Do not make fun of Señor Ripley's purpose, father. To me he has confessed a long-standing interest in it. Many shrewd men have grown old in the search."

Rainbow was covertly watching Gonzales to note the effect of all this. Ramon's jaw had dropped. Obviously he was mystified and completely disarmed; and, if Rainbow was not mistaken, there was a touch of chagrin in his reaction as well.

He was not far wide of the mark. The truth was, Ramon had swallowed whole this story of a desire to seek the lost wealth of the Dominicans. Gonzales cursed himself for his stupidity. If this was Rainbow and Grumpy's real object in the country—and he had no doubt that it was, after the permit, and

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Consuelo's words—then they were less dangerous than he had supposed. He would have asked nothing better than to see them disappear into the wilds for several weeks on a harmless treasure hunt. That hope was gone now. The very rustling on which he had counted so heavily would hold them here.

"Necessarily the treasure hunting must be forgotten now," Captain Herrera voiced his thought. "Your work is here, Señor Ripley. What will you do?"

"We'll join Perez at once and see what further he has learned," Rainbow said soberly.

Making his excuses to the women, he and Grumpy made for the corals. Ramon, Don Porfirio and the captain accompanied them.

"What a shame you are north of the line here, Don Porfirio," the latter exclaimed, as the partners saddled up. "Nothing would suit me better than to accompany your men."

"You have your own responsibilities, captain," the old Don said, adding, "But that need not prevent Ramon from going." He turned to his son-in-law. "I am too old myself, Ramon. You shall go in my stead."

With his own idea of what lay behind the rustling, Rainbow had been waiting for just this. He seconded the Don pointedly. "There's every reason why he should go. I will appreciate his help."

Not expecting anything of this kind, Ramon was taken back: He hesitated briefly, but something warned him against showing too obvious a reluctance.

"I was waiting only to be asked," he muttered, shooting Rainbow an ugly look.

A horse was quickly made ready for him. Swinging into the saddle,

the three men struck out, the mestizo leading them. Not for a minute did Rainbow and Grumpy allow Gonzales to get behind them, as they topped a ridge and the ranch buildings dropped from sight. But Ramon's attention was centered on overtaking Perez now, hoping the *segundo* might have lost the trail of the rustled steers.

IT was a hope destined to disappointment, for when they overtook Perez half an hour later, he was still following the rustlers' sign. Four vaqueros were with him.

Perez saluted Rainbow with a relieved air, but seemed surprised at Ramon's presence.

"This trail is only a few hours old. We should be able to overhaul those desperadoes by fast riding," he declared, wondering why Gonzales was scowling.

Rainbow had his look at the ground. "I thought there were only half a dozen head in this bunch?" he said sharply.

"More have been thrown in with them," the foreman answered simply. "If this continues, they will leave us nothing."

Ramon reined in. "There may be many of them. We must wait for more men," he announced, with a show of authority. Grumpy whirled on him immediately.

"We ain't stoppin' fer nothin'. I kin read sign! There ain't over three or four men with them steers! We'll handle 'em!"

Ramon met his cold stare briefly, and shrugged. "I hope events will not prove you wrong," he forced the words out smoothly.

Pushing on, they were met after a couple of miles by a vaquero who had been cruising ahead. "Perez!" he cried excitedly. "They have taken many steers—sixty—eighty— I do

not know just how many! They have shot Jiminez' horse, and he hid in the rocks! They fired at me, drove me off—"

"Hold on," Rainbow snapped curtly. "Give this to us straight."

The man had stumbled on the rustlers in the act of rounding up a sizable bunch of cattle. He and the guard had attempted vainly to break it up, but the stock thieves had lost no time in heading the steers toward the border. They were only a few miles away.

Faces were grim as Rainbow and the others struck south without delay. The trail of the rustled stock was easy to read. There could be no less than a hundred head in the bunch.

Ten miles north of the international line, in the early afternoon, they traced the stolen stock into the yawning mouth of Canyon Diablo, a desolate, rock-walled chasm. It was an isolated, silent, sinister place. Just inside its frowning portals, Gonzales halted his horse.

"What a shame!" he exclaimed, with every appearance of vexation. "We got here too late. They're gone now." At Perez' surprised look of inquiry, he added: "There are a dozen branches in this canyon. They'll soon be lost in this maze—"

"What do you mean?" Rainbow cut him off flatly. "There's still dust in the air here. We can't miss that!"

But Ramon was stubborn. "Do not be too hasty, señor! The renegades know these canyons as a wolf knows its den. There is no telling what reception they may have prepared for us. What are a few steers compared to human lives?"

At this, Rainbow's and Grumpy's eyes met, and the former nodded slightly. In a flash, Gonzales' words revealed to him the reason for this rustling. Everything about it was

calculated to render them headlong, precipitate. Beyond a doubt, an ambush awaited them somewhere in this canyon. Ramon's reluctance to join in the pursuit noticeable even back on the hacienda, was a final confirmation of the truth if any were needed.

"You have a great regard for life, all of a sudden—now that your own is endangered," was Rainbow's sarcastic reflection. Aloud he said, "We came after those steers, and we'll get 'em!"

Ramon saw himself fairly trapped. It required no sharp eye to note the chagrin and dawning fear in his pasty face. He hung back as they started into the main canyon his glance running apprehensively along its gloomy walls. Noting that, Grumpy said:

"We better keep our eyes peeled. Be dang easy fer somebody to bush-whack us from the rims."

Rainbow wondered whether he had caught a swift intake of breath from Ramon. Seeing his plot anticipated at every turn, Gonzales was both puzzled and relieved. He must get out of this somehow before it was too late; the little man's words showed him the way. Getting a grip on himself, he said:

"Señor Gibbs is right; these walls are dangerous. Why not climb one of them and follow it? This looks like a way up, over here." Suiting action to the words, and obviously expecting the others to follow him, he started for a break in the left wall.

Grumpy's glance at Rainbow was significant. "He's plumb anxious to go that way," he murmured. "Reckon that means we'll have better luck if we go the other."

Rainbow nodded. "Hold on, Gonzales!" he called. "Perez tells me we

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can't go half a mile along that rim without being stopped for good. We'll take the other side." He turned toward the right wall, searching for a way up.

MUTTERING under his breath, Ramon reined back. He was in a killing mood, but he saw no other way to turn.

His every move only served to convince Rainbow that they were on the right track. He did not spare the horses, picking a devious way up the rocks toward the rim. Ramon had started in the rear, and he did not catch up. Ten minutes later Rainbow paused long enough to scan the back trail narrowly. It was empty.

"Reckon that caballero conveniently got hisself lost," Grumpy muttered disgustedly.

"We won't wait for him," Rainbow decided.

Reaching the canyon rim, they found hard going. It was impossible to see more than a little distance ahead at any time. But Perez was for shoving ahead as fast as Rainbow's vigilance would permit.

They were rounding a rugged headland about which Canyon Diablo looped in a wide curve when suddenly Grumpy hauled in with a jerk.

"Look at them two heads, stickin' up over there!" he whipped out. "They're watchin' the canyon—"

Even as Rainbow made out two silhouetted steeple hats, the rustlers spotted him and the others. Crouched in the rocks, they swung around with cries of surprise. That their guns had been waiting in their hands was amply attested by the speed with which they threw the first warning shots.

Two vaqueros tumbled out of the

saddle and sought cover. "Don't hole up!" Rainbow barked. "Rush them! If we can cut 'em off from their horses, we've got 'em dead to rights!"

He led the charge across the open, firing as he went. Grumpy clung to his heels, and Perez and the others were not far behind. The two renegades loosed a blast at them, ducking and running through the rocks. A slug snarled past Rainbow's face and another parted his rein.

The outlaws reached their horses with only a matter of seconds to spare. They swung into the saddle, their six-guns roaring defiance. A streak of blood appeared on Grumpy's chin and he let out a bellow of wrath. His gun crashed. One of the bushwhackers folded over and pitched to the ground. Jamming in his spurs, the other made away as rapidly as the going would permit. He soon disappeared behind a shattered dyke.

"After him!" Rainbow cried sharply. "Don't let him get away!"

But the fugitive appeared to have faded into thin air. A few rods, and the tracks of his horse were gone. They got no further glimpse of him, nor were any more shots fired.

Grumpy was leaning over the man he had wounded when Rainbow came up. "Take a look at this," the little man said gruffly. The Mexican was dead. Rainbow scrutinized the dark-skinned face.

"We've seen him before," he said without surprise. "He was in El Conejo's crowd that night in La Paloma. No wonder Ramon didn't want to come along!"

Grumpy got to his feet. "This death trap was meant fer us, only it misfired. But we better not stand here sheddin' tears if we aim to turn them steers."

Rainbow was in complete accord.

Investigation disclosing the fact that their only means of reaching the canyon floor was to return by the way they had come, they started at once. Halfway down, they ran into Ramon, who was anxious and apologetic of manner.

"I hear the firing, señores, but my horse had gone lame," he said quickly. "I found it impossible to reach you in time. What has happened?"

Rainbow was content to let Grumpy inform him, his contempt for Gonzales making it difficult to keep what he knew to himself. His impulse was to throw a flat accusation in Ramon's teeth and force a showdown, but he mastered it. As for his horse going lame, Gonzales had certainly not lied about that. Whatever the cause, it was plainly limping, for a fact. This was remedied by his exchanging horses with one of the vaqueros.

"And now, señor?" Ramon turned briskly to Rainbow.

"We go after the steers."

Ramon was now entirely willing. Reaching the canyon, they set out at a fast pace, ignoring the danger of further ambush. None came. Reaching a fork they saw the rustled stock had taken the right branch. The hovering dust thickened, golden in the sunshine. Several miles farther on, Grumpy shouted, "There they are!"

IT was true. Don Porfirio's steers were strung out along the canyon. Obviously the men who hazed them on had been warned, for they spotted the pursuit immediately. Several rifles cracked.

"Let's get this over with!" Rainbow exclaimed. They swept forward, Ramon in the lead. "Keep your eye on him," Rainbow mut-

tered to Grumpy. The gnarled one grinned.

"I'll know how to handle him at the first phony move!" he declared.

Evidently the rustlers had no intention of putting up a determined resistance. At a cry from their leader, after the first volley of shots, they broke toward a gap in the canyon wall. Soon they were racing away in full flight. Rainbow and the others dogged them for several miles, but the former soon saw there was no chance of overtaking the quarry. They took advantage of every fold and gully, melting into the rocks. Rainbow drew in at last.

"They've got it on us, in this country," he said reluctantly. "We'll turn the steers back."

Ramon was now all for continued pursuit, breathing fire. His persuasions carried little weight. Perez was delighted at the recovery of the stock; he asked for nothing more.

The steers were turned and headed back for the home range. At the point where the fight with the bushwhackers had occurred, Rainbow and Grumpy climbed the canyon wall to tie the dead man on his horse and bring him along. Once on the rim, they almost passed the spot before they were aware of it.

"Hell, he's plumb disappeared!" Grumpy exclaimed. "Here's where he laid." He pointed out the bloodstains.

There could be no mistake. Though they hunted long, no slightest sign of either the dead Mexican or his horse was to be found. Both had been spirited away.

"I can't say I expected anything else," Rainbow observed as they started the downward climb. "Dozens could have identified that man. Powerful as El Conejo is, he's not foolish enough to run unnecessary risks."

"He's run too many already," was Grumpy's terse comment. "We'll prove that to 'im before we git done."

Dusk saw the Double Cross steers thrown out on Don Porfirio's oak-dotted hills once more. At Rainbow's suggestion, Perez posted a heavier guard.

Waiting at home, the old Don received the news of the recovery of his stock with pleasure. "You see I knew what I was doing when I asked you to stay, Señor Ripley," he declared. "Is it not so, Ramon?"

"Who can doubt it, Don Porfirio?" Ramon, inwardly seething with rage, managed a half-hearted agreement. Captain Herrera had gone. Consuelo rewarded Rainbow with a warm smile.

"I knew my faith in you was justified," she murmured in a tone that made his pulse leap.

At dinner, Grumpy regaled Dona Luz and the rest of the table with the story of their experience. Soon after the coffee, however, the little man disappeared. Rainbow guessed where he had gone. When he returned it was to find Grumpy awaiting him in their room.

"Well, what did you learn?"

Grumpy's eyes were shrewd. "I went fer a look at young Gonzales' horse," he announced. At the other's nod, he continued: "Rainbow, that bronc was lame all right—because he lamed it! I found a thorn buried in its hoof. An' I'll bet yuh couldn't find a thorn in that whole canyon!" He paused. "If we go on livin' under the same roof with that rattler, he's goin' to git his fangs into us! When are we leavin' the rancho?"

"We're heading back to Sonora in the morning," Rainbow answered, "but don't fool yourself about that, Grumpy. It means jumping out of the frying pan into the fire!"

CHAPTER VIII

A WOMAN'S WAY

RIGHT here is the pass—Buzzard Pass, it is called. It crosses the Sierra del Muerto, the only break in the mountains for over forty miles. You see, San Lorenzo monastery lies about here. It has been in ruins for a hundred years. The padres were forced to cross the range on their flight to the coast. They could only have gone by that pass."

Rainbow found something intoxicating in the proximity of Consuelo de Calderon's head, the distracting scent of her hair and her softly rounded cheek, as they leaned together over an old chart spread out on the table. It was difficult to remember that, having learned his decision to start a search for the old Dominican treasure, the girl was volunteering information garnered from years of investigation by others, and comprising what she believed to be an excellent lead.

"It says here"—she busily thumbed the crumbling parchment pages of an old volume of records—"that the padres were 'surprised by treacherous Yaquis in the mountains and killed, every one.' The very name of Sierra del Muerto is significant. Buzzard Pass is the sole point capable of defense on that long dreary trail, and yet the fathers found time to bury their valuables. Don't you see? It *must* have been there that the massacre occurred. Though, as nearly as I know, no one has ever carefully searched the pass."

Hard as it was to think of distant treasure with Consuelo so near Rainbow had grown definitely interested in the padres' cache. As they discussed the subject, he became convinced that Consuelo had indeed hit on a possibility. He was still of

the same mind when, later in the day, he and Grumpy made ready to commence their search.

"We are sorry to see you go, señores," Don Porfirio told them with simple sincerity. "I hope you will not forget Rancho de Calderon. Make this the base of your operations. We will welcome you on your return and be interested in your fortunes."

Rainbow shook hands with the old Don before swinging into the saddle. He had already said good-by to Consuelo, while Grumpy took leave of Dona Luz.

"We'll not forget your kindness, Don Porfirio," he promised. "You can look for us back in a week or two."

They were riding away when they saw a horseman approaching who, on drawing nearer, proved to be Captain Herrera. Greeting them with a smile, he eyed the packs fastened at their cantles.

"I see you are prepared for a trip, señores," he remarked. "No need to ask where you are going."

Rainbow admitted that they were heading for Sonora. He slapped a pocket in which the treasure-hunting permit lay folded in his wallet. "I have my passport here handy. You handled the situation very nicely."

Herrera sobered. "Make no mistake, my friend," he warned, unconsciously lowering his voice. "If I were you I would confine myself to the treasure for a time at least. I have found no trace of Iliff, so you may well believe there will be considerable interest in your activities down there."

Rainbow nodded. "I agree with you, captain. But put your mind at rest. We'll take care of ourselves, and manage to keep in touch with you."

WS—8B

Grumpy drank this in, as well as the talk that followed, in silence. But when they took leave of the captain, he rode for a few minutes in a study. At last he growled, "That bird shore is worryin' plenty about yore health."

Rainbow was surprised. "He's a square shooter, Grumpy," he said plainly. "You ought to know that by now!"

"Reckon I do," the little man admitted grudgingly. "But I ain't forgot how he jumped at this treasure-huntin' excuse. It shore suits his book to git yuh away from the ranch."

The fact had already given Rainbow some little concern. He had not expected Grumpy to point it out, however. But the next moment, he thought he saw the answer. "I see. You mean that hits indirectly at you, too," he grinned banteringly. "For all your talk I know you'd have preferred to stay on at the rancho yourself."

"Shore I would!" Grumpy admitted crustily. "Why not? Comfortable there, wasn't we?"

It was such an abrupt about-face that Rainbow turned away to hide his mirth. He knew it was not comfort which called to Grumpy from the Calderon ranch as much as it was Dona Luz's snapping black eyes.

SEVERAL hours later, Grumpy emerged from his thoughts to note that they were making directly toward Tequila. "No need of us goin' in town," he averred, adding "unless yuh want to—"

Rainbow assented. "I want to talk to Carmen Sanchez, or whatever her name is."

"That dancer?" Grumpy was astonished. "What fer?"

Rainbow shrugged. "She's one of

young Gonzales' little extravagances," he reminded. "She may drop something that will interest us."

Reaching town, they went at once to Jim Donnelly's cantina. The latter's surprise on seeing them enter, was patent.

"Howdy, boys," he said, moving forward. "Takin' a chance in comin' here, ain't you?"

"It's all in a lifetime, Jim," Rainbow grinned.

"What you after?" Donnelly persisted.

"Nothing much," Rainbow evaded, going on. He tossed over his shoulder carelessly, "We'll take a drink, and drift."

Although there was no dancing at this hour, he saw Carmen Sanchez seated at a table in the rear. He did not go to her at once, but climbed the stairs instead to one of the curtained alcoves above, well knowing that curiosity would drag her there eventually. Grumpy followed, Donnelly staring after them suspiciously.

"He ain't forgot them chairs an' windows we busted," Grumpy muttered under his breath.

Rainbow signaled over the balcony rail to the waiter at the bar. He and Grumpy made themselves comfortable in the alcove. The man with the drinks had scarcely come and gone before the curtain parted and Carmen stood there.

"'Allo, boys," she smiled.

It was a stock greeting, accompanied by a play of sultry black eyes that had Grumpy sitting up in a hurry. But Rainbow was not deceived. He indicated a chair. After a deliberate pause, Carmen slipped into it. The look she leveled at him, leaning on her elbows, was inscrutable.

"You see me the other night?" she said abruptly. "You know me?"

"With Ramon?" He chuckled, nodding. "Never fear, *chiquita*. I told no one. Your secret is safe with me."

"Bah! What do I care? That one means nothing to me," she said contemptuously. Rainbow studied her face briefly.

"I believe you mean it," he commented. Carmen's manner grew animated, almost violent.

"*Seguro si!*" And then, spacing her words distinctly: "I theenk I like you much better, señor."

Rainbow pretended both gratification and interest. "Then perhaps you can tell us why young Gonzales hates me? Not that he's said anything, except there at the gate that night."

"That Ramon—he has no balance!" she avoided the question so neatly as to remove all doubt of its having been done by accident. "Sometimes I lose the patience with him altogether! But where do you go now, señores?"

Evincing reluctance at first, Rainbow told her about the Dominican gold cache they hoped was to be found in Buzzard Pass. Carmen asked a number of questions, her curiosity keen. Finally she said:

"But where is this *Zopilote Paso*?"

"It crosses Sierra del Muerto."

The dancer's eyes widened. "No!" she said suddenly. "You must not go there. You must not! Your life will be in danger!"

Rainbow laughed. Remembering the way this girl had turned on him before, Grumpy had kept out of the conversation thus far. Now, he demanded gruffly:

"Why? Is the place haunted, or somethin'?"

"*Si, si*. That is it," she grasped the first explanation of her fears that came to hand. "Strange things hap-

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pen down there, señores. The Indians, guarding the desert jealously—or perhaps the spirits of the Fathers—” She broke off, obviously agitated. “Do not go there, señores, I beg you!”

Grumpy shot Rainbow a puzzled glance. Whatever the girl was driving at, there could be no question of her anxiety to turn them back. Rainbow said slowly:

“Thanks, *niña*. We’ll think it over again. That’s the best I can say now.”

“Give up this mad plan!” she urged. “Return to the rancho, señor. Stick to the cattle. *Quién sabe?* Perhaps your fortune lies there.”

Rainbow put on so successful an expression of reluctant conviction that, on taking their leave of the place half an hour later, Grumpy said sourly, “Yuh ain’t puttin’ no stock in what she said, are yuh?”

“So little,” Rainbow assured him, “that right now I’m mighty curious to know what she’ll do with the information I gave her.”

“Yuh didn’t tell ‘er nothin’ that young Gonzales don’t already know,” his partner objected.

“That’s true,” Rainbow conceded. “But different eyes, different sight cap—”

“What’ll yuh do, now?”

“We’ll keep an eye on Donnelly’s place,” was the answer. “If Carmen leaves, we’ll watch where she goes, find out who she talks to.”

IT had been late afternoon when they arrived in Tequila. Dusk was settling now. Grumpy gloomily predicted that it would be one or two o’clock in the morning before the dancer left the cantina, but he was wrong. Scarcely had the lights of the border town begun to flicker

on before Rainbow’s fingers closed on his partner’s arm in a warning pressure. As Carmen emerged from a rear door, a mantilla thrown over her head, they withdrew farther into the shadows where they had taken up their vigil.

The dancer avoided the main street, keeping to the alleys. Her assurance told Rainbow that she had come this way many times before. Not until he saw her make for an isolated adobe on the edge of town did the truth occur to him. Grumpy got it at the same time.

“She’s makin’ fer home,” he hazarded. “There’s a light in that place. Yuh s’pose she lives with her folks?”

Rainbow didn’t know. But when the dancer entered the house, he said they would creep up close and try to find out. Even before they reached the window from which light streamed, they caught the deep murmur of a masculine voice. It was Grumpy who spotted a fine Spanish pony in the corral at the rear.

“Family?” the little man growled satirically. “That’s some gentleman friend she’s got visitin’ ‘er. Fer a fact, she don’t care so much about young Ramon.”

The next moment proved him right. But neither was prepared for the shock they received on learning who it was who awaited Carmen in her home. It was Santos Salazar! Getting a good look at El Conejo, Rainbow sank below the deep-embursed window of the adobe and gave all his attention to listening. They could hear better now.

“You must not laugh, Santos!” the girl was saying rapidly. “Rainbow Ripley and his partner are shrewd and dangerous. What happened in the Devil’s Canyon should prove that. If they go down into the desert—and there at Buzzard

Pass, of all places—there is no telling what may happen!”

“Heart of my heart!” Salazar returned fondly. “When you are near I think of nothing but you. Day and night I dream only of your happiness—” He broke off. “Tell me again, my little one, you love your big rough Santos—him only?”

Carmen’s response was such as to convince not only him, but Rainbow and Grumpy as well. “Why else should I worry always for your safety?” she demanded. “But I cannot help you if you will do nothing about it.”

“Have no fears,” he told her. “I will see to it that these Americans get into no mischief in the mountains. Sometimes I think they are far more dangerous on Papa Calderon’s ranch than anywhere else.”

“Ramon is a fool!” the dancer burst out hotly. “He makes me sick, that one! But for the use we can make of him, Santos, I would long ago have told him what I think of him—the witless, conceited ass!”

“The time will come when you can relieve your feelings,” El Conejo soothed her. “We will not need him forever, nor even much longer. But that reminds me. See, little dove, what I have brought for you!”

Rainbow and Grumpy heard Carmen’s excited cry of appreciation. They had their cautious look. From his pocket Salazar had drawn an ornate locket set with chip diamond. Grumpy’s lip curled. The girl could command dozens of such trumpery gifts as this. But El Conejo was not yet done. They saw him snap open the locket and expose a loose diamond of some value. Rainbow had little doubt that locket and stone had been stolen. But if Carmen sensed the same, as she must have done, she gave no sign of it, making

a fuss over her lover as he snapped the chain about her neck.

For twenty minutes longer Rainbow and Grumpy listened, hoping to pick up something of value. But they learned nothing of Carmen’s reasons for fearing their trip to Buzard Pass, in the Sierra del Muerto. At length, when Salazar showed signs of leaving, they withdrew to a safer distance.

“She’s got a gall,” Grumpy muttered; “she knew when she was warnin’ us against goin’ that was the one thing that’d make us shore to go. “If anythin’ happens to us down there in the desert, it won’t be because of no ghosts.”

“And there doesn’t seem to be much question but what something will happen, either,” Rainbow seconded grimly. “If Salazar pulls away as I think he will, we’re going with him!”

True to expectation, the light was extinguished a moment later. Salazar and Carmen emerged to stand murmuring together for a few moments. “You must go back to the cantina now,” the Mexican advised, raising his voice as though urging her. “You’ve been gone long enough. I’ll be seeing you soon again, little one—” His voice dropped again into a murmur.

THEY parted presently, Carmen hurrying away toward the cantina, while Salazar turned to the corral. He led his horse out. It was already saddled. Rainbow and Grumpy’s horses were near at hand. They mounted and prepared to tail the renegade.

Unfortunately the flat on which Tequila had been built lay open except for stunted manzanita. They were forced to drop back while El Conejo struck away to the south. They followed as fast as they could,

an occasional whiff of dust from his horse's hoofs, lingering in the still night air, pointing the way. The time came, however, when they could not even pick that up.

"Dang it all," Grumpy complained. "He's givin' us the slip, Rainbow."

"Better let him do that than run up on him and give ourselves away," the latter returned. "Too bad. He sure was leading us to his hide-out. Maybe we can track him by moonlight."

When the moon rose a couple of hours later, they picked up Salazar's trail. It led them a dozen miles, only to fade out on a rugged malpais. Rainbow was not surprised.

"That gent's a wolf," he commented. "Trust him not to leave a plain trail if he can help it. We'll cast around in the morning," he added. "If we don't find anything, we'll hit for Sierra del Muerto."

They made dry camp, and were astir by first light in the morning. It was as Rainbow had said. El Conejo might have taken wing for all the sign that remained of his going. Giving over their search at last, they headed south across the desert.

CHAPTER IX

WOLVES OF THE CHAPARRAL

IT was a journey of several days to reach their objective. More than once the feeling came to them that they were being watched. Not that they saw anyone; the Sonoran wasteland was apparently empty of life. They saw to it that their movements were circumspect, however, and made no move that could appear suspicious to any skulking observer.

At last the wavering blue line of the Mexican mountains drew near. From a considerable distance they

spotted what they concluded could only be the notch of Buzzard Pass, the sinking sun gilding its edges against a sky of fiery red. By the following evening, after a leisurely climb, they pitched camp in the hollow of a slope almost within the portals of the pass.

"Gloomy enough here fer buried treasure," Grumpy muttered, gazing up at the awesome bastions of crumpling rock looming far above their heads. He sounded uneasy. "Blamed if I think much of this neighborhood."

"We haven't been bothered yet, Grumpy," Rainbow returned, hoping to allay the other's growing anxiety.

"No, but that don't mean we ain't bein' watched," the little man pointed out. "I've had the feelin' all day. It's stronger now."

Rainbow was forced to admit that he shared the sensation. But he shrugged it off. Now that they believed themselves near the possible cache of the Dominican treasure, he evinced a keen interest despite his knowledge that their search could be only a blind.

Next morning they proceeded to the pass. Though they appeared to prosecute their search diligently, they ceaselessly scanned the hills and rimrocks. At dusk, for safety's sake they returned to their former camp. A dozen times while they were getting supper, Grumpy straightened for a look around. Rainbow knew what was troubling him.

"Forget it, Grumpy," he advised. "Whatever is coming at us, we'll know soon enough once it starts."

They had cause to remember his words half an hour later when, smoking their pipes beside the fire, the clap of a rifle shot fell on their ears, its echoes running down from above. Backing away from the fire hastily,

they suspiciously tested the night.

"That shot wasn't fired at us," Grumpy muttered. "I never heard the slug at all."

Rainbow agreed. While he was still turning it over in his mind, there came a second shot, and then a high-pitched yell. The sounds came from up slope. They were succeeded by the drum of a pony's hoofs, loud at first, but rapidly drawing away.

"Waal!" Grumpy gave vent to his perplexity. "Somethin' queer goin' on here. Shall we go up there fer a look?"

Instead of answering, Rainbow held up a warning hand. His keen ears had caught something. A moment later, in the circle of light thrown by the fire there appeared a lean, bronzed Yaqui in the uniform of a Mexican rurale.

Knocking aside the gun which ap-

peared so quickly in Grumpy's hand, Rainbow stepped forward.

"What do you want?" he demanded curtly. "Are you carrying a message?"


"I am Nacori," the Yaqui grunted. "This place"—he waved his hand in an inclusive gesture toward the pass—"no good."

Rainbow questioned the man for several minutes without getting anything more definite out of him than that he had fired on one of El Connejo's spies and that the man had fled.

"Then you were sent after us by Captain Herrera, Nacori. You have been detailed to guard us?" Rainbow queried at a venture.

"Si, si," the Indian assented in his queer mixture of Spanish and English. "This," he returned stubbornly to the point, making his

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straight, greasy black hair shake, "no good place, señores. *Mucho malo—ver*' bad."

THOUGH Nacori attempted to persuade them to leave, the only reason Rainbow could elicit was that men had been killed here. Nacori was not referring to the padres, but to some bandits whom the rurales had overtaken and liquidated on the spot. An ancient adobe, he added, had once stood nearby. At Rainbow's request he pointed out its site. A crucifix of purest gold had been found there, by a man scraping in the ashes of a fire. No more searching had been done, it being accepted as a sign of warning.

"Grumpy, Consuelo was right!" Rainbow exclaimed exultantly. "If we were free to give ourselves to it, we might locate that cache. All we can do, though, is make a bluff at finding it."

A guard was set that night, Nacori taking the first turn. Grumpy took over at midnight. Rainbow relieved him at three. The night proved uneventful. Breakfast out of the way, Rainbow began prospecting the site of the ancient adobe. Grumpy joined him. An hour later, standing up to his waist in the hole he had dug, his shovel hit something metallic.

"Just a rock," he growled in answer to Rainbow's questioning look.

Ten minutes later, however, he unearthed a dirt-grimed disk and stared at it, his jaw dropping.

"What kin that be?"

"It's a plate, or salver," Rainbow answered. After a moment's scraping he burst out, "And by Satan, Grumpy, it's pure gold! Look at that!" He pointed to where he had dug the dirt away.

"Waal, that won't make us rich," Grumpy grumbled.

"No," Rainbow agreed. "But who'd be fool enough to bury a gold crucifix and a plate here? I tell you there's more!" In his excitement he momentarily lost sight of their real purpose there. Deepening the excavation, he soon unearthed several more plates, a heavy chalice, and a set of altar vessels. At last they were satisfied that they had it all.

Squatting on his heels, Rainbow examined various items in the collection.

"What's that stuff worth?" Grumpy demanded, wiping his sweat-stained forehead with his arm.

"At least three thousand dollars," Rainbow estimated. "But this is only a small cache. There must be others. The story goes that there was bar gold worth a fortune. If we—"

He broke off abruptly as the sound of a gunshot reached them, shuddering down from the rocks in a thousand shattered echoes. It was followed by a second and third, in quick succession.

Neither had given Nacori, the Yaqui, so much as a thought for some time. Now they saw him running toward them at top speed, while someone fired at him from high in the pass with spaced, deliberate shots.

"He's stirred up a hornet's nest this time!" Grumpy cried. Grabbing up his rifle, he got Rainbow's, too.

Seeing them, the Indian signaled sharply. Rainbow began hastily pitching the gold plate back into the hole from which it had been dug. Between four and five feet deep, and at least as many wide, it was large enough to accommodate them as well.

"Tumble in, Grumpy!" Rainbow said quickly. "This looks like a stand-off—" He whirled as the

Yaqui came up. "What is it, Nacori? Who jumped you?"

The latter made answer curtly: "El Conejo!"

"Are they all in the pass?" Grumpy demanded.

Nacori made an inclusive gesture, his arm encircling them in a tight-drawn net. From that Rainbow gathered that they were surrounded. Droning slugs, coming from several directions at once, attested to the truth of this.

WATCH as he would, Rainbow caught no glimpse of the wily enemy until, firing at the faintest movement of brush far up the slope, he was rewarded by a yell as a Mexican sprang to his feet and made for the shelter of a rock. The very leisureliness of the renegades bespoke how sure they were of their quarry. Twenty minutes passed before, at a fusillade, the bullets began to slap into the earthen bulwarks of the fort. Grumpy answered until his rifle grew hot in his hands. Nacori was more deliberate, but Rainbow noted that when he fired, it was the signal for some man out there in the brush to change position hurriedly.

It was not long before Rainbow realized the full seriousness of their position. It was brought home to him when Grumpy vented a muffled curse, as a stray shot neatly parted his hair at the back—but the wrong way across. They were cornered here, penned effectually. Salazar's wolves could well afford to wait for their eventual surrender. They would be beaten in the end by thirst alone, forced to give up unless help came from an unexpected direction.

There was no change in the situation as the afternoon dragged out. With thickening dusk, they stood off a rush by the renegades, who were

apparently determined to end the affair briefly. A dozen times Rainbow had asked himself whether El Conejo was out there, without finding the answer. He was no more successful on this occasion.

The Mexicans crawled up closer than ever in the darkness. The muzzle bursts of their firing stippled the night persistently. But Grumpy took advantage of a lull to crawl to their camp, a few yards away, and return with food. Nacori alone refused to concern himself with eating now. At last he said briefly, turning to Rainbow:

"No can do anything here. I go for help—"

Grumpy stared at him in amazement. "Yuh can't git through that crowd!" he averred positively. Nacori's impassive glance passed over him as if he hadn't heard. Rainbow's signal warned Grumpy to silence.

"He knows what he can do better than we," he pointed out. "This may be our only chance." He turned to the Yaqui. "If you're sure you can slip away, Nacori, we'll manage to hold out till you return with help."

The savage grunted approval of this attitude. Before crawling over the breastworks a moment later, he drew a long, wicked-looking blade, obviously intending to keep it in readiness. Grumpy had never particularly approved of the Yaqui. At sight of the knife a shiver shook him.

"That hombre's a dang creepin' plague," he muttered, when the rufale was gone from sight and such faint sounds of his progress as he made had died out. "Reckon I don't even wish El Conejo's blacklegs a taste of that sticker he's carryin'."

Whether the Yaqui had an occa-

sion to use it or not, they received no inkling. Half an hour later, Rainbow felt sure Nacori had succeeded in passing through the cordon, but no sounds came to them until, with the early moon, the attackers set up a brisk fire once more. Rainbow and Grumpy answered sparingly, for they had prepared for no such extended siege as this and ammunition was running low.

"How long'll it take that Injun to reach Herrera an' git back?" the little man demanded.

"Hard to say," Rainbow answered. "He should be here some time tomorrow."

Grumpy was dubious, firing at a shadowy outline some distance away, but unable to tell his luck. "Yuh reckon we kin hold out till then?"

"We'll have to," Rainbow said grimly.

They were still holding their own at dawn, but another sharp attack shortly afterward, repelled only by dint of the sharpest firing, reduced their supply of cartridges to an alarming point. In addition, Grumpy received a flesh wound on his neck. At ten o'clock, a cry reached them from the brush.

"Señores!"

"Dang polite, ain't they?" Grumpy growled. Rainbow frowned him to silence, answering the hail.

"Give yourselves up!" the hidden renegade advised. "You cannot get away. Either surrender or die!"

It was not Salazar, unless he was disguising his voice. Rainbow had no other interest in what the man had to say. As for Grumpy, he muttered, "Is he layin' along the ledge, or behind that patch of brush?" A second later, he fired, his accuracy eliciting a yell and a

burst of cursing. The renegades did not charge again. Rainbow guessed they were gathering their forces for a final attempt.

"Let fly at the first man who shows his head," he warned Grumpy. "If we don't stall off the next rush before it gets started, we may never live to weather it."

They had been in tight places before, these two. Not by word or sign did the gnarled little man betray his knowledge of how desperate the situation was. Suddenly he threw his rifle up and fired. Rainbow cut loose as a man got to his feet out in the brush. The shot caught the renegade in the shoulder, whirled him around and down. Another took his place in a flash.

Grumpy was firing steadily now. Still the Mexicans came on. Rainbow could see several of them. He shoved the last of his cartridges in at the loading-gate, his lips compressed to a thin line.

"Toss me some shells," Grumpy growled.

"Haven't got any."

At the first crack of Grumpy's six-gun, which he unlimbered without comment, the renegades read how matters stood. They raised a shout. In another moment they were pouring forward.

Before the charge could get well under way, however, the crack of a rifle coming from a distance fell on Rainbow's ears. A second later he saw horsemen charging forward and recognized the trim, upright figure in the lead. Captain Herrera!

"Nacori got through!" Rainbow cried, a thrill in his tone. "Let them have it, Grumpy! It'll soon be all over!"

Taken on the flank by surprise, the Mexican renegades suddenly broke. Rainbow and Grumpy crawled out

of the hole and began firing hotly. Captain Herrera swept forward, a dozen rurales at his heels. They spread out. But they were not quick enough to prevent the enemy from scurrying to cover in the rocks. Reaching their horses, El Conejo's men started away in full flight. They were like coyotes in this rough country, doubling and dodging until they had all disappeared. The Yaquis pursued for a mile, but soon turned back.

Captain Herrera rode up to the two Americans, a smile on his lips. "You see my warnings were not idle, señores," he remarked. "I hope you are all right?"

"Except for a scratch or two," Rainbow nodded carelessly. "But you came just in time, captain. Another ten minutes would have been too late."

CHAPTER X

WITH PITY FOR NONE

MAYBE we have been wrong, Ramon, laughing at these tales of buried treasure. Santo Salazar turned his head slightly at the fluttering of a bat in a corner of the high-walled room at San Lorenzo; in which he and young Gonzales were discussing the events of the previous day; but he was not to be distracted. "Suppose the gold of the padres does lie somewhere in Buzzard Pass! Shall we leave it for those dogs of Americans to discover?"

"Santos, you are mistaken," Ramon scoffed. "That pair stumbled on a small cache, no more—"

"But we have always believed there was *no* gold at all," persisted Salazar.

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vice and leave the Americans to their harmless pastime! Haven't we got a sure thing in hand, with more gold in it than the padres ever heard of? Bah!" Gonzales was vehement. "What I am afraid of is that your bungling will end by leading those two detectives here. We are too close to the pass to risk taking chances. You will spoil everything if you do not take care!"

El Conejo waved this aside as of no importance. "I have long had the run of this country," he pointed out. "My dorados go where they please and do as they please. Before you speak of my bungling, what about your illustrious papa Calderon?" he demanded. "Is it still your idea that he will take the bait?"

There could be no question about whom he was speaking. Ramon nodded curtly. "Don't worry yourself about Don Porfirio. He is still dangling and will soon drop into our net. He will give us no trouble."

"That's what you said about Jiff," El Conejo grumbled. "And we still have him on our hands."

"In good time we shall dispose of him," Ramon declared; "and Don Porfirio, too, for that matter. But, remember, Santos," he broke off evenly, "it is I who am to have the ranch when the time comes. Whatever money we squeeze out of Calderon in the meantime, we divide. But the ranch is mine. You understand?" There was a cold edge of warning in his tone.

"Ah," Salazar acknowledged, with affected indifference. "Your own little plum. Of course. But what is the old man doing, Ramon? You have been watching him. I have had only his answers to your letters."

"He has told no one. He wishes to deliver the money in person, and is quietly planning a trip." Ramon added, "Unless I am much mistaken he will soon be in Magdalena. In

a week's time we will have him here."

Salazar rubbed his hands together, his irritation forgotten. "Excellent!" he approved. "But while we are about it, *joventito*, why toss anything over our shoulder? This gold the American detectives dug up—there need be no more digging for that."

"What has become of it?"

"Gone to Magdalena in the captain's care. No doubt it would be easy enough to find." There was an insinuation in the words which did not escape Ramon.

"But certainly Herrera has the gold under guard?" Ramon shook his head dubiously. "I have no liking for those snaky Yaquis of his."

El Conejo disposed of the objection lightly. "What are a few Yaquis? Nothing at all," he boasted. "This will be easy."

Briefly they discussed their plan to steal the gold plate, Salazar's intimate knowledge of the rurale headquarters and its routine, often so useful to him, proving of value again.

"One thing I insist on," Ramon said. "This little business must be concluded cunningly, Santos. We cannot afford to have Magdalena become an armed camp just now, when we are expecting Don Porfirio to arrive there."

"Agreed, *compañero!*" Salazar seconded heartily. He got up. "We will set about it at once, tonight! We will be there and gone before our presence is discovered."

IN Magdalena, comfortably established in Captain Herrera's home, Rainbow and Grumpy waited to have their find appraised. The captain had sent to Hermosillo, the capital, for a government assayer.

"Señor Escobar will be here this morning," Herrera assured them at breakfast. "I know him, and you



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will find him more than fair. So that although the Mexican government claims a half of your find, you will still have a goodly sum coming to you."

The assayer arrived on the morning train. They met him at the station. Mindful of their real purpose in Mexico, and anxious to return to their man hunt at the earliest possible moment, Rainbow suggested that they go to Herrera's headquarters at once.

"The gold is there?" Escobar asked.

"In the safe at my office," was Herrera's answer.

The rurale headquarters lay across Magdalena's dusty plaza. It was an imposing adobe with carved, brown sandstone façade. Usually a Yaqui stood guard smartly in the high-arched gate; but this morning there was no sign of a sentry. Frowning at this, Herrera lost no time in entering the courtyard. Rainbow and the others followed closely.

They were in time to hear the captain's surprised exclamation as he nearly stumbled over the inert form of an unconscious rurale. Rainbow made his own swift investigation. The Yaqui had been struck down from behind with some heavy object, dragged inside and dumped out of sight.

Starting up sharply as if struck by a sudden thought, Herrera headed on the run for his office, whistling a keening blast as he went. "Felipe, Jiminez, Nacori!" he cried. There was no answer. The reason for this was made plain a moment later, when Rainbow, Grumpy, and Escobar found the captain standing before his safe in the room he used as both office and primary court.

Rainbow had seen the gold plate stored in this safe two days ago.

That it was not there any longer was equally plain. The safe had been broken open only a short time before. Its door hanging crazily, it gaped blank and empty.

"Waal, dang somebody's ornery hide anyhow!" Grumpy muttered with intense disgust, when the truth sank home. "After all the trouble we had locatin' an' riskin' our necks fer that stuff."

Captain Herrera turned to Rainbow with a distracted gesture. "Señor, I am desolated! I would not have had this happen for anything."

Rainbow, however, was curiously unmoved by it all. After a quick glance at Escobar, whose expression of outrage and indignation reassured him, he said quietly:

"This may turn out the best lead we've had yet, captain. As I figure it, only El Conejo knew we had the gold; your Yaquis wouldn't talk. You can revive your guard and make sure; but I'm already convinced about who is responsible for this. They can't be wasting much time about covering their trail. If we pull out of here now, we may be able to follow them straight to their hide-out."

It was sense. Herrera wasted no time in futile discussion. With the help of the others, he revived the unconscious sentry. The man was able to give them but little information. A Mexican had accosted him—a man he believed might have been one of El Conejo's renegades. But even as he challenged the other, he had been struck from behind. It was all he knew.

As for the other rurales, the pair on duty this morning had been tolled off by the rumor of a fight in a cantina beyond the plaza. They returned even as Herrera started in search of them. At Rainbow's sug-

gestion, all save Señor Escobar made preparation swiftly for pursuit of the thieves.

THEY were on the point of leaving the courtyard when an interruption occurred. A dust-stained man came charging in at the gate without bothering to dismount from his lathered horse. One look, and Rainbow sobered. It was Perez, Don Porfirio's segundo!

Herrera stared at him in surprise. "What is it, Perez?" he demanded quickly. "You carry a message?"

"It is Don Porfirio!" the man burst out. "He has disappeared, Captain Herrera! Completely!" To Rainbow he said: "I have a message for you also, Señor Ripley. The señorita asks that you return at once, supposing I was able to locate you. I need scarcely add how great is her necessity."

Rainbow grasped the segundo's bridle rein.

"Get hold of yourself, Perez!" he commanded. "What is this talk of Don Porfirio's disappearance?"

"Señor, I know little more than I have said," Perez exclaimed, flinging himself from his horse. "Don Porfirio has been troubled for weeks, as you well know. Lately he has been receiving letters from Mexico. Without saying where he was going, he rode to San Diego and borrowed a large sum of money from the bank. I had these things from the señorita," he explained. "After leaving the bank, no trace of him has been found."

"It didn't take Rainbow long to put two and two together. The result was a conviction that Don Porfirio was in the gravest sort of danger.

"Ramon!" Captain Herrera exclaimed bitterly, as their glances crossed. Rainbow nodded. He felt it couldn't be otherwise.

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claim another victim!" he said grimly.

"We must ride to the rancho at once," Herrera declared. He would have said more, but Rainbow cut him off.

"No, captain, we won't do that," he contradicted flatly. "Your duty is plain. You must take up El Coejo's trail while it is hot. Grumpy and I will return to the rancho with Perez. We will do all there is to be done and we will not rest until we know where Don Porfirio has gone and what has happened to him."

"Ramon may have killed him for the money," Herrera suggested. "You may be too late already."

"I can't agree with you, in view of what Perez says about the letters from Mexico," Rainbow answered. "If I'm right, Don Porfirio may be on his way to Magdalena at this moment. If he comes, make sure that he doesn't disappear in the desert as Iliff did."

"You have my promise of that," Herrera said. His face was grave, for he well knew what such a fate would mean to the old grandee.

"And what of Gonzales, Perez?" Rainbow turned to the foreman. "Has he been home all this time?"

"Señor Ramon has been on another trip," was the answer.

Grumpy snorted. "Fer more cattle, I reckon?"

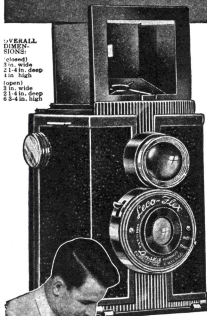
"Si, señor."

Five minutes later saw Rainbow, Grumpy, and Perez taking swift leave of Magdalena. They came to the edge of the desert, and there lay before them the long ride to the Rancho de Calderon. What awaited them there, they wondered.

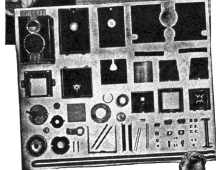
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