

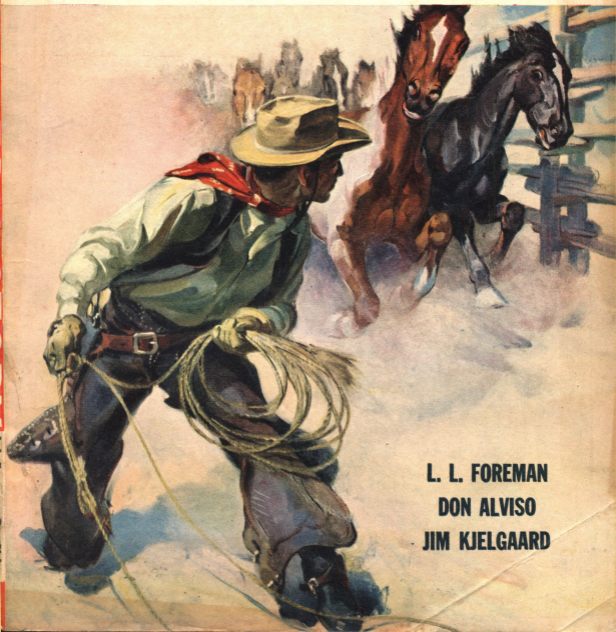
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WESTERN STORY 10 CENTS

OCT. 26, '40

VOL. 186 • No. 3

OCTOBER 26, 1940



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WESTERN STORY

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CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER 26, 1940 VOL. CLXXXVI NO. 3

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 The La Estrella jackpot didn't look like much to the Preacher until he found an old compadre sitting in on the game—then he decided to make his bid with flaming lead and thundering sixes!

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COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

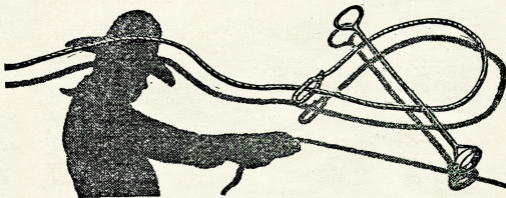
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The Roundup

PROBABLY one of the reasons why John North has such a fast-growing list of friends who rely upon him for information and advice through his column *Where to Go and How to Get There* is that he actually covers much of the territory about which his readers inquire. We have a hard time keeping track of J. N. for he's here and there and yonder, getting authentic data for his column. Latest word comes from the Lone Star State where J. N. is taking a pasear at the moment. He writes:

"Early last week I made a trip over to the wild, rugged cedar brakes and caprock country in the interesting and still sparsely settled Edwards Plateau section of Texas. I went over to get myself a little more first-hand information for the *Where to Go* Department readers, many of whom have shown an intense interest in that locality of late. The fact that there is some darn good fishing on the Colorado River over there, if you know the right places, didn't hold me back either.

"Thanks to the wet spring which put a good 'season' in the ground, ranchers and cattlemen were universally smiling. I saw grass knee high and still growing in former cedar scrub land from which the cedars had been eradicated. Fine range. While adjoining stretches still cedar-cluttered and infested with prickly pear offered little better than grazing for goats. The Herefords were sleek-coated, fat and sassy on land that previous to clearing was nothing but virtually bare ground beneath thickly bunched cedar trees.

"Not much of the land is in cultivation. Some is. For instance there is enough in Lampasas County to produce about three to five thousand bales of cotton annually and appreciable amounts of corn, oats, wheat and forage crops. Also some good pecan orchards there although livestock—beef cattle, sheep and goats—are the main industry. This happy diversification of interests tends to make Lampasas, the bustling little county seat, a pretty prosperous town year in and year out. If one crop sours, the people have other ranch and range income sources to fall back on.

"Good deer hunting out there, too,

and considerable trapping for fur bearers, but personally I wound up at Chism's camp in the high-walled canyon of the Colorado, fishing for yellow cat. And got myself a fifteen-pounder. Ah me, it is a hard life your hired hand leads in behalf of Western Story readers—"

We've always known that New York is a place of violent contrasts, but we think one of the most unusual sights we've so far put down in our little book took place not long ago on a trip to Montauk Point, the easternmost tip of Long Island, Land's End in these parts. We'd taken a week-end breather to see the famous surf down there and watch the departure of the fishing fleet. Montauk Point boasts of a swanky inn known as Montauk Manor. There's, too, the gay Island Club, the Yacht Club and the Surf Club, all a part of the luxury playground which has sprung up there during the last few years. But what had us bug-eyed, as we made a sharp turn around one of the high dunes which make up that part of the island, was to suddenly run smack dab into a bunch of honest-to-goodness cowhands heading toward a corral filled with Texas longhorns!

We' hat we were near the
Deep Dude Ranch, which
was st out a year ago. One
about the
ilding is
ch was
neodore
n Riders
Cuba following
the Spanish-American War.

Yes, sir, it's a far cry from the plains of Texas to Montauk Point, but it only goes to show again that this is sure an age of miracles!

In the tally book for next week:

Ross Lundy and his pards were just forty-a-month cowpunchers until they decided to pool their resources and buy themselves a piece of range. Before they knew just what was happening, they were caught up in a wildcat stampede that promised to make millionaires out of them. But the good fortune of these boom-town buckaroos was spiked with peril, and before the first gusher came in they realized they were on a juggernaut of death. **DERRICKS OF HATE**, Harry Sinclair Drago's lusty new novel, paints a vivid and unforgettable picture of the Western oil fields.

Flash! Hep Gallagher is running for sheriff! It's an election year, and Western Story's loco cowhand figures he might as well collect a few votes, too—just to add to the general confusion. Glenn H. Wichman contributes another of his welcome side-splitters—**HEP'S BALLOT ROUNDUP**.

The Rock Creek country bristled with hidden dangers when Joe Dallam and Bill Flynn entered it to prospect for a new mineral—"fire" gold. Were they on their way to making a fortune, or had they allowed themselves to be duped by the superstitions of ignorant savages? Read **DEAD MAN'S JACKPOT**, by Kenneth Gilbert.

Also in next week's big issue are stories by Wayne D. Overholser, Harry F. Olmsted and other top-hand Western authors—and don't forget that there'll be a new installment of Luke Short's dramatic range-country serial, **GUN-SMOKE GRAZE**.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED - THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!



MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH, MARY EVERYTHING LOOKS SO HOPELESS

IT ISN'T HOPELESS, BILL WHY DON'T YOU TRY RADIO. TOM GREEN IS DOING WELL. TALK TO HIM



BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT. RADIO'S STILL A YOUNG-GROWING-FIELD



TOM'S RIGHT. AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOOD PAY



TRAINING AT HOME FOR RADIO IS PRACTICAL AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST

SOON I CAN START FIXING RADIOS

THERE'S NO END TO THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WELL TRAINED TECHNICIANS

OR WORK ON LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS

OR GET A JOB IN A BROADCASTING STATION



YOU SURE KNOW RADIO. MY SET-UP'SER SOUNDED BETTER

THANKS! THAT'S 410 EXTRA I'VE MADE THIS WEEK IN SPARE TIME



OH BILL IT'S WONDERFUL YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO

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I Trained These Men

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

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HOLLIS F. HAYES
221 Madison St.
Lapeer, Michigan

Service Manager for Four Stores

I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. I am now Radio service manager for the M... Furniture Co. for their four stores.

JAMES E. RYAN
119 Pebble Court
Fall River, Mass.

\$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time

I am doing spare time Radio work, and I am averaging from \$700 to \$850 a year. These extra dollars mean so much—the difference between just barely getting by and living comfortably.

JOHN WASHKO
57 New Cranberry
Hazelton, Penna.

\$200 to \$300 a Month in Own Business

For the last two years I have been in business for myself making between \$200 and \$300 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field.

ARLIE J. PROKHNER
300 W. Texas Ave.
Goose Creek, Texas

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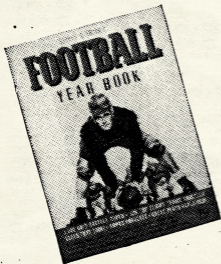
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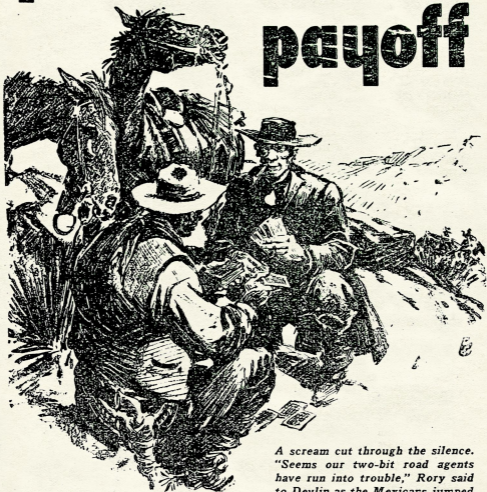
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A scream cut through the silence. "Seems our two-bit road agents have run into trouble," Rory said to Devlin as the Mexicans jumped from their horses and tore open the coach door.

BY L. L. FOREMAN

**CHAPTER I
PISTOL JACKPOT**

FROM up here on the Peloncillo slopes a man could command a generous view of the vast valleyland into which he was descending. He could take pondering note of the next mountain range to be crossed,

the Hachitas, multicolored by distance and gilt-edged by the early-morning sun, forming the eastern boundary of the valley. He could trace with his eye the winding ribbon of road that was an offshoot of the great Butterfield Trail, meandering south down the valley from Lordsburg, a hundred miles to the

north, to Eladrevo, five miles this side of the Old Mexico line. And—if the wind wasn't blowing up dust and he had keen eyes—he might even make out the clustered little dots of that Eladrevo dobe town.

The battered little Lordsburg-Eladrevo stagecoach used this road, but made the round trip only once a month, and then seldom with a heavy load. By tradition and racial instinct, most of the people of Eladrevo and the southern end of Peloncillo Valley looked south to Old Mexico as to their common homeland. Here in this remote southwest corner of the New Mexico territory, Americans of the Anglo-Saxon strain were still more or less foreigners, and Spanish blood remained strong and conservative in its racial ties.

One bold palisade on the face of a Peloncillo foothill stuck out like a blunt and jagged knife blade, and along each side of it ran the steep bend of a dry arroyo. Where the long blade of red sandstone tapered off to form its point, both arroyos converged into one channel, and here two descending horsemen met.

Both drew to a halt. Each had heard the other's progress, and each thoughtfully held one hand hidden behind the shield of his own body. For a while they took measuring stock of each other, before breaking a silence that was weighty. Their brief greetings partook of the nature of warning shots.

"Howdy."

"Howdy."

Dryness edged the flat monotone of their voices, the hard dryness of men who expected trouble from their meeting. Sharp care ambushed behind the impersonal salute of their eyes, the close and cautious care of men who were ready to handle that explosive trouble at the first sign of its rising.

THE first speaker, a dark giant of a man, sat at deceptive ease in the saddle of a splendidly proportioned horse as totally black as the rider's broad hat and knee-length coat. That coat, of black broadcloth, was cut along severely ministerial lines, and the flat-crowned hat matched it for austerity, but the broad hat brim canted at a slight angle that was casually rakish, and the face under it made a startling caricature of the somberly clerical garb.

It was an arresting face, dark and strong, stamped with the half-humorous cynicism and saturnine wisdom of many hard-lived years. It reflected a tough-fibered nature inherently masterful, lawless, predatory. The eyes alone, opaque gray and so chillingly calm as to be almost hypnotic, set their owner apart as a man of iron self-control, deadly force, and dangerous potentialities.

He regarded with some humor the man who, he knew, must have trailed him better than a hundred miles from Sixmile in Arizona, across the San Simon Desert and over the Guadalupes, here into New Mexico. Though he had made no effort to fog up his back trail, still it had been quite a job of tracking. So, while he decided just how and where he would gun the man if it became necessary, he gave credit where it was due.

"Pretty hot comin' over the San Simon, wasn't it?" he commented.

The other nodded gravely. "Pretty hot," he agreed. "I like to've cooked before I began hittin' the higher country this side."

This second horseman had youth, but he bore all the signs of seasoning years of experience. The gun belt loosely buckled around his narrow middle was well worn, slick and blackened with oil, and showed good

care. No such care showed in his clothes, which were faded and shabby, though his boots were good and his grulla horse and saddle evinced sound judgment. Lean and on the tall side, with a quiet voice and a pair of greenish blue eyes that were steady and coolly reckless, he looked capable enough to be a good lawman or a bad outlaw.

He struck bluntly into the heart of the matter that had brought him tracking the other man over a hundred miles. "When that fight in the Sixmile gamblin' house broke up our poker game, I hadn't yet looked at my hole card. We were bettin' blind, you remember. But I had a king pair and an ace showin', an' there was fourteen hundred dollars cash in the jackpot."

"Fourteen hundred and twenty," corrected the somber-garbed horseman.

"All right. Now, I'll admit you didn't start the fight," conceded the younger man. "Those three jayhawkers tried to pull a fake row among themselves an' gun you in the back. I guess they had their own private reasons for that."

"Well, they thought so."

"Yeah. They got what they needed, quick an' sudden, I grant that. An' I grant shootin' out the lights was a handy finish, after that sheriff began squallin' for help. But scoopin' up that jackpot on your way out in the dark— I don't grant that! All you had was two queens—"

"And another in the hole," stated the big man reminiscently.

"How'd you know?" came the swift challenge. "We were bettin' blind on our hole cards."

The big man drew out a long and villainously black cigar, eyed it critically, and bit on the end. "I was dealin'!"

BY silent agreement they rode on together, slowly dropping down into the great valley, discussing the matter with grave politeness. Each assured the other that he wanted to be reasonable and fair, and each kept that hidden hand scrupulously shielded from the other's sight. Neither one displayed any desire to ride ahead of the other, and they kept their voices to a level pitch.

It was not an argument. Rather, it was a debate, and law-court rules of procedure and courtesy took shame by comparison. The younger man raised some interesting points, but the big man had the fourteen hundred dollars and finally explained with devastating logic and brevity why he was going to hang on to it.

"You just weren't quick enough to grab, and I was, and the game's finished. Besides, I'm headed for Juarez and I need the money."

They drew to a halt again. "I guess we've talked enough," observed the younger man. He spoke with a flat note that indicated finality and the coming of a change in events.

"I'd say so," agreed the other. "By the way, if you've got a gun in that offhand—and I think you have—you better tuck it back where it belongs. Keep in mind those three jayhawkers back at Sixmile!"

"I could've shaded 'em as handy as you did." The statement was not a boast, but given as a simple fact.

"Could?" The big man cocked an interested eyebrow. "What's your name?" His interest was purely professional.

"O'Burrishoole."

"Hm-m-m. That's quite a bit o' name to lug around. Are you the Rory O'Burrishoole who raised hell in that Nevada sheep war, couple years ago? Well, well. Mine's Dev-

lin. Er . . . don't forget what I said about that gun!"

Rory O'Burrischoole, war hand and wanderer, gazed pensively down into the valley. After a while he moved his arm slightly. His hidden hand, now empty, came out to rest on his saddlehorn. "I guess maybe I didn't have much of a blind hole card, at that," he granted. "Not with you dealin'!"

He grinned wryly. "If I'd known it was Preacher Devlin I was sittin' down with, I'd have stayed standin' at the bar! An' if I didn't know—an' found out before I started—"

"Gettin' a little tongue-tangled, there, aren't you?" Devlin inquired. "You don't need that name to let folks know you're Irish. All you need do is open your mouth."

Rory O'Burrischoole nodded without resentment. "What I mean is, I could've saved myself this damned journey. It wasn't so much the money that got me goin'. It was . . . well—"

"The principle of the thing," Devlin finished for him. "Sure, that's understandable. I'm all cluttered up with principles, too—where there's cash concerned."

"So I've heard," affirmed Rory, with irony. The things a man was apt to hear about the notorious Preacher Devlin were not conducive to trustful faith in his scruples. Gun master and gambler, rider of the dark trails and wrecker of laws, the lurid reputation of Preacher Devlin leaned heavily to the side of Machiavellian finesse and wickedly eruptive violence.

"So you trailed me all the way from Sixmile, just on principle," mused Devlin. "If I'd known you were behind me I'd have let you catch up sooner. Now, I'm a fair-minded man—"

"I've heard that, too," put in Rory.

"—and I'll give you another chance at the jackpot," ended Devlin, and drew out a deck of cards.

It was a fair offer designed to eliminate further debate, and Rory acknowledged it as such, adding that he would prefer to deal if Devlin didn't object. They got off their horses, and squatted comfortably on their heels with the ground between them for a table.

"Three rounds o' draw poker, best two wins the jackpot," said Devlin.

DOWN the valley from the north moved a column of dust, snailing along the lonely road, and they heard the steady rumble of wheels and hoofs in the still air. "The stage," Rory commented, with a glance that way, and closely scanned the backs of the cards as he shuffled. He dealt carefully, and palmed the deck while he briefly sized up his hand.

A shot cracked down in the valley, sharp and dry, the rattling echoes of it quickly dying away, and a voice hailed a command. Brake shoes squealed thinly, and the steady rumble of wheels ceased.

"Holdup," remarked Devlin absently, his chilly eyes criticizing his cards.

"By heck, that's what it is, all right!" Rory confirmed, with a look down at the stalled stage. "Four hombres just rid out to it."

Devlin made his decision, as between keeping a pair of jacks or trying to fill a flush. "Oh, well—live an' let live. Give me one card."

Rory flipped out the requested card, and gave himself three. "I wouldn't have thought a dinky stage outfit like that would be carryin' enough to make it worthwhile for four—"

"Pretty cheap," agreed Devlin, and flipped the card back again without looking to see what it was. "I like my cards from the top o' the deck, if you don't mind. Just a whim o' mine. Thanks, that's better. What you got?"

"Ace pair."

"First blood's to me, then. I filled my flush." He spread it out, and sat back on his heels. "Deal 'em again, you're doin' all right."

Rory grinned philosophically, thumbing out the next deal. "An' some folks call this a game o' chance! Say, what's busted loose down there, anyway?" He halted the deal to look. "Well, seems like our two-bit road agents have run into trouble, don't it?"

"So's the driver," nodded Devlin. "Somebody just shot him. He's screamin' like— Say, that's no man's scream!"

A murderous fight was raging around the halted stage. The four road agents had barely got down to business, when a second party of riders had suddenly appeared. The second party, numbering a dozen or more, was made up of Mexicans, and they charged in like a cavalry troop. One road agent lay on his back, another dodged about behind the plunging horses with a rifle, and the other two were spurring into the brush lining the hilly side of the trail.

"Finish the deal," said Devlin, and Rory finished it, though preoccupied by the wild scene below.

A knot of the Mexican riders swept around the spooked team, guns thudding, and the trapped road agent there fell like a rag before them. They jumped from their horses, tore open the side doors of the coach, and the screaming sounded clearer. One of the marauders backed out hurriedly, hands

clasping his face, but others shoved in past him. They hauled and claved at somebody inside, and just then the pair of road agents in the brush took to sharpshooting. Even that didn't stop them, though one of them slid on his face against the step and to the ground.

Somebody was being dragged out of the coach, fighting and screaming like a wild cat, and it was a woman; that was evident. It became more than evident when they dragged her out and rushed her to a horse.

"That," vowed Rory, rising, "is goin' too damn far!"

"Yeah." Devlin studied his cards. "Hold your hurry, we still got time to finish this hand."

"The devil with it!" Rory was grabbing the reins of his grulla. "I'm goin' right now!"

Devlin creased his dark brows, a trifle irritated at such a distorted sense of values. It was probably just some little Mexican dance-hall coquette, being fought over by a couple of inflamed rivals and their backers. To break up a poker game for such an unimportant reason, when a minute more or less didn't make any great difference, was downright frivolous. Besides, he held two pairs.

"That's the trouble with the Irish—too damn impetuous," he growled, and stepped to his black saddler. "All right, then, let's get down there!"

CHAPTER II

STAGECOACH CAVALIERS

THEY hit the trail well below the spot where the stage had halted, but a curve and a hill hid it from their view. Firing still went on, but it sounded more like a hot pursuit in the brush than a stand-up fight. The two remaining road agents were hard

pressed and had their hands full, trying to beat off the Mexicans who had taken to the brush after them.

Around the curve swung a small and closely packed knot of riders, five of them wearing tall ant-hill sombreros, and the sixth hatless and struggling in their midst. They jerked to a rearing and tangled halt at sight of the two horsemen loping up to meet them, and three carbines promptly spat smoky welcome.

Devlin dropped his reins, gripped harder with his legs, as his hands whipped under the long black coat. He flipped out a pair of long-barreled guns, and Rory made his draw in the same instant.

"Bet you the jackpot I get three to your two, Irish!"

"I'll take that bet, Preacher!"

"Look out you don't hit the girl."

"You tend to your own shootin'!"

The black ran smoothly, and so did the grulla, rising and falling rhythmically at the free gait. Devlin, riding with a close seat, his long legs hanging straight down, whipped off his first shot as he rose with the easy lift of the black. Rory's gun hammered once beside him. A halted rider bowed over the neck of his nervously dancing horse. Another, in the act of dismounting with a sawed-off Indian rifle, caught his foot in the stirrup, and his head was the first part of him to hit the ground.

They fired again, drawing apart as they charged nearer, and Devlin gave Rory credit for not wasting shells in a pinch. But this time they both picked the same man, attracted by the bright yellow of his shirt and the fact that he was reaching out for the girl, who was kicking her horse and trying to break away. The owner of the yellow shirt capsized as if overreaching his balance, and the girl took that moment to slide nim-

bly from her rearing horse, gather up her flowing skirts in both hands, and run.

The girl could run—no question about that. Light and fast on her toes. Her small feet and trim ankles flashed like drumsticks beating out a rapid tattoo, and she fairly sailed over the ground, hair flying and the flounces of her dress billowing out behind her. There was some scattered cholla hereabouts, and plenty of rough tufa rock, but that didn't slow her down much when she quit the beaten road and took off across country.

The two remaining Mexicans started after her, but changed course when Rory left the road to head them off, and circled back over the hill, chopping shots at him. Devlin kept to the road, leaving Rory to catch the girl and pick her up. He could hear the stagecoach coming at a furious clip, and he rode to meet it, ready to dispute possession of it with anyone who might have preconceived notions about the matter. It was no part of his nature to leave a job done halfway, once he got started at it, and Rory would have his hands full with that girl. Judging from all appearances, she was in no mood to be caught again by anybody without considerable dissension on her part.

OVER the trail's rise loomed the stage, no driver on the box, and the four-horse team clattering along with heads and tails up. The scared animals were in full bolt, their fears in no way dispelled by a recklessly riding Mexican who raced close alongside the leaders, trying to crowd the whole outfit off the trail and wreck it for a halt. Behind came more riders, strung out and all shouting. Their shouts increased when they saw the big, somber-garbed

gringo barring the trail, a gun in each fist, but the rider was too intent on his task of wrecking to take notice.

Devlin slung one shot, and the rider spilled out of his saddle as if jerked off by a rope. The team came plunging on, the battered old Concord coach lurching and careening over the bumps, and Devlin reined his black around in a tight turn. He let the team pass, rode alongside the coach long enough to slide his rifle from its saddle scabbard and toss it on the roof, and caught hold of the swinging side door. With a heave he left the saddle and clambered onto the coach, letting the black canter free.

The stage driver, true to his job, had tied his lines around the brake handle when he was halted. Devlin pulled them loose, braced one boot against the brake, and threw his weight on the lines. A bullet from the rear whispered viciously by his hat, and another whanged off the hand rail. The team lost headway, jibbing and flinching from the sawing lines, but before they finally decided to quit, Devlin rapidly tied up again and reached back for his rifle. The pursuing horsemen were getting altogether too close.

Devlin stretched out on the roof, the heavy repeater to his shoulder, and at once the pursuers showed a disposition to fan out and make it a bushwhacking skirmish. Devlin didn't give them time to carry out their plan. The rifle whammed angrily, one screaming shot after another. When it ran empty and he changed back to his pair of pistols, there wasn't much left to do with them but hasten the flight of the remnant pursuers.

He slid the guns away, returned to the box, and dragged the team to its

final standstill. Then he looked around for Rory O'Burrishoole, and when he saw him he grinned.

RORY was having a time of it with the girl. He had caught her and picked her up onto his saddle, but holding her there was a different matter. She was fighting him tooth, nail and feet. Her desperate ferocity, Devlin considered—from his comfortable viewpoint of an interested onlooker—was not only remarkably energetic and ravaging, but understandable, though founded upon error. She had just gone through an alarming experience. She had been the object of a holdup, been kidnaped and mauled by a second bunch of desperadoes, and now chased and caught by a third party. Obviously, her trust in the motives of tough-looking strangers in this section was pretty badly shattered, and she saw no reason for changing her mind about it.

Rory, the grulla and the girl, all three in a sort of tangle, moved in the general direction of the coach. Even the grulla seemed alarmed, and in disgust at last bucked off both struggling encumbrances and walked to the better company of Devlin's black. The black rolled a wicked eye at him, the grulla shied off, and both went on grazing with a fine show of unconcern.

Rory bounded up, caught the girl again as she tried to dart away, and yelled for help. "Devlin—for the love o' Lucy—c'mere an' tell this girl I'm a decent man! She's wreckin' me!"

Devlin, with no illusions about his looks, didn't consider himself the most suitable man in the world to dispel with soft words the fright of a frantic girl. But he dropped off the coach and walked over. The

girl, he saw, was no tricky little dance-hall piece, and if she had any Mexican in her she didn't show it. She was dark-haired, but her blazing eyes were a deep blue, and her skin was fair. Right now her hair was in a tumbled mess, and her color was high and flaming.

"Cool off, the pair of you," counseled Devlin, and paused by them. "Girl, if you've got half the sense you look to have—"

That was as far as he got. A small white hand flashed at his grim and forbidding face, and he barely managed to dodge it. He moved in swiftly, got behind the girl, and his fingers snapped around her arms. "Why, you durn little spitfire!"

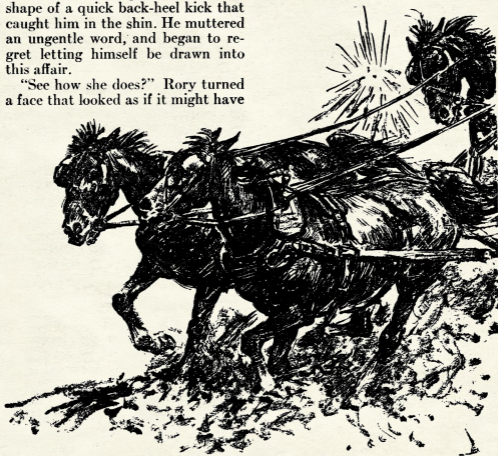
The next interruption came in the shape of a quick back-heel kick that caught him in the shin. He muttered an ungentle word, and began to regret letting himself be drawn into this affair.

"See how she does?" Rory turned a face that looked as if it might have

been dragged through cactus. "She just won't listen to— Oof!" He got a kick in the knee.

"Ought've let the Mex bunch take her. Would've served 'em right!" grunted Devlin. "Take hold of her legs. Yes, I said her legs. Well, her feet then, blast your Irish modesty! That's better. Stay with 'em!"

He shook the girl. "Now, listen to me, an' quit tryin' to butt me in the chest with the back o' your head. It'll hurt you more'n it will me if I let you do it. I'll give you ten seconds to cool off, then I'm goin' to rope you if you don't begin behavin' like a lady. An' I'm takin' a lot for granted when I assume you know



how to behave like one! You look like a dance-hall trick on a wild night, with your hair like that!"

THE girl found her voice. "Why . . . why— Oh, you— You're no gentleman!"

"That makes it unanimous; nobody else thinks so, either," said Devlin. With some misgivings he released her arms. Immediately, her

small hands busied themselves in fussing hastily with her tumbled hair, and he breathed easier.

"For some foolish reason which I haven't yet figured out," he went on, "we busted in an' saved you from that bunch. Believe me, we've got no ideas about carryin' you off to our lair or anything o' that kind. Person'ly, I look forward to bein' well shed o' you! An' that Irish



Devlin lunged for the runaway stage, but the pursuing riders closed in with guns roaring to cut him down.

relic holdin' your feet prob'ly feels the same way, only more so. Look what you did to him!"

Rory let go of her feet and rose warily. He was regarding her as if he thought he recognized something about her and hoped he was right.

"She . . . uh . . . didn't do any great harm," he mumbled.

The girl stopped fussing with her hair and gazed at them, first dubiously, then in shocked dismay. She was small and dainty in build, and the dark hair and deep-blue eyes made an engaging contrast. Her mouth was soft with youth, her short nose turned up a little, her chin was firm and rounded, and she looked as if she might laugh a good deal under normal conditions.

"Oh . . . I'm sorry!" she stammered, and then she wasn't a spit-fire any more. "I'm terribly sorry." She had a low and musical voice, with an accent pleasing to the ear.

"What's your name an' where are you from?" Devlin demanded.

"Moira Mullarky. I'm from Ireland."

Rory O'Burrishoole opened his mouth in a wide grin. "Blazes, I knew you must be Irish!" he cried. "My name's O'Burrishoole—Rory Fitzpatrick O'Burrishoole."

Moira Mullarky smiled a dazzling smile. "Well, now!"

"My father came from Ireland," added Rory.

"Well, now!"

"From Kinalmeaky . . . County Cork."

"Well, now! And I'm from Kinsale, not ten miles from it," cried Moira Mullarky.

"Well, now!" said Rory Fitzpatrick O'Burrishoole.

Devlin turned away, faintly revolted at such unintelligent conversation.

THEY drifted after him to the coach, continuing their mutually pleasant discussion. The girl had altogether forgotten her fright, and Rory seemed oblivious of his marred face. By the time they reached the coach they were attempting to trace a possible relationship, and were already digging into grave dust for mutual great-grand-aunts-in-law.

"Climb in," said Devlin, brutally breaking into their tête-à-tête. He sat on the driver's box, the black tied behind at the boot. "Say, Irish, haven't you mislaid somethin'? Hey, I'm talkin' to you!"

Rory poked his head out of the coach and looked up at him. "Eh?"

"You've forgot somethin'."

"What?"

"Your horse, you poor Kilkenny loon!"

"Oh!" Rory climbed back out of the coach, red to his hair, and Devlin whipped up the team.

Rory caught up on his grulla and rode close to the coach, talking with the girl, who leaned out of the door window. Devlin had the feeling that he was driving some kind of near-honeymoon chariot. It was something new in his stormy and checkered career, and he wasn't sure he cared much for it.

"If you're not too busy," Devlin called down dryly, "ask her what's the reason two mobs should try to grab hold of her."

Moira herself answered, and said brightly that she knew no special reason—but sure didn't such terrible things happen every day in this wild country of America? She had heard about the savage red men, she said, who cut off your hair and left you without any. Some of those men back there had been sort of reddish dark-complected, so she knew they were red men, and wor-

ried to her heart she'd been about her hair.

Devlin gravely met Rory's glance. "Such nice hair, too," remarked Rory, and Devlin took a fresh grip on his cigar.

"Where are you travelin' to, an' why?" Devlin queried presently.

"To a town called Eladrevo," answered Moira. "I'm going to see a Spanish lawyer there named Don Huitado. It has to do with some sort of family business, and he wrote and said it may mean a great deal to me, so that's why I came."

"Alone?"

Yes, she had come alone, she said, to be sure, for there hadn't been money enough to bring Aunt Norah. That is, she called her Aunt Norah, though she was no blood kin at all, but a mother couldn't be better, bless her sweet soul. "I'm an orphan, you see," she more or less elucidated, "and I've no kin living at all—though there must be some in Spain or somewhere. Only they wouldn't be named Mullarky."

Devlin gave up. The international complications and totally illogical reasons for everything connected with this girl were getting too involved. She had candid eyes and an engagingly frank way of saying nothing sensible, but she was either a girl of tangled mystery or a pretty idiot.

CHAPTER III

THE BUFFALO HORN

THE stagecoach rolled into Eladrevo, throwing up dust behind it, and citizens stared at the big flinty-faced stranger on the box. Eladrevo's architecture was mostly of dobe brick, and the layout of the town strongly suggested Spanish origin. Big timber was scarce down here, while dobe cost nothing but labor. Narrow streets ran every way from

the central plaza, and most of the houses were flat-roofed, with thick walls and small windows.

But the plaza flaunted an Anglo-Saxon influence, in the shape of a timber building with a high false front, large front windows, and the final civilizing touch of a new pair of batwing doors. Devlin drew the coach up before the doors, tied the lines, and climbed down. A freshly painted sign proclaimed the building to be the Old Glory Hotel and Saloon—American patronage invited—but Devlin first sought quarters for his horse.

Several men lurking in dark doorways peered at him with hard interest, he noticed, and a Mexican across the plaza took a horse from a hitching rack and rode off in something of a hurry. The stables and corral of the Old Glory were in the rear of the building, and Devlin headed that way, leading his black and Rory's grulla.

A hidden rifle spat spitefully somewhere, and the Mexican rider ducked, his sombrero suddenly cocked over. He gestured defiantly and swung off into a crooked side street, bent low and raking his horse with his spurs.

Devlin paused, while a thick and sullen silence settled over the town, broken only by the fast retreating beat of the hoofs. The peering eyes of the lurking watchers flickered to the side street and returned to bear upon him. He went on to the hotel stables, his mood sharp and reflective. The glowering hostility of this mixed Spanish-American town dug at the senses, definite and tangible as a naked blade. There were turgid undercurrents of crime and violence here, and the sharpshooting affray in the streets left no ripple on the still and brooding surface of life.

When Devlin returned after putting up the horses, he found Rory engaged in argument and Moira warmly backing him up. They stood on the boardwalk beside the coach, facing a group of the men who had watched Devlin. One, a long-jawed man wearing a star, put all the questions.

"Where'd it happen an' what did they look like?"

"About four miles up the road—" began Rory.

"They were red men, some of them!" put in Moira helpfully.

The sheriff looked down his nose at her. "Likely story! Where's Kansas Billy, the driver?"

"Dead," said Rory, his chin beginning to jut out, "as well as some others. You ought to be callin' a posse together right away, if that tin badge you're wearin' means anything!"

The sheriff bristled. "I reckon I'll put you under arrest till I check up on—"

"I reckon," countered Devlin, coming up behind him, "you might do better to put yourself on a horse an' go tend to business!"

The lawman spun around at the harsh growl, and the group grew very still, staring with alert gaze at the tall, dour-eyed gun fighter. An inquisitive bartender squinted out over the batwing doors, took one all-embracing look, and abruptly withdrew. The hush lasted until Devlin spoke again.

"S'long, sheriff!"

The simple farewell could have held either of two meanings, one harmless, the other sinister. Devlin stood with his arms hanging, the long-fingered hands extended a trifle, and his ministerial coat open. His opaque gray eyes had taken on an oblique slant, and they shone with the pale, saturnine humor of the

master gunman contemplating one more victim. He was recognized here, he knew. The recognition had lurked in the long glances of the watching men, and now it widened the sheriff's stare. There were too many dodgers scattered through the country for him to go unknown, and too many men with an abiding thirst for his bounty.

The sheriff tried to save his face. "I'll . . . uh . . . talk to you fellers later," he promised, a little tight around the mouth. He moved off, and the group silently followed his lead. One of the men swung up onto the coach, pulled loose the lines, and prepared to drive off. He did it casually, as if it was his job to do it, and he was going to run the coach and team over to the stage office.

"Wait! My trunk!" called out Moira.

The man ignored her, and swung the long bight of the lines to whip up the team. Rory leaped up beside him, snatched at the lines, and shoved a balled fist within an inch of the man's face.

"I'm just gettin' mad enough to bust somebody," he rasped, "an' it looks like you're—"

The quick and solid roar of a shot cut him off and set the horses stamping. The sheriff's group had paused and turned, on the alert to seize the advantage of an inattentive moment. One of the group, a bright-eyed stripling with buck teeth, took a chance and whirled into a doorway, slashing out his gun. Devlin's draw and shot had caught him just before he made cover. The gun master turned his stony stare from him and sent it drifting over the group.

BRIGHT EYES dropped his gun, looking painfully white, and sank down tiredly on the doorstep, holding his shoulder. "My mistake,

Preacher!" he mumbled, and just then Rory knocked his man off the coach. Moira had to side step to avoid a flying leg.

The sheriff's men stood motionless, each caught short in his attitude of halted action, most of them with hands poised readily over low-slung holsters. Their strained regard rested on Devlin's pair of heavy pistols, which now pointed skyward, mutely inviting them to follow the rash example of the buck-toothed stripling. Up on the coach, Rory executed a speedy cross-draw and gestured for Moira to make herself missing. But the girl stooped over the man who lay knocked senseless on the boardwalk and neatly filched his gun.

Again the sheriff set the cue by swinging on his heel and making off, muttering something about tending to this affair later. The group slowly broke up, and the wounded youth stumbled after them.

Moira threw up the leather apron of the coach boot, and tugged at her trunk. Rory jumped down and helped her, while Devlin closely scanned a gathering of Mexicans across the plaza, searching them for combative prospects. From all signs, this country appeared to be split wide open by two warring factions—Mexicans on the one side, and gringos on the other—and for some hidden reason the girl was a bone of contention between the two.

They entered the hotel by the side door. It led into a short hall that ran past the barroom to the foot of a staircase. Devlin looked in on the barroom. It was empty except for the bartender, a stout man with a red and perspiring face, who evidenced an uneasy state of mind by sidling toward a backbar door.

"Hey, pull up there!" Devlin called curtly. "We want rooms."

"Ain't got none," gulped the fat man. "All took."

Devlin glanced at the keyboard behind the bar. "You're a liar," he said calmly. "Hand over three o' those keys."

The bartender swallowed. "Listen, gents, I dassen't—" His voice trailed off helplessly as Devlin stalked around the end of the bar and helped himself to three tagged keys.

The rooms were cramped, but fairly clean and furnished with washstands. Rory, washed and half shaved, his face still wet, burst into Devlin's corner room and found the long rider carefully cleaning his guns.

"A mob's gatherin' all round the back an' in the side alleys, Devlin!" he announced grimly. "It's that sheriff's bunch, only more of 'em. What the hell d'you make of it?"

Devlin dropped a spot of oil into each cylinder. He spun the cylinders, snapped them shut, and tested the actions. "Take a look out that front window."

RORY looked, and whistled softly. Across the plaza, facing the hotel, massed a crowd of swarthy men who could have stepped from the renegade ranks of any rebel general's army. All were ponderously armed, and none exhibited the dull docility of poverty-crushed peons. They were fighters, and the sharp-edged quality of them showed in their bold black eyes. The stagecoach had been driven off, and no women or unarmed citizens could be seen anywhere.

"Saints alive!" breathed Rory. "What brand o' devil's delight have we sashayed into?"

"Better not stay too long at that window," Devlin advised. "Might be a temptation—"

The crack of an exploding cartridge and the shattered dissolution of the window came almost simultaneously. Rory leaped aside and swore. Devlin glanced up at him.

"That's what I meant," he murmured, and reloaded his oiled guns, examining and tenderly wiping each stubby shell.

Moira came running in. She stopped, gazed at the broken window, and then at the two men. "Mercy me, such a place!" she exclaimed, and stepped toward the window. "What are all those men—"

Rory caught her promptly and pulled her back.

"But what does it mean, all those men out there?" she insisted.

"It means," drawled Devlin, "that you've got more men interested in you than any girl has a right to expect!" He shoved the washstand over the floor and jammed it against the window. "A fine howd'ye-do this. Looks like the whole town an' half the territory's on our necks, an' all we did was— Who's that?"

A diffident rapping sounded on the door. At Devlin's bark the door opened part way and a head appeared. It was a bald and bony head, with a thin face and a humped nose that was too large for it. Cavernous black eyes blinked annoyedly behind a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Gentlemen, may I ask that you make less noise?" said the gargoyle testily. "I reside and have my office in the next room, and your abominable noise is very distracting. The making of unnecessary noise, gentlemen, is the mark of an inferior intelligence. I detest it! To me it gives nothing less than excruciating pain, and it is the trial of my life that I must—"

"C'mon in," Devlin invited, and yanked him in without further ado.

"Maybe you can tell us what's loose around here?"

But the next-door neighbor was too taken up with his grievance to be side-tracked into anything less important. He was a skinny little man, old and cantankerous, dressed in rusty black serge, and he was obviously an educated Spaniard of indoor tastes. His bleached skin bespoke a rare acquaintance with sunshine.

He went on in his precise, academic way, absently straightening his shiny coat, but otherwise ignoring Devlin's high-handed kidnaping of him. "It is the trial of my life that I must be constantly affronted by hideous noises, and I was born with the curse of superacute hearing. The slightest sound, particularly a discordant sound—"

"All right, Noisy, we believe you," interrupted Devlin, whose harsh voice was anything but melodious. "Now answer my question."

The little man winced and eyed the big gun fighter without liking. "My name, sir, is Don Ambrosio Huitado!"

"Do say!" ejaculated Rory. "Moira, isn't that the name of the gent you came to see?"

"Why, to be sure!" Moira curtseyed formally and charmingly to the old gentleman. "Mr. Huitado, I'm Moira Mullarky."

DON AMBROSIO HUITADO cocked his bony head as if savoring something with the hypercritical discrimination of a connoisseur. "A pleasant voice—yes, definitely pleasant," he gave his verdict. "Clearly articulate, but modulated. It does not offend the ear. Accept my congratulations, Miss . . . er . . . eh? Mullarky?"

He pronounced it "Moo-yarky." He stared blankly at the girl. "Good

heavens, this is terrible . . . terrible! Did you not receive my last letter? I warned you in it not to come. Ah, what a pity! What a terrible, terrible pity!"

Rory planted himself in front of the distressed old lawyer. "What's pitiful about it?" he demanded.

Don Ambrosio spread his shaking, blue-veined old hands. "I have brought her to disaster!" he replied hushedly. "She has no chance . . . no chance at all!" He clucked his tongue in mournful sorrow. "Such a pleasing voice, too!"

He turned back to Moira, who was gazing at him in bewilderment. "The carved buffalo horn—have you it with you?"

"Yes, it's in my trunk. I'll go and get it."

She left, and ten seconds later her scream sent Rory leaping out after her. But Devlin went and took another look into the plaza. The Mexicans had spread out. Devlin spied out the other window, down into the side alley. Other men lurked there—gringos, these, partly screened behind the high sides of an empty Mexican cart that the blacksmith next door had evidently been repairing.

Devlin scowled, and wished himself well out of here. To be hemmed in tight by one gun mob was bad enough, but two mobs were plenty too much. He began to feel like a stag at bay on a hill, surrounded by two hungry wolf packs. Besides, he saw no stakes for himself in the mad and menacing enigma, and that irritated his practical mind.

Some sort of commotion sounded along the hallway outside the room, followed by the whirlwind clatter of a body descending the stairs in a rush. Moira and Rory came back in, Moira flushed, and Rory licking a skinned knuckle.

"It was that bartender," Rory divulged shortly. "The fat thief was pawin' into her trunk."

Moira opened an oblong-shaped leather box that she was carrying. She drew from it an old buffalo powder horn, a carved and polished thing with a silver ball on the point. The carving was in the form of a coat-of-arms, elegantly executed. It was plugged at the thick end with a black substance that bore several impressions of a small seal, stamped into it long ago while warm and unhardened.

She held it out. "Here it is, Mr. Huitado."

The aged Spaniard jerked away as if he thought she intended to gore him with it. "No, no!" he stuttered, and began backing out. "I . . . I refuse to accept it! Young lady, take my advice; throw that thing out the window and let those who seek it kill each other for it!"

CHAPTER IV

MASTER OF LA ESTRELLA

DEVLIN reached out a long arm and pushed the Spaniard into a chair. "Take it easy, Ambrose. What's so spooky about an old powder horn? S'pose you tell us, h'm?" He bent over and sank his voice to a growl. "Talk up or I'll squall in your supersensitive ear!"

Don Ambrosio flinched at the threat. "Barbarian!" he muttered. "Dissonant-voiced ruffian! Very well, I'll tell you." He pointed at the horn. "A hundred men would willingly kill you for that! Two men, I happen to know, would pay a very high price for it. On the possession of that thing rests the fate and ownership of . . . of a minor kingdom! Yes, a kingdom!"

"Where's the kingdom?" queried Devlin, and eyed the old powder

horn with a totally new interest. Maybe this bullet-splashed game didn't lack high stakes, after all.

Don Ambrosio gestured about him. "Here. This corner of New Mexico. All this Peloncillo Valley, from the Mexican boundary almost up to Lordsburg. It is an old Spanish grant. You have heard, I presume, of the old Spanish land grants?"

Devlin nodded. He knew about them, of course. For years many of them had been the subjects of bitter dispute and litigation. During Spain's royal reign over what it considered the Spanish province of New Mexico, huge land grants had been carelessly conferred upon various favorites of the crown. The sprawling realm of New Mexico, then embracing most of the Southwest, had become a land of great haciendas and mammoth ranchos, of incredible wealth and equally incredible poverty, where the haughty Spanish hacendados ruled as potentates and the Indian peons worked as serfs.

It was the last stronghold of the ancient feudal system, faulty and tyrannical, but magnificently splendid in its wealth and proportions. Cattle and sheep were counted by the tens of thousands. Landowners seldom saw the full extent of their land grants, nor knew the exact location of their boundaries, nor cared. Sometimes the grants overlapped each other, but what did a few miles of range and mountain matter, when a man owned a million acres? Here in the New World lived and arrogantly thrived a blood-proud autocracy of Castilian cavaliers, and all the imperial tradition of Old Spain.

Mexico, after its break with Spain, had been too occupied with internal war and border strife to make any

change in the situation. But after the Mexican War and the thrust of Western democracy into the land, the old order began crumbling. It crumbled, but its reverberations could still be heard here and there where Spanish grantees fought to retain their hold. Law courts had been set up to rule upon the claims. Wherever a grant holder could prove with reasonably legal documentation his right to his land grant, it was ceded to him. When he failed to produce such proof, the land was declared open for settlement by homesteaders.

THIS is the Velasco Grant," Don Ambrosio went on. "It was originally conferred by the Spanish crown, nearly two hundred years ago, upon a blood relative of Viceroy Luis de Velasco. The last Velasco to own it was Don Gregorio, who died two years ago at the age of ninety-three. Unfortunately, Don Gregorio left no children, and I have been engaged since his death in attempting to trace his next of kin. I am, perhaps, the greatest living student of the famous Velasco family," he added with a certain show of pride.

"Undoubtedly," Devlin assured him politely. "Go on. Who's offering the cash reward for that old buffalo horn?"

But the old attorney was not to be hurried. "I shall come to that," he answered. "Now, it so happens that a short time ago a certain man appeared from the south with a large force of armed Mexican ruffians, took possession of the Velasco hacienda—which is named La Estrella—and laid claim to the grant. He claims to be a direct descendant of Bartolomeo de Velasco, the original grantee, and calls himself Don Ricardo de Velasco."



The Preacher felt the glowering hostility of the town, sharp as a naked blade, and realized he had ridden straight into a baited trap.

"Don—what? Ricardo, did you say?" Devlin's eyes narrowed.

Huitado nodded. "You know him?"

"No, I reckon not," Devlin muttered slowly. "I know a certain Don Ricardo, but it'd hardly be the same rascal. Can he prove his claim?"

"In a sense, yes," admitted the Spaniard. "The courts believe him, and they have given him one year in which to produce proof of grant." He waved a skinny finger. "But he is no true Velasco! No well-born Velasco would have such outrageously insolent and noisy followers!

Also, he is thought to be a cattle thief. He has overrun the range with thousands of many-branded Mexican cattle."

"Sure sounds like my Don Ricardo!" observed Devlin. "If it is, he's playing for mighty big stakes this-time. But he never was a piker, I'll say that for him. Can you break his claim in court?"

"I could have done so easily a short time ago," declared Don Ambrosio. "But not now. Nor would I dare make a move to try!" He pointed at Moira. "There is the real and legal owner of La Estrella and the Velasco Grant!"

THEY stared at him, disregarding sounds of movement outside in the tension-filled plaza. Rory was first to speak. "She's no Spanish girl!" he blurted. "Hell, she's as Irish as I am, an' more!"

Moira looked guilty. "I'm afraid you're wrong," she confessed. "My grandfather's father-in-law, or somebody like that, was Spanish."

"It was your great-grandfather, on the distaff side of your lineage," Don Ambrosio corrected her, "and he was the son of Bartolomeo de Velasco. At that time, Spain had established overseas trade with Ireland, and Kinsale was the chief port. Don Bartolomeo's son engaged in it, and he eventually married an Irish lady and settled in Kinsale, where he died. I need not go into the many details which I have traced and uncovered in my research, but I can state positively that you are the only living descendant of that union, and therefore your title to the Velasco estate is clear!"

"What's the buffalo horn got to do with it?" Devlin asked.

"Everything!" exclaimed the lawyer. "Don Bartolomeo, according to his own diary, kept the original

Spanish royal deed of grant in his powder horn. He packed it in melted wax to preserve it from mildew, plugged up the end of the horn with black rosin, and sealed it with his signet ring. After his death, many of his personal belongings, including the horn, were sent to his son in Ireland. The son died a short time later, and nothing was heard from his widow, so the estate passed to a distant Velasco relative. You can see that is the same horn, by the Velasco crest and the seal of Don Bartolomeo's signet ring."

Devlin took the horn from Moira and examined it. He struck a match and held it to the plugged end. There was a quick sputter of flame, and he had some little trouble in smothering it out.

"That's rosin, all right," he murmured, sucking a burned finger. "Yeah, your Don Ricardo upstart naturally would crave the grant deed, so he could cinch his claim in the courts. But you said there are two hombres bidding for it. Who's the other?"

The Spaniard motioned toward the rear. "He is the one who has brought in all those gringo gunmen. His name is Quentin Falk. What his interest in the matter is, I do not know. I had hoped to keep everything secret until Miss Moo-yarky and I could appear safely before the court and establish her claim. That is why I sent for her to come, without divulging very much to her in my letters. But my clerk got drunk downstairs one night, and told all he knew. I sent another letter at once to Miss Moo-yarky, warning her not to come."

"The letter was likely stolen before it got to Lordsburg," Devlin remarked.

Huitado nodded. "Very probably. All the proof that I worked to gather

—old birth and death records, wills, and Don Bartolomeo's private diary—was likewise stolen. A band of masked men held me up in my office one night and took it. They were some of those gringo gunmen of Falk's, I am certain."

"So that's why two mobs fought over the stage, eh?" Rory muttered. "Both were out to grab Moira and the horn. Why, the dirty—"

He paused, catching Devlin's deeply speculative stare. "Some hombres," he said meaningly, "would do anything for cash!" He snatched the horn, dropped it back into its leather box, and slammed the lid shut. "I'll shoot it out with any man who makes a grab for that, no odds who he is!"

DEVLIN grinned faintly and turned to the windows, aware of a heavy hush outside. The scene had changed some out there. The two heavily armed factions no longer gave all their attention to the Old Glory. The Mexicans were watching the gringos grouped behind the cart in the alley, and the gringos narrowly eyed a lone Mexican who paced his deliberate way across the plaza, coming toward the saloon.

He was slim and dapper, this lone Mexican, dressed in the expensively fine charro garb of tight-fitting pants, frogged jacket, and embroidered sombrero of rich plush. Most Mexicans this far north showed the gringo influence of blue jeans and cotton shirts, but not this one. Here was a *muy grande caballero* who dressed the part with flair and studied effect. The white bone handles of a pair of holstered guns nodded and winked at his thighs as he sauntered jauntily on his way.

Devlin bit clean through his cigar. His deep-set eyes took on their oblique slant at sight of the elegant

figure, and his hard mouth twitched again in the shadow of a grin that was grudging but appreciative. Blast him, the fellow had the sublime nerve of a saint.

There he walked, with the easy air of a man on his way to nothing more important than a drink, while a dozen gringo gunmen glared at him from the alley. His Mexican crowd would open up fast if required, but that wouldn't save him. He was insolently gambling his life that the gringos would use discretion—and he made good on his bet. He even paused to light a cigarette, and the manner in which he tossed his match over his shoulder made it a gesture of pure insult.

A moment later his light step sounded on the stairs, then along the hallways outside. Devlin walked to the door and opened it, keeping it before him. Then Don appeared in the open doorway. He bowed with a fine military snap, clicking his polished heels so that the silver spurs jingled musically. When he straightened up, his handsome face wore a masking smile, though his dark eyes openly mocked what he saw.

"Excuse my presumption," he murmured, with barely a trace of slurring accent, and stepped sedately into the room. "I have come to welcome—"

Then the door swung shut, and he saw Preacher, standing tall and somber beside him, with bleak eyes that were chill and quizzical, and a pair of long-fingered hands that hung deceptively at rest with the thumbs hooked into the lapels of his long black coat. The Don went very still, his charming smile frozen and his eyes suddenly brittle.

"Lo, Rico," Devlin greeted him tonelessly. "Thanks for the welcome. I was beginning to think I had no friends here!"

The Don found his voice. "I . . . ah . . . amigo, you surprise me! But a pleasant surprise, of course," he made haste to add. "Oh, most pleasant! Er . . . hm-m-m . . . will you smoke?"

Devlin shook his head. "I never use 'em, as you might recall. An' I happen to know you don't keep 'em in your hip pocket, unless you've changed your habits, so make your hands behave!"

Huitado blinked at both of them through his spectacles. "Then . . . then you do know this man?"

Devlin didn't shift his steady regard. "Yeah, we're by way o' bein' old friends," he responded, and the aged Spaniard sniffed, obviously feeling that it was no recommendation to either one of them.

The break was long enough for the Don to regain some of his usual easy composure. "Amigo, this happy occasion calls for refreshment," he urged warmly. "Shall we go down to the bar? I am sure your friends will excuse you."

For an instant their eyes met and clashed, sending and receiving cold challenge. Both were master gun fighters, skilled in chicanery and tricky maneuver, never backing down and ready at all times to match wits and violence.

Devlin nodded. "Sure." He pulled open the door, his hand gaining the knob just ahead of the Don's reach. "No, Rico—after you!"

CHAPTER V

SIX-GUN SELLOUT

WITH the fat bartender nowhere to be seen, Devlin and the Don poured their own drinks from a bottle on the bar, standing side by side.

"The last time we parted, Rico," Devlin remarked reminiscently, "you

were still calling yourself Don Ricardo de Risa. An' you were half a jump ahead of seventeen kinds o' law, as usual! I don't recall any Velasco in your name."

Don Ricardo de Risa, otherwise known as the Laughing One—bandit extraordinary, one-time rebel general, and the quickest shot south of the Rio Grande—tested his whiskey and set it down. He ran his experienced eye over the backbar shelves, seeking something better suited to his discriminating palate.

"Merely an abbreviation. My full name is Don Ricardo de Risa y Velasco," he drawled.

"Hm-m-m." Devlin finished his drink. "Must've been a maverick branch somewhere on the Velasco family tree."

Don Ricardo, going behind the bar, threw him a wintry stare. "As a Velasco, I resent the implications of that remark!" he declared with dignity. "The Velascos—"

"Come clean, Rico; you're not foolin' me!" Devlin calmly cut him short. "You've jumped into a good thing, an' you're anxious to clinch it. Say, hand me some o' those cigars while you're prowlin' around there."

It kept him occupied, watching Don Ricardo and at the same time keeping tabs on all doors and windows. Out there in front were the Don's fighting men, and all around the sides and rear were the gringo gunhands. The hotel was their objective, and sooner or later one side or the other would make a move. When it came, this town was going to blow up, and this barroom would be the first part of it to explode. As for whatever the Don might have in his agile mind, that was a question. It was seldom the Don's way to approach a play directly, but he could be fatally sudden when he got to it.

Don Ricardo brought cigars and a

tall green bottle to the bar, and played host. "To a certain extent you are right, amigo," he allowed pensively. "I have hold of a very good thing, but I also have my problems, without you having to come along and add to them!"

He played his dark eyes over the big gringo gun fighter, the only man who could shake his sublime self-confidence, and frowned as he poured his green *creme de menthe*. He and Devlin had crossed wits many times in their lurid pasts, and paid for it. Each had respect for the other's special gifts, and each knew that when the showdown came they probably both would go down smoking. It was not a step to be lightly undertaken.

"This Falk hombre crowdin' you?" Devlin queried, helping himself to cigars.

Don Ricardo lifted his eyes from his pouring. "You know him? No? Well, he is the promoter of a land-and-cattle company. A foreign syndicate, I think. Very wealthy, judging from the high-priced gunmen he has brought in. Gear, the so-called sheriff, is one of them. A dangerous man, that Falk. The confounded bandit is trying to rob me of my land!" he ended indignantly.

It was the first time Devlin had ever heard of anybody trying to rob Don Ricardo, and it intrigued him. Generally it was the other way around. "Damned outrage," he commented with scant sympathy. "Why not smoke him out?"

"It isn't as simple as that," returned the Don. "If open fighting breaks out, troops from Fort Bayard will come in to restore order. That would mean serious investigation and . . . ahem . . . well, I prefer for that not to happen. Falk has some political power, and he holds himself up as the friend and cham-

pion of the homesteaders. In the past, several homesteaders were allowed to settle here. Falk has stirred them up against me, and is trying to bring on trouble, so that he can have an excuse for asking for soldiers to come in and take control. Some of those homesteaders have been here for years, and they think they have a right to stay—damn their impudence!"

"You've got a tiger by the tail, Rico!"

The Don laughed shortly. "No, no, amigo, I am all right. All I need is that deed of grant. Then, with my claim secure, I shall have a perfect legal right to defend my land from intruders. I'll smash Falk and his hirelings, run the homesteaders out of the valley, and establish myself once and for all the master of La Estrella, owner of the Velasco Grant—*Grande Patron* of the Peloncillo!"

"And," Devlin put in dryly, "you'll also be in a fair way to drain half the cattle out o' Mexico! But first the grant deed, hm-m-m?"

"Er . . . exactly," assented the Don, and scanned the gun master's unreadable face with a searching glance. "Until I have it, I wish to avoid trouble," he stated frankly. "I would . . . ah . . . pay five thousand dollars for that Velasco powder horn!"

DEVLIN twirled his cigar contemplatively, listening to slight sounds around the building and to the rattle of wheels drawing to a halt in the rear. There was some hushed activity back there, and the Don's fighting men were growing restless in the plaza. The dogs of war were straining at the leash.

"How about that Mullarky girl?" he inquired. "Old Huitado says he dug up enough proof of her heritage

claim to upset you in any court. Falk stole it from him, an' likely plans to hold it over you."

"Those," murmured Don Ricardo, "are minor matters which I shall attend to in good time! First, the powder horn."

"Fifteen thousand," said Devlin.

Don Ricardo half closed his dark eyes, masking his thoughts. "Ten."

"Cash?"

"Gold!"

Devlin nodded, and his eyes traveled along the bar to the side entrance that led from the hotel hallway. Rory stood there, glaring at him with bitter accusation in his blazing eyes, his gun half drawn.

Devlin said gently: "No, Irish; better not. You'd be surprised what one shot would start around here!" He reached across the bar and blocked the Don's hand-streaking motion.

"Who is he?" rapped the Don.

Devlin shrugged. "Just a fellow I beat out o' fourteen hundred dollars. Persistent cuss. Trailed me all the way from— Dammit, Rico, stand easy!"

But the Don had whirled around, and when Devlin followed his narrow stare he saw the cause. The backbar door swung slowly open, and a man entered with the careful deliberation of a cat crossing a muddy lane.

He was large, stout, dressed in city attire except for riding boots and a wide-brimmed hat. His monstrously big face had the fat and pallid softness of lard, but the round green eyes that peered out of it were as hard as glass. He betrayed no habits of nervousness. He moved in, surveyed Devlin, then Don Ricardo, and nodded. His pale and massive face remained lax and expressionless. His voice, when he spoke, held no special expression,

either, and his words were so commonplace as to carry no meaning.

"How do you do, gentlemen." No rising inflection at the end. Not a question, but merely a habit of cold civility that smacked of the business office.

Don Ricardo surveyed him up and down, then elected to ignore him, though his jaw muscles bunched and a tiny vein over his nose stood out markedly. He whipped his sharp glance to the hallway door, but Rory was gone. No sounds of any kind now disturbed the weighted silence around the building. All life in the town had an air of frozen waiting and strained listening. The silence shrieked of distrust, of maneuvering finally finished, and violence only awaiting the spark.

The Don moved to the batwing doors without turning his back to the newcomer, and sank his voice to a purring whisper that only Devlin could hear. "Get the powder horn and come with me, amigo—quickly! I have the gold at La Estrella."

Devlin shook his head, scrutinizing the armed rabble in the plaza. "No, Rico. I'll let you bring it here."

The Don hid his angry disappointment behind an indifferent shrug that only confirmed Devlin's suspicions. "Very well. But watch that man! He is Quentin Falk. My men will be on guard while I am gone. If any attempt is made to take that powder horn out of this building—amigo, I advise you not to let that happen!" He passed swiftly out of the barroom.

Devlin swore silently, his thoughts on the raniicky young Irish war hand upstairs, and Moira, and the buffalo horn. It came to him that he and they stood between two fires on hell's hottest lid, with no way to jump and the fires closing in on them. Had it been a matter of standing off Rico

and his mob—well, that perhaps could have been done with the careful use of guile, wit, and some judicious double-crossing. But here was this Falk jamming up the deal and tangling everything into a snarl.

DEVLIN turned and regarded Quentin Falk with bleak dislike. As between the businessman and the Mexican bandit, he preferred the bandit. Rico, damn his stained soul, was at least stimulating in a blackguardly sort of way. He was utterly without conscience or scruples, wily and treacherous as a Comanche, and Devlin had no illusions about that ten thousand in gold. It was bait with a sharp hook in it. It was against all Rico's principles to pay good cash for what he wanted.

But this Quentin Falk. There was nothing human about him, nothing admirable. You could admire the raiding wolf for its daring, and the panther for its sleek and competent killing prowess, and even the snake for its handsome skin. But this big flaccid-faced frog—

The green eyes, round and unblinking, met Devlin's. "I am Quentin Falk. You are the gunman known as Preacher Devlin, I believe." The tone was that of a man of authority interviewing a prospective employee. "I wish to hire you, Devlin, to help me protect the Mullarky girl."

"I'm not for hire," Devlin said curtly.

The round eyes continued to regard him. "I wish to see that buffalo horn placed where it will be safe."

"So does Rico," Devlin drawled, "an' he got here first."

"What was his offer?" questioned Falk bluntly.

"Ten thousand."

"I'll double it!"

Devlin went to the bar and poured himself another drink. "You bidding for the girl or the horn?"

"Both!" Falk drew a bulky wallet from an inside pocket, and tapped it. "I'll pay cash on the line, in thousand-dollar bills, as soon as we clear town."

Devlin cast an eye at the wallet, and sighed over his drink. Bigger bait, with a bigger hook in it somewhere. But it was a challenging temptation, and his sigh was for his departing discretion.

"A few years ago, back along the Arizona line, a big piece of range was thrown open for homesteading," he remarked. "The homesteaders came in, but Mex raiders gave 'em trouble. Finally, a big gringo cow company sent in a tough fightin' bunch—to protect the homesteaders, they said. Last time I passed that way, the same company was runnin' its cows all over that range, an' homesteaders were as scarce as Mex raiders!"

Falk nodded, unruffled. "This country," he declared heavily, "is for strong men—men of power and vision. It is no place for poverty-stricken homesteaders and picayune cow settlers, nor for insolent Mexican impostors!"

"Nor for a girl who happens to have legal inheritance rights to it, either, hm-m-m?" Devlin appended.

Falk remained imperturbable. "My company will buy those rights from her," he returned.

That, in Devlin's view, was doubtful, considering the way Falk's hirelings had attacked the stage carrying Moira and the buffalo horn. He began revising his estimation of Quentin Falk. The man was a hypocrite, but a dangerous and ruthless hypocrite.

Falk put away his wallet with an

air of finality. "Twenty thousand dollars is as high as I will go," he stated flatly. "Take it or leave it, but I warn you I'll stop at nothing to get what I want! I'll send in every man I've got. I'll turn this town into a battleground before I let that Mexican win his way!"

He wasn't bluffing. His tone held no bluster. Rather, it was matter-of-fact and coldly positive. Devlin leaned his back against the bar, studying the Don's Mexican fighters out in the plaza. Any chance was better than waiting here for the coming explosion, trapped in the core of it and blocked on all sides. And there was the girl to be considered.

"Aren't any o' Rico's men watching the rear?" he queried.

"Yes," responded Falk, "but they'll be taken care of."

Devlin nodded. "All right. Tell your guns to be ready. Rico's boys will be right on tap soon's they catch onto us, an' we'll have to jump fast!"

CHAPTER VI

HELL'S CORRAL

RORY stood near the head of the stairs, his right hand hovering over his holster.

Devlin, climbing the stairs, said quietly: "Pity you didn't hang around downstairs a mite longer, Irish. You'd have heard something to set you thinking."

"I heard enough!" countered Rory grimly. "Keep your hands in sight, Devlin, an' stay where you are!"

Devlin shook his head, and didn't halt. "I'm comin' on up, but don't worry about my hands. You didn't hear half of it. We've got to check out o' here with that girl the best way we can. I think I can convince you o' that, without having to use a gun on you."

He raised his hands shoulder high. "There isn't much time to argue, but—" He tripped on the top stair, lurched, and threw out his arms for balance.

Rory, taking a backward step out of Devlin's way, opened his mouth to say something, but he never got it out. One long black-clad arm flashed out, and the fist that struck him between the eyes came too fast for any defensive reaction. His head snapped back, and the next smashing blow caught him under the jaw. There was no need for a third.

Devlin bent over Rory and took his gun. "Hope I didn't break his fool neck; that girl'd kill me!" he muttered.

A low murmur of voices issued from Huitado's room. Devlin went directly to it and thrust open the door without knocking. The first thing he looked at was the menacing muzzle of a cumbersome old smooth-bore gun, trained straight for his middle, and it occurred to him that Rory must have spoken of the talk he had heard in the barroom.

It was an old-fashioned muzzle loader with a yard-long barrel, and it was held in the bony hands of Don Ambrosio Huitado. The old caballero had evidently just finished the lengthy job of loading it, for on his desk lay the ramrod and gun box of black powder, lead balls, percussion caps and wads. Behind Huitado stood Moira, holding the pistol she had taken from the knocked-out man outside on the boardwalk.

Devlin blandly eyed them. "Your Irishman," he told Moira, "has been taken sick, somehow. He's lyin' out there on his back. Seems like somebody ought to look after him."

"Oh, mercy!" The girl rushed past him and sped from the room.

DEVLIN thoughtfully regarded Huitado and his big old muzzle loader. The leather case containing the buffalo horn lay on one of the crowded bookshelves that took up all the wall space. The room was a hodgepodge of dusty volumes, bundles of yellowed papers and letter files, with the massive old desk cramping the cot into one corner and a few articles of clothing hung up carelessly. How the old lawyer ever found what he wanted in the jumble was a mystery.

"What d'you figure to shoot with that smoke pole?" Devlin asked pleasantly.

"You, you scoundrel, if you try to betray that girl!" came the prompt reply.

"Reckon you could hit me with it?"

"In my youth, sir, I hunted buffalo with this same weapon!"

"Do tell," murmured Devlin, and moved over to the window. From this end of the building he got a view of the hotel's dove-walled corral and the full length of the alley that ran between it and the back of the building.

To the right, at the open end of the alley, some of Rico's fighters were grouped on watch. Whoever stepped out of the back door into that alley would step directly into the range of their ready carbines. It posed a knotty problem. One of the corral gates faced the back door across the alley, but it would take more than a leap to reach it. The other gate, on the far side of the corral, opened out into one of the back streets that led to the valley road.

There were men in the corral. Devlin settled his gaze on three whom he recognized, and ticked off their names in his mind: Nort Ebster, Little Cole, Nevada Jones, a close-knit trigger team that charged

high, but always delivered according to contract. With their horses they flanked a shining new surrey with a fringed top and spindly wheels, and they had saddled Devlin's black in readiness for the breakout. Quiet men, these three, when on a job. Quiet and efficiently competent, but it didn't seem possible that they and the few others in sight were all the force Falk had on hand. Falk had talked as if he could call up an army at a moment's notice.

Devlin turned back to Huitado. "Helluva mess o' books you got here," he observed. "I never could quite decide whether you lawyers have 'em for show or use. For show, probably, to impress the customers. Now, take this one here, for instance—"

It didn't happen to be a book which he dragged carelessly from a cluttered shelf, though it looked like an extra big one. It turned out to be a collapsible letter-filing case, and it fell open in his hands like a concertina, strewing papers at his feet. "Blast it, that fooled me!" he murmured, spilling more papers while he tried to close the case.

"Clumsy lout!" snapped Huitado angrily, and reached to take it from him.

"Sorry," Devlin apologized solemnly, letting it fall and neatly plucking the smoothbore gun from the Spaniard with a darting swoop of his hand. He shook out the percussion cap and tossed the gun up onto the highest bookshelf close to the ceiling.

When he left, Huitado was swearing in Spanish and clambering up onto his desk to get at the gun. The old lawyer was too thoroughly mad to notice that Devlin carried Moira's leather box under his arm as he walked out.

Don Ricardo and Devlin both knew they would go down smoking when the showdown came—and the showdown was coming!



RORY was just beginning to come to, but his senses were still too dazed to be of much use to him.

"Look at his poor face!" mourned Moira, sitting in unladylike manner on the floor and holding his head in her lap. Rory had a bluish bump between his eyes, and another on his jaw.

"Must've hit it on something," said Devlin. He got an arm under Rory and hauled him to his feet. "Girl, pick up your gun an' follow us. We're checkin' out o' here."

He saw the shrinking doubt in Moira's face. She was no fool, this girl, and could not easily be led. Soon, if her distrust crystallized, she would be raising a ruckus and

maybe shooting off that pistol at him.

"Keep your chin up, Irish," he muttered to her, and for once some of the chill harshness was absent from his voice. He even smiled down at her, crookedly but genuinely. "He's not hurt bad. Are you scared to trust me?"

She tried to match his smile, but it was a tremulous attempt. "Yes; but I'm more scared not to!"

They went down the stairs to the back door that opened out into the alley. Devlin, half supporting Rory, looked out, but only once. After that one look, a carbine whammed its warning note along the alley, and the bullet screeched off the wall. Through the corral gateway they could see Falk's men,

still grouped around the surrey, waiting, shielded from Rico's fighters by the high adobe wall. The trigger team—Nort Ebster, Little Cole and Nevada Jones—formed the nucleus of the Falk group, and stood together, saying nothing while the rest waited for their cue.

Nort Ebster, blond and bearded, with more the appearance of a solid Mormon farmer than a kingpin gunman, raised a hand to Devlin and wig-wagged a finger briefly. Devlin nodded, understanding it as a signal that something was about to happen. He met the blond gunman's contemplative gaze, and drew from it a sure knowledge that the man was sizing him up with professional care. The same expression lay cool and remote in the eyes of Little Cole and Nevada Jones. The trigger team had a job to do.

Heavy wheels suddenly began crunching nearby, and a stir ran through the Falk group. Devlin chanced another look down the alley, and grasped the significance. The high-sided Mexican cart, parked between the hotel and the blacksmith's shed next door, was being rolled out with a rush, blocking off this part of the alley from the sight of Rico's fighters at the other end.

Devlin handed Moira the leather box, leaving his right arm free while he helped support Rory with his left.

"Come on!" he muttered, and lunged for the corral as carbines erupted a ragged volley down the alley. Mexican voices, high-pitched and hoarse, yelled the alarm, and from the plaza broke a pattering rush of running feet. The Mexican gunhands, following the orders of their absent Don Ricardo, were storming to the attack at the first sign of the break.

DUE either to the crash of gunfire or the fresh air, or both, Rory came to his full senses with a jerk and a grunt, just as Devlin pitched him into the surrey, after Moira had leaped into it with the leather box. He reared up, glaring about him, and bared his teeth like a bristling dog having a bad dream, but he tumbled off balance when Gear in the driver's seat slashed a whistling cut at the team. The surrey took off at a rattling pace across the corral for the back street gateway.

Devlin whipped a long leg over his waiting black, at the same time thumbing the animal in a dancing circle so that he could keep the trigger team under his eye. A rapid glance showed him a seamed and angry face peering over a long barrel at one of the hotel's upper windows.

"Gringo scoundrel!" howled Don Ambrosio Huitado, and the big smoothbore boomed like a cannon. A lover of silence, he had made the supreme sacrifice. Having made it, he clapped hands to ears in a reaction of purest agony.

The dry hiss of the bullet came very close, for all that Devlin was a moving target. "Hell, he can shoot the thing, at that!" muttered the gun fighter, and got his horse lined out in a dead run for the back street.

The trigger team had whirled at the roaring report. A gun flashed in Ebster's hand and blared three times. The upper window shattered into pieces and became vacant. When Devlin looked back again, all three of the team were shooting, but not at the window. Some of Rico's Mexicans had reached the alley gate, and the trio was gunning its way out of the corral.

The rest of Falk's men were rid-

ing fast out of the corral and splitting up when they reached the back street, some swinging off to the left and others to the right. But Gear kept the bouncing surrey rocketing straight ahead. Devlin held his black to the course of the surrey, with the gunmen trio thundering along in his rear. The corral swarmed with Rico's fighters now, some on foot and some riding, pouring around from the plaza and coming in yelling pursuit. Others raced through the side streets, riding furiously to cut off the fugitives before they could get out of town.

Devlin was gaining on the surrey. As it lurched around a bend, he saw Rory rise up and hurl himself at Gear. He saw something else, too—shadowy forms and the motionless muzzles of guns waiting in every doorway and window along both sides of the narrow street. And now he knew why Falk hadn't displayed many men in the corral. His biggest force lay in silent ambush, while Rico's Mexicans were being lured into the trap.

Devlin rounded the curve in time to see both Rory and Gear roll out of the surrey and land tangled and struggling on the ground, while the hurtling vehicle continued its headlong way full into the path of a half-dozen men who ran out to intercept it. Moira had hold of the lines, tugging vainly in an effort to halt the runaway team. When she saw the men ahead she groped down on the floor and came up with her gun.

Devlin drew up in a jump and spun his horse around so fast it stood quivering with its haunches crouched close to the ground. Hoofs pounded on his course, and around the bend swerved the trigger team, Ebster in front. They, too, drew up all in a jump, and for an instant sat

image-still. And then, as if all were actuated by a single mind, they broke into movement.

THERE was no warning word, no preliminary signal, either on their part or on Devlin's. They were gunmen, each with his acutely trained sense of timing, of knowing when and why to dispense with the waste of preamble. Devlin's hands slashed under his somber coat and out again, and his pair of long-barreled guns roared their first discharge before the coat settled back into place. He heeled the black at the same time.

Ebster, a gun already in his hand, reined his horse rearing high and fired around its upflung head, one of the tricks he was famous for, but its efficacy didn't take into account any sudden charge on the part of the target. The black bounded forward at the dig of heels, slid aslant at another kick and slammed broadside into the rearing horse, while Devlin, riding in one stirrup and half out of his saddle, got in two more shots.

The collision wrecked the smooth teamwork of the trio and piled everything up in confusion. Little Cole, shooting and sliding out of his saddle, tried to dismount faster as Ebster and his horse toppled over backward on him. He could have made it, but a bullet slapped his foot and slowed him down. Ebster's horse rolled on him, though the gunman himself fell clear. Nevada Jones, always reputed to be a game man, elected to stick to his seat and shoot it out.

Beyond the bend, a hammering crash of exploding cartridges suddenly drowned out the noise of a running mob. Falk had pulled the trigger of his ambush. Back along the street, too, where the surrey

raced, a pistol duel raged. At the back of Devlin's mind, as he flattened over his horse and thumbed a shot at Nevada Jones, bobbed a recollection of Rico's earnest desire to hold off trouble until his own good time. Rico was due for a shock when he got back from La Estrella. This town had ripped the lid off for fair.

Nevada Jones bowed himself out of the fight and didn't straighten up after, and Devlin slung a gun back in line with Ebster. But Ebster lay in the street with both hands empty. He had dropped his gun in the fall. He had another in his left holster, but he didn't seem disposed to reach for it, and his eyes were closed.

CHAPTER VII

TRIGGER TROUBADOUR

ALONG the street, Rory ran at a limping trot after the surrey, with Gear's gun. The surrey had broken through the group of men, but one man hung to the heads of the team, dragging his feet and trying to bring them to a standstill, while Moira laid onto him with the whip. The rest, except for two who had lost all interest in the world, were swapping shots with the advancing Rory.

Rory was still going on at his limping trot when Devlin bore down on him from behind. The gun master leaned out from his saddle and grabbed his shirt. "Hang on here, an' we'll bust up that party the quicker!" he growled, and they swept on together, guns blazing.

The fellow hanging onto the team turned loose when he got the animals halted, only to discover that he had no support left within striking distance. Two more of his group were down and another stumbled slowly away, while a pair of wild

men who had no business being still alive came charging at the surrey. The man threw up his hands and bolted. Rory sprang up into the surrey, and Moira laid on the whip.

"Turn off at the next corner," Devlin, called, riding behind. "Street's blocked!" He was right about that. Another bunch of riders swung in from the valley road, coming at a gallop into town. All Falk's forces were closing in on this street, drawing the noose tighter around Rico's trapped Mexicans fighting for their lives back there around the bend.

The next side street ran back toward the plaza, but there was no choice. Moira jerked on the off line, and the surrey careened around the corner on two wheels, with Rory holding on and chopping shots at the bunch. Devlin scraped a stirrup getting around the corner, drew the black to a leg-braced halt, and quit the saddle. The town was ablaze with battle, riderless horses stampeding through the streets and gunfire crashing out in volleys, but the well-trained black would stand there with dangling reins and cocked ears until hell swallowed it.

The bunch had flung a scattering of shots at the surrey before it turned off, and now their intent was pursuit. They were forty yards from the corner, riding in a packed mass, when Devlin poked his guns around the adobe and hammered them empty of their last shells. He didn't wait to see the resulting chaos of horses and riders plunging in tangled disaster over the fallen leaders, but the ugly noises of it satisfied him. He slapped the black and mounted on the run.

Nothing could be seen of the surrey when he burst into the plaza, and he had no way of telling which direction it had taken. Narrow

streets branched out from all sides of it and at all angles. A Mexican reeled on foot across Devlin's course, pursued by two Falk men. Other remnants of the back-street battle raged here and there, where some of the Rico party had broken out of the trap. Devlin, with empty guns and no time to reload, whirled off to the nearest street and clattered on through it.

ALL the streets in Eladrevo frayed out into a fringe of trails outside the town, and the trails in turn became tributaries to the main roads and paths of the valley. A Pueblo Indian in cotton trousers and rag-bound hair, resting with his string of wood-laden burros in the scant shade of a lone piñon, regarded Devlin with alarmed and distrustful dark eyes.

At the Preacher's short query, he pointed with his chin. "That way, señor . . . and men riding after it."

Devlin threw him a coin and touched the black to its long lope, reloading his guns as he rode. The country ahead was a succession of low hills, rising higher toward the Peloncillo range, the knolls blackly peppered with piñon and the hollows flooded brightly with the yellow-blossoming chamisa clumps. Soon he picked out the dust of the surrey, and then the surrey itself, appearing and vanishing along the trail that made its winding way through the hills. Rory and Moira, foreign to the country, didn't know where they were going, but they were streaking along at a breakneck gait.

It was only when he got within hailing distance of the bouncing surrey that Devlin caught sight of its pursuers. They were Falk men, Gear among them, and they weren't following the variations of the trail. They rocked into sight over the

shoulder of a hill, and pounded down the slant at an angle that put them in a good position to head off the fugitives.

Moira stood up in the surrey, lashing the team, and the flat report of Rory's gun cracked through the drumming of hoofbeats. Farther along, the trail dipped before it rose up the cutaway bank of a long escarpment, and Devlin judged the dip to be an arroyo crossing. Moira kept the surrey plunging straight on for the dip, regardless. She could handle a team, but she wasn't quite familiar with the unexpected features of this kind of country.

Horsemen wearing crossed bandoleers and high-peaked sombreros bobbed up on the trail at the top of the escarpment, just as the surrey went hurtling down into the dip. There was a splintering crash, and water splashed up in two fountain sprays. The wrecked surrey bounced into sight again for a brief instant, somersaulting end over end with both front wheels smashed to the hubs, while the squealing team bolted on up the escarpment alone, dragging broken leathers.

The slim and dapper figure of Don Ricardo detached itself from the horsemen up on the escarpment, and came riding down on a high-headed palomino. The Don didn't trouble to shoot, but his men did. He had only his small bodyguard squad with him, but they had the advantage of position and surprise. Their carbines burst alive with a chattering roar, upsetting two Falk riders and sending the rest racing for cover.

The Don reappeared from the arroyo, going back the way he had come, with Moira slung limply over his saddle and the leather case under his arm. Devlin cursed, lining out after him, and it came to him that the luck of the Irish had turned

pretty sour when it led the surrey along the trail for La Estrella, of all places.

Rory lay gurgling and drowning under the wreckage of the surrey, and Devlin paused long enough to reach down and yank him out, dripping wet. The gun master hauled him half across the saddle, legs dangling, and put the black up the escarpment bank with a rush. Behind him, the Falk party, reorganized, was already in pursuit.

The powerful black topped the bank, struck level ground, and stretched out into its swinging lope. Ahead, the trail ran on into a forest of pine and shimmering aspen. Flat adobe roofs and the jutting ends of vega rafters were visible through the trees, with here and there a glimpse of white-washed walls, and at one point a church tower and copper bell.

The forest turned out to be a thick windbreak, sheltering the walled hacienda of La Estrella. The hacienda, of sprawling Spanish-Mexican plan and proportions, was more of a self-contained village than a rancho. Here, from the higher ground of the windbreak that partly overlooked the encircling wall, could be seen the large ranchhouse, the workers' quarters, barns, commissary and church. The thick adobe wall was typical. Built in the long ago for defense against marauding Apaches, it made a fortress and sanctuary of the great hacienda in times of need. There were doors in it, but only one gate wide enough to allow the passage of ox wagon cart or carriage.

DON RICARDO and his men had gained the sanctuary, and the main gate was creaking shut when Devlin rode through the wingbreak firing into the wide and level clear-

ing outside the wall, and headed for the gate.

"For shame, caballeros! Where's your Spanish hospitality!" he hailed. "Here's company!"

His hard flippancy appealed to the sardonic strain in the Mexican mind. They let him push on through. He quirked a fraternal grin at them, and helped slam the massive gate. Don Ricardo was down at the far end of the low-walled driveway leading from the main gate back past the big house to the patio and village. With much gallantry and a tight arm he supported Moira, who leaned dazedly against him as he led her up the steps into the little stone church. He glanced back at the Preacher, and spoke to some of the men who were with him.

Two of them walked back and met Devlin. They nodded at Rory, sagging in the saddle. "The gringo is hurt?" one inquired solicitously. "Let us take care of him, señor."

Devlin let them take Rory between them, seeing no special point in arguing the matter. "He's some banged up, but he'll get over that," he remarked. "Put my horse in a corral, too, will you? Water him an' loosen cinch, but leave the saddle on. *Gracias, hombres.*"

He went on into the big house. Its furnishings spoke eloquently of Spanish elegance, grace of living, and the long security of many years. From a window Devlin watched Rory carried into the church. Rico and the others came out soon, and locked the carved oaken door. The little stone church, it seemed, made a tight prison. Devlin was making himself comfortable with a wine decanter and a cigar when Rico entered.

"How's the girl?" he queried casually.

"A little stunned by her fall," answered the Don. He placed the leather box on a table, keeping one hand on it, and stared reflectively at the Preacher. "What happened in Eladrevo?"

"Plenty!" said Devlin, and cocked his head, listening. "Not much shooting going on out there. How long can you hold out here, Rico?"

Rico shrugged. "Does it matter? When my good fighting men get here—"

"Your good comrades are *muy* good right now—good an' dead, most of 'em!" drawled Devlin. "Falk ran an ambush on 'em."

Disbelief brought a smile to the Don's lips. "*Es verdad?*" he murmured politely. "And so you brought the girl and her buffalo horn and that Irish trouble maker here at once, yes? Ah, you are my true friend! And how fortunate it was that you knew the way here to La Estrella!"

His mockery was obvious. He turned as a scarred old Mexican entered, heavy spurs dragging and armed like a pirate. "Yes, Lorenzo?"

"The gringos have drawn off into the trees, chief," reported Lorenzo.

Don Ricardo shrugged lightly. "No matter. Lorenzo, I am told that our men are many dead, smashed by the Falk gringos. What think you of that?"

"Bah! We shall see how dead they are, when they come and hunt like coyotes these ones who hide in the trees!" snorted Lorenzo, and stalked out.

DON RICARDO flashed his engaging smile at Devlin. "I fear my good segundo does not believe," he apologized silkily. "But, even if true, it is of small consequence. There will always be good men to follow Rico." He slapped the leather

box gayly. "And here I have the greatest ace card—the grant deed! Amigo, I thank you with all my heart!"

With a flourish he sprang the brass lock and flung open the lid. "The sweet señorita in the church shall be rewarded for bringing to me the famous powder horn of—"

His gay prattle broke off. He stood blinking down into the box, and for a moment looked almost pitifully bewildered and disappointed. Finally the angry color rushed to his face and he choked out one word.

"Empty!"

Devlin craned his neck and peered. "Damned if it isn't," he agreed, and sipped his wine.

Don Ricardo snapped up his head, glaring. "A trick!" he swore. "*Mil diablos!* The horn of the *cibolo* no is *aquí!*" He was so excited he stuttered and forgot some of his perfect English. "*Fuego!* That girl she makes the trick to make the fool of me!" He started for the door in a passion, but froze to a halt, seeing Devlin's hands slip under the long black coat.

"Goin' to church, Rico?" Devlin said softly. "Gen'rally speaking, I'd approve—but not this time!"

He watched the glitter brighten in the Don's eyes, heard his sharply indrawn breath, saw the muscles of his lips move and ripple.

"No, Rico, don't call in your cut-throat buddies!" he warned. "Don't do it, Rico—or we'll be settling an old question we've both always wondered about!"

For a moment it looked as if the Don would take him up on it and stake all on his fast draw. But he met the emotionless, nerve-tingling stare of the coldly blank gray eyes, and it did to him what it always did, putting an inner query into his confidence. Very slowly, he drew out his

gold case and chose a cigarette. He lighted it, blew smoke delicately through his fine nostrils, and then he smiled and was the cynically amused caballero again.

Lazily, he took down a guitar, returned with extravagantly mincing step to a couch, and seated himself. For a while, cigarette in mouth and head resting indolently against cushions, he idly fingered the strings. His attitude spoke of dreamy patience, an enjoyment of untroubled hours, and no thought for tomorrow. He finally struck into the galloping rhythm of "*Adios, Mi Chaparrita,*" and sang softly to it:

*"Adios, mi chaparrita,
No llores por tu Pancho—"*

CHAPTER VIII

GUNSMOKE BARGAIN

DEVLIN sat with his back to the wall, watching the door and the Don. The music was not unpleasant. Daylight faded from the tall, narrow windows, the chill of night crept in, and still Rico sang on, parading an amazing repertory of songs. Devlin knew what he was waiting for. The Don fully expected his army of ragged followers to come storming in from Eladrevo, and it was useless trying to convince him that they had been defeated and scattered. Devlin thought of the bodyguard outside, and of the Falk riders in the windbreak, and of Moira and Rory imprisoned in the church. The situation was a stalemate, and he speculated as to what the outcome of it would be.

Old Lorenzo jingled noisily in, peered through the gloom at his singing chief, then at Devlin, and scratched his grizzled head in puzzlement. There they sat in the dark and the night chill like shy lovers,

the breadth of the room between them, and Don Ricardo serenading this big devil-eyed gringo.

Foolishness. Old Lorenzo grunted, heaved himself up onto the long table, and lighted the huge copper lamp that hung from a rafter. As he trimmed the wick to a steady glow, a reminding shot cracked from a rifle out in the windbreak. A bullet crashed through a tall window, grazed the lamp, and smacked into the opposite wall.

"*Fuego!*" muttered Lorenzo with annoyance, and got off the table, while Don Ricardo chuckled and winked pleasantly at Devlin. The old segundo sniffed indignantly, knelt by the enormous fireplace, and kindled a charcoal fire. With a last look around, he stamped out, and they heard him banging pots and pans in the kitchen. Don Ricardo kept no servants but his ruffianly fighters.

The Don was in the swing of "*The Devil Has Hauled Him Away,*" when a sudden flurry of shooting exploded outside the wall of the hacienda. It came from the windbreak, and with it came shouts and a confused rumble of many hoofs. The running hoofbeats drew rapidly closer, louder, and the shouting voices resolved into chanting cries.

"*Viva Don Ricardo! Viva De Risa, the Laughing One, Patron of La Estrella!*"

The Don leaped lightly to his feet, eyes aglow, and tossed aside the guitar. He looked at Devlin triumphantly. "Behold, amigo, the ghosts of my dead men come riding back to me, yes?" he crowed, and laughed aloud in his exultance. "*Hola, Lorenzo! Open the gates for our wayward children! Tell them all to come to me, and I shall show them a man who objects to the going to church!*"

When the surrey whirled out of the corral, a gun storm broke from all sides and the Preacher was caught right in the middle of it.



DEVLIN rose, hands under his coat, listening to the noise outside in the darkness, for the moment incredulous and taken aback. He had seen Rico's men plunge into the back-street trap in Eladrevo, had heard them fighting hopelessly for their lives, had witnessed the remnants cut down while they fled across the plaza. Yet here they came riding home to Rico, shouting victory. It didn't make sense.

The boom of the big gate sounded

as it was dragged wide open, and the men of the hacienda bodyguard were laughing and shouting to the incoming party. The shouts abruptly changed to startled yells. Shots roared in the driveway, and stamping hoofs came thundering on toward the house.

Devlin dove at the door and



slammed it shut. He shoved in the big iron bolts and whirled on the Don with his guns out. "You blasted fool, let's hear you sing now!" he snarled. "They're not your cussed segundos! That's the whole Falk mob, an' you've let 'em in! By

Satan, Falk's done it again!"

The Don, stunned, turned pale. But he hooked out his guns and acted promptly. He slashed a shot through a window, and a dark shape, lunging

by, went down with a crash.

"But . . . but my men!" Rico muttered. "Where are they?"

"In hell, where you'll soon join 'em—you an' your fool guitar!" Devlin flung at him. "Didn't I tell you?"

"Yes . . . yes," groaned the Don. "But how should I know when to believe such a liar!"

The invaders were already smashing doors open and storming through the buildings of the hacienda. From the racket, they had some trouble with the church door, but soon a voice yelled out, "Here's the gal—yeah, an' that Irish knot-head, too! All right, you, git your paws up or eat lead!"

The noise quieted down some. Then Falk's voice sounded outside the house. "Devlin . . . Risa . . . I want that powder horn. You can't hold out in there, and you know it. I've already sent a request for cavalry troops to come in and take control of this valley. Come out, give up your guns and that powder horn, and I'll give you both an hour's start for the border!"

"Never!" vowed Don Ricardo, and fired through the bolted door.

"Never's a right long time, Rico," Devlin growled. He leaned forward and smacked the Don neatly over the head with a gun barrel. Then he opened the door and stepped back.

FALK came in slowly, watchfully. Among the gunmen crowding at his heels was Nort Ebster, looking more than ever like a sober Mormon farmer despite a blood-soiled shirt, bandaged chest, and face drained white and sick. Gear, the puppet sheriff, was among them, too, his eyes stealthy, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. They had Rory and Moira with them, pushing them ahead.

Devlin had retreated to a shadowy corner. He spoke from there, quietly but compellingly. "Falk, I don't like crowds!"

Falk paused and mutely raised a hand. Those still outside remained

there. The rest silently spread out inside to block doorway and windows. Falk gazed stonily about the room, at Don Ricardo lying on the floor, and finally at Devlin.

"Where is the powder horn?" he demanded in his flat voice.

"Not here," said Devlin. "There's just one man in the world who knows where it is—and I'm that man!"

There was no necessity to enlarge upon the implications. Falk paced to the table, unhurried and deliberate, and drew out his oversized wallet. "The powder horn is no longer of any value to anybody but me," he stated. "I have here Huitado's papers. I have possession of the property—and the girl!"

"There's still law left in the country," Devlin reminded him.

Falk nodded. "Yes, and I make use of it. Troops from Fort Bayard should arrive here in two or three days. Long before then, the girl will have signed her rights over to my company. While the soldiers are restoring law and order, the courts will be ratifying my claim of ownership of the grant. I shall even ask for military aid in legally removing from my property all undesirable characters and trespassers, such as squatters and troublesome Mexicans—and renegade gunmen! You see, Devlin, even the law is on my side. Can you say as much?"

"We-ell—maybe not," Devlin granted, understating the fact by a wide margin. Whenever he and the law bent in the same direction, it was sheer coincidence. "What makes you think the girl will sign away her rights to you? And what would become of her after she did it?"

Falk offered no reply to that. He opened his wallet, exposing a thick sheaf of bills. "Twenty thousand

was the price we agreed on, I believe. The offer still stands."

"Cash in advance?"

"No!"

Devlin shrugged. "All right. I'll need my horse. Be back in about an hour. But don't rig up a 'buscado on me, Falk, or you'll never see that powder horn. I want the gate left open, the driveway empty, and no crowd standing by to jump me. And have the cash ready on hand."

"I'm a man of my word," retorted Falk heavily.

"That's as may be," Devlin murmured, and left, aware of Nort Ebster's brooding stare following him as he passed on out of the house. The last of the trigger team had a bitter score to settle with him when the time came. So had all the others, that was plain, from the looks they gave him as he got his horse from the corral and rode out of La Estrella.

Going through the windbreak, Devlin hipped around and looked back for signs of stalkers following him. Here the ground was higher than the level of the hacienda, but all he could see were the night-grayed bulks of the wall and buildings, only one light visible and that coming from the big copper lamp in the ranchhouse, framed by the high and narrow window. Even in victory, Falk was taking no chances with too many lights, and the big gate had been banged shut after Devlin rode out.

Nothing moved on the bare ground outside the adobe wall, and Devlin rode on, but with his mind far from easy. Falk was right, and he hadn't been bluffing. He could call the law to his aid, and he had done it. With all his flabby looks, the man knew how to make himself invulnerable, all powerful. Soon this country would be overrun with soldiers, gun-

men, deputies, and probably plenty of law from Lordsburg. The prospect held no enticement for a man of broad-minded views and a high cash bounty value. In the meantime, Falk had everything pretty well tied down.

But it was the things that Falk had left unsaid that held the more menacing significance—as baleful as the bitter stare of Nort Ebster, and as definite as the silent animosity of the gun mob. That girl would not have a pleasant time, before or after she signed away her inheritance rights. The round green eyes of Quentin Falk lacked even Rico's mocking but human quality of decent chivalry.

CHAPTER IX

POWDER-HORN BOOMERANG

IT was well over an hour later when Devlin hailed the gate and heard the rattle of the crossbar being withdrawn. The place looked just the same, with the single copper lamp burning and all else in darkness. The gate swung in, and for the second time he entered La Estrella.

The men who had opened the gate walked ahead of him down the driveway, leaving the gate open. Before dismounting at the house, Devlin watched their figures drift on into the darkness in the direction of the corrals. He took note of the fact that they did not look back at him after their first long inspection. Small things were straws in the wind, to be studied with care. That the whole place was under a hush he noted, too, a hush that was not natural, considering the number of men here. He divined it as an evidence of stilled listening, and probably of watching, though he could pick out no unexplained shadows.

Under other conditions, Devlin would have backed for the gate with his guns out. All his training and instincts joined in screaming warning, the more insistent because signs of danger had been so carefully erased from this place.

He left his horse standing in the driveway with reins dangling and head pointed toward the gate, and stepped lightly up to the door of the house. He thrust the door open quickly, standing well back and aside from the released fan of lamplight.

Falk sat at one end of the long table, nearest the fireplace, and Moira at the other. Rory stood against a wall, his battered face white and eyes blazing. Near him, Don Ricardo, stripped of his guns, hatless, a patch of his black hair spiky with dried blood, tried to appear grandly nonchalant about the whole business. Gear had them under his sawed-off shotgun. Nort Ebster lounged in a tooled-leather chair. There was no one else in the room.

All looked at the door as it swung open. Gear began a motion that was automatic, then caught himself and relaxed. Nort Ebster moved nothing but his head, and after one slow scrutiny gazed ruminantly across the room into the fire's red glow.

Falk, without rising, said flatly: "Come in, Devlin."

The whole scene was too placid, too restrained—too perfect in its acting, so that its very perfection rang a false note.

DEVLIN stepped inside, left the door open, and placed himself by it with his back to the wall. He ran his glance rapidly around at the high windows, but the lamplight shone on them and turned them into

mirrors. The walled driveway outside, he judged, might be the only part of the hacienda not yet covered by hidden men, but even it could be swept by gunfire from the dark corrals, and the light from the doorway would make such sharp-shooting fairly easy.

The waiting silence grew oppressive, and Devlin did not choose to be the first to break it. Falk finally spoke again, his round eyes pinched small by a frown.

"Well, did you get it?" he demanded. It was his first sign of impatience.

"Sure," murmured Devlin, and Don Ricardo, staring bitterly at him, narrowed his eyes in sharp disbelief.

But the Don changed expression when Devlin brought his right hand into sight from behind his back, holding the buffalo horn. "Sure," said Devlin again. "Here—take the damn thing!" He tossed it spinning with a flip of his hand.

It was a high throw. Falk, not prepared for it, bumped the table in trying to make the catch. The horn spun past, well above his reaching hands, and sailed into the fireplace behind him, scattering the neat charcoal fire. Falk floundered around, upsetting his chair, and uttered an oath of dismay.

"Gear . . . Ebster! Get it!"

The rosin-packed end of the horn caught with a splutter and flared up like a struck match, and both Rory and Don Ricardo acted fast, each in his own way. Rory stuck out a foot, and Gear, jumping to obey orders, sprawled his length on the floor. The Don, for his part, promptly dove for the horn and aimed a kick at Falk, who also lunged for the thing. Both got hold of it and reared up, fighting and kicking for possession.

"Damn you, Rico, leave that

thing—" Devlin had no time to finish.

Nort Ebster, his mind set on one purpose, bounded up out of his chair with both guns clearing his holsters, and in the same instant the blazing buffalo horn exploded. It exploded like a bomb between Falk and the Don, and while the roar and blinding flash of it still filled the room with sound and smoke, a single shot boomed somewhere outside the hacienda wall.

The big copper lamp fell straight as a plummet, its hang chain cut cleanly by the accurate ball aimed from the windbreak. As it fell, the rush of wind guttered the flame high up the glass chimney, and Devlin drew and fired before the lamp crashed itself out on the table below. A low glow remained in the smoke-filled room, coming from the scattered charcoal fire, and the figures of Rory and Moira cut across it, charging for the door. Rory had Gear's shotgun, and was leading the way.

A window broke, then another and another, and men outside cursed as they took chance shots into the darkened room. This 'buscado was all blown up. The explosion and the shattered lamp had put a crimp into a perfect plan for murder.

Somebody blundered into Devlin. Not Falk. Devlin, making a hasty search, had found Falk lying on his face, very quiet and slack of muscle. Nor was it Ebster, who had quit shooting. It was Don Ricardo, stumbling about and moaning softly with his hands to his face. Devlin caught hold of him and dragged him along to the door. They both barged into Rory, standing close to the house while Moira's heels tapped a running patter toward the main gate.

"Get out o' here, Irish!" growled

Devlin. He slung the helpless Don onto the waiting black, and vaulted up after him into the saddle. Men were coming on the run into the driveway from the rear, shouting for somebody to shut the gate.

"Sure—right away," responded Rory, and the shotgun roared its buckshot load down the driveway. He flung the emptied weapon after it, grabbed a stirrup leather, and took off along with the black.

THEY caught up with Moira on the way to the windbreak. "Step along, girl," Devlin called to her. "I've seen you run that fast with only an Irishman after you! Sooner we make the windbreak the better."

Rory, hanging onto the horse and the girl, both, yelled back: "What good's the windbreak? Can't stand 'em off long from there!"

"Don't need to," answered Devlin. "Old Ambrose is somewhere along here with horses an' his buffalo gun. I finally convinced him my intentions are good. There he is! Good shot, that Ambrose!"

They piled onto the horses. "Borrowed 'em in town," Devlin mentioned, and didn't think it necessary to add that he took them from a hitch rack. "We'll head north an' keep goin'. Ambrose, d'you reckon you can ride all night?"

"In my youth, sir," stated Don Ambrosio, "I was known as an excellent—"

"*Bueno*," said Devlin. "Here's where you renew your youth. Hang an' rattle, Rico. Let's go!"

In the early light of morning they rested their weary and sweating horses. The Peloncillo lay far behind down the horizon, and ahead rose the eroded red hogbacks of the Pyramid Mountains.

Don Ambrosio, stiff and sore, got down shakily and lay on the ground,

mumbling something about old bones not being what they used to be. Rory helped Moira out of her saddle, and spread out a blanket for her to lie on, while Devlin squatted on his heels and searched his breast pocket for a cigar to chew on. But Don Ricardo stayed in the saddle, saying nothing. His hands were burned and powder-blackened, and he could not hold his reins, but he had managed somehow to wrap a handkerchief over his scorched and streaming eyes.

Rory gazed reflectively at Devlin. "I don't know if we ought to thank you or cuss you, but we're still alive an' that's a lot!" he observed. "How did you know where to find that powder horn, anyway?"

Devlin fished out a broken cigar, eyed it with some disparagement, and clamped the end between his teeth. "Well, you see," he murmured, "I took it out of the box in the first place, when I went to Ambrose's office, an' shoved it behind some books. Figured that was better than handing it over to Falk, so I just brought along the empty box. Ambrose didn't know that. He was some surprised when I went back last night an' pulled it out under his nose."

Don Ambrosio raised his tired head. "It is my profound opinion, sir," he announced, "that your methods and general conduct are not those of a scrupulous man!"

Devlin nodded gravely. "As a lawyer, sir, your opinion is no doubt based on wide experience."

"But what made the durn thing explode?" asked Rory, and Don Ricardo evinced a somber and macabre interest in the painful subject.

"The gunpowder," said Devlin blandly. "I dug the horn empty, filled it up with Ambrose's black powder, and plugged it up again with

some o' the rosin. Figured to catch Falk with it. Ambrose was to shoot out the light as soon as he heard the bang. As it happened, it caught Rico, too. Tough luck, Rico!"

The Don swallowed, but still said nothing, and Devlin drew out a long wad of yellow wax. "Your grant deed's buried in this, just as Ambrose said it'd be," he remarked, and tossed it to Moira. "Just melt the wax off an' there it is. By the way, here are those papers they stole from Ambrose, too."

He drew the packet of papers from a large and fat leather wallet, initialed "Q. F.," and handed them over. "Take good care of 'em," he counseled, and put the wallet back into his pocket. "Ambrose will go with you to Lordsburg an' attend to everything. You may run into the troops an' some law on the way there. Let Ambrose do the talking. Inside a few weeks you'll be living at La Estrella, with all the Peloncillo for your stampin' ground, an' the devil only knows how many head o' cattle to look after. That right, Ambrose?"

Don Ambrosio opened one eye. "Decidedly. You may safely take possession of the Velasco estate as soon as the soldiers clean out those gunmen, Miss Moo-yarky. I shall be very happy to see you established there. You have a charming voice. Er . . . I shall ask no fee for my services, if you will agree to give me some quiet place on your estate to live."

"Why, of course!" cried Moira. She gazed next at Rory. "And . . . and—"

"Yeah, sure he will," said Devlin dryly. "Make a good ranch manager, too, maybe, if you keep him away from cards. That reminds me, Irish—that jackpot. Let's split it an' no more arguments."

He counted out seven hundred dollars and stood up. "Better not loaf here too long," he advised crisply. "Push on till you get to Lordsburg. No, I'm not goin' there. Hey, where's Rico gone?"

HE caught up with the Don, half a mile away. Rico rode at a walk, chin on his chest, burned hands folded on the saddlehorn, eyes bandaged. He made a lonely figure, and a pathetic one. He heard Devlin draw near, and out of his new world of darkness he salvaged enough pride to lift his head and set his jaw.

"Where you goin', Rico?" Devlin inquired presently, after they had ridden in silence for a while.

Don Ricardo shrugged. "Where does one go when one is penniless and blind, and has many enemies? Does it matter? Where would you go?"

Devlin pondered on that. "I reckon I'd go to Juarez," he decided. "There's a feller there who'd hide

Satan himself, providin' he had the cash to pay. Got a nice place, an' quite a few nice folks stay there, some of 'em permanent. One of 'im is a first-class doctor who'd know what to do about your eyes. I think he killed a big somebody an' can't go home, so he stays there an' always needs cash. Optical powder burns can be cured, as I know. Yes, that's where I'd go, Rico."

"Very good advice, no doubt," returned Don Ricardo politely. "And how would a blind man get there? And without money, how—"

"It just so happens," said Devlin, "I collected a cash fee last night, an' Juarez is right where I'm goin'. Care to come along?"

He reached out and gathered up the Don's reins. "I shouldn't do this, you ornery cuss," he growled, "but come on!"

Don Ricardo's white teeth flashed in a smile, and Preacher Devlin grinned back, and they rode on together toward the Rio Grande and Juarez.

THE END.

CHANGES IN RANGE CUSTOMS

MOST of the changes in range work have come about as the result of progress, efforts to make life easier for both men and stock. In the days when all branding was done in the open, a lot of fat was run off the steers by men who rode through the loosely held herds, roping the calves and dragging them to the branding fires. If for any reason it was necessary to road-brand the steers, the loss was even greater. To overcome this, the building of roomy corrals near fenced pastures became an almost universal practice. Calf roundups were held as usual, but instead of the big branding times, with two or more ropers riding through the herd, the cows and calves of each brand were separated and taken to the pasture, the calves cut away from their mothers, branded and weaned. Now, on most of the large ranches, narrow chutes have been built, through which the steers must go single file, to be dehorned, branded or vaccinated. It is much easier on the cattle and less dangerous to men and horses than the old dramatic custom of roping them by the head and hind legs and pulling them down. Of course these methods are much less exciting and rob the cowboy of a lot of excitement and opportunity to show his skill as rider and roper.

GHOSTS OF THE DESERT

BY DON ALVISO

WHEN it became known that young Tom Vickert intended to compete for the hauling contract from Dobe Landing to Goldrock, the old-timers around the mining town shook their heads. This section of the newly formed Arizona Freighting Co.'s line ran smack through the middle of Frying Pan Desert, and that stretch of blistering sand was about as near to hell as any living man ever got.

Frank Harkness, who bossed Arizona Freighting, met young Vickert in Dobe Landing the day before the trial run. Tom was a lean, yellow-haired youngster who knew plenty about horses and cattle, and something about the freighting business. His father, Mel Vickert, had run cattle on the Flying V up north of the desert until about two months before when the ranch had been lost on a mortgage foreclosure.

Harkness called a friendly greeting, his shrewd eyes running over Vickert's wagons and the six scrawny mules feeding from the bed of the trailer.

"Maybe you'd better give up before you start, Tom," Harkness said seriously. "You know the Frying Pan better than any white man alive, but with that outfit, you haven't got a chance."

"Competition's open to anybody, ain't it?" Tom countered, and went on rubbing neatsfoot into harness leather.

"Sure, it is," Harkness answered a little gruffly. "But I hate to see a man waste his time. As you know, this contract is going to be

let to the man who makes the best time from here to Goldrock. I've just been looking over Sig Jondro's outfit. He's making the run tomorrow with eight fast horses, and he'll be in Goldrock by the time you make Cougar Wells."

"Maybe," Vickert said softly. "Jondro can afford to kill four span of good horseflesh by whippin' 'em over that hot strip of sand. But the man who gets the contract will have to move your freight with mules. You've been in this business long enough to know that horses can't stand that run. Yet Jondro will kill eight good horses to get the contract. You think that's fair?"

Harkness shrugged his heavy shoulders. "There's another angle to be considered. I've got to be sure that the man who gets this job can see it through. If I give it to some shoestrapping outfit that goes to pieces after a couple of runs, I'll be responsible to my company for the delay."

Vickert continued his work on the harness. "Sure. You're right about me goin' into this on a shoestrapping. Since Jondro foreclosed on the Flyin' V, I've got nothin' but two wagons and these six long-eared critters. But your notice said this trial run was open to anybody that wanted to try, so I guess I'll just give it a whirl."

Big Frank Harkness nodded and gave Tom a sympathetic smile. He couldn't help admiring the young man's nerve. When things had started going bad on the Flying V, Tom had taken to prospecting out on the Frying Pan. Rumors said

that somewhere out on that barren waste there was a rich ledge of free-milling gold. None of the old-timers had ever located that ledge, and neither had Tom. But he had learned the treacherous washes and side canyons of the Frying Pan like a book, and he was depending on that knowledge to win the profitable contract for hauling between Dobe Landing and the mining town of Goldrock.

"Why don't you throw in with Jondro?" Harkness asked curiously. "He's got to hire a driver anyway, and knowin' that strip of desert like you do, you'd be a cinch for the job."

Vickert shook his head. "Sig Jondro's not the kind of man I could work for. I don't like his way of gettin' what he wants."

Harkness lifted his eyebrows, but said nothing. He had heard that there was something shady about the deal when Sig Jondro took over the Flying V, but he figured it was none of his affair. Abruptly, he turned away and strode past the cluster of buildings that was Dobe



On the blistering sands of the Frying Pan, Tom Vickert and Jondro came to grips—and Jondro alone had a gun!



Landing, making for the wharf that clung to the muddy Colorado's bank. Tom Vickert took a can of mutton salve from the wagon box and carefully massaged a sore spot on the shoulder of one of his mules. He gave his outfit a last appraising glance and then went toward the town's one eating house.

AS he passed the Landing Bar, a suddenly loud voice from inside the saloon drew Tom's attention. He went on a few steps and then swung around abruptly and pushed into the saloon. Heavy-bodied Sig Jondro stood at the far end of the bar next to the free lunch. The withered figure of a man lay squirming in the sawdust. The big wagon boss gave the ragged shape a vicious kick and turned his back to pour another drink and gulp it down.

Jondro paid no attention as Tom walked the length of the bar and lifted the fallen man from the floor. Blood ran from the oldster's toothless mouth and a livid bruise showed on his wrinkled forehead just above his sunken left eye. Tom set the old fellow on his feet and held his swaying body upright by a firm grip on a bony arm.

"You hurt bad, Ben?" Tom asked. The oldster shook his head, saying nothing. Tom led him to a chair by a card table and then turned to face Sig Jondro. The big man had swung his back to the bar and stood with his thick elbows hooked over the mahogany edge, a glass of whiskey held carelessly in his right hand.

"Better git that tramp out o' here, afore I let him have it again," Jondro said unpleasantly. "Gittin' so a white man can't eat in this town without havin' his grub picked over first by a filthy bum."

Tom knew now what had started

the trouble. Old Ben had tried to help himself to the free lunch and Jondro had objected. Standing there measuring Jondro's wide, heavy shape, Tom felt his dislike for the bully rising to a reckless fever. Jondro was an oily-skinned man with a short, bristling mustache, flat face, and shaggy black brows. He was not only a power in this territory through the influence of his many holdings, but he had broken plenty of men bigger than Tom Vickert. Tom wanted no quarrel with him now on the eve of this race for the freighting contract, but Jondro's arrogant and overbearing ways had nagged at his even temper for a long time.

"You're a little too quick to knock people around, Jondro," Tom said calmly. "Especially someone that can't hit back."

Jondro's fat lips pulled apart, showing large discolored teeth under the black mustache. "Maybe you'd like to try some of this hittin' back. Maybe you'd like to get in your two bits' worth now, 'cause I'm thinkin' that after tomorrow you ain't goin' to have a hell of a lot to say."

"If you want it that way, I guess you might as well get it out of your system," Vickert answered quietly. "You've been hankerin' for it for a long time."

Jondro let the half-emptied whiskey glass slip from his thick fingers. Without warning, his right hand clenched and in the same move he lunged forward, driving his fist into Vickert's jaw. The blow landed with a sharp snap, and Vickert reeled backward to crash over a card table and fall face down on the floor.

Sig Jondro kicked a chair out of his way and followed up quickly.

While Tom was still dazed by that first stunning blow, Jondro moved to stand over him, ready to stomp him with his heavy-soled boots. That was the big man's way of fighting, and the ring of onlookers held their breath as Jondro braced himself and lifted his right foot for the swing.

One instant before the boot reached him, Tom twisted with cat-like speed and rolled onto his back. His knees snapped up to double his legs over his body, and Jondro, following through on the kick that missed, was caught off balance for a split second. Then Tom's feet drove out, striking Jondro squarely in the middle, and the big man's breath rasped in a sudden tortured gust.

With the lithe speed of youth, Tom was on his feet, closing in on his opponent. His rights and lefts tore at the big man's flat face and toughly muscular body, driving him back, but doing little damage. But Jondro was seasoned and an old hand at rough-and-tumble fighting. He had the advantage of long experience and forty pounds of brawn. His thick chest reached for air, and while Tom continued to drive him back, Jondro watched for an opening and swung.

That blow sent Tom crashing toward the bar. As he fell, his head cracked sharply against the solid brass rail, but he staggered to his feet in time to meet the next rush of his iron-muscled adversary. Shaking his head dazedly, Tom dodged and fainted, ripping in quick blows that cut Jondro's dark skin, drawing blood from the man's flat face.

Then, by sheer weight, Jondro pushed his way past Tom's guard and again there was the sharp crash of the big man's fist on Tom's jaw. The blow sounded like a meat cleaver slapped flat against a thick

raw steak. Its force snapped Tom back against the bar where his lean body went limp, and then slipped to the sawdust-covered floor.

Jondro rushed in and landed one powerful kick against the fallen man's chest, then crouched to jump with both feet upon Vickert's senseless body.

From the fringe of the crowd that had gathered to watch the fight, Frank Harkness called: "I think that's enough, Jondro. Cut it out!"

Blood lust burned in Jondro's small eyes, but under Harkness' stern and steady gaze, the oily-skinned freighter boss held motionless. The barkeep leaned over the bar and poured a bucket of water over Tom. The latter stirred and rolled over, and old Ben sidled around the semicircle of onlookers and helped him to his feet. As the two men passed out of the saloon, Sig Jondro threw a parting taunt.

"That's just a sample, Vickert. If I meet you out on Fryin' Pan tomorrow, I'll top you off real proper."

AFTER washing up at the well back of the eating house, Vickert and old Ben went inside and took stools at the counter. Ben's dark-skinned and shriveled figure was a more or less familiar sight through this part of the Arizona desert. His full name was Ben Allee, and beyond that folks didn't know anything about him, except that he came and went with the silence of an Indian, and had been thrown out of every saloon along the trail for trying to help himself to the free lunch.

Some said that Ben was an Apache, one of Geronimo's warriors that had lived on beyond his time. Others claimed that he was just a shiftless old Mexican, but admitted that his thin face and narrow nostrils gave his withered countenance

a look they had never seen on a Mex or an Indian.

Tom Vickert had known old Ben Allee through most of his boyhood. As a boy, he had often taken grub from the Flying V cook shanty in a gunny sack and ridden out to the edge of the Frying Pan in the evening to meet the dried-up old desert rat. Ben had shown Vickert all the mysterious rock-rimmed side canyons in that strip of treacherous desert during the months when Vickert prospected for the free-milling ledge. The old man didn't believe the ledge was there, but he helped Tom look just the same, and Tom got to know



the Frying Pan from one end to the other.

Tom ordered a meal for the two of them and while they were waiting to be served, spoke to Ben in a kindly tone. "You know you can't eat free lunch in a saloon unless you

buy a drink. So you might just as well quit tryin'. How come you showed up here at the Landing?"

Ben's good right eye twinkled and he leaned closer to Tom. "My friend, I hear things on the night wind. I hear you are going to make the drive over Frying Pan tomorrow."

Tom's lips pulled into an understanding smile. "Sure, Ben, you're always hearin' things. And I suppose you just sort of figure to go along?"

Ben Allee nodded. "Yes, my friend," he said quietly, and fell to work on his plate of beans. The two men ate in silence, and when they were finished, Tom led the way to a grounded barge on the sloping river bank. A tent had been pitched on the warped deck of the barge. Tom pushed past the flaps and spoke to the white-haired man who lay on the blankets.

"Hello, dad. How do you feel now?"

Mel Vickert looked up at his son with sunken, fevered eyes. "Purty fair, Tom. But you don't need to go frettin' about me. I'll make it all right till we kin figger a way to get downriver and have these inwards o' mine fixed up."

Tom nodded. "Sure, you will, dad. And I'm layin' a bet that after tomorrow we'll have what it takes to get you doctored up right."

"Then you're set on tryin' for that freightin' contract?"

"Sure, and I'll get it, too," Tom replied with more confidence than he actually felt. "I aim to make enough off that haulin' job to buy back the Flyin' V."

"You ain't drivin' alone tomorrow, are you?" his father asked.

"I'll say I'm not. Ben's going along."

Mel Vickert shifted his haggard

eyes to Ben Allee, and from the tent's far corner the desert rat smiled back toothlessly.

A shade of worry crossed the elder Vickert's lined face. "I suppose you heard about Jed Larkin, the other fellow that was goin' to try to buck Jondro on the run tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I heard about Jed," Tom answered. "Talk around town has it that he just plain backed out, but I happen to know different. Jondro tried to hire Jed to drive his outfit and Jed turned him down. Then sometime last night something happened to three of Larkin's mules—something that made 'em go lame. Jondro went to see Jed again this mornin', and Jed had changed his mind. He's drivin' for Jondro."

The sick man pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You ain't askin' me to guess what lamed them mules, are you, Tom?"

"We don't need to guess," Tom said bitterly. "I've known all along that Sig Jondro didn't have the guts to make that drive through the Fryin' Pan by himself, and the only way he could hire a driver was to get someone in a corner like he did Jed Larkin. Jed can make it through all right, and he probably will. He's got a wife and four kids at Gold-rock, and he'd take a lot before he'd see them go hungry."

Mel Vickert tossed restlessly on his makeshift bed. "Well, you, better turn in and get some sleep, Tom," he said finally. "Three o'clock in the mornin' comes awful early."

Tom turned to leave the tent. "I'm sleeping with the wagons," he said over his shoulder. "I don't want any lame mules in the mornin'. Ben will stay here with you till it's time for us to start."

Walking back toward his outfit,

Tom reflected on his father's illness. He knew that no doctor could cure the thing that ailed Mel Vickert. His father had taken sick right after Jondro had foreclosed on the Flying V. The former cattleman talked about his "innards," but Tom knew that his father was slowly dying of discouragement and a broken heart. The only way to save Mel Vickert was to put him back on the Flying V.

TOM was up long before three the next morning. While darkness still hung over Dobe Landing, he led the six mules down to the river and let them drink their fill. Then he went over to the eating house and had his breakfast. His jaw was so sore from Jondro's pounding that he could hardly chew, but he managed a grin when the man behind the counter wished him luck on the run.

Tom brought his three canvas water bags from the wagon and filled them at the pump back of the eating house. It was still dark when he returned to hitch up the mules. At three o'clock he drove down to the wharf where Ben Allee was waiting for him, and lined his wagons alongside the pile of freight. Tins of lard, sacks of beans, and barrels of whiskey, bundles of shovels, picks and singlejacks, kegs of nails, bales of fuse, and cases of blasting powder.

Arizona Freighting men swarmed around Tom's wagon and began to load. When they finished four tons of the assorted merchandise would be stacked solidly in the beds. On the far side of the freight pile, Tom could see Sig Jondro's outfit loading from the opposite edge. Jed Larkin was there supervising the loading, and Jondro stood off in the shadows watching all that went on.

At four o'clock sharp Frank

Harkness fired the signal gun and the two heavily loaded outfits pulled away from the wharf at Dobe Landing. As soon as the wheels of Jondro's wagons struck the soft sand, the big man uncoiled a long stock whip and cracked it sharply over the backs of the laboring spans. The spirited horses plunged forward against the collars and broke into a plunging run. While Jondro waved his arms and shouted from the seat of the lead wagon, his outfit rolled quickly up the sloping river bank and left Dobe Landing behind.

Vickert's six mules leaned steadily against their load. The heavy wagons behind them seemed hardly to move as they strained up away from the river. Past the town the mules settled to a brisk rhythmic walk, a pace they could hold for a long time, but one that soon left them far behind Sig Jondro's racing four-span team. Harkness rode past, mounted on a big dun and trailing two pack animals loaded with water bags. He would push on to Goldrock to be there when the first freight outfit arrived.

From his seat beside Vickert, Ben Allee grunted. "Jondro's a fool, I think."

"Sure. Foolish like a fox," Vickert replied gloomily as he frowned at the receding backs of Jondro and Jed Larkin. "Harkness didn't specify that this test run was to be made with the same equipment used later to haul the freight. I spent my last cent for two wagons and six mules, because I knew I'd need mules to do the job. Tomorrow, when we ketch up with Jondro at Goldrock, he'll probably buy my outfit at his own price. That's just how foolish Sig Jondro is."

"Mebbe so, my friend," Ben said softly, relapsing into silence.

QUARTERING northeast from Dobe Landing, the Frying Pan stretched narrowly between two vast reaches of rearing and jagged rock. On account of their erect and towering shapes, these rocks had been named the Needles, and they formed a miles-long impassable barrier with only a strip of burning sand in between. Past the Needles, the Frying Pan desert widened into a haze-shrouded and mirage-haunted wasteland bordered by abruptly ascending rock mesas into whose walls myriad canyons and coulees cut back to lure the traveler from his way.

By mid-forenoon Jondro's outfit was lost from sight, far ahead in the distant desert haze. When the burning sun stood directly overhead, Tom pulled the mules into the scant shade of a rearing boulder to let them rest.

Climbing down from the seat, Tom went toward the water bags hanging alongside the wagon bed. With one hand outstretched toward the nearest bag, his eyes widened and he froze in his tracks. The three canvas bags were flat and dry, and the sight of them made Tom's tongue feel parched and thick in his mouth. He jerked one of the bags from the hook and looked closely at the seam along the bottom. There was a tiny hole near the lower corner, a clean-cut gash that could have been made only by the point of a knife. The other two bags had been similarly punctured. There was no doubt in Tom's mind that Jondro had bribed one of the Arizona Freighting men to puncture the bags during the loading of the freight. He turned toward Ben with a troubled frown.

"That means no drink till we get to Cougar Wells, and we'll have to do some steady travelin' to make the wells by night."

Old Ben Allee shrugged and pulled back his ragged coat. Slung from a strip of hide over his shoulder, he carried a small camelskin bag. He swung the bag up on its thong toward Tom.

"Drink, my friend," he invited. "The bag is small, but we can fill it again at Cougar Wells."

Vickert drank and made a wry face. He remembered this old camelskin bag well. Ben had carried it for years. It must have been filled and emptied more than a thousand times, but it still reeked with the disagreeable odor of the pachyderm. As Ben lifted the bag to his thinly puckered lips, Tom couldn't help smiling. He recalled the days when he and Ben had prospected over this same region. Often they had drunk from this same old skin bag.

"One gets used to the camel taste, my friend," Ben had said often. "And besides, if the water is not so good, a man does not drink so much."

When the mules had rested, they pushed on again toward the northeast. Around sunset the haze lifted a little, and far ahead Tom could see the straggling green growth around Cougar Wells. The weary mules had begun to lag and by the time they pulled up beside the waterhole, darkness had fallen over the desert.

The two men unhooked the animals and led them to the shallow pool. Thirsty as the mules were, they sniffed and nuzzled at the water for several minutes before five of them finally decided to drink. Cougar Wells had always been noted for the heavy mineral content of its water, making it unpalatable for man and beast alike. All but one of the team drank their fill at the waterhole, and then Tom led them

back to the wagons. He was worried about the sixth mule, fearing that it was either sick or too exhausted to drink.

While Tom and Ben Allee ate their supper from cooked food carried in the grub box, the round desert moon crept up past the rock mesas, etching the face of the desert in its ghostly light. A sudden commotion over by the wagons drew Tom's attention. One of the mules lurched forward, went to its knees, and fell to the sand, kicking convulsively. Two more quickly followed, and before many minutes had passed, five of the animals lay dead on the moonlit sand.

With a baleful gleam in his good right eye, Ben went toward the waterhole. He dipped his finger into the tepid pool and touched it to his sharply pointed tongue. His wrinkled face twisted into a grimace of disgust and he began searching the low growth around the waterhole. Presently he picked up a round tin can and went back to where Tom was examining the dead mules.

Tom glanced at the label on the can and his breath pulled hard between his teeth. "Arsenic!" he rasped. Then with bitter self-condemnation: "Why didn't I have sense enough to know that Jondro would pull a trick like that? He gets here first, waters his horses, fills his own bags, and then poisons the waterhole. How much water you got left, Ben?"

The oldster lifted the camelskin bag for his inspection. A scant quart of liquid remained. The two men drank sparingly, and then Tom's gaze swung eastward over the seemingly endless expanse of Flying Pan. Sixty miles of arid and barren sand lay between the Wells and Goldrock. The remaining mule, even without

water, might carry one of them to the mining town.

"Ben, suppose you ride into Goldrock," Tom said dully. "Ike Peavey at the feed barn will loan you a couple of horses. I'll stay and watch the wagons until you get back. Better leave word for Harkness."

Ben slowly shook his head. "No, my friend. You go and I will stay. The desert is my home. I am like the camel. If I have water, I drink. If there is none—I wait."

SOMETHING in the old man's words jerked Tom to sudden attention. His young face suddenly lighted with newborn hope. He stepped close to his friend and laid an eager hand on the bony shoulder.

"Do you suppose . . . do you think that maybe Bell and Bess might still be over there in Jawbone Gulch?" he asked eagerly.

Ben Allee's good right eye gleamed in the bright moonlight, and then opened wider. He swung around to gaze toward the towering mesa rim. Almost due south of Cougar Wells, Jawbone Gulch cut its long crooked way back into the rock wall which hemmed the desert. From the waterhole, the men could see the mouth of the gulch only as a black maw between overhanging ledges of rock.

As he grasped Tom's thought, Ben's toothless mouth widened in a satisfied grin. He scampered to the one mule that remained on its feet, unbuckled the harness and threw it to the sand.

"Perhaps it can be done, my friend," Ben said as he climbed onto the mule's back. "I will ride to the gulch and see. While I am gone, you fix the harness. The tugs must be long—a wide breastband and no collar."

Ben dug his heels into the mule's

sides and headed out over the desert. Tom pulled the harness from the dead mules, and with his jack-knife began splicing tugs and fashioning makeshift breastbands from the collar pads and other parts of the harness. He worked with the feverish haste of a man who has just glimpsed a ray of hope past the dismal gloom of hopeless failure.

If Ben Allee's mission succeeded, they would get the wagons through to Goldrock. Jondro, by driving the life out of his eight-horse team, would probably reach the mining town hours ahead, but a certain pride deep down in Tom Vickert's nature made him determined to get his wagons and their cargo through to their destination even if he had no chance of winning the contract.

Two hours, perhaps three, slipped quickly by while Tom completed the job on the harness. He straightened up and turned to gaze southward over the Frying Pan. Somewhere on the far mesa rim, a coyote howled dismally, but no movement on the desert floor gave hint of old Ben's return. Vickert took a bucket from the wagons and began baling out the waterhole. Other men and animals would pass this way, and the pool, emptied of its poison, would fill again with water that was safe to drink.

The time seemed long before two tall, awkward shapes came out of the moonlight's shadows, traveling with a rolling, swaying gait toward the waterhole. Two lean and towering shapes whose presence seemed weird and ghostlike here on Frying Pan. Bess and Bell! They approached with surprising speed, Ben Allee's scrawny figure perched astride one of the humped and shaggy backs.

It was three years since Ben had

led Tom Vickert back into the mysterious silence of Jawbone Gulch and showed him the two camels whose existence he had always kept a secret. After his first amazement, Tom had realized that he was looking at what were most probably the last two of a herd of camels imported years before by the government to carry mail and later turned loose when the project was abandoned. But though there was a logical explanation for the presence of the animals on the Arizona desert, Tom had never ceased to wonder at them.

He watched now, wide-eyed, as old Ben brought the two humped and hulking brutes to a stop in front of the wagons. Bess and Bell were half wild from their years of foraging for themselves on the open desert, but they seemed to know the old man who drove them. They sniffed at Tom suspiciously, and his nostrils caught the powerful stench so inseparable from the pachyderm, the same persistent odor which still clung to Ben Allee's skin water bag.

"Keep back, my friend," the old man warned, as he slid to the ground and began harnessing the camels. "Bess and Bell, they know old Ben, but with you they are afraid."

Crooning unintelligible words and alternately stroking the shaggy hides, Ben hitched the two gangling brutes to the heavily loaded wagons. Then he grasped the tuft of coarse hair atop Bell's hump and drew himself astride her sharp-ridged back. At Ben's peculiarly guttural command the camels leaned forward, felt the breast bands tighten against their forequarters, and then slacked off in half-frightened restlessness.

Ben cursed and coaxed and kicked his sharp heels against their tough sides, and at last persuaded them to

lay their strength against the load. The strange caravan moved forward. Atop Bell's towering and awkward shape the old man kept up a weird and constant crooning. Sitting on the piled freight of the rear wagon, Tom marveled at the speed with which they moved over the flat floor of the desert.

Cougar Wells was soon left behind. After that they picked up the tracks of Jondro's wagons and passed the carcass of one of his horses, sprawled upon the sand. An hour later they came upon three more dark blots lying limp and motionless beside the trail. Three dead horses, and from the howling cries which cut the night's stillness, Tom knew that the hungry cats back in the rock canyons had caught the scent of meat.

The eight-horse team had been cut down to four, but, callous and greedy as he was, Jondro would drive the other spans on till they dropped in their tracks. Tom's parched tongue felt rough against his cheeks, and his hate for the bullying Jondro ate at him like a burning fever.

AS the moon's rim touched the bleak western horizon, Tom saw Jondro's outfit faintly outlined on the trail ahead. As they drew nearer, Tom saw that the wheels of the other wagons were bogged down in the sand. Jondro stood up in the bed of the lead wagon and his slashing whip cut cruelly against the backs of the floundering horses.

Ben veered the camels aside to pass the stalled freight wagons at a safe distance to the south. Vickert saw Jondro's wheel horses go down, and the leaders in tortured panic snapped the hitch. The reins were jerked from Jed Larkin's hands and

the lead span plunged forward, leaving the wagons behind. Larkin leaped down from the seat and came running toward Tom's wagons. Tom called to Ben to stop.

Tom could see Sig Jondro half crouched by the wheel of one of his stalled wagons; caught the glint of moonlight on a shiny gun in the bully's hand. Then screaming lead and crashing explosions shattered the silence of the night. Tom jumped down from the high-piled freight and started toward Jondro's wagons. Bending low, he zigzagged as he ran forward. Jondro's lead sought his flesh hungrily, but his lean shape was a weaving and difficult target in the failing light. As he closed up the distance, he counted the crashes of Jondro's gun.

Three—four—five. A pause. Was that all, or was the big freight boss saving the sixth bullet? Some sudden whisper of instinct made Tom throw himself to the sand just as another fan of flame spat from the muzzle of the gun. Then he leaped forward, his toes digging into the sand.

Jondro met his rush with a slashing downstroke of the gun's barrel. Vickert caught that blow on his forearm and drove his fist to Jondro's flat dark face. Mingled fright and hate burned in the big man's eyes. Pressing in close, his hammer-hard fists flailed crushing blows on Tom, then landed a right that sent the young man back on his heels. Tom swayed and dropped to the sand, but he was up again before Jondro could get at him with his feet.

Tom's dry tongue felt thick and rough against the roof of his mouth. His lungs seemed ready to burst with each gasping breath of the light dry air, but he fought on desperately. Jondro's weight was no ad-

vantage now. While Tom sidestepped lightly, shifting to avoid Jondro's hard-swung blows, the big freighter boss was hampered by the footing of fine loose sand.

Tom's long arms snapped gashing blows past Jondro's guard, slowly but surely wearing him down. Once again Jondro pressed in close and swung up a knee toward his opponent's groin. Tom sidestepped and arced a crashing right to the big man's temple as he lunged past. Jondro grunted and went down heavily.

Panting for breath, Tom stood over the fallen man, waiting for him to stagger to his feet. Jondro got to his hands and knees, poised a moment, and then sprang upward and forward. His plunging drive landed a hard blow to Tom's face, and the young man shook his yellow head, at once driving in to knock Jondro sprawling on the sand.

Again the freighter boss staggered to his feet, and Tom summoned all his strength to send him crashing backward again. This time Jondro lay still.

AT the eastern edge of Frying Pan Desert, the town of Goldrock clung precariously to the rocky side of the mountain. Frank Harkness was up early. He had his breakfast and then went out to lean against the wheel of an ore wagon while he scanned the far stretch of the lower desert. As the morning sun cleared the saw-tooth mountain ridge, Harkness suddenly jerked erect and his unbelieving gaze fixed on a blot moving eastward across the desert floor.

When Tom Vickert and Ben Allee brought their strange outfit to a stop at the edge of the mining town, everybody in town was on hand to

meet them. Harkness saw Jed Larkin jump down from the lead wagon and hurry over to his wife, who waited on the fringe of the crowd. Sig Jondro sat sullenly on the wagon seat, a beaten man, his flat face torn and bloody, his small eyes lowered to his heavy-soled boots.

A drunk staggered out onto the porch of the Bonanza Saloon, took one look at Bess and Bell, and covered his eyes with his shaking hands. "Jumpin' Jehosaphat! I'm seein' things!" he shrieked, and reeled backward into the saloon.

Harkness edged warily past Bess and Bell, moving close to the wagon to stare up at Tom Vickert. "What is this?" he expostulated. "I don't quite—"

"Just a minute," Tom interrupted. "Jondro has got a little piece he wants to speak before he forgets." He turned to the sulking figure at his side. "Go ahead, Jondro, and tell these folks how you doctored up that note dad give you for the loan on the Flyin' V."

Jondro's sullen eyes lifted to sweep over the crowd, but he didn't speak. In the moment of silence Tom noticed that Ben had unhitched the camels and led them away from the disturbing throng.

Tom turned toward Harkness. "Guess Jondro has got kind of bashful all of a sudden. What he wants to say is that the mortgage on the Flyin' V was supposed to run for five years, but he got impatient and changed the five to a two. Last night, out on the Fryin' Pan, he decided that dad and me had three more years to pay off the loan." He swung back to Jondro and grasped his arm. "That's all correct, ain't it, Mister Jondro?"

The big freighter boss nodded and

answered sullenly, "Yeah, I guess that's right."

Frank Harkness grinned and reached up to grasp Tom's hand. "Well, I guess with this freighting contract you can pay Sig off, all right."

Tom looked pleased. "I take it that means I get the job?"

"Why not?" Harkness demanded. "You earned it, didn't you? But it beats me how you can start out from Dobe Landing with six mules and end up in Goldrock with two stinking camels!"

Tom slid down from the seat, grinning. "I've got to thank Ben for that," he declared. "Most folks around here have forgot that back in the '50s the government brought in a bunch of camels to carry the mail across Texas and Arizona. The scheme didn't work out and they finally turned the brutes loose to drift. Most of them have either died or been killed off, and long ago the Arab drivers that came over with the original herd went back home. All except one, and he's old Ben. Folks around here don't know that Ben's real name is Ben Ali, and that he's an honest-to-gosh Arab." Tom's glance swung to search the circle of faces for his old friend. "By the way, where is Ben?"

"He just went into the Bonanza with a hungry look in his eye," someone volunteered.

Tom brushed past the bystanders and burst into the Bonanza Bar. Just inside the doorway he stopped, his amused look settling on a withered figure at the far end of the bar. Tom's lips widened into a grin. Old Ben Ali stood bellied up to the free-lunch counter, helping himself with both hands. His good right eye gleaming, he ate ravenously, and nobody made a move to throw him out.

RANGE SAVVY

by H. FREDRIC YOUNG

Mexican brands, unlike American brands, have no definite meaning. An American brand, such as B-B, means "B bar B." Below the Rio Grande a



itself would have no name. Hence Mexican ranches were named after owners, localities, or saints, but never after brands, as is often the case in this country.

The unsung hero of the Overland Stage lines in the West was the "stock tender," who lived alone on the prairie, caring for the horses that had to be ready for a quick change when the stage arrived. A stock tender was essentially a jack-of-all-trades, being called upon to shoe the horses, repair harness, mend broken lead chains, weld brake rods, rebuild parts of a coach overturned on the trail, and at the same time be a one-man army against encroaching savage Indians.



quiet, courageous men, competent horse wranglers and accurate rifle shots. Freighters also arranged their stops here. But, all in all, it was a lonely life. A stage would come in, and while weary passengers would climb down to stretch their

cramped limbs, the stock tender was spending those few minutes hitching fresh horses. And presently he stood watching the cloud of dust disappear in the west. But not for long. The six weary horses must be cooled and rubbed dry, the harness inspected, and all made ready for the next coach.

One of nature's curios is the difference in direction of the growth of hair on cows and horses. Horses apparently were put on earth to ride, heading into blizzards and all sorts of nasty weather.



A horse's hair slopes from head to tail, so that when he heads into bad weather the hair fends the cold away from the hide. Contrarily, the hair on a cow slopes down and toward the head. Watch a cow next time a blizzard catches her in the open and you'll discover that bossy tails into a storm always.

There are really no robins in America. The name itself is a misnomer, for the birds which we call by that name are migratory thrushes. A little close observation identifies them with the thrush.



Early colonists in America mistook them for the English robin, which has a red breast. The American robin does not have a red breast. It is orange-brown in the males and grayish in the females. Our songs about "robin red breasts" all originated in England.

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.

HOT-LEAD VERDICT

BY JOHN COLOHAN

WHEN the knock came on the office door Tubby Logan was lost in gloomy contemplation of a dead and dusty street, but at the sound he flowed into action automatically. He lowered his feet from the window sill, swung his ponderous bulk into line behind the desk with elephantine

agility, spread a whole row of formidable-looking legal documents out before him. All this was window dressing, done in haste, but the caller might be a customer, and Tubby didn't mean to let any customers get away.

"Come in," he called.



High in the hills the chase came to a smoking climax.

The door opened. A lean slab of a man in Levis and scuffed boots slid through the opening and closed the door behind him carefully before he faced Tubby. The lawyer saw a thin and high-boned face, beard-stubbed, a pair of burning eyes, a tight-lipped mouth—and then he saw the gun. Held hip high, it was pointing straight at him.

"Get your hands on the desk," advised his caller curtly. "Get 'em out where I can see 'em."

The lawyer spread both hands flat atop the desk. At twenty-two, Tubby Logan weighed two hundred and thirty pounds. The tonnage was hard to handle sometimes, but it gave Tubby an air of mature responsibility beyond his years. He watched the man with the gun shuffle across the floor.

"You Stephen Logan?" the visitor demanded. "Attorney-at-law?"

Tubby nodded. "I am."

"You any good at lawing?"

"I have never lost a case," said Tubby with quiet dignity, and saw no need to add that, having set up in practice here in San Rafael only two weeks before, he had as yet had no case to lose.

"I'm Tom Horner," his caller said bitterly. "Outlaw—murderer—that's what they're calling me. Reckon if ever a man needed a law shark I need one now."

"You're . . . Tom Horner?" Tubby Logan said.

More than ever he was careful not to move his hands. If this gaunt-faced man was Tom Horner, he was, by repute at least, an outlaw and a murderer. This was the nester who, two days ago, had shot Lige Foley in the back and fled the country. The entire San Rafael range was up in arms over the brutal murder and lynch talk was floating freely in the air.

"I'm Horner," the man said harshly. "I'm one jump ahead of a hang rope right now. And I'm innocent; I swear I'm innocent. I never killed Lige Foley—I never killed any man in my life. That's why I come to you."

Tubby nodded. "Put the gun away," he said calmly. "Pull up a chair and sit down and tell me what happened."

Tom Horner sat down. He didn't put the gun away; he held it ready in his lap. His eyes were haunted. "How do I know what happened?" he demanded. "Two days ago—Monday—I was at Flat Top looking for a stray horse when my boy comes riding like the mill tails o' hell, to tell me the sheriff and two other jaspers are at the house waiting to arrest me for murder. His mother had sneaked him out to warn me right under the sheriff's nose." For a moment the nester's haggard face was queerly touched with pride. "Reckon the sheriff didn't figure an eight-year-old kid could swing a chore like that."

Tubby tried to look judical. He had grown up in this country. Although he didn't know Horner he knew something of the background of the case. "You'd had some trouble with Foley before," he said.

"Sure," admitted Horner. "Foley runs a big outfit. He didn't have no patience with a one-cow spread like mine. We'd had trouble. Not killing trouble."

"Two men saw you riding away from Foley's after the killing," Tubby reminded.

"Two men!" Horner said bitterly. "Jess Garvey and Newt Hancock! Garvey, who's hated me ever since I beat him off when he tried to jump Soda Springs; Newt Hancock, who can't wipe his nose unless Garvey gives him permission! Those are the

gents who claim they seen me running from Foley's after the killing. I was on Flat Top that day." He spread a hand. "How can I prove it? - Garvey's a big rancher; he's got influence. I'm a nester. Who'd believe me?"

IN sunlight in the wide street beyond the open window Tubby saw a man running through dust toward the courthouse on the corner. The man disappeared through the side door leading to the sheriff's office and the jail. The fat lawyer made a mental note of that.

"You believe Garvey and Hancock are trying to frame you?" he asked.

"Listen," said Horner grimly. "They claim they seen me running from Foley's. That's a lie, because I wasn't within ten miles of Foley's any time that day. But how can I prove it? They're two to one agin' me."

Tubby rumbled his sandy hair thoughtfully. This was his first case, his first client since he had nailed a shingle to the door and set up in business as a lawyer. A tough case. Lige Foley had been a well-liked man, and his murder had shocked a whole community. Feeling was running high against the killer, and Tubby knew enough of the evidence at hand to know that all the facts pointed to Tom Horner as the guilty man. And yet, facing Horner now, he had a feeling that the man was telling the truth.

"You've got to surrender," he said. "If you're telling me the truth, we'll fight this case and beat it. You'll be safer in jail anyhow, because half this country's gunning for you now. I'll call the sheriff—"

The gun leaped up. "Danged if you will!" said Horner grimly. "I ain't going to jail. They'll hang me,

sure as hell, and I ain't in no mind to get hung right now."

"But if you're innocent—"

The gun motioned. "Quiet!" Head cocked sidewise, Horner was poised on chair's edge, tense as some hunted animal, listening to something Tubby had not heard. And then the lawyer heard the sound of scraping boots as someone mounted the staircase beyond the closed office door.

Horner was on his feet. Soft-moving at a cat, he was backing toward the door, gun covering Tubby all the way, until the nester stood just inside the door. He waited there, a gaunt and sinister figure, with grim determination written in every line of his bony face. Boots were clumping down the hallway. Tubby found time to hope that the man outside might be bound for one of the other offices on this floor of the building; the hope died as a fist hammered on his door.

Tubby's lips twisted wryly. "My busy day," he thought. For an instant he sat motionless behind the desk, his mind fumbling with the possibilities in this situation. On one side of his door a visitor; on the other a desperate, driven man, gun in hand, who might explode into violent action any moment.

TUBBY was spared a choice. The knob turned. The door opened a foot and Deputy Sheriff Bart Talley's hatchet face was thrust into the office.

"Hi, Tubby," Talley said. "It wouldn't be that Tom Horner called on you, would it?"

Tubby pushed ponderously to his feet. "Horner?" he said. Tom Horner was crouched behind the door, a scant foot from the deputy. Tubby moved across the room. He could see the gun in the nester's

hand, the desperate resolution in his face. Horner did not mean to surrender.

He gripped the door. "Horner?" he repeated. "Why would Horner call on me, Bart?"

The deputy shrugged. "Jud Tolliver claims he saw him sneaking in the back door. Can't figure what he'd be doing here unless it was to hire a lawyer."

Tubby wedged his bulk against the door. "I've been out," he lied cheerfully. "We can look in the bedroom."

He ushered the deputy before him. The office was divided, with the smaller part in back serving Tubby as a bedroom. Deftly the fat lawyer herded Tally through the office. He followed the deputy into the bedroom, closing the door after him.

"He could be hiding in the closet," Tubby suggested.

The deputy looked in the closet and under the bed, the only possible places of concealment in a bare and empty room. He shook his head. "He ain't here."

They turned back toward the office, and Tubby breathed a little sigh of relief. The office door was still open, but Tom Horner had disappeared from sight.

Talley lingered an instant in the doorway. "I'll go through the building," he said. "If he's in town, he's trapped. I got men watching both roads out."

"You think he's guilty, Talley?"

"Guilty as hell," the deputy nodded.

Tubby went back to his desk. He sat down and watched the dusty street beyond his window, wondering what had prompted him to aid Tom Horner in making his escape. Horner had come to him as a client, to be sure, and a lawyer's first duty was to his client; but by his action

today Tubby knew he had gone further than the law anticipated. He had made himself an accomplice—an accessory after the fact—to a man daubed with an ugly charge of murder.

He shook his head, remembering the gaunt nester's haggard face. Horner had a wife, a child. And he had sworn that he was innocent.

"I hope he gets away," Tubby muttered.

And like an answer came the blasting roar of a gun. One shot, and another, and then a rippling volley of rifle fire. Tubby pushed to his feet and through the office and lumbered down the stairway toward the street. Deputy Sheriff Talley joined him on the wooden sidewalk, and together they hurried toward that end of town whence had come the sound of shots.

"I baited a trap for him," the deputy said grimly. "Reckon he stepped right into it."

But, it appeared, if Horner had stepped into the trap, he had also stepped out again, for at the edge of town Jud Tolliver, rifle in hand, came down the road to meet them. Tolliver's clothes were torn and his face was covered with blood and dirt.

"What happened?" Talley demanded. "Did Horner try to get by you, Jud?"

"He got by," said Tolliver curtly.

"What happened?"

"He came rolling down the road like a bat out o' hell," said Tolliver. "I upped with my rifle, told him to stop. Only he didn't stop. He turned his bronc on me and rode me down and damn near rode over me. And then he rode on."

"You let him get away?" the deputy said bitterly.

"I let him get away!" Tolliver grunted. "Mister, I was damn well pleased to get away myself!"

THE posse formed swiftly. Bart Talley picked men out of the crowd that assembled on the scene.

"Get guns and horses," the deputy ordered. "We're riding right away."

Two men were hurrying down the street—Jess Garvey, owner of the Anchor brand, and Newt Hancock, who was by way of being a handyman for the Anchor boss. Garvey was burly-shouldered, black-browed, arrogant; Newt Hancock looked like a weasel. These were the two whose testimony had linked Tom Horner with the murder of Lige Foley; they were the men whose testimony would hang Horner if he were caught.

"Just heard about it, Bart," Garvey said. "You can count Newt and me in on that posse."

After all, Tubby Logan thought suddenly, a lawyer's first duty was to his client, and Tom Horner was his client. "Count me in on that posse too, Bart," he said.

The deputy stared at him in surprise. "Glad to have you," he said. "We leave in fifteen minutes."

They left well within the allotted time, a six-man posse. Deputy Sheriff Talley and lanky Jud Tolliver rode in front. Spread out behind the leaders, came Jess Garvey, Newt Hancock, and Jim Empson of the Rafter T outfit. And, bringing up the rear on a thick-barreled, deep-chested sorrel especially chosen for him, was Tubby Logan, a more graceful figure in saddle than he would ever be afoot. At the edge of town Talley reined his mount down for an instant.

"He's heading for Panamint Pass, likely," he said. "We'll make him run for it."

Therein, as it developed, the deputy was wrong. Ten miles beyond the town, at the bottom of Carbonate Canyon, a buckskin horse

grazed placidly. The horse was without saddle or bridle but the yellow hide was still flecked with lather, and lanky Jud Tolliver swung his mount around.

"That's Horner's bronc," he cried. "I'd know that yellow horse anywhere. Horner must be footing it up Carbonate toward the rim."

They back-tracked the horse to where Horner had dismounted, and here they found the man's trail striking out up the steep-sided canyon toward the sheer wall of rock which boxed Carbonate on the north. They lost the trail almost at once, and Talley issued curt instructions.

"We'll spread out," he said. "Three of us on each slope, and we'll sweep right up the canyon. That way we'll shove him back against the wall, and if he tries to climb that we'll pick him off with lead." His gray eyes flicked over them grimly. "No need for me to tell you Tom Horner is bad medicine. He killed one man—he'll kill again. Take no chances with him!"

They left their horses at the narrow canyon mouth, and in a ragged skirmish line, swept up the canyon

Tubby moved forward with the rest. Assigned a position in the center of the line, with Garvey and Newt Hancock above him and the others of the posse advancing on the opposite slope, the fat lawyer toiled his painful way up steep canyon walls.

And, climbing, Tubby found time to wonder what would happen if suddenly he should come upon the man who was the quarry in this man hunt. He had joined the posse on impulse, out of a desire to protect Tom Horner rather than to aid in his capture, and this despite the fact that he realized the evidence at hand indicated that Horner had shot Lige Foley in a most cowardly man-

ner. To balance that evidence, he had Horner's unsupported word that he was innocent and his own certain knowledge that Horner was not a coward.

AND then it happened. The wall of rock ahead was very close now, and Tubby laboriously hoisted his bulk up and over a shelving ledge, and then all at once he was face to face with Horner. Not thirty feet separated the two men. Horner had come to rest against a cutbank slope where boulders formed a makeshift fort; he crouched there like a cornered animal. Sunlight gleamed on the barrel of the rifle in his hand. His lips twisted in a snarl.

"Damn you!" he said distinctly. "Drop that gun! Drop it fast!"

But Tubby Logan didn't drop his gun. He held it in his hand, looking at Horner across open space.

"I'm your lawyer, Horner," he said quietly. "Remember that. Surrender to me now and I promise you'll get a square deal in court. If you're innocent, I'll never quit until you're free."

Horner shook his head. "I'm innocent," he said doggedly. "I aim to fight it out right here. Not in any court."

"You've got no chance," Tubby argued. "There's five more men scattered through this canyon looking for you. You'll be killed."

"I've got no chance in court," said Horner harshly. "Not with the cards stacked agin' me—not with Jess Garvey and Newt Hancock ready to swear my life away with lies—"

For an instant Tubby forgot to listen, seeing a flash of movement in the brush above the cutbank ledge. Jess Garvey, higher up the slope, had circled around Horner. Even now the black-browed Anchor man was closing down on the unsuspecting

nester from behind. He was creeping closer, closer.

It would be better this way, Tubby thought. Better that Horner should be taken from behind, better that he should be compelled to surrender without a chance, than that he should throw his life away in a hopeless fight for freedom. If he himself could just keep Horner's attention occupied until Garvey was in position.

"What about your wife, Horner?" Tubby asked earnestly. "She's got a stake in this. What about that boy of yours?"

The gaunt nester's face twisted. "Mebbe you think the boy'll feel better knowing his dad swung on a gallow's rope," he said bitterly.

"You won't swing, Horner. Not if you're innocent, like you say."

Garvey was in position now. Ten feet above Tom Horner, poised at the rim of the rock ledge, the Anchor man had his rifle up and a dead drop on the nester. He would call upon Horner to surrender now; and Horner would have no choice but to comply.

So it seemed; and then, quite suddenly, fat Tubby Logan saw that it was not to be that way at all. With horrifying suddenness Tubby realized that the Anchor man did not mean to offer Horner even the opportunity of surrender. Garvey was leveling his rifle deliberately, and there was murder in his face.

He meant to shoot Tom Horner in the back! There could be no doubt of it.

And because the mind works fast in times of stress, Tubby Logan saw all this, and in the same instant he thought of something else. How easy his murder would be! How safe! How very sure! Tom Horner was a fleeing outlaw; burly Jess Garvey would claim that he had shot

to save Tubby Logan's life; that would be the end of it. Tom Horner would be dead, voiceless, unable to speak for himself.

All this, in one swift instant—all this in the flashing moment of time before Tubby Logan tilted his six-gun impulsively and sent a wild shot winging toward the man crouching on the ledge above Tom Horner. The bullet was fired wildly, without aim, but the finest marksman could have done no better, for the slug hit Garvey's gun. It drove the gun back into Garvey's face; and so doing, it saved Tom Horner's life. That was the first result. There was another: Garvey leaped erect in startled surprise, and, leaping, lost his footing at the very edge of the rocky shelf. A moment he stood straight, clawing frantically at empty air, before he fell headlong, to land in rocks behind Tom Horner. He lay in sunlight, motionless.

Tubby Logan pushed himself erect. Across open space Horner stared at him.

"He was going to shoot you in the back," Tubby said, and then he picked his way forward to the fallen man. While Horner watched, he rolled Garvey over on his back. Garvey's head had smashed against a rock; he was unconscious but still alive. There was an ugly gash in his forehead and his face was covered with blood. He was hurt; how badly Tubby didn't know, nor, at the moment, did he greatly care.

"He was going to shoot you in the back," Tubby said again, unbelievably. "Why would any man do a thing like that?"

Tom Horner's voice was a harsh croak. "Why not?" he demanded. "That's the gent swore he saw me running from Foley's after the killing. How could he convict me of killing Foley quicker than by shoot-

ing me in the back? Like he shot Foley."

Tubby stared at him. "You think . . . he shot Foley?" he asked.

The nester's shoulders slumped wearily. "I dunno," he said. "I've thought mebbe it might have been Garvey. It wasn't me, though I reckon I'll hang for it. But Foley was shot in the back."

THE sun beat down. A magpie, white and black and swift as an arrow in flight, swooped between canyon walls. Garvey's rifle lay on the ground beside the unconscious man. Tubby Logan picked up the gun and looked at the nick where his lucky bullet had struck the magazine; he levered a fresh shell into the chamber and found the rifle still worked perfectly.

All this he did mechanically; his thoughts were elsewhere. His brain was fumbling with a whole host of speculations aroused by Garvey's attempt to murder Horner, by Horner's suggestion that Garvey might be the man who had killed Lige Foley. When Tubby had agreed to defend Horner he had done so because, despite the evidence, he believed in the nester's innocence. But if Horner were innocent, it meant that Garvey had lied when he said that he had seen the nester running from the scene of the crime after the killing. If Garvey had lied, Newt Hancock had lied likewise. Why?

There could be an answer to that. Remembering back, Tubby could recall that there had been trouble between Garvey and dead Lige Foley years ago. There had been some sort of a lawsuit, the details of which had slipped his mind; there had been bitterness between the two men afterward. That might furnish a motive.

Here on a wooded hillside, with a rifle in his hand, fat Tubby Logan

was hastily building the framework of defense in his first case as a lawyer. Newt Hancock had backed up Garvey in his statement that Tom Horner was seen riding away from Lige Foley's place after the murder. Hancock was a rat-faced little man who would lie effortlessly, but this was pure speculation. Tubby realized he had no single shred of proof to offer a jury in support of his belief in Horner's innocence. The weight of evidence against the nester was overwhelming.

And Horner spoke suddenly. "I've changed my mind," he said. "I'll take a chance with you. We'll fight it out in court."

Tubby nodded abstractedly. Fifty yards farther up the slope another member of the posse was slipping stealthily through the brush. The man was Newt Hancock, the second witness against Tom Horner. Still unaware of the men directly below him but plainly troubled by the shot which had sounded a moment before, Hancock was crawling forward cautiously on hands and knees. His rifle gleamed in the sunlight.

And Tubby Logan slid rifle barrel across a rock and lined the sights on that crawling figure. He glanced at Horner. "Duck down out of sight," he said.

The nester was staring at him in alarm. "What you aiming to do?" he demanded.

"Get out of sight," said Tubby sternly. "I'm opening for the defense."

Above, sprawled flat on his belly, Newt Hancock had pulled up behind a boulder to study the lay of the land ahead of him. Tubby Logan, no stranger to guns, took careful aim. He squeezed the trigger. His slug splashed dirt six inches in front of Hancock's nose.

Before Tubby could fire again, Hancock had whirled like a frightened rabbit and dived out of sight into brush. As fast as he could work the lever, Tubby sent lead crashing up the slope.

Hancock answered with a splatter of rifle fire. Bullets whined through the air harmlessly above the ledge where Tom Horner and Tubby Logan crouched in perfect safety. The nester was regarding the fat lawyer with amazement.

"You missed him," he said accusingly.

Tubby grinned. "Meant to miss him."

Maybe he was a fool. Maybe this wouldn't work at all; maybe this would result only in making him a laughingstock in the community. That part he could stand, but more than his own reputation was at stake; there was the life of a man who might be guiltless of murder, who might be the victim of a cowardly conspiracy.

No time for explanation now. Swiftly Tubby issued instructions to the puzzled Tom Horner, and together they worked their way down the slope, holding always to the shelter of the jagged ledge. They reached a patch of thick buck brush, and here Tubby directed Horner to conceal himself. He waited until the nester had burrowed down out of sight.

Newt Hancock was somewhere on the slope above him. Deputy Sheriff Talley and two members of the posse were across canyon, but now they would almost surely be working their way toward the scene of the shooting. Tubby watched patiently until he caught a glimpse of a man below him, moving cautiously up the wooded hillside. Only then did Tubby lift his voice.

"Hancock!" he bellowed. "Hey, Hancock!"

A voice up slope made reply. "What you want?"

"You got him," Tubby Logan called. He stood up then, moving around the ledge until he was in plain sight of the man above. He worked his way along the hill, scorning concealment, and after a moment he saw Hancock come up from behind a pile of boulders some fifty yards up the slope. The rat-faced little man started down the hill, rifle ready in his hand.

IT would be a matter of timing now, Tubby Logan thought. He went forward to where big Jess Garvey lay sprawled on rocks. The man was still unconscious, and his face was a bloody mess. Tubby waited until Hancock had reached the ledge over him. He looked up then.

"It's Garvey," he said, and his voice was full of surprise. He stooped over and felt the unconscious man's pulse ostentatiously. Garvey's heart was beating strongly. Tubby straightened. "It's Garvey," he said. "Shot through the head. He's dead."

From the ledge above, Newt Hancock was staring down in stupefied surprise. "Garvey!" he whispered.

"You killed him," Tubby Logan said.

And swiftly, in full sight of a man who watched with uncomprehending eyes, the fat lawyer set the stage for his denouement. He straightened the unconscious man's body; he folded Jess Garvey's hands decorously; he picked up Garvey's big black sombrero and covered the bloody face. Then he turned on Newt Hancock.

"You killed him!" Tubby Logan said, in his best prosecuting-attorney voice. "You shot him through the head!"

This was the picture which met

the eyes of Deputy Sheriff Talley and the two possmen when they arrived on the scene. Jess Garvey was lying on his back in an unmistakable attitude of death, with a black sombrero covering his face. Newt Hancock, his face the color of dead ashes, was sliding down the ledge. Fat Tubby Logan was standing back like a figure of avenging justice.

"It's Jess Garvey!" Tubby said dramatically. "He's dead. Hancock shot him through the head. I saw the whole thing." He turned on the deputy sheriff. "Better get his gun, Bart. He killed Garvey in cold blood."

Newt Hancock let his rifle slip from his fingers to the ground. "I thought he was Horner," he protested. "I thought—"

Tubby Logan pointed a scornful finger at the rat-faced little man. "You thought he was Horner!" he said. "At fifty yards you were close enough to shoot him through the head—but you thought that he was Horner! That story won't stand up in court, Hancock. I saw it all, and it was murder. You'll swing for it."

"I thought he was Horner," Hancock insisted doggedly. "He fired at me first—"

And Talley's puzzled glance turned from the fat lawyer to the man he had just accused of murder. Jim Empson and Jud Tolliver had pulled up the slope to stand behind the deputy.

"You say he fired first, Newt?" the deputy asked.

"He sure did," said Hancock earnestly. "I tell you, Bart, his first slug never missed my head six inches—"

"He fired at you first," jeered Tubby Logan. And for a moment it was as though this spot of wooded hillside had become a courtroom, with rat-faced Newt Hancock on

trial facing a murder charge, with Bart Talley and two men of his posse as the jury. But no longer was Tubby Logan the attorney for the defense. Tubby was prosecutor now, scathing in his scorn. He pointed a finger at Newt Hancock.

"You say he fired at you first," Tubby said sternly. "You ask us to believe that? Jess Garvey is dead and can't speak for himself—and now you ask us to believe, that he shot first! He took a shot at you, and then you killed him! That's your story, isn't it?" The fat lawyer's voice dripped sarcasm. "Why would Garvey shoot at you, Hancock? Can you tell us that?"

HANCOCK stared at him. Stunned momentarily by an unexpected fact, charged with murder, he was like an animal looking out of a trap. His fumbling fingers found his throat, loosened the collar of his shirt, as though already he felt the bite of rope around his neck. He faced Tubby Logan defiantly.

"I can tell you that, too," he snarled. "Garvey took a shot at me because he figured it was the best chance he'd ever have. Because he figured Tom Horner would get the blame and he'd be in the clear. He was a pretty smart jasper, Jess Garvey."

Tubby Logan's voice was soft. "Why would he want to be rid of you?"

"Because," said Hancock quietly, "it was Garvey who killed Lige Foley. Not Tom Horner. Garvey killed him, and I knew it, and he promised me a thousand dollars to keep quiet." His voice was bitter. "I reckon he figured it would be cheaper to pay me off in lead."

And then climax piled on climax, for suddenly Newt Hancock's white

face was whiter than before. His eyes were bulging, and he looked like a man who had glimpsed a walking ghost. He pointed a shaking finger.

"He isn't dead!" he cried.

Jess Garvey was sitting up. He had brushed the black sombrero from his face, and he was sitting up on the ground. His face was covered with blood, but through the blood they could see the Anchor man's glaring eyes. And Garvey had a six-gun in his hand.

"You're smart," Garvey said. He was talking to Tubby Logan, and his voice was flat and deadly. "You built a pretty trap. But you won't live to enjoy it. You're too smart for your own good." The gun was lifting now. "You won't live long enough to see me hang—"

And the high canyon walls sent back the roaring echo of a shot. Not Garvey's shot. The bullet hit Jess Garvey in the chest and drove him backward; the gun slipped from his fingers. Deputy Sheriff Talley took two quick steps, Colt smoking in his hand. He looked down at Jess Garvey and then he let his gun slide back into the holster. Then Talley's voice broke a long moment of silence.

"Saw him reach for his gun before he sat up," he said slowly. "Couldn't figure what a dead man wanted with a gun. So I watched him. Then, when Hancock named him a killer—"

He shook his head. "So Garvey was the killer," he mused. "That'll be good news for Tom Horner, wherever he is."

"I'll tell him," Tubby said.

The deputy's jaw dropped. "Jumpin' Jehosophat! Don't tell me you've caught Horner, too?"

"My client," said Tubby Logan, with dignity, "is hiding in some brush. I'll go and call him now."

"Killed him, eh?" Gindoe grunted to Aktah.
 "All right, Injun. From now on you do as I say—or swing."



BULLET BLACKMAIL

BY JIM KJELGAARD

At a sharp blow from the short limber stick the trapped silver fox dropped. He stretched convulsively, his jaws opened and snapped shut, then a little trickle of blood bubbled from his nose to make a red puddle in the snow.

Aktah stood beside him, the stick poised for another blow. But the fox was dead. Looking down on him, Aktah's eyes glowed and his chest swelled with pride. This was the first silver fox he had ever caught, and it meant much to him.

He had no rifle of his own, and perhaps he would use the money he got for this pelt to buy one, the bolt action kind, with hooded front and receiver rear sight, that city sportsmen used when they came up to hunt moose and bear, and other big game. Aktah had long wanted a rifle like that.

The short spruces that surrounded the trap were covered with the soft snow that had fallen only last night. As far as the trap chain would reach, the snow was trampled in a wide circle where the fox had leaped and struggled in his effort to free himself. Aktah knelt beside the animal, and started to take him out of the trap.

One of the spruces waved a bit, and a mass of snow tumbled from it. Aktah threw himself flat on the ground a split fraction of a second before a rifle blasted. His hand shot to the long knife at his belt, and he sprang straight at the spruce.

Behind it, dressed in a caribou-skin jacket with a cape that fitted over his head, an Indian was frantically ramming another bullet into the long muzzle of an antique rifle. Seeing that he could not load again in time, he let the rifle fall in the snow to grasp his own knife.

For a moment the two circled cautiously, Aktah studying the other's clothes, and as much of his face as he could see. The Indian was a stranger. Plainly his intention had been, and still was, to kill Aktah and take the silver fox.

Aktah held his knife low, his fingers wound about the hilt almost to the blade. It was a good knife, and had come to Aktah from his father and his grandfather before him. In the days before the white man's law had come to supplant tribal law, it had drunk the blood and taken the scalps of many enemies. Aktah had never used it on a man, but, if the

gods to whom he still prayed in secret were with him, now the long knife would again drink man's blood.

The other Indian, obviously a crafty and experienced fighter, searched for an opening. Aktah's eyes roved over him, but betrayed nothing of the weakness he had found. The other held his knife well, but a trifle too high. There was an inch and a half between his hip bone and his lower rib that was open and should have been covered.

Then, as though he had stumbled on a snow-covered stub and could not help himself, Aktah fell two paces forward.

With a pantherlike leap the other Indian came in, and when he leaped he brought his knife up another inch and a half. Aktah spun half around. He felt the blade rip through the outer edges of his jacket, and the sting where it grazed his ribs. But it was the cutting edge, not the point, that struck.

Aktah was scarcely conscious of the warm trickle of blood down his side as he snapped his own knife forward. He felt it strike, pierce clothes, flesh and bone as it slanted upward through the short strip that had been left open. The Indian's jaws gaped wide as the blade drove through his heart, and he grunted heavily. His arms waved feebly as he fell backward to land supine in the snow. Then he was still.

Breathing heavily, Aktah stood over him. His blood raced hotly as for a moment he stood in the grip of the savage emotions that his forefathers had known long before they had bowed to the superior strength and arms of the white men. He had done no wrong. He had killed an enemy who had first tried to kill him. And that, to him, was fair.

Then Aktah looked at the bone handle of his knife, slanting into the

dead man's breast. The fighting lust that clouded his brain gave way to lucid reason. The white men hanged all killers! It was no use to run from the police, either. As far as he ran, they would find him. Still nobody had seen the fight, no one knew as yet that he was a killer. Here in this isolated place the body might remain undiscovered for weeks or months, and might never be found.

Aktah knelt again and wrenched his knife from the body of his slain enemy. He cleaned the blade on the snow, then froze in his tracks. Through the cold, quiet air there was borne to him the voice of a white man.

"Well, well, Injun. A fine way to treat your little playmate! I knew somethin' was fishy up here! That grunt couldn't 've come from anything but a man!"

FOR one long moment Aktah knelt where he was. In the heat of the fight and the excitement his keen ears had not heard the white man's approach. For a moment he considered taking the knife and leaping at the newcomer; they couldn't hang him any higher for two killings than for one. But white men were too smart to be caught easily, and doubtless this one had a rifle. Besides, the white man had done him no wrong and would only be upholding his own law if he took him to prison.

Slowly Aktah rose to his feet and turned around. The white man, holding a short-barreled carbine, stood ten feet away between two spruces. He was a tall man, wearing a worn jacket. The hood thrown back from his head revealed a bearded face, a long, angular nose, and colorless little eyes that had no expression in them. He laughed jarringly.

"Killed him, eh? Well, you'll soon have as good a collar around your neck as any squaw could make, Injun! An' it'll fit tighter!"

Aktah stood numbly, his hands hanging down and the knife trailing from nerveless fingers. There was something about the way this white man talked that struck terror into the very depths of his soul. He looked at the rifle, and for a second thought of jumping into it. His hands tightened a little. That was the best way—die now in the wilderness he loved rather than face the nameless terrors that even the thought of prison conjured up. But the white man was speaking again.

"All right, Injun. What do you aim to make of it?"

Aktah stared, puzzled.

"What do you mean?" he muttered.

"Just this. I *could* use a man. You can go with me, an' do as I tell you. Or you can get yourself handed over to the police. There's no pay in it if you go with me, but you got a choice between that an' hangin'."

Aktah studied him. The white man wasn't a constable. He wanted Aktah to go with him, and do his bidding in return for which he would keep silent about the killing. If Aktah chose not to go, he would be given over to the police—and hanged. Obviously there was only one decision a sensible man could make.

"I'll go with you," he said quietly.

"You're showin' sense for an Injun," the white man declared with satisfaction. "The first thing you got to do is hand over that cape you're wearin'."

Aktah stood a moment, indecisive. His cape was a parka made of finest caribou skin, with a collar of fringed wolverine skin. The hooded jacket which the white man was

pulling off, was made of the coarse hide of a bear and had only four dirty ermine skins stitched in as a collar.

"All right, Injun!" the white man snapped at Aktah. "Get it off! You do as I tell you an' do it quick!"

Aktah hesitated a moment more while the white man watched him. Then he took off his cape and handed it over. Doing so, there burst over him full realization of what the gesture signified. He was choosing voluntarily to cast his lot with the white man, and from now for as long as the white man lived, and could tell of the killing, he would be a slave.

"That's better, Injun." The white man's colorless eyes were cloudy with anger. "An' get this straight right now: If you ever figger to use that knife on me, you might get away with it. But, if you do, you'll hang anyway. I'll see to that, an' I'll show you how it's goin' to be done. You're goin' to be responsible for my life. Get it?"

Aktah was amazed. The fact that he was surrendering his cape should be assurance enough that he had agreed to the white man's terms, and would do anything the white man asked him up to and including fighting for him if necessary. But evidently the white man did not understand that. Aktah put on the other's discarded cape.

"I'm ready," he said quietly.

The white man's roving eyes found the silver fox. "That belongs to me, too. Bring it along, Injun. You're now part of the Lace Gindoe Tradin' Co."

Aktah walked ahead of Lace Gindoe to a winding little stream. Eight big dogs hitched to a sled lay in their traces there. When the white man came back they arose, cringing as he walked to the back of the sled

and picked up a snaky whip. He snapped it, and the lash went curling out to burn the lead dog's flank. The dog groveled, his head on his front paws.

"Gimme your knife," Gindo ordered Aktah.

The Indian handed it over. Gindoe laid it on the load, and then climbed on, facing Aktah with his rifle across his knees. He pulled a fur robe over himself and arranged his back comfortable. But he kept his hands out where he could use the rifle freely.

"Start the dogs," he ordered.

Aktah shouted at the dogs. They strained at the traces and the sled started to move. Slowly it gathered momentum and began to go faster as Aktah guided it.

FOR three days they traveled north, and in that time crossed the snowshoe trails of only two other men. Then, on the morning of the fourth day, man signs became more plentiful. Aktah made no comment, but wondered why Gindoe should think of trading up here. They were approaching the Bandler River, the hunting grounds of the Yiki Indians. The Yikis were a poor tribe. For years, due to the down swing of the fur cycle, their hunting grounds had been all but bare of fur.

At twilight on the fourth day they came to the river and the village. There were long rows of firewood stacked along the river, and back from it two rows of log houses that the Yikis lived in. Aside from these there was a new, one-story log building and, a little way away from the village, a police post. At a word from Gindoe, Aktah swung the team over and stopped in front of the post. The white man got off

the sled, and Aktah went into the post with him.

The constable in charge, a young, shrewd-faced man who had worked among the Yikis for five years, sat behind the desk. Aktah waited by the door while Gindoe went up to introduce himself, and it seemed to Aktah that more than a little hostility showed in the constable's face. That was strange. White men meeting in isolated places usually made a great fuss over one another.

"My name's Gindoe," Lacey said. "I've got a tradin' license to come in here, an' I'm the one as had the post built. I thought you might want to see my credentials."

"I'm Matthews," the constable told him. "Weren't you through here in July?"

"Yes," Gindoe admitted. "I found out then that the fur was swingin' back in here, and the Yikis should have good catches this year. I shipped in two thousand pounds of trade goods by boat an' I've got another thousand with me. Or I'll pay cash if the Injuns want it."

"Your boat shipment got here and is stocked in your post," Matthews said. "But listen, Gindoe, part of my job here is to see that these Yikis aren't cheated. The fur pockets they've been finding this year are the first they've found in a dozen years. This is their chance to get out of the rut. We won't have any trouble if you make up your mind now to pay them fair prices."

Lacey Gindoe laughed. "As if I didn't aim to! Constable, if any Injun comes to you claimin' he's been cheated, bring him over an' I'll make any adjustments you think necessary."

"I'll remember that," Matthews told him.

Aktah followed Gindoe outside, and again started the dogs as Lacey

walked to the log post. The dogs stopped in front of the building and Gindoe whirled.

"Bring 'em around to the side!"

Gindoe entered the building. Aktah drove the dogs around to the side, where there was a small door. Gindoe opened the door and motioned Aktah inside. He showed him a small metal box and a piece of paper.

"Can you read?" he demanded, waving the paper under the Indian's nose.

"No," Aktah answered.

"All right. I'll read it for you. It says: 'I, Lacey Gindoe, do declare that if I am killed or injured, Aktah is to be held responsible. I also declare that I saw Aktah kill a man on Ferguson Creek.'" He folded the paper and looked at Aktah. "Do you know what that means, Injun? I'm puttin' the paper in the box, an' I'm takin' the box over to the police post. I'm leavin' word that it should be opened only if anythin' happens to me. Now go ahead an' unload the sled, an' don't fool around the false bottom."

Aktah unloaded the sled, carrying in to the post needles, cloth, knives, hatchets, a bundle of traps, a dozen old Ross rifles and ammunition for them, and various other trade goods. None of it was first-class material, but nothing except the rifles was very poor. Aktah broke open a box of ammunition and found partly corroded bullets with the leads loose in their chambers. He shook his head. The man whose life depended on one of those rifles and the ammunition Gindoe was selling with them, was placing himself in a very precarious position. They might work on game, but they were apt to fail just when needed most.

It was night when Gindoe came back to the post. Aktah had built a fire in the stove and spread the white man's blankets on the steel bunk in one of the small rooms leading off the main store. He himself would have to wait with his blankets until Gindoe told him where to sleep. That came hard; Aktah's father was a Sioux, and through Aktah ran no servile blood that would allow white men to kick him around with impunity. Yet it was better than hanging. Moreover, Lace Gindoe had Aktah's word that he would be his servant, and Aktah didn't break his word. In every way he could he would serve Gindoe and help him.

The dogs were unharnessed, fed, and chained to separate posts to keep them from fighting, but the sled was still outside the door. Aktah wondered about that sled. It had carried only about half as much as appeared to be on it, and Aktah had unloaded it down to the false bottom. He knew that there were still goods to be unloaded under the bottom, but Gindoe had ordered them left alone.

But now, carrying no light, the white man took Aktah outside. He loosed the clamps that held the false bottom in place and lifted it out. Aktah stared wonderingly. The bottom of the sled was filled with small kegs, and the smell told that they could contain nothing but cheap, high-powered alcohol.

FOR two weeks Aktah worked setting the store in shape, while Gindoe slept, drank from one of the kegs that he had kept apart from the rest, or disappeared with an ax and a rifle to be gone all day. When the work was all done Aktah presented himself before the white man, who was half drunk.

"Go out an' get some fresh meat!" Gindoe snarled. "Did you think you was goin' to sit around here eatin' my grub for nothin'?"

Aktah looked at him submissively. Never to be forgotten was the fact that one word from Lace Gindoe would put him in the small cell back of Matthews' barracks awaiting trial—and hanging.

"I haven't any rifle," he said simply.

"Then get one!" Gindoe snapped. He strode through the store to where the dozen old Rosses had been placed in a rack by themselves. Carefully he examined them, then thrust one and a box of cartridges into the Indian's hands.

Aktah started north away from the river. Both the forearm and stock on the rifle was loose, and there was a slight wobble in the bolt, but that made no difference now. It was good to breathe free air again if only for a short time. It was good to be away from Lace and hunt once more. Aktah sighed, and thought of the days when he had planned to build his life around hunting and trapping.

A mile and a half out, Aktah killed a yearling moose. He skinned it, cut it up and hung the meat in a tree. Reluctantly he started back to the post. He laid the rifle on a shelf outside the small room which Gindoe had assigned to him, and which was always locked at night. Gindoe was taking no chances on Aktah's creeping out and knifing him while he slept.

For the rest of the winter Aktah worked around the post and supplied Gindoe with fresh meat. The first days of spring brought the first of the Yikis in from the trapping grounds with fur. There was still enough snow so they could use dogs.

Five men, letting their teams of

two or three dogs lay outside, came into the post. Aktah watched from the background while Gindoe approached them. He heard them arguing over the trade goods and the furs, and then there was some low-toned conversation that Aktah could not hear. One of the Yikis went back to his sled to bring in sixteen lynx pelts. Aktah saw Gindoe give him trade goods and money, and opened his eyes in surprise. The goods the white man handed out were fair value for the furs he got in exchange.

The lone Indian went back out and took his team away. The other four went into the rear of the post with Gindoe. Aktah remained where he was, and when the four came out their eyes were dilated and big with excitement. They shouted to their dogs and drove away, just enough of Lace Gindoe's cheap alcohol in them to whet their appetites for more. Then Gindoe came back into the main room, his face as flushed and excited as the Indians' had been. Aktah saw the greed there, the cupidity, and waited for the white man's orders.

"Git the dogs ready, Injun," Gindoe told him. "We're goin' out to-night."

AT dark, Gindoe riding and Aktah driving the dogs, they left the post. Covered by the robes at Gindoe's feet were two of the small kegs. For half an hour they traveled up the river, then swung north along a small creek. A mile up the creek they met the four Yikis who had been at the post that afternoon. Aktah remained poised on the sled while Gindoe got off to talk with them.

Then Gindoe came back for the kegs and Aktah watched while the four drank greedily from one, swill-

ing it down like water. One of them began to laugh senselessly, and the other three joined in. Then Gindoe took the keg away, though the four Yikis begged for more. He sat on the kegs, his rifle ready, and shook his head. The four disappeared in the darkness.

They reappeared staggering under loads of fox, mink, and marten pelts, wolf and fisher hides, lynx furs, ermine and beaver skins. They laid their pelts beside Gindoe's sled, and he gave them both kegs of alcohol.

Aktah watched, writhing inwardly. The Yikis were friendly little people; he liked both them and their country. They had worked hard all winter for the pelts they were now trading for one night's drunken debauch. They and their families would have none of the wealth they had earned. But Aktah could do nothing. He was Gindoe's slave, and would be until the secret gods to whom he now prayed harder than ever saw fit to release him from bondage.

Gindoe loaded the furs on the sled and, strapping on a pair of snowshoes, walked ahead of it. Aktah followed him with the dogs. They went another mile upstream and swung into the spruces. Then they came to an exposed southern slope from which the wind and sun had taken all the snow. The dogs strained and panted, but the sled moved slowly down the slope, to bring up at a little clearing in the spruces where there was a platform erected on four tall poles. It was a cache, built strong enough so that nothing but a grizzly bear could tear it down. Gindoe must have built it on one of the occasions when he had been absent from the post.

"Put 'em up there, Injun," Gindoe ordered now.

Aktah carried the furs to the cache

and covered them with canvas. The white man's plan was clear now. For all furs taken in at the store, he would give fair value, and thus allay Matthews' suspicion. But he would meet as many trappers as he could out here and trade alcohol for their furs, which he would keep in the cache.

Within two weeks Gindoe could go down the river with a fortune in furs. Those in the cache he could bring in to the store a few at a time and pack them there.

EIGHT times in the following ten days Aktah harnessed the dogs and drove Gindoe out to meet trappers. Each time they carried one or two of the kegs, and each time gathered a small fortune in furs to be added to those already in the cache. Fourteen of the sixteen kegs Gindoe had had on the sled paid for sixty-five percent of the furs the Yikis caught, and Gindoe got most of the other thirty-five percent with his trade goods. Twice Matthews visited the store. He was puzzled: either the Yikis' catch was not coming up to his expectations, or else something was happening that he knew nothing about. If the latter, he meant to find out about it.

Matthews' second visit, made the day the last of the snow disappeared, worried Gindoe. Aktah had been busy for two days sorting and packing fur to take down the river when the boat called, and had most of the fur that had been taken in at the store packed. But it would take at least three nights to smuggle in and pack the fur in the cache. Lace was going to load it in the boxes the trade goods had been in, and pile it on the dock. He could take his unsold trade goods back down the river if he wanted to, and once past Mat-

thews was sure he could get it the rest of the way.

The Yikis were sullen, but so far none of them had gone to Matthews. When they complained at the store, Gindoe placated them with some of the last of his alcohol, and sent them away again. An Indian with a couple of drinks of strong liquor in his stomach couldn't think of anything else.

The night after Matthews' last visit Gindoe sent Aktah to start bringing in the fur from the cache.

A pack sack hanging loosely on his shoulders, Aktah struck directly for the cache, glad as usual to be alone and free of his white master. The Yiki village was quiet as he passed through, but to Aktah it seemed more a sorrowful than a resentful calm. The Yikis had had their chance to make money with fur, and instead had traded it for Lace Gindoe's alcohol. Aktah looked back when he was a little beyond the village, then squared his shoulders and walked on.

He came to the southern slope and swung down to the cache. Within a hundred yards of it he stopped to listen. Then, very carefully, he crept through the spruces to look. Something was wrong at the cache. Aktah had sensed it, but still did not know what it was.

From the edge of the spruces he peered out at the cache, or where the cache had been. It was down now. Three of the poles still stood, but one pole and the platform were on the ground. A great dark shape moved within the clearing, cuffing at the fur bundles with a big paw. Aktah slunk lower. It was a huge grizzly, the biggest he had ever seen, and it had ripped the fourth pole out or broken it in two. Aktah raised his gun, pressed the trigger. The grizzly ran into the forest. Evidently he had

come out of winter hibernation very hungry, and was finding the furs acceptable food.

At a mile-eating little trot Aktah returned to the village and the post. He knocked on Gindoe's door, heard the steel bunk creak. Then the white man's impatient voice:

"What do you want?"

"A grizzly knocked the cache down," Aktah reported. "He is eating the furs."

Gindoe swore, and Aktah heard him stirring about as he dressed. Then he was at the door, a rifle in his hand. Aktah eyed it. He had dreamed of owning just such a rifle as that.

"You blasted Injuns!" Lace snarled. "Why didn't you shoot him?"

"I—" Aktah started.

"Come on!" Gindoe cut in. "We can't get all that fur in at once, an' we got to get that grizzly!"

Together, alternately trotting and walking, they returned to the cache. Lace examined the scattered furs, and came back to Aktah at the edge of the brush.

"That grizzly'll be back!" he snapped. "We'll wait here. If you was worth your salt, you would have got him!"

"I—" Aktah began again.

"Quiet!" ordered Gindoe peremptorily.

The night wore on. Silent, tense, the two men lay side by side in the spruces. Aktah breathed a prayer and gripped his rifle. Gindoe kept his eyes on the ruined cache. The first faint light of dawn threw silver streaks across the sky, but it was not until an hour after that that the grizzly came back.

Aktah saw him first, a huge, clumsy-footed, head-rolling thing that came halfway out of the brush and paused there while he watched.

Aktah felt himself go rigid. The grizzly he had always accorded the deepest respect, and this one was far bigger than any he had ever seen before. The grizzly came out of the brush into the clearing and stood presenting a broad frontal target.

The crash of Gindoe's rifle punctured the silence. The grizzly dropped as though he was a huge, stuffed skin that somebody had let fall. With a triumphant shout Gindoe sprang into the clearing, ran to the grizzly and kicked it.

But, as though the kick was the shock needed to call it back to life, the grizzly was up. Gindoe shot again, but the bear was towering over him, his four-inch claws raking. Aktah heard the white man's frenzied shout:

"Shoot, Injun!"

Aktah clubbed his rifle and leaped at the grizzly. The bear dropped Gindoe, staggered drunkenly forward two steps, and collapsed for the last time.

But Gindoe, lying where he had been dropped, was dead too.

AKTAH carried Lace to the river on his back. He dropped the white man's body in front of the police post, and Matthews came out. His eye roved from Gindoe's motionless figure to Aktah, and back again.

"How did it happen?" he asked.

"He wounded a grizzly," the Indian explained. "It got to its feet and killed him."

Then Aktah folded his arms across his chest, awaiting the pronouncement of doom that would now fall upon him.

"Well, I'll take care of him," Matthews said. "Stick around. I may need you to help with the report."

"There was a steel box and a paper," Aktah reminded him quietly.

It was better to get everything over with.

"Oh, yes."

Matthews went into the post and came out with the box. He opened it, and spread out the paper. Then he glanced up, puzzled.

"This is nothing important," he said. "Just a receipt from Pete van Gelder at Cotton Bow. Gindoe sold him some furs last year. I suppose he wanted to keep the receipt for reasons of his own."

Aktah stood with arms folded, his impassive face concealing the exultation that leaped through him. He should have known that Gindoe would not have dared put into the hands of the police anything at all that might bring an investigation on himself—an investigation that would without any doubt have revealed his own illegal actions. On the other hand, Pete van Gelder was one of the most reputable traders in the North. The mere fact that Gindoe could prove he had had business transactions with Van Gelder might have helped divert suspicion, had any arisen. Pete van Gelder didn't deal with fur bootleggers—if he knew they were crooked.

The constable leaned against the door, frowning slightly. There was something lurking beneath Lace Gindoe and his trading that had not come to the surface. He had long been suspicious, but had found no proof that would enable him to act.

Aktah hesitated a moment more. Gindoe was dead, had no possible claim on him now. And his rifle—

"Can I take Gindoe's rifle?" he asked Matthews.

"Didn't he pay you wages?" the constable said almost carelessly.

"I . . . no," Aktah forced the words.

He felt the flush in his cheeks. The

constable's tone was smooth, but pierced like a knife blade.

"Tell me how Gindoe traded."

Aktah straightened, and all the dignity of his Sioux father showed in his whole bearing. If the constable suspected him, if he was lost, the Yikis need not be. They would get their fur back, because he would explain exactly why it should be given back.

"He gave the Yikis alcohol and took their fur when they were drunk. It's all in a cache. The bear spoiled some, but not much. They can still sell it to some honest trader."

"I see," the constable nodded soberly. "And just what was *your* connection with Gindoe?"

"I was supposed to work for and protect him."

"Why didn't you?"

"I tried," Aktah said quietly. "But he gave me one of his trade rifles to hunt with. I shot at the bear last night, and the bullet stuck in the barrel. Had I tried to shoot again with it this morning, the rifle would have exploded in my hands."

The constable looked at him keenly. A lot of men came into the wilderness. Some were running from whatever they had left behind, some had pasts, and some were criminals. But one test of a good officer was knowing when to act and when to let sleeping dogs lie. Aktah, no matter what he had done to give Gindoe a strangle hold on him, was not a criminal. And the Yikis needed a strong leader. Matthews turned to go into the post.

"You can take Gindoe's rifle," he called back. "Don't worry about anything else."

Aktah smiled in relief and understanding. He wouldn't worry. No man needed to if he had a good rifle.



BY HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

HORSE OF ANOTHER COLOR

"This will be Marlin," Clay Norcross, the Wells Fargo messenger said to himself as he felt the engineer slap on the air. No. 7 lost speed rapidly as it rolled through the warm summer evening.

Standing at the barred wicket in the door of the express car, Clay saw the lights of the town swing into view. This Oklahoma country was not new to him, though he had not laid eyes on it in three years.

WS-6C.

As the train ground to a stop, he heard a hand truck roll up to the door. But he did not open up until he saw the local agent standing there, a gun on his hip. Clay's head went up an inch or two as he noticed the three men with the agent. One of them wore the badge of a United States marshal. All carried repeating rifles.

"Cole Roberts and a couple deputies," he muttered, identifying the

marshal at a glance. Suspicion of their purpose tightened his mouth. "They ain't here for their health," he thought.

He ran the heavy door back on its rollers. The agent, the marshal and his deputies climbed into the car at once. The agent carried a package which he handed to Clay.

"Better put this in the safe and lock it up right away," he said. Clay saw that the package, heavily sealed, was addressed to the Drivers' National Bank, in Dull Knife, twenty miles north of Enid.

"Glad to get that off my hands," the agent declared, mopping his brow. "Valued at ten thousand—"

The value of the package, great as it was, hardly explained the agent's obvious anxiety. Down in Texas, Clay had carried such amounts often enough to regard it as commonplace.

"Any particular reason for saying that?" he inquired as he signed for the package. The agent flashed him a look.

"I'll say there is. You're new on this division, Norcross. Don't open up for anyone tonight unless you know what you're doing," he warned. "The Santa Fe has had two stick-ups within a month. It may be our turn next. Marshal Roberts, here, and his men are riding with you."

Clay nodded in response to the informal introduction.

"I've got it pretty straight that Champ Quantrell and his gang are out of the Strip and somewhere east of the Cimarron tonight," Roberts explained. Suddenly he gave Clay a closer look. The latter's surprise at mention of Champ Quantrell's name had been apparent. "Your face looks familiar to me," the marshal declared. "Ain't you the boy who used to work for Hank Gore's Sash & Outfit, east of Dull Knife?"

"Yeah," Clay nodded. "I worked around that country a long time. In those days Champ Quantrell was just a cheap blackleg living on what the gamblers and chiselers in Dull Knife tossed at him." His tone was suddenly hard and bitter.

"He's plenty bad now," Roberts said heavily.

Clay, busy with taking aboard the local express for the north, made no comment. With the agent giving him a hand, the work was soon done. Then the agent lowered himself to the platform.

"All right, Charlie, give him the 'all clear!'" he called to the conductor. And to Norcross: "Luck to you! You're in good hands!"

CLAY closed the door with a bang and locked it. A warning toot from the engine, and No. 7 began to move. She was ten minutes late leaving Marlin, and the engineer had her kicking up her heels in a hurry. Roberts and his deputies disposed themselves comfortably on the express trunks, while Clay busied himself with his work.

The train was under full speed by the time he finished, the heavy express car swaying on its trucks, and the warm night air sucking down through the ventilators with an eerie sound. Clay swung around in his chair and faced the marshal.

"It's a wild stretch of country north of here for sixty miles," he said. "We've got only three stops between here and Enid—Manatee, Iola and Quanah. Two, if we're not flagged at Quanah. Where do you figure we may run into trouble?"

"Quanah—if we stop. It's just a guess. But it doesn't matter," Roberts said confidently. "We'll be ready for 'em. If Quantrell climbs into this car tonight he'll get the surprise of his life. They say he's

got a great sense of humor. Maybe. I'd like to see him laugh this off."

"I know all about that sense of humor of his," Clay remarked bleakly. The marshal cocked an understanding eye at him.

"It begins to come back to me," he said. "You've got an old score to settle with Quantrell, haven't you?"

"I ought to have—remembering what he did to me," Clay answered.

"Lifted Gore's fall steer money off of you, didn't he? It was first drive you ever made for old Hank, wasn't it?"

"I didn't make the drive," Clay corrected him. "Brent Rucker, Gore's segundo, was in charge of the shipping. At least he was until a steer slammed him against a loading gate a few minutes before we had the last of the stuff aboard the cars. We had to send Brent to Doc Lester's place. He left me to take over, so when Lanahan paid off, I got the money."

Clay shook his head as his thoughts dwelt on that long-past afternoon.

"It was the first time anyone had ever trusted me with so much money," he went on. "I made up my mind to stay with it, and see that nothing happened to it. Our wagon was on the big flat just outside of town. The boys had no sooner washed up and thrown a little grub into themselves before they lit out for Dull Knife to make a night of it. I'd always been a ringleader in that sort of fun, but that night I didn't go."

"I should have gone in with them and hoisted a few," he said. "But I couldn't take that chance—not with all that money in my shirt. So I sat around the fire with Billy, our grub slinger. I was getting ready to turn in when Quantrell came riding

across the flat. He hailed us and came up to the fire."

"Why did you let him do it?" Roberts asked. "You knew he was bad."

"I knew he wasn't any good," Clay countered. "His laugh didn't fool me; I just figured he didn't have guts enough to slap a gun on me. That was my mistake. He hadn't said ten words before he had me covered. 'Hand it over,' he says. I tried to lie out of it. I told him Brent had the money. That was when I began to get acquainted with his brand of humor. He laughed till his fat belly shook. 'You was too cute about this,' he says. 'If you'd gone to town with the rest of the crew, I wouldn't have tumbled. But when a fun-loving gent like you stays away from the bright lights, it's plain reading.'"

Clay was silent for a moment as he rechecked the waybills for Manatee, and got the stuff ready.

"It wasn't just losing the money that washed me up with Sash 8," he said finally. "It was the way Quantrell played me for a sucker. You don't get over a thing like that."

"Didn't you go after him?" one of the deputies asked.

"Go after him?" Clay echoed bitterly. "I chased that skunk for a year without seeing anything of him. I drifted down into Texas then and went to work for the company. I'd sure like to meet up with him again."

"Stay on this run and you will," Roberts promised, "unless I snag him first. 'His face was grim. 'It'll be a break for you if my hunch is right and he stops us tonight. Whatever happens, don't be a fool, Norcross. Getting a slug between the eyes won't help you to square your grudge with Quantrell.'"

Clay jerked his head in agreement. It was good advice, and he knew it.

TWENTY minutes later, the engineer blew his whistle as the train approached the little town of Manatee. Roberts and his men got down behind the trunks and shoved



their rifles out in front of them. With a grinding of brake shoes the train rolled up to the station.

"Take your time about opening up," Roberts warned.

Clay followed the instruction. After a moment he said: "The agent's out there. I don't see anyone else."

"All right, slide the door back," Robert ordered tensely. "We've got it covered."

Clay did as he was told. The charged stillness inside the express-car was abruptly shattered by the impatient panting of the locomotive and nerve-racking song of the cicadas in the gum trees. Then the head and shoulders of the Manatee agent appeared in the open doorway. He handed in a package and received the few Clay had for him.

"Warm night," he remarked. "Feels like rain."

That was all. Roberts nodded and Clay closed the door. Listening, saying nothing, the four men waited until the train began to move again. One of the deputies sighed heavily. Roberts gave a mirthless laugh.

"We got tightened up here for nothing," he said dryly.

They struck a stretch of new road bed. Dust sifted up through the floor and down from the ventilators. In their brackets the oil lamps seemed to swim in a yellow haze. Forty minutes later they were in Iola. It had begun to rain, a heavy drizzle. Otherwise, it was as peaceful as it had been at Manatee.

"Begins to look as though I was all wrong about this," Roberts grumbled. "We'll know better when we get to Quanah. If we're flagged there, look out."

"It's a likely spot for a holdup," Clay observed soberly. "Nothing between the railroad and the Cimarron to stop a hard-riding bunch."

Roberts had pulled out his watch. He snapped it open and held it in his hand. "Eleven minutes running time to Quanah," he remarked. "We'll know soon." He didn't put the watch away. Finally he said: "Just about there." His round, smooth-shaven face had a set look. Plainly he believed the expected was about to happen. "Get ready, boys," he advised.

The words were not cold on his lips before they felt the engineer slap on the air. The train slowed. The four men exchanged an anxious glance, taking it for granted that they were being flagged. The next moment, however, the wheels began to click faster. Quanah was left behind with a rush. Roberts ran a finger around inside the collar of his shirt.

"Got all steamed up for nothing,"

he grunted. "Thought that was it for a minute."

The tension that gripped the others had snapped. Enid was only half an hour away. The deputies chuckled, or pretended to. One of them rolled a cigarette. Clay had work to do, but he waited, his glance fixed on Roberts.

"Marshal," he said, "why were you so sure Quantrell knew I had that package aboard? How could he have found out about it?"

"Huh!" Roberts snorted. "How do they ever find out such things? Someone tips 'em off, of course. Chances are he knew we'd be with you tonight. We may hand him a surprise even yet. No. 8 will be standing on the track when we pull into Enid. We'll double back south on her just on the chance that Quantrell may try to top off the laugh he's having at my expense by giving her the works. As for you, you'll be all right, north from the city."

"I hope so," Clay said thinly, "but my guess on that cunning wolf is that he may do the unexpected." To himself he added: "And if he does, this time I'm goin' to be ready for him."

IN Enid, it was only a step across the platform from one train to the other; but the brief moment that it took Roberts and his deputies to climb aboard the southbound No. 8 was long enough for a man lounging against the station to spot them. Sure of what he had seen, he melted back into the shadows to where his saddled horse waited. A few seconds later he was heading north in haste.

Clay quickly cleared his Enid express and, foregoing the usual friendly chatter with the handler on the truck, took aboard the stuff for the north and promptly locked

himself in. He ran to the safe then and twirled the combination. If Champ Quantrell had a joker up his sleeve tonight, Clay proposed to top it.

The business he was about did not take him long. Working rapidly, he had it finished before the engineer applied the steam and the first shudder ran through the train. A second later No. 7 nosed north out of Enid.

His eyes hard and bright with excitement, Clay lowered himself into his chair and sat there waiting for the train to gather speed.

"It's bad enough to let a man make a sucker of you once," he muttered. "To let him get away with it twice is your own fault."

Instead of picking up speed, No. 7 loafed through the yards. Clay knew what that meant. The engineer was stopping at Crow Creek tank for water.

A minute or two later, he felt the air go on. The train stopped, and as he listened, Clay heard the fireman climb over the tender and lower the tank spout. The water began to rush into the tender. But only for a moment. Suddenly the spout banged as it jerked upward. Another moment, and a shot shattered the stillness of the night. Hard on its heels came a violent pounding on the door of the express car.

"Open up in there!" a voice boomed. "Make it quick, if yuh don't want to be blown to hell!"

Clay pulled himself out of his chair and stood there, the blood draining away from his face. There was no mistaking that voice. Slowly he pulled his gun out of the holster and tossed it on his desk.

"Make up yore mind!" Quantrell roared. "We ain't waitin'!"

"All right!" Clay answered.

Willing hands ran the door back

from outside as he stepped away. He was instantly covered. Three men leaped into the car. Of them Clay recognized only Champ Quantrell.

"Git that safe open before I put a slug—" Quantrell stopped short, his mouth dropping open with surprise. "Waal!" he boomed. "If it ain't my old friend, Clay Norcross! Ha! Ha! Ha!" His laugh was as loud and jarring as ever. "Boys, this makes it perfect!" And to Clay: "I'm shore glad to renew my acquaintance with yuh, Clay," he grinned brazenly. "Funny how every time we meet yuh seem to be handin' over somebody's dough to me." He started another laugh.

"Come on!" the weasel-eyed outlaw at his elbow cut across his merriment coldly. "We ain't got all night here. Git this over with!"

"That's what I say!" the third man snarled. "What are we stallin' for?"

QUANTRELL'S eyes narrowed, and the light in them was murderous. Apparently he didn't relish being told where to head in. The contemptuous smile he caught on Clay's lips did not soothe his feelings.

"I always got time for a laugh," he blustered.

"You've had your laugh," the outlaw who had spoken first flung back at him.

Clay saw Quantrell waver. He wanted to take up the challenge, but he seemed to realize on what a thin thread his authority hung. The easy way out was to ignore it.

"You're right, boys," he muttered. "That puts it up to you, Norcross. I want that package you've got in the safe." He shoved the nose of his gun into Clay's belly. "Get it open!"

Clay shook his head. "If you

want to get in that safe, you'll have to blow it. I'm not opening up. It'll mean my job if I do."

"It'll mean yore funeral if yuh don't!" Quantrell said flatly.

"Putting a slug through me ought to be easy," Clay said coolly, "but it won't get you what you want—"

Quantrell seized on this cleverly dangled bait in a hurry. "Then yuh



admit you've got the package!" he whipped out.

"I'm not saying anything," Clay answered evenly.

"Of course he's got it!" the weasel-eyed outlaw put in. "That's the only reason he's stallin'."

Quantrell nodded. "Five seconds for yuh to make up yore mind, Norcross!" he barked. His gun bored

deeper into Clay's stomach. "I won't ask yuh again."

Clay was not only willing, but secretly anxious to open the safe. His pretended reluctance to do it, his talk of losing his job and all the rest of it was only to make Quantrell overanxious. He knew he had gone as far as he dared. Now it was his move.

"You win," he got out sullenly. "Get that gun out of my belly."

Dropping to one knee in front of the safe, he gave the combination two long turns and a short one.

"She's open," he muttered.

Quantrell gave the steel door a yank and it swung back. "Here it is!" he cried triumphantly as he pulled out a sealed package. "Drovers' National Bank," he read from the waybill. That was enough for him. He was grinning from ear to ear when he straightened up. "Norcross, yo're better than Santa Claus!" he laughed. "We'll shore be lookin' forward to meetin' yuh again—"

A shot sounded from the rear end of the train. Running feet sounded on the gravel, and a man stuck his head in the open door.

"We got to git movin'!" he threw at Quantrell.

"Comin'!" the bandit answered. He was the last one out of the car, and he could not forego a final thrust. "Sorry I had to break in on yuh so unexpected tonight." He laughed mockingly. "I'll send yuh a postcard next time!"

CLAY heard them reach their horses. Firing a harmless volley to discourage pursuit, they crossed the tracks ahead of the locomotive and struck west. A few minutes later the conductor and brakemen ran up to the door of the ex-

press car. Two members of the local police and a group of armed passengers were only a step behind them. The brakemen hoisted the conductor into the car.

"Well," the latter got out excitedly, when he saw Clay, "I'm glad you're all right. "The open safe caught his eye. "I see they cleaned you."

"Not exactly," Clay informed him. He went to the little cast-iron stove—unused since winter—that stood in a corner of the car, and, after fishing around inside it for a moment, drew out a soot-smearred package. "This is what Quantrell wanted. All he got was some letterheads. When Roberts left us in Enid, I figured something like this might happen, so as we stood at the station, I fixed up a package as much like this one as I could make it. I plastered it with sealing wax, and made the waybill out to the Drovers' National of Dull Knife."

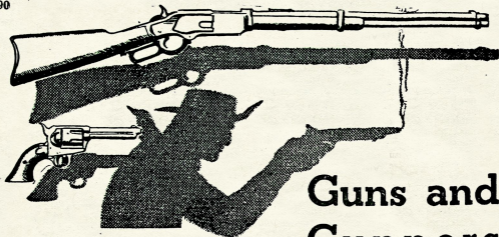
"And Quantrell fell for that?" the conductor demanded incredulously.

"I stalled him so long that when he finally got his hands on the package he didn't look at it twice," Clay explained.

"Hooray for you!" a man at the door burst out. "Quantrell will never live this down. When this gets out, the whole country will be laughing at that skunk!"

"That's right, Norcross," the conductor agreed. "He does a lot of laughing, when the laugh is on the other fellow, but his sense of humor won't be equal to this."

"So I figure," Clay said over his shoulder as he returned the package to the safe. "If your health means anything to you, you'd better get this rattler rolling before Quantrell comes back looking for an explanation."



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

THE work of refinishing a gun stock is not so complicated that the average home workman cannot do a very excellent piece of work and get satisfactory results, but it requires a great deal of time, patience, and elbow grease. If you attempt a job of this kind, you would be wise not to eliminate any of the necessary stages.

If you have a military rifle, the stock will have been boiled in oil to get it as near waterproof as possible. If you have an old shotgun or rifle stock, it may at one time have been finished with plain varnish. If there is any varnish or lacquer left from the original finish, this must be completely stripped before you attempt to apply a new finish. Any of the varnish removers or lacquer removers will work on this, depending, of course, upon the finish. They are simple to use, but rather messy.

Varnish removers are applied with a rag or an old brush, and allowed

to soak in, whereupon the old varnish becomes soft and sticky. A dull knife is then used to scrape it off. Sometimes coarse tough rags dipped in varnish remover, can be used to scrub it off. Be sure you get every trace of it off the surface before you attempt the following step.

If there are any slight dents in the stock, not *gouges*, you may raise the surface to smooth them out without the application of sandpaper. Do this by careful application of a wet rag and the tip of a hot flatiron pressed only to the spot in question. The steam will thus penetrate the pores of the wood and cause the dent to swell back to normal. Naturally, if the dents are very deep, the stunt will not work. Nor can it work on scratches where the wood has been

The following list of literature is available to our readers: STRAIGHT SHOOTING, SNAP SHOOTING, WINCHESTER AMMUNITION HANDBOOK, SAVAGE, STEVENS, FOX, COLT, SMITH & WESSON, HARRINGTON & RICHARDSON, 3c each; MOSSBERG, MARLIN, 2c each; WESTERN AMMUNITION HANDBOOK, 5c; REMINGTON ARMS AND AMMUNITION, 6c; and a large three-pound bundle of assorted catalogs, 30c each and 38c west of Chicago. None can be sent to Canada. Postage stamps are accepted.

Application blanks for membership in the National Rifle Association may be obtained by writing to Mr. Sharpe. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp with your request.

removed. There you must use sandpaper and files to remove all traces of the scar before starting to apply the new finish.

The secret of a satisfactory finish lies in the preparation of the wood. Have it as smooth as possible after you have removed the old finish.

First, sand the wood very carefully with a coarse grade of sandpaper, and then with succeeding finer grades, until you get down to about size 7/0. Always work with the grain—*never* across. Finally, use a small pad of steel wool about No. 000 grade.

Next, raise the grain. Do this by wiping the surface with a wet rag. The surface should be reasonably moist, but not too wet. Let it soak in for not more than a minute or two, and dry it suddenly over a hot fire, either a coal stove or a gas range. Keep the stock rotating constantly and keep it far enough away from the flame so that the wood is not scorched. It should be dried very quickly all over.

After the stock has been thoroughly dried in this fashion, run your fingers over it and you'll find the surface all "fuzzed up" with very fine and rough slivers of wood. Use your No. 000 steel wool again and rub the stock down once more, following the grain carefully.

Repeat this operation until you can no longer raise this fuzz. Then let the stock dry over night, and you'll find that many of the porous spots have become filled up, due to the raising of the grain.

Do not use varnish for applying a

new finish. Modern gun stocks of the better grade are finished in dull oil which will take on a high polish if properly rubbed.

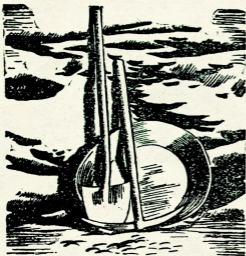
To apply your oil finish you'll need some rubbing felt. A small block of this about three or four inches square and a half-inch thick can be purchased for a few cents through your local paint supply house.

You first use a wood filler to completely fill all of the porous grain of the wood. The best material is silica. You can, of course, prepare your own under directions given you by your paint supply house or you can obtain a prepared mixture from the same source.

After the stock is thoroughly dried and carefully cleaned, apply the filler, rubbing it in with a rag *across* the grain instead of with it. Let it stand for an hour and remove the surplus with a piece of rough cloth, rubbing against the grain. Dry it overnight, then go over your surface lightly with No. 000 steel wool.

Use standard boiled linseed oil obtainable through a paint shop. If the wood is light-colored, and you wish to darken it, apply a little bit of oil dye to the oil, not the wood. However, *wood will naturally darken as it absorbs oil*. Rub the oil into the wood well with bare hands. Permit it to stand and dry for two or three days, and then polish with rubbing felt and rotten stone, obtainable from your drugstore, and a little water, rubbing down smooth always with the grain. Repeat as many times as you desire, and the more you do it, the higher polish you'll get.

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 Gunnery Department, Street & Smith's Western Store, 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

ASSESSMENT work is a term familiar to experienced prospectors. Yet just what it is, and what it means seems to puzzle many newcomers to the mining game. The right to possession of a valid mining claim can be kept up by doing a certain amount of work on the claim each year. This is the "assessment work." It must have an equivalent value of at least one hundred dollars, in labor or actual improvements of a mining nature beneficial to the claim.

As long as this much work is done each year, sworn to and recorded with the proper authorities, Uncle Sam says the claim is yours. Let the assessment work slide, and the claim, even though it embraces a mineral deposit you yourself have discovered, becomes automatically open to relocation by any qualified person—United States citizen—who chooses to restake the property in

his own name, unless actual work on the claim is resumed by the original title holder before such a relocation has been made.

T. J., of Niagara Falls, New York, who admits in his letter that he is a green hand at prospecting, but anxious to learn as much as he can before starting his first trek west in search of gold is one of the more recent readers to query us on this important subject. M. B., of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and a crowd of others have asked for substantially the same data. The answers to their questions are grouped together here in a single article. We suggest that the article be clipped and saved because information once given is seldom repeated in these columns.

The assessment-work year does not conform to the calendar year. It begins at twelve noon on the first day of July, and ends at the same time the following year. No assessment work is required for the assessment year in which the location is made. In other words, if a claim was located in, say, November, 1940, no assessment work would be necessary until that covering the 1941-42 assessment year, which should be done and recorded before noon of July 1, 1942. Even then, if work was not actually begun until the morning of July 1st—before noon—and was faithfully performed continuously thereafter until the one hundred dollars' worth of work had been completed, the claim would not be subject to relocation for failure to perform the 1942 assessment work.

The mining laws give the prospector and original discoverer of a mineral deposit a mighty fair break in such matters, perhaps because they are so largely founded in the United States on the early-day codes and

practices devised and set up by the pioneer prospectors in the West themselves.

However, do not forget that many States have regulations of their own requiring that a certain amount of work shall be done on a claim within a stated period after the date of location, usually sixty or ninety days, to make the claim valid. Where they exist, such regulations must be observed, and this "location work" or local State requirement is a regulation separate and distinct from the annual assessment work exacted under the Federal statutes.

To hold a claim by the performance of assessment work each year the work done must be such that it will aid in actually developing the mineral deposit on the claim. Merely hauling some tools out to the property, dumping them on the ground, and then spending a few weeks contemplating the scenery won't do. Assessment work means bona-fide work, such as sinking shafts, or driving tunnels in hard rock for lode claims, or digging test pits and prospect holes in placer ground to help prove up the actual extent and value of your deposit. Of course, definite mining on the property is one of the best and most incontrovertible forms of assessment work.

Inasmuch as neither Federal nor State statutes specify exactly what will and what will not constitute acceptable assessment work, there are many instances where work different from that mentioned above will come under the head of necessary labor

for the improvement or development of the claim, and thus be received as assessment labor. For instance, road work, or necessary trail construction, even though it is not on the claim itself will frequently pass muster. So, sometimes, will removing brush to get at the underlying gravel in a placer claim.

If you are in doubt as to what will and what won't hold water as assessment work in any particular State or locality, it is wise to consult local officials before going ahead or, if possible, get a definite ruling from the attorney general of that State. But it is still best if you wish to maintain an unblemished title to your claim, to avoid any attempted short cuts and stick to noncontroversial forms of accepted assessment work in the annual labor which you must perform on your claim each year in order to hold it properly.

A valid mineral claim, title to which is kept alive by faithful performance of the required annual assessment work can be sold, or leased, and passes by descent to the owner's heirs just like any other piece of real estate. In the latter case, the heirs of course must see that assessment work is done each year to continue their title to the property.

To J. K., Berkeley, California: The law in Arizona requires that all public assayers must be licensed or registered. It is against the law for an unregistered public assayer to do, or offer to do, assaying for a fee.

● 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.



The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

The main objective in corresponding is, of course, to afford ourselves enjoyment. It's fun hearing from lots of people, sharing their lives, in a sense—but the opportunity you have here at the Old Hollow to make friends in so many different countries as well as all over the United States shouldn't be overlooked from an educational standpoint. You can gather a fund of knowledge about the world and get your information first-hand from the folks best fitted to give it to you. So start off now by getting in touch with the Pals whose letters appear this week and finding out all about the places in which they live. Our first letter is from Bonnie Burns who writes:

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eighteen years old and would like to get letters from everyone in every corner of the world. Besides writing letters my hobbies are reading, collecting "Confucius say" Chinese proverbs, and witty sayings of all kinds. Come one, come all and write to me.—Bonnie Burns, Box 111, Hatch, New Mexico.

Brighten up Helen's life—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I join the Hollow Tree? I am eighteen years old and just out of high school. I am interested in writing letters, the movies and traveling. I live in the mountains and it is quite dull for there aren't many people here. Please help me get some Pen Pals. I promise to give a prompt answer and want to hear from both boys and girls.—Helen Gookins, Lake Hughes, California

Some information on gold mining wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We have been following your department for a long time in hopes that we would see a letter from someone with the same interests as

ours. Those letters that we did answer brought no replies, so we are hoping this letter will bring many to fill our mailbox. We are two boys, twenty-six years old, who love to hunt and fish and have our hearts set on gold mining. We have been all through the West, but didn't find anyone who would help a couple of Easterners. So, come on, girls and boys, young and old, and tell us what you know about mining and help us get started. We promise to answer all letters.—Wayne Hunter and Harry Bassett, R. F. D. No. 2, Orange, Massachusetts

Clarence has songs to swap—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm a farm boy twenty-five years old from down on the banks of the old Red River in Oklahoma, where the sand blows. I'm in search of some real Pen Pals. I have some five thousand songs I'd like to exchange with someone. My favorite pastimes are swimming, hunting and all other outdoor sports. I guess I've said enough to let you Pals know you're welcome from far and near. I'd especially like Pen Pals from old Mexico and Hawaii.—Clarence Willingham, c/o F. A. Wright, Rt. No. 4, Randall, Oklahoma

Make room for Estelle—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I enter your cozy corner? I'd like Pen Pals from everywhere, both boys and girls, between twenty-one and thirty-six years of age. I am twenty-three and my favorite pastimes are reading, writing, skating and dancing. I'll exchange snapshots with Pen Pals.—Estelle Alexander, 1919 Ayers Street, Corpus Christi, Texas

From beautiful Hawaii comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a steady reader of clean-cut Western Story magazine, and I have written for Pen Pals before but have never had much luck in getting answers, so I thought I would break into your Hollow Tree and try my luck. I'm a lonesome soldier way up in the mountains in the land of beautiful Hawaii. I've also visited two foreign countries. I am twenty-one years old and would like to hear from girls and boys of all ages. I will send pictures to all who

write and will answer all letters.—Private Wilfred Beaudion, Company M, 21st Infantry, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii

Regina likes the movies—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a nineteen-year-old girl who lives on a farm out in the country and I get very lonesome. I would like to have Pen Pals all over the world, so come on, all you boys and girls, and write to me. My favorite pastimes are swimming, dancing and going to the movies.—Regina Kembas, East Bethany, New York

Wanted: A partner—

Dear Miss Rivers:

After reading *Western Story* for many, many years, I am venturing my first request. I lost my old partner a year ago and would like to find a prospector or miner in Nevada, Arizona or New Mexico who would like to take his place. I would like to find a place where game and fish are plentiful and mining possible. I am nearing seventy but am pretty husky. Please help me out, friends.—H. F. Brown, Grantsburg, Wisconsin

Betty wants more friends—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Is there room in the *Hollow Tree* for me? I hope so. I am an eighteen-year-old girl who would like to get writer's cramp answering letters. I am not lonesome for I have a large circle of friends, but I do want to enlarge it, so come on, all, and make my circle the biggest one ever.—Betty Lou Leonmazzi, 350 Avondale, Monterey Park, California

The good things in life appeal to Tom—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have always wanted Pen Pals—lots of them—and I promise any members of the *Hollow Tree* who will write to me that I will answer all letters, even though it is only a short note. I am a radio operator on a battleship of the U. S. navy and have traveled extensively while in the service. I would like to hear from people all over the world—people who like to travel and enjoy the fine things of life. I appreciate good music, good food, and try to enjoy life to the utmost. I hope you will publish this letter and I sincerely hope many readers of *Western Story* will answer my appeal for Pen Pals.—Thomas O'Brian, Jr., Radio Division, U. S. N., U. S. S. *New York*, c/o Postmaster, New York, New York

Anne lives right in the center of things—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Come on, everybody, everywhere, and write to a lonesome gal who is on duty ten hours a day, six days a week, and who loves the outdoors. I live near a famous mountain resort, a fort, an air base, a lake, and the Pacific Ocean. I've answered lots of letters in the *Hollow Tree* and have had some grand replies. I'll do my best to make my letters interesting.—Anne Hardy, Rt. No. 7, Box 524, Tacoma, Washington

Albert will exchange stamps and coins—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Have you room for a lonely CCC boy in the *Hollow Tree*? I am twenty years old and col-

lect stamps and old coins as a hobby and I would like to exchange with others who have the same hobby. Basketball and track are my favorite sports and I also collect photographs and necktie pins. I enjoy writing letters and will answer everyone, so come on and write to me.—Albert Charity, 160th Company CCC, Kerwin Brook Camp, Wesley, Maine

This Pal will tell you about Chicago—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please enter my name in the *Hollow Tree*? I am in my early thirties and have lots of time to answer letters. I'd be glad to hear from anyone regardless of their age. I live practically in Chicago, so could write lots about that city. My hobby is reading, and I also enjoy softball and going to the movies. Please; may I have lots of letters soon?—Mrs. Caroline E. Schott, 13441 S. Greenwood Avenue, Blue Island, Illinois

"Chief" is a real Indian—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Can you find a corner in your department for a lonesome Injun cowboy? I wish I could rope lots of Pen Pals from all over the world. I am thirty-five years old and am an Indian born in Oklahoma. I've been all over the West and can tell you lots about it. My hobby is writing cowboy songs and poems, and I will exchange poems and snapshots with anyone. I promise faithfully to answer all letters, so come on, boys and girls, and fill my mailbox full of letters.—"Chief" Carlson, Box 56, Turner, Montana

The West intrigues Hortense—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would appreciate it so much if you would enter my earnest plea for Pen Pals. I am a nurse and was born and have lived in Florida for most of my life. I trained in North Carolina, however, in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains. I have always wanted so very much to know people from out West and learn something of ranch life and the beautiful country in which they live that if someone way out there in the wide open spaces will take up their pen and drop me a line, I'll even promise a quick airmail reply and will tell them anything of interest about Florida. But everyone is welcome to write no matter where they live.—Hortense Capote, 2202 Highland Avenue, Tampa, Florida

Alex likes the outdoors—

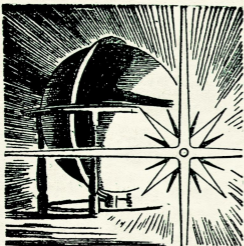
Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-two years old and would like Pen Pals between twenty and twenty-five years of age who are interested in hunting, trapping and fishing. I will answer anyone who cares to write.—Alex Brown, General Delivery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Fill Lucille's mailbox—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Come on, all you lads and lassies—how about writing to a girl who likes to make new friends in her spare moments. I am eighteen years of age and am employed as a secretary. I am fond of dancing, especially "jitterbugging" and am looking forward to seeing my mailbox swamped with letters. Please don't disappoint me.—Lucille Warmkessel, 341 N. 6th Street, Allentown, Pennsylvania



Where to go and how to get there

BY JOHN NORTH

JUDGING from the many letters we have recently received on the subject, the urge to follow the trap line is still strong among adventurous, outdoor-minded readers of this department. This is as it should be. The romance and lure of a life in the open is an integral part of our natural heritage.

In the early days it was men like Jim Bridger, Kit Carson and a host of other equally famous "mountain men" who were literally the first American pathfinders in the West as far as white men were concerned. They were fur hunters, professional trappers. In their wake and over the trails they first blazed came the army to set up outposts, the prospectors, the cattlemen, the dirt farmers and the settlers who have since opened up the West and made it the great, rich, colorful land of opportunity that it still is today.

Though conditions naturally have changed considerably since the era of the mountain men, there are wide areas of wilderness remaining. The trapper may find places in these sections where, once he has learned the country and his trade, he can run his lines and make an outdoor living by his trapping skill.

J. H., of Canton, Ohio, one of those who have queried us lately on professional trapping, wisely asks: "First, just what are the general qualifications necessary for success as a professional trapper? I may have them, and I may not, although if possible I would like to take up fur trapping either in the Western States or the far north country of Alaska as a career. I have always been keen about camping and living outdoors. I have also done some trapping for muskrat, but more as a hobby than a business."

J. H. has at least two of the essential qualifications as shown by his own words. He *likes* to trap. Likes it for itself as well as for the profit there is in it. Otherwise, trapping wouldn't be a hobby with him, hobbies being something we derive pleasure and satisfaction from regardless of the monetary returns. That is a good start, not because the profit in trapping is to be looked down on, derided, or even lost sight of, but because the chances are we do best the things we *like* to do.

The other favorable quality that J. H. says he possesses is a love of outdoor living. Professional trapping is just that. Outdoor living at its best—and worst. Not a mere vacation camping trip of a week or so's duration, but actually living throughout a whole season, the rugged, hard winter season, in a cabin deep in the forested fastness of some snow-drenched, blizzard-swept wilderness terrain. Unless you

have a partner you will probably be miles away from the nearest living being. And still more miles away from the town or settlement that is your closest supply center. For weeks and months on end it will be just you, your trap lines and the snow alone in the eerie silence of the great outdoors.

If the prospect scares you, if you can't take solitude in wholesale doses, better give up the idea of becoming a professional trapper in the north country, or in the mountain wilderness of the Western trapping States. You won't like it.

On the other hand if you possess an unquenchable longing for far places, if you prefer to be in the woods in every kind of weather, self-reliantly on your own in every respect, then trapping holds out an opportunity to live an adventurous, healthy outdoor life—and a chance to earn your living doing it.

The trapper, too, must know camp craft and woods lore pretty thoroughly. To start with, the permanent trapper in wilderness country will probably have to build his own shack or log cabin. Sometimes previously abandoned cabins, former prospectors' shacks, and such may be found and rehabilitated, but not always. It is better to know how to build your own. The cabin will have to be stocked with a season's supply of food, a good stove, and plenty of firewood.

Some trappers with long trap lines to attend, build additional shacks or

shelters as adjuncts to the main cabin. When this is done, spare bedding, part of the food supply, some clothing and cooking utensils should always be kept in one of the secondary shelters. Why? Not only for convenience, but because accidents do happen. Suppose somehow your main-cabin burned and all your equipment was in that one building—bedding, clothes, food. The fire might clean you out entirely. More than that, it might leave you stranded in midwinter with a fine chance of freezing, or starving to death before you could trek back to the nearest outpost of civilization. So even if you have just one cabin in the wilderness, as a matter of precaution and possibly life insurance, it is a smart trick to cache safely somewhere nearby a spare assortment of foodstuffs, clothing and extra bedding.

For the same reason it is a good idea for the far-country trapper to take along two axes, instead of one. A damaged, broken, or lost ax head could quite conceivably be a matter of serious concern to anyone deep in the big woods on an all-winter trapping trip. At the very least, it would mean an arduous, maybe dangerous trip to town to replace it.

Those are simply two illustrations of what was meant a few paragraphs back by the statement that any person contemplating professional trapping in the back country must have a sound knowledge of practical camp craft to start with.

● 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.



Gunsnake GRAZE

Part Four

BY LUKE SHORT

The Story So Far:

Will Danning buys the rundown and isolated Pitchfork Ranch in order to provide a hiding place for Murray Broome, his former employer, who has escaped from jail after a murder conviction. Angus Case, who owns the ranch next to the Pitchfork, and Pres Milo, his foreman, both are hostile, and Milo, who has long wanted to buy the Pitchfork himself, discovers the

identity of Broome, or Milt Barron, as he is now known.

Milo threatens to turn Milt over to the law unless he persuades Will to sell the Pitchfork. According to Milo, there is copper on the ranch, a discovery he has managed so far to keep secret. Without telling Will anything about the copper deposit, Milt tries to get him to sell the ranch, but Will refuses.

CHAPTER XII

UNDER ARREST



In town, Chap Hale, the old lawyer who managed the sale of the Pitchfork for Will, is murdered. Will discovers that Angus Case is the executor of the estate. Since Hale had bought the Pitchfork in his own name, expecting to turn it over to Will, the latter asks Case for the deed. Case refuses to give it up.

That night Milo breaks into Hale's office to look for the deed which, unknown to anyone is in the hands of Mary Norman, a girl who claims to be a friend of Murray Broome's. She had found it in a letter sent to Will by Hale just before he died, and which she stole from Will before he had a chance to read it.

Milo forges a letter purporting to show that Chap Hale feared Will Danning, and makes Angus Case, whom he has been blackmailing for years, pretend to find it among Hale's papers and turn it over to the sheriff. Next day Will is arrested for murder.

Will's jaw sagged in amazement as Sheriff Phipps' words sank in and he realized that he was being accused of Chap Hale's murder. It was so manifestly absurd that he was almost inclined to laugh.

"You danged old fool," he said with patient scorn. "I heard Mygrave tell you that both me and Milt were standing in front of the saloon when Chap was shot! You think I can shoot around corners?"

"Let me finish, Danning," Phipps said harshly. "I don't claim you murdered Hale yourself; I claim you had him murdered by one of your men. The only man in your crew beside yourself that couldn't have done it is Barron, here. As for the rest, one of them done it!"

"And why would they kill him?" Will demanded angrily. "Chap was the only friend I had here. Why would I hire him killed?"

"Because he wouldn't sell you this place."

"But he would!"

"You got the deed?" Phipps asked.

Will shook his head. "You know damn well I haven't! Chap didn't have time to make it out to me before he was killed!"

"I know he *wouldn't* make it out to you," Phipps said grimly. "Where were you last night?"

"Right here."

"With your crew?"

"Every man jack of 'em."

"And I suppose you played poker for a couple of hours and then went to bed," Phipps said angrily.

"That's right, except it was rummy."

"Chap Hale's office was robbed last night," Phipps said thinly. "The safe was blown. You aim to

tell me now that it wasn't you that done it lookin' for that deed?"

Will was speechless. He stared at the lawman with bleak, murderous eyes, not knowing how to deal with him.

And then he said in a flat, toneless voice, "You ain't got proof anyone killed him, you ain't got proof of any motive, you ain't got proof I was even in town last night, and still you aim to arrest me and my crew for Chap's murder?"

"A couple of other things figure in it," Phipps told him bleakly. "One of them is that Angus Case heard a man arguing in Hale's office the night Chap was killed. He figures it was you."

WILL didn't even look at Milt, and Milt didn't say anything. Behind his anger, Will wondered at that and was unreasonably hurt. But Phipps was taking something out of his pocket, a piece of paper. He extended it to Will.

It was the note Pres Milo had written. Will read it, and read it again, and then looked up at Phipps, eyes questioning.

"That was found in Chap's papers," the lawman said.

"And where were the papers?" Will asked softly.

"Scattered to hell and gone."

Will smiled wickedly. "Whoever wrote this could've left it lyin' with the rest of the papers when he blew the safe, couldn't he?"

Phipps shook his head. "That was in a drawer in the desk you missed, Danning. Case is Chap's executor, and him and me searched the office this mornin'. Case found that in a locked drawer."

"Case found it," Will drawled. "Well, well. Of course he couldn't have put it there, and pretend he'd just come on it."

"I figured you'd say that," Phipps said calmly. "You claim Harry Mygrave let Chap's killer go, too, and Mygrave is the straightest man I know. Angus Case is about the next straightest, and now you claim he's a crook." He shook his head. "Trouble with you is, you figure everybody's as crooked as yourself. You'll have time to think about that in jail, though."

"And you're goin' to take my whole crew to jail?" Will asked.

"All except Barron. He couldn't have shot Chap, because he was with you."

Then it was safe to act, Will thought. Milt wouldn't be arrested if he kept his mouth shut and didn't lose his temper.

Will frowned, pushed his hat back, put his hands on his hips and said, "All right, Phipps. I'll go with you. But the law don't give you the right to ruin a man when you arrest him on suspicion of murder, does it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I got a busted shaft on that windmill out there!" Will pointed out the door. "My stock can't get water unless you leave Milt a man to help with that."

Phipps, who up to that moment, hadn't taken his eyes off Will, made the mistake of glancing out the door. In that moment, Will dived for him. "Watch out!" one of the sheriff's men yelled.

Phipps was a quick thinker. He heard the man yell and pulled the trigger of his six-gun immediately. Will, foreseeing that, had stepped to one side when he moved. The slug plucked at his shirt, and then he slammed up against Phipps, his iron grip on the wrist of the sheriff's gun hand, Phipps' body between him and the deputies.

Will whirled the frail old law-

man around, and said swiftly, "Stay there, boys. Don't move. Drop your gun, sheriff!"

Phipps' gun slipped to the floor and Will backed toward the door with the sheriff in front of him. At the door, he realized that while he was going to make a break for it, he didn't have a horse. But he could take one of the sheriff's.

"Where are your horses, Phipps?"

"Behind the house," Phipps said.

Before anyone could say anything, Will gave the sheriff a savage shove into the room, slamming him into his deputies. Then, turning, he ran toward the cook shack end of the house. He heard Milt's voice yell at him as he ran, but he couldn't make out the words.

Just as Will reached the corner of the cook shack, the first shot slammed out behind him, kicking a geyser of dust up at his feet.

He turned the corner, out of sight of his pursuers now, and made a quick decision as to what he would do. He could take a horse, ride back the other way behind the house, cut for the wash and ride up it and then into the Breaks. They would never find him there.

He turned the rear corner of the house at a dead run, and then hauled up abruptly.

There were no horses here! Phipps had trapped him.

Will whirled, knowing he was cut off from the corral now. Even if he wasn't, he couldn't saddle a horse under the fire of three deputies.

And then he saw the stone-sided root cellar, buried in the side of the hill. It was some twenty yards from Will. He ran for it and dived down the steps, just as a pair of shots from the corner of the house chipped the stone face.

Will slammed into the door, and it gave. Then he was in the gloom

of the cellar. He turned, crawled up the steps again, raised his head, and sent two shots at the feet of Sheriff Phipps. Phipps stopped, turned and ran for the shelter of the house. Two more shots hurried his passage.

And now Will heard Phipps bawling, "Surround the cellar! He's forted up inside."

In less than five minutes, one of the deputies was on the hill above the root cellar, a second was in the wagon shed to the left and Phipps was posted at the corner of the house. Will was trapped as neatly as any sheriff could want. The fourth deputy, of course, was guarding Milt and the rest of the crew.

WILL squatted in the doorway out of the line of fire and considered his position. He had a belt of shells, his own gun and Phipps'. He could fight off capture as long as his shells held out. On the other hand, it would be the purest luck if he could break through Phipps and his crew.

The thought that right behind him, not fifty yards away, lay the Sevier Breaks with all its canyons, was maddening to Will. The idea of giving himself up had not occurred to him. A kind of hot and wicked stubbornness was in him now; someone had framed him, and he would not submit to it. Milt wasn't in trouble, so he could put his mind at rest on that score.

Will knew, with cynical certainty, that if they got him, they would hang him. People hate what they are not used to and they hated him because he was a stranger, because they thought he killed Chap, and because he didn't mind their hatred. They would hang him as certainly as they would be deaf to his defense.

Phipps' voice roused him. "You're surrounded, Danning. Better give up, or we'll come in smokin'!"

"Come ahead!" Will called.

He gauged his chances carefully. The three of them couldn't take him. By the time they had sent to town for reinforcements it would be dark and under cover of darkness his chances for escaping would be increased a hundredfold. He decided instantly and definitely to fight them off till dark and then try to escape.

Phipps again demanded Will's surrender, and all he got for his pains was a brief, "Go to hell!" After that, the three deputies poured a steady stream of fire at the steps, which Will did not even bother to return. Toward dusk, some gravel from the hill up above him rolled onto the steps, and he knew the man up above was inching down the slope with the intention of shooting over the roof edge.

Will only retired a foot inside the door where, by raising up, he could see the house and the shed and send a slug toward each.

He waited tensely until dusk fell. Occasionally when he rose, he could see Pinky and Ollie carrying wood up and stacking it by the corner of the house. Phipps, apparently, wasn't going to take any chances of his prisoner escaping under cover of darkness.

When night came, Phipps again tried to get Will to surrender, and again he refused. Afterward, the fire was lighted. It cast a bright light over the area in front of the root cellar, and Will considered it with dark foreboding. It was brighter than daylight. And then, the deputy at the wagon shed opened up again, and so did Phipps.

Will squatted on his haunches, facing the door, and tried to think.

This looked like the payoff, unless something broke. And nothing would. He was here till help came and then they'd dynamite him. He considered that and still there was no thought of surrender in his mind.

The sporadic shooting at him livened the night. He hunkered in a constant cloud of dust, raised by the slugs slamming into the roof of the far wall.

The shooting slacked off after a time and he wondered if they were content to rest for a few minutes.

And then in the following silence he heard, "Will! Will Danning!"

It was Becky Case's voice. Or was it? Was this a trick to draw him up to the stairs where a man above could put a slug in his back?

"I'm coming over, Will. Don't shoot!"

WILL raised up and looked. Becky was on this side of the fire, walking slowly toward him. There was nobody behind her.

Will waited, and when she reached the steps she called, "Are you all right, Will?"

"I'm all right," he answered. "Watch those steps."

The girl came down them into the gloom of the root cellar. She paused in the doorway and peered in.

"What are you doin' here, Becky?" Will asked sharply.

"I heard in town they were going to arrest you, and I came out, Will. I . . . well, Sheriff Phipps was a friend of Chap's, and I wasn't sure if he wouldn't lose his head."

"He kept it," Will said wearily. "He's got me nailed down, now."

Becky came over to him, and knelt on the floor facing him. "Will," she said quietly, "I don't know much about this, only I know you

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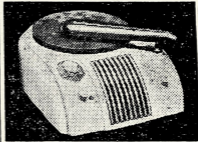
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didn't kill Chap Hale. You never killed anybody!"

"Tell Phipps that," Will said bitterly.

"But what are they doing to you, Will! Why do they think you did it?"

"A note your dad says he found in Chap's papers—a note from a gunnie claimin' he wouldn't go against Will Danning for pay. It makes out I was threatenin' Chap and he was scared of me. They figure one of my crew killed Chap, from that note."

Becky was silent. "And dad found it?" she asked finally.

"That's what Phipps said."

"Will," Becky said in a low voice, "something's wrong with dad. He's afraid. He doesn't sleep, he's worried, and he's ashamed of himself. I . . . I think he put that note in Chap's papers."

"But why?"

"Because Pres made him."

"But why would Pres do it?" Will demanded.

"Oh, Will, it all goes back to something I don't understand. Pres wants this place. He's crazy wild to get it, and he'd do anything to drive you off, don't you see?"

"He robbed Chap's office for the deed?"

"He could have."

"And now he's made your dad plant that note." Will was silent, thinking, and then he swore softly. "Becky, if I could get out of here I'd find out what's behind this. I'd do it if I had to take your dad and wring his neck!"

Becky was silent. Will stood up and looked out at the fire. It was burning brightly as ever, and Phipps was watching the place. Will turned and paced down the narrow cellar, beating his fist against his palm in

time with his slow steps. He had to get out of here, he *had* to!

"Will." He turned.

"You can't do it," Becky said earnestly. "I met one of Phipps' deputies riding to town. He's after help. They'll get you."

"I know," Will said grimly.

"If you'll go to jail, Will, they'll leave you alone," Becky said.

Will scowled. "How's that?"

"Now they're waiting for you with guns. But once they have you locked up, they'll forget you. And wouldn't it be easier to escape from jail than here?"

WILL smiled in the dark. "I've got a gun here, Becky," he pointed out meaningly.

"But what if you had one in jail?"

"In jail?" Will echoed.

"Oh, don't you see what I'm trying to tell you!" Becky burst out. "I don't think you killed Chap, Will. I want to know about dad. I don't want you killed! And some way, I'll help you break jail if you'll give yourself up! I promise it."

"And go to jail yourself?"

"I don't care. They won't touch me. Oh, Will, you can't wait down here like a stubborn rat in a hole and let them cave this place down on top of you! They hate you in town! They'd like to kill you! Have you thought of that?"

"Yeah," Will said.

"Then let me go out and tell Phipps you'll surrender. And once you're in jail, we can figure some way to break you out. I'll even hire gunmen to rescue you."

"Becky," he said slowly, "you could almost make me do it."

"Do it, Will! I'm your friend. We'll find a way."

Will stood there undecided a moment, and then he said, "All right,

Becky. Here are my guns."

He held out both guns. Becky didn't take them immediately. She kissed him swiftly and lightly, and then took the guns and fled up the steps.

When Phipps came down the steps, Will was still staring at the door Becky had gone out of.

The sheriff prodded him outside, and the other two deputies, both holding guns on him, came up, too.

"I'd like to talk to Barron for a few minutes, alone," Will said.

"Go ahead," said Phipps. "Only make it quick."

Milt was brought out from the big room. Phipps left him and Will by the fire, and backed out of earshot, although not out of gunshot.

Milt's face was dark with anger. He and the others had been kept sitting on the floor, just where Will had left them, for fear they would try for a break.

"You all right?" Milt said swiftly.

Will nodded, and Milt said bitterly, "Those damn murderin' law dogs! You won't stay in jail long, Will, if I have to blow it up!"

"Listen, careful, feller," Will said warningly. "Get this straight and remember it. You don't make a move to help me, understand?"

"Why not?" Milt demanded, his voice still angry.

"Because they'll pick you up then, and once they get you, the jig's up. Can't you see that?"

Milt nodded reluctantly, and Will went on, "Don't even come in to see me. Sommers may still be in town. Stay on the place, talk soft, and say nothin'."

"But dammit!" Milt protested, "I can't let you stay there, Will! You're in there on my account!"

Will smiled faintly. "I won't be in long," he murmured, wondering if it was the truth.

CHAPTER XIII

JAIL BREAK

AFTER breakfast in the hotel dining room, Charlie Sommers went upstairs, as if he were going to his own room. Instead, he looked up and down the hall, saw that nobody was in the corridor and knocked softly on Mary Norman's door.

A sleepy voice bid him enter and he went in. Mary Norman was still in bed. Her black hair was braided in a long rope on her pillow, and when Charlie stepped inside she pulled the covers up to her chin. Charlie wondered idly, for about the four thousandth time, how an ex-honkatonk girl, gambler's shill, and petty crook could keep her looks the way this girl had.

"You might give me time to dress," she said curtly.

Charlie, a married man, wasn't impressed by the feminine clothes scattered on the lone chair. He shoved them on the floor, sat down and regarded the girl.

"Try gettin' up at a decent hour and I wouldn't catch you in bed."

"There's nothing to do in this town but sleep," Mary Norman said bitterly.

"There will be now," Charlie told her.

Mary looked interested, but she said nothing. Charlie glanced around the room, at the papers, the clothes, the letters littering the dresser top, and then he pulled out a sack of tobacco and rolled a cigarette.

"Will Danning was brought in last night," he told her. "They're holdin' him for murderin' Chap Hale."

"Did he do it?"

"He did not," Charlie said flatly. "He's bein' framed, near as I can

make out. I dunno who's framin' him, either. But that ain't the point. What I come to tell you is I'm likely to be away for a while."

"Where?"

"Jail."

The girl laughed briefly. "That's a laugh. A deputy United States marshal in jail!"

"It won't be funny," Charlie said stolidly. "I mean it."

"But why?"

"Never mind why. All I want to tell you is that when I go away or I'm locked up, that's no chance for you to hit the grit. Don't try and run out on me, you understand?"

Mary said nothing, and Charlie went on in a matter-of-fact voice, "I'm still goin' to find Murray Broome. This is part of it. And you're still goin' to help me, unless you'd rather go to jail. So when I get in trouble, don't figure you can dodge out and me not know it."

Still the girl said nothing.

"I sent a letter off last night to Hortense, and another up the line to Seven Troughs. They'll watch for you. This jerkline stage that dumps you over in Sevier is no good either, because I've tipped the Sevier marshal off."

"What do you want me to do?"

Mary asked.

"Stay put. Keep your eyes open for Broome. Stay clear of me and keep your mouth shut and wait till I'm out. If you get any news of Broome, send me a message by someone you can trust. That's all."

Mary watched him get up and walk over to the door. She said then, "What if you never get Murray?"

"You keep tryin' to help us for a year, and the judge'll likely let you off."

"And the rest of my life I try to

live down being a squealer, is that it?" she said in a low, bitter voice.

Charlie nodded. "That's what you get for pickin' up with crooks like Broome. They buy you clothes and jewels and show you a good time—but, sister, they're poison. You're findin' it out."

CHARLIE went out. He didn't go near the sheriff's office on his way down to the livery stable. There he hired a horse and rode north out of town. He'd never have a better opportunity than now to do what he'd been wanting to do for weeks.

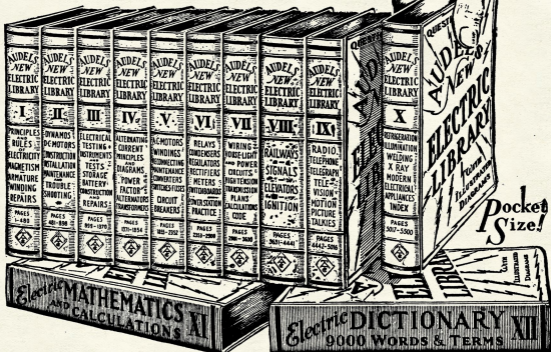
He rode into Will Danning's place around noon and hailed the house. Nobody answered. Will's foreman, whom Charlie had heard was the only one of the crew to escape arrest, was not around. Charlie dismounted and went up to the door, which was open. The room looked as if someone had just walked out of it, but when Charlie looked about for proof of this he couldn't find any. It was just an impression, that was all.

He went through the rooms, calling out for anybody, but there was no answer. He had to be satisfied with this, so he turned to the bunk-house wing. Swiftly, expertly, he searched all the warbags, glancing at the contents of every letter he could find. To Will's stuff he paid special attention, but found nothing. Will's wordly goods were less than his Mexican cook's, his letters nonexistent. This puzzled Charlie. Surely, somewhere among Will's possessions must be something to indicate he had worked for Murray Broome, knew where he was, or had heard from him. If this wasn't so, then Charlie's hunch, on which he'd staked his reputation

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with the commissioner, was wrong. He knew that couldn't be true, yet there was nothing in this whole house to indicate that Will Danning had ever heard of Murray Broome.

Twice Charlie went to the bunk-house door and looked over the place. He still had the uneasy feeling that there was somebody here, somebody watching him. When he was finished with his job, however, and nobody had disturbed him, he rolled a cigarette and stood in the doorway of the big room, his ruddy face set in a scowl, his sharp eyes musing. He had found exactly nothing and yet, contrariwise, he was more firmly convinced than ever that Will was in touch with Murray Broome. It was intuition, a hunch; call it whatever you would, it was still there. And he determined to go through with his original plan.

Charlie Sommers rode back to Yellow Jacket, arriving after dark, ate his supper and then strolled over to the sheriff's office.

Phipps greeted him cordially, and they talked for a while, mostly about Will Danning. Charlie listened and didn't talk, and from what he gathered Phipps was ready to rush through Will's arraignment and trial. In that stubborn way some courageous men have, Phipps had blinded himself to any doubts. Will Danning was guilty of Hale's murder and would hang.

Afterward, Charlie asked Phipps if he might talk with the prisoner, and he was let into the cell block. It consisted of four cells. Pinky and Ollie were in the far cell, Pablo next to them. There was an empty cell between him and Will, who was next to the office. An overhead kerosene lamp in the corridor supplied the light.

WHEN Charlie Sommers came in, Will rose on his elbow and said hello not very enthusiastically. Charlie was an expert at reading on an imprisoned man's face just how much confinement galled him. What he saw on Will's face pleased him; Will was not resigned. Charlie pulled a stool across the corridor, parked it by Will's cell and sat down.

"Luck seems to be runnin' against you, Will," he observed.

Will sat up and stretched, his face drawn with boredom. "You don't call a frame-up luck, do you?"

"I call it a crime," Charlie said briefly.

Will glanced at him and grunted. "You can't call it, though, Charlie. This here is Phipps' party."

"What can I do for you?" Charlie asked.

Will shrugged and didn't look at him. "Nothin'. Hell, I could hire a crew of lawyers and it still wouldn't change the jury I'll draw."

"Break out," Charlie suggested.

Will looked at him and said, "Hah," humorously and looked away.

Charlie said, "Will," and Will's glance shuttled to him. In Charlie's hands, thrust halfway between the bars, was his gun. Will saw it and then raised his glance to the lawman, questioning.

"Ain't you rode me enough, Charlie?" he said wryly. "Now you want me to take a busted gun, so Phipps'll have a chance to cut down on me."

"Look at the gun, then," Charlie said.

Will took it. He saw that the hammer wasn't filed. He looked at the cartridges, supposing the powder had been pulled. Charlie knew what he was thinking.

"Pull out a slug and look for yourself," he said.

Will did. It was good black powder in the shells. He hefted the gun, glanced sharply at Charlie and handed it back.

"No, thanks, not from a lawyer," he said dryly.

"You figure there's a catch, don't you?" Charlie asked softly. He knew the others were watching this scene, but if they were as loyal to Will as his crew at the Double Bar O had been, Phipps would never hear anything about this.

"What do you think?" Will said derisively. His smoky eyes were angry, like those of a man who has been goaded beyond toleration.

"I don't think so," Charlie said. "I'll tell you why. I watched you for quite a spell when you were workin' for Broome, Will. I saw you come up from a kid horse wrangler to roddin' that outfit. I watched you grade up that Double Bar O beef, I talked to your neighbors, I kept my eyes open. I've never heard a man say anything against you yet—except that you're stubborn."

Will listened in silence. Charlie nodded toward the outer office. "I just come from talkin' with Phipps. He thinks you had Chap killed. And he aims to hang you."

"I know that," Will growled.

Charlie smiled faintly. "You and me was on the other side of the fence durin' that Broome business, Will. We still are, I reckon. Only I don't think you'd kill a man. And I don't think you're a crook."

"Try tellin' Phipps that."

"No, I'm goin' to play it another way," Charlie said slowly. "I'm goin' to risk a job I like and a badge I got a lot of respect for."

Will was puzzled.

"How?"

Charlie held out the gun. "Take

it. Shove it in Phipps' face and walk out of here."

For a long moment Will stared at him, and then he said softly, "What's the catch, Charlie? You want somethin', and I know what it is, too."

Charlie nodded. "I want somethin', and you think you know what it is, do you? You figure I'll give you the gun if you'll tell me where Murray Broome is?"

"That's it."

Charlie shook his head. "I ain't even goin' to ask you where he is, Will; I think you know, but I'm not goin' to ask you, because you wouldn't tell me."

"No."

"Here's all I ask," Charlie said quietly, looking Will straight in the eye. "Take that gun and get out of here. You'll be on the dodge with a reward on your head. I don't know where you'll go, and I don't give a damn. You'll meet Murray Broome. You and him are friends, and I know it, Will. I know how much he used to depend on you." He paused now, driving his point home. "Here's what I ask: When you find out that Murray Broome is the cheap, flashy crook I know him to be, I want you to come to me and help me bring him to justice."

Anger stirred in Will's eyes, but before he could answer, Charlie held up his hand. "There's no promise you got to make, Will. Understand, I said *if* and *when* you find out Broome's just plumb narrow gauge, you come help me."

"And if I don't find this out about him?"

"You will," Charlie said bluntly. "You ain't a crook, Will. You're decent and honest. Murray Broome ain't. Some day he'll prove it to you. If he don't"—Charlie spread his hands and shrugged—"I just

made a bum guess, that's all. You'll be free and I'll lose my job and likely go to jail. I'm riskin' it."

"You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you, Charlie?" Will drawled slowly, still puzzled. "You're pretty sure of Murray, too."

CHARLIE nodded. Will was mute, impressed by the man's quiet conviction. For a moment, he wondered if Charlie was right about Milt, and then he knew he wasn't. It was just that Charlie Sommers thought any man who killed another was automatically a killer, never seeing through to the motive or the justification. Will didn't pretend to understand all the politics behind Murray Broome's killing of Senator Mason, but he felt deep within him that it must have been justified. A queer thought fled through his mind then; he remembered Chap Hale saying the same thing as Charlie had about Murray Broome.

But Milt was straight. You can't know a man's innermost thoughts for five years and not know that about him. He had to cling to that, remember it. As for Charlie's proposition. It was fair, straight forward, and Will knew he must accept it. The reason had become plain to him during these hours in jail. He couldn't let Becky help him break out. Phipps was a man who wouldn't spare a woman, and if the break was successful and Becky was implicated, Phipps wouldn't spare her. Last night, faced with hopeless odds and persuaded by Becky, Will had thought it might work. Now, he knew he couldn't accept her help. And he could accept Charlie's.

Charlie's voice roused him, saying, "Better take the gun, Will."

"What about you?" Will said

softly. "Hell, they'll get you, Charlie. And there's nobody folks hate like a renegade lawman. They'll nail up your hide, sure."

Charlie nodded, smiling a little. "It'll be pretty rough. But once they find out you're innocent, and you turn up Murray Broome, I'll be all right."

"But I won't turn up Murray!" Will said swiftly. "Forget that. You can't count on that, Charlie."

"I am countin' on it."

"And you're willin' to risk roostin' in jail for twenty years on it?"

"Hell, I'd risk hangin'."

"You're a sucker. Give me the gun," Will said meagerly.

"You promise that when you find Broome's a crook, you'll help me get him?"

"If I find he's a crook, I'll come to you and help you get him," Will promised.

Charlie handed him the gun and rose. "I don't have to tell you that Phipps is an honest lawman. Don't hurt him." He shook hands with Will and went out, a ruddy-faced stocky man who saw nothing strange in what he had just done. At the door he paused to button his coat, so that his empty holster would not show to the men in the office.

When he was gone, Will hid the gun under the blanket on his cot. The others watched him, speechless with surprise. Then Ollie Gargan growled, "Will, you're goin' to walk into a trap. That there marshal will have a dozen men with rifles planted across the street."

"You boys want to try it with me?" Will countered.

Ollie considered. "I reckon," he said finally.

"How about you, Pinky?"

"I'll take a chance."

Continued on page 112

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Continued from page 110

"Pablo?"

"Me, too."

Will sat back to consider. Unless he played this cagy, none of them would get out. You couldn't stick a gun in Phipps' face and tell him to open up. What if he didn't have the keys with him? But he carried them, Will remembered. What if he refused, knowing you wouldn't shoot? You'd have to get him in the cell, and that meant waiting till mealtime. And that meant making an escape in daylight, which would be more dangerous.

No, he'd have to try it at night—tonight.

Every night at ten or so either Phipps or one of his deputies would come in and blow out the lamp. This was the time to act. The other three were looking at him expectantly, and Will said, "Let me play this my way. Just watch."

He smoked two cigarettes in quick succession and then waited impatiently. The others were lying on their cots, watching him.

Presently, one of the deputies, a big young puncher, came in to blow out the lamp.

"Roll in, you bums," he said cheerfully.

Will was sitting on his cot. He yawned and said idly, "Phipps still here?"

"Yeah, but he won't talk to you," the deputy said.

Will stood up and took out his gun and stepped to the bars. As the deputy reached up for the lamp, Will said quietly, "Leave that alone."

THE deputy glanced at him, then his gaze traveled down to the gun. His mouth sagged open and slowly he raised his eyes to Will's face.

"One yelp out of you and I'll blow out your short ribs," Will drawled tonelessly. "You got it?"

The deputy nodded in speechless assent.

Will saw that the man didn't have a gun. "Come over here by the door," he ordered. "Make it quick!"

The deputy did as he was bid. Will knew he was too scared to bluff it out and too dumb to gauge a prisoner's desperation, as Phipps would do.

Will rammed the gun in his midriff and said swiftly, "Does Phipps carry the cell keys with him?"

The man shook his head in negation, and for a moment Will knew despair. He thought quickly, racking his brain for some way to get Phipps in here with the keys. He didn't dare let the deputy go. Then he said, "Listen careful, now. Tip-toe over to that corridor door and open it soft. Then come back here, stand in front of that Mexican's cell and yell for Phipps to bring the keys. Wait a second."

Still keeping his eyes on the deputy, Will said, "Pablo, lie down on the floor away from your cot. When Phipps comes in, don't move, don't say anything. You *sabe*?"

"Sí, I'm seeek," Pablo said.

"That's right." To the deputy Will said, "Phipps don't smoke, does he?"

"No."

"Give me your tobacco."

The deputy was too scared to be mystified at the request. He handed over his sack of dust, and Will pocketed it. Then Will said, "If that door squeaks when you open it, I'll shoot you in the back. Hurry it!"

The deputy went over to the corridor door and silently pulled it ajar under Will's gun. Getting Will's nod, he came back to Pablo's cell, where the Mexican was lying

on the floor, and then called, "Hey, sheriff! Bring in them cell keys, will you?"

It was good. There was just enough urgency and excitement in his voice to arouse curiosity. Will sank on the cot, put the gun behind him and waited.

Phipps stalked in, hand on gun. When he got into the cell block the deputy pointed. "He's sick, or somethin'. You want to look at him?"

Phipps was an old hand at all the dodges. He came up to the cell, looked at Pablo, who was jerking his legs in a strange manner.

"Go out and get a doc," Phipps said meagerly.

The deputy looked at Will, and Will realized he'd have to stop him.

Will came to his feet, the gun concealed in his waistband in the small of his back. "No need for that, sheriff," he drawled. "Just roll him over and blow tobacco in his nose. It makes him sneeze and he comes out of them fits."

Phipps looked as if he didn't believe it, but he said to the deputy, "Got some tobacco?"

The deputy, deprived of his tobacco, shook his head.

"Here," Will said, and held out the sack through the bars. The deputy made a start for it, and hauled up at Will's warning glance. Phipps didn't notice. He came over and reached absently for the sack. Will grabbed his wrist, swung him around, yanked him to the bars and wrapped his arms around his neck, choking him. Phipps kicked like a horse and tried to grab his gun, but Will had his hand on it.

"Unlock this door, feller," Will said swiftly to the deputy.

"Don't!" Phipps gasped.

The deputy stopped, undecided, and Will saw he was wavering. He

clamped down on Phipps' throat and yanked out the gun and pointed it at the deputy.

"Open up or I'll gut-shoot you!"

"No!" Phipps gasped.

Will knew he would have to act, regardless of the danger. He shot once. The slug plucked at the deputy's sleeve and slammed into the stone wall. The report bellowed in the cell block.

"Next time it's dead center!" Will warned. "Get them keys!"

The deputy was really scared now. He lunged for the key in Phipps' pocket and the game sheriff tried to fight him off. But Will was choking the lawman savagely.

The deputy got the keys and fumbled them into the lock, and then the door swung open. Will dived through it, brushing the deputy aside. Phipps was just coming to his feet then, and Will swung a left into his jaw that knocked him flat. Will didn't even wait to watch him. He swung the gun on the deputy and said, "Open the rest!"

"Go on, Will!" Ollie yelled. "You ain't got time for us!"

Already they could hear shooting in the street.

But Will stubbornly prodded the deputy over to the end cell. He let Pinky and Ollie out. Just as they came through the door they heard footsteps pound through the office.

WILL raced for the corridor door, and he was halfway to it when it slammed open and a puncher tumbled through, shooting wildly. Will shot low and the puncher went down, and then Will yelled, "Come on!" and jumped over the downed man and through the door.

Two more men from the saloon across the street boiled into the office and slammed into Will. Immediately they were at such close quar-



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and ten thousand
dollars on his
head!*

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ters they couldn't shoot, and Will slashed out with his gun. He caught one man on the side of the head, and he went down, and then Will kicked out at the other, who was bringing up his gun. The shot boomed hollowly in the room and the slug slammed into the roof and then the gun went kiting after it. Will picked up a chair and smashed it down on the man's head, and then turned to look back. The downed puncher had Ollie and Pinky covered, and they were backed against the wall, hands overhead. Ollie saw him and yelled, "Go on, Will!" and the puncher turned and snapped a shot at him. At the same moment someone from across the street let go with a rifle, and the slug bored into the door jamb beside Will's head. It was too late to help his crew now, Will knew. He lunged out into the night, and was immediately caught in a cross fire along the boardwalk. He vaulted the tie rail, and then saw the stream of men pouring out of the saloon toward the sheriff's office. It was so dark out here that nobody was recognizable and Will knew they couldn't spot him unless they heard the shouting of their companions. He ran out into the street, shouting:

"Surround the place! Get around in back!" Exhorting each man as he passed him, he ran for the horses at the tie rail in front of the saloon.

But now he was in the dim lamp-light cast through the saloon windows, and he heard men yelling behind him. He was recognized now.

He piled into the protection of the horses and swiftly untied the reins of one. Before he mounted, he looked across the street. Men were running up the boardwalk now, flanking him, cutting him off. As soon as he pulled out from the tan-

gle of horses, he would run a gantlet of fire. And yet he had to have a horse to escape.

He made up his mind after one bitter moment of indecision. He swung into the saddle of a big chestnut, crouching low on his neck. He roweled him through the narrow passage between two tie rails onto the boardwalk. Then he reined him straight into the door of Hal Mohr's saloon. A tattoo of gunfire beat on the sign above the door.

Will savagely roweled the horse which brushed up the door with his shoulder. Then he ran across the sawdusted floor of the saloon. Will lifted him over one long table and snaked him in between two others. Hal Mohr's shotgun blasted across the room, and Will heard the buckshot slap on the opposite wall. Will reined the horse through the backdoor. The animal slipped and almost went down. Then, catching himself, the horse lunged forward through the open door into the alley. A parting blast from the shotgun stung Will's back and the horse's rump, but the distance was ineffective for shooting.

Will turned the horse up the alley and let him stretch out into a lope, heading north. He knew that darkness would hide him until he was swallowed up hours later in the Sevier Breaks.

CHAPTER XIV

A FRAME-UP IN THE MAKING

ANGUS CASE had left the house for the barn some time ago and Becky was cleaning up in the kitchen. There was a worried frown on her face, and a kind of dread excitement within her. Her father was going to town this afternoon, and she was going with him. Some-time during the evening she would

call on Will in jail, and when she left he would have the gun she smuggled to him. She had given much thought to how she could help, and had settled on the gun. All other ways were closed to a lone woman, and she was exasperated by her helplessness. What if they caught Will with the gun and used that as an excuse to shoot him?

She put that out of her mind and ran through the things she must finish before she left. There was Tomas to see. Last night in the darkness he had walked into his quarters in the barn where Pres Milo had forbidden him to have any light. During the day one of the hands had thrown a harness into Tomas' room for him to patch. When Tomas came in, he tripped on the harness, fell into the table and peeled two square inches of hide off his shins.

Becky found her salves and stepped out the back door. The slow wind rustled her skirts and she smelled the warm summer scent of wind on grass and the faint smoky odor of cedar.

She had passed the bunkhouse, humming softly to herself, when she saw Pres Milo ride through the gate and out directly toward the big corral where a couple of hands had the wheels off a spring wagon and were greasing it. Becky wondered why he was in such a hurry.

One of the hands called, "He's in the loft, Pres," and Becky saw Pres start for the barn. He dismounted at the door, ground-haltering his horse, and strode inside, not even seeing the girl. Becky made her way to Tomas' door, knocked, heard no answer and went in. Tomas was asleep on his cot, snoring softly. On his legs were two bloody bandages. Becky came across the room,

intending to wake him, when she heard Pres' voice say gruffly from behind the partition, "Well, Angus, he's done it! Damn his eyes, he busted out!"

"Danning?"

"Shot his way out last night. Fought through the whole gang from Mohr's and rode his horse through the saloon and made it."

"So your little frame-up was wasted?" Case said wearily.

Pres swore savagely, but Becky didn't even notice. A wild elation was in her. She heard Pres say, "What nobody can figure out is how he got the gun. Phipps claims nobody but that United States marshal could have give it to him."

"Nonsense."

"Well, he's out," Pres said grimly, "and he'll be harder to catch than a muley steer."

Case said nothing, and Becky heard Pres sit down on a bale of hay.

"Tomas inside?" Pres asked.

"He's sleepin'."

"All right. I want to talk to you, Angus. I want to know some things. What are you goin' to do about that deed that's missin'?"

"Just what I told you," Case said flatly. "The Gold Seal outfit has a record of who they deeded that land to. It'll be Hale. I'll get another deed. That's all there is to it."

"And you won't sell it to me?"

"Not ever," Case said flatly. "That's out. If a buyer comes to me and wants it and takes it to court, I'll buy it myself before I'll let it get out of my hands."

Pres laughed unpleasantly. "Would you buy it, say, if you found it was worth a lot of money?"

"Of course I would," Case snapped. "It isn't worth money, though, except to a crook. And

I'll tell Chap's heirs that, too."

"It is, though," Pres murmured.

CASE was silent a moment, and Becky tried to picture his expression. She couldn't, nor could she understand what Pres was driving at.

"Why is it?" Case demanded.

Pres chuckled. "You don't think I'd be sucker enough to tell you, unless I had a signed and sealed paper givin' me half of it, do you?"

"And you don't think I'd give it to you, do you?" Case countered.

"I think you will," Pres drawled. "You just make out a deed sayin', if I can prove that Danning's place is worth more than a hundred thousand dollars to a buyer, then I'm to share half the profits with you in further development."

"Did you say worth more than a hundred thousand dollars?" Case asked softly.

"That's it. If I can't prove to you that it's worth more than that to anybody, then I don't get a cent. But if it is, then I get a fifty-fifty cut."

"On what?"

"On the money we'll make."

Becky's heart hammered riotously and she held her breath.

"What is it over there, Pres?" Case asked.

Pres laughed. "Hell, for three years I've known it," he boasted. "I've tried to get the money to buy the place, so I'd have it all to myself. But I couldn't swing it. Then Danning came in. I tried to drive him off, but all I done was make him mad. There's only one way left now, and that's to split it with the only gent that can buy it. That's you, Angus."

"But split what?" Case demanded. "Gold. Is that it?"

"You'll know when you sign the

paper. Will you sign it—a ten-thousand-dollar risk on more than a hundred thousand?"

"I'll have to see what you're talkin' about first."

"You will like hell!" Pres snapped. "You'll buy the place blind and take my word for it. Even if I'm lyin' to you—and I ain't—you'll still have the place, won't you?"

"Yes," Case said grudgingly.

"Then you're goin' in town with me this afternoon and buy it for yourself. Make out a deed to yourself, get the deed from the Gold Seal, deposit the ten thousand and you've got the place."

"If you're lyin' to me, Pres, I'll get—"

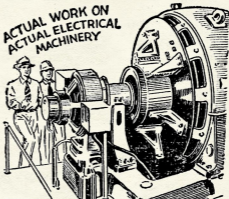
"Lie to you!" Pres shouted angrily. "I'm comin' to you because I can't swing it any other way! You think I like you good enough to make you rich, you damned old fool!"

Becky heard her father answer wearily, "No, I don't. If you ever came to me for help, it's because you couldn't help it."

"Then saddle up," Pres said. Becky heard him get up, and she fled out the door, leaving Tomas still sleeping.

BECKY was in the kitchen again when she saw the two men come out of the barn. In that few minutes she had done a lot of thinking. Will Danning was being cheated out of his rightful property. She'd told her father that, but he was stubborn in his intention of resorting to legal trickery to keep Will off the place. And now, he was going to cheat Will out of a fortune by the same method. She was sick at the thought, angry at her father and bewildered. What did Pres have on her father that

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he could make him do these evil things?

Case came into the kitchen and said, "Ready, Becky?"

"I've got a headache, dad. I think I'll stay here."

Case looked at her and frowned. "I'll be away a week."

Becky laughed and came over and kissed him lightly. "Since when have I been afraid to stay here alone?"

Her father grumbled a bit more, then went out. Soon he and Pres rode off toward Yellow Jacket together. Becky, now that they were gone, sank into a chair and considered what she had heard. She felt a weak excitement and a kind of pride when she thought of Will's escape. If she could only get to him now with the news she had heard. But what could he do if she did reach him? Nothing. He was a fugitive. Besides, she couldn't reach him. He'd be smart enough to stay away from the Pitchfork, because they'd be watching the place. All she could do was sit by, helpless, and watch this steal.

That afternoon and evening were torment. Becky almost wished she'd gone with her father. Anything, so that she wouldn't think of what was happening.

After supper she was sitting by the lamp in the kitchen reading week-old newspapers when she heard a faint tap on the window. She looked up, listening, and the tap came again. She went to the door and, opening it, stood there, and then she heard a whisper, "Becky." Her heart began to beat so rapidly she felt suffocated. It was Will!

Can Will hide out from the law long enough to prove his innocence? What will become of Milt meanwhile? Will Pres Milo and Angus Case be able to put through their deal? Follow this gripping rangeland drama in next week's issue.



Stew's chuck wagon hurtled toward the stampeding herd and with it went the only chance of the Two Arrows to survive.

LAST ROUNDUP

BY NORMAN A. FOX

THIS Two Arrows beef gather was just about over, which only meant that the danger hovering in the hills might be that much closer. Perhaps that was why old Stew Quealy was so jumpy. Or perhaps he kept seeing that phantom parade of other oldsters, long-dead grub liners he'd fed in his forty-odd years as Two Arrows cook. Stew didn't want to be a grub liner himself when this roundup was finished. Yet only a flimsy cigar box stood between him and such an end.

The cigar box was in his lap as he hunkered inside the chuck wagon, a little monkey of a man with a seamed, quizzical face. There were newspaper clippings, brittle with age, in the box. These, however, were only to hide the money—crisp new currency and soiled, soggy currency—over a thousand dollars of it. This money, his life savings,

would keep Stew Quealy from the grub line when he wrangled his last Dutch oven. And if Lance Adler took over the Two Arrows, that unhappy day would be mighty soon.

Maybe he should have banked the money, Stew reflected uneasily. But he'd come to distrust banks in the days when such institutions were no stronger than the consciences of the men who ran them. He couldn't risk this bulwark he'd built against the twilight years.

Stew was fondling the money when he felt eyes upon him. He jerked his head, his faded blue eyes meeting the narrowed stare of a man looking in upon him over the tail gate, where pies were cooling. He was strikingly handsome, this stranger, dark-haired and clean-shaven. But it was the alert gleam in the fellow's eyes that alarmed Stew. Hastily he thrust his cigar box beneath some bedding. The stranger grinned disarmingly.

"From the brand on these pies, this must be the Two Arrows outfit," he observed. "Had a palaver with Miss Holland yesterday at the ranchhouse. She allowed she was still owner till a certain Lance Adler took over, but she said she left hirin' and firin' to a gent named Shiloh Landrum."

Stew tried to hide his uneasiness as he awkwardly climbed over the tail gate. The camp was atop a bluff, the chuck wagon, its wheels rock-braked, clinging to the very lip of the hill. Below spread the tawny panorama of Bluewater Basin.

"Shiloh's down there." Stew flung his arm sweepingly. "He's range boss and— *Hell fire and high water!*"

Racing to the mess box, he hauled out the hind quarter of a yearling. He'd had no business daydreaming

over his precious savings, or wasting time with this stranger. Where the bunched beef milled below, a half-dozen riders were laying a dust funnel as they beclined for camp. The crew was coming for the noon meal and it wasn't ready!

Hot lard crackled in a kettle over one Dutch oven and the bubbling coffee sang its song above the open fire. But the steaks Stew was frantically slicing should have been flour-coated and sizzling ten minutes ago. The stranger, with a glance that appraised the situation, darted to the flour barrel, scooped out a panful, snatched at the steaks. Stew flashed him a look of half-grudging thanks. The crew was already toiling up the slope, Lance Adler leading them.

A big man, this Lance Adler; garbed for the bridle path rather than the range. His blocky face was dark and blue-shadowed beneath his cream-colored sombrero, and he struck his quirt against his polished riding boots as he dismounted to stride forward. Stew had seen that petulant gesture before. It was an indication that Adler was hopping mad.

"Damn it, Quealy, why ain't the grub ready?" Adler fumed. "The chuck wagon's set on the edge of the bluff so you can see us the minute we start in, ain't it? Are you so glandered up you can't move any more?"

"I'm plumb sorry," Stew mumbled. "Yuh see, I—"

Adler stiffened. "Don't stand there making lying excuses to your betters," he stormed. "Get that grub ready, damn it, or—"

His quirt arm raised. Whether he actually meant to strike, nobody ever knew. For suddenly the Two Arrows crew, who'd listened with averted faces, were surrounding Ad-

ler, and grizzled Shiloh Landrum knocked the quilt aside.

ADLER, maybe yuh don't know no better!" Landrum said icily. "I dunno. Yuh dress like a dude, but yuh can handle them guns yuh pack, and sometimes yuh talk like a range man. If yuh are one, yuh ought to savvy nobody ever lays a hand on the cook. If yuh ain't—then I'm tellin' yuh!"

The flame of Adler's wrath died, but the cold embers of it made him seem the more deadly as he glared at Shiloh Landrum.

"You bucking me?" he asked stiffly.

Shiloh spat. "Meanin' it might cost me my job, eh? Mebbe so. When Miss Betty come home from that Eastern school after her daddy died, she figgered she'd sell the Two Arrows. Yuh come along just in time, but yuh wanted the right beef tally before yuh bought. That's why we're makin' this off-season gather. Mebbe after the critters are counted, yuh'll be the new boss. But until yuh are, I'm runnin' the range end o' this spread. And I'm tellin' yuh to leave Stew plumb alone!"

At the Dutch oven, Stew warmed with appreciation, yet trembled with wrath. Thirty years ago, little as he'd always been, he'd have shown Lance Adler a trick or two. But now he was just an old range cook—a has-been. Mechanically he got out the eating tools, and the crew, grabbing them, passed from one Dutch oven to another. The stranger, with a nod from Stew, helped himself, but the meal was strained and silent.

While eating tools clattered into the wreck pan, the stranger spoke to Shiloh Landrum. Stew cocked an ear for the foreman's answer.

"I dunno," Shiloh said with a shake of his grizzled head. "I'll put it to yuh straight, mister. They's a

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wide-loopin' rannihan back in the hills—Topaz Seton. He ain't no ordinary rustler. He's foxy, and he's spreadin' wide. Heard tell his crew stopped the Modoc-Pineboro stage and lifted a pile of dinero meant for the Modoc bank. Now I'm expectin' he'll try liftin' the Two Arrows gather. How do I know yuh ain't here to hamstring us when Seton's ready to strike? Yuh might even be Seton hisself? Mighty few gents has seen that galoot, and all they remembered was a black beard a shears could wipe off pronto."

The stranger grinned his disarming grin. "They call me Omaha," he said easily. "I ain't blamin' you for being scary, but I'd shore admire to get on a pay roll. How about me flunkieyng for the cook. You ain't afraid of me poisonin' the biscuits to side this Seton, are you?"

Shiloh had to unbend to that contagious grin. He eyed Omaha speculatively. "Yuh're hired," he decided. "Yuh'll take orders from Stew."

Stew groaned inwardly. When Shiloh had mentioned Topaz Seton, he'd named the fear that shadowed all the Two Arrows outfit—including Stew. But the cook had another fear—a personal one. Omaha had seen the cigar box. Stew didn't hanker to have the stranger within reach of the chuck wagon from now on. There was something queer about this Omaha. Spreads were hiring beyond the basin, so why was Omaha content to take a flunkiey's job?

Yet Stew knew why Shiloh had hired another man. Shiloh was trying to make Stew's load lighter. He wanted to save the cook from Lance Adler's future wrath. That was the factor that choked any protest Stew might have voiced.

But he felt old and impotent after the crew rode away. Once the dishes were washed, he sent Omaha in

search of wood, a chore to keep the stranger at a distance. While he was gone, Stew dug out an old .45 he'd long since ceased to pack. It was stowed inside his shirt when Omaha came back to camp.

WITH the new hand was a rider who'd apparently come from Wolfhead Pass, the rocky back door to Bluewater Basin. Stew, his eyes widening, waved a fork in joyful greeting.

It was Betty Holland. Not the thin-legged youngster who'd once tagged Stew from cook shack to ranchhouse, plying him with a thousand questions, but another Betty Holland, who was both girl and woman, a hazel-eyed, dark-haired beauty, unspoiled by the select Eastern school she'd recently left.

"Hellfire and high water!" Stew cried joyfully. "I bin wonderin' if yuh'd lope out afore the gather was finished." And then, because his own words reminded him that danger might strike: "But yuh ain't aimin' to stay in the basin!"

Betty laughed. "Still trying to keep me from under your feet, Stew? Well, I won't be bothering you much longer."

Her laughter faded then, as an echo dies among the crags. Something shadowed her eyes. "Do you suppose I'm doing wrong, Stew, selling the spread? I thought I wanted to return East, but now I'm wondering. I want you to know, though, that you and the others will stay on, no matter what happens. That'll be part of the agreement with Adler or anybody else who buys."

Stew couldn't answer the question Betty had put to him. In him was a fierce desire to blurt the truth, to say that with the selling of the Two Arrows would go all the old days and the old ways on the spread. Lance

Adler could and, Stew was sure, would use a word like incompetency to loophole through a contract, get rid of the old hands. But Stew Quealy had never begged for consideration, and he was too old to begin now.

"Reckon yuh know what's best," he mumbled.

Betty nodded half-absently. Her eyes had locked with Omaha's, and Stew read an invitation and a challenge as old as creation. It startled him at first. But why shouldn't Betty look at Omaha? The gent was young, good-looking. But Omaha was a riddle, a man whose eyes widened at sight of another man's money. Stew shook his head dubiously as he watched the couple.

Betty had ridden out here to see Omaha. Whether the girl admitted the truth to herself, Stew didn't know. But wherever Omaha's chores took him that long afternoon, the girl seemed always to wander. She was with him when the crew thundered in for supper.

They greeted Betty boisterously, those Two Arrows hands, and, because she was with them, the evening meal had something that had been lost since tension gripped the roundup. Lance Adler hovered near the girl, smiling and unctuous. But Shiloh Landrum gnawed his mustache in stormy silence, and Stew interpreted the worry on the range boss' face. Guards were to be doubled tonight. Danger might ride at moonrise. The basin was no place for a girl.

Betty rolled into blankets when the rest did, chaperoned by the very nature of these men. Soon silence came to swathe the camp, brooding silence broken only by the distant singing of the nighthawks, the dolorous wail of a coyote, the fretful slumber of saddle-fagged men.

Stew slept apart from the others, his alarm clock, set for four, perched on a turned-over milk pan. Once he'd fallen asleep as soon as he was under his tarp, but that had been on other roundups. Now he had his miseries to plague him. Now he had that ghostly procession to review, those phantom has-beens who'd eaten, then ridden on. They kept reminding him of what might happen to him.

Yet he slept. For suddenly he was awake, torn from slumber by something he couldn't identify. It hadn't been the changing of the guards. The moon, soaring over Wolfhead Pass, told him it wasn't time for that.

Cautiously Stew eased from his blankets. And because his greatest fear drove him, he crept to the chuck wagon, laboriously pulled himself inside. Then, his panic feeding upon itself, he clawed for his precious cigar box, dug into it with trembling fingers, and awoke to the fullness of calamity.

He didn't need to bring the box into the moonlight to know the truth. He'd handled that sheaf of currency too often not to know it was thinner now, much thinner. With a muffled cry of despair, he scrambled toward the tail gate, thumping through the money. Less than three hundred dollars was left.

Why hadn't the thief taken it all?—Stew wondered. Had he been startled at his nocturnal work, snatched part of the money, and fled in panic? Stew didn't know. But with the first shock of discovery passing, a rage flamed within him, and that rage sent him out of the wagon, wild-eyed.

The sleeping riders were indistinguishable beneath their bulking tarps. But Stew had to know which one of them was Omaha. Only

Omaha had known about the money. But Omaha was gone, for there in the moonlight Stew saw the manner of his departure. The stranger was leading his own mount down the bluff, working along cautiously.

INSTANTLY Stew was after him, but his haste was tempered by caution and the awkwardness of age. Now Omaha was at the base of the bluff, disappearing into a cluster of cottonwoods. Puffing, Stew was behind him, closing in on him, but at the very instant he grappled with the shadowy figure he heard hoofs drumming.

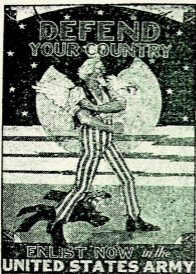
"Stew!" Betty Holland cried, and the old cook knew it was the girl he'd seized while Omaha was getting away.

"Stew!" She pulled herself loose and turned to face him. "Did you see him? He crawled into the chuck wagon, then went and saddled his horse. I came here to head him off, ask him what he was up to. He acted just like a thief. But he got away—"

"Yuh got tears in yore eyes," Stew said accusingly. "Who is that gent? What . . . what's he to yuh?"

"I don't know," Betty said miserably. "He rode up to the ranchhouse yesterday, stayed several hours. I . . . I liked him. He asked a lot of questions about the basin country, and I thought he might be another buyer. But then he asked for a job."

A vagrant moonbeam filtered through the cottonwoods to glint in her eyes, and she was like the little girl who'd dogged Stew's footsteps, asking a thousand questions. "Stew," she asked wistfully, "can two people just know each other for a day and . . . and then it's different for them? Even when they really don't know each other?"



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And that same fear of an impending raid made the crew sullen at breakfast. Afterward, when they headed down into the basin, Stew felt unutterably lonely. The bulk of the .45 inside his shirt was a little reassuring.

Yet, if the Two Arrows had troubles, Stew had troubles of his own. Last night his missing money hadn't seemed so important—not in the face of Betty Holland's heartbreak. But today, and remembering the malevolent look Lance Adler had given him riding off that morning, Stew saw the shape of disaster.

A thousand dollars might have bought a small spread where he could have hired a rider to do the heavier work. With less than three hundred dollars, that dream was drifting away like the smoke of his cook fires.

Well, he'd build himself a shack in the hills, he thought, trying to console himself. He'd pan a little color to keep alive. And if this was a fool's dream, at least it sustained him through the weary morning.

His eyes were often on the riders who were building the herd. He didn't intend to be caught napping a second morning. He wanted to see those riders when theyunched to come thundering in for the noon meal. And he did. The steaks were sizzling when the dust plume arrowed the bluff. Thoughtfully, Stew marked their progress.

And so it was that Stew Quealey first saw the raiders.

ONE second the only dust cloud was raised by the Two Arrows. The next, a second dust cloud was fanning out behind the herd. Stew's eyes widened. Popping guns sounded like snapping match sticks in the distance. The bellow of startled cattle was a faint, faraway thing. And then the Two Arrows herd was stamped-ing!

It was clever work, timed in a manner that indicated an inside knowledge of how the ranch crew worked. The Two Arrows men heading for the bluff, were right in the path of the stampede. They could only scurry for cover, and they were scurrying now, their angry curses reaching the strained ears of Stew. They couldn't fight back, for that myriad-legged juggernaut of beef was bunched between them and the rustlers.

Now the cattle were in full, head-long flight that would cease only when fatigue overtook them. Straight down the basin they stampeded, a blunt arrowhead aimed for Wolfhead Pass. And once through that pass, Topaz Seton could haze them back into the hills, deep into his own wild domain.

From the bluff Stew saw it all, a solitary spectator with a gallery seat to view the drama below. In another five minutes the cattle would be abreast of the bluff. In another fifteen they'd be through Wolfhead. Stew swiveled his head to gauge the distance, and saw a solitary horsebacker spurring from the pinched walls of the pass. Then he remembered something that sent new fear shooting through him.

"I'll be heading back through Wolfhead," Betty had said, "come noon tomorrow!"

"Hellfire and high water!" Stew tried to shout, but the horror that engulfed him choked the words. That was Betty Holland down there in Wolfhead Pass. The girl was in the very path of the stampede! And with only the sheer walls of the pass to flank her, there was no escape from that charging, thundering death, for there was no way to turn the stampede.

No way? Suddenly Stew tensed. A split-second later he was tugging at the rocks that braked the chuck wagon's wheels there on the bluff's



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crest. He hurled them aside only to see the wagon lurch an inch or two, and stop. Instantly Stew was at the front of it, ramming his shoulder against a wheel, clawing at the spokes.

He'd made no plan—yet he had a plan. If he could only get the wagon rolling down the bluff, rolling into the path of the steers, it might turn the leaders, head them into the draws that dissected the basin's nearer walls. But a chuck wagon is the heaviest piece of ranch rolling equipment, and perspiration masked Stew's seamed face as he struggled to get it rolling.

He wished now that he had Lance Adler's bulk or Omaha's youth. He wished he could shear away the years, just for an instant. He prayed for strength, knowing he was praying for a miracle. And his prayer was answered. The wheel began to turn very slowly. Then the chuck wagon was leaping like a live thing, jolting forward.

It moved so suddenly that Stew fell flat. When he got his nose out of the dust, the wagon was careening backward down the bluff, the tongue bobbing until it smashed against a rock, snapped off. Bawling hoarsely, Stew darted after it, scarcely conscious that he was hurling himself into danger.

The vanguard of the herd struck the wagon, tipping it over, the canvas bellying to the breeze. Cattle were piling onto the wagon. Wild-eyed and snorting, they were kicking it to pieces. That was the moment when time stood still for Stew Quealy, for the ways of cattle are unpredictable. But now the herd was swerving, heading a dozen different directions. And a wild shout of triumph boiled in Stew's throat for he'd broken the stampede.

HE tottered along, his eyes dust-filled and streaming. Then he remembered. The cigar box that held what was left of his money! It had been in the wagon. He hadn't had time to think about it in his mad struggle to launch the wagon. Now the few remaining dollars would be trampled, strewn to the four winds. With it went his slight dream of a shack in the hills. That phantom parade of grub liners was so real now that Stew could actually see them—dust-shrouded horsemen looming before his very eyes. Then he realized these were flesh-and-blood riders with big Lance Adler leading them.

"I turned 'em!" Stew babbled. "I saved Miss Betty! I—"

A rider wheeled up in a flurry of dust, a rider who leaped from his saddle, grasped Stew's shoulder, forced the oldster down behind a rock. It happened as suddenly as that. Stew blinked his dust-filled eyes.

"Omaha!" he shouted. "So yuh're back! Yuh organized this raid! Yuh stole—"

Choking on his words, he clawed at his shirt front, tugging at the .45. He was blind with rage and blind from dust, but he could hear. The shouted words of Omaha finally percolated into his consciousness.

"Down!" Omaha was bellowing. "That's Topaz Seton's crew lopin' up! Don't you savvy? Lance Adler is Topaz Seton with his beard shaved off. It was a slick trick to get the herd. Seton pretended to be buying the spread, so they'd bunch the cattle for a tally. That made it easy for his crew to run 'em off!"

Stew wanted to call him a liar. He hated Lance Adler, but he wasn't ready to believe that Lance Adler was Topaz Seton in a fancy shirt.

Not on a thief's say-so, anyway. Then he saw that Lance Adler was thumbing a gun and sending the bullets spattering about the rock that sheltered Stew and Omaha. And those riders with Adler—they weren't Shiloh Landrum and the others! They were loose-lipped, stubble-jawed riders from the rim-rock.

No part of it made sense to Stew Quealy. But he answered the challenge of gun flame with gun flame, thumbing his old gun to spill a rustler from his saddle. Beside him, Omaha was also shooting, taking effective toll. But it was Stew, firing through a red haze that lifted him above weariness, who smashed lead into Lance Adler.

The rocks gave the beleaguered pair some protection. That was the only thing that saved them from dying in the first leaden blast. From their scanty cover they triggered again and again, sending the rustlers fanning wide, emptying saddles, ducking as bullets droned overhead. But Stew sensed that the end would be. This was his last roundup in more ways than one. Just as he was resigned to a hot-lead finish, he realized that the ending might be different. Peering out from behind the rock, he saw something that sent new hope surging through him. Shiloh Landrum and the rest of the Two Arrows crew, freed from the menace of the stampede, were clattering up.

After that it was short—but none too sweet. Rustlers, whirling to fight this new force, died as they spun. And it was a blood-spattered, dust-begrimed range cook who finally staggered to his feet, only to find nobody to fight. Nobody but Omaha. But Omaha had sided him through the hell of gun smoke, and that was enough to freeze the old cook's trigger finger.

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seven hundred dollars—and an apology," Omaha said with a grin. "You see, old-timer, I'm from the sheriff's office at Modoc. I was trailing the gents who stopped the Modoc stage. It was Seton's crew, just like the sheriff suspected. But when I saw you thumbing that roll in the chuck wagon yesterday, I couldn't help but think maybe you'd been in on that currency steal. Our office had the serial numbers, so I took the newer currency from your box last night to check on it. It didn't tally."

Betty Holland was suddenly among them. She was out of the saddle instantly. "It's true what he says," she assured Stew. "I got to the sheriff's office not fifteen minutes after him early this morning. We even rode back together, but Omaha came on ahead—"

"I'd got to thinkin'," Omaha explained. "I wanted a job here in the basin, so I could snoop on Seton without him guessin' a lawman was around. But all the way back from Modoc this morning I kept rememberin' Lance Adler's face. Then I woke up. I'd seen Topaz Seton years back—with his beard. I burned leather when I figured things out."

"I'm glad," Stew said humbly. "I'm plumb glad." And his words were not prompted by the news about his money.

"I'm glad, too," Betty said. "You see, Omaha's talked me into staying out here, and that means I've changed my mind about selling the Two Arrows. I'm going to run the spread. I'll be needing the same old crew—and cook."

Omaha was reaching for her hand, and the Two Arrows crew discreetly turned its backs. But Stew Quealy's eyes lingered a second longer than the others'. He was grinning contentedly when he faced about. And it wasn't because that ghostly parade of long-dead grub liners had been banished forever.

THE END.

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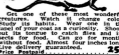
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