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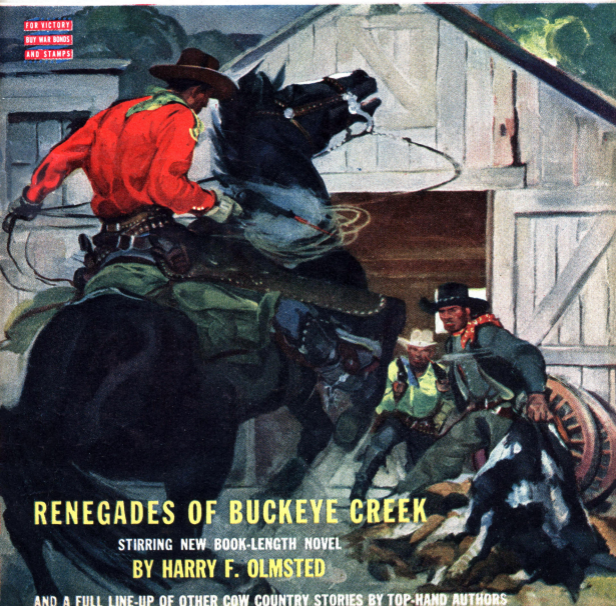
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VOL • 206 • NO • 5

APRIL 3, 1943

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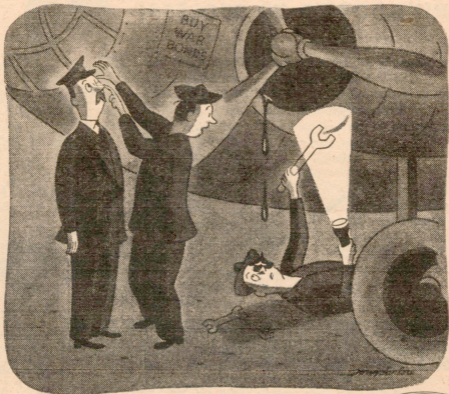
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VOL. CCVI, No. 5

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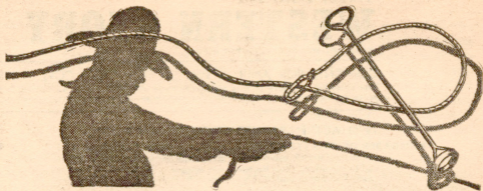
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The Roundup

WE were minding our own business the other day, when we heard the quick thudding of a burro's hoofs just outside our office. Sure enough, it was the Old-timer.

He turned Nellie out to graze in our filing cabinet, came over and plumped himself down in a chair by our desk. And when he cocked a watery gray eye our way we knew he was plenty riled.

"It's a dab-blame shame!" he said.

"What is?" we asked.

"About them ghosts, yuh idjit! Somethin's gotta be done!"

This was getting nowhere, so we pinned the old boy down and learned what he was jawin' about: It seems that because of the war requirements, a number of abandoned mines were being put back into production. Many of these mines, located out through the West, had long since been considered played out. But now they were producing the lead, quicksilver, magnesium, molybdenum, vanadium, manganese, zinc, mica, copper, talc and other minerals so badly needed to win the war. That they are doing this in spite of the shortage of man power, we sug-

gested, was a tribute to the will and determination of the American people. The Old-timer agreed, but then shook his head.

"That ain't what I'm grousin' about," he said. "I'm thinkin' about the pore ghosts who are bein' choused outen their homes in all them ghost towns. What are we gonna do about *them*?"

"You mean—you think the ghosts should be rehoused?"

"Yo're doggone tootin'," Old-timer shot back, "an' I'm gonna see that it's done." He got up, headed for his burro. "Come on, Nellie—git away from them manuscripts, they'll give yuh a bellyache!"

"Where you going?" we asked innocently.

"Where yuh think, younker? Down tuh Washington!"

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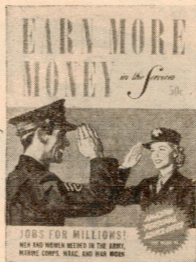


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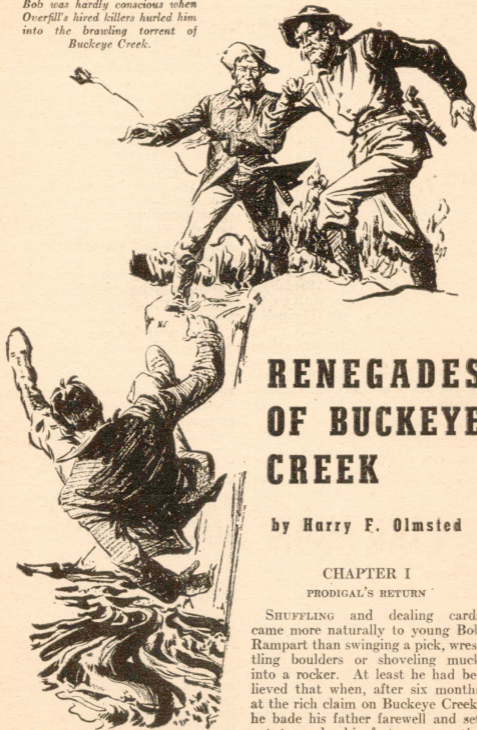
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Bob was hardly conscious when Overfill's hired killers hurled him into the brawling torrent of Buckeye Creek.



RENEGADES OF BUCKEYE CREEK

by Harry F. Olmsted

CHAPTER I

PRODIGAL'S RETURN

SHUFFLING and dealing cards came more naturally to young Bob Rampart than swinging a pick, wrestling boulders or shoveling muck into a rocker. At least he had believed that when, after six months at the rich claim on Buckeye Creek, he bade his father farewell and set out to make his fortune over the

gaming tables of San Francisco—richest and wickedest city of that day. When grizzled Holt Rampart had suggested that his son try out the gaming tables of nearby but no less riotous Gentryville, Bob had only laughed. Frisco was calling.

Now, sadder, wiser and poorer after a year in the big city, Bob was on the eastbound stage, headed back to Claim No. 11 Below Discovery, on Buckeye Creek, and the fine old man who slaved there. Jammed in between a sweating foreigner who swore in a thick tongue at each jolt, and a Chinaman who smoked a vile metal pipe, Bob braced himself against the lurching of the coach and thought of his father and the mine. He stared out at the falling snow, sweeping through the rifts in the marching pine brigades. Looked as though it would make deep drifts before morning. More snow meant higher water when the thaw came, washed-out intakes, lost sluices, heavy boulders to be moved and ditch to be dug before sluicing could be resumed.

Bob hoped his father would have sense enough to get into his tight cabin and wait out the storm. Holt Rampart still had the idea a man wasn't old till he got up around eighty, which left him about fifteen years. Bob knew his father would be working at his sluices, his joints sore and stiff with the miseries suffered by men who work long hours in cold water. Old Holt had nothing but contempt for babying.

Holt had been bitterly disappointed when Bob left for the city. But for all that, his letters reflected a fierce pride in an only son, a pride poorly masked by his preachments against "the wicked fleshpots of Gomorrah," and his stern scolding. Bob grinned, thinking of the going over he'd get from the old man, start-

ing the minute he set foot on the claim. Yet Holt would be delighted that his son had sown his last wild oat and was quite reconciled to buckle down and work out the claim.

THE storm had become a blizzard by the time the stagecoach rolled into Gentryville, to feed the passengers and change animals before undertaking the bitter trip to Summit. Early twilight was settling when the coach stopped at the station and Bob Rampart, the collar of his homespun coat turned up to his ears, stepped out to wait for a roustabout to hand down his telescope grip. Passing a coin to the cold menial, a habit acquired in Frisco, he picked up the heavy grip and started along the splintered boardwalk.

Snow stung his face and the raw wind took his breath, but something in Bob reacted to the conflict and he grinned. Fair or stormy, it was good to get back into the high hills. Frisco hadn't satisfied the restless longing in him. The sham of life down there had sickened him, made him realize he didn't belong. These were his kind of people up here. Tomorrow he'd put on his frayed and faded work clothes and pull his share of the load.

There were few people on the street as Bob headed for the stable. Good night to hug the fire, this. Even this hardy young man, with the build of a light-heavyweight, his strength and quickness unmarred by a year in Frisco, had to duck his head and plow into the wind to make headway.

Now Bob turned into the drafty portal of the big log feed stable, where a sickly light struck across the threshold of the cubby office. He shouldered into the small, overheated room with almost a yell:

"Hello, Ab! How's chances of getting that pesky Jeanette mule?"

He stopped short, closed the door and set his telescope down. His eyes, suddenly narrowed, swept the back of the cubby, where two men sat tilted against the wall, near the stove. One—and he was the one Bob noted first—was about forty, not over medium height but built like a great thick slab hewn from the bole of a straight tree. Stiff, cowlicked hair stuck up in rowdy disarray, the shock liberally sprinkled with gray. Eyes, dark and inscrutable, peered out expressionlessly from under bushy brows. His nose, flat and bulbous, seemed splattered out into the fullness of his florid cheeks and an ugly scar ran through the nose and down to the lipless gash of his mouth.

THE second man was tall, rawboned and shifty-eyed, an imposing enough figure but patently without the spirit to match his stature. Bob eyed the two for the briefest of seconds, then shook hands with the stable owner, a ruddy-faced man, Ab Whitcomb. With a smile, for everybody, Ab was salt of the earth, never unhappy when he could adjust his temper to that of the character he happened to be with at the moment. His hand flashed out.

"Glad to see yuh, Bob. Lookin' fine, boy. Back on a visit?"

"Back to stay, Ab." The chill in Bob's voice clouded the stableman's face. Like others in Gentryville, Whitcomb had seen Bob in a hair-triggered mood. "Back to help with the claim. A man don't appreciate things till he leaves them. How about that mule?"

"Sorry, Bob. It's spoke for."

"Who?"

"Bill Goddard and Red Parnell are down. They want to take Jenny

back loaded, though I hate most mortal to see her out in this weather. I got a—"

"Bill and Red, eh?" Bob broke in, pleased at thought of seeing the owners of Claim No. 12 Below—neighbors to old Holt. "They must be getting rich hauling back a mule load of grub. Those two penny throttlers usually only buy what they can hoist on their backs."

The laugh of the man with the smashed nose was like a curse. Bob flashed him a glance, but the man was looking at the floor. And Ab Whitcomb was saying: "Bill and Red ain't packin' grub back on that mule, Bob. They think they'll have a body to tote to the burying ground."

"Body?"

"The miners' court is meeting now, in Strickland Hall. Bill and Red are with 'em. Bob . . . your dad's bin missing for several days. The inside of his cabin's bin tore all to hell and his sluices has been robbed!"

BOB RAMPART stood frozen, the blood draining from his face, leaving him gray and grim. Almost wearily, he turned about, undid the straps on his telescope grip and brought out a pistol. This he stuck into his waistband, then rose again to face Ab Whitcomb.

"Ab," he said, and his own father could hardly have recognized that voice, "a day before I left for Frisco, old Beany Bacon, of No. 26 Above, was slugged and robbed and left for dead. I tracked Zeb Aggeler and caught him with the goods, in his camp near the pass. I fetched him in, turned him over to the court and, when it was plain old Beany would get well, I pulled out, knowing Aggeler, the thief, would be given his

needs. Now, a year later, I come back and find him sitting in your office, snug and safe. How come?"

Bob heard two chairs come down, as the chairs of the two at the back of the room straightened. But his glance didn't shift from Ab's troubled face.

The peace-loving stableman looked uneasy. "Trouble was, Bob," said the old-timer, Beany Bacon didn't get well. Took lung fever an' passed out without ever gettin' strong enough to talk. Zeb sent to Marysville for a lawyer an'— Aw, Zeb can tell it better than I can, Bob. Ask him."

Bob made a quarter turn and stepped to face Zeb Aggeler, where he sat with tall Del Donlin. Both were smiling faintly, seemingly amused but really alarmed and stiff as rattlers ready to strike.

Bob's lips were pressed into a bitter line and his eyes were cold as death.

"Aggeler," he said softly, "when I brought you in I figured another cottonwood would bear fruit and these diggings would be safer places for men to sluice gold. A slick lawyer saved you, for a while anyway. You paid that shyster plenty dust, I'll wager. Stolen dust. But I doubt you'll need him if it so happens I take your trail again. I'll never again put the burden of proof on the miners' court, where you're concerned, you understand? And if this long-coupled snake beside you don't quit inching toward his gun, he'll wind up all of a sudden with leaky guts. When I leave here, you polecats talk things over and figure your percentage in staying around this camp."

"Them"—Zeb Aggeler bounced up from his chair—"are fightin' words, Rampart. I don't like you, never

did an' never will. Any time you want fight, you won't have to ask me twice. No, on second thought, I'll pass yore slurs, as the fool prattlin' of a kid. This camp would hold it agin' me if messed up a city-duded, lily-fingered card sharp, anyway. You're the town's fair-haired boy. Go away an' quit temptin' me."

"So you can brag that I took water?" asked Bob tightly. "You got me wrong, Aggeler. I won't crawl. This will put it up to you." He swung his heavy fist against Aggeler's chin.

CHAPTER II

HARD TO TRAIL

WITH rights and lefts, Bob punished the meaty man savagely. Zeb bent under the storm of blows, trying to draw his pistol. Bob chopped at his forearm with the heel of his hand, grounding the unfired weapon. When Del Donlin horned in, Bob smashed him in the groin with a swinging boot. Donlin fell, writhing, gasping for breath. Aggeler, half blinded, tried to lay steel fingers into Bob's throat. Failing, that, he clawed his face, gouged his eyes. Del Donlin was on hands and knees, scrambling for his fallen gun so Bob took no further chances. He doubled Zeb Aggeler up with a lifting punch to the belly, sledged him to the floor with a terrific blow to the jaw. An instant later his pistol covered the suddenly ambitious Donlin.

"Palm it, Del," he invited. "Pick it up and I'll kill you like a mad dog. You and your dirty sluice robbers murdered Fred Baker and stole what he'd worked hard for. Fred was my best friend, almost like kin-folks. How do I know? Fred was still alive when I found him, Donlin. He whispered your name. Why

didn't I tell the miners' court? I did, but Brice Overfill, the president, is a timid soul. He doubted it was evidence, figgerin' Fred was about to say something else about you. He allowed that if Fred lasted long enough to name you, the court could act. So, like Aggeler, you're on the loose, free to carry on your killing and thieving."

Donlin stumbled up, his face convulsed. "You can't talk to me like this, Rampart. No man can manhandle an' slander me like you just done an' get away with it. You'll pay, an' I mean heavy."

"If I have to, I'll pay," said Bob coldly. "But you'll never take payment, Donlin. Listen, you night-crawling high grader; take your scaly partner somewhere and bring him around. Then both of you light a shuck out of these hills. If you don't we'll meet and it won't be with words. I'm going over to the court and see what Bill Goddard and Red Parnell know. If my dad's been shot from the brush, I'll know it's you and your thieves, and your death warrant will be signed, sealed and ready to deliver. Now, think that over!"

He brought his fist against Donlin's chin so hard the big man hurtled into the corner, shoulders down. Donlin moaned and lay there. Bob wheeled to pick up the two fallen pistols, feeling the stableman's eyes on him. The little man looked morose and worried.

"No harm done," Ab," Bob said, the tight ring gone from his voice. "You are in the clear here and I want these two buzzards, who ain't half as asleep as they try to make out, to listen to me. If they lay a finger on you; if they get nasty and take out their spite on you, I'll kill them both."

THE door flung open then and Red Parnell came in, with a roar of wind that made the lamplight dance on its wick. Red, a man showing plainly his thirty-odd years of hard work and precarious living, shook snow out of his collar, batted his pale blue eyes and scratched his flaming-red hair as he eyed the two men on the floor.

"Trouble, Bob?" he drawled.

"Just a disagreement, Red. Certain parties had too much confidence in their bluff. Now they won't be so sure of their luck."

"Uh-huh." Red nodded, his eyes thoughtful and troubled. A pallor overspread his face, making his huge freckles stand out startlingly. "Somebody said they saw you get off the stage and head for the stable. I couldn't believe it but come down to see, anyway. How come you reached here just . . . just now?"

"Took me a year, Red, to find I didn't know everything. So I came home. Let's go somewhere and talk."

Bob closed the grip, tossed it in a corner, patted the frightened barnman on the back and went out into the storm, which was howling now in an upswing of fury. Red, owner with Bill Goddard, of the claim adjoining Holt Rampart's, followed him. Good neighbors, Red and Bill had been, always willing to lend a hand, share their supplies or throw in on any project necessary to one claim or both. From the first, Bob had liked them, trusted them fully. Old Holt had loved them like they were his own.

Wind discouraged talk, as the two men struggled across the street, but Bob managed one question. "Where's Bill? Let's get him."

Red grunted, pushed Bob toward the Mountain House, Gentryville's log hotel. They plowed into the bar-

room, warm and catering to a select trade, and sat at a corner table with their drinks.

"Bill," the redhead explained soberly, "is over with a special call of the miners' court, trying to talk Brice Overfill into organizing a hunt for . . . for your father. You see, he—old Holt's gone and got himself—"

"Ab Whitcomb told me, Red. What more do you know about it?"

Red poured himself a stiff drink. "Nothin', Bob. Bill an' me had run a drift out along a fold in the bed-rock an' was plenty busy for three or four days. Too busy to go visitin'. Realizin' then that old Holt hadn't been near us, which wasn't like him, we went over to his cabin. The door swung open an' the place looked like a herd of pigs had stampeded through it. Everything tipped over, the floor wrenched up and Holt's possibles scattered. Looked like it was done several days before."

"Any sign, Red? Footprints or such?"

"Nothing to speak of. The dog—Shep—lay just inside, his skull crushed. A big spot of blood in one corner looked almighty scary, but nothin' to tell was it human blood or dog blood. Holt's Mouse burro was gone an' so was his rifle, over the fireplace. After lookin' things over for mebber an hour, we heard brayin'. Mouse came wadin' across the crick, draggin' his reins. Clotted blood covered his back an' withers, an' not burro blood. Mouse hadn't a scratch on him. Bob, it scairt the daylight out of us."

"Could you back-track Mouse?"

"Tried, Bob, but lost the trail. We got some of the boys to knock off an' stage a hunt. Findin' nothin', come sundown, me an' Bill come in to tell the court. First fellers we

seen when we hit town was big Del Donlin an' snaky Zeb Aggeler. They were grinnin' guilty, like the sheep dog that's et a lamb."

"I don't know of anyone else in these diggings who'd harm dad, even a man so desperate he had to go to robbin' sluices."

"Me, neither," grunted Red. "You mind the day you fetched Aggeler in an' turned him over to the court? I heard him tell you then that he'd make you an' yore dad do plenty sweatin' before he was done with you."

WHAT you didn't hear, said Bob grimly, "was him threatenin' to kill us both when the court turned him loose. Just like he knew they'd never punish him. If I'd so much as suspicioned he wouldn't hang, I'd never have left for Frisco, I'll tell you that."

"Now that you're here, what you aim to do?" asked Red.

"What I was on my way to do when I ran into Aggeler and Donlin." There was a hard tightening of Bob's square jaw, smoldering fires in his pale eyes. "I'm splitting myself across one of Ab's saddles and pulling out for the claim."

"In this storm? Nothin' gained by that, Bob. Stay here tonight an' me an' Bill will go back with yuh, an' as many of the miners as Bill can talk into staging another hunt."

"You and Bill try to get Brice Overfill to come out to the claim with the miners' court. Maybe we can find something tomorrow that will help pin this job onto Zeb Aggeler."

Red shook his head. "After this snowfall? Wasn't a thing beforehand, an' me an' Bill shore hunted hard. Anyway, you can't buck the storm. That wind will freeze yore marrow an' a horse can't tell where

he's travelin'. Wait till it clears—"

Bob shook his head stubbornly. "Wind's coming straight down the Buckeye Canyon. I'll keep it in my face and the side slopes will hold the pony straight. It won't be fun, but we'll make it. I'd go crazy, stayin' here, all comfortable and knowing dad's out there somewhere, maybe calling for me. Tell Bill hello. I'll see him when he gets to the claim."

He got up and turned to the door. Red watched him go out into the storm again, his eyes filled with trouble. "I sure hope," he murmured, "he finds old Holt at the cabin when he gits there. I'm scairt of what'll happen if Bob finds his dad's dead. It'll make a killer of him, shore as shootin'."

CHAPTER III

NEW GRAVE ON BUCKEYE

THROUGH as nasty a night as those high hills spawn, Bob Rampart rode up Buckeye Creek, toward Claim No. 11 Below Discovery. Alone. Deeply apprehensive. Wrestling back a rage already so great as to fill him with a restless fever to indulge it. Into the teeth of the storm he forced the unwilling pony, through a bitter, freezing blackness.

Wind-driven snow bit into Bob's eyes. Before long his ears and cheeks grew numb with frostbite. His hands, in fleece-lined gloves, were cold and his feet, wool-clad under stout leather, were like chunks of ice. But his mind, busy with its problem, was coldest of all. Wishfully, Bob kept telling himself that old Holt needed him. But that part of him which dealt solely with reality told him that he had come back too late. Bitterly, he condemned himself for ever having indulged his headstrong yen to try his luck

against the Frisco gamblers. If he had been at the claim when the sluice thieves struck—

With most of his trip behind him, Bob began trying to distinguish landmarks. This bend of the trail held the cabin of Hez Donovan, though he could not see it. Hez Donovan, the laughing Irishman who could outwork, outfight and outcuss any living man, according to his own boast. Hez Donovan, who had laid siege to the heart of the Frisco Lily, a beautiful singer who had come to Brice Overfill's Sierra Saloon. Hez had won only ridicule from the Lily, and he still mourned the wife she might have made him.

Memories rode alongside Bob. This creek crossing was where Ah Gee, the pitiful Chinese miner had found the ten-pound nugget. Ah Gee, who picked away at white men's worked-over ground for the few crumbs they had left, suddenly made rich by a jet of the luck god. Bob recalled how Ah Gee, drunk with his good fortune, went all the way up the gulch, showing his find to all the boys, bidding them good-by before he left for China. But the Chinaman didn't get to the home of his ancestors. He was killed in his sleep that first night. And, ironically, with the prize nugget. Someone had used the prize to bash in Ah Gee's head. And everybody turned out to bury the happy, chattering little Oriental, respected and liked wherever known.

Here the trail straightened into the meadow. Holt Rampart's cabin was less than a thousand feet farther. And here the horse threw up its head, snorting. The faintest pin prick of light showed ahead. It was a lantern carried by one of a group of heavy-coated men who trudged along the drifted trail. Two of that

half dozen men carried a stiff, blanket-wrapped burden across their toil-thickened shoulders. Bob knew what that burden was and a tightness grew in his throat. Holt Rampart was gone. His friends were bringing home the shell of what to Bob had been the greatest man alive.

WHEN the men became conscious of Bob's approach, directly behind them, the burden was laid down and Bob faced six leveled pistols. The guttering lantern light played upon six strained faces, whiskered and snow powdered. Old Jeff Baker, owner of Claim 14 Below and father of Bob's dead friend, Fred Baker, rasped: "Who are you an' what you up to in this blizzard? Sing, brother, 'cause we're damned short of temper!"

Bob reined in and stepped from the saddle. He almost fell, so numb were his legs. Finding his balance, he said: "I'm Bob Rampart. Is that my father?"

"Bob!" The word ran from tongue to tongue, and these rough, tough men were strangely embarrassed. Old Jeff came over and sank strong fingers into Bob's arm.

"Get hold of yoreself, son. It's Holt, or what's left of him. Dan an' Wally Blades found him at the foot of the slant, where the high trail cuts up the side gulch, opposite 16 Below. The fall could have killed him, but he'd bin shot in the back. Sorry yore homecomin' has to be shadowed by somethin' like this."

They took Holt home, built up a fire in the cold cabin. The claim holders stood in an awkward group around the stove, rasping their cold, calloused hands. The blizzard wailed in an icy voice outside as Bob pulled the blanket down and looked at the chill, gray face of Holt Rampart. Bob said nothing and,

after a minute, pulled the blanket up again. But when he turned to face the gathered miners, they had never seen a face so contorted with rage. He looked them over, one by one, and when he spoke there was something in his voice that made them start.

"Thank you, boys," he said. "Dad was murdered—shot in the back by a yellow bushwhacker who laid alongside the trail of the sluice thieves and plugged him when he came hunting them—alone. I ain't gonna be good for another damn thing till I find who done this and hunt 'em down."

"An' we're behind you to a man," said Jeff Baker. "I lost a boy the same way, as you know. It's time we cleaned out some of the murderin' rats. Come, on, boys."

They went out into the storm. Not that there was one among them but would have admired to sit up with old Holt Rampart. But it took no mind reader to see that Bob Rampart wanted to be alone with his dead.

There was quite a funeral on Buckeye Creek, when the storm abated. On the little bench, overlooking the claim he had located and developed, Holt Rampart was sealed in a rough-pine casket and lowered into a hole that was like a black scar against the white purity of the snow. Everybody was there, from Claim 26 Above—up near the ridge, to 40 Below—not far from Gentry River. Hard-working miners who had known Holt as one to fetch your troubles to, a stern man but a fair man, gathered now to pay their last respects.

From Gentryville came merchants who had advanced Holt credit and never lost by it. There was handsome Brice Overfill, tall and straight and distinguished in his black

broadcloth, owner of the Sierra Saloon and president of the miners' court. With him had come the Rev. T. Millard Burkett, first and only pastor of the stone church built with gold dust collected by Holt Rampart from owners of a hundred claims.

A belled sleigh had come up from Gentryville, filled with honkatonk girls to mourn the passing of a man who had offered them nothing but a decent smile and the warm humanity usually denied their kind.

Wildlings from Tennessee Bar, the boom camp across the high ridge, came over to see the burial of a man who had argued against the court placing a ban on them for their hell raising. But if the miners noticed them, by their actions they declared a truce, here at the grave of a departed friend to them all. Ma Stallings of the Gentryville Kitchen, brought up equipment for making doughnuts and coffee, and neighbors had relaid the floor in the cabin so that she could work her magic. A little something hot would make the bitter return trip that much shorter. Men stamped their feet as the preacher said the plain sermon over the grave, and flasks of whiskey passed from hand to hand.

WHEN the funeral was over and the neighbors had filled in the grave and mounted the fresh, clean earth, Bob, Bill Goddard and Red Parnell stood there with hats off, until all the rest had gone down the trail to get some of Ma's doughnuts and spin yarns about old Holt over brimming cups of hot coffee spiked with whiskey. Bob was trembling and, noticing it, Bill cuffed him smartly on the shoulder.

"Snap out of it, son. I know how you feel, but—"

"Of all the gall!" Bob exploded.

"Big Del Donlin and Zeb Aggeler coming here to the graveside and taking off their hats. The hypocrites! They killed my father, Bill. I'm sure of it."

"You can't prove it, son. Listen! If we're patient an' wait 'er out, the killer might drop somethin' over a whiskey glass, or to a girl. But if you start something now before you got the goods on 'em, then it's your neck. Use some brains on this, Bob. Red an' me feel the same about it, don't we, Red?"

Parnell grunted, jerked his head and they started Bob down the trail, one on either side of him. Deep in his thought, Bob didn't speak till they hit the flat, where the diggings were. Then he said: "Proof is for the court, boys. I had the proof on Zeb once before; caught him with it. What did it buy me? They turned Zeb loose so he could rub out Holt Rampart, a man worth a hundred of Aggeler any day. I don't think I can stand the sight of Aggeler grinnin' at me over a cup of coffee, on my own claim. If I call him and Donlin to a gun showdown, don't you boys horn in. All you'll do is to get yourselves or me killed."

"Your dad was on the court, Bob," Bill reminded him. "Even he'd have to vote for hanging you, if you kill them two buzzards on the flimsy evidence you've got. Besides, I don't want to have to bury you, right after plantin' Holt. Give it up."

Bob halted, faced them. His lips were curled and his eyes flashed. "You're afraid of them two," he charged. "Everybody's afraid of them, even Brice Overfill—president of the court. Well, I'm not scairt of 'em. Get away from me." He turned away, but Bill Goddard spun him about, his seamed face working. "Bob was a lanky, stringy man

of uncertain age. Sandy-haired, he was active and hard as nails, but probably not less than fifty.

"If you wasn't the son of your father, you foolhardy young pup," Bill said fiercely, "I'd smash that lie back into your teeth. I'm not scairt of any man living or dead, an' that goes for you, too. Your hot-headedness an' honin' fer trouble don't become a Rampart; I'll tell you that. I ain't shore you've got a ghost of a chance of makin' a worthy son of old Holt."

He strode away angrily. Bob stood there, hurt and filled with bitter self-recrimination. He turned to Parnell, but the redhead dropped his eyes.

"He'll git over it, Bob," Red said. "His mads don't last long. I oughta know, livin' with him like I have fer two years. He's right, though."

"Sure he is, Red. When I get hot, I just burn all over. I'm coolin' down now, though, and you won't have anything to worry about. Let's go to the cabin."

BOB'S eyes searched for the two men he hated, when he forced his way through the throng about the cabin. But he saw nothing of them. Men took his hand and murmured condolences as he passed. Even Brice Overfill, one of the important men of the district and not prone to fraternize with lesser men, came to Bob, and the pressure of his hand was warming.

"This is not your loss, Bob, but a district loss," Overfill declared. "I feel as though one of my own family has suddenly gone. It will be harder and not nearly as pleasant going on without Holt. What are your plans?"

Bob shrugged. "Work the claim, I guess. What else?"

The saloonman shook his head. "You're not cut out for the deady

monotony and dirty mucking necessary to make a river claim work out well, Bob. Your place is at a card table, dealing faro or playing poker. I can make a lot of things possible for you. Come see me at the Sierra, will you?"

"I see you here," said Bob shortly. "What's on your mind?"

Overfill's laugh reflected amusement. "I've got a little money laid by, Bob, and I think enough of No. 11 Below to offer you ten thousand dollars, cash on the barrel head. And a job dealing for me at ten percent of your earnings, which is the same as working for yourself. Besides, I can now and again put you in the way of making a nice clean-up, on the side."

Bob was tempted. Ten thousand was a lot of money. Ten percent of his winnings could amount, and frequently would, to a thousand dollars a night. Once, before leaving for Frisco, Bob would have leaped at such a generous offer. But since that disastrous year he had come to look upon money differently. Come easy, go easy; that was the way it had been. If the urge came upon him, he could easily lose the ten thousand on the turn of a card. Which was the same as saying he could lose the claim on a whim. Holt Rampart's claim. And Brice Overfill would throw gangs of men in and clean up the pay dirt, fast. Might even dig up the little bench where old Holt was sleeping.

"Thanks, Brice," he said. "But I've quit gambling. And the claim ain't for sale."

Overfill's lips tightened and a hardness came to his long-lashed eyes. "When I want something, Rampart," he said bitingly, "I don't beat about the bush. I offer all a property is worth, maybe more than I can ever take out of it. Only a

fool would try to haggle up a price on me."

"I'm not haggling, Mr. Overfill. I just don't want to sell. Far as I'm concerned, that ends it. I don't want to hear any more about the business."

Overfill stood still, but his cheeks pinched down and his lids drew up, giving Bob a view of burning red flames far back in his eyes. No warmth or compassion there, no humor or friendliness. Bob saw a new Brice Overfill in that split second, and the knowledge that he had long held too high an opinion of this man came as a shock, dragged like a rasp across his nerves. And now Overfill was speaking, though there was no visible movement of the lips.

"You'll regret that decision, Rampart. I've tried to be kind to the wastrel son of my old friend. I see I made a mistake." He turned away, losing himself in the crowd. And Bob was suddenly confused by the implications of the enmity he had read in those fanatically direct eyes. Overfill was president of the miners' court. He had but to nod his head to ruin a man. And Bob was remembering a number of sluice thieves who had been hung in the district, thieves whose claims had somehow later come in to Overfill ownership.

CHAPTER IV

SNAKE TRACK

KNOWING what the haunting loneliness of the Rampart cabin would mean to Bob, Bill Goddard offered the hospitality of the snug half-cabin-half-dugout he had and Red Parnell shared. Bob accepted gladly. To be alone in his own cabin, reminded by every item of its patent vandalism of the tragedy, was almost more than he could face. When

the crowd had gone and dusk was creeping into the gulch, the three of them walked down to Claim 12 Below, built up a fire in the dwelling and relaxed from the strain of past hours. And the two partners listened to Bob's story of his refusal to sell and what he had read in Brice Overfill's eyes.

Bill and Red exchanged glances. The redhead said: "You ain't tellin' us nothin' new, Bob. Overfill come to us with a like deal, finally uppin' the ante to seven thousand apiece. We laughed at him an' he halfway promised us bad luck for the rest of our lives. That was almost a month ago."

Bob sat up on the bunk. "Do you know whether he offered dad a price?"

"Sure he did. Ten thousand. Holt laughed him right off the claim. I was there at the time an' I told your dad he'd made a bad enemy in Brice." Bill Goddard stroked his stubbled jaw and studied. "You see, son, I was thinking of that when I asked you not to go hog wild and start shootin' up Del Donlin an' Zeb Aggeler for something Brice Overfill could have done."

"You don't suspicion Brice of sneakin' around bushwhackin' his enemies?"

"Not with his own hand, mebbe. But, in his position, he could get away with plenty that would never by any chance be laid to him. And don't think it's any hit an' miss proposition with him. You'd be surprised how many claims he owns on Buckeye right now."

"How many?"

"I ain't in a position to know for certain, Bob," said Goddard. "But I know two fellers that has already sold an' got the money. They're stayin' on at wages, just so the word won't be out that Overfill's buyin'

wholesale. But if Brice can work it, he'll own Buckeye from one end to the other." The grizzled placer miner's face grew bleak. "Well, let him try to get this one. Let him come at us, eh, Red?"

The redhead grinned. "I wrote his name on a wad an' rammed it down on a double load of powder. The court may stretch my neck, but Brice Overfill won't be there to see me swingin'."

THE obvious sincerity of these two friends turned the spotlight of Bob's rage from Donlin and Aggeler to the saloonman. Likewise it puzzled him. "Why?" he asked, "is Overfill so keen to collect claims? Can't work 'em all at once without his hired hands robbing him blind. And he'll never live long enough to work 'em out, one by one. What's his angle?"

"Just what Bill an' me wondered," said Red. "I had to make a trip to Marysville an' while there a hardware man happened to remark that Brice Overfill was in a way to becomin' hog rich. I asked how come, an' he said Brice was hauling a machine up here, part by part. Some sort of a giant shovel that bites holes in the side of the mountains an' lifts the river gravels like they was sawdust. Way he talked, it sounded like three men could work out claims like ours in a few days, makin' millions. That's what he's up to an' that's what we're up against. What do you think of the idea?"

"I've heard of 'em," mused Bob. "They're working satisfactory along the foothill toes, south of Jintown. Run by steam an' burn stove wood. Plenty successful. I don't know what we could do if it wades right across the middle of our claims."

"I do," Red snapped. "Some-

body's got to run a monster like that. An' that somebody ain't liable to be wearin' a cast-iron suit. Sure keep 'em busy bustin' in operators."

But Bob was looking backward, not forward. And the full weight of Overfill's scheming, if it had it right, fell upon him. Overfill, in a position of trust and command, was the leader of a sluice-robbing gang. The wealth thus derived he was using to buy out the very men he had robbed, perhaps, to lend an atmosphere of legitimacy to his business, and also to purchase a machine that would gut the placers in a quick clean-up. It added up to quick conviction, making Bob ashamed that he had suspected Donlin and Aggeler, no matter how bad they might otherwise be.

"This is a tough one," he told the partners. "If we stake out on this gang, and happen to catch 'em at work, we'll nab only some thick-skulled bushwhack hireling. The real culprit will go scot-free."

"Me an' Red are sure Overfill's our man," said Bill. "But what good will it do to advertise our suspicions? What we've gotta do is to get the deadwood on him. An' how to do it?"

"Best way to do that," Bob declared, "is to stake out around his house. Where does Overfill hang his hat now?"

THE partners looked glum, shook their heads. Red said: "That's no good. He lives in a big place, four mile up Gentry Crick from town. An' don't figger on slippin' in on him. Twelve-foot log stockade all around it, the poles sharpened an' fire-hardened. Men guard them walls an' the strong gate, day an' night. An' just in case somebody does get in, he's up against a pack of hungry bloodhounds. Brice

claims to be a dog breeder, but a man don't breed the kind o' brutes he's got except for protection. You mess around the Overfill place an' you're a goner."

"It's a chance I'll have to take, boys. I'm— Look out, Bill, Red! Man outside! Duck!" Bob's eyes had strayed to the one glass pane in the makeshift dwelling. A sailor had brought a porthole light into the hills, having stolen it from the ship from which he deserted. Red had bought it to grace the cabin. Through that small round pane, Bob had seen an evil, whiskery face with close-set eyes, and the barrel of a horse pistol lifting. He kicked at the table leg, knocking the lamp to the floor and plunging the room into blackness. Muzzle flame danced at the aperture. Glass tinkled and a bullet plopped into the rear wall.

Jerking his gun, Bob propelled himself to the door and outside. Running footsteps squeaked across the snow and Bob lit after the sound, running hard. Near the edge of timber a gun flash licked toward him and a bullet droned past his face. Bob shot at the flash and then strained his ears, listening. No sound. He was still poised there when the partners came from the cabin, one carrying a lantern.

"Get back inside with that light," Bob yelled. "You want to get killed?"

It gave them pause and Bob felt his way forward as soon as he had rammed home another load. He stumbled over the body, almost falling. "Now you can fetch that lantern," he called, and the partners came to him. The guttering light fell across the swart face of a ragged

"If I've got to die, I want my Bible in my hand," Bob declared. But when his hand came out of his pocket it was a pistol he was holding.



CHAPTER V

WARNING FROM JACKASS GULCH

Mexican, whose only decent item of apparel was a fine pair of Russian leather boots, undoubtedly taken from the body of some victim. The would-be assassin was dead, his gun still in his hand, and a search of his clothes produced only a knife, tobacco, a small poke of dust and a note from an anonymous source, inviting one Diego Cespedes to come at once to Gentryville for fighting pay and quick loot.

By mutual consent it was agreed to leave the body where it was until daylight, notify nobody of the killing and bury Cespedes where he fell. Gleefully, Red Parnell remarked it would be a lot more alarming to Cespedes' boss to have the Mexican disappear than to have him slain. Bob disagreed with that theory.

"The man who sent the Mex to kill us," he said tartly, "don't care a hang for anything except that Cespedes failed. For that he likely would have killed him anyway, to shut his mouth. It was a close shave . . . too close. He nick either one of you?"

"Slug passed right between us," said Bill. "We was lucky."

"Luck has a way of changing," warned Bob. "Let's get to bed. We've a hard job of digging in the morning."

But morning brought something besides digging. The body of Diego Cespedes was gone. Tracks of two men led to where a pair of horses had been tethered. Bob followed the hoof marks for a mile or more, losing them in Buckeye Creek and failing to pick them up again.

"Tain't everybody can sport a horse around these parts," he told the partners, upon his return. "It might be something to work on, if we wanted to forget that Overfill keeps a whole stable of saddlers."

STILL having no stomach for the loneliness of the Rampart claim, Bob spent the day helping the partners. It proved to be a day of excitement. A shaft, put down in heavy boulders on the north line, was completed to bedrock. And there, throwing back the light from its dull golden beauty, was the coarse pay dirt of a veritable glory hole. One could pick it up with the fingers. It was no trick at all to gather a dozen pounds of the rich stuff.

With dusk coming on, the partners quit work, cut a few capers on the diggings and gave vent to their joy with a series of war whoops which should have been heard for a mile. They had taken out dust most every day, but nothing extraordinary if one considered the cost of necessary supplies. But here was the real thing—pocket stuff that some hit and others didn't. Bill pointed out the reason for Bob.

"See that light streak along the mountainside, yonder? Well, that's an ancient stream bed. Buckeye Crick, as she was a million years ago. Follow her along, by the white gravel dumps. See her wrigglin'? Just like a snake. Now she bends an' comes across our claim, an' yores. An' yonder you can see it windin' across the tall ridge. Yore fortune's made, kid!" He caught Bob and did a jig with him. "Wisht old Holt could o' lived fer this day. All along he insisted he was planted right over the top of the heavy pay dirt. This proves him right."

Red was already on his way to the cabin, calling to them to follow and help him kill the bottle he had cached there. Bob, sharing their elation, was for getting right down to his claim and starting work. Bill

talked him out of it. "Can't work at night, son. Take to it in the mornin'. Your bedrock's shallower'n ours. You should be on it by this time tomorrow."

Imbued with a new enthusiasm, Bob tied into his task next morning, putting every muscle to the test. Come midafternoon, he struck bedrock, without having encountered any of the big boulders Bill and Red had gone through. There was fine gold on bedrock; he panned some to test it. But where in Buckeye Gulch was there bedrock without some pay on it? Bob had missed the glory Streak.

Disappointed and sore all over, Bob knocked off as dusk came creeping up the gulch. His feet dragged a little as he moved down toward the empty cabin. He had prospected along his north line, where the old stream bed should cut through. There he had found bedrock only a scant six feet deep, and overlaid with outwash rather than stream detritus. What could that mean?

UNDER the trees near the cabin, the light was almost gone. Yet it was enough to show the door swinging open, and the quick movement of something just inside. Bob stiffened, halted. His gun came to his hand. Two swift steps took him to the cabin's front wall. "All right, whoever you are. Come out, with your hands up!"

"It's me, mister." The voice was thin and frightened. "Don't shoot, 'cause I ain't got a gun an' I ain't here fer no mischief neither. I folered Zeb here an'—"

"Zeb? Zeb who?" Bob had his gun centered on the small, ragged boy who emerged cringingly from the cabin.

"Zeb Aggeler, Mr. Rampart. He rid a horse down here to watch you

workin'. He was up to no good an' I figgered mebbeso I could warn you before he done you some lastin' harm. But he only set up there in the timber, his gun across his knees, watchin' you dig. An' I couldn't git down to you without him seein' me. He come down an' poked through yore cabin an' when he was gone, I come here to wait fer you."

"Wait for me, eh?" Bob went over to the boy, patting him for hide-outs. But the youngster carried no weapon, not so much as a pocket-knife. "Who are you, an' what did you want to warn me about?"

"I'm Wolf Bealor's kid. They call me Wart, but my name's really Ward. I heard 'em talkin' over how you was to be killed an' thought—"

"Heard who talking?"

"Zeb Aggeler, an' Uncle Del."

"Del Donlin? Is he your uncle?"

"Yeah." The boy squirmed restlessly. "Though a feller'd never guess it to see how he knocks me around. Sometime"—a bleak look came to that pinched face—"I'm gonna take on enough height an' taller to get even fer all the whuppin's he's give me. An' that Zeb—" Wart spat.

Bob stood up, his face cold with suspicion. "You came over the ridge, didn't you? From Jackass Gulch. I heard Wolf Bealor had taken up a claim over there after being run out of the Gentry Creek diggings for suspicion of robbery. I don't know why you came over here or what your game is, but you go back and tell them that sent you that Bob Rampart don't scare easily. Tell Del that when he wants my hide, to come himself instead of sending a buzzard like Diego Céspedes. And to make the first shot good, 'cause he'll never get the second one. Get over into your own gulch and stay there. And tell Wolf

and Zeb and all the other precious blackguards they'll have to think up a faster one to lull Bob Rampart to sleep."

Before he stopped talking, Bob saw the boy's face contort and his head start shaking. Now Ward cried: "No, Mr. Rampart. Nobody sent me over here. I come on my own say-so, an' if Del knowed I was here, he'd tan me good. Like I said, I follered Zeb hopin' I could warn you—"

"Why should you want to warn me? When the miners ran Wolf Bealor out, they sentenced him to hang if ever he came back. And it's the same for anybody he sends back here on his dirty business. You don't owe me anything. Why should you want to warn me?"

Embarrassment seemed to grip Wart. "I wasn't rightfully doin' it fer you," he said. "But for Holt Rampart. Him an' me was friends. He . . . he used to buy me candy an' dried apples an' cookies at the store in Gentryville. Told me if ever I got tired livin' with snakes, to come over here an' he'd gimme a job. It . . . it shore hit me hard when I heard Holt was dead. If I'd thought you was so different from him, I wouldn't've come to warn yuh."

He darted an' swerved, eluding Bob's clutching hand and speeding into the gathering darkness. Half shamed, Bob let him go. Getting his supper, he kept reviewing what the boy had said, and while conviction came slowly, it came nonetheless. Maybe it was because he regretted his scorn of the boy's heroic, lone-hand journey to warn the son of a friend. Maybe it was because Bob had suspicioned Zeb Aggeler and Del Donlin first and that suspicion died hard. Anyway, it wasn't long until he had turned

completely over again, deciding for the second time that Holt Rampart had been slain by the pair he, Bob, had manhandled in Gentryville. Much easier to believe than that Overfill had done it.

HAVING eaten his supper and washed up the dishes, Bob went out into the frosty night and up to the grave on the little bench. What he really went for was to swear over that grave that Holt Rampart's killers would die for that crime. But what he found on the grave hit him hard. A little clump of faded cloth flowers the kind women wear on their gowns or on their hats. Attached to the offering was a note, penciled in a childish scrawl. In the light of the cabin hearth, Bob deciphered it. It said:

Deer pardner—Me an' dad tried to stop him an he kilt dad. Again I git a gun I'll square fer you an him I promise. Rich pannins pardner. Good-by from yore friend—
Wart Bealor.

It twisted Bob's heart, that illiterate scrawl. The boy had been telling the truth of a friendship Bob hadn't even suspected. One thing mentioned in the note excited Bob's deepest interest. Wolf Bealor, blackguard, renegade, suspected high grader who had been run out of Gentry Creek, was apparently dead—slain by the same man who had killed Holt Rampart. Who was that man? Certainly Wart had known and he, Bob Rampart, had sent the boy out into the night with the ache of friendship refused. Had he kept Wart here, fed and warmed him, he, too, might now have the information he wanted more than anything else in the world.

Torn with bitter self-recrimination, Bob got into his heavy coat, donned a pair of snowshoes. An

angry wind was squalling around the caves, warning him to stay indoors by the hot stove. But in Bob Rampart was a stronger argument. It would take him all night to cross the ridge, find the Bealor claim, learn the truth from Wart and return. He reached for the rifle on the wall. It was gone. It had been there when he ate supper. His eye flashed to where the belt of cartridges was wont to hang, beside the fireplace opening. It, too, was missing. While Bob had been at the grave, Wart must have slipped in and taken the gun and ammunition. Now, overburdened, he was trudging across the wind-swept mountain to kill the murderer of his father.

The thought chastened Bob. He located his father's pistol, which with his own gave him fire power with much less weight. Clapping on his hat, he blew the light and ducked out into the night. It was snowing again, big, soft, feathery flakes. And the icy, gnashing wind promised more to come.

CHAPTER VI

HAND OF THE BUSHWHACKER

UP the rough, endless grade leading to the high ridge. Through the black aisles of roaring, storm-whipped pines. A four-mile struggle to the top, from whence a man would at least have gravity with him. Four long, snow-drifted, freezing miles. A man softened by a year in the city, unused to hard physical exertion, floundering upward against a wind that tore needed air from his lungs, against powdery snow clinging to his webs as if to drag him back. And the damning thought persisting that little Wart had no chance of making it through this fury.

Man's endurance is a puny thing,

and when Bob came to the end of his, he was far short of the ridge. No longer could he whip his muscles to carry him upward. Nothing to do but turn about and let the wind blow him home again. There would be another day. If in the meantime Wart killed or was killed, there was nothing Bob could do.

The storm hung around for three full days. Then there was an equal period of raw clearing weather, with flurries of snow and wicked gales lashing the Buckeye cabins. Bob spent most of that week toasting his shins in the cabin of Red and Bill. And though they talked about almost everything, he told them nothing about Wart Bealor's visit, preferring to avoid their mirth at the slick way the youngster had put it over on him. But he did tell them of his shaft, the shallow bedrock along the north line and his puzzlement. It was food for much speculation.

The first day the hills were freed from their low-lying cloudy shroud, the partners walked down to Bob's claim with him, to try to trace out the course of the ancient stream bed. There, after considerable disagreement, a new site for a shaft was spotted.

"Right there," said Bill. "If you don't hit it here, I'll eat the muck, without salt. If you miss, it means the old river cuts through the mountain, or mebbeso dips under bedrock. Could be it's carryin' the present stream. As I recall, Holt taken out some coarse gold along the crick margin, didn't he?"

"He did," admitted Bob. "Coarser than most. All the mint reports show it. I'll give this spot a try and if I miss I may be better off selling to Brice Overfill at the price he offers."

"Let the rest of us down, eh?" Bill

Goddard flared up.

"How so?" asked Bob. "I know the way you fellers feel about sellin', but would you feel just the same if you was tied to a claim that didn't pay to work?"

They admitted they wouldn't but denied that Bob had proved his claim worthless and urged him to keep working. Next morning, early, they passed, each carrying a tow sack loaded with nuggets and dust. They were heading for the stage-coach at Gentryville and a celebration at Marysville.

"Don't pay to keep gold around, with things like they are," said Bill. "Cash in small an' often; that's how to cheat the sluice thieves."

"Look alive on the trail," Bob warned them. "No telling who's watching us."

Red grinned fiercely, brandished a pistol. "Who, me? Let 'em try me out."

BOB watched them go, feeling vaguely uneasy. Hard-working miners setting out upon a holiday, they wouldn't be too difficult to surprise. But he forgot to worry about them as the weather turned bright and he sweat profusely as he attacked the gravels. Unseasonable heat gnawed at the drifts, sending muddy cascades into the creek. From a murmuring brook, Buckeye became a roiled, debris-filled torrent, rising steadily, eating at its banks, roaring defiance at whatever might impede it.

In spite of the heat, Bob dug with a will, thinking often of Wart Bealor. He promised himself that as soon as he completed his shaft, he'd cross the ridge and find out what the boy knew. Foot by foot he went down, the material becoming coarser, the test a little more stern. Climbing to winch-up the

bucket, then returning to fill it—grueling work made exciting because of the gamble.

It took him four days to hit bottom—and disappointment. On the irregular bedrock was no coarse gold, none of the dull glory Bill and Red had found. The ancient gravels somehow by-passed his claim. The claim had values, his dad having wrung a steady income from the ground by dint of hard work. But slavery like that did not appeal to Bob. He was tempted to let Overfill have the claim.

Dusk gloomed the hole and Bob climbed out of the shaft. The creek, gorged with float, still thundered, though it had dropped a foot since morning, Bob noted. That was good, he thought. In another week he could be snaking out two-pound trout for his suppers. The clamor of the stream filled the gulch with so many clashing echoes that Bob felt he had imagined he heard a harsh, toneless voice call his name strongly and with a note of command. "Rampart!"

Bob whirled, startled, to stare at a clump of pine slashing, not fifty yards away. "Somebody call me?" he shouted. And when no answer came, he went deliberately toward that clump, his forehead puckered, his brain reaching out for the answer to the uncanny feeling that somebody had spoken to him. And he was thinking of Wart Bealor rather than enemies when muzzle fire leaped from that covert and the crash of guns rose powerfully over the roar of water. A giant hand seemed to cuff him around, first this way, then that. And agony, in dreadful waves, tore through his body.

The echo of his own cry was in Bob's ear as he fell. And the image of a number of figures darting from

the thickets, coming toward him, was in his failing vision. Desperately, he tried to cling to the last fraying end of his consciousness, tried to spur his will to drive his hand to draw his own pistol. It seemed to him he did draw the weapon, but then suddenly he knew nothing as he plummeted into a dark and bottomless void.

THROUGH a nightmare of pain, Bob came back to a hazy sense of reality. He lay on his back, looking upward through slitted lids at the three cruel faces peering down at him, faces alight with an unholy joy, faces quite strange to Bob. One of the trio gave a scornful laugh. "Of all the danged fools! Did you see him come right up to our guns? An' after the warnin' he's had, too." "No brains," allowed another. "Look, the boss offered him ten thousand cart wheels for this claim; kin you imagine? He turned it down."

"Yeah," the third one chimed in. "Brice offered him a spot in the Sierra Saloon, too. I'd rather have that than any gold claim. This jasper turned that down, too."

The one who seemed to be the leader had turned away, was staring down the shaft. "Whee-ew!" he whistled. "The boy's bin workin', I'll say that fer him. Must be down almost to bedrock an' that bonanza vein they're strikin' in them other claims. Boys, this is the biggest thing you an' me will likely ever see in the placer country. The three an' a third percent interest we each get fer beefin' Rampart will make us rich. An' I mean hog rich."

"Looks like the boss would o' ketched Rampart alive an' forced him to sign papers of ownership befo' he killin' him."

"Don't worry about Brice, boys.

He knows what he's doin', all the way. He's got a tinhorn dealin' in the Sierra—you know, the feller with the yaller hair. That pen magician can look at yore John Henry an' scribble it better'n you can. A quit-claim is already on its way to Sacramento."

"It's night an' I'm hungry," complained one. "What about the corpse. Hoot?"

The leader stirred. "Toss him into the crick for the catfish."

Bob was conscious enough to realize what that meant. A strong man, with all his faculties, could hardly breast that torrent. For Bob, it was a death sentence, if indeed his wounds did not already doom him. But the instinct of self-preservation was strong and it bade him hang limp and take his chances with the more merciful waters. And that he did, though their rough handling tortured his broken body.

That hundred yards to the stream seemed to take an æon of time, and a parade of thoughts tortured Bob's mind. He thought bitterly of that smiling, affable archhypocrite—Brice Overfill. A trusted man, whose judgments spelled doom to many miners, Overfill claimed many influential friends and total immunity to suspicion of crimes such as murder and robbery.

The thought inflamed Bob with a fierce will to live. And he needed that incentive and a lot more when they swung him by feet and arms into the rampaging creek. He lit with a splash, gulped a breath and went under, rolling. The icy water contracted his muscles, expelled air from his lungs and brought an increased mental activity as he began his struggle for life, which called now insistently.

He broke water, arms flailing against the powerful current. A

floating tree caught him in its tentacle roots, whirled him under. Vainly he struggled to extricate himself. Where now was the first surge of strength which had promised so much?

His lungs began to scream for air. His head pounded. Strength deserted him. Consciousness faded in a blaze of flickering lights. Back on the bank, in the deepening dusk, the two assassins stared out across the surging flow.

"Funny how a killin' starts a feller seein' things, Sug," said one. "I'll swear I saw the corpse come up swimmin'."

"You an' me both," said Sug, shuddering. "Ugh-h-h, I'm cold. Let's git out o' here, Gord."

CHAPTER VII

SAMARITAN

BOB revived, coughing, vomiting water. He hung suspended over the tumbled waters, swaying dizzily. The crisp wind of movement smashed him in the face. The ropes under his armpits proved to be roots of the snag which had rolled him under. Having almost drowned him, the log had rolled again and lifted him free.

Too strangled, too weak to try to release himself, Bob rested. His wounds throbbed and his torn muscles stiffened terribly. And, worst of all, the fact that the easy-riding log might whip over again, preyed on his mind. What little strength he owned he dared not use, lest his struggles start the snag spinning.

After a while, moving carefully, Bob flexed his knees, put pressure on one foot and lifted his chilled body off the life-saving armpit supports. Each movement was an agony as he twisted his body and clamped a desperate hold on the

roots as ague hit him. And, until the spasm passed, he prayed the log might not turn just yet. His prayer was answered. Steadily his precarious craft bore him down the Buckeye toward Gentry River. And then, terribly through the roar of waters, came the voice of Dogleg Rapids—a thousand feet of jutting rocks and foam-flecked hell.

The power of that nearing, gnashing menace shook the air. But Bob knew when it reached for him only when the snag suddenly shuddered, halted and swerved, its roots hurtling toward the west bank. As it swung, it turned. Violent hands wrenched Bob from his perch. The greedy howl of the stream filled his being. Spray smashed him in the face. Then the waters folded over him again, whirling downward.

Bob did little to resist the current. It was a gamble from here on and he played what little percentage he had. Were he still caught in the snag roots, he would now be a gone gosling. Here at least he could indulge the hope that the creek would be kind.

It was that very hope, the determination to go on living, which first gave him the idea that he was not as badly wounded as he had believed. He wanted to live, and he would. He used his arms, a puny force, fighting toward shore. As he shot up out of a sandy tow, he cleared his throat with a yell, flailing the surface with swift overhand strokes and frog-kicking with his feet. The actions were purely a reflection of his will to live, for his body was numb with cold and shock.

The current rolled him under again, holding him down until he thought his lungs would burst. Then it crashed him into a jutting rock, the impact tearing at his waning



Bob would have been beaten to death if Lurabell had not made her appearance with a gun.

consciousness. The next moment he was racing down a swift-flowing slot between rocks, where the kick up from the bottom almost lifted him from the water. And suddenly he was in a treacherous, down-pulling whirlpool, with two chances if he broke out—depending on what segment of the circle chose to free him. If at the stream center, it meant certain death. If on the shore side, he had a fighting chance. And it had to come quickly, whichever way it went. He couldn't last much longer.

IT was not Bob Rampart's time to go. Straining every nerve and muscle, he broke that deadly orbit and was pulled into the quieter water along the rocky bank. It must have taken him twenty minutes to drag his body out on hands and knees. He found the gulch road, staggered to his feet and reeled along the trace, stumbling toward a light that looked as though it could be no more than a quarter mile away. He fell, rose, fell and rose, until it became a deadly monotony. Yet never once did his will to reach

that light weaken.

Now Bob sat down on a stoop and hammered on a door. A miner, one Mike Mazurdi, a patient, plodding Pole who fetched his accordion to all gulch festivities, came to the portal, caught him in his thick arms and pulled him inside. Inclined toward taciturnity, Mike did not bother Bob with questions. He set to work. In a half-hour, he had three sore but hardly dangerous bullet wounds bandaged. He had circulation rubbed back into Bob's numbed legs. He had hot grape brandy sluicing down his patient's throat, and some strong broth. To top off his Samaritanism, he had Bob's clothing thoroughly dried before the roaring fire. And not until they were put back on did he feed his curiosity.

"You Holt Rampart's boy, no? What happened—high-grade mans jump on you?"

"Yeah," answered Bob. "Then threw me into the river. I needed a lot of luck."

"You bet me," Mike agreed. "You stay here till you feel good. Mike tak' good care of you."

"Good of you, Mike. Thanks." Bob shook his head, grimly eyeing the walls. "I got to get back to the claim. How's chances of borrowing the use of that pistol hanging there?"

"Good." Mike beamed. "You go after done devils, eh? Mike go with you. With shotgun, no?"

"No. Keep the shotgun here to guard your own claim. What I'm going to do, I do alone. The pistol?"

"You take it," said the Pole, sobered. "But you are veak. You not get very far. Mebbe you take my burro, yes?"

"Yes," said Bob, and he was astride the lop-eared, mouse-colored little beast when he pulled out into

the darkness, a few minutes later. The liquor was running strongly in his veins and most of his pain was gone. He was bundled into one of Mike's great, coarse-wool coats which kept the seeping cold from his weaknesses. And, when Mike had shut himself back in his cabin, Bob turned the burro about and struck out for Gentryville. Brice Overfill didn't know it, but he was due for an appointment with a man returned from the grave—a man whose claim, if hireling chatter could be believed, was already being refilled in Overfill's name.

CHAPTER VIII

WHIM OF A GAMBLER

APPROACHING the lights of Gentryville, a scant mile from Mike's cabin, Bob was obsessed with doubt. At first he had been so cruelly spurred by his rage that there seemed no alternative to unmasking that hypocrisy of Brice Overfill, then to call him out, exchange bullets with him and leave the issue to the gods. That was when Mike's hot brandy was stiffening the courage in him, buoying up his sagging strength. But now the effects of those libations were wearing off. In the light of cold realism, Bob knew nobody would believe what he knew to be the truth about Overfill. And Overfill was far too good with a pistol to be in any danger from a man in Bob's shape. Still, he could not back out, like a whipped puppy.

At the gnawed pole rack before the Sierra Saloon, Bob slid off the burro, reeled inside and took a weaving course through the lively patronage to the bar. He ordered a brandy, hoping to banish that emptiness somewhere inside him. Glass in hand, he turned to run his glance over a patronage that sud-

denly had gone silent. They were staring at him, as men might stare at a ghost. Word had gone out that he was dead; no doubt about that. And the source of that word stood in an open portal, at the rear of the barroom. Brice Overfill. And, behind him, two of the three faces which had floated before Bob's shocked vision, out there in the dusk of Buckeye Creek.

It was easy to see the difference in the expressions of those three, and the others in the barroom. Overfill's jaw hung lax and there was only disbelief in his dark eyes, with maybe just a touch of fear. The other two were patently afraid—fearful of the supernatural; fearful of Overfill's wrath if this was Bob Rampart in the flesh, this pallid, ghostlike man in clothes too dry to have been in the river.

One of the two assassins muttered something. Brice Overfill turned on him with a curse, then came toward Bob, his poise fully returned, that half sly, half friendly smile on his handsome face. Bob gulped his drink, against nausea and weakness, poured another. Overfill came over to him.

"Rampart," he said, "it's the first time I've ever seen you drunk. Not a very pretty sight, believe me."

Bob, hardly knowing how to play this game, followed the saloonman's lead.

"Drunks ain't nothin' new to you, Overfill," he said vacantly. "You make 'em—for a price. And what a price. Whiskey's too high, Overfill. Too damned high. Takes a lot of dust to go on a spree, and a lot of work to get the dust. I ain't been working and I've run out of what it takes to buy likker. How about a loan?"

"With your claim as collateral?" Brice Overfill's eyes sparkled.

"Shylock, eh?" Bob said. "Might's well sell it as to mortgage it—to you. You offered me ten thousand. Still want it at that?"

OVERFILL pursed his lips. "Right now," he said, "I'm running a little short. Tell you what I'll do—" He scratched his shock of iron-gray hair, his eyes studious. "I'll give you five thousand in dust and a title to a good claim in District 9. Good a claim as yours but a little too far away for me, situated like I am on Gentry River!"

"Where is it?" asked Bob.

"Jackass Gulch."

Bob started, and once again the face of Wart Bealor flashed across his mind, and the boy's words that night of the howling blizzard.

"I'll chance the claim, sight unseen," agreed Bob. "As for the money—ten thousand or nothing, on the turn of a card."

Overfill scowled, then nodded sullenly. "It's a go, Rampart. Tom, toss me a deck." He broke open the new pack, riffled them between his long, slender fingers. Now he tendered them, smiling confidently, and Bob made the cut. "All right," said the saloonman, and everyone in the place was crowding around as word spread of the gamble. "Pull your card, Rampart."

"One minute." Bob's eyes fell upon the pair that had carried his body down to the creek and tossed him into the fiercely tossing current. "Each of you make a cut and keep it blind."

"What's the idea?" Overfill barked.

"Cut!" ordered Bob, with steel in his voice. And the jumpy pair obeyed. "Now," Bob told Overfill, "we cut to see who gets the big man's cut—you or me. High card

takes the big man's cut; low card the little feller's."

"No!" Overfill dusted off his hands. "That wasn't the deal. Only excuse for this folderol is that you don't trust the cards—and me. You saying that?"

"I'm saying nothing," drawled Bob. "Draw."

Overfill was shaking his head and anger was working like a yeast in him when the patrons began to smile, than to laugh. "What's the matter, Brice?" taunted someone. "You scairt of your luck?"

"Mebbe he don't gamble by luck," another suggested.

"The kid's picked a sure-shot way to keep the draw fair an' square," sang out a ragged old-timer. "Looks like that ain't the way Overfill wants to play."

Raillery ran around the banked circle and Brice Overfill's lips flattened with rage and his eyes glittered. "All right," he said, and drew the king of clubs. Bob drew the five of diamonds. Overfill said:

"What's your cut, Hoot? Turn it up."

The larger of the two hireling assassins flipped over the mine of clubs. His companion in crime pulled a queen of spades. Bob had won, even if by a device of his own authorship.

Overfill took it with bad grace, stomping in stiff-legged rage to his desk in the rear office, weighing out the dust, eighty pounds of it, scratching out a quitclaim to a described holding, over the ridge in Jackass Creek, and preparing a paper for the proper transfer of Claim 11 Below, on Buckeye Creek. This last Bob signed with a trembling hand, gulping down air and wondering if his strength would hold out. The warm inside closeness revived his nausea. His vision played

tricks on him. He could feel the trickle of blood down his side, though the pain seemed general over his body, rather than from his wounds.

"Eighty pounds of gold is a lot for a man in your condition, Rampart," Overfill said. "Suppose I send my boys along, to help you get it where you're going."

"Needn't bother," said Bob, rising shakily, though he knew he was totally unable to lift that bulging leather bag.

"Nonsense; no bother at all." Overfill was solicitous. "Hoot, you dash over to the stable and arrange for a horse for Rampart. Sug, you carry that dust over and stay with Rampart till he has no further need of you. Luck to you, Bob." Overfill's hand closed over his. "For your dad's sake, I hope you make it big. Come and have a last drink with me."

BOB didn't remember having that drink. He was slipping fast. The smash of the cold night air in his face halfway revived him. He was alone, reeling across the muddy street toward the yawning entrance to the great log feed barn. A faint light shone inside; Ab Whitcomb was not about and a strange hostler was helping the two assassins load the gold on a spare horse. All three beamed upon Bob and he felt cold streams of warning chase along his spine. Sick and weak as he was, he still wanted to live. And he was in no doubt as to the undercover orders of these two shaky killers. His hand brushed the gun in his pocket. It was like the comforting touch of a strong friend.

They helped him into the saddle, handed him the pack mule's lead rope. Then Hoot asked: "Where'll we take yuh, Rampart?"

"Thanks, boys. You've done

enough." Bob wanted only to leave them. "I'll get along all right now."

"Pshaw," snorted Sug. "The boss said to see you where you're goin' an' he'll skin us if we don't. Nobody bothers you or yore dust to-night, feller."

Bob was too far gone to argue, so he rode from the barn, holding fast and bracing himself against the pony's action. They had asked where he was going and the answer was: "To the grave," if his growing sickness was a gauge. But first there was business to transact with old Jeff Baker, father of Bob's dead friend. He wondered if these human buzzards would let him ride that mile and a half.

One rode at each stirrup, slightly behind, along the darkened post road to where the river branched into the willows. A year ago, Bob reflected bitterly, there were occupied cabins all the way down the river. Now, due to Overfill's purchases, the cabins were dark and the claims awaiting the attack of the human mole. A mile and a half of black loneliness. Bob shuddered.

Chill of night and imminence of danger quickened Bob's wits. Taut as a coiled snake, he waited for the play he was certain they would make. Throughout that first dragging half mile, he believed himself ready, still he was surprised by Sug's swift dash to his bridle bit and his: "Got it, Hoot. Drill him!"

Hoot reproved his companion. "Allus in a hurry, Sug. All you think about's money. Killin's an art, like drawin' pitchures. If a artist don't enjoy his work, it don't rate. Now me"—he shoved a cocked pistol against Bob's head—"I study a man I'm gonna kill, watchin' fear turn to panic an' then to desperation. I listen to him beg an' watch peace come when my lead poisons

him. That's pride o' workmanship, feller."

"What is this?" asked Bob, to gain time. "You mean—"

"That you're finished, Rampart. You slipped our first trap, though who it was we shot an' throwed in the river I'll never know. If you know a prayer, get at it."

"I never harmed you," protested Bob. "But if I got to die, I want my Bible in my hand." And he reached for a "Bible" that was Mike Mazurdi's six-barrel pepper box—a fine new cap and ball pistol. The weapon sent its recoil up Bob's arm and its slug into Hoot's heart. The man dropped his weapon, clutched at the horn, lost strength and tumbled beneath his pony's plunging hoofs.

SWIVELING to meet the threat of the man at his bridle, Bob saw the white blob of Sug's face as he emerged from the shock of the killing. The renegade's lost moment was reprieve for Bob. He fired first, his slug dumping the desperately striving Sug over the tail of his horse. The echoes ran out and the two men lay silent in the road. Bob's fighting energy ebbed, leaving him cold, shaken and clinging to the horn for support.

Sweat drenched him. His eyes deceived him, and his ears, too. He thought he saw lanterns bobbing toward him. He heard the voices of aroused men. And then he knew nothing more until light blinded him and old Jeff Baker's face was before him. "Bob Rampart! Bob, boy, what ails yuh? Come in."

Strong hands helped him inside. Buxom Ma Baker brought hot water and bandage cloth. The young Baker lads—Kim, fourteen, and Joe, sixteen—were sent out to care for the ponies. They were back in a mo-

ment, toting the leather bag of gold. In a land beset by sluice thieves, that dust was cause for doubt. Out of a tight silence, Jeff said: "Bob, how do you come by all this gold?"

Bob couldn't tell them he had sold his claim without hurting them worse than by confessing himself a thief. These folks had lost a son and brother through grim determination to hang onto their competence, never weakening. They would not believe him if he told of his plan to unmask Brice Overfill, so he remained silent. And that silence condemned him. Ma Baker burst into tears and left the room. Jeff glowered.

"Bob," he said soberly, "I've allus maintained you'd prove to be the son of yore fine father. Reckon I was wrong. We'll patch you up an' then take it kindly if you get along. Can't think of but one way you could get this dust together, an' I don't reckon you'd turn agin' us an' sell out. However, it ain't for the likes of us to condemn you. We'll fix you up an' get you started out o' here, so's you won't draw so more lightnin' down onto our heads."

However bitter their feelings, they nonetheless took the best care of him. The bandages Mike had put on, were removed; the wounds washed and poulticed with some concoction Ma had prepared, and then Bob was bound up again. Tea, strong and hot and black, was poured down him. He felt vastly better when they had finished, well enough to have spent more time with them, explaining just what had happened. But they were filled with suspicion and stiff unfriendliness so he asked for pencil and paper and scribbled a short note to the partners, Red Parnell and Bill Goddard, in which he transferred to them all his right, title and interest to the

claim on Jackass Creek. This the Bakers signed as witnesses and promised to deliver.

The gold engendered some little acrimony. Bob gave it to Jeff, "just to help you make your fight against Overfill." And when the Bakers protested scornfully, he said: "I know you think I stole it. You're wrong. Overfill himself will admit paying it to me. If you hate me so bad you just can't touch it, give it shed room till you find somebody that needs it."

"I'd rather not keep it," said Jeff stubbornly. "Why don't you take it with you?"

"Where I'm going"—Bob's voice was grim—"I won't need it and I can't be bothered with it. Thanks, folks, and . . . and good-by."

THEY didn't answer and he stumbled outside and got his horse. And when he rode, the old doubt rode with him. Well enough he knew who had struck at him. In him was no remaining confusion as to the true character of Brice Overfill. But who had killed Holt Rampart? That still seemed to be Bob's real problem, and only Wart Bealor could tell him, if Wart had survived his night in the blizzard. Bob turned his pony into the trail leading to Jackass Creek. He didn't care much now how things went with him. His future was in the lap of the gods, and the gods were speaking to him from the trail ahead.

"Stop comin'," horseman! Sir? out who you are, and pronto."

A shadow moved up yonder and the starlight ran along the barrel of a leveled gun. Bob's pony halted, trembling, snorting. And the old gambling recklessness rode beside Bob. He jerked the pepper box, jabbed his animal in the ribs and roared ahead. His weapon spat fire.

Muzzle flame licked at him. He heard the bullet hit flesh and knew the horse was falling.

Bob kicked free of the stirrups but was somersaulted over the pony's head so fast he couldn't land right. His head struck something. Flame filled his brain and he knew nothing more.

CHAPTER IX

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

BOB came to with mixed impressions of gun blasts, bullets biting his flesh and cruel men cursing him. With full consciousness, the gun blasts became the popping of packers' whips; the bites of bullets became the throbbing of his wounds and the cursing was not for him but for a train of fifty or so heavily burdened burros. When he straightened, a familiar, taunting voice said:

"You sleep sound, Rampart, an' long. Began to figger you was bad hurt. No?"

It was not easy to recognize the usually well-groomed Del Donlin in this unshaven, dirty rider. "You needn't worry about me, Donlin," Bob said, testing his tight bonds.

The man grinned gloatingly. "Not at all, feller. You taken a lot of joy manhandlin' me, but now it's my turn. I'm takin' you up country to pay you off. Nice little party."

"Injun stuff, eh, Donlin?" Bob said grimly. "That's about your style."

Donlin chuckled. "Chinee stuff, Rampart. Got a cook name o' Lung Low who knows how to put on a show with a victim an' a sharp knife. It oughta be good." He swiveled to regard a rider pelting up from behind. "Oh, you Keno? Where's Hoot?"

The man drew rein—a ratty little man with a shifty eye. "Hoot's dead," said the courier. "An' Sug,

too. They left town with a feller named Rampart, who'd just took ten thousand in dust away from Overfill, on the turn of a card. I lit out after 'em but couldn't find hide nor hair. Takin' the river road, about daylight, I come across the bodies of them boys, each shot once.

Gun in hand, Bob stepped into a room—and faced a murderous-looking Oriental who lunged at him with a knife.



That Rampart kilt 'em, sure as shootin'."

"That right?" Donlin's cold glance stabbed at Bob. "Overfill pay you ten thousand dollars?"

"That part of the story's right," admitted Bob.

"For what? Why would he pay you so much?"

"He bought my claim."

"Did, huh?" Donlin's eyes glittered. "Where's the money now?"

"I gave it away."

The big renegade flushed. "You're a liar! Gimme the truth or I'll—"

"If you know so much, why'd you ask me? I gave the money away."

"Who to?"

"None of your business."

"Won't talk, eh?" Donlin's rage convulsed him. "I'll make you talk, bucko. You'll beg to talk an' curse the day you was born. Wait'll I get you to Jackass Crick, you damned —" His quirt cut a vicious arc, slashing across Bob's shoulders like a searing flame. On the back stroke, it would have bit into Bob's face had he not bent over the saddle-horn. Again and again, Donlin flogged his helpless prisoner, until shock again turned Bob's outraged body cold and nausea swept him again like an undermining tide.

DONLIN'S arm grew tired and he finally desisted, riding up ahead where the packers were having a time holding the hungry burros to the trail. Bob rode in misery, cursing Donlin and praying only for a chance to get at the big man, with his hands free. Ahead lay torture and death, without a doubt. The only ray of hope Bob had to cling to was the faint chance that somehow Wart Bealor had survived the blizzard and might be induced to help him against an uncle the boy had so grimly promised to whip when he

could get the size. It was a weak hope to pin any enthusiasm on.

That night, where they camped in a high-hung mountain meadow, Donlin again put the fateful question. Bob cursed him and was thrashed again, less severely as if Donlin was tired of the torment. And at least twice every day, during the three days it took the slow-gaited donkeys to make the trip across the ridge, Donlin made further attempts to wring the truth from the prisoner who had very little left but pride and deathless determination. Each time the renegade got only tooth-gritting defiance.

After each of those sessions, with the sting of the quirt searing his soul more than it hurt his body, Bob felt a renewal of his youthful energy and a strong feeling that he had labored under a mistaken idea that the bullets of Hoot and Sug and the one called Gord—there in the twilight of Claim 11 Below, on Buckeye Creek, had sealed his doom. Now he was just as certain that his wounds were healing and that strength was returning, even if at a snaillike pace. If only he could have known that and laid low until he was strong again. But that it was water under the bridge, and water doesn't run uphill.

Along about noon of the fourth day, the burros quickened their pace, braying noisily. The way dropped sharply down into the rugged canyon of Jackass Creek—already staked and working along its entire length. The packers shouted gladly from one to another and Del Donlin galloped swiftly down toward the diggings at the foot of the trail.

It was quite a layout, Bob could see that even from a distance. Several large and plainly permanent buildings, of stone and mud mortar,

nestled in the cove, back from the extensive sluices along the creek. Strong pole fences, picket sharpened, marked the boundaries, upcreek and down, as if to warn neighbors that traffic was discouraged. A number of bearded miners came crowding out of the smaller buildings to hail the arrival of the supplies and to glare at the bound prisoner with a keenly pointed unfriendliness. About this outwardly busy placer claim there was a hidden something that smashed Bob in the face, some ghostly warning, some mark of blood.

With the burros circling in the yard; with the packers and miners leaping under Donlin's orders to remove the packs and store the goods, a man came to the doorway of the larger building, grinning in a cold sort of a way at this picture of industry and then coming lazily toward Bob, his pipe cocked at a jaunty angle. It was Zeb Aggeler, murderer of the old prospector, Beany Bacon, caught by Bob with Beany's effects on him and released by the miners' court after Bob's departure. Twisted, angular Zeb Aggeler, whom Bob hated worse perhaps than any living man, regardless of whether or not he was mixed in the murder of Holt Rampart. Aggeler leered at him, chuckling and gloating.

"Bringin' company to supper, eh, Del? Nice pickup. We got something to square with this monkey, eh?"

"More'n you think, Zeb. He just killed Hoot Morgan an' Sug Carra-day."

"The devil he did!" Zeb's angry gaze was on Bob, sultry and expectant. "Then what you savin' him for? Why are them ropes around his wrists instead of his neck?"

"Hoot an' Sug must've shot him up considerable before they died," said Donlin. "I aim to get him robust again an' then turn him over to Lung, for that trick he calls the thousand cuts."

THEY both turned to glance at the tall, frozen Mongol, who stood in the doorway, his hands in the flowing sleeves of his mandarin coat. And Bob, having loosened his bonds by long continued flexing of his wrist muscles, cast off the ropes and made a try for freedom. He hurled himself at Keno, the renegade who had fetched news of the two dead killers, flung an arm about his throat, jerked the man's pistol and leveled it.

"Now, boys," he said. "I'll tell you what to do."

Keno must have felt how weak Bob was. Del Donlin already knew and Zeb must have sensed it. Instead of knuckling, they all made fighting moves—each at the same instant. Keno twisted violently, upsetting any idea Bob might have had of aim. Zeb Aggeler, always a tricky workman with a gun, drew and shot from his sideling angle, the bullet smashing the commandeered weapon from Bob's hand. And Donlin palmed his wrist-hung quirt and sent the lash whistling.

Bob tried to hold the squirming Keno before him, but his strength was too far sapped. The man broke free and Bob was slashed to the ground by the cruelly punishing split-tail rawhide lash. And there, helpless to do more than cover his face and head, he underwent another terrible beating that threatened to rob him of consciousness. Right in the middle of it, he heard a feminine command:

"Uncle Del, stop it! I will not

have you flogging men here, as though they were mad dogs. Stop it, I tell you!"

"Get out of this, Lurabell. Go on in the house. This is no business for a woman. Get inside!"

"I came out to stop this and I will," the girl's voice said insistently. "If you want it this bad, go ahead." Bob heard a gun click to full cock. The men grew silent and the quirt no longer played its stinging rhythm across his back. Into the silence the girl's voice sheered again, harsh, commanding: "Pick him up and carry him inside. He's hurt. If he dies, I'll—"

"Don't worry, Lurabell. He won't die until all the sign is right. Keno, Jim, pick him up and—"

The words faded out of Bob's consciousness and he knew nothing more.

CHAPTER X

A TRIO TO BEAT

WHEN Bob woke up, he lay in a soft bed, in a room where a night breeze bowed a pitiful excuse for lace curtains inward and bright moonlight filtered in the open window. From another room, just beyond a closed panel, came the low murmur of men's voices. And through the window drifted the reek of a strong pipe burning acrid natural leaf. Evidence, Bob knew, that Donlin and Aggeler were taking care that he did not escape them.

Sitting up, Bob tried his muscles and winced with pain. He was sore from his wounds, sore from the beatings Donlin had given him. Yet he was better, stronger, without any doubt. He swung his feet to the floor, his eyes questing for his clothes. And not until then did he become aware of the figure pressed against the wall, at the head of the bed. He shrank away, bracing him-

self for further punishment. A boyish voice said:

"It's me, Mr. Rampart. I thought you'd never wake up."

"Wart!" A sudden gladness welled up in Bob Rampart, choking him. He was glad to fumble for and find the hand of someone friendly in a world of enemies. He was glad he had not sent Wart to his death, that cold, blizzard night. He was . . . well, just glad. "Where're my clothes? Any idea?"

The boy stooped to lift a bundle from the floor. "They got your clothes, pardner, so you can't run off. I fetched you some of my pop's that oughta pretty near fit you. Try 'em on."

"How'd you get 'em in here?" asked Bob, unrolling the coarse denims. "Ain't Donlin and Aggeler watching me?"

Moonlight seemed to broaden the boy's grin. "Only one feller outside—that damned Keno. Every time he goes around fer another drink, me an' sis pop in an' out of the winder. Why not? It's sis' room an' her claim, though they're tryin' to put her off of it. Before they do"—rage crept into his voice—"some of them snakes is gonna die off. They don't know I've got a gun hid out an'—" He fell silent. Then: "Your gun, Mr. Rampart. I . . . I ain't no thief, but I just had to have a gun. Just had to."

"It's all right," said Bob. "But this Lurabell; is she your sister?"

"Sure is, an' she wants to see you. Hurry into them duds. Keno's about dry enough to take another pasear to the rum bottle." He tiptoed to the window, looked out. And his hand made violent motions for Bob to hurry the dressing.

A few moments later, with Wart leading the way, Bob slid over the

sill, ghosted along the eave shadows, darted across a moon-flooded opening and followed the boy into a darkened cabin. Lurabell stood at a moon-bathed window, looking out into the yard. There was sadness in her face and a troubled hardness about her lips. Without turning, she said: "You are Holt Rampart's son. Holt was our friend. He did things for us that we would like to repay. There is food on the table. Sit and eat while we talk."

Bob was suddenly conscious of his need of food and he lost no time accepting. Meat and bread, real coffee, strong and hot, a small bottle of red wine. Bob ate it gratefully and could feel it sending new strength along his veins. When he had finished and his pipe was going, he relaxed in the easy deerskin chair and admired the girl's even profile. With the moonlight making a halo of her corn-colored hair, it seemed to Bob she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"You were feverish and talked a lot in your sleep," Lurabell told him. "But why would you have talked about Jackass No. 29 being yours?"

"Because it was," said Bob. "Until I signed away my interest to Bill Goddard and Red Parnell. You see, I took it as part payment for my Buckeye Creek claim."

"From whom?"

"From Brice Overfill."

"Overfill!" Bob sensed terror in the one, swift word. "He doesn't own 29. He doesn't own a smidgin of interest in it and never will. You've been swindled. How did the deal come up?"

BOB told her everything that had happened to him since his return from Frisco, leaving out nothing. He saw brother and sister exchange glances when he told his re-

gret at having let Wart venture out in the blizzard and how he had failed when he tried to follow. When he had finished, there was silence for several moments. Wart muttered: "Gosh!" Over and over: "Gosh!"

Finally Lurabell said: "What did you do with the dust?"

"That I'll tell to nobody, miss."

"Would it interest you to know that Del Donlin says you stole ten thousand dollars from Brice Overfill?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," Bob said grimly. "It would just be something else to be squared for, between me and that man. There were too many present at the transaction for anybody to put across a yarn like that."

"A lot of men know the truth in these canyons, Rampart. Men who dare not speak what they know for fear of their lives."

Bob nodded. "I know. I suppose, to add to what they've already done to me and my dad, they'll fasten me with the brand of a thief. Wart, you said that the man who killed your father was the one who killed mine. Who was that man?"

The boy's breath sucked noisily through his teeth. Lurabell said tartly: "Nonsense. Ward always did have too much imagination. My father's mule stumbled on the down trail, hurled him over a cliff and broke his neck. And Ward could not possibly know anything about the death of Holt Rampart, which I understand happened in much the same way. Men will always be falling to their death in this steep country, and there will always be the ones who like to make something sensational out of their passing."

"Is that right, Wart?" asked Bob, soberly.

"Yeah," the boy admitted. "I

was just hoorawin' you, Mr. Rampart."

"I had Ward bring you here because he and I have overheard Aggeler and Keno talking about taking you out tomorrow and letting the Chinese cook torture you," the girl explained. "Maybe it's just drunken talk, but, knowing them as I do, I cannot chance it. They have your clothes, but here's a pistol. I'll hide a horse in the brush, across the creek and at the foot of the hill. When my brother gives you the word, step out this window, duck into the brush and cross down near our lower line, working back. Then ride. You can turn the horse loose when you no longer need him. He'll come home."

"What about you?" Bob asked her.

Lurabell shrugged. "Don't worry about me. This claim belongs to Ward and me. The blood of our dad runs in both of us. When the story is told, I think we'll have taken pretty good care of ourselves." She walked to the window, stood a moment watching, then dropped swiftly over the sill and disappeared.

Bob grunted. "Such trustfulness is distressing, Wart," he sighed.

"Gosh!" The boy was beside him, clutching him with a fierce grip. "You just about spoiled everything, pardner. I ain't told Lurabell half of all I know. You just can't trust wimmen thataway. What I told you about them killin's goes. I heard Uncle Del an' that snake, Zeb Aggeler, augerin' over their likker. They was full o' whiskey, but whiskey talk is true talk. They was quarrelin' over who had comin' yet from Overfill fer killin' yore dad an' mine. They never settled nothin' except in my mind. It's purty hard to have to kill yore own uncle, pardner, but that's what I

gotta do. Uncle Del kilt yore dad an' Zeb killed mine. But Brice Overfill really kilt 'em both—an' him the head of the miners' court."

Bob was startled to find how close he had been to the correct answer all the time. But the dominant emotion surging through him was pity that this youngster should be poisoned by this lawless business, and clouded with the urge to slay. Right there Bob promised himself Wart wouldn't have to do any killing.

The gun he found was one of the late cap-and-ball revolvers—a six-shot weapon. Bob pocketed it and felt capable of caring for what the ensuing hours might bring, regardless of the shakiness of his legs and the lightness of his head. Wart, watching from the window, came to him now. "Time to shag out o' here, pardner," he said regretfully. "Sis oughta have the pony cached by now an' that thirsty Keno has slipped around for another long drink. Time fer you to haul out. Gosh, if I had this end cleaned up the way it's gonna be, I'd ride along with you. Gotta take up a few minutes of Brice Overfill's time. Well, good-by, pardner. You . . . you better stay out of Gentryville until you get your health back."

BOB shook the boy's eager hand, stepped out into the night. Hugging the shadows he found the corner of the house; then instead of cutting left into the brush he darted across a lighted interval to a long, low line of buildings adjoining a crazy fence corral. At the end of this structure, a door yawned and Bob popped inside, his hand on his gun. The echo of a voice caused him to swerve from the doorway and freeze. He was in the stable—one far too pretentious to belong to a common placer claim.

Bob froze, gun palmed, listening. Ponies snorted and stomped. The air reeked with the pungency of wet hay and manure. A voice said: "What's that? I'd swear I heard something come in that door." Bob stiffened. He had heard that voice the evening bullets had struck at him as he climbed from his shaft.

A man laughed tauntingly. "Gettin' jumpy, eh, Gord? That ain't surprisin'. I look for fireworks before the sun rises. Brice didn't fetch ten guns along just for the company. Del Donlin ketched that Rampart Jasper an' got the ten thousand Brice expected. Hoot an' Sug to fetch back to him. Del is denyin' same, but he'll come through or the boss will have his ears. If an' when our call comes, Gord, we'll come at this nest from four sides an' wipe it out. The boss figgers Del's gettin' too strong anyway."

"Since he's taken up with Zeb Aggeler," grunted Gord. "There's a smart one, Al. An' a hard one if ever he gets the upper hand. Where you reckon that Bealor gal was headin' a-horseback?"

"Any place would be better'n this hell coop," the other. "Further off she gets the better— Look, there she comes back, an' afoot! Now where in thunder did she take that ridin' horse?"

"To her kid brother," guessed Gord. "That's like the gal to look after everybody else except herself. Now she's goin' right back into the house where the trouble's due to begin."

Through the doorway, Bob saw the flash of the girl's swift dash across an open spot and felt the urgency of warning her. But how to get out of the trap he had stumbled into. In entering, he had caught that waiting pair off guard. But now they were watching the

yard and any movement he made would be instantly detected.

Bob gathered himself, poising for a desperate departure under renegade guns. But even as he summoned the last iota of his scattered strength, a roar of rage beat from the house. Big Del Donlin's voice sounded: "By Satan, that Rampart feller's gone! He's flew the coop! Keno, Spooky! Link, Goober! Get after that killer, you sleepy whiskey guzzlers. If he gets away, I'll skin you all alive. Flush him, or I'll—"

For an instant they were framed in the portal and in the gathering turmoil, Bob backed down the corridor behind the stalls and went out a door at the rear. His first problem had been solved, but the business of getting into the house looked like a long gamble. Doors were slamming. Men were darting here and there in a panicky sort of man hunt. Bob slid along the corral fence, well hidden, stepped through it at the corner and darted into the open. A man came running toward him. Bob jerked his hat low and spoke gruffly. "Find anything of him?"

"Hell, no!" the man answered. "Del's crazy. It's like lookin' for a needle in a brush pile. No tellin' how many miles that feller's made, but I'm bettin' it's plenty. I'll go in the front of this shed. You sift around back in case I flush him."

Bob sifted, and that was the last contact made with the man hunters. Sprinting, he reached the back of the house, stepped across the same sill he had quitted a half-hour before. A gun came to a clicking cock. "He ain't in here," said a thin voice. "Go out the way you come or go out ridin' a bullet."

"Wart," Bob called in a low voice. "Pardner." The boy caught his

breath, and then he was beside Bob. "What you doin' back here? Couldn't you find the horse?"

"Brice Overfill is here," Bob told him.

Wart grunted. "I seen him. Heard 'em talkin'. Overfill's gettin' tough with Uncle Del, demandin' eighty pounds of dust. They augered a lot an' finally Overfill agreed to settle for you—and sis. You had left an' he ain't come for sis yet. When he does—"

"Overfill brought ten men with him. They're hid out around the place. Seems like he's figuring on a wipe-out. Where is your sister now?"

"Right here." Lurabell's voice came from a corner, and Bob sensed the stanch courage activating this small, frail girl. Spartan stuff handed down by fighting forebears. Not a weak thread in her make-up, that would fail in the strain of trouble. "Why didn't you ride while you had the chance?"

"And miss the fun?" Bob seemed suddenly to have cast off shackles that had bound him. "No, girl. I think some scores will be settled here tonight and I wouldn't ever feel right if I didn't put in my two-bits' worth."

WART laughed and he was trembling as he snuggled closer to Bob's side. In a low, chastened voice, Lurabell said: "I don't doubt that little brother of mine any more, Mr. Rampart. I'm convinced now that he was right and that you were, too. I guess we're alone against my uncle and the renegades he travels with. But the door is a strong one; we have guns and the price of taking us out of here will not be cheap. I remember my dad used to say: 'Too many people die shamefully; thank your Maker when you

can die fighting, with a song on your lips and the right on your side.'"

"I guess Wolf Bealor wasn't the wolf the miners' court pictured him," said Bob.

"Your father didn't think so," said the girl proudly. "Don't forget, the first day we spent in Gentryville, dad struck Brice Overfill and knocked him to the ground. Our bad luck started then."

"Listen," commanded Bob. Heavy footsteps were echoing in the corridor. A fist pounded the door. A voice, cruel and mandatory: "Lurabell, open up. It's your uncle. That Rampart snake is loose; you got him in there?"

"No," answered the girl. "Go away."

The door was pounded again. "Open up, or I'll bust down the door."

"Try that," yelled Wart, "an' I'll shoot you dead!"

From farther back in the corridor came a raucous belly laugh, and Brice Overfill's taunt: "Your move, Del. They've called your bluff. The kids are staging a mutiny in Jackass Diggings. I'll enjoy this. It's your bet."

Donlin cursed, muttered, but withdrew. And, a little while later, dawn paled the east and a grayness crept into the room. For several tense minutes, those in the room strained for sounds of the next move. It came in a howl of warning from a renegade outside. Boots clumped to the door and they heard Overfill bark: "What's that?"

A man came running from the yard, his voice hoarse with excitement. "Big gang of horsebackers pullin' down the trail. Gentryville men, mostly, but there's a sprinklin' of Buckeye Gulch fellers—Red Parnell, Wally Blades an' others. What you reckon's up?"

"Look here, Overfill!" Del Donlin's voice reflected doubt. "If this is some more of your strong-arm pressure, I'll—"

"Shut up, you fool!" Brice Overfill silenced him. "These ain't my men. Looks like big trouble unless we put it down with bullets. Scatter 'out, boys. Cover the windows. No shooting till they get close—too close for us to miss them."

CHAPTER XI

"DUST TO DUST"

THAT order galvanized Bob into action. "Be back directly," he said, and stepped out the window again. He hurried to the corner, paused there, staring. Yonder, winding onto the flat in the half light, was a cavalcade of shadowy riders. "Red! Bill!" He roared the names of his friends. "They're set to rub you out. Get back!"

From one of the shacks came the snarl of a gun. A bullet sang past Bob's ear, chunking into the house logs. Needlessly exposed, Bob went back to brother and sister, both pale and frightened but grimly ready for war. And war it already was, judging by the fusillade of gunfire suddenly shaking the morning calm.

"Pardner," Bob told Wart, "you close and bar the door after me. And watch the window that somebody don't come at you that way."

"Where are you going?" demanded Lurabell.

"Giving those boys a chance by silencing the rifles in the house."

"And throwing away whatever chance you have," said the girl sternly. "Don't do it. I—" She hesitated. "I prayed for a good fighting man to come and work with us here. Once in control of this claim, we could make it worth his while, couldn't we, Wart?"

"Sure could—an' will," declared the boy stoutly. "But you don't understand, bein' a female, sis. You can't have the things you want unless somebody fights for 'em. Ain't that right, pardner? Me an' Bob will take care of them snakes, sis, an' be back before you can wink twice."

Bob grinned, lifting the bar on the door. "You stay with Lurabell, son. One of us has to protect the women an' I think it's more seemly that you care for that end of it."

The boy was disappointed, bitterly so. But he nodded and took it like a soldier. Bob stepped outside and the falling of the bar was something like the stroke of doom. Gun in hand, Bob moved along the corridor where the early light had not yet penetrated. Silently, he stepped into the room at the end of the hall, heard a gasp and saw a giant robed figure rise from a cot, whip out a knife and lunge at him with the swift silence of a nightmare. A broad Mongol face contorted; black eyes glittered. The menace almost froze Bob's faculties. With the man almost upon him, he fired, swerved aside to miss that deadly chopping stroke and heard a muttering as the Oriental fell.

The echo of the shot was washed out in the general firing. And though Bob covered the door leading to the front, it remained closed. The renegades were unalarmed. Bob went through that door, into a front room, never knowing what he would be up against. He found plenty. Two riflemen knelt at the sill of the one window giving toward the approach of the alien cavalcade. Reckless, snarling Zeb Aggeler stood at the jamb of the open door, a smoking pistol in his grip. Behind him, holding a short gun against the first

chance to use it, stood Brice Overfill, his back squarely toward Bob.

BRICE OVERFILL'S body was relaxed, inactive for the moment, but not so his mind. The fury of man conflict was partially closed out by an interlude of self-adulation. From the beginning of time, he was thinking, the one that ran free of the pack, the lone wolf, had been target for the hates and more dangerous missiles of lesser men. Wild men. Men of caliber. Wolves. Imitators were only coyotes.

Into this daring, insolent brotherhood, Brice Overfill saw himself fitting with confident pride and the ability to outplan those who from the first had misread him. Yet now, facing an attack he couldn't quite understand, fingers of fear played around his heart. He had gambled for big stakes, against odds. Was this the deal that would break him? What had brought these men from Gentryville and the Buckeye? A black premonition of disaster tapped him on the shoulder.

Overfill couldn't have told why he turned to look behind him. But when he did, there stood Bob Rampart—a man who by all the rules Overfill knew should be dead. "Rampart!" He spoke the name in a lull of firing, staring as if at a ghost. In a low, dead voice, the man he had tried to slay said:

"Overfill, who killed Holt Rampart?"

Overfill was not smiling now. In what light there was, his face was flintlike, merciless. He said: "Aggeler killed him, Rampart. For a piece of my money. What good will the knowledge do you?"

At the door, Zeb Aggeler flung about, his face contorted. "You

damned fool! You magpie-chatter-in' fool!"

If Bob had ever doubted that Aggeler was a killer, all doubt was dispelled by the glitter of his eyes and the murder hunger in his face. Zeb was on the kill and his energies bent with the surge of that momentary rage against Overfill. He shot at the boss renegade, but Bob's bullet drove into his body an instant before Zeb triggered. The killer's aim was bad. Overfill, knocked down by a bullet in the thigh, croaked hoarsely, hurtled at a doorway and crashed through into an adjoining room.

Zeb, struck mortally, expelled his breath in a tremulous sigh, wilted at the knees and fell headlong. Overfill had vanished beyond that threshold, but there were others there, interrupted at their gun work by the door crashing open and Brice Overfill tumbling through. Now they stood there gaping at Bob—big Del Donlin, Keno, the messenger who had been sent for Hoot, three or four others. Del's shocked gaze was on Zeb's sprawled form, and suddenly he bawled: "It's Rampart! He's killed Zeb!" And his gun lifted to this new target.

Bob shot by tilting his weapon. He heard the breath driven from Donlin's lungs, saw the man reel backward and out of his sight. Bullets were snarling at Bob then and he side-stepped with nothing worse than a nicked leg and a stinging along his left side. He sent another bullet through a door left ajar and, caught between two fires, the renegades gave way to panic, yelling and crashing the main house entrance and darting to the nervous ponies tethered at the rack.

A wave of increased gunfire greeted them. Bob, racing into the room they had abandoned, cast a

quick look around, found the place deserted and turned through the open main portal. He saw Keno and two others reach the horses, straddle them and spur away in a hail of bullets. He saw Del Donlin go down, get up, stumble a few paces, then sprawl and lay quite still. Bob's brow furrowed. Where was Brice Overfill?

HURRIEDLY, Bob swerved back to the door of the room where brother and sister were. Inside was silence, then suddenly the roar of a gun. An ugly curse dribbling off Brice Overfill's lips. Wart screaming counterdefiance. Snarl of a pistol, followed by the boy's stricken cry and Lurabell's scream. Bob hurled himself against the panel, bouncing back with the dead certainty he could never force the bar. Righting himself, he flung from the hall, raced to the back door and slowly opened it. Overfill's strained voice came to him.

"Come out, girl. I don't aim to hurt you, but you're acting as my ticket of leave from Jackass Gulch. Of course, if they decide to shoot through you to get me—"

"I won't go, you . . . you murderer! You've killed my brother and—"

"You'll come out now," snarled Overfill, "or I'll kill you where you kneel."

"Overfill!" Bob took the short step downward. The Gentryville boss whirled on him, flamed with fighting rage and then, quite unexpectedly, laughed. He dropped his gun, came slowly toward Bob, his hands shoulder high.

"You're too good for me with a gun, Rampart," he confessed. "Just as you were with cards. I'd be a fool to do anything else but surrender to you now—"

He came on, Bob thunderstruck and disarmed by the man's candor. And then, when he was so close Bob could have rammed the gun muzzle into his belly, Overfill rolled a quid of fine cut in his cheek; his lips pursed and he squirted a stream of tobacco juice squarely into Bob's eyes. He dove for Bob's gun arm; there was a brief and unequal struggle and he had the weapon. He jabbed it into Bob's kidney. "March," he ordered. "You poor fool. You won't make quite the protection the girl would have, but you'll do. Head for the stable."

Bob moved, torn with self-disgust and a sense of having lost because of his own foolish underestimate of Overfill.

"Bob!" screamed Lurabell. "Stop him. Somebody help me."

Bob halted, and Overfill flung about without relaxing the gun pressure in Bob's back. A rifle barrel came swinging out the window. Behind that weapon was a face, contorted with hate, streaming blood. A thin voice—Wart's—cried: "Here's for my pop, you buzzard!" The rifle flamed, the bullet striking Overfill in the throat. The renegade fell heavily. And then Bob was running to a sobbing half-conscious boy who hung over the sill, limp and—

ECHOES of the firing had died away. Nests of renegades, in the outlying cabins were cleaned out, the captured ones already sweating as they dug graves for their leaders and ill-fated companions. With a bloody bandage around his head, Wart sat in a chair before the house, with Bob squatting at his feet and Lurabell's arms around him. Standing around were Red Parnell and Bill Goddard, both slightly wounded; Ab Whitcomb, the Gentryville stableman; Dan and Wally

Blades, Bob's near neighbors on Buckeye Creek, Mike Mazurdi and the much beloved sky pilot, T. Millard Burkett, even now framing what he would say over the graves of men who had died in sin.

"A nice ride an' a heap more fun than I expected," declared Bill. "When me an' Red got that paper of yours, Bob, all we could make out of it was the location of a place where you was probably in trouble. So we collected a few of yore friends, augered Ab into furnishin' horses, threatened Jeff Baker with complete an' sudden misfortune if he didn't change his mind an' come along, an' rode up here. We got us a smoky reception an' knowed intanter we'd come to the right place."

"They must've bin nervous," said Red dryly. "I never seen worse shootin'." He waved a paper at Bob. "I never believed it when they told me you'd sold out. Not till I found this on Overfill. Shouldn't o' done it, feller, just because them shafts was hungry holes. Me an' Bill got it figgered the present stream bed is plumb over the old one, at yore claim."

"That didn't matter," said Bob. "Overfill wanted the claim and his offer seemed a little too generous. I knew he was the boss of the sluice robbers, but the problem was how to prove it. My hunch was that if I took his offer he might show his hand. He did."

"Don't need to worry now." Red tore up Bob's quitclaim. "It's gonna be sort o' tame goin' back to sluicin' dust on the Buckeye after what you bin through."

"Wart and I will do all we can to keep him from going back to the Buckeye," said Lurabell Bealor, twisting her fingers into Bob's coat

sleeve. "And why should he? He's got a gamble over there, with the best to be hoped for a rich bar that will soon be exhausted. Here we've got the rich bar, overhung by a lode that will mean good diggings for a long, long time. Bob Rampart's earned a half share here and what kind of a partner will he be to Ward and me if he's fooling around on the Buckeye?"

"Aw, he ain't gonna leave here, sis," said Wart, looking worshipfully at Bob. "Are yuh, pardner?"

"All I can say," put in Red Parnell, "is that if he leaves here, he's swappin' a sure-enough rich thing for a pig in a poke. Better let me an' Bill work out yore Buckeye claim along with ours, Bob."

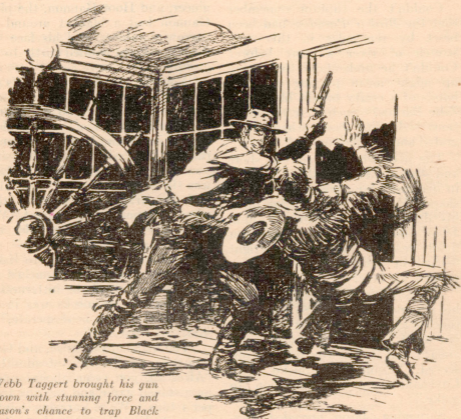
Bob looked at Lurabell, saw the wistful hope mirrored on her face, felt her fingers tighten on his sleeve. And he knew all at once the true answer to the restlessness that had driven him. A home. A gracious woman at his fireside. A partner to share his shifting tides of luck. What more could a man ask? He nodded his acceptance of the terms and his friends swapped smiles of understanding.

The words of the Rev. T. Millard Burkett came from the newly dug graves, where the bodies were being lowered. "He who taketh up the sword, by the sword shall he perish . . . the wages of sin is death . . . earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

And to his listeners, battle-scarred and grim, the minister's words were less a burial service than a hopeful augury for the future of a district that had long writhed under the heel of its most trusted son. And a promise that never again would renegade influence be felt in high places.

BOOTHILL 'ROUND THE BEND

by Norman A. Fox



Webb Taggart brought his gun down with stunning force and Jason's chance to trap Black Zeke Barlow's spy was gone.

THE sloshing paddle wheels of the *Bird o' Paradise* had put that Benton-bound packet well beyond the mouth of the Niobrara and deep into the trackless wilderness bordering the muddy Missouri in the Northwest. Or so Jason Lane guessed. Imprisoned here in the hold, he was unable to distinguish between night and day, and only by his wide knowledge of the great waterway could he gauge the packet's prog-

ress. Each time the engines had ceased throbbing, Jason had made a mental calculation, and thus he knew St. Joseph and Fort Omaha were far behind. And thus he also knew that the hour was drawing nearer when disaster would strike at the steamboat.

Tonight the engines were silent again, the packet tied up to the bank. No captain dared run the uncharted reaches of the upper Mis-

souri in the dark, yet Jason Lane, a tall, black-haired young man in fringed buckskin, ceaselessly paced the room that confined him and damned Captain Samuel Covenant for taking the usual precautions at a time like this.

Couldn't the captain remember that the *Bird o' Paradise* had been beset by renegades in this very stretch of river a year before? Couldn't he understand that tying up might mean playing into the hands of a crafty bandit like Black Zeke Barlow? Such were the questions bedeviling Jason when a key grated and the door opened.

The man who entered was short and stocky with a bulldog's tenacity in his underslung jaw and a shield-shaped U. S. marshal's badge upon his drab vest. Scowling at him, Jason said: "You, eh? Have you finally realized that you've no right—legal or otherwise—to keep me penned up here?"

Marshal Webb Taggart matched his prisoner's scowl. "So you're as touchy as you were that first day out of St. Louis when I found you aboard and locked you up," he observed. "Come along, bucko. Cap Covenant's got a proposition to make."

Struggling, Jason preceded Taggart up a ladder to the fore'st'le deck and stood blinking in the twilight, studying the timbered shore line. They were deeper into Dakota than he'd guessed. Then Jason was herded up to the boiler deck, and here he blinked again, his heart skipping a beat. A scattering of passengers loitered here, and one glanced too long and intently at Jason—a black-bearded man in a wheel chair that was pushed by a giant Negro. Jason moved on, keeping his face expressionless with an effort.

USHERED into the captain's quarters on the hurricane deck, Lane found all the packet's officers assembled—portly Captain Covenant, his ruddy face wearing a worried frown, lanky Cord Coleman, the mate; Yankee Smith, the grimy engineer, and Hoot Gannon, the pilot. Gannon had a blanket around his narrow shoulders, and his face was flushed. Jason nodded curtly to the group.

"You can see that the fever's got hold of Gannon," Covenant said without prelude. "And we haven't a doctor aboard. You've got a pilot's license in steam, Jason, and you've run the river with your father since you were knee-high. Kendall Lane was the greatest pilot of them all—and my friend. Remember that when you consider my request. Will you take over for Hoot, pilot this boat on a night run?"

So Covenant was going to risk a night run! Admiration touched Jason briefly, but all the bitterness of those days below decks was in his voice. "You must be desperate," he said, "to trust me!"

"The marshal thinks so, and Gannon does, too," Covenant admitted. "After all, you came aboard under an assumed name and wearing trapper's togs. We're carrying minted money to Fort Benton again, and it's hard to overlook the fact that you're Kendall Lane's son and that a court found him guilty of turning this packet over to renegades a year ago, when we were also carrying money. Your father would be serving time now if he hadn't escaped prison."

"You believe dad guilty!" Jason cried, "yet you claim to be his friend!"

"Somebody let the renegades know this boat was carrying rich loot," Covenant said wearily. "And only the officers aboard knew our cargo.

That night of the raid we were tied up to the bank and your dad was keeping watch in the pilothouse—the only officer awake. He claims someone signaled the shore with a purple lantern, someone he couldn't identify in the dark. Yet a letter was afterward found in your father's belongings—a letter from Black Zeke Barlow, the most notorious wrecker of them all, promising your father a cut of the loot for betraying this boat."

"That letter was planted!" Jason declared.

Covenant shrugged. "This is another run and another cargo," he said. "Barlow will have a hard time boarding us if we're on the move, but the June rise is changing the channel every minute and I can't run without a qualified pilot. Yes, I'm desperate. Will you take the wheel?"

FOR a long moment Jason was silent, for he was remembering a stuffy courtroom in St. Louis and his father's stricken face as his hitherto spotless reputation was torn to shreds. And he was remembering the sneers of river men who had shunned him, Jason, because he was Kendall Lane's son.

By diligent spying, Jason had discovered that minted money was in this boat's cargo. So he'd come aboard this run in the hope that history might repeat itself. If Black Zeke Barlow struck again, Jason hoped to capture the renegade and force a confession from him, make Barlow admit Kendall Lane's innocence. That hope had died when Webb Taggart, assigned by the government to guard the precious cargo, had recognized Jason and put him under lock and key. But now he was being offered comparative free-

dom because his skill was desperately needed.

"I'll pilot you," Jason said slowly. "My dad told me time and again that no man is as important as his packet or the passengers aboard it. Seems I can't forget his teachings."

Captain Covenant nodded gratefully, but Hoot Gannon burst into speech. "You're playing the fool, captain," he stormed. "You're trusting your boat to a kid whose father's a proved Judas and—"

Two steps took Jason to the pilot's side. Then, with his fists knotted, he shrugged in disgust, remembering that Gannon was too ill to fight.

"Keep your tongue off my father's name!" Jason warned. "You were never good enough to be anything but a relief pilot when Kendall Lane was aboard this boat!"

He turned to Webb Taggart. "Come on, watch dog, there's work to do. Or didn't you figger on watching to make sure I don't wreck the boat?"

Coloring under the thrust, Taggart climbed behind Jason to the cupolalike pilothouse perched on the Texas deck above the officers' quarters. Yankee Smith had kept steam built up and, giving the engineer time to get below decks, Jason signaled half speed ahead. The great paddle wheels began to thrash, then the *Bird o' Paradise* was nosing upstream, and Jason was following the treacherous twistings of the channel with all the instinct of a born river man.

Sandbars that had stood out prominently on other runs were now submerged by the rising, snow-fed river, but the sibilant song of the current held a dozen different notes, each with a meaning for Jason. Hour after hour the packet picked a way between the timbered banks, Cap Covenant's visits to the pilot-

house becoming more infrequent until at last he sought his bunk and Jason was alone with the night and the hulking figure of Webb Taggert.

The officers had guarded the packet whenever it tied up, Jason guessed, for all of them looked weary. Taggert himself alternately dozed and jerked awake, his hand always near the gun in his belt. With the man snoring, Jason fell to thinking about that black-bearded figure in the wheel chair, and, in the midst of his musing, he saw the weird light below.

Down on the starboard side of the hurricane deck a man, shapeless in the gloom, waved a lantern that cast a purple light. And yonder on the right-hand bank another such strange light signaled in reply. All that Jason saw at a glance, and knew that history was indeed repeating itself. The same signal that had identified this money-laden packet to Black Zeke Barlow last year was now telling the renegade there was more loot for the taking. And the same man, doubtless, was doing the signaling!

Jason Lane had never deserted a helm before, but he left his post now, making a wild lunge for the doorway. He wanted mightily to get his hands on that lantern swinger, but the boat lurched violently with no one at the wheel. Simultaneously two things happened—both spelling disaster. Webb Taggert came to his feet, gun in hand.

"No, you don't, my bucko!" he shouted. "Thought I was sound asleep, eh? You're not escaping this easy!"

His gun barrel arced. The glancing blow caught Jason alongside the head, and his knees buckled. But just as he went down to unconsciousness, he felt the packet shudder be-

neath him, and he knew the nature of this second disaster—knew it too late to save the boat. For the packet, running wild for a moment, had struck a sandbar, hitting it with a terrific force.

WHEN consciousness returned to Jason, he lay in darkness and a full minute passed before he realized he was back in his prison room in the hold. The engines had ceased throbbing, and memory came back with a rush. That man with the queer lantern—the sandbar—Webb Taggert's mistaken suspicion. Lurching to his feet, Jason pressed a hand to his reeling head just as a key grated and the door swung open.

It wasn't Taggert, Jason saw immediately. Two men crowded through the doorway, and there was a world of concern in the voice of one. "Jason?" he cried.

"Dad!" Jason ejaculated, his hand finding the other's in the darkness. "I was sure I recognized you in spite of your beard and the wheel chair. But how—"

"As pilot aboard this packet, I carried keys to every lock," Kendall Lane explained. "I had duplicate keys in St. Louis, and they've served me well this run, it seems. Son, meet Napoleon, the best friend I have on the river. He used to be a stevedore, and I did him a turn in Fort Benton years back. Bread cast upon the waters. He and I have done a bit of prowling aboard this packet in the dark nights, but I didn't know you were aboard until this evening. A while ago Napoleon saw that marshal lug you back here, so we came to do some talking."

"Your disguise served you better than mine," Jason admitted. "Dad, you're here because you know what's aboard!"

"Minted money," Lane said. "It sounds like we both snooped out the same truth about the cargo, Jason, and got the same idea. Napoleon has been working for me since I escaped prison. And now there're three of us to smoke out the traitor who waved a lantern from this packet a year ago."

"Where are we now, dad?" Jason demanded, his fingers biting into his father's arm. "Still beached on that confounded sandbar?"

"Aye," said his father. "But the boat suffered no real harm and, with the river rising, we'll be floated off in a few hours."

"But someone signaled Black Zeke and he'll be aboard before then!" Jason cried and quickly explained the proposition Captain Covenant had made and told of the ill-starred ending to that brief period in the pilothouse. "I might have gotten hold of the lantern waver," he concluded, "but Taggart moved too quick."

His father paced the little room. "Then I'm too late—too late," he muttered. "I want Black Zeke, but not aboard this packet if it can be helped. I'd planned to keep an eye peeled for a signal from the boat, see who did that signaling. Then I intended slipping ashore, hunting down Barlow who'd be bound to be nearby. And now he's on his way to the packet—him and his whole cutthroat crew!"

"And us perched on a sandbar like a crippled duck in a mill pond!" Jason groaned.

"Possibly we'll be floated off before he gets here."

"And what if we are?" Jason countered. "Cap Covenant will have to tie up at the bank. He can't run at night without a pilot, and he'll never give me a second chance. Anyway, he probably won't believe that

I really saw a signal."

"Once we're floated off, I'll take the wheel if needs be," his father declared. "You see, son, I thought I came aboard only to clear myself, but I can't forget that this was my boat once and that a hundred passengers are in danger. The main job is to get the boat beyond Barlow's reach."

"You can't do it!" Jason cried. "Don't you understand? If you take over the pilothouse, every officer aboard will know you for who you really are! Webb Taggart will carry you back to St. Louis in chains!"

"We'll run that shoal when we come to it," his father decided. "There's a few hours before a pilot will be needed aboard this packet. Meanwhile we're going on shore and see if we can head off Barlow. He probably had a man posted to watch for a signal, and it'll take that man a while to carry word to the pack."

But even as his father spoke, Jason knew it was too late to go ashore, and the proof of it was in the sudden beat of rifles, the scurrying of footsteps on the decks above, the hoarse shouts of boarding renegades. Black Zeke Barlow had struck!

JASON went through the doorway in a leap, his father and Napoleon trailing behind him. Hurrying up a ladder to the fo'c's'le deck, he faced a weird scene made weirder by the bobbing lantern that lighted it. Renegades were everywhere, rough-garbed whites and breeds, the scum of the river, and prominent among them was barrel-chested, long-maned Zeke Barlow himself. They were lining up frightened, bewildered passengers while other renegades piled down ladders to the hold where the cargo was kept.

Naked fists were Jason's only

weapons, but he charged forward with those fists flailing. And as he did a voice cut out of the darkness. "Here's Kendall Lane's kid now!" someone cried.

He knew that voice, did Jason, and he was trying to identify it when the renegades swarmed upon him, pressing him backward by the sheer weight of numbers. Barlow put a gun against Jason's ribs.

"Be quiet, buck, or you're dead," he warned. "Boys, load him into a bull boat."

Kendall Lane and Napoleon had faded into the shadows, obviously realizing the futility of pitting themselves against such odds at this time. Captain Covenant and Webb Taggart came piling down a companion-way only to be confronted by guns as they reached the fo'c's'le. The two were being lined up with the passengers when Jason was lowered into one of a cluster of bull boats—those cup-shaped Indian-made crafts of buffalo hide stretched over a willow framework.

"Do you see, Covenant?" Taggart snarled. "Lane's one of them, and they're taking him from the packet to save him from prison!"

A renegade's fist had knocked Jason almost senseless, and he lay silently in the bull boat, dimly aware that loot was being lowered to other boats. There was a bit of a moon now, and he saw the labels on wooden packing cases. "MACHINERY," the labels read, but this, Jason guessed, had been a subterfuge designed to fool raiders—a trick that had failed. Whoever had waved the signal lantern, the same man who'd shouted Jason's name and identified him to the renegades, had doubtless told Barlow what cases to steal.

And now Jason was a prisoner. He thought he could guess why he'd been singled out to be taken along,

but when the renegade crew came swarming into the boats, Barlow taking his place in the same boat that held Jason, the youngster put a question to the man.

"What's the idea of taking me with you?" he demanded.

"To save the skin of our boss, who's still aboard," Barlow answered, with a laugh. "You don't understand? Our boss signals us from the boat whenever there's loot worth taking. If Sam Covenant suspected there was still a traitor on his packet, he'd hunt him down. Last year we left a letter in your father's coat, understand, and the fools aboard arrested him. Tonight the boss whispered to me that you were aboard and under suspicion, and now, with you taken along with us, Sam Covenant will look no farther for a traitor. The boss'll be safe for another run—and another cargo."

So Jason had guessed right! He was to be the scapegoat, just as his father had been framed the year before to cover the real traitor. Yet his father was aboard the *Bird o' Paradise* and therein lay Jason's only hope of rescue—a forlorn hope at best. Glancing across the moonmisted waters, he saw that the river was still rising, its turbulent surface dotted with uprooted trees and floating debris, the current running strong. But it would still be a while before the rise would lift the *Bird o' Paradise* from her sandy roost, and until it did, Kendall Lane was stranded aboard the boat.

Padding renegades toiled against the current, and by the strength of many arms the little flotilla rounded a bend and the packet's lights vanished behind. Here the river was broader, and a small, wooded island stood midway in the channel. An hour later the boats were beached

among overhanging willows that crowded down into the water, the renegades falling into a frenzy as they hastily unloaded the packing cases.

"Rip one open!" someone shouted. "Me, I hanker to hear the clink o' minted money. Rip a case open, I say!"

His suggestion won instant approval, and with a pistol barrel used as a pry, boards were wrenched from a case. But as the renegades crowded around the open case a howl of dismay went up.

"Machinery!" a man shouted hoarsely. "These cases are loaded with just what the label says! Machinery!"

BLACK ZEKE BARLOW, a frown creasing his broad forehead, elbowed men away and peered into the case. With an oath, he ripped boards from another case, his face darkening as he looked inside.

"Boys, we've been played for fools," he said slowly.

"But the boss said to take the cases marked machinery," insisted one of the renegades.

"The boss was maybe schemin' for himself," Barlow muttered, fingering the gun at his belt. "Do you see it the way I do? He had to signal us or we'd have got suspicious

and come aboard anyway. But he thought it would be a spell before we learned the truth about these cases. Meanwhile he's maybe got friends primed to raid the packet upriver—friends who'll do his bidding for a smaller share of the loot than we'd want!"

A renegade spat into the river and moved toward the boats. "Then let's be getting back aboard the packet," he said and hurled a lantern aside, a queer-looking lantern with dark glass sides. "We'll do no signaling this time," he added. "This'll be a surprise attack—and the surprise will be on the boss!"

"Wait!" Barlow ordered, his eyes narrow with thought. "He'll expect us back the minute we find out what's really in them cases. And he'll have the whole boat primed to meet us, likely. But we'll find a way to fool him. Let's get to our cabin and sharpen our wits with a bit of whiskey."

"What about him?" someone asked and nudged Jason.

Barlow gave Jason a calculating glance and grinned wolfishly. "He's no good to us," he said. "And he's a river man, understand. So let's give him a taste of the river. Tie him to yonder willow."

The deadly import of that command knifed through Jason and he



struck out wildly with his fists as renegades once again swarmed upon him. But they were too many, and he was dragged into water up to his waist and lashed with a length of rawhide to a willow. Then, tied in this fashion, he was left behind as the renegades disappeared up a dim trail toward their cabin somewhere on the island.

Thus Jason Lane was left alone to face his doom, for the fiendish finish Black Zeke Barlow had planned for him was all too apparent. Up until now Jason had been hoping the river would rise quickly, lift the packet off the sandbar. But now each inch that the river rose meant that he was that much nearer to being drowned!

Already the water was above his waist, the level of the river slowly rising toward his armpits. Soon it would be to his shoulders—his chin—his nose. Writhing desperately, he struggled with the knots that bound him, panic giving him a strength beyond his own, but that strength was not enough.

Or was it? His wrists were looser now! Straining with feverish intensity, he churned the water with his wild thrashings, his hopes surging wildly as he remembered something that the renegades had forgotten in their haste and anger. They had bound him with rawhide, and rawhide stretches when it is wet! The knots had been just above water when they'd tied him, but now they were submerged. And they were giving, just a little!

REDOUBLING his efforts, Jason worked with renewed vigor. The water was up to his neck now, and a vagrant ripple gave him a mouthful of the muddy river. Then his hands came loose, and he floundered to higher ground, there to lay prone

and panting, unnerved by his brush with death.

But there was no time for rest—not with Black Zeke Barlow somewhere close by and planning another raid on the packet. Coming to his feet, Jason shaped a plan, and his first step was to set Barlow's bull boats adrift, shoving all but one of them out into the stream and watching them bob away.

The moon was fading rapidly, and the darkness before dawn would soon be upon the river. Climbing into the last bull boat, Jason went to work with the paddle, narrowly missing a collision with an uprooted tree that shot past him. Then the current had his boat in its grip and was sweeping it downstream, back toward the stranded steamboat.

For that was Jason's destination. He was going to get aboard the *Bird o' Paradise*, lay his story in the lap of Captain Covenant, warn the man that if Barlow had more boats it was certain a second raid was impending. Surely Cap Covenant, who'd once been his father's friend, would at least listen to him now.

Then Jason was rounding the bend and the packet was before him, its cabins rising in banked tiers to the pilothouse. The boat was off the sandbar now, no doubt of that, for the *Bird o' Paradise* was nosing upstream again, a banner of smoke from its stacks unfurled against the night sky. And something in that sight took the heart out of Jason Lane, for he knew full well what it meant.

The packet was risking another night run, therefore a firm hand was at the wheel in the pilothouse. And only one able man aboard the boat was qualified for such a post. Kendall Lane had claimed that no man was as important as his packet or the passengers aboard it. Possibly

Kendall Lane, with Napoleon's help, had taken over the pilothouse by force. If that had happened, Lane must have betrayed himself into Webb Taggart's hands by this night's work.

Such were Jason's stricken thoughts, and for a moment he let his boat drift aimlessly until a new thought struck him. Had Hoot Gannon, faced by an emergency, roused himself from his sick bed to try a night run? Did Captain Covenant know that Barlow hadn't gotten the loot and that a second attack was imminent? Or was it Kendall Lane up in that pilothouse, true to a river man's code? If that were true, then Kendall Lane would need his son's help if the king pilot was to escape from Marshal Taggart after this night's run.

There was one chance left to save Kendall Lane from the consequences of his unselfish act, the slim chance that the traitor who was still aboard the boat might be captured and made to confess. Dipping his paddle into the river, Jason once again headed for the packet, fighting the current as he cut diagonally toward the steamboat. Soon he was into the boil of the starboard paddle wheel, clutching frantically at a trailing rope as the bull boat was sucked into the churning maw of the wheel.

DRAGGING himself onto the fo'c's'le deck, Jason lay panting for a long minute. Then he crawled erect and headed up the companionways. The boiler deck was soon behind him, and he was onto the hurricane and easing open the door of the cabin always reserved for the pilot.

He had to know if Gannon was inside, for if the pilot wasn't in his sick bed, then it was he who was

in the pilothouse above, and not Kendall Lane. But Gannon was here, for Jason almost collided with him as he stepped inside the cabin. And Gannon instantly threw his arms about Jason, the two of them crashing to the floor where they rolled and struggled.

A dim lantern swung overhead, and by its light Gannon had recognized the intruder. And it was no wonder Gannon had fallen upon him, for Jason had been twice branded as a renegade tonight. But suddenly it struck Jason that Gannon was fighting with a ferocity that gave the lie to his claim of being a sick man. Then they were rolling half under Gannon's bunk, and Jason's head bumped against an object hidden there.

That blow almost snatched Jason's senses away. But he had recognized the object—a queer lantern with dark glass sides, a mate to the one a disgusted renegade had thrown away on the island! And that was when the whole truth exploded inside Jason's brain. Gannon was the renegades' boss, the man who'd swung a signal lantern from the hurricane deck, this run and last year as well. Gannon! He had pretended to be sick to avoid running the river at night, of course. He had wanted the packet tied up to the bank so Black Zeke Barlow could fall upon it with no trouble!

The traitor was in his hands, and that thought put strength behind Jason's bunched knuckles as they found Gannon's jaw. Dragging the dazed pilot to his feet, Jason scooped up that telltale lantern from beneath the bunk, herded Gannon out of the cabin and up into the pilothouse. Captain Samuel Covenant was there, and Marshal Webb Taggart, and Napoleon. And at the wheel was Kendall Lane.

"HERE'S your traitor," Jason said before any of the startled men could speak. "Here's the devil who twice betrayed this packet, and betrayed his renegade crew as well." He glanced at his father. "I should have known that when a pilot was needed, you'd take the wheel, dad. It wasn't likely you'd forget the very things you taught me. But I'm here to clear you, even if I have to choke a confession out of this skunk."

Then he was hurrying into his story, telling everything that had happened that night, and when he had finished, Kendall Lane laughed triumphantly. "You've done it, Jason!" he cried. "You've put the finish to the trouble that's bedeviled this boat so long. Don't you see? You've got Barlow's boss, and we've got Barlow where we want him—on an island without boats and with the river rising. I think Barlow and his crew will be glad to come aboard with their hands in the air by the time we get up to the island. But you don't understand, do you, son? Tell him, Taggart."

"I made a mistake tonight, bucko, when I clouted you down," Taggart said. "I might have made another mistake after the raid when a wheel-chair cripple came to me and admitted his true identity and offered to pilot us once we were off the sandbar. You see, your father was mighty anxious to get upstream since Black Zeke had taken you in that direction. Also, he knew that Barlow would be back as soon as he opened those packing cases. Seems that Kendall Lane packed keys that got him into the cargo hold, and him and his colored friend shifted labels so that Barlow would get the wrong cases if he did raid us. Once Lane proved that the money was still aboard because of

his ruse, I figured he was entitled to have his way in the pilothouse. And now I'm thinking that Gannon, here, has got a lot to explain."

"Lies! All lies!" Hoot Gannon screamed. "I tell you this young renegade had that purple lantern in his hand when I found him skulking along the hurricane a few minutes ago. Sick as I was, I jumped him, but—"

Jason winked broadly at Webb Taggart. "You locked me below on suspicion," he pointed out. "I suppose you'll be locking up Hoot Gannon for the same reason until the truth comes out. How about putting Black Zeke Barlow in the same room with Gannon, once we get that renegade aboard. Black Zeke is almighty peeved at *somebody* aboard this boat—the boss that he thinks double-crossed him by switching labels on the cargo. Hoot, here, put up a good show of pretending to have the fever. I'd like to see what kind of a show he puts on when him and Barlow are cooped together!"

But the color that Hoot Gannon had pinched into his cheeks was gone now, an ashy grayness taking its place as Jason spoke. "No! No!" he protested. "I'll talk! I'll tell everything! Don't pen me up with that devil Listen—"

But Jason didn't listen as the babbling confession tumbled from Gannon's lips. Marshal Webb Taggart could take down the story and present it to a St. Louis court that had made a mistake when Kendall Lane had stood before it. But right now Jason Lane had a more important job. He was busy at his father's side, peering at the dawn-tinged river—a pair of pilots seeing their packet through the last stretch of troubled waters.

RANGE SAVVY

by Carl Raht

Due to a shortage of beef, there is some talk of using horse meat, as they do in European countries. To most people the idea is distasteful, yet it is a matter of record that meats we shun today were once considered delicacies in the old West. Next to beaver tail, panther meat was the early trapper's choice. Dis-



gust the meat of the prairie dog by calling it squirrel meat, and few people could tell the difference, and even the lowly burro has something of the flavor of bear meat, as this writer knows from experience.

It is a fact that few Indians are left-handed, and in the rare cases where one is, he suffers more inconvenience than his counterpart in the white race. The Indian woman's dress is made to conform to the free use of the right hand and arm. The Moqui squaw wears her manta over the left arm and shoulder and under the right arm and shoulder for work. All Indian horses are broken to right-side mounting. In his days of war, the Indian rider shot from right to left, concealed himself on the right side of his horse, shot buffalo or enemy from the right side. The left-handed Indian therefore was handicapped in the chase and battle, as all circling charges on horseback were made from the right.



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The wild mustang was not the hardest horse to capture; the tamed horse which had somehow escaped to the wild bunch was even more difficult to trap. The tamed horse's contact with man gave him an understanding of man's ways and a familiarity with corrals, fences and traps of all kinds. Once he had gone wild, he not only used his savvy to keep himself free of traps, but guided other horses away from man-made contraptions. A mule gone wild was even more cagy, and horse hunters, unable to capture such an animal, were forced to kill him. Deprived of their educated leader, the mustang band was more easily caught.



The dugout of the early-day cowboy and settler was simply constructed, requiring only a spade, saw and ax. An open rectangular hole was dug in the south slope of a hill, the earth thus forming the back wall and part of the side walls. Logs made up the remainder of the front and side walls and were chinked with mud. A mound of tamped earth served to divert rain water from the roof, which was a layer of logs, bushes and mud, and packed earth. At the back end a chimney vent was dug up through the solid wall of dirt. A blanket served for a door. With the door closed and a brisk fire burning, the dugout was warm and snug in the worst blizzard.



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Mr. Raht 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.



"PACK up, mom, while I take the car down to the garage and have it greased. We're leaving for South America in the morning."

"Gee, pop! You mean we're going through the jungles and over the Andes Mountains and everything? Oh, boy!"

"You said it, son."

When "Fill 'er up, Bub," again becomes the national password and tourist travel again becomes the great American pastime, variations of that conversation are going to be heard from Maine to California, from Minnesota to Texas and way points in between. If we knew how to say it in Spanish or Portuguese we could give you the South American version of the same thing. Except of course that families there will be heading north just as enthusiastically to visit the United States

and Canada. Busses will roll over the road. Trucks will wheel down the long miles with commodities and return laden with things we need, rubber perhaps from Brazil and other raw materials.

The road will be an artery of commerce as well as a highway of tourist travel. More than that it should help to strengthen real Latin American solidarity, binding the countries of the Western Hemisphere together in mutual trade and better understanding.

It's going to be a great road. And it is not just an engineer's plan on paper, or a set of marked maps and a sheaf of blueprints. It's the real thing, slowly but surely approaching completion. The dream stage started years ago in 1923 when the project was first conceived in Santiago, Chile, at a then held confer-

When the war ends and tourists again
take to the open road, there'll be mil-
lions of Americans heading down—

THE LONG TRAIL

by
Jim
West



ence of the American Republics. Actual construction began in 1930. Since that time various links of the long road have been laid out and opened to travel. But it took the stimulus and urgency of a global war to shift construction of this tremendously important highway into high gear.

Most of the remaining gaps are in certain uninhabited dense jungle sections of Central America. There the road will have to go through rugged, forested mountain country where brightly colored macaws and other tropical birds wing like daytime fireworks through the green trees. Getting the road over Death Pass in the unbroken wilderness of mountain between Costa Rica and the border of Panama is going to take quite a bit of doing. That's one of the gaps at present. Though the route over this virtually impassable hundred-and-fifty-mile stretch has been marked it may be more feasible at first anyhow to detour this section by means of a ferry trip from Costa Rica down to Panama.

THERE is another bad strip south from the Panama Canal into the northern part of Colombia. In this section are three hundred miles of virtually unmapped jungle in which the Atrato River and miles of dangerous swamps block the way. All roads south stop on the jungle's edge at Chepo.

Another boat ride will probably be necessary for quite a while. This time from some port in Panama to the little town of Turbo, Colombia. Turbo itself is not on the highway, but Colombia is building a spur road to it from Medellin, a fairly large city that at present marks the northern end of the Pan-American road from the standpoint of the South American mileage.

There are other gaps still to be closed. These intervening distances however are but dots and dashes when the total length of the proposed route is taken into consideration—between *fifteen and sixteen thousand auto travel miles*. It is just three thousand miles by car from New York to San Francisco.

The eventual plan for the Pan-American Highway is one continuous road from Fairbanks, Alaska, through Canada, the United States, Mexico, the Central American Republics and thence clear down to Megallanes on the Straits of Magellan at the southern tip of South America. The road will then continue north again to Rio de Janeiro. It is probably the greatest highway project ever undertaken. In addition to the main north-south route, east-west feeders and branch roads will reach out into various parts of the different South American countries.

Last year one highly important link in this road through all the Americas was rushed to completion ahead of schedule in a bang-up construction job under U. S. Army supervision and guidance. We refer to the Alcan Highway connecting Fairbanks, Alaska, by direct auto road with the United States via northern Canada. This year may see another militarily important segment of the Pan-American Highway well on toward usability. It may even be finished in 1943. Uncle Sam wants an auto road cut through from the Mexico-Guatemala border to the Panama Canal. And Uncle Sam has a habit of getting what he goes after. United States construction engineers are in Central America now. United States contractors are rushing through this difficult task of road building as fast as men and machinery can do the job.

Like the Alaska link, military experts have considered a direct overland road to the Panama Canal of utmost importance, vital to hemispheric defense and possibly to the defense of the Canal itself. Over such a road supply trucks, men and munitions could be rushed south to the canal if needed. Men could also be speeded down the road to repel a land invasion anywhere along the hundreds of miles of Central American seacoast.

THIS Central American segment, already authorized and on which work is now being done is part of our allied emergency defense program. Much of the roadway will, at least for the present, be only temporary construction joining the highways now in use in Central America between Guatemala and the Panama Canal into a single chain of defense.

The new stretches will be "auto" roads in the sense that they will be passable for truck travel. But that is about all. The width called for varies from ten to sixteen feet. Ten percent grades will be permitted. Again as is the case with the Alcan Highway, this section through the jungles of Central America is strictly a military operation. It is the army that will use it, at least until after the war.

In spite of the enormous length of the Pan-American Highway about ninety percent of the entire system has been finished and can be used at least during the dry season. Once the war is over the day won't be far distant when, after you have made the thrilling Alcan Highway trip to Alaska and back, you can step into your favorite gas station and ask for a route map of the road to Buenos Aires. The highway is already a very nearly completed job.

South American countries have been forging ahead steadily with their share of the route, and with road-building programs of their own. Almost all of Colombia, for instance, except that northern edge from Medellin up to Turbo is covered with good roads. From Colombia the Pan-American road continues along the ridge of the Andes up to Quito, the capital of Ecuador. Some of the road in Ecuador is merely a wide, graded patch covered with crushed stone, but it is a road, nevertheless. From Ecuador there is another gap to be filled in, and Ecuador is working on it now.

Meantime it is necessary to drop from the heights of the Andes down to the coast and bridge the missing segment by ferry across the Gulf of Guayaquil to reach the continuation of the road in Peru. The con-



tinuation is a grand stretch, a thousand miles of paved road down the Pacific coast. Though the narrow shelf of land which the road traverses is mostly barren and scantily populated, you have the blue waters of the Pacific on one side and shoreward are the snow-capped Andes towering high above you in the distance. Lima, the capital of Peru, is on this road.

South of Lima near Arequippa there is a fork in the road. You pay your money and you take your choice. Heading south, if you take the fork to the left you have started on a trip up over the Andes on what is known as the "highest road in the world." It is a honey, too, finally topping out at Anticona Pass, elevation sixteen hundred feet above sea level. This is Inca country, the heart of that great and once-rich ancient Indian civilization. Follow the road which, in turn, follows the old Inca trails past Lake Titicaca. Beyond the lake you come into La Paz, the capital of Bolivia. If you keep going you will eventually roll into Buenos Aires clear on the other side of South America.

La Paz to Buenos Aires is not an overnight trip. You had better have your camping stuff along. The road distance between the two cities is roughly in the neighborhood of two thousand miles.

WHAT about the other fork back there near Arequippa, the right-hand road? You can take that, but you will wind up in Buenos Aires just the same. The road runs south through miles and miles of desolate coastal country in northern Chile. When it reaches Santiago the land has blessedly become more fertile. At Santiago the road swings east

again, and pretty soon you start climbing, almost scaling the sharp, steep slopes of the Andes.

It is a shorter route to Buenos Aires than the angling road much farther north. But you can't use it during Chile's winter months. The pass is snowbound. The Anticona Pass route is open all year around. However, if you are in Chile at a time when this shorter road can be used, once through the pass it drops quickly to the rich lands of the Argentine pampas and makes a beeline across them for Buenos Aires.

From Colombia south these fascinating thousands of miles of road through mountains, deserts and rolling plains to Buenos Aires are finished and in operation. They are being used right along by our South American neighbors. The bottle neck of intercontinental transportation by auto road is not in South America. It lies in the particularly rough stretches of jungle, mountain and morass farther north in the Central American area of the route. That bottle neck is being broken now. When it has been chopped away, and the war clouds clear from the world's present troubled skies, the entire road or most of it will probably be ready for everyone to use.

The Pan-American Highway is more than just another road to be lined with gas stations, hot dog stands and tourist camps. It is a symbol of increasing Latin-American solidarity. It opens new vistas, visions of more travel, of more business and of lasting friendship between the Americas in the future.

It will be a grand way for us to get better acquainted with our South American neighbors. And man, oh, man, what an auto trip to plan on taking!

THE END

NEW RANGE

by

David Lavender



Leaning far over in the saddle, Mark caught Lon's shirt, then gripped him under one arm and tried to haul him up.

CHAPTER I

CALL FOR HELP

THE sound of shots came again. Three of them, evenly spaced in a signal for help. Mark Hargrave laid down his shovel beside the post he was resetting at his wild horse trap in the draw and stepped to his horse. Clouds lay swollen and gray over the sandstone mesas of western Colorado. The lifeless air, thick with the threat of a spring storm, had ab-

sorbed the sharp edges of the reports, leaving them flat and remote, hard to pin down. Yet Mark was sure the shots had been fired from very near his own cabin.

A little line appeared between his dark brows. Otherwise his face stayed blank, as though long ago he had formed the habit of shutting his thoughts deep down inside himself. He swung into the saddle, a long, lean man, handling his hard body without waste motion.

"Let's go!" he said and touched spurs to the horse's flanks.

He came out of the brush and his frown deepened. The door to his low-roofed, earth-thatched cabin of cottonwood logs stood open. Over by the corral gate a huge, sweat-streaked, barrel-chested bay horse, seventeen hands high and spattered with mud, nosed at a forkful of hay that had been thrown to it from the winter-grayed stack by the barn. A fresh, white scar, too deep and cruel to have been made by brush, showed on the saddle cantle.

"That bullet," Mark Hargrave thought, "came awful close!" He loosened his heavy .45 in its holster, joggled to the cabin and dismounted. As he stepped toward the door, he noticed six empty shells lying on the ground.

The cabin was a single-room affair with a packed earth floor and the barest requirements of homemade furniture. Sprawled on the tarp-covered bunk by the log wall was a vast mountain of a man.

A surprised smile broke the somber lines of Mark's face. "Barely Able Andy Vorst!" he murmured. "Shoot for help and then go to bed. If that isn't typical!" Aloud he called: "You fat baboon!"

Andy Vorst reared up, his spurs dragging a harsh rasp from the canvas tarp. His seamed, tired face was covered with a bristle of grayish-red beard. His round, brown eyes, sunk deep in folds of fat, were blood-shot. As he dug the sleep out of them with his fists, he looked as helpless as a bogged beef, but Mark well knew the earthquake energy to which Andy's rare fits of passion could arouse him.

"Mark!" Andy said. He didn't offer to shake hands; there was a bond between them which made the formality unnecessary. "I didn't

know whether you'd hear me shoot-in' or not."

"I almost didn't," Mark told him. "What happened? Did you fall asleep before you could reload and shoot again?"

"I was savin' ammunition."

"What for?"

Andy hesitated. Mark Hargrave's face turned bleak again. "So it's Lon?" he said harshly.

"Yes," Barely Able answered. Sadness clouded his brown eyes as he read the younger man's bitterness. "He's still your brother, Mark."

"I can't help that!"

"You can help him, though. He needs you, Mark. Needs you bad."

"Not interested," said Mark.

BARELY ABLE ANDY heaved up from the bed. "I never thought you'd go to pot like this!" he growled. "Oh, I know what you're goin' to say. That buyin' Lon out of one scrape after another cost you your ranch. But you can't improve things by nursin' your grudge. It'd serve you right if one o' these jug-headed brons you're tryin' to trap did break your neck. You're useless this way. No man can live for himself alone!"

Mark's eyes grew smoky. "Save your breath. There's no pulpit here!"

"I don't need a pulpit to make you listen to me," Andy bawled in outrage. "I used to fan your britches for you when you were a limber-necked kid, an' I can still do it!"

His great hulk quivered in indignation. Mark grinned in spite of himself. "You might fall down on me and smother me to death," he said. There was affection in his voice. Barely Able Andy Vorst's lumbering size had been a joke between them ever since Mark's father had died,

and the fat foreman of his ranch in the Santos Valley had undertaken to raise the two orphaned boys. He'd washed their ears when they were youngsters and ridden stirrup to stirrup with them when Mark came of age and assumed management of both his own and young Lon's interest in the ranch. Legally Andy had been their guardian, but Mark had never tagged the man with a word. He was just Barely Able, always around and kind of comfortable—except when he broke out in an itch.

The memory of these things eased the tension between them. Barely Able went on: "It's this way, Mark. Lon hit Santos town yesterday after a stretch of loggin'-up in the mountains. Some slickers talked him into a card game at the Drovers' Saloon. He won heavy. Toward midnight one o' the fellers accused him o' cheatin' and went for his gun." Andy slanted Mark a look. "You used to wonder if you'd made a mistake, teachin' the kid to use his irons so well. But if you hadn't, he'd be dead now. Instead he got the other fellow."

Mark's face stayed expressionless. "If he's so good, why does he need help?"

"Hear me out!" Andy rumbled. "The rest o' them card players slunk off like whipped coyotes. But somebody must have stirred 'em up again. All of a sudden they come tearin' back, howlin' 'Lynch!' an' makin' out they were bosom friends of the dead man, hot for vengeance. Sheriff Naylor beat 'em to Lon by half a jump an' slapped the kid in jail on a charge o' disturbin' the peace. Lon's safe now, but the wolves are layin' siege. More men comin' in all the time. They'll rush the jug tonight. They'll hang Lon to the highest tree in Santos—unless you

an' me an' Naylor figure out a way to stop 'em!"

Mark stared at his fingernails. "Maybe Lon was cheating," he said, dead-voiced.

Andy turned red. "No such thing! Lon's wild an' reckless. But he never did a mean thing or a low thing in his life!"

Mark measured the man. Barely Able had lost, too, when Lon's continual scrapes had bled the Hargrave ranch dry. Except for that Andy might still be foreman of one of the sweetest steer spreads on the Colorado-Utah border. Instead he was swamping now in a Santos livery stable. But it hadn't shaken his loyalty.

"Still sticking up for us, aren't you, Barely Able?" Mark said softly. "Even after all the grief we've caused you."

"It ain't grief when you care about somebody," Andy said. Then, flustered by his show of sentiment, he bristled like a wounded buffalo. "I ain't here to gab!" he bellowed. "Are you comin' back to Santos with me or not?"

Even then Mark could not shake his old bitterness. He turned toward the door. As he gazed across the bleak range to which the loss of his ranch had forced him, his attention was caught again by Andy's bullet-scarred saddle. His eyes narrowed. "Who shot at you on the way up here, Andy?"

"Some o' the bunch that's after Lon," Barely Able replied. "They didn't want me bringin' help." His glance ran over Mark's frame, trained down by his long months of wild horse trapping to hard bone and muscle, every fiber of him fit and ready. "Especially no help from you," he added. "They know what you can do when you cut loose."

"They?" Mark demanded. "Who are they?"

Andy dodged the question. "Them card sharps," he said. "But that ain't the point. The thing is, are you goin' to side me or not?"

Little knots stood out on Mark's jawbones. "I'll side *you*, Barely Able," he said. "But if I find out that Lon really was cheating—" His voice trailed off, hard and bitter.

FOR eleven miles they rode fast across rough tablelands, their horses' feet drawing sucking sounds from earth still soggy with melting snow. Then the muddy going wearied the animals, and they had to slow to that long, running walk which Western mustangs can hold for hours without a break. Barely Able relaxed in the saddle. Mark had put him on a fresh horse, a big, blue, easy-gaited roan.

"He drifts like a rockin' chair," Andy said with a yawn. "Maybe I could catch a little snooze if I tried."

Mark laughed. "You could do it without trying. You're the only man I ever knew who could sleep any place, even standing up like a horse. Well, knock off. I'll lead the bronc for you."

He took the bridle reins and jogged on. In two minutes Barely Able was snoring.

The land grew rougher. Ahead, outlined against the swollen clouds, was a gap between two sandstone ridges where the trail broke through into the valley of Santos Creek. Mark drew to a halt, studying the place. If bushwhackers were watching the trail, that gap would be a logical spot for them to hole up.

"I reckon I'd better take a look see," he mused.

He led both horses to a clump of piñon pines and tied them there.

Barely Able Andy slumped a little deeper in the saddle, his double chin sagging on his chest. Otherwise he never stirred.

"Sleep it off," Mark told him gently. "You done your share to-day."

Keeping to the cover of the brush, Mark made his way on foot toward the gap. "If I was a bushwhacker," he wondered, sizing up the place, "where would I locate myself?" He glanced at the north slope. Patches of snow still clung there; the ground was damp and cold. Across the way, where the thin April sunshine had reached the southern slope, the soil was drier. "I reckon I'd go south," he decided.

He slipped up through the piñons, the resinous smell of them rich in the damp air. Back against the cliff were huge slabs that had fallen from the rim. Winding his way among them, he came out high on the shoulder of the hills. A tingle of triumph ran along his veins. Below him, stomach down on a ledge screened from the trail by a clump of buck brush, lay a man. A short-barreled .30-30 saddle carbine was ready by his hand.

Mark eased toward him. "Lookin' for someone?" he called.

CHAPTER II

BUSHWHACKER'S PAYOFF

THE bushwhacker's head snapped around. He was swarthy-faced; under the brim of his high-crowned hat his eyes looked jet black. For a second he crouched motionless, slack-jawed with surprise. Then when he saw that Mark's hands were empty he grabbed for the rifle.

It was a mistake. Mark's fingers dipped and came up, all in one smooth, fluid motion. And now the heavy, cedar-butted .45 was in his

fist. The gun spat once. The bushwhacker's hat jerked on his head and daylight showed through a little hole in the crown. He dropped the carbine as if it had burned him.

"That's better," Mark said and walked on down. He picked up the .30-30, levered the shells out of it and threw it into the brush. "Now," he said, holstering his own gun, "just why are you so anxious to kill me?"

The fellow licked his lips. "You are Mark Hargrave, no?"

"Yes."

"I don' wan' to es-shoot you. Eef you had come tomorrow, I would not."

"What's tomorrow got to do with it?"

"Of that I don' know. The boss, he es-say only: 'You watch for thees mans Hargrave, Ramos. Eef he have not appear by dark and eef the weather looks rainy, you come back.' Now, you see for yourself, señor, that eet will rain tonight for surely. In another hour I would have been gone, and thees trouble, she would not have happen."

Mark glowered at him. The fellow was regaining his composure now that he saw he wasn't going to be manhandled, and underneath his glib tongue there was a growing note of insolence.

"So if it rains tonight, you let me go," Mark growled. "That doesn't make sense. If you're trying to run a windy one me—"

"I es-swear, señor! The boss, he es-say, eef eet rain, then we mus' do another job."

"What job?"

"That he does not tell."

"Who is your boss?"

"Drew Wenner."

"Wenner!" Mark's lips pulled back from his teeth. "That pint-sized rat! What—"

He broke off. Down in the draw

WS—5E

a stone had clicked. Mark shot a glance toward it. Then he grinned as Barely Able Andy's fat hulk protruded around the edge of a boulder. The foreman must have been awakened by Mark's shot and was coming to investigate.

"It's O. K., Andy!" Mark called. "I got me a fish up here full of stories that need shaking down. I'll be with you in a minute."

Barely Able wiped the sweat off his face, sat down on a rock and began rolling a cigarette. "You ain't got no consideration," he said in disgust. "I run forty pounds offn myself tryin' to catch up with the fight, an' now it's over!"

MARK chuckled and started to turn back to Ramos. All at once a chill drove through him. He had shifted his attention from Ramos no more than a moment, but it had been enough. Glittering in the man's fist was a thin-bladed knife he had pulled from his boot. Lunging out, he struck savagely. A split second earlier and he would have caught Mark squarely in the back.

The horse trapper ducked low, hurled himself forward. The knife ripped through his jacket, dug a red track along his shoulder. Then he banged into the attacker, bowling him backward. Locked together, they fell and rolled, kicking and gouging down, the hill. Ramos still clutched the knife. He tried to thrust it into Mark's belly but couldn't free his wrist from the horse trapper's iron grip. His swarthy face turned wild then, and he began to fight like an animal with his teeth and his head and his feet.

Mark clung to him, hearing his harsh breathing, feeling the insane fury of his straining muscles. They crashed through brush and onto the

lip of a ten-foot ledge. Ramos broke clear, drew back his legs and tried to kick the horse trapper over the drop. The blow all but caved in Mark's ribs. With a strangled sob he wrapped his arms around the man's waist and hung on, fighting for balance.

The whole world seemed to drop out beneath him. Over the ledge they went. As they fell, Mark gave a spasmodic heave. Twisting so, he managed to get Ramos' body underneath. They hit bottom. All the breath went out of the bushwhacker with an explosive grunt. He twitched violently, then lay still.

Pinwheels of white light skittered through Mark's brain. He rolled aside, gagging. Dimly he heard Andy's voice yelling: "Mark! Mark!" Shaping his head clear, he got drunkenly to his feet. The fat foreman was scrambling up the hill, gun drawn and face ashen with alarm.

The horse trapper drew a deep breath, feeling it burn all the way to the bottom of his chest. He stared down at the bushwhacker's limp body. "That guy plays for keeps!" he muttered.

Barely Able knelt beside Ramos, exploring his head and shoulders with fat, deft fingers. "Not no more he don't," he said. "He's dead as a hammer. Neck broke when you fell on him." He straightened, watching Mark uneasily. "Did you find out who he is?"

"The same buzzard who took a pot shot at you, I reckon. A hired hand." Mark's eyes, dark and angry, fastened on Barely Able. "Why didn't you tell me Drew Wenner was behind this?"

"Because I wanted you to come for Lon's sake, and not because you saw a chance to take a crack at Wenner."

"So it was Wenner's men who got

Lon into the card game?"

"Yes. And it was one of Wenner's men the kid killed."

"Was Wenner there?"

"Course not!" Andy said. "That yellow-backed bantam always keeps his own hands clean when he's runnin' a frame-up."

Mark scowled, tormented by doubt. Maybe it wasn't a frame-up. Maybe Lon really had been cheating. "Why should Wenner try to put the kid out of the way?" he muttered. "What harm could Lon do him?"

Andy gave a baffled shrug. "I dunno. Naylor an' Lon an' I cracked our brains all last night, tryin' to figure. But there's some reason, sure as a skunk smells. An' it's important. Else he wouldn't be pullin' his men in off the range to rush the jail."

Mark looked at the stormy sky. "Tonight, if it rains!" he muttered, remembering what Ramos had said. "The whole thing's crazy!"

"No," Andy said. "Nothing Drew Wenner does is crazy. If he lynches Lon an' bushwhacks you tonight, it's because tonight is the time you're liable to be dangerous to him. It's not only that he hates your guts, Mark. He's afraid of you."

MARK stood silent, gripped by memory. Drew Wenner, cheating him on a water right deal when Mark had first taken charge of the Santos ranch and was still green as a gourd. Wenner in a fringed-top buggy pulled by high-stepping thoroughbreds, courting Rachel Blanchard, the girl Mark had dreamed of marrying before he'd lost his spread. It was Wenner, too, Mark had recently learned from wandering riders, who had picked a quarrel last winter with old Nate Blanchard, Rachel's father, shot him

through the chest and ridden off, leaving him to die in the snow. Blanchard had managed to crawl home but pneumonia set in and he'd died, dumping a stack of debts and a hard-pressed ranch on his daughter's shoulders.

A vein in Mark's temple stood out blue and hard. "That sawed-off, two-bit hide buyer!" he raged.

"Now, don't go underestimatin' him!" Andy said in alarm. "He's no hide buyer any more. Long ago when the rest of us were livin' high an' thinkin' the steer market would stay good forever, he seen that the railroads would come into Texas an' end the trail drives north. We didn't stop to wonder where we'd get our beef when that happened. But Wenner did! He knew we couldn't raise the stuff ourselves here in the mountains, where it costs too much to feed a cow through the winter an' blizzards keep the calf crops way down. So he went over across the Doloroso River, in them red deserts beyond the Utah line, an' started buildin' up a cow an' calf ranch. Sure, the country's tough. But the winters are mild. He can raise plenty of yearlin's to sell to the mountain ranchers."

Andy's voice sank to a growl, and he began emphasizing his words with short jabs of his fat left hand. "He might have made an honest business out of it. But it ain't in him to be honest. He's got delusions o' grandeur. He figures he can stamp out all competition an' establish a monopoly over the beef supply. He don't care how he stamps, either. Why do you suppose he killed Nate Blanchard?"

Mark's breath came out with a soft exhalation. "I see! Nate figured on moving over into Utah and starting a cow and calf outfit to buck Wenner!"

"Right. And now that Nate's dead, Rachel figured to go ahead an' finish the job!"

Alarm ran through Mark. "That country's too hard for a woman to tackle!"

"Rachel Blanchard never stopped because a thing was hard," Andy said. "She pulled out of the Santos a week ago with her herd. She's holdin' it down by the Doloroso now, waitin' for the drift ice to go out of the river so she can cross."

"Has Wenner hit at her yet?"

"Not that I know of. But sure as fate he's goin' to!"

Mark chewed his lip, his quick mind trying to divine Wenner's scheme from what he knew of the man's devious methods. One thing struck him hard. If Wenner was set on stopping Rachel, why was he wasting so much energy on Lon Hargrave?

"Do you reckon there could be a tie-up somewhere?" he asked Andy.

The foreman's forehead wrinkled in perplexity. "Could be," he muttered. "I never thought of it that way before. But we're sure not goin' to find out standin' here."

"Then let's go!" Mark said. His glance dropped to the dead Ramos. "Rain!" he wondered again. "What in blazes has rain got to do with it?"

While Andy went for the horses, Mark washed up in the creek. The icy water made him feel better, and his muscles were limber and sure as he swung once more into the saddle. Though they rode fast down the soggy trail into the trough of the Santos, the thinning light showed that the sun was dipping low behind the clouds.

NERVES stretched taut, Mark and Andy drew up in front of the Santos livery stable.

"My present place of servitude,"

Barely Able said wryly. "But at least I can get oats at cost. We'll leave the horses here."

Mark winced, remembering the days when Barely Able Andy Vorst, as foreman of the Hargrave spread, had been the oracle of all the young cowboys in the valley. Now he was a stable swamper. Mark shook the thought away. None of it was of his making. Let Lon stand up and answer.

"Can you trust the hombre who runs this place?" Mark asked Andy.

"He won't tell Wenner what we're doin', if that's what you mean," Andy said. "But he won't lift a finger to help us, either. Here he comes now."

The stable owner waddled out to meet them, the smell of his profession clinging to his cotton shirt and stained Levis. He measured Mark's long frame with a speculative gaze, and when Barely Able asked him how the town was, he giggled nervously through his crooked nose, like a horse whinnying.

"The jail's still in one piece," he said, "but I reckon there's gonna be a *habeas corpus* proceedin'—mostly *corpus*—soon as it's dark. Another bunch o' Drew Wenner's crew just rode into town."

Mark's teeth worried his lower lip as he thought it over. With Santos full of Wenner's men, Lon couldn't stay in town even if the kid was spirited out of jail. They'd have to run for it, but the mounts Andy and Mark had ridden were too jaded to hold up another hard ride.

Mark turned to the stable owner. "You got a couple of fresh, fast horses you'll sell?"

"Sure."

"Grain 'em good and saddle 'em ready to go. Leave 'em tied to the hitch rack in front with slipknots

in the reins that'll come loose fast if a man wants."

"Three horses," Barely Able corrected.

"No, you don't," said Mark. "You've a job here. I don't know where Lon and I are going when we leave, except away. Different ways," he added bitterly.

Andy hitched his trousers. "I said three horses."

"Sure," the stable owner agreed. He rubbed his soft hands on his hips. "You'll have to pay now, though. I hate to make a deal, an' then have my customers shot up before I kin send 'em a bill." He whinnied again.

"Barely Able, sometimes you're hard to get along with," Mark said.

Andy just grinned.

Mark knew the grin and gave in. "All right, you fat son," he said. "But I'll get even with you some day."

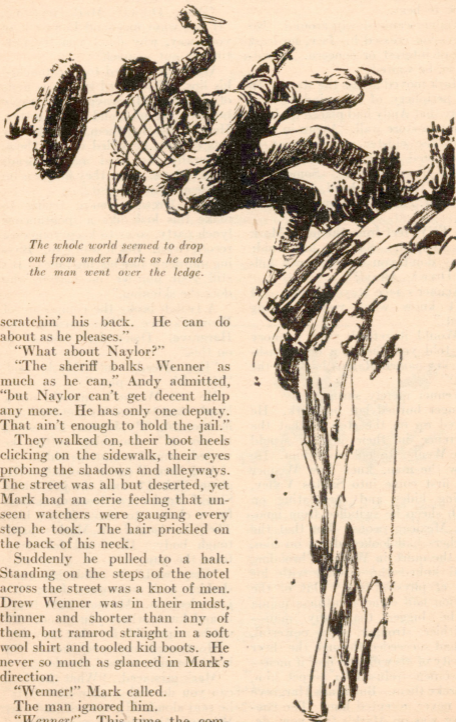
CHAPTER III

BULLET BOND

MARK paid for the horses and they walked along the street toward the jail. As Mark sized up the town, the corners of his mouth pulled down. Every third or fourth store was closed, its windows boarded up. The sidewalks were dirty and uncared for. A lone, high-sided ore wagon rumbled down the street with a load of quartz from the gold mine at the head of the valley.

"Santos has gone downhill in a hurry," he remarked.

Andy nodded somberly. "What with the cattle market weak an' no beef comin' from Texas, the old steer spreads are foldin' up left an' right. The mines are still haulin' ore, but the valley won't come back until we're sure of a cattle supply. Wenner is sittin' pretty; things flowin' his way an' all kinds o' bigger men



The whole world seemed to drop out from under Mark as he and the man went over the ledge.

scratchin' his back. He can do about as he pleases."

"What about Naylor?"

"The sheriff balks Wenner as much as he can," Andy admitted, "but Naylor can't get decent help any more. He has only one deputy. That ain't enough to hold the jail."

They walked on, their boot heels clicking on the sidewalk, their eyes probing the shadows and alleyways. The street was all but deserted, yet Mark had an eerie feeling that unseen watchers were gauging every step he took. The hair prickled on the back of his neck.

Suddenly he pulled to a halt. Standing on the steps of the hotel across the street was a knot of men. Drew Wenner was in their midst, thinner and shorter than any of them, but ramrod straight in a soft wool shirt and tooled kid boots. He never so much as glanced in Mark's direction.

"Wenner!" Mark called.

The man ignored him.

"Wenner!" This time the com-

mand was loud enough for the whole block to hear.

Wenner came slowly around. No expression crossed his face, no least sign of interest or concern. Standing so, he waited.

Mark moved across the street. In the periphery of his mind he was aware that Andy had placed his back against a store wall. A gun in each hand, the oldster was grinning as he covered Mark from any sneak attack from the rear. Somewhere a horse tossed its head, jangling a chain bit. It was the only sound.

A FEW feet from the man, Mark stopped. Softly he said: "Why don't you do your own killing, Drew? Afraid?"

Wenner's face stayed blank. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Would it refresh your memory if I told you there's a dead bushwhacker named Ramos back on the trail?"

Wenner merely shrugged.

Anger burned hot in Mark. He moved up on the step so that the difference in their heights would force Wenner to look up at him. He knew the man: knew how Wenner had first come into Santos Valley, buying hides and speculating on scrub sheep he swindled from ignorant Mexican peons. For that the ranchers had looked down on him, and the quirk in Wenner's brooding mind linked the disdain with his lack of physical size. Out of the fixation had come a ruthless mania to be bigger than any man—wealthier, stronger, more powerful. He had succeeded through the sheer ferocity of his will, and now if men—or women—refused to accept him, he broke them. But Mark Hargrave had never accepted him. The contempt was on Mark's face now, de-

liberate as a slap.

"Why, Drew?" Mark repeated. "If you want me—and Lon—out of your way, why don't you try putting us out yourself?"

Wenner's pointed tongue touched his lips. "This card ruckus is none of my affair, Hargrave. It's strictly between my men and your brother. He was cheating them, and when he was caught, he killed one of them. Naturally the dead man's friends want redress. How they find it is up to them. I'm out of it."

"No, Drew. You're trying to make this look like a spontaneous lynch party, so as to keep your own record clean. But it won't go. Buying murder is like buying hides. It's still your murder, no matter who does the skinning."

A twitch broke the composure of Wenner's face. "I'm warning you, Hargrave. Don't deal yourself in on this!"

"I'm already in!" Mark said. "Now it's your play!"

He saw Wenner's smooth, quick hands start toward his gun butt and he thought, "By Jupiter, he's going to do it!" Laughing softly, he waited, arms loose at his sides.

And then Wenner paused. His glance flicked toward the jail, where Sheriff Naylor was located, anxious for a chance to move in on him. Then he looked at Mark's hard, tough body. His hand fell away from the gun.

"Very well," he said, his voice shaking with suppressed fury, "it's your decision. My men have heard it and know where you stand. I'll not be responsible for what they do."

He turned and went across the hotel veranda toward the door.

Mark grimaced. "What the devil can you do with a man like that?" he said aloud. His eyes drifted over Wenner's tight-lipped crew. "Boys,"

he mocked them. "I'm sorry for you. The kind of wages you get just aren't worth earning."

He swung away. Down the sidewalk someone squalled shrilly: "Yi-hi! That's the way to put the little rooster in his place!"

MARK looked around. As he did so, he saw that Wenner had stopped in the doorway and was glaring toward the speaker, his face flushed with anger.

A bowlegged, sun-charred man with pink catfish mustaches and a skin beaten by the weather into a maze of wrinkles, came toward Mark, hand outstretched.

"Tinkleman!" Mark exclaimed. Santos was the last spot he'd expected to see the fellow. Tinkleman owned a ranch over in Utah. A queer, outspoken hermit, he almost never left the place. He had strange notions about running the herd of half-wild cows he'd assembled on his desolate range. Mark had stopped off with him two or three times while hunting mountain lions, and out of those brief meetings a firm bond of friendship had grown.

"What are you doing over here in Colorado, Tink?" Mark asked curiously.

"Had to see a lawyer," Tinkleman said. His face puckered with disgust. "Seems a feller can't sell a piece o' property without wrappin' hisself in paper like a mummy." Then he chuckled. "It was worth the trip, though, just to see you take Wenner down. Right in front of his own men, too. But be careful, Mark. He won't forget that sham-in'. Never. He'll pay you back if it's the last thing he does."

Mark shrugged. "He didn't look as if he were very fond of you, either."

"No," I reckon not." Tinkleman grinned happily. "He tried to buy my place at Iron Springs last fall. I told him where to go. Made him mad as a hornet. Especially when he found out I sold it an' all my cows a week later to Nate Blanchard."

"Nate!" Mark echoed. "So that's where Rachel's bound? To your Iron Springs ranch?"

"Yup. Nate sold his place here in Santos to git money for the deal. Agreed to be offn the land by April 1st. Then he died. He was hardly buried before the gal had to shove away. She's holdin' her herd down at the Doloroso now, waitin' to git across an' trail up to Iron Springs. I'm goin' back to my ranch now to gather my cows to turn over to her." Tinkleman's face grew serious. "Mark, I don't like the smell o' things. That gal's up agin' a mean proposition—movin' her whole ranch to new range. Range Wenner wants for himself. No, sir, I don't like it."

Mark didn't answer. Tinkleman scrutinized his drawn face, then blurted: "Why don't you swaller that bullheaded pride o' yours? Go down there with Rachel an' keep an eye peeled. That new foreman o' hers, that Nash Fraley, I don't think he's worth a dang!"

Still Mark stood like a man turned to stone, the dark depths of him wrenched by the memory of things as they might have been. A person couldn't go to a woman like Rachel empty-handed. When the Hargrave ranch had collapsed under Lon's recklessness, Mark had ridden away without even telling the girl good-by. How could he go back to her now?

Andy's sharp cry dragged him up out of the past. "Mark!"

He glanced up the street. Several horsemen had stopped on the far side of the jail. They dismounted

and fanned out, some going into the alleyway behind the building, others taking up position in empty doorways. The group of Wenner's men on the hotel porch stirred restlessly. As soon as it was dark and a man couldn't watch his back—

A tremor ran through Mark. He must walk this gantlet. And why? To save the skin of a person who had cost him everything he held dear.

"Tink," he said, "I don't know where I'll be riding next. It's going to be a tough night."

"I see," Tink said. His eyes swept the street. "I'll cover you until you've got where you're going." He hitched his gun butt around in reach, and every man on the porch saw him do it.

Mark smiled. "Thanks, Tink," he said and joined Andy.

BARELY ABLE was jumpy and on edge. "Hadn't I better bring the horses up from the livery?" he asked.

"No," Mark said. "It'd tip Wenner off to our next move. He'd stam-pede 'em and leave us afoot. We've got to catch him off guard and bull through."

"How?"

Mark lifted his shoulders. "I don't know. Maybe this isn't our lucky night."

They turned into the jail unmolested. Sheriff Naylor was in his office in the front part of the building. The lawman's long, bony face was tired and grooved with strain, but his eyes were steel-bright with fight. They met Mark's squarely and he said straight off:

"Lon's got to answer to a charge of disturbing the peace. I can't let him go except under bond."

"So!" Mark's teeth set. "I've got

to foot bail for him, too! How much this time?"

"One dollar."

Mark stared, not knowing whether to laugh or swear. "What's the idea?"

"When you go his bond," Naylor continued, "you'll also have to agree to be responsible for him until his trial. I've booked it for a year from today."

Mark's glance flashed from the sheriff to Barely Able. "I see!" he said grimly. "You two have had your heads together. You aim to trick me into taking Lon into tow again!"

"Yes," Naylor said. He leaned forward earnestly. "The bond works two ways, Mark. Lon has to stay on his good behavior or come back to jail. He'll need help, though. He's plenty sore about this frame-up. His next shooting might be real murder instead of self-defense. Then he'll be through. Do you want to see that happen?"

"Why should I care what happens to him?" Mark retorted.

"It's your fault he's the way he is."

"Mine!"

"Certainly. Half that ranch was Lon's by your father's will. Oh, I know, you were trustee of his half until he came of age. But in his own mind it was always half his. Did you appreciate that? Did you ever consult him about how things should be run?"

"He was too young," Mark growled. "Too flighty. How could I let decisions rest with a kid who thought horses were made just to buck and steers to rope?"

"That's just it. To you Lon never stopped being a boy. Naturally he wanted to prove he was a man. But you held him down on the ranch, so he turned to saloons and gam-

bling and brawls, trying to be tough. Well, you've another opportunity now. Meet him as a man, not as a brat who needs a paddling, and perhaps you can bring out the decency I know is in him!"

The vein in Mark's temple began to throb. Too long he had lived locked in his granite shell of resentment; now he could not escape. "I've bought him out of trouble," he said bleakly. "Now I'm here to shoot him out of it. But after this I'm through."

"Then he stays in jail," Naylor said. He went to the window and looked out on the twilight. His voice was bitter as he added: "At least he stays until Wenner takes him out and hangs him!"

CHAPTER IV

THE LAW STANDS ASIDE

THE door burst open and a deputy ran in, a blunt-jawed man with a gold tooth shining in his open mouth. Mark knew him—Sam Jamrock, a good man, slow-witted, but loyal.

"They're really puttin' on the pressure!" he gasped. "Ben Estin is liquorin' up a bunch o' stumble bums an' riffraff in the saloons. He's got—"

"Who's Ben Estin?" Mark interrupted.

"Wenner's foreman! He's got his dupes in a lather about card cheats an' murderers bein' given jail protection. They're formin' into a vigilante committee. They'll be comin' soon!"

Naylor looked at Mark. "Well?" he said.

Mark stood motionless, his blank expression masking the turbulence inside him. If he could just be sure that Lon hadn't been cheating!

"Can I talk to the kid?" he asked Naylor.

The sheriff read the misery in his eyes. He nodded. "All right. But make it fast!"

He led the way into the cell block, unlocked one of the doors and threw it open. Mark entered. Lon rose from the bunk to meet him. No man could have doubted their relationship, for all that Lon's hair had the red color Mark's missed. The same supple length was in their trunks and limbs, the same hot willfulness in their bony jaws.

For a long moment neither spoke. Then Lon said volently: "So Andy brought you! Well, I didn't ask him to. I can take care of myself!"

"Is this an example of it?" Mark asked dryly.

Lon's fists clenched. "Naylor had no right to lock me up! I killed that man to keep from being killed. He called—"

"I know," Mark cut in. "He called you what maybe you deserved to be called—a cheat!"

Lon's face went white. Before Mark could lift his guard, the kid lashed out and hit him square on the point of the chin. Mark's head snapped back against the wall of the cell. The room spun. Working automatically, he got his legs apart, shoulders up, waiting a rush.

It never came. Lon stood there breathing hard, and all at once Mark realized that his brother was ashamed—not of the blow, but of all the years of misunderstanding that lay behind the blow.

"You asked for it," Lon rapped. "You know I never played a crooked card in my life!"

MEETING his eyes, Mark did know it. His ugly suspicions fell away and he laughed. "No," he said, rubbing his bruised chin, "I

don't reckon you ever did cheat. Else you wouldn't have taken the trimmings you did."

He swung to Naylor, tossed the sheriff the last silver dollar in his pocket. "Trot out your bond. We're pulling freight."

A great smile lighted Naylor's face, then faded. "I hope it's not too late," he said.

Lon was scowling at them. "What bond?" he demanded.

"You tell him, Tom," Mark said and wheeled away.

Barely Able met him in the office, beads of perspiration shining on his fat face. "Mark!" the foreman whispered hoarsely. "Look yonder!"

He gestured toward the window. Light spilled from the Drivers' Saloon on a moving, shifting press of men. They choked the street between the jail and the stable where the horses waited. Haranguing them from the edge of a watering trough was a lank, hatchet-faced man. His long arms kept waving toward the jail, and at each point he drove home, an angry sound, like flood waters slapping against a rock, rose from the mob.

"Ben Estin," Barely Able said. "Wenner's foreman. Drummin' up a lynch party. They're not takin' any chances now that you've shown up, Mark. They've got half the town ready to rush us."

Mark gave the mob one swift survey. Then crossing to the window on the far side of the room, he looked out on the upper end of the street. The thought kept hammering at him: *Why?* Why should Wenner spend so much effort on this? Why tonight, instead of tomorrow? *If it rained!* Mark thought, remembering the dead bushwhacker. He glanced at the swollen clouds pressing down with the darkness on the town. A shiver

chased along his spine.

Angrily he shook the puzzle aside. There was no time for wondering now.

The street above the jail was all but empty under the threat of the storm. In that emptiness three men loomed like warning flares. Two stood in the doorway of a saddle shop. Another leaned against an awning post across the way. Their thumbs were hooked in their gun belts, their motionless faces were turned toward the jail.

"There's half a dozen more out back," Andy said. "We can't bust through 'em. Not now."

Mark didn't answer. His eyes were on the upper end of the street, on a slow-moving ore wagon coming down from the mines behind four big horses. He heeled toward the door, flecks of light dancing in his eyes. Then all at once he pulled up, hearing Lon's sharp voice.

"To blazes with you!" the kid was yelling defiantly at the sheriff. "I'm not letting Mark railroad me for a year under a bond like that!"

IRRITATION narrowed Mark's eyes. He started to snap that Lon would do as he was told, but the hot words were never spoken. The sullen defiance on his brother's face was like a blow. *Meet him as a man, not as a brat who needs a paddling*, Naylor had said. Mark made himself smile. It was a wry smile, bitter with memory, and the effort it cost corded the muscles of his stomach. But he did it, and that was victory.

"Lon," he said, "I didn't want the bond either. But Naylor and Andy are smarter than we are. They saw that the bond could be the start of a partnership deal between us, if we'd come down off our high horses and make it work. How about it?"

Lon hesitated. He'd been expecting an order. Now he had no words to answer. He swallowed hard and there was a sudden mistiness in his eyes.

Mark nodded. Let the kid make his own decision, don't rush him into it willy-nilly. "Think it over," he said. "I'll be back in a minute. If you want to go with me, be at the door—with your gun out!"

Andy got in his way. "Mark, what are you goin' to do?"

"I hope to fix it so we can bust that mob wide open and get to our horses. But I have to start alone. They'll open up if we all crowd out now. Stay here in the doorway until I yell."

He went on out. Lightning flickered on the horizon, and the raw wind hit him like a fist. He let his shoulders sag before it as if he were discouraged and beaten. Slowly he walked along the sidewalk toward the saddle shop and the approaching ore wagon.

The watchers straightened abruptly. Had Lon appeared, they would have cut loose on the instant, because they had a "reason" to excuse his killing. But murdering Mark in cold blood, rather than under cover of a general fight, was outside their plans. They held their fire, puzzled and wondering why he had emerged alone. And because they were strong, because they believed they could drop him when they chose, they relaxed, smiling their confidence.

Mark recognized one of them—Luke Brock, a loose-mouthed saddle tramp from the old Santos days. And now he saw two more men in a narrow passageway between the buildings. He let them look their fill while he shuffled along, waiting for things to line up the way he wanted them.

He drew abreast of Brock. The man met him with a sneer. "So you come to your senses an' seen you couldn't buck it, huh, Hargrave?"

Mark shrugged. Behind him he heard a roar from the mob. They were starting to march on the jail.

"Better shove," Brock said. "We don't want you—yet. It's that cheatin' brother—"

THE words ended in a startled croak. Mark had snapped around, fist driving. He hit Brock flush on the nose, knocking him against his companion. While they were off balance, Mark jumped for the middle of the street. The ore wagon had rolled up, shielding him from the man by the awning post, and the unexpectedness of his move gave him the second's time he needed. He swung up on the wagon's high seat, seized the reins from the astonished driver and with a sweep of his arm knocked the man backward into the deep bed. Then he jumped down beside him, just as a rifle roared in the passageway, chewing splinters from the seat.

"Keep quiet!" Mark warned the driver. The viciousness of the tone was enough. The man flattened against the load of ore.

The lead horses reared as gunfire chattered up and down the street. Working from the wagon bed, Mark whipped the team onto the sidewalk, then reined them sharply in, halting the wagon within a yard of the jail doorway.

"All aboard!" he yelled.

Lon appeared over the high sideboard, turned and reached down a hand. Clutching it, Barely Able struggled into the wagon. "Whoof!" he gasped as he landed. "This ain't no place for a fat man!"

Six-shooters roared as Naylor and his deputy opened up from the jail

window. A man screamed in agony, and the attackers who had poured into the street from behind the jail ducked for cover. Mark lashed the horses. Terrified, they lunged ahead.

He peered through the crack under the seat. The undisciplined mob had paused in midstreet. As the wagon thundered down on them, they split in panic, jostling each other in their wild rush for safety. Andy let out a yowl. "Run, you rabbits!" Grabbing a chunk of ore, he heaved it at them, laughing uproariously as one of the hoodlums yelped with pain.

Off to the side a man with a cooler head was calling: "Shoot the horses! Shoot the horses!"

Mark gripped the reins with one hand, drew his gun with the other. A swift glance showed him Ben Estin, crouched by the watering trough, gun coming to bead. Mark rose above the sideboard, snapped a shot at him. Estin grabbed at his arm, cursing. Here and there guns spat in answer. Mark heard the ricochet of one bullet as it whined off the iron tire of the wagon. Others ripped the wood. But the street was in a tumult—men shouting and crowding until effective aim was impossible. With a thunder of wheels and rattling of tug chains, the wagon swept through the mob.

UP on the veranda of the hotel, a small, shadowy figure dropped to one knee. Wenner! Metal glinted as he rested his gun on the porch rail. Mark fired three times but the sway of the wagon wrecked his aim. He heard window glass crash behind the man's head and knew he had missed. Then Wenner's gun streaked orange flame. Six times, almost as fast as a man could count. One lead horse screamed and stumbled. Mark heard Lon's gasp

but had no time to look. He leaped upright on the seat, heedless of the screaming lead, and fought to keep the wounded animal on its feet.

"Ready to jump!" he shouted.

They gripped the sideboards. Thirty yards short of the livery stable, the lead horse dropped. The wagon tongue dug into the earth. The vehicle skidded heavily, tilted on two wheels.

"Now!" Mark yelled. They flung themselves clear as the ponderous vehicle, tipping slowly, fell with a rending crash on its side.

A glance showed Mark that all of them, the driver included, had landed safely. He looked back. The mob had flowed once more into the street after their passage, blocking the way to the half dozen horsemen who were trying to set out in pursuit. He laughed aloud.

"All right, boys, head for the stable!" he called. They raced away, Andy puffing in the rear and the erstwhile driver gaping after them, still dumfounded by the mad three minutes into which he had been plunged.

CHAPTER V

ATTACK IN THE NIGHT

THE horses Mark had bought were waiting at the hitch rack. Swinging into saddles, the three men raced out of town. They threaded a forest of yellow pine, dipped into a gulch and came out on a long bed of slick rock that would hold no tracks, Mark veered sharply east, down valley, and at last came to a halt behind a dense screen of scrub willows on a ditch bank. Far to the north he could hear the faint pound of Wenner's pursuing horsemen.

"So much for that!" he said. "Anybody hurt?"

"My dignity," Andy grumbled. "It's bruised all over."

Lon stayed silent. Mark struck a match. The kid's hand was pressed against his side.

"It's just a scratch," he muttered, but Mark made him pull off his shirt while he examined the wound, an ugly gouge directly under his short rib. By morning Lon's whole side would be stiff and sore. Mark washed the wound with ditch water and bound it with a clean bandanna.

Raindrops began to spatter on their hats. "Agh-h-h!" Barely Able groaned, "I was hopin' to find a dry bed o' leaves to sleep in."

"No sleep tonight, I'm afraid," Mark said. He was thinking hard. Rain! The bushwhacker, Ramos, had said that if it rained tonight, he would have another job to do. What job? Certainly Lon must hold the key to it, or Wenner would not have tried so hard to put the kid out of the way.

"Lon," Mark asked, "why was Wenner after you?"

Lon gave his head a baffled shake. "There's no reason, except that he hates the whole Hargrave tribe. Why, I hadn't even seen him or any of his men for months. Not until I rode into town and met Ben Estin in the livery stable. It wasn't

With death hovering in the air, Mark didn't have time to argue. Reaching out, he lifted Rachel from her saddle.



an hour after that that they finagled me in the poker game and the ruckus began."

"What was Estin doing in the stable?"

"Nothing. Just talking to a hombre named Fraley."

"Fraley!" Mark exclaimed. "Rachel Blanchard's new foreman!"

"I don't know. I never saw the fellow before."

"What were they talking about?"

"I didn't hear much of it. I was hunting for oats to give my brone. I went into the back part of the stable. I heard Estin's voice say something like: 'Don't get in such a sweat, Fraley. It's bound to storm soon. All you have to do is keep the cattle in that cove every night.' Then Estin saw me. He said hello and asked what I wanted. I told him and he showed me the oat bins. If that's cause for a murder frame-up, I'm crazy."

"Maybe he thought you'd heard more than that," Mark said. He scowled his perplexity. There was one unvarying thing in the whole mess. "Rain!" he mused aloud. "What the devil does it add up to?"

"Mud!" Barely Able Andy said in disgust.

And then it hit Mark. Mud! And mud slides! He should have guessed long ago. Rachel, tricked by her double-crossing foreman into holding her cattle in some narrow-mouthed cove by the Doloroso River, where the crumbling shale cliffs could be dynamited down on them and the attack blamed on a storm! Of course Wenner wanted Lon silenced, so he couldn't send a warning to the girl. With Rachel bottled up, Wenner could take over Iron Springs, the last challenge to his complete control of the new cow range of southeastern Utah.

WIRE-TIGHT with dread, Mark blurted his suspicions. "We've got to get there before they can blast down a slide under cover of this rain!"

He swung into the saddle, then paused, glancing at Lon and wondering if the kid's wound would keep him from making the ride. "How about you?" he asked.

Lon misunderstood. "Never mind the soft soap!" he snarled. "You don't have to ask me how about anything. That bond makes me jump whenever you crack the whip, doesn't it?"

Mark's temper slipped its leash. "No wonder you're always in a jam, with a chip like that on your shoulder. And I can still knock it off for you, any time you want!"

"Mark! Lon!" Andy cried desperately. "Swallow it down! This is no time to be quarrelin'!"

Mark colored. "Sure, Andy," he said. To Lon he added: "Sorry, kid. All I meant was that you could stay behind if your side hurts too much."

"All right. Skip it," Lon muttered. "If it hurt twice as much, I'd still ride plumb to hades for a crack at Wenner. Let's go!"

They spurred down the trough of the Santos toward its junction with the river. The storm, still no more than a light drizzle, was drifting slowly in the same direction. If they could outride it, Mark figured, they would be all right.

The miles rolled by. In the flickers of lightning they could see the tall, shale cliffs bordering the river, stark against the sky. And now a new noise met their ears—the grinding rumble of the flooded stream.

A sudden, blinding flash turned the heavens to white fire. The earth-shaking crash which followed

seemed to split the clouds wide open. Rain fell in torrents. But the lightning had also shown Mark a jagged opening in the cliffs. A little distance to the south of it was a gray tent and a rope corral in which horses stirred restlessly.

They swung toward the cleft, the steel-shod hoofs of their ponies ringing on the rocks. A voice called a challenge from the darkness. It was the night herder watching the entrance to the cove, Mark guessed, and he squalled back: "There's a slide coming! We've got to move those cows!"

His answer was a shot and he heard the whisper of lead past his face. "Keep going! Keep going!" Mark yelled as Lon cried "Fraley!" and started to swing toward the attacker.

They swept on, their headlong rush carrying them past Rachel's treacherous foreman and into the cove. The fitful lightning showed it to be an almost round, cliff-girt pocket. About four hundred head of cattle were crowded into it. Evidently the animals were let out by day to graze along the river bank, then held in the cove at night to prevent straying. It was a motley herd, mostly gaunt longhorn cows and calves, with here and there a white-faced Hereford. But every animal counted. They were the nucleus of Rachel's new outfit. Without them she'd be licked.

The same lightning that revealed all this, Mark knew, must have shown their arrival to the dynamiters on the rim. The attackers would set off the blast now as fast as they could. Minutes were precious. The three riders sped to the upper end of the pocket. One piece of luck was with them. The booming thunder had frightened the cattle. They were on their feet. Pale balls of St.

Elmo's fire glimmered on their tossing horns.

THE riders whooped up behind the cattle, emptying revolvers into the air. Close-packed backs stirred. The ripples widened, grew stronger. The terrified animals wheeled toward their only escape, the mouth of the pocket. Heads down, tails up, they stampeded. The rumble of their hoofs rose above the beat of the rain.

Out by the pocket entrance, men were yelling and shooting. Rachel's cowboys, Mark guessed. Roused by Fraley's gun and not knowing what was going on, they were trying to turn the cattle back. But the stampede was in full flow. The crazed brutes pounded ahead regardless, and the bewildered punchers had to fall back. Crowding close behind the animals, Mark pushed between the narrow walls. Suddenly he froze. Off to his side a rider was calling frantic orders. The words were lost in the uproar but the voice was a woman's. Rachel! When the slide came she would be directly in its path.

Mark spurred toward her. She faced him, a dim shape in the night. The sharp crack of a small caliber revolver rang out, and Mark felt the burn of a bullet across his arm.

"Rachel!" he yelled. "It's Mark! Mark Hargrave!"

For a taut instant she was silent. Then she gasped: "You! Doing this!"

He understood then. She thought he was a rustler. There was no time to explain. "Get out of this pocket!" he shouted.

She didn't budge. Stifling an oath, he reined his horse against hers and swept her from the saddle. She cried out, struggling in his arms, beating his head and shoulders with

her fists. At the same moment a muffled explosion sounded above them, followed by the rushing thunder of a mud slide. Rachel went limp.

Mark's spurs raked his pony's flanks. The horse lunged ahead and out of the pocket with no more than yards to spare as a wall of boulders crashed into the gap behind them.

Safely out on the flat, Mark halted. For a moment he felt the warmth of Rachel's body against his, then he set her roughly down on the ground. "Satisfied?" he growled.

"Oh, Mark!" she said. "Can you ever forgive me?"

He stirred unhappily, hating himself for his brusqueness. "Forget it," he said. "I'd have shot, too, in your boots. Only it's a good thing for me your aim's rotten."

"You're not hurt?"

"No," he said, though pain throbbled all the way down his arm to his fingertips. Gruffly he added: "We're not through yet. We've got to round up those cattle before they're scattered all over western Colorado."

"I'll get my men together." A hopeless note crept into Rachel's voice. "Did Wenner—"

"Yes!" Mark answered and added violently: "Dang a man who won't come out and fight in the open! You're not through with that snake yet, Rachel!"

CHAPTER VI

DANGER COMES DOUBLE

NO more trouble developed that night, however. The noon sun was breaking through the clouds when they assembled the scattered herd once more on the river bank. Mark was last in with his gather. He turned his animals over to one

of Rachel's cowboys, then went down to the river to water his horse. There he bathed the wound in his arm. It was a clean gouge and had bled freely. After a day or two's soreness it would be as good as new, but it reminded him of Lon's hurt and he wondered how the kid was making out.

Bone-tired, wet and cold, he unsaddled his horse and walked stiffly toward the cook fires. Barely Able and Lon were already there, nursing tin cups full of coffee. Lon's eyes were bright and feverish, and he scarcely nodded in answer to Mark's greeting. He had been looking for a fight with Wenner's men, Mark realized, and was let down and angry at having found only the dismal chore of rounding up the cattle. Mark frowned. How long would it be before the kid learned that all things couldn't be settled with reckless action? An impatient rebuke trembled on his tongue. With an effort he checked it. Lon's wound hadn't done his mental state any good. The kid might come around after a little rest.

"How's the side?" he asked.

"O. K." It was Barely Able who answered. "We just put a new dressing on it." The foreman's face was ashen with weariness, his eyes pouchy.

Mark's swollen lips twisted into a grin. "Old lard bucket!" he murmured affectionately. "I'll bet you've sweat off half a ton in the last twenty-four hours!"

"It ain't funny!" Andy groaned. "Stampedin' a bunch o' cattle on purpose! Boy, I'm goin' to sleep for a week. If I ever dream about cows, I'll shoot myself!"

"Any sign of Fraley?" Mark asked. "No, he's dropped out of sight. Probably rode back to tell Wenner the scheme backfired." Andy's red-

rimmed eyes gazed contemptuously at Rachel's crew. They were clustered in a knot, talking in low voices. "I wouldn't depend on that bunch any farther than I can throw a hippopotamus by the tail. Fraley's boogered 'em with a lot o' talk about what'll happen if Wenner decides to jump 'em. Now the slide an' Fraley's disappearin' durin' the night has finished scarin' 'em. They won't be worth a hoot in a pinch."

RACHEL rode toward them on a white-maned sorrel gelding. She had been out checking the cattle as they came in. Fatigue had laid shadows under her blue eyes, so that she looked as small and helpless as a child. But her determined chin showed that she had inherited all the dogged will of her father.

"We lost only eighteen head," she said. "It might have been so much worse, except for you three."

Her warm smile, meant for them all, lingered longest on Mark. Barely Able gave Lon a wink. "We'd better tend to our horses."

They walked off before Mark could think of a way to protest. He tried to keep his eyes on his coffee cup, but in spite of himself they lifted to the girl. During the crowded hours of the night he had managed to shut her from his mind. Now, as she dismounted and stood warming her hands by the fire, he saw all the things he had tried so long to forget—the curve of her throat, the way her dark hair curled at her temples—and the past flooded over him. He swallowed hard, fighting the quickened beat of his pulse. And because he could not say what he wanted to say, he took refuge in the problems of the present.

"You've bitten off a big chew, Rachel."

Her shoulders lifted. "There was

no other choice. Dad saw last fall that his only chance of staying in the cattle business was to move some place where he could raise cows and calves. He bought Tinkleman's ranch and cows at Iron Springs. It wasn't until Wenner"—her voice caught—"shot him that we realized what we were up against. I suppose Wenner thought that with dad dead, I wouldn't dare go on. But dad had promised to be off the Santos ranch by April 1st so I had to leave. I have to get to Iron Springs. Everything dad worked for is sunk in this move."

"Sunk how deep?" Mark asked.

Her lips curved wryly. "Awfully deep. We thought we'd have enough money to start out on the new range. But dad's doctor bills used it up. Now I've got to borrow."

"On what?"

"The cattle we bought from Tinkleman. A bank representative is going to come up and count them, before making me a loan. It's the only way I can manage. This little herd here is already mortgaged."

Mark frowned. Those cattle at Iron Springs gave Wenner still another mark to shoot at. Tinkleman was supposed to be up there now, gathering them, but the eccentric rancher, all alone, might not be able to hold off an attack.

Rachel was silent, searching Mark's face, and he knew she was choosing her next words with care. Even so he wasn't prepared for what came. "My foreman turned out to be a double-crosser, Mark. Now I need another one. If you—"

"No!" He cut her off brusquely and came to his feet. Again the past had him by the throat. There had been a day when his ranch and his prospects were the equal of Rachel's. All that lay between them had been

built on that equality. Now he had nothing, would have nothing until he could make a fresh start with his own two hands. So long as he could help her on the old basis of equality, he would. But a job, or anything that smacked of pity or favor, was like acid to his dark pride.

He saw her lips tremble and knew she had sensed his bitterness. Before she could speak, he turned away.

ABRUPTLY he stopped. A man, whose flat shoes marked him for a farmer, was galloping toward them. Barely Able and Lon also saw the rider and edged forward.

"You Mark Hargrave?" the farmer asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Sheriff Naylor's brother-in-law. He sent me—"

"So Tom's all right?" Mark interrupted with a surge of relief.

"Well, no. He got plugged in the belly durin' the fight last night. Pretty bad, but Jamrock managed to get him over to my place. He'll pull through, I reckon, but it's gonna be a close thing."

The vein in Mark's temple began to pulse. Sharp-etched in his mind was a picture of Naylor at the jail window, six-shooter blasting as he covered their flight from town. Very softly he said: "You tell Tom I'll square that account some day."

"You'll get your chance pretty quick," the farmer told him. "That's what I come about. Jamrock's been watchin' Wenner to see what the skunk did next. Well, he's roundin' up a big bunch o' cattle—a thousand or more. He's gonna start 'em toward the crossin' here, to crowd you out."

Mark's glance swept the narrow strip of land between the river and the cliffs. The short feed was al-

ready strained to capacity by Rachel's cows. If Wenner's big herd was jammed into it, a lot of animals would starve to death.

Fury swept over Mark. Here was a chance for a fight in the open. He swung back to Rachel. "Is that foreman's job still open?" he asked harshly.

Color returned to the girl's pale cheeks. "Wide open!" she said.

Mark glanced at the rest of them. Barely Able was frowning at him. But Lon was smiling. A tight, thin smile that mirrored the passion in his feverish eyes. It hit Mark like a bucket of cold water. The kid was seeing only the prospects of a run-in with Wenner's crew, without stopping to think what might be the cost to Rachel. With a shock Mark realized that his own temper had nearly tripped him into the same mistake. It would do scant good to invite a battle, if in the process Rachel lost her herd. First and last, that had to be the main consideration.

Rachel was watching Mark. "What are we going to do?" she asked anxiously.

Mark got a grip on himself. Pride or not, he'd let his sudden flare of anger thrust him into this job and he had to see it through. "We can't do anything now," he said bleakly. "Your cattle, horses, men—everybody is too tired to move. We'll have to sleep on it. Wenner can't get that herd here before tomorrow afternoon."

He made her go to bed, then mounted her horse and rode out to the cattle. Rachel's men had had some sleep the night before and could take care of the day-herding. They accepted Mark's instructions, but their nervousness left a sour taste in his mouth. Barely Able was

right. Those men couldn't be counted on.

When Mark got back, Lon had gone off to the cowboys' camp, where there were enough extra blankets for their beds, but Barely Able was still sitting on a log end. His fat face was somber.

"Looks like we're in a vise," he said to Mark. "That river in front and Wenner behind. The girl loses cows either way. Question is, which way does she lose least."

"That depends on what kind of punchers we are," Mark told him. He eyed the river, wincing involuntarily at the sullen roar of it, at the sight of the gray cakes of drift ice bobbing and grinding in the turgid current.

Andy followed the direction of his gaze. "I don't think it can be done," he said.

"Tinkleman must have swum it to get back to Iron Springs."

"A lone horse and a whole herd of cows an' calves are two different things," Andy argued. "Besides, I know that big-barreled bronc o' Tink's. It's part duck."

"Then we've got to learn to quack, too," retorted Mark. "If we stay, Rachel's liable to end up with nothing. If we go, maybe we can save part of the herd."

"It's got to be more'n part. She needs every one o' them animals."

Mark shrugged helplessly. "All a man can do is try." A spasm of anger shook him. "Danged if I thought the day would ever come when I'd run away from Drew Wenner!" Face drawn, he dismounted, turned the horse into the cavvy and strode off to bed.

IT seemed to Mark he had scarcely lain down before a hand shook him awake. He blinked stupidly. It was dark, and it took him a mo-

ment to realize that he had slept through the day and well into the night. Then he recognized Rachel's worried face.

"What's wrong?" he said with a stab of alarm.

"The men!" she whispered. "They got talking together. They saw it was either tackle Wenner or tackle the river, and they don't dare do either. They've quit in a body."

"I expected it," Mark said helplessly. "Well, you'd better get back to the cattle. We can't leave them alone. I'll be with you in a minute."

He watched her disappear through the starlight, a tangle of emotions playing havoc in him. Then he kicked out of his blankets and pulled on his boots. A glance at the Dipper showed him it was nearly midnight.

Barely Able was flat on his back, snoring like an ungreased wagon wheel. Lon stirred and muttered in his sleep. Mark touched his brother's forehead. The kid's fever had broken and that was a gain. Mark tiptoed away. No use waking the two of them yet. They'd need all the strength they could get.

He found Rachel riding slowly around the bedded herd. "What now?" she asked him.

"Run," he said bluntly.

"Which way?"

"Straight ahead!"

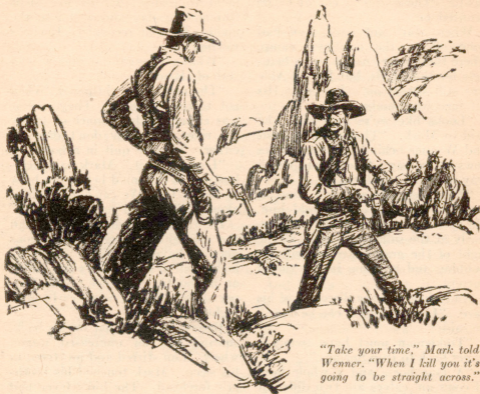
"Ahead?" She looked at the river, oily black in the starlight. "We can't!"

"Why not?" He spoke with a confidence he was far from feeling. He had to keep her chin up.

"But there are only four of us—"

"Four good men are better than eight poor ones."

He saw the idea take hold, saw the latent courage in her bring a wan smile to her lips. She was her father's daughter, all right. It was



"Take your time," Mark told Wenner. "When I kill you it's going to be straight across."

in her voice as she said: "Thanks, Mark. I'd almost forgotten how to be brave."

"No," he said. "Not you. Now, go back to camp and get ready. We'll move as soon as it's light enough to see."

RACHEL left and Mark took up the monotonous riding about the cattle. Toward four o'clock the cook fires winked on, and he knew the girl was preparing breakfast. The herd was quiet, so he left it and jogged to the camp, all at once terribly conscious of how hungry he was.

Barely Able and Lon were up. Andy was fussing around the Dutch oven, flooding the girl with small talk in an effort to keep her spirits

high. She didn't need it. Her eyes were bright now and she moved with quick, sure decision.

Lon stood in the background, nostrils pinched and angry-looking. When Mark dismounted, the kid said sarcastically: "So you're tucking up your tail and running!"

Mark turned on him, thin-lipped. "Shooting won't prove anything now."

"It'll prove the color of your backbone."

"A lot of good that'll do if the cattle are scattered while you're off trying to outgun some bought-by-the-yard tough who isn't worth the powder it'll take to kill him. Or do you think a bullet's easier to face than that river?"

Lon's lips twisted. "You can't

stampede me with that kind of talk."

Mark lost all patience. "I don't have to stampede you. I've a bond that says you'll do as you're told!"

Instantly he regretted the words. Rebellion flared in Lon's face. It was like the old days when Mark had given the orders and expected his brother to obey them without question. Thick-voiced, Lon said: "Crawl if you like! I'll help you over the river—because Rachel asked me to. Then I'm leaving, bond or no bond. And I'd admire to see you stop me!"

He stalked away, poker-stiff, to saddle the horses.

CHAPTER VII

RIVER DRIVE

THERE wasn't enough daylight to throw a shadow when they crowded the cattle down to the river bank. The lead cows went out to their knees, then balked, bawling their fright at the surging eddies. The riders crowded hard. If they could get a few head to tackle the stream, the rest might follow.

Yelling their lungs out, lashing the cattle with their ropes, the men forced the reluctant brutes belly deep. Then the animals balked again, and this time no amount of pressure could drive them farther. In desperation Mark hurled his horse at the front cow and literally knocked her into the stream. She gave a gasping bawl and struck out. Seeing her move, the animals behind gave way to the crowding riders and followed. Soon there was a line of them strung out in the stream, only their heads and curving horns visible above the murky ripples.

The grind of the swift center current boomed in Mark's ears. Icy water crept up his legs to the seat

of his pants. He dared not look ahead for fear he'd lose his nerve.

And then, just as he was beginning to hope, the thing he had been dreading happened. A huge, jagged piece of ice came bobbing down the current. It slammed broadside into the lead cows and they turned before it, thrashing in panic. In a twinkling the whole herd was in a frenzied mill, their hoarse bellows and the frantic shouts of the riders sounding thin and helpless in the thunder of the stream. Of one accord the animals headed back for the shore they had left.

There was no chance to outmaneuver them. The horses' thin bodies lacked the buoyancy of the cows' big bellies. The animals dodged past the floundering ponies and scrambled clear. Blue with cold, the four riders bunched the herd once more. Again they tried to cross and again the cows broke back.

Soaking wet, her teeth chattering in the raw wind, Rachel met Mark as his horse splashed into shallow water. "It was a good try," she said to him, "but it just isn't in the cards. There's no way to keep them from turning when they're in deep water."

Mark didn't answer. The drift of the stream had carried them a full half mile down the river, and now Mark saw something he had missed before. It was a rowboat that some placer miner had beached in a sandy cove. He leaped from his horse and shoved the light craft into the stream. Fortunately it was watertight and both oars were sound.

"Andy!" Mark yelled. "Come here!"

Barely Able rode over. He saw Mark standing in the boat. "What in tarnation you up to?" he exclaimed. "You can't ferry these cows over one by one in that thing!"

Mark laughed. "No, but we can do something else with it."

Swiftly he explained his plan. Face doubtful, Andy climbed in the boat and took the oars. "All right," he grumbled, "but I'm sure goin' to be mad if this upsets an' drowns me!"

RACHEL got in the stern of the boat. Lon and Mark forced the cattle into the water. Andy kept the boat close to the lower side of them, working the oars until the sweat poured down his fat cheeks. Again drift ice bore down on the animals and again they bent before it. But this time the strange, darting boat—a thing the cattle had never met up with before—blocked their way. Rachel knelt in the stern, whipping her slicker in their faces with terrifying pops. Back and forth Andy sent the little craft, sometimes ramming it square into the beasts. The bewildering, charging thing, the alarming *slap-slap* of the slicker frightened the animals even more than the ice. They faltered, straightened out and swam for the opposite shore.

"Mark!" Suddenly Rachel's sharp call froze his triumph. "The calves!"

He looked back. The icy current had chilled a calf numb. It had given up the struggle and was drifting downstream. Kneeing his horse around, Mark tore loose his lariat. It was a hard target, lassoing a calf's bobbing head from the back of a swimming horse. But the cast went true. He caught the calf squarely around the neck, dragged it ashore behind his horse.

Mark plunged back for another calf. Lon, riding at the tail end of the herd, saw what he was doing and spurred ahead to join him. Together they snaked calf after calf from the hungry jaws of the river.

Rachel and Andy rescued more with the boat. By the time the herd was across most of the calves were saved.

When Mark finally splashed ashore his body was shaking with chills. For the past quarter of an hour he had been going on nerve alone; now the reaction caught him and he slumped over the saddlehorn, coughing and limp with nausea.

Behind him Lon's voice demanded ironically: "Quittin' already?"

Mark raised his head. Lon was pointing at the river. Far out in the current was a calf they had missed. Below the animal the river narrowed, plunging with a cascade of foam among the black rocks of the rapids. Mark gave his head a weary shake.

"We can't get it now," he muttered.

"Who can't?" Lon mocked. His eyes glittered feverishly.

Mark stiffened in the saddle. "Don't be a fool!"

Lon had already set spurs to his horse. Over his shoulder he flung back: "Crawling again, are you?" He raced down the bank to get ahead of the calf, whirled and leaped his horse into the stream.

"Drown and be danged!" Mark muttered angrily. But even as the words left his lips he whipped his pony in pursuit. In spite of his irritation at the reckless stunt, he felt a grudging admiration. Lon was breasting the current dead on, regardless of the rapids thundering a short hundred yards below him. He stood in his stirrups, whirling his rope. It looked like an impossibly long shot. When he threw he leaned far over the saddlehorn, as if he could make the rope carry by sheer will. The luck that so often rewards the defiance of reason came to his help. The calf lifted its head and kicked out in a last attempt at life.

The brief check in its course was enough. The noose settled about its neck.

GRINNING triumphantly, Lon turned back. As his tired horse swung around, the boiling eddies caught it and threw it off balance. Lon was swept from the saddle. A hoof, a rock—something must have struck his head. His limp body went rolling end over end toward the rapids. The horse, freed of his weight, righted itself and struck for the shore, dragging the calf with it.

Ahead, a reef of rock jutted into the river. The current thrust against this, veered off and plunged in a glassy slide between mammoth boulders. Mark whipped his horse onto the reef, peered through the glinting spray. Lon was some twelve yards upstream, his body twisting grotesquely. Eight yards. Mark's spurs raked his horse. A shudder ran through the animal. Then it leaped.

Leaning far over in the saddle, Mark caught Lon's shirt, pulled him close. Then he gripped him across the chest and under one arm. At the same moment he threw his weight hard against the birdle reins, forcing the terrified pony to turn straight downstream. There was no chance to escape the rapids. All they could do was try to ride them out.

Into the chute between the boulders they slammed, shot through and into the mad white water beyond. The wrenching currents buffeted them like clubs. The horse, staggered by the weight of the unbalanced riders, turned upside down. A numb ache seemed to paralyze Mark's limbs, a roaring dizziness engulfed his brain. He clung to Lon, holding his breath until his tortured lungs burned like fire.

A backwash caught them, floated them into an island of quiet. They bumped something soft. It was the horse, borne by the same currents. Mark gripped its tail with his free hand and sucked in great, gasping breaths. With a surge of hope he saw that Lon's eyes were open.

The kid's blue lips moved in a whisper. "Get . . . yourself out. I'm . . . done for."

"Who's talking quit now?" Mark demanded.

He felt the horse move and shifted his grip high on its tail. The bronc struck out, long legs driving through the choppy waves that foamed between them and the shore. Drift ice scraped Mark's side, threatened to break his hold. Desperately he buried his fingers deep in the horse's mane while the water rolled over his head.

SOMETHING gripped Lon's shoulders and jerked him back from the dim distances into which he was sinking. His heels scraped bottom and he shook himself alive. He was in shallow water. Barely Able Andy, panting from his run down the bank, held him by the shirt collar. The foreman's other hand clutched Lon's limp body.

Mark forced himself to his feet. Together they carried Lon ashore. Rachel was waiting for him. Her face was stark white, but she wasted no words. She rolled Lon onto his stomach, placed her hands against his lower ribs and began the slow fight of pumping life back into his battered lungs.

After a time he was breathing normally. Andy built a roaring fire, fetched blankets and bundled him up. Mark left them then. Dead beat, he stumbled off to a sandbar and dropped full length upon it.

An hour or more passed. The

sun warmed the tawny sand; the spring smells of willows and cattails, stirred with the wind. Slowly the leadenness went out of Mark's limbs. With a muttered curse he remembered the cattle. Grimacing at the stiffness in his muscles, he pulled himself to his feet and rejoined the others.

Lon was sitting up, wrapped in a blanket like a squaw.

"How you feeling?" Mark asked him.

"Still able to wiggle," Lon said. A flush crept into his pallid cheeks. "You should have let me sink. I might have killed us both. I . . . I've been a fool, Mark. I was sore. I wanted to show you up. All I did was gum the works."

"Yes, you're a fool," Mark agreed. "And so am I, ordering you around like I was a tin god. But I don't reckon we're too old to learn better."

Their eyes met, and for the first time in years, the beginning of a new understanding lay between them.

CHAPTER VIII

RANGE HOG'S HOMESTEAD

ANDY had already gone back across the river in the boat for their camp equipment, and then had swum it on horseback to bring up the pack animals. It took but a short time to load up, gather the cattle and shove them around a hill out of Wenner's sight. But that little drive showed how badly they needed rest. The cattle, particularly the calves, had been badly buffeted by the river. Lon's wound had reopened, and it was all he could do to sit on a horse and trail along behind.

For four or five miles they crept along through the afternoon shadows. At last they reached a tableland whose long, open slopes made

a surprise attack impossible. Here Mark called a halt. For the better part of a week, while the weather turned unseasonably hot and melted away the last patches of snow, they husbanded their strength. Soon Lon's wound began to heal and he was chafing to do more of the camp chores than the others would allow.

Mark kept an eye peeled on the river. Wenner's herd had arrived and then stayed on the far bank, though the sign of Rachel's crossing was plain. Apparently Wenner was unwilling to risk drowning part of his herd in pursuit. Nor did he endeavor to block them in other ways. This unreasonable respite alarmed Mark more than an out-and-out attack.

Another factor added fuel to his worry. Tinkleman, Rachel said, had promised to round up his cattle at Iron Springs, then come back to guide her to the ranch. He was due on a Saturday but did not appear. Sunday dragged by and Monday. At last Mark could stand the uncertainty no longer.

"We're in shape to move now," he told the others. "I'll ride ahead to Iron Springs and check up while the rest of you follow with the cows."

"You've hunted lions over here and know the trail," Andy protested. "We don't."

"Just head due west along the ridges. The only bad part is a thirty-mile stretch of desert."

"Thirty miles! That's a two-day shove with this she stuff. We'll have to have water, the way the weather's turned hot."

"There's a hole about halfway across." Mark drew a map in the sand. "A couple of brushy little canyons, six or seven miles apart, run down out of some hills. There's water enough in the north gulch for

a horse, but not for a herd. You'll have to angle for the south one. Hornet Seeps it's called, because there's lots of hornets and wasps around. Mean stingers. They may cause trouble when the cattle hit the brush."

Andy snorted. "If hornets is all the trouble we have, we'll make out. Where do we pick you up again?"

"I'll try to be back before you reach the Seeps," Mark said. "If I'm not, keep coming until you see a big red butte. Tink's camp is just this side of it. It's tough, wild range. Once we're there, we can fort up and really give Wenner a run for his money."

"We can't stand much more bad luck," Rachel said wearily. "The bank representative is due soon to count Tinkleman's cattle. If everything's not shipshape—"

"We'll make it shipshape!" Mark said. He spoke lightly, but his words sounded false in his own ears as he mounted and rode off.

MARK reached the desert at sundown, rested an hour or so and then pushed on, so as to put the hot wastes behind him during the cool of the night. Dawn found him in a weird land of canyons and soaring buttes, fantastically eroded by wind. Here and there in pockets and coves his practiced eyes saw a wealth of feed. Grama grass, rice grass, shad scale. It would be no easy job watching cattle in that jumbled land; but if a man kept on the job, drifting the animals from section to section as the seasons required, his cows would put on real flesh, raise real, market-topping calves.

Mark's face grew dark. This was the country over which Wenner was trying to establish his monopoly.

Land enough for a dozen ranches—yet one man hungered for it all. His camp wasn't many miles away. As long as Drew Wenner kept his iron grip, there could be no free range, no plans for the future.

Topping a rise, Mark saw a majestic, crimson-sided butte, several miles long and almost as wide, ringed by sheer walls like an island in the sky. "Iron Butte!" he thought. The springs were just ahead.

A horse pasture fence barred Mark's way. He found a gate and jogged on to a mud-chinked log cabin, to neat barns and corrals shaded by massive cottonwoods. The place seemed very still.

Dismounting, Mark went inside. A thin layer of red dust lay on the table and bunks. Frowning, Mark felt of the stove. It was stone cold. "Maybe Tink's camped out on the range," he thought. Then he noticed a pot of coffee and a kettle of stale beans. A man wouldn't leave food simmering on the stove if he intended to be gone very long.

Thoroughly worried now, Mark went outside. He found horse tracks several days old striking off from the barn toward Iron Butte. Mounting, he followed the trail. Suddenly his mouth turned dry. Hanging to the gate ahead of him was a limp thing that looked like a scarecrow.

Mark flung himself from the saddle, but the need for hurry had long since passed. Tinkleman had been dead for several days.

The old rancher had been shot in the back. There were two more wounds in his chest, and eight shells were missing from his cartridge belt. Mark's eyes, agate-hard, followed the trail the dying man had left as he'd dragged himself through the brush to the gate. The story was easy to guess. Tinkleman had been

bushwhacked, had fought back, escaped into the rocky wilderness and then tried to get home. As he was reaching for the gate latch to let himself through, his ebbing strength had flickered out.

A mistiness blurred Mark's eyes. Tink had settled here when no one else would give the convulsed range a second look; seeing that the country was apt to grow more settled than he liked, he'd decided to move out. But he had loved Iron Springs and had not wanted it to fall in dishonest hands. He'd done everything in his power to help Rachel buck Wenner. And his reward was murder.

Mark loaded the broken body on his horse, took it back to Iron Springs and buried Tink at the base of one of the gnarled old cottonwoods. For a long time he stood by the grave, remembering how Tinkleman had covered his walk to the jail. Then the shock of grief wore off and anger swept him.

"Wenner again!" he said between his teeth.

But why?

The answer seemed obvious. Without Tinkleman's herd, Rachel could not get the loan she needed. If Wenner had killed Tink and rustled his herd, the girl was licked!

Mark swung into the saddle. Striking out in a wide circle, he skirted the range. At dark he was back at the cabin, utterly baffled. Not a track had he discovered to show that any cows had been spirited off the land.

"They must be hidden nearby," he reasoned. The up and down range was riddled with canyons and pockets where a herd might be penned for weeks and a rider never know they were about unless he rode right on top of them.

FOR two days Mark pressed the search, poking into gloomy gorges and rock-walled mesas, prowling the dense forests of cedar and piñon. Not a single track did he find. At his wits' end he began to wonder if Tinkleman had really had any cattle. Surely a herd large enough to be worth a loan would have left *some* sign behind.

That night Mark threw himself down on the bunk in Tinkleman's cabin, a prey to nagging worry. Rachel and Lon and Andy should right now be making camp at Hornet Seeps. But were they? All Rachel had left was the little herd she was trailing up from the river. Would Wenner strike at it? It seemed likely. If she was turned back, she would have to put Iron Springs on the auction block. Either Wenner or some stooge could buy it for a song, and the fellow's hold on the range would be complete.

Mark's taut nerves wouldn't let him sleep. At midnight he saddled up and headed for the Seeps. The sun was no more than half an hour above the horizon when he came in sight of the gulch. A blue spiral of wood smoke wavered in the air. A campfire! He relaxed in the saddle. They must have made it.

Humming tunelessly, he picked his way down the hillside. Off to his right a harsh voice said: "Far enough, Hargrave!" Whirling about, Mark looked square into the muzzle of a .45 held by a long-nosed, yellow-eyed man whose broad face was covered by a stubble of black beard.

The fellow chuckled. "Wenner thought you might be comin' back this way."

"Wenner!" Cold fingers touched Mark's spine. "He's camped down below?"

"Nobody else!" The man whistled shrilly and the echoes bounded

between the narrow walls. "Just lettin' 'em know the fish is caught," he explained. "Keep goin' down the trail ahead of me, with your arms up! An' don't get skittish. I couldn't miss the back o' your skull with this cannon."

Mark obeyed, his stony face masking the anguished questions in his mind. What had happened to the cattle? Where were Rachel and Andy and Lon?

They reached the canyon bottom, following a trail that wound along the rim of a brush-choked arroyo. He heard the click of hoofs. A moment later Drew Wenner and gaunt Ben Estin, his arm in a sling, rode into sight. Wenner's neat little face oozed satisfaction. He pushed his horse close to Mark's; with a smile that was pure insolence he reached out and disarmed the horse-trapper. Then the trio holstered their own guns, a mocking gesture of superiority that brought the blood rushing to Mark's face.

A HUMMING noise filled his ears; in the back of his mind he was aware that it came from a swarm of wasps flying about a gray paper nest hung to an oak limb a little distance away. It was an angry sound and seemed to fit the hot throbs of his own pulse.

Wenner nodded to Mark's captor. "Nice work, Fraley!"

Mark glanced at Rachel's one-time foreman. "Yes," he said. "Just the kind of work for a double-cropper." His eyes came back to Wenner. "What are you doing here?"

"I made a homestead filing on this land the other day," Wenner explained blandly. "I've got the lower end of it fenced already."

Mark laughed in his face. "This is an open waterhole on a stock

driveway. Neither you nor anyone else can fence it off."

"That's for the courts to say. Their decision might take a long time. Too long to do you much good."

"What do you mean?"

"Rachel Blanchard showed up last night with a mighty thirsty herd. Until my claim here is legally declared invalid, I have a perfect right to resist trespassers. I put guards along my fence and turned the cows back."

"With bullets?" Mark asked. His throat was so tight he could scarcely get the words out.

"No," Wenner sneered. "Even that scatter-brained brother of yours realized they'd lose the whole bunch if they tried rushing us. They



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headed back for the river. They may not make it, though. It's a mean trail and those cows need water."

Mark let out a long sigh of relief. As long as Lon and Andy kept the herd intact, there might still be hope. He started to rein away. He was directly underneath the wasps' nest when Wenner stopped him.

"Where do you think you're going, Hargrave?"

"After Rachel."

"No." Wenner's smile mocked him. "You're coming with me. I want to watch your sweat!"

Mark sensed then the full depths of the man's vindictiveness. Wenner had once tried to win Rachel and had failed. Now his warped mind wouldn't let him permit anyone else to have her either.

Mark's horse tossed its head and stamped, afraid of the golden wasps buzzing ominously near. Fumbling with pretended nervousness, Mark took off his hat and wiped his forehead on his sleeve. His captors formed a cordon around him.

"Get going!" Wenner said softly.

CHAPTER IX

MISSING CATTLE

MARK straightened in the stirrups. Lashing out with his hat, he hit the wasps' nest and broke it in two. One half dropped right in Fraley's lap. The other fell under the horses' feet. In an instant a whirling mass of infuriated insects filled the air.

Red-hot lances of pain drove into Mark's cheeks and shoulders. His horse began to buck. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Fraley start for his gun, give up and bat wildly with both arms. Estin, hampered by his sling, was having all he could

do to manage his mount. Wenner got his gun out of leather, jerked it toward Mark. Then he screeched and clapped one hand to his eye. The gun went off straight into the air.

More than that Mark had no time to see. His sunfishing horse dived over the arroyo bank into the brush. The raking branches ripped Mark's shirt and tore his skin but helped fend off the wasps. He pulled leather shamelessly, recovered his balance and hauled up the bronc's head. There was no need to use spurs. The wasps took care of that. The horse stretched out, running for all it was worth. Behind him Mark heard frenzied curses and yowls of pain as his one-time captors scattered in every direction.

He reined out of the arroyo and up the hillside with a clatter of hoofs. Swinging wide around the fence end, he picked up the tracks of Rachel's herd below the Seeps.

His brief exhilaration left him then. His shoulders and neck and face ached from a dozen stings; his head felt as big as a balloon. And the tracks he followed, pointed back toward the river, were like a sign post of defeat. The sun blazed down on the red sands, and each rod he traveled he expected to see some thirst-tortured animal that had dropped in its tracks.

All at once a frown wrinkled his forehead. The trail had veered sharply north. "What the devil?" he muttered.

He followed at a lope. As he neared the rim of the canyon some miles north of the Seeps, the sound of axes met his ears. Looking down into the bottom he saw the cattle, penned in a tributary gulch by a brush fence. Out in the center of the canyon Andy and Lon were hard at work, cutting down trees

and bushes. As fast as the stuff was felled, Rachel snaked it out of the way with her horse.

"Have they all gone loco?" Mark wondered. He spurred toward them. They heard him and leaped for their rifles. Then, recognizing him, they halted.

Andy stared at his swollen face. "What happened to you?"

"I stirred me up a hornets' nest," Mark said ruefully. He was glowing at the dark spot of moisture that oozed from the earth, stained the ground for a few yards and disappeared again. "What did you come here for?" he asked. "You can't even water a horse, let alone a whole herd."

LON spoke up. "The calves were, too, tuckered to make another pull across that desert without a drink. We started toward the river so Wenner would think we were giving up. He was so sure he had us blocked he never bothered to follow. We swung this way under cover of dark. The cattle can rest today. Then tonight . . . well, you'll see."

A caustic rebuke trembled on the tip of Mark's tongue. It was never spoken. Lon looked right back at him, head up. Yet it wasn't the sheer defiance of the old days. He had something up his sleeve. What it was Mark couldn't guess. But this much was sure: Lon had been balked back there at the Seeps and he hadn't flown off the handle. He'd made a start toward thinking through a crisis instead of trying to strong-arm it; the least he deserved was a chance to carry out his plan.

"O. K., kid," Mark said. "It's your show."

A wide grin, almost incredulous, crossed Lon's face. He had been expecting to be thrust aside when

Mark returned to assume command. Instead he was receiving co-operation.

Mark went off to plaster mud poultices on his stings. When he returned, Rachel asked him if he'd seen Tinkleman. He nodded grimly and told her what he'd found. Tears sprang to her eyes.

"Oh, Mark!" she whispered. "He was so . . . so square." Then a new fear caught her breath. "His cattle! Are they—"

"They're up on the range," Mark said. He couldn't bear to add any more discouraging news. With pretended casualness he asked: "How many cows did Tink have?"

"Dad paid him for six hundred and twenty-three."

Mark winced involuntarily. Over six hundred—and he hadn't found a single track!

As his bewilderment showed on his face, Rachel asked nervously: "We aren't going to have trouble rounding them up, are we? The bank representative is due soon to count them and—"

"Whoa!" Mark said. "One herd at a time. We've got this one to worry about now. Maybe Lon knows what he's doing, but it's the first time I ever punched cows with an ax handle."

He managed to divert her and they went on grubbing like beavers. At sundown Lon straightened, rubbed his stiff back and said: "Let's get some supper."

He would not divulge anything of his plans, smiling mysteriously when Mark tried to pump him. They rested until a quarter moon showed over the horizon. Then he led them back to the once dry stream bed.

It was not dry now. A sparkling rivulet flowed down it, to be captured in rock tanks Lon had dammed up along the channel.

"Holy cow!" Mark breathed. "Where did that come from?"

"It was underground all the time," Lon said, relishing his triumph, "but it never had a chance to reach the surface. The trees and brush sucked it up and it evaporated through the leaves. Now with the growth cut and the sun down, the seep can flow. We can water the cows a little bunch at a time and be on our way in two hours!"

He slid a glance toward his brother, hungry for approval. He got it. Mark gave his head a wag. "And I thought you were crazy! Maybe I'm the one who ought to have his think tank examined!"

THEY reached Iron Springs unmolested. The next morning Rachel wanted to ride out and look at Tinkleman's cows. For the first time since that nerve-racking night at the river, she was happy. Mark sensed then that she had never really believed she would reach her new range, but had kept on plugging only because it was not in her to turn back. Now she had found hope again. Last night, until the velvet dark had closed down and coyotes began mourning at the stars, she had stood lost in absorption before the great red battlements that ringed her land. Already their strength and beauty were part of her dreams. As she came out of the cabin into the fresh, golden light of morning, the color high in her cheeks, Mark could not bring himself to tell her she was still faced with failure.

"You've done enough cowboying for one spell," he said. "This cabin is your home and deserves a little attention. Barely Able and Lon and I'll tend to Tink's cows. After that's done, one of us will go to Santos and fetch up your dad's old housekeeper and her husband. It's

not fittin' for you to be staying out here all alone."

Rachel made a face at him but, womanlike, gave in to the prospect of fixing up the house. The three men rode off. Mark had already told them about the vanished herd. They separated and scoured the land. Late in the evening they met again and rode back to the ranch, silent and discouraged. Not a track had they seen. Tinkleman's cows, if they existed at all, had disappeared as completely as migrating robins—and leaving as little trace.

A strange horse was in the barn when they unsaddled. A sudden premonition hit Mark, drying his throat. He strode to the cabin. A spare, bespectacled man was sitting stiffly in a chair across from Rachel, tapping the table top between them with a pencil. A sheaf of papers was spread neatly in front of him.

Rachel rose with a smile of relief. "This is Hiram Crawford, Mark," she said. "He's here from the Stockman's Bank to count the cattle for my loan. He's been asking me more questions about them than I can answer. Perhaps you—"

"Did you bring the cattle in?" Crawford interrupted crisply.

Mark swallowed uncomfortably. "Well, no. They—"

Crawford's lips grew pinched. "I'm a busy man, Mr. Hargrave. You knew I was coming up here. You should have assembled those animals so I could look at them without waste of time. I—"

Mark cut him off, eyes steely. "You listen to me, Crawford. We're busy, too. We'll get those cows here just as soon as it's humanly possible. If that's not fast enough to suit you, you can hit the grit. We'll make the loan at another bank and pay them the interest. Take your choice!"

It was a colossal bluff, but it worked. Crawford cleared his throat angrily, sputtered an incoherent protest, then subsided. Mark went back outside and told Lon and Barely Able what had happened.

"We've got a breathing spell," he concluded. "We'll take another look tomorrow. If we don't find the cattle then—" His voice trailed off and he swore in baffled anger.

THE three men were starting out at dawn when Crawford came running toward them. "Hold on!" the banker called. "I've decided to go with you. I can look at the cattle on the range, then be on my way. I've another call to make in the neighborhood—"

The riders exchanged glances. Mark stammered: "It's . . . well . . . it's a hard ride, Mr. Crawford, and—"

Crawford frowned. "Are you trying to pull the wool over my eyes? I warn you, I'm not here to be trifled with!"

"All right, all right," Mark muttered. This beating around the bush wasn't getting them anywhere. "The truth is, we haven't located all the cattle yet. You'll have to give us more time."

Crawford's mouth shut like a steel trap. "So! Miss Blanchard is being deliberately dishonest—trying to obtain money on cattle she doesn't possess! And you're backing her up. How big a cut are you getting, Hargrave!"

It was all Mark could do to keep his hands away from the man's sneering face. "You'd better look up the word honesty in your dictionary again, mister," he said evenly. "Miss Blanchard told you she had six hundred cows because that's the number Tinkleman agreed to turn over to her. And Tink was straight. If

he said the cows are here, they are. But he's dead and can't show us where. We've got to look ourselves. While we're looking, you'd better sit down and learn to watch that loose trap of yours."

"Indeed!" Crawford snapped. "It so happens I have an appointment with Mr. Wenner and—"

"Oh!" Mark's face broke into a smile. Like silk he drawled: "I'd sure hate to inconvenience Mr. Wenner!" He turned to Barely Able and jerked a thumb toward the corn crib. "Andy, fix up the guest house. Our visitor has decided to stay!"

Andy's great hand reached down and gripped Crawford's shirt collar. Like a thoughtful host inquiring after his company's pleasure, he asked: "Would your nibs prefer to walk—or be dragged?"

CHAPTER X

CANYON CLEAN-UP

WHILE Andy stood guard over the corn crib, chucking at the deplorable language that issued between the cracks, Mark and Lon headed for the range. They went north, skirting the edge of the cliff-girdled butte that overlooked the ranch. Ahead of them was the only part of the land they had not examined, but Mark had scant hope of finding anything there. Unlike the rest of the canyon-cut country, this section was rolling and open. Cattle in it would have been visible for miles. Yet there was no place else to turn.

Lon's sharp voice jarred him alive. "Mark, look!" The kid was pointing toward the base of the smooth cliffs of the butte. There on the talus slope was a red and white object. A cow!

They loped toward it. The animal was dead, its body horribly

crushed. Not a track led toward the corpse.

"How did it get here?" Lon asked.

Mark's eyes lifted to the soaring cliff above their heads. An electric thrill ran through him. "It must have fallen from the butte! Maybe the others are up there, too!"

"You're crazy!" Lon scoffed. "A fly couldn't climb those walls! Besides, there's no water on top or there'd be canyons cutting the sides. A whole herd couldn't possibly live up there!"

Mark didn't answer. He was thinking hard. The side of the butte facing Iron Springs was, as Lon said, absolutely unscalable. But what about the back side? From a distance it, too, looked sheer; by all logic it should be the twin of its neighbor. Things had gone past the point of logic, however. With Mark in the lead, they rode along the base of the butte, scanning every foot of its breathless walls.

Ahead of them was a jungle of rocks and tree. In ages past an enormous slab of stone, the full height of the butte, had cracked loose from the cliff. Falling, it had shattered into countless boulders. Gnarled piñons and stiff buck brush had taken root in the cracks between the rocks, forming an apparently impassable barrier. They started to ride around it. Then all at once Mark stopped, eyes riveted on a clear channel that wound back through the debris. Though it seemed the path must lead to a dead end, he rode into it.

The way brought them hard against the cliff. But here the rock was not smooth. The line of cleavage, where the slab had cracked loose, slanted upward in a broad ledge. From a distance, to a man who had already assumed the face was unscalable, the ledge looked like

a shadow, a tenuous wrinkle on the rock. But now, viewing it from close at hand, Mark saw how a few head of cattle at a time could be crowded into the channel between the boulders. Once there they could not turn back. They would have to go on to the ledge.

Taut with excitement, they forced their horses up the dizzy path. In places where the natural footing was too thin for safety, it had been blasted wider by hand. Engrossed in their discovery, the riders failed to look down into the forest below them. And so they did not see the man with his arm in a sling who was watching them through a pair of binoculars. As soon as the fellow was certain they were going to follow the ledge to its end, he spurred away at full speed through the trees.

A SET of wooden bars, five feet wide, blocked the top of the ledge. About a hundred head of cows were clustered behind the barrier. When the men appeared, the animals bawled eagerly. More came running from the swales and groves of trees that dotted the butte's rolling top. Their sides were sunken and they were panting.

"Starved for water!" Mark said. Fury gripped him as he looked at the pathetic beasts. It was plain what had happened. This was Tinkleman's "winter range." He had driven the animals up each fall, fenced off the trail, and never had to give them another thought all winter. The cattle could get by licking snow and drinking out of rock tanks in which run-off moisture collected. But when the snow disappeared in spring, the herd had to be taken down. Tinkleman had been on his way to do this when he was shot, and his cattle left stranded on the mesa top. To make sure the

animals had time enough to die, Wenner had tried to delay Rachel at Hornet Seeps. Perhaps he figured that if she turned back, he could appropriate the herd for himself. But even if she did come on, she couldn't get her vital loan with only corpses for security.

The veins in Mark's temples throbbed as he glared off in the direction of Wenner's camp. In another day the thirst-tortured animals would have been beyond salvation. Already some of them were so weak it would be nip and tuck to get them to water.

Mark threw the bars out of the trail and the animals streamed down the ledge. The riders swung around the butte top, gathering the lag-guards. They were jogging back toward the trail when Mark saw a feather of dust moving toward them from Wenner's camp. Horsemen—five of them!

He felt Lon's eyes on his face and guessed the question in his brother's mind. Grimly he shook his head. "This time we don't run! Wenner's got to rustle the cattle to kill the loan. And for once he's forced to move in the open. He must know we're watching. He won't let us get away with evidence that'll send him to the pen!"

Even as he spoke, the five riders down below separated. Three of

them began picking up the cattle and driving them along the base of the butte, keeping away from open land where they might be seen from Iron Springs. The other two men left their horses and took up position behind the boulders at the bottom of the trail.

"If we try going down that bald rock now, they'll pick us off like tin ducks in a shooting gallery," Mark muttered. "And if we stay up here, we'll starve."

A muscle rippled in Lon's cheek. His hand slid toward his gun butt. "I'd rather eat lead than nothing. Let's go!"

"Wait!" Mark commanded. "We've got to use our heads!"

Lon swung on him, the old recklessness hot in his eyes. Their glance locked and in that taut instant the new-found understanding between them trembled in the balance. One false word, one hurried gesture could smash it all. In the nick of time Mark forced himself to relax.

He grinned and said: "Let's save the fight for Wenner."

Slowly Lon unbent in turn. "Sure," he said. That one word was all, but they both knew that the selfishness and anger which had once driven them apart could never hurt them again.

Mark sucked on his lip. "That

THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:



*Instead o' shootin' off yore mouth, how
about sendin' our boys some bullets
so's they kin shoot off their guns?*

INVEST IN WAR SAVINGS BONDS AND STAMPS—NOW!

dead cow we found—she must have been trying to get down to water when she fell. There's probably some kind of trail, or she wouldn't have started."

Lon's eyes glinted. "Wenner's headed that way with the herd. Maybe we can get down ahead of him!"

They drew far enough back from the rim so the watchers below couldn't see them, then set spurs to their horses. When they were approximately above the dead cow they dismounted. Crouching, they ran along the jagged edge of the rim. "There!" Lon called. Ahead of them was a tiny break in the wall. Cow tracks led into it. But only a thirst-crazed animal would have risked that narrow footway. It dropped steeply for perhaps seventy feet, then petered out into a series of broken ledges.

MARK pulled his eyes away from the dizzy drop beneath. "That cow had hoofs," he said. "We've got hands. Maybe we can hang on."

He got a coil of rope from his saddle. Together they crept out on the bare, wind-swept face. The sun beat down on the red sandstone. The rock was like fire to the touch. Gusty wind, hot as an oven blast, was sending swirls of dust into their mouths and eyes. Grains of weathered sand slithered treacherously under their bodies. They flattened against the surface for friction holds, digging in until their fingers were raw and bleeding.

About thirty feet from the bottom the precarious holds dwindled to nothing. Only thin air lay between them and the talus slope beneath. In the timber at the left the approaching cattle were bawling.

Mark tied his lariat to a projecting snout of rock, and dropped the

end to the ground. "Hustle!" he whispered to Lon. "And don't stop to rest! I'll be right behind you!"

Lon gripped the rope, went down hand over hand. Mark was starting after him when someone shouted in the trees. A shot rang out. Lead spat against the cliff by his side. He swore helplessly.

Lon went down the rope like a monkey. Three men burst into view, revolvers cracking as they spurred for the slope in a cold-blooded effort to cut the two cowboys off before they could reach ground. Mark braced his heels against the cliff, kicked with all his might. The rope swung like a pendulum, making him a hard target to hit. He wrapped his legs around it and slid down so fast the hard-twist rope seared his palms. Bullets snarled past, knocking stinging chips of rock from the cliff.

Mark's gun was in his hand when he hit bottom. Lon was already crouched against the rock, Colt blasting. And now Mark had his first clear look at the attackers. A mirthless smile curved his lips. Fraley, Estin riding with his reins in his teeth and firing with his good hand—and Wenner!

There was no cover close by behind which a man could hide. But the attackers were equally exposed. Their rush had carried them so far into the open that they dared not turn their backs now and run for the safety of the trees. It had to go to the finish. Win or lose, this was the payoff.

The three men leaped from their horses, dropped belly down for steadier aim. A bullet stung blood from Mark's thigh.

"Split!" he yelled to Lon. "And carry it to them!"

Ducking and weaving, they separated by twenty yards. The higher

ground gave them an advantage, and now they presented individual targets and could rake their adversaries in a cross fire. Bent low, they zig-zagged down the hill, pausing to shoot, then on again before the men below could draw sure bead.

Estin crumpled without a sound, as though his bones had all at once dissolved. Lon let out a yip of triumph and charged forward. Then suddenly he stumbled and fell. Fury swept Mark then. The gun bucked in his hand. Fraley, jerked upright, clawing at his chest, spun half around as another slug smashed into him.

Mark whirled toward Wenner, then checked his finger just as it was tightening on the trigger. The man's gun was empty, and he was digging frantically at his cartridge belt for more shells with which to reload. Mark let his arm fall to his side.

"Take your time, hide buyer!" he called. "When I kill you, it's going to be straight across."

Wenner's teeth gleamed under his drawn lips. He thumbed two cartridges into his revolver, pretended to reach for a third. Then without warning he whipped up the gun and fired. His own frantic haste proved his undoing. The bullet missed Mark's head by a foot.

He never shot again. Mark's Colt crashed. A round, black hole appeared between Wenner's eyes. He sprawled forward with a long, gasping sigh and lay still.

Over on the slope Lon's voice said: "So much for that!"

Mark stared as if at a ghost. Lon was limping toward him, grinning wryly. "Wouldn't you know?" he grumbled in disgust. "I plugged one guy, then turned my ankle and fell flat on my face right when the party was getting good!"

LATER, Rachel and the others stood by the corn crib, watching Crawford jog toward town. The banker rode meekly, and he did not turn toward Wenner's camp. He had been well convinced of the uselessness of that. The hide buyer's would-be monopoly had collapsed like a wet dish rag. The two bushwhackers he had stationed at the bottom of the butte trail, learning how the plan had miscarried, had turned tail and fled for home. There they'd spread the alarm. Wenner's crew, imagining the breath of the law hot on their necks, had promptly left for parts unknown.

Barely Able stretched prodigiously. "Now we can sleep!" he rumbled.

"Not quite yet," Mark said. "You've got to ride to town and get Rachel whatever help she needs. Then we'll be on our way."

All the gladness went out of the girl's face. "Mark!" she cried. "You're not leaving! Not now!"

"I reckon I've got to," Mark told her. "I've been talking to Crawford. Wenner was trying to grow big too fast. He borrowed heavy at the bank. Now he's dead and the bank has all those cattle on its hands. Lon and Andy and I agreed to run them. We're going to take part of the range rights and a percentage of the herd increase for our work. We won't be very far away—just over the hill yonder. I could . . . well . . . after we're settled, I . . . maybe—"

"Yes, I think perhaps you could," Rachel said softly.

They stood looking at each other, not speaking, not needing to speak. Barely Able sighed. "Come on, Lon," he said, his eyes twinkling. "It's time to tend to our horses again!"

CODE OF LYNCH TOWN

by William B. Heuman

ANGRILY, Johnny McCann ripped open the batwing doors of the Red Horse Saloon and walked out into the night. Behind him he heard Ed Tobin's chill voice.

"Duck yore head in a hoss trough, Johnny," Ed called. "Cool yoreself off."

Stubbornly, Johnny walked down

the board sidewalk of Travis City, the .45 Colt banging at his leg and the silver conchas jingling softly in the darkness. He'd get out of Travis City tonight. He and Ed Tobin had come to the parting of the ways. The Texan had been his friend; they'd worked on two or three different spreads together; they were riding north from the Pecos country to the lush range land of Wyoming.

"We got enough dinero together," Ed grinned when they planned the



The scar-faced man shot at Johnny, then raced toward the rear of the barn.

thing, "to buy a few cattle and fix up our own brand." They'd been riding north for three weeks and Travis City was a Saturday night stop over. In the Red Horse, Ed Tobin had gotten into a stud poker game and Johnny McCann watched his friend's money dwindle.

"These tinhorn gamblers will clean you out, Ed," Johnny warned. "We'll pull out o' here without a cent."

Ed Tobin stared at his partner. Tobin was a year older but he was still young. Tobin was a slim, dark-skinned man with a sharp nose and clear black eyes.

"I reckon I kin take care o' myself," Tobin said coldly. "Git yoreself a glass o' milk, Johnny."

Johnny McCann went back to the bar and watched from the corner. He knew Ed would never quit the game now till he had cleaned it or they had cleaned him. Once again, an hour later, he had tried to intervene but Ed had had a few drinks and was in an ugly mood.

"I'll get out," Johnny said flatly, "and I won't come back." He liked Ed but, if Ed wanted to make a fool out of himself, that was his business. Grimly, Johnny McCann walked down the dark main street of Travis City. He'd saddle his horse and ride away tonight. If Ed wanted to follow him, he could catch up tomorrow. Johnny told himself he didn't care whether Ed followed or not.

At the corner Johnny saw the two dark figures dash out of a doorway and run across the street toward the Travis City National Bank, Johnny flattened himself against the wall of the building and waited. Men didn't run around that way at night unless they had a motive.

Johnny peered across the street. He knew he couldn't be seen stand-

ing in the shadows but he saw the two men standing outside the door of the bank. He heard the soft jingle of broken glass and then silence. Up the street a sudden roar of laughter from the Red Horse had almost covered the sound of the breaking glass.

JOHNNY saw both men disappear inside the door. It was a bank robbery! Slipping his .45 from the holster, Johnny silently ran across the street. Again he flattened himself against the brick wall of the bank and waited.

He had plenty of time to intercept the bank robbers when they came out again. Undoubtedly, if he could break up this thing there would be a reward! Ed Tobin had remarked only last week that their capital was none too large and they might have to work out as cowhands a few months before they could go on their own.

He remembered then that he and Ed Tobin had come to the parting of the ways. Tobin had insulted him in the Red Horse Saloon. The Texan had told him to soak his head in a horse trough.

Johnny McCann's lips tightened. He shook his head angrily. If Ed wanted to go it alone, that was all right with Johnny. There were plenty of other partners.

Johnny tried to fit his square shoulders into a break in the wall. He gripped the gun and waited impatiently. Tonight there was no moon; only the dim light of a million stars lit up the dark street.

A sudden step sounded behind him and he spun around. He saw the long, evil face with the slanted eyes and the small, tight mouth. He saw the crescent-shaped scar leading up from the left side of the mouth to the left eye. It was dark outside

the Travis City National Bank, but Johnny McCann knew he wouldn't forget that scarred face.

Desperately, Johnny tried to bring the big gun around but it was too late. It was over in a fraction of a second and he was reeling out into the gutter, lights exploding in his head. The scar-faced man had brought the barrel of his pistol across Johnny's skull.

Sick and weak, Johnny sank to his knees as the gun fell from his hands. With dull eyes, he watched his assailant run around the corner and enter the bank. He heard the sudden shrill cry and the gunshot. Johnny pulled himself to his feet with an effort.

The three men ran out of the door and disappeared down the street. Johnny heard their footsteps in the road. He picked up his gun and reeled toward the bank door.

Up the street he heard yells as men began to pour out of the Red Horse Saloon. Johnny stepped inside the door and stared into the darkness. He knew someone had been shot inside. Leaning against the door, he waited for the dizziness to leave him. There was no blood, for his hair was very thick and the gun barrel had not cut his skull.

Turning, Johnny saw the crowd pouring down the street. He waited as they swarmed around him and he heard them yell. Men grasped him by the arms and yanked the gun from his hand. They wrestled him to the ground and two of them held his arms.

Above the uproar, Johnny tried to make himself heard. He protested that he was innocent.

"Where's the sheriff," somebody was roaring in his ears. "This hombre shot old Jed Thompkins, the cashier!"

"We oughta string him up now,"

shouted another man. "Why wait for the sheriff?"

Johnny McCann stared into the mob of angry faces. He saw the big man with the black Stetson pushing through the crowd. Earlier in the evening he had seen Sheriff Bob Martin in the Red Horse. Martin was a big, gray-haired man with a ruddy face.

"I'll take him," Martin said authoritatively. "You boys go back to your games."

THE mob didn't go back to the Red Horse. They followed the sheriff and his prisoner down to the jail house and watched as Johnny was locked in one of the two cells.

"There were three men," Johnny tried to explain. "Two of them were inside the bank and the third one came up from behind and hit me on the head."

"See any of them?" Martin asked from outside the bars. They heard the mob outside still yelling.

Johnny nodded. "The man who hit me," he said, "had a scar on his face." He felt the lump on the back of his head. "I won't forget him in a hurry," he added grimly.

Martin shrugged. "We'll arrange a trial," he stated. "If you can prove you're innocent, you have nothing to worry about."

"I can prove it," Johnny told him. "I was in the Red Horse Saloon just a minute or two before the shooting."

The sheriff stared at him coldly, and instinctively Johnny disliked the man. Martin had pale-blue, almost colorless eyes. He had a peculiar habit of blinking quite suddenly.

"Jed Thompkins, the cashier," Martin said flatly, "was a popular man around here. Folks don't like

the idea of someone shooting him down like a dog."

Johnny sat down on the cot and stared through the bars. "I'll talk at the trial," Johnny said quietly. He wondered where Ed Tobin was. Usually, in any kind of trouble they were together. Once Ed had fished him out of the Red River with a hundred head of cattle milling madly in the water. Another time Johnny had broken the arm of a drunken vaquero as the Mexican herder slashed at Ed with a twelve-inch knife.

Sheriff Martin went back to his office and Johnny listened to the crowd outside the jail house. After a while the noise subsided and he knew they had gone back to the Red Horse or the other saloons at the other end of the town.

The bank robbery had occurred at about nine o'clock at night. Johnny McCann was in the jail cell nearly two hours when Sheriff Martin opened the door and came down the little corridor.

Johnny sat up and waited. Martin stood outside the door and looked through the bars.

"They're having a little meeting down at the Red Horse," Martin announced, "and they're planning on a lynching party tonight. You can guess who'll be the guest."

Johnny felt the chill run through him but he smiled bleakly. Looking at the thick stone walls and the heavy bars across the windows, he realized how helpless he was. If the drunken mob from the Red Horse swarmed down on the jail he wouldn't stand a chance. They'd string him up before he could explain about the robbery and the killing.

"I've never lost a prisoner since I been sheriff of Travis City," Martin

said "and I don't intend to lose you."

"You can't hold 'em all off," Johnny pointed out, "and you can't shoot 'em all down."

Martin nodded and Johnny saw the coldness in the man's pale eyes. "If you're innocent, as you claim," said Martin, "then you won't try to make a break if I let you out for tonight."

"Let me out?" Johnny asked blankly.

Martin nodded. "There's a horse waiting outside. Stay out in the brush tonight and come back here tomorrow morning. If you're innocent you can prove it at the trial; if you make a break tonight we'll know you were guilty and we'll catch up with you somewhere—some day."

"Fair enough," Johnny said. "I'll be back." He stared at the sheriff. This was something he hadn't expected. He waited as Martin unlocked the door. He'd be a fool to run away now and admit his guilt. He'd be branded as a bank robber and a murderer and some day some one would catch up with him. There'd be no chance to raise cattle with Ed Tobin— Johnny's thoughts stopped when he remembered that Ed was no longer his friend.

"They'll be here in a few minutes," Martin explained. "Ride fast and stay out of sight."

JOHNNY walked down the corridor, opened the door into the sheriff's office, and halted abruptly. The scar-faced man was sitting behind the sheriff's desk, a smile on his face and a big .45 in his hands.

Johnny swung his fist without looking and it caught Sheriff Martin on the jaw. The lawman gasped as he fell back through the doorway. Johnny dodged after him.

He heard the roar of the gun as

the scar-faced man came to his feet. Johnny felt the slug graze his neck and slam into the door post. He pushed the door shut and heard the lock catch. Then he dove at Martin who was scrambling to his feet, yanking at the gun in the holster.

The set-up was quite plain. Martin was in with the scar-faced man. The sheriff might have been one of the two men Johnny had seen crossing the street. Probably they had shot the cashier, Jed Thompkins, because the old man had recognized Martin. The cashier being in the bank late on a Saturday night was something they had not planned on.

Martin and Scar-face planned to kill Johnny McCann and claim it was an attempted jail break. There was no lynching party being formed at the Red Horse.

The Travis City sheriff was almost on his feet when Johnny hit him in a flying dive. They rolled on the floor and Martin managed to get the gun out.

Johnny grasped Martin's wrist and twisted it toward the ceiling. Grinning at him, Martin pressed the trigger. The town would hear the shots and come running. They'd find the prisoner attempting a jail break and that would prove Johnny McCann's guilt. Sheriff Martin held all the good cards in this deal.

Desperately Johnny rolled his man over. Martin was bigger and heavier, but Johnny had youth on his side. He hit Martin in the face with his free hand and knocked him against the wall.

They clinched again and Johnny twisted the gun downward. He heard it roar and the sound deafened him. He felt the gunpowder burn his wrist. Suddenly Sheriff Martin went limp.

Johnny felt the sheriff falling to the ground. He let go and Martin

dropped at his feet. The corridor was lit up with a small lantern at one end and Johnny saw the blood staining Martin's shirt front. The sheriff's eyes were wide open and staring. Martin was dead!

Someone was pounding on the door outside and Johnny picked up the gun and took the sheriff's keys from his pocket. The shots had been heard all over town and the citizens of Travis City would be swarming around the jail house in another minute. Johnny had to get out.

The scar-faced man was waiting outside and he was armed. Johnny stared up and down the corridor. There was only one way out and that was through the door before him.

He slipped the key into the lock quietly and then, yanking the door open, bounced out into the opening with drawn gun. He saw Ed Tobin standing in front of him. The Texan had a .45 Colt in his hand and death in his eyes.

"Ed!" Johnny yelled.

THE Texan grinned. He stared at the body of Sheriff Martin in the corridor. "I was comin' down," Tobin drawled, "to see what I could do for you, Johnny. I bumped into a hombre running out the door and then I heard the shots inside. I knew you were still here."

"We have to get out," Johnny said quickly. They heard the shouts up the street. "They won't listen to me now that Martin is dead."

"We'll have to take it on the run for a while," Tobin agreed. He pointed to a rear door. "We kin separate outside and make a run for the livery stable."

Johnny nodded. He stopped and grinned. "Thanks, Ed," he said suddenly.

Tobin gave him a push toward

the door. "We're partners, I reckon," he drawled. "I was comin' down to help, Johnny."

They bolted out the door and Johnny saw Ed Tobin disappear in the darkness. The livery stable behind the big Grant Hotel was at the other end of town and it would be safer to go separately. Johnny heard the shouts outside the front door of the jail house.

He ran down a side street and he saw the people pouring out of doorways. Travis City would get little sleep tonight.

Making a wide circuit of the town, Johnny ducked into the livery stable and quickly saddled his mount. Ed hadn't come yet. Probably he had gone more slowly.

Johnny found the Texan's saddle and threw it over Ed's chestnut horse. He waited in the semidarkness, but still Ed didn't come. Johnny began to feel some misgivings.

With the sheriff dead in his own jail house, and Ed Tobin known as Johnny McCann's friend, if Ed were found in the vicinity of the jail, townsmen would put two and two together. Ed would be in a bad spot.

Johnny saw two men suddenly appear in the doorway and he shrank against the wall. They passed him by and went down to the other end of the stable. He had not been able to see their faces, but he knew he had to get out of the stable.

Slowly he crept along the wall and then stepped out into the night. Ed Tobin was long overdue and Johnny was sure something had happened to the Texan. There was no alternative but to go back to the jail house.

Pulling his Stetson down over his face, Johnny walked down the deserted street. The crowd was mill-

ing around the jail house and Johnny heard the roar of many voices. He kept his hand near the gun and stood behind the crowd. He was sure he wouldn't be recognized. He had been captured in the darkness and hurried off to jail. Only a few men had seen his face.

"What happened?" Johnny asked a little, weazened man with a white goatee.

"That wild cowpuncher shot up Sheriff Martin and got away," the little man answered. "They caught his friend, though. He ran plumb into Deputy King's arms. He tried to put up a fight, but King had three men with him."

Johnny nodded. Then Ed had been captured and was already lodged in the jail. Listening to the talk around about him, Johnny knew the citizens of Travis City weren't going to bed that night until something was done about it. Two men had been shot and killed. Somebody had to pay.

He saw Deputy King, a lean man with round shoulders come out of the door and try to speak to the mob.

"Go back to your homes," King roared. "We're keepin' this man for trial."

Off to Johnny's left, a man said: "You were keepin' the other one, too, King. What happened?"

King swore aloud and then slammed the door behind him. It looked to Johnny as though the deputy wouldn't be able to hold off the mob once they decided to do something about the killings.

"Git a rope," another man howled. "We'll try him after we hang him."

Moistening his lips, Johnny drew back from the crowd and stood in the shadows across the street. They'd be getting worse and worse from now on. He'd seen crowds operate be-

fore. Most of them had liquor inside of them and couldn't think clearly.

He heard the rising roar and sensed the deadly murder fever spreading. Men were already up the steps of the jail house and pounding on the door. Again Deputy King came out to argue with them but they drowned him out.

Johnny saw them wrench King's gun from his hand and push him back through the door. Desperately, Johnny stared around him. He couldn't fight this mob with a lone gun and expect to make a getaway. All of Travis City was here.

Coming down the main street earlier in the day, he and Ed had noticed the old ramshackle building nestling between two newly painted structures. The building was empty and falling to pieces. Once it had housed the Travis City *Gazette*.

"They should tear it down," Ed Tobin had observed as they rode through. "It spoils the look of the town."

"A fire would help," Johnny McCann had said. He thought of that now. As the mob broke into the jail house, Johnny ran back up the street. The door of the *Gazette* building hung from rusted hinges and he stepped inside. He heard rats scurrying away over the paper-littered floor.

QUICKLY Johnny scooped together armfuls of paper, made a great pile and then struck a match. The paper caught fire quickly. In five minutes the building would be in flames, for the wood was dry and inflammable. Johnny piled more loose papers on the flame.

In another moment the tongue of fire was licking up at the ceiling. Johnny stepped out into the street

again. He saw them dragging Ed Tobin out of the door and hurried around the outside of the mob.

Very shortly they would discover the fire and then he had to be ready to act. They were pulling the Texan down the steps and hauling him toward a nearby telegraph pole.

Johnny McCann pushed himself through the wild crowd. He tensed when he heard the yell of "Fire." Suddenly silence fell as the mob stared at the flames appearing in the window of the old *Gazette* building.

As one man they turned and ran toward the building. The *Gazette* office was too close to other buildings in Travis City for comfort. If those other buildings caught fire, a whole block of structures might go down before the blaze could be extinguished.

Running through the crowd, Johnny came up behind Ed Tobin. Half a dozen men had been clinging to the Texan. Three of them, probably men who owned property near the *Gazette* building, let go and ran for the fire.

Johnny McCann stepped up behind the others. They were hanging onto Ed Tobin and staring at the fire. Johnny hit one of them on the head with the barrel of his gun. He crashed a fist into the face of another. The third man went down as Ed suddenly came to life and lashed at his captor with his fists.

"The livery stable!" Johnny shouted in Tobin's ear. They were behind the crowd now and only a few people had witnessed the rescue.

Tobin pulled a gun from the holster of one of the fallen men and then ran up the street with Johnny. Going past the jail house they saw Deputy King, disheveled and bleeding at the nose, appear in the doorway. King had a gun in his hand.

He stared at the two prisoners and then yelled.

Johnny saw the flame from King's gun and he heard the slug rib past his head. He poked a quick shot over King's head and the deputy ducked back into the doorway. Johnny didn't want another killing for tonight.

They ran down the darkened street toward the other end of town.

Ed Tobin swore silently. "He'll have the whole blasted town after us, Johnny."

Johnny McCann nodded soberly. He heard the footsteps and the yells. In spite of the fire, King had managed to get a number of men to help him retake the prisoners.

"I have the horses saddled," Johnny said. "We're ready to ride."

Tobin scowled and shook his head. "We can't ride through them," he declared. "They'll shoot us down."

They reached the livery stable and saw the dark dark forms coming up the street. Deputy King had at least a dozen men with him.

"Bar the door," Tobin said grimly. "We'll have to hold 'em off, Johnny."

They slammed the big doors together and the Texan climbed up to a window. Deputy King and his men stopped twenty-five yards from the stable. Ed Tobin pointed his six-shooter out into the night and pulled the trigger. The slug bit up dust several yards to the right of the group.

"No closer," Ed called. They could see the little group scatter behind the hotel porch.

Johnny McCann peered out between the cracks of the door. In a short while the mob would put out the fire in the *Gazette* office and they'd all come swarming down to the livery stable. He and Ed would be cooped up again like rats in a den.

ED jumped down from the window. He looked along the stalls of restless horses. Halfway down the stable there was a lantern casting a yellow glow on the floor.

"There's another door down there," Johnny said suddenly. He noticed what had appeared to be solid wall was in reality two heavy doors folded together at the other end of the barn.

"You take a look," Tobin said. "I'll keep 'em off."

They heard King shouting from the hotel porch. "Better give up, Tobin. You haven't got a chance."

The Texan laughed. "Come in and get us," he roared back. "Only we ain't bein' taken. We don't trust yore jails, King."

Johnny McCann ran down to the other end of the barn and heaved at the doors. He heard the chain rattle outside and knew the rear door of the livery stable had been locked.

He came back to the front. "No use," he told Tobin.

"We gotta get out," the Texan said slowly. "That mob should be down here any minute."

"The roof," Johnny said quickly. "I believe there's a window up in the loft. We could climb out on the roof and drop down on the other side. They might not see us in the darkness."

Ed Tobin nodded. "We're lucky it's a dark night." He shot out through the window and then ran back toward the loft ladder halfway down the stable.

"It might be a big drop," warned Johnny, "but we'll have to take a chance. If they catch us tonight there'll be no trial."

Tobin grinned. "According to them, we robbed the bank, shot the cashier, killed the sheriff—"

"And tried to burn up the town," Johnny finished grimly. "They

won't be foolin' now."

They climbed the loft ladder and plunged into the hay. They saw the dim light through the window up above.

"Here," Tobin called. The Texan was climbing over a mound of hay when Johnny saw the dull barrel of a gun gleaming through the blackness.

With a bound he was at Tobin's side. Grasping the Texan around the waist, he threw him down into the hay. He saw the flame from the gun barrel and he heard the roar.

The two men rolled through the hay and Johnny heard Ed Tobin cursing. He saw the two men suddenly jump up out of a pile of hay and plunge toward them. Again the gun roared in the darkness and Johnny felt the bullet cut his ribs.

Tobin was up and grappling with one of the men. The other was running toward the ladder. Johnny suddenly remembered the two men he had seen come into the livery stable earlier in the night. Whoever they were, they weren't friendly.

Johnny shot once at the man running toward the ladder, then ducked down into the hay as the stranger poked a shot at him. The man climbed rapidly down the ladder and the light from the lantern suddenly lit up his face.

Johnny saw the long crescent-shaped scar and the thin face with the small mouth. At the bottom of the ladder, the scar-faced man shot up at him again and then ran toward the rear of the barn.

SLIDING quickly down the ladder, Johnny ran after him. These two men were the bank robbers and he had to take them. He was sure Ed Tobin could take care of himself up in the loft.

Horses were plunging wildly and

whinnying with fear as Johnny ran after the scar-faced man. The bank robber turned at the end of the stable and shot again. The bullet struck the lantern and the place was plunged in darkness.

Quickly Johnny fell to the floor and lay there. He saw the flare as Scar-face shot toward the ladder, and he shot at the flare. There was a sudden scream of pain and Johnny heard Scar-face fall.

Up in the lot Ed Tobin was calling down. "You all right, Johnny?" Tobin laughed. "I got this hombre trussed up with his own belt. Had to hit him on the head a coupla times."

"Stay where you are," Johnny said. He crawled noiselessly along the floor, keeping his gun ready. The scar-faced man might have been wounded and be waiting for him to strike a light.

Inch by inch, Johnny crept along the floor. He heard the horse's hoofs striking the floor a few feet from his head. He hoped he wouldn't crawl into one of the stalls by mistakes and be brained by a spooky horse.

Reaching out with his hand, he felt the coat of Scar-face. The man didn't move. Groping around, Johnny found the bandit's gun. He lit a match and looked down.

"Dead?" Tobin called from above.

"Dead," Johnny said regretfully.

"Who are they?" Tobin asked as he climbed down from the loft. He carried a heavy leather bag.

"You open the bag," Johnny grinned, "and you'll probably find the haul they took from the Travis City National Bank. They were working with Sheriff Martin."

Ed Tobin slipped open the bag and stared inside. Outside, they heard Deputy King calling to them again.

"We've surrounded the place,"

King roared. "Better give in, fellows."

Johnny walked to the door. "Come inside, King. We'll talk to you—alone."

A moment later they heard King fumbling at the door. Johnny slid it open and the tall deputy came in.

"You boys have caused a lot of trouble," King said grimly.

Johnny struck a match. "We have the men who robbed the bank," he said flatly. "One of 'em's dead and the other is trussed up in the loft. Maybe he'll talk." Johnny handed the deputy the leather bag and King stared at him and Ed.

"Martin was in with them," Johnny explained. "He tried to shoot me in the jail. We had a fight and he shot himself."

"How do I know that's what happened?" asked King.

Johnny shrugged. "Maybe the hombre up in the loft will talk."

ED TOBIN brought down the dazed man. He was a Mexican, a small, dark-faced man, half dead with fear.

Johnny spoke quickly, confidently. "Sheriff Martin told us where you'd be hiding."

The Mexican gasped and his eyes were wild. "Sheriff Martin!" he snarled. "Did he plan the robbery?"

Deputy King nodded grimly. "I never did think much of Martin," he admitted. "He was too smooth." He took a look at the body of the scar-faced man and gasped.

"He's a bad hombre," King snapped. "We have a poster in the office with his face on it. There's a big reward out for him by Wells Fargo. You boys should be able to collect."

They heard the rumble of voices outside the barn.

"How about them?" Ed Tobin asked. "They don't believe we didn't rob the bank?"

King nodded again. "I'll convince 'em," he snapped, "if I have to shoot up this whole town." Walking to the door, the deputy opened it and called the names of five men.

The men came in to the stable and King explained to them what had happened. They were five of the leading citizens of Travis City.

"We have the bank robbers," King said, "and we know Sheriff Martin was in with them. I'll testify to that effect at the trial."

The five men looked at the body of the scar-faced man and at the Mexican huddled in a corner.

"See if you can convince those maniacs outside," King ordered the townsmen. "If they want to come in then, tell 'em to come shootin'."

The five men went out and King grinned. "It'll be all right now," he said. "You boys can stand trial and I'll testify for you." The deputy paused. He looked at the scar-faced man. "Besides the reward for him," King said, "there'll probably be a reward from the bank for recovering the stolen funds."

Ed Tobin grinned broadly. "That'll buy a heap o' cows," the Texan drawled. "This is our lucky night, Johnny."

"After losing all your money in that poker game," Johnny retorted, "I should think you'd need another stake."

Tobin carefully built himself a smoke. "Before comin' down to that jail house to look fer you, Johnny," he drawled. "I cleaned out that poker game."

Johnny stared at his partner. "Duck yore head," Tobin grinned. "Duck yore head in a hoss trough, Johnny. Cool yoreself off!"

LONGHORN GOLD

by
Felix Flammonde



Don Pedro caught hold of the bellowing steer's horns, and hung on tightly as the frightened animal headed for the shore.

At first Don Pedro Felipe Perkins y Castillo merely shrugged his velvet-shoulders and refused to be perturbed. All California, since the gold-mad Americanos began pouring in to make their fortunes in the northern mines, had become a hot-bed of rumor and counterrumor, so that no man could any longer state with confidence what was true or false. Every ragged *arriero*, beating his burros over the dusty Camino Real which twisted like a tormented snake from Upper to Lower California, brought newer and wilder gossip of the invasion. So, Don Pedro Perkins listened unheeding—until the summer afternoon a black-hulled schooner anchored off shore and sent beachward a stout whale-boat bearing seven piratical-looking ruffians bristling with muskets and pistols.

For nearly a century the Hacienda de Santa Marta—four *leguas* of the

best and richest cattle land in the Californias—had been the domain of the proud family of Castillo, descendants of Spanish adventurers and New World *conquistadores* of Mexico. Here on this sandy strip of blue Pacific coast, midway between the Presidio of San Francisco to the north and the sprawling adobe huts of the Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles on the south, Don Pedro's grandfather had been shipwrecked two generations since. The Boston hide buyer, a shrewd Yankee who knew an opportunity when he saw one, had stayed to settle down, win the lovely dark-eyed Carmelita Castillo, and change the family name to Perkins.

Don Pedro was enjoying his siesta, drowsily relaxed in a hammock suspended between two orange trees in the cool shade of the ranchhouse patio, when the trouble started. His white silk shirt lay open at the

throat against the July heat, making a sharp contrast with the tousled black hair and the thin uptilted mustache that penciled a line across the olive hue of his face. His legs stretched long and slim in the bell-bottomed velvet *pantalones*, and a tasseled red sash encircled his waist. A short-sleeved bolero, ornamented with handworked piping and frogging of gold thread, strained to confine the deep chest and broad shoulders. The long, straight nose and deep-set gray eyes—a legacy from his Yankee forebear—afforded his fine head a startling resemblance to the fierce but noble-looking eagles which maintained their eyries atop the towering pines of the moun-

carried a coiled rawhide riata, and saucer-sized spur rowels jingled on his knee-length doeskin boots.

"*Hola, Chato,*" Don Pedro said, and sat up in the hammock. "What devil drives you, that you interrupt the siesta? Have I not told you—"

Chato tugged off his tattered sombrero, his owl eyes popping. "A ship, Don Pedro! At this moment a boat full of strangers is landing on the beach!"

Don Pedro reached for a bunch of grapes on a table near the hammock, and said without anger: "I should have you flogged." He leaned back, munching the fruit. "No, on second thought, I shall do it myself. Then we shall see if I



tains marking the eastern boundary of the hacienda.

DON PEDRO awoke as the oaken gate in the patio wall creaked open to admit Chato, the fat and waddling major-domo. Chato had been supervising the branding of a bunch of young saddle stock in the small circular corral that fronted the smithy and carpenter shop in the hacienda's own village which quartered the Indian field stock and Mexican cowboys and their families. The major-domo was puffing with the unaccustomed effort of haste, and his rough cotton pants and shirt were stiff with dust and sweat. He

may enjoy one complete siesta or not. Yes, then—"

Chato grinned feebly, but insisted: "This is no time for making jokes, señor!" He waved a pudgy hand westward, where the sea lapped at the beach only a few hundred yards from the ranchhouse. "Arouse yourself, Don Pedro. These are strangers and worse—Americano outlaws!"

Don Pedro flipped a grape into the air and let it drop back into his mouth. "You make them sound like demons. A landing party, no doubt, needing water or wishing to purchase fresh meat and fruits. Go you, then, to greet them, and say that I will make them welcome as

soon as I have changed into more formal clothing. *Andale!*"

"Visitors do not come with guns in hand and a small cannon gleaming in the sunlight!" Chato said stubbornly.

"The devil!" Don Pedro rolled out of the hammock, and in one motion caught up his flat-crowned sombrero and reached for the high-heeled boots at the foot of the orange tree. "Dolt! Why did you not say that?" He jammed his feet into the boots, meanwhile shouting to someone inside the house: "Consuelo, my pistol! Chato, toll the bell for the peons to gather! Quickly, now!"

STANDING up, he gave the major-domo a shove, then turned as an Indian woman came padding on bare feet from the house with his gun belt. But before he could take them from her, a voice from behind grated harshly in English:

"No need for that! I'll give the orders around here now!"

Don Pedro wheeled, then froze. A great bear of a man, with a heavy black beard and cruel hot eyes, stood just inside the patio gate. Backing him were four evil-looking fellows with gold hoops in their ears, and each man wore at his belt a pistol and carried in his hands a musket with the hammer cocked. They stood staring at the elegant young master of the hacienda, who returned the gazes with angry calm.

"Who are you?" Don Pedro demanded then, in English as faultless as his Spanish. "What do you want here?"

The questions were pure formality, Don Pedro realized even as he put them. Inwardly, he cursed himself now and, too late, wished that he had paid more heed to the rumors floating down from San Francisco. This ugly crew undoubtedly

would be one of the outlaw bands recently reported marauding the coast for loot to supply the clamoring market created by the gold rush in the North.

"You'll be Pete Perkins, I reckon," the bearded man rumbled.

The rancher corrected him stiffly. "I am Pedro Felipe Perkins y Castillo, owner of this property. We do not welcome pirates here! Leave at once," he demanded, "or I shall certainly report this indignity the next time the corvette from Monterey puts in here."

"Sure talk pretty," the invader remarked. "Almost as pretty as you look." He spat on the patio tiles and sneered, "We ain't worryin' about no spiggoty patrol boat, greaser. You be sensible, and you'll get off easy. If you don't, we'll have to be mean."

"What do you want here?" Don Pedro repeated.

"Come along, and you'll find out." The bearded man turned to his crew. "Two of you fellers stay here to keep an eye on these two." In rough Spanish he warned Chato and Consuelo against any outcry, then returned to Don Pedro. "Come peaceful, Perkins. We're takin' you out to the *Shark*."

"I refuse to go! I insist—"

"Look over the wall, toward the beach," the bearlike fellow suggested amiably, "and you'll change your mind."

DON PEDRO strode across the patio and looked seaward. What he saw made his heart sink. A small brass cannon, with balls and powder bags stacked back of it, crouched on the beach with its muzzle trained on the ranchhouse. Two men squatted on their heels in the sand nearby. One of them was puffing at a long black cigar, which

evidently served the dual purpose of a smoke and a punk for the cannon's fuse.

"All right," Don Pedro said then, and stood ready to do the invaders' bidding. For the moment, at least, he had no alternative. Until he found out what these men wanted, he was helpless.

"Do as these villains say, and make no foolish move," he cautioned Chato. "It is futile to offer resistance—now."

The bearded man led the way, with Don Pedro stalking proudly between the two armed henchmen. As they got into the boat drawn up on the beach, the leader spoke to the cannoneers: "If any trouble starts, fire on the house. We'll back you up with the big guns on the ship." He gave an order to the two men in the boat, who had now exchanged their muskets for oars, and the whaleboats began sliding over the green water.

Don Pedro remained aloof and silent while the boat drew alongside the ship and a rope ladder was let over the side. Prodded by the leader, he climbed aboard. More than a dozen bare-footed seamen lolled about the deck, while others kept on the alert near the cannon which poked their black snouts shoreward through the gun ports. The *Shark* was a trim craft, with sharp bows and a tapering stern, and Don Pedro noted that her dark color derived from the natural hue of the teakwood of which she was built. Her cleanliness and the shipshape appearance of her gear showed plainly that this was a prosperous ship and despite his own immediate danger, Don Pedro felt a quickening of his interest. This was an unusual vessel in the eyes of one whose knowledge of ships was confined mostly to the creaking hulks of

coastal traders and Boston hide buyers; so surely, he thought, her master would be equally unusual.

He was that. Aft, on the poop, an elegantly garbed blond man with a waxed mustache sat smoking a slim Spanish cheroot and sipping wine from a long-stemmed goblet. He got to his feet as Don Pedro ascended the ladder, and courteously removed his tall beaver hat.

The bearlike man gave Don Pedro a push, then said to his chief:

"This here's Perkins, sir. The fancy-lookin' galoot—"

He recoiled a step as the elegant shipowner lashed out like a striking snake and dealt him a raking blow with the back of his hand. The owner wiped his knuckles with a handkerchief pulled from his sleeve, and ordered sharply:

"Apologize, Trask, and smartly! Señor Perkins is a guest, and will be treated as such—unless he becomes difficult. Beg his pardon now, and quick about it!"

Trask turned to the astounded Don Pedro, his hot eyes blazing hatred. "Sorry, sir," he mumbled, wiping blood off his cheek where his master's ring had slashed a deep cut. "My apologies, sir." Under his breath he added: "You blasted Mex!"

THE shipowner waved Don Pedro to a chair under the awning which shaded table and decanter, and poured a glass of wine while he introduced himself. "Captain Arthur Howe, at your service, señor. Permit me to beg your indulgence for the rudeness of my officer. Mine is a rough business, and demands rough men." He lifted his glass and reached out to clink it with that of Don Pedro. "To our mutual gain, señor!"

Don Pedro found his voice. "If

you will be kind enough to explain this outrageous action, Captain Howe. I am at a loss to comprehend—"

"Why, my dear sir," Howe purred amiably, "I have come for a shipload of your prime Spanish longhorns. In San Francisco beef is worth a dollar a pound on the hoof, and there's a fortune in it. I am astonished that you have not already participated in the profits, since you have one of the largest holdings in the territory."

"My herds have been under contract to Eastern hide buyers for two generations," Don Pedro said sharply. "I have no animals for sale elsewhere."

Captain Howe sipped delicately at his sherry. "I know all about that, and about you. I always investigate a situation before I plunge into it, which accounts for my success. However, contracts are made to be broken—especially when it is profitable to do so."

"Not mine!" Don Pedro set down his glass. "Were my longhorns worth their weight in gold—"

"Which they are," interrupted Captain Howe.

"—I would not break my family's long-established agreement," Don Pedro finished. He got to his feet. "And now, if you will send me back ashore—"

"Not so fast," Captain Rowe said, and his voice suddenly went cold. "I am here not to buy, but to take! I want five hundred of your longhorns on the beach, ready to take aboard my lighter, within forty-eight hours. Meanwhile, I'll hold you hostage, and you'll instruct your major-domo to do as I direct."

"And if I refuse?" Don Pedro asked steadily.

Captain Howe pointed to the gunners in the waist of the ship. "In

that case, I'll have your hacienda cannonaded until not a wall remains standing!"

DON PEDRO nervously paced beneath the captain's luxurious quarters the captain's luxurious quarters beneath the poop, where he had been locked up pending the bringing aboard of Chato. Outside the heavy teakwood door, he could hear the shuffling of the barefooted sentry posted there to guard against the *ranchero's* possible attempt to escape. Don Pedro cursed, and savagely kicked over a padded footstool that got in his way. For the first time in his life he faced a situation of which he was not complete master, and his proud spirit was aroused.

He had no thought of capitulation, although that was of course the easiest way out; his holdings were so large, and his herds so vast, that five hundred longhorns would be a loss too small to quibble over. But to be robbed, to be inflicted with the indignity of being held prisoner by a band of ragged water-front cutthroats—*por diablo*, no Perkins y Castillo could stomach that!

Calmed by the necessity for effective thinking and action, Don Pedro paused in his pacing and inspected his prison. Captain Howe, he reflected wryly, did himself extremely well. The pirates' cabin was large, about eight paces long by six wide, and furnished with ornately carved rosewood and mahogany. Gleaming brass oil lamps swung in gimbals on the walls, and the large square windows of heavy cathedral glass were framed by costly tapestries and velvet drapes. A small-paned French door opened onto a wrought-iron balcony which overhung the sea and was shaded by a bright-striped awning. Here, in fair weather, the ship's master probably

sunned himself and took the air while planning future depredations.

Don Pedro tried the latch on the French door, but found it locked. Closer inspection showed that the lock could easily be forced, but he immediately rejected the idea. Even if he were to jump into the sea from the balcony and try to swim ashore, he must surely be sighted and shot by the crew before he could go far. Too, the cannoneers on the beach would be another hazard. But after dark, if the opportunity still offered, there might be a chance.

Footfalls sounded outside the cabin door, and it swung open. Chato came through with a lurch, kicked by an armed seaman behind him. Last came Captain Howe himself, smoking his inevitable cheroot.

The major-domo saw Don Pedro, and began to chatter. "*Patrón*, such barbarians!" A cruel cut bled slowly down his cheek, and one eye was swelled up and beginning to turn black.

Don Pedro swung angrily upon Captain Howe. "This is unpardonable! As long as I accede to your demands, I insist upon humane treatment of my people!"

Captain Howe waved his cigar. "Rough business, rough men, as I said before. Now, let's get down to business." He sank into a throne-like chair before a massive mahogany desk. "I have sent two squads of my men ashore, so I anticipate no trouble from your side. Now, you tell your fat foreman here exactly what to do, and I'll meanwhile arrange for my lighter to be towed to the beach for transfer of the cattle." He got up and turned to the door. "I'll leave you two alone, but the guard will be outside. I advise you not to make any wrong moves."

When the sound of his footsteps faded, Chato came close to whisper in Don Pedro's ear. "My beating was not in vain, señor. Look you!" He reached down inside his doeskin boot and pulled out a long pistol. "During the scramble, I managed to snatch up one of your weapons. These men are cruel, but stupid, and they did not notice, the saints be praised!"

Don Pedro took the pistol and secreted it in his sash. "A brave act, and one which may well serve us! However, with but one shot, I must resort to it only as the last extremity. For the moment, my good Chato, this is more a matter for wits than weapons!"

Chato wrung his fat hands. "But, señor, what are we to do? We are a peaceful people, unaccustomed to arms and fighting! Never in our lives have we—"

Don Pedro gripped his servant's shoulder. "What think you," he asked with a grim half smile, "would happen if five hundred of our wild Spanish cattle, once aboard this vessel, should be frightened into a stampede? Eh?" His smile widened to a grin. "Would that not be a spectacle to behold?"

BY noon the next day the first of the longhorns began trickling from the range to the corrals of the hacienda, under the watchful eye of Chato. A dozen leather-faced Mexican vaqueros riding sleek palominos took small bands of the animals to the beach, where a dozen or two at a time were lightered out to the *Shark*. At the ship a boom and hoisting tackle had been swung out, and the terrified and bawling steers were lifted aboard singly.

Don Pedro, haggard and worn after a sleepless night, during which he had abandoned the idea of trying

to escape by way of the captain's balcony, leaned on the rail and watched his animals come aboard.

Captain Howe, still immaculate and smoking a cheroot, stood a few paces down the deck. "By Jupiter!" he breathed in satisfaction at the scene. "Magnificent stock you raise, señor. After this little stroke of business, I can retire for life a rich man. Every one of those struggling brutes will be a four-legged piece of live gold up in Frisco."

Don Pedro stirred. "You have feed and water, I presume? It is a two-day voyage to San Francisco, and these creatures require quantities of both."

Captain Howe laughed and flicked ashes overside. "Haven't room for that. Too much trouble, anyway." He continued callously: "I don't expect to get them all there alive, you know. That's why I'm taking a full ship. Why, if only half of them are alive when I dock, I'll make a fortune!"

Don Pedro turned away in disgust. He spent the rest of the day alone in the captain's cabin, his aloofness broken only when one of the men brought a tray of food. He pecked at the dishes, finding them strange and unappetizing, and wished for the time that the last of the cattle would be aboard and the *Shark* ready to sail.

Late the following afternoon, Captain Howe came aft to where Don Pedro sat under the poopdeck awning smoking a black-paper *cigarro*.

"Well, señor," he announced amiably, "I guess we can wind up this deal." He pointed his cigar at the waist of the ship, filled now almost solidly with bawling cattle. The stamp of hoofs was a rumbling thunder throughout the ship, and the click of horns as the closely packed animals shifted restlessly was like

the chorus of countless castanets. The odor of the herds hung over the vessel like a cloud, and swarms of small black flies buzzed back and forth like tiny bullets. "Come below and make me out a bill of sale."

"That is hardly necessary," Don Pedro said. "You have the cattle, and I am helpless."

Captain Howe winked slyly. "I'm not a fool, you know. First thing you'd do is notify the authorities, naturally. But if I have a bill of sale in your handwriting, and witnessed by a couple of my own loyal men, you can't touch me." He motioned toward the companionway. "Let's not waste time. Come below."

Don Pedro shrugged in apparent resignation and followed the ship-owner down the companionway to the cabin. He noticed that, for the first time, the door was unguarded; the loading of the cattle accomplished, Captain Howe no longer felt the need for further precautions. Inside, the captain sat before his desk, unlocked the drawer and took out writing materials. He pushed them across to Don Pedro, then froze in midmotion.

DON PEDRO stood, balancing easily to the gentle roll of the ship, and in his hand was the pistol Chato had supplied him. Now he held the big muzzle steadily aimed at the pirate's heart, with his finger curled around the trigger.

"I have never killed a man," he said calmly, "but I am ready to do so now. Remove your keys from that chain across your waistcoat—slowly—and toss them to me. Do not make a false move, captain, or I shall assuredly kill you."

But this was not the first time Captain Howe had faced death, and he did not hesitate. With a surge

of his slim shoulders he swung up his right arm, and the heavy inkpot in his hand took Don Pedro squarely in the face. The pistol exploded with a thin, dry report, and the next instant Don Pedro felt the pirate's strong fingers at his throat.

Captain Howe, for all his elegance, did not lack courage. He swarmed upon the *ranchero* like a raging tiger. Don Pedro, half stunned by the blow from the inkpot and blinded momentarily by its contents, was at a disadvantage the shipowner was quick to make capital of. Don Pedro clawed away the seeking hands for an instant and dashed the ink from his eyes, but Captain Howe returned to the attack with desperate fury. He was no fair fighter, but a vicious one; he brought up his knee in a savage thrust at Don Pedro's groin, and the younger man gasped with pain and nausea. Something rolled under his foot, throwing him off his already precarious balance, and he went over backward with the pirate clinging to him like a bur.

As he went down, Don Pedro threw his arms wide to break the fall, and his right hand closed over something cold and hard—the inkpot which had caused him to stumble. His left arm slid around the captain's neck then, imprisoning his head, and then Don Pedro brought the ink pot down on the man's skull with crushing force. He felt the captain go limp of a sudden and relax his throat hold. Rolling free, Don Pedro lifted the inkpot for another blow, but it was not needed; Captain Howe lay upon the thick-napped cabin rug, blood coursing from his temple. His eyes were closed, and his breath came in sobs.

Don Pedro snatched the keys from the wounded pirate and sprang to a heavy chest occupying one cor-

ner of the cabin. From this chest he had watched the captain pass out powder and ball to his men, but now it would serve another purpose.

He lifted out two canisters of powder and poured the contents on the rug in the middle of the cabin, keeping enough to make a thin trail to the French door giving on the balcony outside the room. Then he hurriedly piled furniture, drapes and tapestries together on the floor and over the whole thing he emptied the oil from the lamps. This done, he dragged the unconscious captain to the door, where he would be found before the flames consumed the cabin, and sprang to the French door and smashed it open with a lusty kick.

DON PEDRO paused then, took flint and steel from the pocket of his bolero, and struck a spark to the powder trail. When it sizzled and flared with a puff of dense black smoke, he climbed over the low balcony and dropped quietly into the warm sea. Here the bulge of the vessel's hull hid him from the deck above, and he swam with a few powerful strokes to the stern, where he secured himself in the rudder chains and waited.

Smoke began to pour out of the poop, followed almost immediately by a shout from the deck. Bare feet thudded on the deck above. A hoarse voice cried: "It's the captain! Get him out of there!" Someone else raised a shout, and Don Pedro recognized the harsh tones of big Trask, the brutal officer:

"Git them fire buckets aft, you loons! And find that Mex! He's the one what done this!"

Don Pedro caught the clash of buckets and the splash of water, but the smoke continued to mount even more heavily than before; nothing

could quench the flaming oil that he had been careful to spread around the cabin. Water would only increase the scope of the flames.

Now the bawling of the cattle in the waist was added to the hubbub. Don Pedro could imagine the rolling eyes, the terrified straining, and the final irresistible pressure of the milling tons of flesh that would crumple the ship's rails like paper and free the fire-crazed beasts into the sea. Nor had he long to wait. A crashing and splintering from above told him the first movement of the stampede had started, and when the splash of heavy bodies dropping into the water reached his ears, he heaved a long sigh of victory and satisfaction. He would lose a few head of stock; that was inevitable. But coast cattle are good swimmers, and the shore was not far off. His losses would be negligible.

In a few minutes the flames were leaping high, and the sea was black with bobbing heads as the longhorns headed for the beach with their horns gleaming in the late afternoon sunlight. The men on the ship were still trying to control the fire, but it was a hopeless task. Soon they would have to abandon the vessel and take to the boats.

A gigantic black steer came around the stern of the vessel, his powerful legs churning the water to foam. Don Pedro pushed off from the rudder chains, caught hold of the animal's horns and scissored his long legs around the thick neck. The steer, too terrified to be concerned with this new worry, bellowed once but kept swimming shoreward.

HALFWAY between the ship and the beach, Don Pedro heard a shout, then ducked instinctively as bullets hailed into the sea around

him. Then he shook the water from his eyes and took a fresh grip on the steer's horns. By the time the musketeers could reload, he would be well out of range.

The animal lurched under him suddenly, fighting for its feet, and Don Pedro pushed himself away and straightened his legs. The sand felt good under his feet, and he began wading toward the group of vaqueros and Indians, headed by Chato, who awaited him with shouts and wild gesturings on the shore. They ran into the water to meet him, crying out happy greeting and calling upon the saints to witness the safe deliverance of their master.

Chato, his fat face wrinkled in a joyous grin, flung his serape around Don Pedro as the young rancher gained the beach.

"*Por Dios, señor*, this is a tale that will be told in every village in California! There will be songs, there will be poems in your honor! There will be—"

Don Pedro laughed and began striding toward the ranchhouse. "Enough of your mouthings, Chato! Do you not observe that we are about to receive visitors?" He pointed seaward, where boats were pulling away from the flaming pirate ship and heading for the beach. "Dispatch at once a courier to the garrison at Monterey, and tell the *comandante* there to prepare accommodations for some permanent guests. Meanwhile, arm the men quickly, although I doubt that our visitors are in the mood for more trouble." At the ranchhouse door Don Pedro paused for one final instruction. Smiling, he said:

"Go you now and greet them, and say to the *Capitán* Howe that I will make him welcome as soon as I change to more formal clothing!"

PIT OF DOOM

by

Paul Ellsworth Triem

THAT year Big Jules and his diminutive partner penetrated far into a country of rugged pinnacles and water-carved canyons. Big Jules for the most part poled the boat up the foaming crest of the middle river, for at the sides were whirlpools that would have sucked men and boat under. But sometimes he had had to use the neck line—

take a turn round his huge chest, then push cautiously forward under hundred-foot cliffs of blue glacier ice. At these times Little Louie sat amidships, keeping the boat off with the pole.

They made camp in a land which probably no white man had ever seen. Together they cut the spruce logs for the cabin, with Jules cut-



*Like a man facing death,
Little Louie let himself
down into the gaping
canyon.*

ting three logs to Louie's one. And when the logs were cut and notched it was Big Jules, silent and apparently pondering some deep mystery of the northland, who lifted them to their place at the top of the wall. Louie tapped about with his light ax, cutting wedges and gathering sphagnum moss. Then it was time to set out the trap line.

Louie went out only once. The dizzy heights of this eerie land terrified him, although he pushed out his chest and boasted of his prowess. There was one canyon in particular that gave Little Louie bad dreams. You reached it by climbing a series of plateaus that were like giant steps. At last you came out upon a wind-swept ledge and were able to peer down, straight down, to where among the creeping shadows great pine trees showed—dwarfed by distance till they looked like club moss. One glance into that void sent Little Louie reeling back.

After that he stayed in the cabin. He cooked and cleaned up and split firewood, while Big Jules went ponderously about the job of tending the traps. Big Jules never protested when his partner failed to do his share of the work. He seemed not to know when he was being cheated.

The cold came on fast and the river froze solid and one night there was a heavy snow. Next morning Big Jules set out on snowshoes to uncover his traps. The afternoon passed and night came but Jules didn't return.

All that night the little man in the bunk near the fireplace lay listening. Sometimes he got up to tend the fire, and then he stood just inside the closed door, listening. When the late thin daylight came, Little Louie ate breakfast and stood in the doorway, staring uphill. He could see the wide swath left in the

soft snow by Big Jules' snowshoes. The pupils of his eyes were big and black as he strained his sight for a first glimpse of Big Jules, coming like a bear down toward the cabin. After he had eaten his noon meal he lifted down his snowshoes, belted on the warm wool jacket Big Jules had given him at Christmas, and headed up the giant staircase, on the trail of the missing man.

LITTLE LOUIE saw the trail his partner had left, and later he saw another track, made evidently by some wild thing that had gotten into one of Big Jules' traps and then had pulled the chain free. Big Jules had followed this trail. He would follow it till he caught up with the creature in the trap, for he was chicken-hearted about things suffering.

The man's tracks were on the left, the trail of the fox or marten on the right. At one point Jules had evidently broken into a run. That meant that he had sighted his quarry and was trying to overtake it. Louie tilted back his head and stood staring up in the direction the two of them had headed. Silhouetted against the dull steel of the winter sky he saw a rim of snow-crusting rock, as straight and sharp as if it had been drawn with a pen and a ruler. And now Little Louie knew that he was again approaching the canyon.

Climbing more slowly now, he saw where the two sets of tracks vanished. And he wondered if the thing Big Jules had caught was a werewolf, that had had the power to draw the big trapper on to his death. For those tracks reached the edge of the canyon wall, and disappeared. And Jules' snowshoes stood there on the brim.

As Louie stood there with his lips

parted, sweat formed in drops on his forehead. He held his breath, and in that instant there came to him a sound which he knew was a cry of pain.

Louie slipped his moccasins out from under the toe straps of his snowshoes. He went up the remaining slope cautiously and twice he stopped and looked back. But each time he pushed on, and at last he dropped to his belly and inched forward till his head was thrust over the edge of the canyon brim. Then he saw Big Jules.

The trapper lay on his face on a ledge scarcely wide enough for his shoulders. Farther along the ledge lay a dead fox, with one forepaw in a trap. The ledge was covered with snow, but Little Louie saw a sprinkling of gravel on it, and there was a raw place in the canyon wall where a bush had pulled out. And he realized that Big Jules had started to climb down to the ledge, and had fallen.

The man down there was breathing slowly. Little Louie crawled stealthily back, got to his feet, then snatched up his snowshoes. He tried to run without them, then got his moccasins under the toe straps and went precipitately down the slope.

THE return trip to the cabin was like flight in a nightmare. Louie struck the cabin door with both hands and fell in upon the puncheon floor. Up in an instant, he threw a pair of blankets on the bunk and began packing them with grub.

He turned at last toward the wall, where his rifle, and hunting knife and ax hung. And then for the first time his arms fell straight at his sides and his lips began to quiver. Every one of those things was a gift from Big Jules. Louie had always spent his share from the win-

ter's catch in the dance halls of Fort Yakut, but when he later needed something, Big Jules appeared silently with it, shaking his great bearded face roughly at any stammering thanks from Louie.

Little Louie sat flat on the floor. All the strength had gone out of him.

"That Big Jules—he my only friend," he whispered. "He cabin with me now for five winters. Who else take me?"

And he saw himself as he was—a coward, a boaster, not very bright. He had been kicked around the various camps till Big Jules met him. Now Big Jules was perhaps dying on a ledge above hell itself.

After a time Louie stood up. He looked vaguely round the cabin, then took his ax and hunting knife from their pegs and after that lifted down a coil of rope, the neck line Big Jules had used for towing the boat.

It was like flogging a terrified horse along a trail smelling of blood to force his agile body back up those giant stairs. But he did it, and lay flat to peer over into the canyon. Jules apparently hadn't stirred. This time Little Louie called to him.

"Jules—I fetch de rope. I let him down, you fasten de end, I pull you up, eh?"

Big Jules seemed to shiver. "I break bot' de arms," he called back unsteadily. "What good de rope to me?"

Louie backed away and sat up.

"Even if I get de rope roun' him, what good it do?" he thought. "Big Jules weigh two hunnert pound!"

He breathed out with relief, for this thing was manifestly impossible. He was free now from any farther obligation.

But all the time a detached frag-

ment of his mind went right on, on the trail of helping Big Jules. If Louie could get the rope round his partner's body, then rig up some kind of pulley.

But there was no pulley nearer than Yakut. There was nothing Little Louie could do. Yet he knew that this was not true. A Little Louie he had never known or suspected had gotten control of his will, and was driving him forward.

Sitting in the snow, he looked round. Near the edge of the canyon wall grew two black-boled pines. Each of them had its heavy limbs on the side away from the abyss. Little Louie studied them in uneasy silence, then crawled back and called down to the man on the ledge.

"Jules, boy, I fix everyt'ing! You lie still, I fix you up."

Backing away, he stood up and gripped his ax. He glanced from one to the other of the two pines, then set to work to fell the tree farthest from the edge.

Resinous chips went flying into the air and after a time the tree began to shiver with each ax blow, and then it swept down and sent the snow flying in a crystal mist. Louie marked off a section of the trunk and again started swinging his ax high and bringing it thudding down. When he had the log chopped free he walked again to the edge of the chasm, dropped to his chest, and peered over.

"Jules, I drop de rope—you get him round you, eh?" he called.

A muffled voice called back, "My arms smash like little sticks, I tell you!"

LITTLE LOUIE backed away and sat on his haunches, like a woodchuck. He sighed and shook his head and mopped sweat from his face. Then he stood up and walked

slowly, like a man who is going to lay his head on the block.

"I got to go down dere," he told himself huskily. "At las' dis t'ing I afraid of got me in de corner. Now I de big man, Big Jules, my boy."

Picking up the rope, he uncoiled it. He slung the ends free and tied one of them to the standing pine. He threw the other end over into the canyon, heard the rope swish, and saw it jerk taut. Then he caught hold of it and let himself slide over.

The powers of darkness swooped round Little Louie's head as he went slowly down toward the ledge. At first he looked down to where Big Jules was lying, but that way lay paralysis and destruction. He squeezed his eyes shut and felt himself pivoting till he knew he must be facing out over the terrible canyon. Then his feet touched rock.

Louie opened his eyes and looked down. He was standing just above Big Jules' shaggy head. He squatted, reached back, and gripped the dead fox. He swung it round and fastened the trap chain well up on the rope. Then he began to thread the end of the rope under the injured man's burly chest. He got it round Big Jules' body and tied it in a knot that would not slip.

"You all right now, Jules, boy," he said, and laid his light-boned hand on the big man's head. "I tak' care of you, Big Jules."

The task of climbing hand over hand twenty feet up to the canyon brim was not much in itself, for a wiry man like Little Louie. But it seemed to him as he swung free from the ledge that clammy hands, gripping his fingers, were striving to tear them loose. And even with his eyes closed he could see that void below his feet—with the tall pines looking like moss. For a moment he stopped climbing and just hung on.

There was no sound from the man on the ledge. Perhaps Big Jules was already dead. At that thought Louie went swiftly up the rope and hauled himself over to the top of the wall.

He untied the end of the rope from the pine tree, passed it twice round the black trunk, and dragged the end in his hands back to where the log he had cut lay in the snow. The end of the rope he fastened securely to this log and rolled the latter toward the edge of the rock wall.

He clung to the rope and pushed the log till it slid over, and the rope drew itself taut. With those two turns round the tree Little Louie could check the descent of the heavy pine log. He crouched on the edge of the abyss and looked over. He was no longer afraid. And he saw that Big Jules was beginning to rise—head bowed upon chest, like a wraith rising out of a coffin.

With bared teeth and staring eyes Louie tended the rope. Big Jules was coming up. Then he was within arm's reach. He was up over the edge of the wall—and with a swift slash of his hunting knife Little Louie cut the rope and yelled triumphantly as he hauled his friend back to safety.

A thick miner's candle burned on the table and the fireplace was piled with radiant coals. The air of the cabin room was filled with the aroma of frying side meat and a blue haze hung over the skillet.

Big Jules, lying on his bunk, opened his eyes and stirred. Louie crossed with lithe steps to his partner's side.

"You, Jules, boy," he whispered, and his eyes were luminous, "you all safe now. I haul you up . . . eh? I make travois an' haul you home. I splint bot' de arms. Now you lie still, I tak' care of you—like you tak' care of me."

THE END

SATANIC BORDERLAND SCOURGE



was the **FLAMING PHANTOM**, whose weird wizardry plunged Tommy Rockford into a chilling fracas. This great complete novel by Walker Tompkins is in the April 10th issue—plus an Oklahoma Kid novelette, **SNAKE-BITE SHOWDOWN**, by Lee Bond, and a smashing Kid Wolf novelette, **QUICKSILVER GUNS**, by Ward M. Stevens.

The renegade ranger, Blacky Solone, stars in **GUN-SMOKE PALAVER**, by James P. Webb, in the April 24th number, while Señor Red Mask lashes out at **LOOT FOR LOBOS**, in a dramatic novel by Guy L. Maynard. Another smashing yarn is **BLACK DEATH IN PIUTE**, by William F. Bragg, featuring red-headed Deputy Flash Moran.

Don't miss the new, more-for-your-money—

WILD WEST

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS



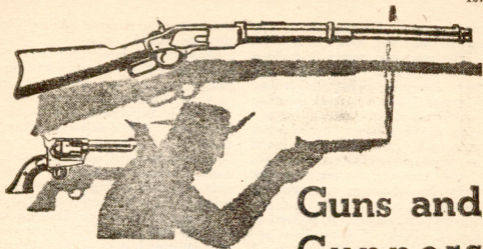
GRIZZLY BEARS

by Dan Shaw

EARLY AMERICANS recognized the grizzly bear as the wisest of all wild animals, not excepting the beaver. Many tribes of Indians worshiped the bear as having super-intelligence, and the fact that few of the savages attempted to kill a grizzly made these animals extremely dangerous and ferocious. They were, however, the first to discover that their wit and enormous physical power were no match for the white man's gun, and were the first wild animals to discover that dogs and men could follow their tracks by the scent, and to find a way to hide them. They began by leading dog packs over soft ground, where the animals had no difficulty in following. When the bear had succeeded in giving the impression that he was heading toward a certain locality, he would jump to the top of a fallen log, spring from that to a rock, and perhaps wade up a stream, reaching a point from which he could watch his pursuers. Incredible as this seems to be, it is a fact well established by hunters and naturalists. Frequently hound packs have been misled by the sagacity of a grizzly, and have led their hunters miles beyond the point where the animal was resting in perfect safety.

The grizzly possesses a keen sense of humor. There is no question but that he enjoys playing tricks, not only upon members of his own family, but upon those who hunt him. Not only does he do things for fun, but he enjoys sliding downhill and will actually make a place on a snowbank for the purpose of coasting. He never forgets an injury, and seems to be able to make a distinction between the individual man who has wounded him and the rest of the human race. Instances have been known where a bear appeared to be harmless to the members of a community until a hunter, who had shot him several years before, appeared; then the grizzly went on the warpath and took his revenge.

Many students of the grizzly found qualities that were clear evidence of reason, some that even indicated the calculation of an angle. One pair of young grizzlies, captured when they were no larger than rabbits, were taught to do many things that only domestic animals are supposed to do. The male of this pair discovered the pleasure of rocking in a chair when he was quite small. As he grew larger, the strength of the chairs was increased, but finally no chair he could find was sufficiently strong to hold him. He would come up to a chair, lay a huge paw upon it, discover that it rocked, then after a moment's consideration would turn away, showing his disappointment.



Guns and Gunners

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

WITH the war going on, American firearms lovers have been finding it very difficult to get new guns and even ammunition for their old ones. On June 15, 1942, all manufacture of ammunition for civilian consumption was stopped. This even included police ammunition. But the sportsman was not discouraged. War work cut his chances of hunting last season, anyway, and he has other seasons after the war to look forward to. Meanwhile, what?

Many chaps have turned to books. Increased war salaries have given them money rather difficult to spend with the shortage of civilian goods. Many of the boys are building up their libraries, and reading firearms books in their leisure time.

Mail during the past year has brought an increasing number of requests for book information. Firearms books have doubled in sales. Only a few new ones have come out.

Books on this subject are much more expensive than fiction books. The reason should be obvious, they cost a great deal more to prepare. Illustrations are found in most of them, and these are very expensive. The paper is of a much better quality, and so is the binding.

"I'd like to build a complete library of gun books," one chap writes. "Where can I get them, and how much will they cost?"

What a question! There is no such thing as a "complete" library. I've seen many good collections, but each has books not included in the other. And the cost? Real money! Your firearms editor has a good collection, a long way from being complete, yet the inventory for an insurance company shows a value of over a thousand dollars.

Building a book library is like building a firearms collection; logic should be used. Start slowly with books specializing in the types of guns in which you are most interested. Get a few important books, then fill in the collection with other numbers as time and money permits.

A few years ago this writer prepared the largest volume ever printed on American-made rifles. Titled "The Rifle in America," it contained over 650 pages about the size of a business letterhead, plus over 400 illustrations of American-

made guns. The volume is two inches thick and weighs 5 pounds.

The man who wants to build a library of useful gun books should first determine what he wants. There are books on target shooting, books on hunting, books on trap and skeet shooting, books on bird hunting. In fact, there are many books on special subjects such as woodchuck hunting, hunting telescope sights, hand loading, gun collecting, automatic guns, pistols and revolvers, and so on. It is hard to choose. Books of normal size sell at from about \$4 to \$10 and up. A few small "pocket manuals" sell at about a dollar.

I can't very well recommend a "library," but I can outline a few good books. Please bear in mind that the lists are not complete, and that many other good books are available—hundreds of them. But here you have a few:

"Automatic Arms," by Johnson & Haven. An excellent volume on all kinds of automatic arms—pistols, rifles, shotguns, machine guns, et cetera, by the designer of the Johnson auto rifle. \$5.

"Automatic Pistol Marksmanship," by Reichenbach. A fine pocket manual on how to shoot this type of gun. \$1.50.

"Book of the Springfield," by Crossman. The best and most complete book ever written on the famous .30-06 Springfield rifle.

"Textbook of Pistols and Revolvers." The best book on the subject ever written by the army's fin-

est authority, General Julian S. Hatcher. \$4.25.

"English Pistols and Revolvers," by George. Fine history on English guns.

"U. S. Martial Pistols and Revolvers," by Gluckman. For the collector who wants historical data. \$4.50.

"Gun Collecting," by Lt. Chappel. A basic volume to guide the beginning collector, giving recent sales prices of many old guns. \$2.50.

"Complete Guide to Handloading," by Phil Sharpe. A large volume covering history of the subject, listing all American powders and 6,000 loads for all cartridges. \$7.50.

"Six-gun Cartridges and Loads," by Elmer Keith. Good hand-loading information for the hand-gun fan. \$1.50

"Wilderness Hunting and Wildcraft," by Whelen. An old book packed full of practical big-game hunting dope. \$3.75.

"Military and Sporting Rifle Shooting," by Crossman. Another fine volume of practical data and instruction. \$4.50.

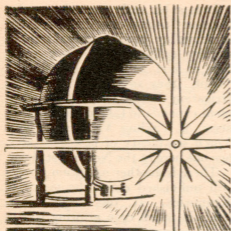
"Big Game Rifles and Cartridges," by Keith. Fine dope in a pocket manual. \$1.50.

"The Woodchuck Hunter," by Estey. A fine manual on this subject, including proper equipment. \$1.50.

"Six-guns and Bull's-eyes," by Reichenbach. The best manual on hand-gun shooting. \$1.50.

".22 Caliber Rifle Shooting," by Landis. Mostly target shooting. Excellent dope. \$3.75.

• This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, United States Army. He will continue to answer all letters from readers, either civilians or members of the services, with the least possible delay. Just address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

CORN is a familiar story in agricultural Iowa. They know all about it in the Hawkeye State. But it is something new and startling in central Washington, out in the Pacific Northwest. Particularly corn grown with the aid of irrigation water.

Tall corn, and lots of it, is the latest wrinkle in the Yakima Valley. The tasseled stalks are not replacing the valley's famous apples, its cherries, pears, peaches, cantaloupes and other specialty crops. Instead, corn supplements them. It is a sign that the Yakima section's growth has expanded. The valley now includes both livestock and feed crops in its broadening farm program.

W. B., who hails from Waterloo, Iowa, has heard something about corn being raised in the Yakima Valley more or less in the shadow of the Horse Heaven Hills. "I thought,"

his letter says skeptically, "much of that was irrigated land out there. Can corn be grown under irrigation conditions? Being raised myself on an Iowa farm, corn is right up my furrow, and I have long wanted to settle on some central Washington farmland. The very thought of the Pacific Northwest, goal of the pioneers who trekked across the long hard miles of the Oregon trail, has always fascinated me."

Without being brash, considering you are a corn expert, W. B., corn *can* be raised on irrigated land in central Washington. Farmers in the Yakima Valley are doing it. Several thousand acres were harvested last fall. Not much compared to Iowa or Kansas or Illinois. But pretty good for a starter in a fairly new enterprise. It may be that in time to come folks won't be at all surprised to see corn growing in fields watered by irrigation ditches.

Most all the farmers raising corn in the Yakima Valley are reported using good hybrid types borrowed direct from Iowa, too. Iowa No. 939, tested and sponsored by the Washington State Bureau of Agriculture's experimental branch at Prosser, seems to be a favorite. The local soils of central Washington apparently offer no extraordinary difficulties for the corn grower. A growing season of 150 days, and sufficiently high summer temperatures are climatic factors that could hardly be called a drawback. Top this off with the fact that in the Yakima Valley the corn's moisture needs are not dependent on the right amount of rain at the right time, but can be taken care of at will by irrigation and you can readily see why corn ought to and does grow tall in central Washington.

It is only within the last two or

three years that corn has been grown to any extent in the Yakima Valley. Most folks know only the orchard fruits and special crops for which the valley is famous and have jumped too hastily to the conclusion that corn is a Plains States proposition, at least as far as any extensive acreage is concerned.

Let's take a look at the short, but so far highly commendable record. Varieties adapted to the region ripen and make good mature feed. Much of the corn grown in the section to date is used as silage for local dairy and beef cattle. Corn growers report twenty to twenty-five tons per acre of silage as not unusual, or from 500 to 700 tons of feed in the silo out of a planting of thirty acres.

Some of the fields in which the corn was husked for hog feed or turkey rations have netted 100 bushels or more per acre. Those were the best, of course. But they do show what can be done with corn on the right type of rich soil plus irrigation water in central Washington.

Comparing corn with alfalfa, an old standard feed crop in this area, corn producing up to 100 bushels an acre requires half as much water as alfalfa yielding six to seven tons per acre. General practice among corn growers now in the Yakima Valley and the schedule recommended by the Experiment Station at Prosser is to give four waterings a year. A light irrigation is given just after planting, and the heaviest water sent over the fields at tasseling time.

It is a bit early to make predictions on this new crop departure, but some valley people are said to be mighty enthusiastic. They claim corn is just getting really started. "Wait," they say, "until that Roza Irrigation Project now in development expands to take in 72,000 more acres of Yakima Valley farmland. You'll see plenty of new corn acreage out here in the Northwest then."

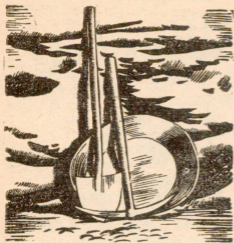
There is another irrigation project still unfinished down the valley at Kenniwick. It, too, might water lands in which corn growing will be found extremely practical in the future.

Corn wasn't tried much or given much attention in the Yakima Valley earlier for a good and sufficient reason. There was no general need for it. Originally the Yakima Valley was mostly open sagebrush desert. Irrigation set some half million acres of this rich but arid soil blooming in fruit orchards and vegetable crops. Hay and alfalfa were raised. These are all still extensively grown. But as dairying, the feeding of beef cattle and some hog raising gradually supplemented the older crops, the need for local-grown corn began to make itself felt.

That started the experiments. The result seems to be a new crop for the region, irrigated fields of green corn waving at the base of the Horse Heaven Hills. Maybe Iowa had better look to its laurels. It is hard to tell what farmers in the Pacific Northwest will think of next.

• 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.



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

PROSPECTORS have every right to be proud of their calling. There is an essential profession. Without the prospector, few new mines would be discovered, few new ore bodies of important metals located. The engineers and the men who develop mining properties come later. They are the follow-up crews. They, too, are needed. But in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, it is the prospector in the field who makes the finds that lead to mining history.

In the days of the early mining discoveries in the West the pioneer prospector, strictly an American product, was an individual who chose to go his own way and take his own chances on reaping the rewards of his efforts. He gambled on his skill, his fortitude and the richness of the mineral resources of the West. At times his monetary rewards were great. Often they were meager.

In any event the prospector lived a life he liked in the great outdoors

of a wonderful country. He worked hard and played the same way. Though he was apt to be devoid of book "larnin'," he developed a nose for ore and gained a practical knowledge of mineral formations and their relation to minable metal deposits that was amazing.

More than a few times he out-smarted the experts by plugging along after they had turned thumbs down on a particular deposit or formation or neighborhood. Above all, the prospector had indomitable perseverance in his endless search for the various metals, precious and industrial, on which modern civilization is so largely based.

The plain "jackass and blanket" prospector has been laughed at for his superstitions. He has been called a fool for following blind leads in barren country. He has been cursed for his shenanigans when he came out of the wilderness to blow off steam in some boom-town mining camp. On occasion he has been acclaimed a hero for his epoch-making discoveries that were in a large measure the seed from which grew the mining industry of the West.

In spite of jeers and cheers, the prospector has continued on his self-appointed way. He kept on in the hills and lonely mountains, pushing into the far places and penetrating the fastness of the desert. His job was finding mines. He is still finding them wherever and whenever he can.

The results of present-day prospectors' discoveries in the strategic metal field are being watched and checked by engineers and government experts. They are likely to have an important bearing on our domestic mineral economy in these times when tin and tungsten, chrome ore and vanadium, copper, lead and zinc are so urgently needed. Other

metals are also in this category. Keep looking for 'em is the modern prospector's motto.

M. P., whose letter comes from Tacoma, Washington, asked us to say a few words about "prospectors" this week. He would like to know just how, when and where the term originated.

The word has an interesting history, M. P. You can't find it in any dictionary published prior to 1850. Apparently it first came into use about 1845-50, when it was used in reference to certain pioneers in the old Galena, Illinois, lead district. The lead mines there, mostly shallow surface diggings, had been worked on a relatively small scale by the Indians. White men started working them about 1825. A few years later settlers in the region, farmers generally, found out they could turn a pretty penny now and then in their hunt for farmlands if they kept an eye out for lead showings and outcrops that could be sold to the pioneer mining interests.

Some of these men, perhaps more adept at tracing the lead formations than others, evidently found it more interesting and profitable to do nothing but search for lead deposits. They made no attempt to work their finds, but simply made a business of selling their discoveries to the miners.

To distinguish these men from the miners who dug out the lead, some now forgotten writer referred to them in dispatches to the East as "pros-

pectors"—men who prospected for new bodies of ore. It was an apt term and quickly caught on. Some of the "prospectors" became experts in their special art. They prided themselves in their distinctive title. It set them apart, and, they felt, elevated them above the status of a pick-and-shovel miner. The prospector was a craftsman. It took skill and knowledge to become a good one, and it still does.

Even today this professional feeling exists among quite a few older prospectors. Yet many of them are at least part-time miners, and generally good ones when they engage in development work on their own prospects or undertake to mine; that is, recover metal from their own small-scale gold lode or gold placer properties. Conversely, many miners have turned to prospecting when jobs were hard to find, dividing their occupational time between the two callings. Other ore hunters work for wages in a mine long enough to obtain a grubstake and spend the intervening stretches out in the hills prospecting.

The early discoveries of fabulously rich deposits of easily won placer gold in the West, and later in the Klondike and Alaska, made the term "prospector" a colorful word throughout the country. It soon became loosely used. But in the beginning a prospector was some punkin in the mining field. Calling him a miner was closely akin to an insult.

● 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

Almost everyone has a goal in life, some one thing they are striving for above all else. Some will find their goal always out of reach, elusive; others will attain theirs easily, through their own efforts or with the co-operation of friends and acquaintances. This week the Hollow Tree offers an opportunity for at least one Pen Pal to reach her goal easily—if you will give her a helping hand. How about it?

Dear Miss Rivers:

I just recently discovered the Hollow Tree and I find it very interesting. I have been answering some of the letters I find in it, but haven't received many replies, at least not as many as I'd like. I've set a goal for myself which is to have at least one Pen Pal from every State, so won't you please print my letter and help me reach my goal? I'd like to hear from those between sixteen and twenty. I have light-brown hair, hazel eyes, am five feet seven and weight one hundred and twenty pounds. I'm interested in all sports, especially roller skating and I collect post cards, too. Maybe someone can help me.—Mabel Haven-camp, 55 Katherine Street, Westfield, Massachusetts

Ladies preferred—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I hope you have a place left in the Hollow Tree for a lonesome fellow thirty-seven years old from the Keystone State. I am anxious to make friends all over the world, women preferred, my age. So come on, everyone, and fill my mailbox.—William Wallace, R. P. D. No. 4, Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania

Chick and Toots are waiting—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are both admirers of Western Story and the acquaintances brought about through the Hollow Tree. We would like you to print our plea for Pen Pals. Arvilla Eberle is eighteen and Threasa Marty is sixteen. Our hobbies are

the same—square dancing, swimming, ice skating and there are others. We also love cowboy music and stories. Arvilla is a Girl Guide and very proud of it. We are hoping to gain many friends through the Hollow Tree as we both love letters, so fill our mailboxes. Arvilla's nickname is Chick and Threasa's is Toots.—Arvilla Eberle, Pioneer Ranch, R. R. No. 2, and Threasa Marty, General Delivery, Kelowna, B. C., Canada

Shirley is lonely—

Dear Miss Rivers:

A friend of mine wrote you for Pen Pals and received so many interesting letters I thought I would try my luck. I am twenty years old, born January 25, 1922, and have blue eyes, brown curly hair, and am five feet six inches tall. My favorite sports are tennis, hunting and miniature golf and I love dancing. My hobby is collecting photographs and I would like to start a collection of miniature dolls and animals. Being engaged to one of Uncle Sam's leathernecks who at present is overseas, I am quite lonely. Everyone's invited to write to a lonely Texas girl.—Shirley Pierce, Rt. No. 2, Box 204, Esccondido, California

Zelma's heart is on the farm—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a working girl of twenty-three, away from home, and would like to find friends through the Hollow Tree. I have fun in the city, but I like farm life best. I enjoy the movies, good books, writing letters and am interested in poultry, gardening, nutrition and many other things, especially those pertaining to the country and farm life.—Zelma Swanson, care of General Delivery, San Antonio, Texas

Gladys doesn't waste words—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-six years old and a defense worker. Would like to write to anyone who is interested in dancing, reading and hiking.—Gladys Noble, 2715 North Spring, St. Louis, Missouri

And here's a Connecticut jitterbug—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to receive letters from boys and girls from all parts of the country. I like swing music, roller skating and football. I am sixteen years old and a sophomore in high school. I have blond hair and green eyes. I will exchange pictures and answer all letters.—Rosemary Shea, 10 Maple Avenue, Clinton, Connecticut

Lonesome boys, here's a friend—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an eighteen-year-old girl and attend Natural Bridge High School. I am very anxious to have some Pen Pals. My favorite hobby is collecting pictures, so won't you send along a few with that letter? I would like to hear from young and old, so come one, come all, fellows and gals, cowboys, and any boys who are lonesome, and sling a little ink my way. I'll be waiting to hear from you.—McChesney Resterson, Glasgow, Virginia

Mable's order is a big one—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like very much to hear from Pen Pals from all over the country. I live in a small town and have plenty of time to write, so come on, everybody, and drop me a line. I am a girl seventeen years of age and have brown hair and brown eyes, a fair complexion and am five feet ten inches tall. There is no age limit for my Pen Pals; I want everybody to write. My favorite sports are basketball, skating and bicycle riding, and my hobbies are collecting post cards, stamps and pictures. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots if you wish, so come on, Pen Pals, and fill my mailbox full.—Mable Miller, 105 West Polk Street, Alexandria, Indiana

This Canadian friend has the blues—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a twenty-year-old Canadian boy and would like to hear from Pals who are interested in cowboy songs and mountain ballads. I'm ill at present and cannot work or get in the army; I've really got the blues. My favorite pastime is singing and playing the guitar. I know a lot of songs and have quite a song collection, and I would be glad to exchange some with anyone who would like to.—Roger Planchet, 101 George Street, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

To the rescue, Hollow Tree members—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is an urgent S O S for Pen Pals from a lonesome girl of nineteen, five feet three, 112 pounds, with reddish-brown hair and brown eyes. I love horses, enjoy all sports and writing letters. I'll exchange photographs and answer all letters.—Wilma Lamphear, Kennewick, Washington

A surprise is in store for you—

Dear Miss Rivers:

For years and years I have read every issue of Western Story, and the Hollow Tree has always interested me. It's a great magazine, I must say. I want to join the group, Miss Rivers and hear from young and old from every corner of the world. I'm interested in all sports,

live in the Red River Valley of the North, the greatest wheat-raising district in the world. Those who answer this plea will receive a surprise so don't tarry.—Muller Kirkide, c/o Harry Hammoeller, Route No. 2, Grand Forks, North Dakota

Another young wife bids for Pals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

How's about putting a plea in the Hollow Tree for some real Pen Pals for me? I'm a steady reader of Western Story and would like to hear from young and old married or single. I'm eighteen years of age, married and have a fifteen-months-old baby girl. My husband is a bronco buster and we both hail from the desert. It's really lonesome out here, so please don't overlook my plea.—Mrs. C. D. Timmerman, Box 128, Shevlin, Oregon

Help Jimmie fill his album—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Just dropped in to ask you to aid me in roping some Pen Pals by the dozens. I've a big mailbox. My pastime is collecting snaps and cards and horseback riding is my favorite sport. All you Pen Pals send me a snapshot or photo. I need two hundred more to finish my album; there are three hundred already in it, and it holds five hundred. I want Pen Pals from here to yonder, girls and boys, men and women.—Jimmie Lee, 832 N. 7th, Paducah, Kentucky

Ever hear of a pinto bean?

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am fifteen years old, five feet four inches tall, have brown hair and hazel-colored eyes and am a sophomore in Estancia High School. I live on a pinto bean farm twelve miles northwest of Estancia. My hobbies are collecting stamps and buttons that you pin on clothes. I would be glad to hear from anyone and will answer all letters.—Buna Grossham, R. R. No. 1, Estancia, New Mexico

Wanda wants to be a nurse—

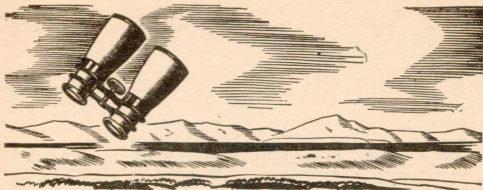
Dear Miss Rivers:

I have reading the Hollow Tree regularly for quite a while now and have found some real friends through it, but I would like some more, so will you make room for my plea, please? I'm a lonely farm girl in my teens five feet five inches tall with dark-brown hair and dark-blue eyes. My ambition is to be a nurse and my hobby is receiving and answering letters. I promise a prompt reply to all I may be fortunate enough to hear from, any age, but I prefer those who are lonely, too and really enjoy receiving letters. Will exchange snaps with all who wish to do so.—Wanda Jean Berry, Ravenden Springs, Arkansas

Freda has a large order!

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-five years old have brown hair and blue eyes, am five feet two, and tip the scales at 127 pounds. I am interested in music and play the guitar, and I love to read books and anything else I get my hands on. As a hobby I collect pictures of people and places. Can I enter your Hollow Tree and get some Pen Pals? Here's hoping I receive a dozen letters a day and I promise to answer all I get.—Freda Atkins, Ashford, West Virginia



Missing Department

WATFORD, J. P.—He is my father and has not been heard of since December, 1909, at which time he was in Dothan, Alabama. He is about six feet two inches tall, has gray eyes and a long scar on his right arm. He was born and raised in Graceville, Florida. He has four children, two boys and two girls, and we would like to know his whereabouts. If anyone has any information concerning him, please write to his daughter.—Mrs. Alma C. Starnes, R. F. D. No. 1, Box 140, Brinson, Georgia

SANTIAGO, GONZALES JAMES—He is my brother and was last heard from twenty years ago at which time he was working in a mine in Bingham, Utah. He is forty-two years old, about five feet nine inches tall and has dark, wavy hair, a dark complexion and light-brown eyes. If anyone has any information about him or knows his present whereabouts, I would appreciate hearing from them.—Mrs. Ben Selph, Aztec, New Mexico

CURTIS, IKE—He is my only uncle on my father's side and I would appreciate any information anyone might have about him. I am the only daughter of Charles and Violet Curtis. My uncle was still living in 1934 and was somewhere in Texas. He has a sister who also lived in Texas, her name was Florence Jackson. If anyone knows the whereabouts of either my uncle or his sister, I would appreciate it if they would please get in touch with me.—Mrs. May Richardson, Cottage 4, N. Scrapper Street, Vinita, Oklahoma

TEMPLETON, MRS. A. M. C.—She is the sister of Nels Scholen, and some fifty years ago lived in the vicinity of Round Lake, Saratoga County, New York. Nels Scholen and family would like to get in touch with her. If anyone knows her present address, please notify me.—O. E. Scholen, Rt. No. 2, Box 847B, Edmonds, Washington

LUNDGREN, EMIL and CARL—They are my father's two brothers, seventy-one and seventy-six years old respectively. They were last seen in San Ardo, California, in 1901 and both were blacksmiths. If anyone has any information concerning these two men, please get in touch with me.—R. D. Lundgren, 300 West Main Street, Santa Maria, California

LACEY, LENORA GRACE—She is my daughter. She ran away from home August 11, 1939, and has not been heard from since. She is twenty years old, has light-brown curly hair, gray eyes, and is about five feet tall. I have been worrying about her so much and will be very lonely now with one son already in the army and another son and my husband soon entering the service. If anyone knows her whereabouts, please get in touch with me, or ask her to communicate with her mother.—Mrs. Nora Lacey, Box 15, Smith Ferry, Pennsylvania

TOWNDROW, MRS. ROY (NEE IDA DANIELS)—I have received information that this friend of mine has married again and is living in Hot Springs, New Mexico. Since I do not know her new married name, I do not know how to locate her. She is about thirty years of age, slender, has blond hair and blue eyes. "Pat, if you see this, please write to your old pal."—Mrs. Edgar Pounds, c/o Mrs. Allie Pounds, New Castle, Texas

SANDERSON, LAURENCE and LEO—They are my two sons and I have not seen them since 1920. They were five and seven years old then. Laurence is thirty years old now and Leo twenty-eight. I am fifty-one years old, have remarried, and would like very much to locate my boys. If anyone knows their present whereabouts, please notify me.—Mrs. Thomas Gallagher, Box 72, Talbotton, Georgia

ROSNER, JOSEPH F.—He is my son, twenty-three years old, has brown hair and eyes, weighs about one hundred and twenty-two pounds, and is five feet four inches tall. When last heard from in June, 1941, he was in Chicago, Illinois. If anyone has seen or heard of him, please notify his mother.—Mrs. A. E. Rosner, 928 Ashland Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland

PAGE, NEIL CLAYTON—He is my husband and disappeared from home March 15, 1941. He is short, has short legs and long arms, very little hair, which is light-brown, and gray-green eyes. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. Mildred Page, 19240 Five Point Avenue, Detroit, Michigan

AMES, LORNING E.—He is my father and has been missing since about 1925. We believe he is in Phoenix, Arizona, where he is working as an auto mechanic. He is about thirty-five years old, five feet eleven inches tall. If anyone has any information concerning his whereabouts, please write to "J. A." in care of the Missing Department, Western Story

LEFORT and REMILLARD FAMILIES—My father's maiden name is Narcisse Lefort. My mother's maiden name was Melvina Remillard. Grandpa and grandma Lefort, Joseph and Mary, lived in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Grandpa Remillard, whose first name was Nasaire, and grandma Remillard, whose maiden name was Merence, Morisette, lived near Fall River, Massachusetts. If anyone has any information about anyone in these two branches of my family, I would appreciate hearing from them.—Mrs. Carl Lefort Davis, Sergeant Bluff, Iowa

KENNEDY, DANIEL—He was born near Menagh, County Tipperary, Ireland. Was last heard from in 1910 from Helena, Montana. He may have gone into some neighboring States or Canada. He lived in the Klondyke for some time, too. My father in Ireland has asked me to try to locate this man and I would appreciate any information anyone can give me about him. Write to "J. K." in care of the Missing Department, Western Story

ARNOLD, FLOYD CHARLES—He is my son, left home in November, 1935, and I have not heard from him since. He is forty-two years old, five feet seven inches tall, and weighed about one hundred and forty pounds. Has dark-brown hair, blue-gray eyes, and a medium complexion. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. Allie Arnold, West South G Street, Broken Bow, Nebraska

WILSON, EDWARD—He is my father and was last heard from in 1930 at which time he was living on South Hope Street, Los Angeles, California. He is a carpenter by trade. I have not seen my father since about 1926 and I would love to hear from him or from anyone knowing his present address.—Mrs. Georgia Poulton, 3316 Elm Street, Rockford, Illinois

WADE, H. and HAZEL C.—Send us your address. It may be important. Your brother is not so well. Our address and phone number is the same.—"Big Sis"

FAUGHT JOHN EUGENE—He is my stepson and I would like to know his whereabouts. He is the son of Guy and Irlby Daniels Faught and was born May 29, 1919, at Tipton Switch, near Ranger Texas. His mother and father were divorced and his mother married Frank Eddings, a railroader. I would appreciate any information as to his whereabouts.—Mrs. Ruth Faught, 746 East Washington Street, Sullivan, Indiana

NOTICE—I would like to get in touch with Clyde Golding, Guy Mills and Earl Hayes, who, in 1914 and 1915, were in Prince George and Usk, British Columbia, Canada.—Arthur M. Delrup, Tulsa, Oklahoma

BURNS CHARLES PRESTON—He is my father-in-law and was last heard from in 1926, at which time he was in Medford, Oregon. If he is still living, he would be eighty-six years old. He had a sister named Mrs. Mary Hamilton who lived in Oregon City, Oregon, and another named Mrs. Lucy Hitchcock who lived in Portland, Oregon. Anyone having any information about my father-in-law or either of his sisters, please get in touch with me.—Mrs. Charles P. Murray, Box 172, Oakridge, Oregon

HANAN MRS. LORENA—She was last heard of in Denver, Colorado. Has a fair complexion, red hair, is five feet tall. Has a daughter, Mary, about sixteen years old. "Please, Lorena, write to me. Your mother passed away in February, 1942."—Mrs. Boyd Cupples, Eagleville, Missouri

CASSIDY, GEORGE—He is my nephew, born in 1898 in Illinois. When he was quite small his father took him, we think, to Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. We have had no word since. His aunt is in very poor health and would like to hear from him. If anyone has any information as to his whereabouts, please write to me.—Mrs. E. V. Stephens, Salmon Arm, British Columbia, Canada

NOTICE—I am seeking some word of my kinfolks in Oklahoma. I left Oklahoma in 1926 and had fifteen or twenty uncles, aunts and cousins living near Justin, Hughes County, Oklahoma. I wrote many letters to them but received no answers. If any of them see this notice, please write to me.—D. R. Eslick, Wardell, Missouri

GARRETT, CECIL—He is my father and when last heard from in 1938 he was in Tulare, California. He would now be thirty-three years old, is five feet eleven inches tall, has brown hair and blue eyes, walks with a limp and was not in very good health. Any information concerning his whereabouts would be greatly appreciated by his son.—Jack Garrett, 231 Merced Street, Salinas, California

CLANCY, GEORGE—He is my brother and was last heard from in 1929 at which time he was in Norfolk, Virginia. He is fifty-four years old and a steel worker. If anyone knows his present whereabouts, please notify me.—John Clancy, Wayne Hotel, Ft. Wayne, Indiana

● There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

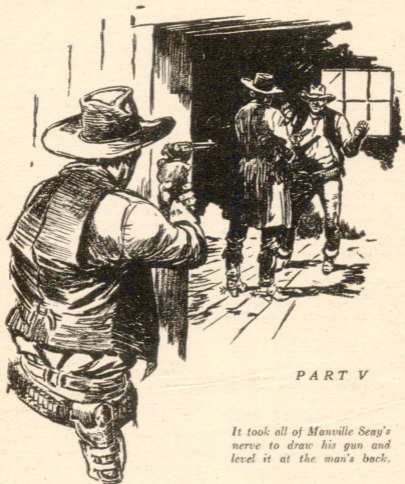
While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

by Bennett Foster



PART V

It took all of Manville Seay's nerve to draw his gun and level it at the man's back.

MAN TRACKS

The Story So Far:

In a country where rustlers, outlaws and raiding Indians make law enforcement difficult, the Hatchet Ranch, run by its half owner, Lane McLain, has a reputation for being able to hold its own. On his way in to the town of Aspinwall to meet his partner, an Easterner named Jud Warrend, who has come to Arizona for a rest, Lane makes a brief stop at the little town of Handout to deliver a warning to several rustlers who congregate there. When he has left the

group, two of them, Nosy Harmon and Clay Garret, decide they will spread the word that McLain is on the prod, in the hope that the man who has been rustling Hatchet stock will try to bushwhack the cattleman.

In Aspinwall, Judith Warrend, Jud's daughter, is impatient at Lane's delay and fails to understand a country where a man must sometimes take the law into his own hands. But that night after a dinner party she is looking out of her hotel window and

sees a man about to shoot Lane, who is standing talking to Guy Pryor, the city marshal. Her scream saves Lane's life, and Pryor, whirling, kills the would-be assassin—the man who has been rustling Hatchet stock.

Life at the Hatchet progresses peacefully and uneventfully save for the fact that Lane and Judith fall in love—to the disappointment of Neil Rodgers, Lane's closest friend and foreman, who has become infatuated with the girl. Without disclosing his feelings to Lane, Neil quits his job and joins up with Red Dowd, a hard case.

Crosby Agnew, an Easterner, decides to buy the English-owned Secate Ranch which adjoins the Hatchet, and take over the four main brands on that range. Because he suspects that Agnew is due to be swindled by Manville Seay, manager of the Secate, Lane agrees to receive and count cattle for the Easterner.

Meanwhile Marshal Pryor, who is also deputy sheriff of Aspinwall, has been given warrants for the arrest of Nosy Harmon and Clay Garret, who have secretly been working for Seay, and is shot in the back by Seay when he attempts to arrest Harmon.

CHAPTER XXI

AGNEW'S DECLARATION

THE livery stable horse was accustomed to the Junction road and took it without direction. Judith Warrend, leaning back against the seat, watched the aura of light over the western hills while the buggy wheels purred their rhythmic cadence in the soft sand. Wind touched her hair and her tilted head exposed the long, graceful line of her throat. Crosby Agnew, risking a glance, thought that he had never seen so lovely a picture.

"I feel guilty," Judith said. "We shouldn't have come, Crosby."

The man laughed, although he, too, was apprehensive. He had planned this expedition, determined that for once he would have Judith solely to himself.

"Why not?" he asked. "Surely you would rather ride than listen to the new minister expound."

"But Molly had planned for me to go with her to call on them," Judith said. "I really do feel guilty, Crosby."

"Molly," Agnew observed, "hasn't let you out of her sight. I wanted you for myself without Molly or the judge chaperoning. Molly acts as though she didn't trust either of us. I'll confess I haven't liked it."

"It has been trying," agreed Judith.

"As though," Agnew pursued the idea, "we were two small children that had to be constantly watched. You trust me, don't you, Judith?"

"Of course. But I'm not sure that I should let you drive. After all, you've only one hand. Suppose the horse should run away?"

"This horse?" Agnew laughed. "Don't mention it, Judith. You'll give him delusions of grandeur."

Judith's laugh joined the man's and the livery horse plodded sedately along. "Besides," Agnew continued, "my hand is nearly well. The doctor dressed it today and said that it was healing nicely."

"I was afraid that you would lose your arm." Judith's voice carried a recollection of her concern. "You were very ill."

"That was the whiskey Pickles gave me." Agnew laughed again. "How could anything happen with both you and Molly to nurse me? I'm really not very bright, Judith. I should have stayed in bed a month instead of three days."

"I suppose," Judith commented, "that you'll be going back now. When will you go, Crosby?"

"The doctor says that I should stay in town and have my hand dressed every day," Agnew answered. "Really I'm well enough now to leave. Will you miss me when I go, Judith?"

"Of course. It's been pleasant having you here."

"Just pleasant?"

No answer came from the girl. The livery horse, of its own volition, turned from the road, taking a dimmer way toward the east. Agnew kept his eyes on his companion, drinking in the sweet curve of her lips, her eyes half shuttered with the lashes long upon her cheeks, the wind-touched tendril of her hair that brushed a small ear.

CROSBY AGNEW had known women all his life. As Waite Agnew's son he was accepted everywhere, not for his father's sake alone. Being personable and accomplished, Crosby Agnew was welcomed wherever he went, and lovely women were no novelty. Indeed they had been part of a game he played, a game taken lightly by both players. No one had ever been hurt in those minor flirtations in New York or Boston or Philadelphia. But this was different. An ache welled up in the man, unnamed and unidentified.

"Star light, star bright, first star I've seen tonight—" Judith quoted.

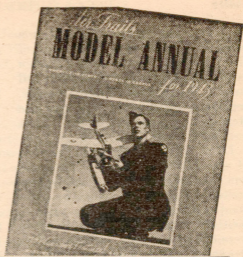
"Tell me what you wish," commanded Agnew.

"You've broken the charm," Judith protested. "Now it won't come true."

"Please tell me."

"I don't know what I would have wished." Judith rested her head on the seat back. "Isn't it lovely tonight? I think I might have wished that I could just ride like this, on an on, forever and ever."

When Agnew first met Judith at Judge Morton's he had admired her beauty and her sparkling wit. They had gravitated together naturally, drawn by their mutual background. Agnew loved music and it had been a delight to hear Judith play and see her at the piano. But any woman



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such as Judith would have been a relief in this strange wilderness of the West, and Agnew sensed it then even as he knew it now. Judith had turned to him for similar reasons, seeking a familiar type among the strangers she encountered. That had been at first.

Later, when Judith began her visit at the Mortons', while Lane built fence across Blocker Gap and Agnew waited for word to come, the girl's companionship had been a release. Neither was serious; simply they were two of one kind, surrounded by strangers. Their common interests, music, friends in the East, books that both had read, operas heard and places visited, offered topics for conversation. Each had used the other to stave off nostalgia. But this was different, these last few days had changed the status.

Agnew, studying Judith, could remember her concern as she bent above his bed, her relief when first he was allowed to sit up and journey to the living room, her pretty protests added to Molly's, when he transferred himself from Morton's to his room at the hotel, and how pleased she had been when, with his arm in a sling and a hostler from the livery driving him, he had come up the hill to visit. Surely he meant more than just a pleasant companionship to the girl, a stop gap for her idleness. Desperately he realized how much it meant to him to be important to Judith.

The girl flushed under his scrutiny. "Hadn't we better go back, Crosby?" she suggested tentatively.

"Not yet." Agnew did not realize that his voice was hoarse. "Not for a while. Please, Judith."

He was in love. Agnew knew that he was in love with this girl who leaned back against the seat of the

buggy, whose lovely voice had quoted the old nursery jingle, whose clear eyes gazed at the starlit sky. He was in love with her and she belonged to another man. With a twinge of conscience Agnew recalled Lane, dependable, four-square, honest, engaged now in work that he himself should be doing. He dismissed the thought. It was fair, Agnew told himself, almost fiercely, anything was fair when a man loved a woman! If McLain loved Judith he should not leave her unguarded. In McLain's place nothing would have torn Agnew from Judith, not promises or duty—nothing!

"You would?" he asked.

"Would what, Crosby?"

"Have wished that you could ride like this, on and on, forever and forever?"

"I think so."

"With me, Judith?"

How could Crosby Agnew know that Judith's concern, her tenderness, her freely given companionship had not been for him but for Lane? He had been Lane's deputy. Judith, having punished Lane for leaving her, was contrite. She missed Lane and when he came, concerned over Agnew, the girl's love welled over. The care she gave Agnew, her thoughtfulness, her companionship, were not for him at all but rather an overflow of her love and longing for Lane. The tone, the catch in Agnew's voice, warned Judith and she turned to him.

"Please, Crosby," she begged.

The horse, having reached the top of a long ascent, stopped to blow. Below them the country lay spread, twilight still bathing it, the moon tipping the eastern mountains spreading a soft light across the land. Agnew's voice, hoarse with his emotion, answered. "No! It's

too late to stop now. I love you, Judith!"

THE declaration was made. It lay bare and bold upon the serenity, like a scar. Judith turned her head away, and Agnew leaned forward, trying to see her face.

"I'm sorry that you said that," Judith murmured.

"I had to say it. It's true. I love you, Judith."

"Please," the girl protested once again. "Take me back now."

"Not yet. Not until I've told you, Judith!"

"But there's Lane," Judith remonstrated. "I'm engaged to Lane. Crosby, you're not being fair."

"And you're not being fair to me!" the man accused. "Hear me out, Judith! You think that you love Lane. But hear me, Judith! Listen to me! If you love him, why have you been so happy with me? You have been happy!"

"But—" Judith began.

Crosby's voice overwhelmed her. "You have been happy with me. You can't deny it. You and I don't belong in this desolate, forgotten country. We're different. You know we are, Judith. Could you live here, with no companionship, no beauty, no one that even speaks the same language? Can you go to the Hatchet and stay for the rest of your life? With mud walls and a dirt roof and no one but a native woman for companionship? Think, Judith. Could you?"

"I'll have Lane," Judith defended.

"You'll have Lane!" There was scorn in the hoarse voice. "How much will you have of him? Gone from morning to night while you're alone. Wrapped up in his work, with no time to take you anywhere and nowhere to take you. Would you be satisfied with that? You

know better. Can you live without music and friends, without any of the things you know? No, Judith. You can't. It would stifle you."

He could see that the girl was shaken. The appeal had been bold and direct and so savage that it must have effect. Judith's face showed doubt and hurt, and Agnew exploited the advantage he believed he had gained.

"Think of it. Think of living in this country! You saw a man killed the first night you were here. Apaches attacked you when you went to the ranch. Savagery all about you. No books, no music, nothing! Let me take you away from it. I love you, Judith. Marry me! I'll spend my life making you happy. You'll never regret it."

The moon hung over the hills now and all the land below was soft with light. Black shadows marked the brush and rocks and in the stillness Judith could discern blacker moving shadows. Judith straightened as the darker shapes took form. Those were horsemen on the road, two riders leading a third horse that bore a saddle. They paused at the foot of the hill. Agnew, intent on Judith, had not seen their approach.

"Answer me, Judith!" he pressed. "Tell me that you will."

"I— No! Please, Crosby!" Judith's voice was frightened, and Agnew, mistaking the cause, continued his pleading.

"You will! You must!"

The livery horse stood placidly, the lines lax on the dashboard where they had dropped. Below, the riders had disappeared and, heedless of Judith's protest, Agnew swept the girl into his arms, seeking to overcome her resistance. She struggled against him, her hands pushing on his chest, forcing him back. Her

voice was muffled. "No, Crosby! Please."

PASSION dulled the plea. Agnew's arms were hard and the girl stiffening against them, relaxed suddenly. For an instant Agnew was triumphant, believing that he had won. Then he, too, heard the sound, the swift hoofbeats of a moving horse. He released the girl and straightened. There was a rider on the road, not ten feet away, a tall man who reined in his horse and stared at them. Manville Seay's face was etched clearly in the moonlight, a mask of malignant cunning. Gradually the expression smoothed. Seay swept off his hat and amusement tinged his voice when he spoke.

"Good evening, Crosby. Miss Warrend."

Agnew managed to answer. "Good evening, Manville."

"A beautiful night," Seay drawled. "Beautiful. I trust you are enjoying it?"

"We are just going back," Agnew stated stiffly. "Miss Warrend and I have been riding."

"Riding?" Seay drawled. "Yes, I see. Well, I'll not detain you." He bowed with elaborate courtesy, replaced his hat, and reining his horse around the buggy, rode on. His laugh came floating back, taunting and sinister.

"I'm sorry, Judith," Agnew apologized when the sound of Seay's horse faded away. "I didn't dream—"

"You had no right!" Judith interrupted indignantly. "Whatever made you act so? You had no right to touch me."

"Perhaps not." Agnew's voice was low. "I lost my head. I love you, Judith, believe me, I do; and seeing you so lovely and— Forgive me. Please."

The anger, drained out of

the girl. Agnew was so humble, so contrite that she could not maintain her wrath. An essential fairness spoke to her. She was equally to blame. If she had not been persuaded to come, none of this would have happened. Swift anger was supplanted by apprehension.

"I was to blame." Judith's voice was contrite. "I shouldn't have come. But it's been so dull in town and— Do you think he'll mention it, Crosby? If Lane found out—" Judith let the sentence stand unfinished.

"Manville won't talk," Agnew said with an assurance he was far from feeling. "Don't worry, my dear. I'll see him and explain. I'm sure that he'll say nothing."

The girl shivered. "Did you see his face?" she asked. "It was . . . evil. That's the only word I can think of. What he must have thought when he saw us here!"

Agnew resumed the lines and, pulling off the road into a clearing, swung the buggy in a circle. They retraced their way down the hill and reached its foot before the man spoke.

"You should hate me, Judith. I hope you don't."

"No. I don't hate you."

"But you don't love me." Agnew's voice was very soft. "I know that now. I've hurt you, Judith. I'll do anything to make amends."

"I've been wrong, too," the girl said frankly. "I think— We'll say it was the moonlight, Crosby. Perhaps we were both a little mad."

"You're being kind," Agnew said. "There is one thing, Judith: if ever you need help, if ever I can be of service, you must promise to call on me. Promise?"

"Of course." Judith placed her hand fleetingly on Agnew's. "Of course—good friend."

CHAPTER XXII

SEAY MAKES PLANS

WHEN Manville Seay had stepped, gun in hand, from behind the shed corner at Harmon's he was still fearful. This was not the first man he had killed, but never had he dealt with one so dangerous as Guy Pryor. It had taken all his nerve, all the courage he could muster to draw his gun and level it at Pryor's back. Indeed, Seay's gun hand had been so shaken that he was forced to steady it with the other. Pryor was dangerous and deadly as a bull rattlesnake in rutting time. If the shot missed, Pryor would turn, the shotgun would flame, and that would spell finis for Manville Seay. And still Seay had fired, knowing that he must, knowing that if Nosy Harmon was taken into town, all his chicanery would be exposed and would lie rawly naked for all to see. He pulled the trigger and saw the man go down, saw Harmon leap and, snatching up the shotgun, discharge it. And then Seay came from behind the shed.

For a moment he did not speak. Harmon, cursing savagely, kicked the dead man, not once but many times, and finally Seay found his voice.

"We've got to get rid of him," he rasped. "Don't do that, Nosy! We've got to get him out of here and get out ourselves. He might not be alone."

Some measure of sanity returned to Harmon's eyes. He backed away from the body and, stooping, picked up the weapons he had discarded. "How'd you get here?" he demanded. "Never mind; you come

in pat. You're right. We've got to get him out of here."

Seay's mind began to work again. "We've got to fix this so nobody will know!" he rasped. "What did he say before I shot? Why was he after you? He's never worked out of Aspinwall before."

"He said he had a warrant for me," Harmon growled. "He said that Buntlin had give it to him. Damn Buntlin! I'll fix him. Sickin' his dogs on me. I'll get Buntlin if it's the last thing I do!"

"Not now," Seay ordered. "The first thing is to get Pryor away from here. Where's his horse?"

For answer the gray stamped in the shed and both men jumped, Harmon wheeling toward the door, his gun lifted. The gray stamped again and slow relief sagged both men's shoulders.

"His horse is in the shed," Harmon rasped. "He was waitin' in there for me. Damn him! I thought for a minute somebody was in the shed."

"So did I," Seay agreed.

"What'll we do with him?" Harmon glanced toward Pryor's body. "I'll tell you they'll be out lookin' for him. It ain't goin' to be easy to hide this."

"We've got to think," Seay said. He stood staring down at the man he had killed, ideas forming in his mind.

"Take yore time," Harmon drawled. "We got all night."

"We're going to fix this," said Seay. "I think I know how. We'll load him up and pull out north."

"An' deliver him in Junction?" Harmon scoffed.

"And deliver him in Junction," Seay answered steadily. "His horse, anyhow."

"His horse?"

"If Pryor's horse is found in Junc-

tion tomorrow morning, what will folks think?" Seay demanded.

"They won't think. They'll look around for Pryor."

"And they won't find him. Pryor will be about six feet underground." Seay's mind was working now, his ideas taking shape. "They'll find his horse in Junction and they won't find Pryor. We'll leave the horse tied to a hitch rack. They'll think Pryor left him there."

"And what good will that do us?" Harmon was slow to comprehend.

"This much good: We're going to bury Pryor where nobody will find him. But they *will* find his horse tied to a rack in Junction. A freight pulls through Junction early in the morning. The talk will be that Pryor was on it, that he pulled out because he was afraid to serve that warrant."

"Buntlin!" Harmon snarled, and Seay saw that he had made a mistake in mentioning the warrant. "He give it to Pryor. When I get hold of Buntlin— Where would Buntlin get a warrant for me anyhow? Who swore it out?"

"I knew about the warrant," Seay said quietly. "Jack told me. He wasn't going to serve it. The Warrend girl swore out complaints against you and Clay."

"The Warrend girl?" Harmon cursed again, a torrent of savagery. "Then McLain's behind it! He didn't have guts enough to brace me an' Clay himself. By thunder, I knew that he was yellow! Hidin' behind a woman!"

Seay's point was almost won. "Are you going to let him get away with it?" he drawled.

"You know I ain't!" Harmon's eyes were pin points in his working face. "I'll get McLain. Buntlin, too. Why, damn him! He—"

"Don't blame Buntlin until you know how it happened!" Seay snapped. "I don't think Jack gave Pryor that warrant. I think that's more of McLain's work. Jack had made Pryor his deputy, you know. The folks in Aspinwall made him do it when Pryor got the marshal's job. Let's go, Nosy. We'd better get at this."

RELUCTANTLY Harmon turned toward the shed. "I don't think it'll work," he complained.

"Then think of something better!" Seay said with angry impatience.

Harmon brought the horse and a piece of old canvas from the shed. The canvas covered the saddle and Pryor's limp body was disposed upon it and lashed in place. They made a quick and thorough survey of the corral and shed, careful to see that no evidence of Pryor's presence was left. Then, after Harmon had re-saddled and Seay reclaimed his horse, they rode away. Where an arroyo cut down toward Rio Bosque, they stopped and unloaded the body, disposing it against the bank and pinioning it with stones. The overhanging bank was caved so that stones, body, canvas, all were hidden; then satisfied with a task well done, they went back toward the Handout road, talking as they traveled.

Harmon, more controlled now, gave Seay a brief account of the happenings south of the fence.

"They jumped us when we were movin' cattle, like you wanted," he stated. "McLain an' the colored feller an' another man. It looked like Harbury, but I ain't sure. Anyhow we took a shot at 'em to warn 'em off an' they come down on us. Clay was hit first thing an' them yellow-livered *paisanos* I had along struck out for the timber. I got

Clay into the trees an' he died on me. Right there. Never said a word. I don't know how he made it that far. He was hit hard. I sent one of the Mexicans to the ranch for a shovel an' we planted Clay. There wasn't no sense to bringin' him in."

Seay nodded agreement. There was indeed no sense in bringing the death of Clay Garret to the attention of the public. "What about it?" he demanded. "Are you going to get some cows around that fence for me? That's what I came to see you about and it's lucky that I did. Are you going to move some cattle?"

"There ain't a chance," Harmon growled. "I couldn't get a crew into that country. McLain an' them are ridin' it. I can't move cows by myself."

Seay did not press the point. "But you're going to level off with McLain for what he did, aren't you?" he drawled.

"Yo're damned right I am!" Nosy Harmon snapped.

They were well along the Hand-out road now, a long rise confronting them, the shadows of the brush upon it black in the moonlight. Seay reined in and Harmon paused, their horses close together. "Here's where we split," Seay announced. "You go on to Junction and put Pryor's horse where it will be found, and I'll get on to Aspinwall."

"What's the idea?" Harmon demanded suspiciously.

"To find out what happened," answered Seay. "I want to know how Pryor got those warrants. And I want to be on hand tomorrow when word comes in about finding Pryor's horse in Junction."

"Go on then," Harmon growled,

and started across the road into the brush.

Seay hesitated and then rode after him. "You won't forget about McLain?" he asked.

"Not by a damned sight! And I won't forget that you killed Pryor, neither. You remember that, too!"

Seay hesitated and then said: "I'm not likely to forget it. I'll get in touch with you through Ryan. Better stay pretty close until you hear from me."

"I'll look after myself!" Harmon growled, and Seay swung away, back toward the west.

His horse climbed at an angle up the long slope, and Seay, letting the animal have its way, scowled to himself. It might have been better to let Pryor take Nosy. But, no, that would never have done. Harmon would have talked and spilled his guts. This way was best. Seay needed Nosy for a while, until McLain was out of the way, at least. After that it would be different.

Seay crowned the rise and there in the road was a buggy, its top down. He saw the two on the seat, the woman close held in the man's arms. For an instant surprise filled Seay, and then fear. His hand swept back to his gun and then dropped away, and the two on the buggy seat drew apart. Agnew and Judith Warrend! What were they doing here? The answer came like a flash and Seay's fright was gone. He swept off his hat with mock courtliness and indulged in a brief colloquy. The humor of the situation pleased him and when he rode on he laughed. Momentarily Guy Pryor and the tragedy of the corral were forgotten. Here was a bull whip placed in his hand. He was master of the situation and he would wield the lash!

CHAPTER XXIII

A STRANGE LETTER

PORTER said: "There ain't a thousand head in the whole country. I don't believe there's five hundred head. I've rode it an' I know." His face was gloomy and he stared toward the cloudy north.

Lane, looking at Porter and Harbury and Raoul standing about him, felt compassion for the men. They had done their best and they were through. Nothing that Lane could do changed the fact. He tried to console them, although he realized the uselessness of the effort.

"Maybe you didn't get all over it," he said. "Maybe there's more in the hills that you missed. It's been raining and a man doesn't see too well in a rain."

"Remnants," Porter growled. "Ol' *ladinos* that we could spend a month gettin' out. There ain't enough of 'em to make it worth while. Rain or not, I could see 'em if they was there. We're stuck."

Raoul found a ray of hope and advanced it. "Mebbe Seay—" he began.

"Seay ain't even at his wagons!" Porter snapped. "He ain't been there for some time. His foreman don't know where he's gone or why. We're finished, I tell you. What's the total tally, McLain?"

Lane looked at the tally book. "Fourteen thousand, six hundred and three head," he answered. "You'd better make another gather, Porter. If you'll take your crew, and Harbury and Raoul take theirs, you might get the cattle."

"Five thousand head?" Porter looked at Lane. "You know we won't get 'em. It's no use, McLain. They just ain't there. I'm done. Now what I want is to see Seay!"

Harbury nodded, but Raoul scowled at Lane. "If it hadn't been for you," he growled, "Agnew would have taken a book count on these cattle. If you'd kept yore nose out of this business we wouldn't be in a jackpot."

Lane had expected this. He said nothing in answer to Raoul. Harbury's eyes, as he looked at Lane, also held an angry glint. "That's right," he agreed. "You had to butt in, McLain. Do you know what this means? It means that we're short five thousand head of stock. It means about a hundred thousand dollars."

"You went through with it," Lane said. "I'll give you that. You were game."

"An' we got stuck!" Raoul's anger had mounted. "A hundred thousand dollars! That's enough to wipe every one of us out. Damn you, McLain. If you'd kept yore bill out we'd have been all right."

"And what about Agnew?" Lane asked coolly.

"Hell! He's got plenty of money!" Raoul snarled. "What's money to him? It ain't his that he's spendin', anyhow. It's his father's. It's damned funny to me, McLain! We've been yore neighbors for a long time an' here this Eastern dude comes in an' you take up with him. You went against yore own kind of folks."

"You'd rather," Lane drawled, "have put it over on Agnew than to have had an honest count? Is that it? That's the way you talk. You went into this to cheat Agnew?"

"No, I didn't!" Raoul's anger flashed hot again. "I had the cattle I said I had. If you'd checked the brands you'd know that. But I still say that you sided him against us. I still say that."

"We made our mistake," Porter rumbled, "when we all signed the same contract. That's where we fell down. It's Seay, damn him! He's the one that's short of cattle. Wait till I get a hold of Seay. I'm goin' to make him—"

"You'll have a chance pretty soon," Nebraska, standing beside Lane, drawled the interruption. "There's somebody comin' down the fence an' I think it's Seay."

THE men turned. In the west a horseman rode up from a depression, showed briefly and then disappeared again. "Seay!" Porter snapped. "Yo're right, Nebraska. We'll quit talkin' till he gets here."

They waited, glimpsing the horseman's yellow slicker as he came at a trot along the wire, alternately appearing and dropping from sight. Manville Seay rode jauntily despite his draping slicker and sodden hat; not at all like a man caught in chicanery; assured, confident, and smiling. Reining in, he swung down and advanced toward the group by the wagon.

"Howdy," he greeted. "Just get done for today?"

"We've got clear done," growled Porter. "For today an' every other day. We're through an' we ain't got the cattle. Our tally's just over fourteen thousand. Where's the other six thousand, Seay? Where's the cows you claimed you had? We didn't find 'em!"

Seay smiled confidently at Porter. "You didn't know where to look," he answered. "They're back in the hills."

"Then you better hyper out an' get 'em!" Porter's tone and appearance were threatening. "We don't aim to get stuck for a hundred thousand dollars. Not on account of you."

WS—10E

Raoul and Harbury, too, were facing Seay, glaring at him angrily. Seay appeared unconcerned. "I've got a letter for you, McLain," he announced casually. "Here it is." That he was enjoying himself was apparent as he reached under his slicker and brought out an envelope.

Lane opened the letter slowly, watching Seay as his finger ripped the flap. He glanced at the unfolded paper, his eyes widening as he read.

"Agnew sent this?" Lane asked, disbelief in his voice.

"That's his signature," Seay drawled. "Can't you see?"

Slowly Lane's head nodded. "It's his signature," he admitted.

"You could tell the boys what he says," Seay prompted.

"I'll read it." Lane's voice was terse. "'Dear McLain:—This is dated yesterday, in Aspinwall—'Dear McLain: By now you will have received the bulk of the cattle bought by me. Mr. Seay assures me that the rest are in the hills and that it will be a costly and lengthy task to round them up and count them. I am sure that this is unnecessary and therefore, to avoid more delay and expense, we will consider that all the cattle have been received and I will settle with the sellers accordingly. Your services and that of the crew will no longer be necessary and I shall settle my bill with you at the earliest opportunity. Thanking you for your help and services, I am, Very truly yours, Crosby Agnew.'"

Lifting his eyes from the letter, Lane stared unbelievably at Manville Seay. Seay's grin had become a triumphant smirk.

"I expect," he announced, "that you and the Hatchet crew can roll your beds and go home, McLain."

SLOWLY the purport of the letter sank in. Raoul's face was a map of shifting emotions. At first it mirrored disbelief, then gradually that was dispelled and, snatching his hat from his head, Raoul threw it into the air and as the hat fell, jumped upon it joyfully, his voice ringing out in a shrill whoop of glee. "We're done, by jacks! Done! Agnew's taken our cattle. We ain't short a cow! We're done!" He caught Harbury's shoulders and shook the man joyfully.

Harbury, too, showed the release of pressure. As Raoul shook him, so now the other pounded Raoul's back and the two indulged in a gleeful, impromptu war dance. Seay grinned sardonically at their clumsy antics and turned to Porter.

"Satisfied, Able?" he drawled.

"I reckon," Porter growled. "I've got to be. But I sure don't *sabe* this. Agnew was hell-bent to count 'em an' then he changed his mind. I sure don't *sabe* it."

"You don't have to understand it," Seay returned. "It ought to be enough for you that Agnew's satisfied and that he's going to pay off."

"Mebbe." Porter pushed back his hat and scratched his head. Harbury and Raoul, their first exuberance over, had stopped their pomeling and rejoined the others.

"How'd you do it, Manville?" Raoul demanded.

"*Everybody* in this country"—Seay's eyes challenged Lane—"doesn't think I'm a crook. That's how I did it. I convinced Agnew that there was no need to go any further with this foolishness. Well, McLain?"

Lane glanced at the refolded letter in his hand and then at Seay. "Well, what?" he drawled.

"What are you going to do?"

"Pull out." Lane's voice was calm. "That's all there is left to do. Agnew's satisfied and I'm working for Agnew." He tucked the letter into his shirt pocket.

"I'll take that letter then," Seay announced, holding out his hand.

"It's written to me." Lane's eyebrows lifted quizzically. "I'll keep it."

"But that shows that Agnew's goin' to take the cattle," Raoul expostulated. "That shows we don't have to deliver any more."

"It will be safe with me," drawled Lane.

Seay took an impulsive step then stopped short as Nebraska and Ben Israel moved in concert. "The boss will look after that letter," Nebraska stated. "Don't worry about it."

Seay glanced at Porter, then at Raoul. "Well," he said, and jerked his head toward the waiting horses. Plainly he wanted to talk without Lane's presence.

Raoul said, "Then take care of it if you're so set," and, wheeling, walked to his mount. Seay followed and, more slowly, Porter and Harbury walked away, Porter calling: "Be back in a minute, McLain." The four made a little group, well away from the wagon, each man holding his horse.

"He don't like it," Seay grinned at Raoul and Harbury. "He can't take it. He thought we didn't have the cattle to fill that contract. This is worth a ride in a rainstorm."

"You must have had them cows hid good," Porter rumbled. "We rode all that country north an' couldn't find 'em."

"They're there all right," Seay assured him casually. "You just didn't know where to look. Well, what's the program now?"

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READY

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Give more this year—give double if you can.



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**AMERICAN
RED CROSS**

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HARBURY glanced toward the west where a heavy cloudbank hung. The sky was overcast and an occasional drop of rain spatted sharply, driven by a cold wind. "You sure wanted to get here," he commented. "That's a heavy rain over west, ain't it?"

"Plenty heavy," Seay agreed. "I did want to get here. There was no use in keeping you working after I had that letter. I came right out, rain or no rain."

"I don't like McLain keepin' it," complained Raoul. "It's all we've got to show."

"Agnew won't go back on his word," Seay assured. "You've got nothing to worry about. We'll all go to town and get this settled."

"I'm goin' up to my crew," Porter rumbled. "I'll send 'em back to the ranch. No use of them wastin' any more time tryin' to gather cows, I reckon, an' no use payin' 'em any more. It costs me money to run that wagon."

"That's right," Harbury agreed. "I'll hit for my outfit, too. How about you, Francis? Goin' with me?"

"I might as well," Raoul agreed. "No use runnin' up expense. Manville, I was thinkin' pretty hard of you awhile ago. I take it all back."

"Me, too." Harbury reached out and shook Seay's hand. "I was sure mistaken about you."

"I don't blame you boys," Seay said. "I guess it did look bad. Who I blame is McLain. If he hadn't talked Agnew into it we'd have done this in the first place and we wouldn't have had to spend all this time and money rounding up our stock. When will you get to town, Jimmer?"

"Tomorrow, I reckon," Harbury

answered. "I want to get this settled up."

"Me, too," Raoul added.

"How about you, Able?"

Porter was frowning thoughtfully. "I'll send my crew back to the ranch," he said slowly. "I'll try to get into Aspinwall tomorrow."

"Aren't you suited?" demanded Seay.

"I don't know whether I am or not." Porter's face told nothing. "I never like to go against somethin' I don't *sabe*. Well—"

"By Jehoshaphat, McLain don't waste any time!" Raoul interrupted. "Look. They're brin' in the remuda. I reckon he's pullin' out right away."

"An' we'd better not waste any time neither," Harbury announced. "It's goin' to rain again."

INDEED Lane was wasting no time. When Seay, with Harbury, Raoul and Porter moved away from the wagon, Lane turned to his men. A little outburst of talk followed Seay's departure, Cuff demanding profanely to know what had happened to Agnew, Nebraska growling that the Easterner had lost his nerve. The wrangler, the two vaqueros and Pancho looked on interestedly.

Lane abruptly checked the outburst. "Cuff, you go and tell Pickles to get his outfit together and bring it here. Nebraska, you'll ride down and tell Emelio the same thing. You'll start home in the morning." He turned and snapped an order to have the remuda brought in and the wrangler moved.

"Home?" Cuff asked.

"Home! I wish we'd never left it."

"Where are you goin', Lane?"

"To Aspinwall. I want to see Agnew."

Cuff glanced at the sky. "It's goin'

to rain again," he predicted, just as Harbury had done. "You'll get wet."

"They're goin' to their camp," growled Nebraska, watching Seay, Raoul, Harbury and Porter mount. "I thought old man Porter was comin' back."

"No need for them to come back," Lane stated. "They've got what they want."

"So," Cuff drawled, "we work a month an' don't get done an' then we're called off the job. It's damned funny. What's the orders after we get to the Hatchet? Stay there?"

Lane debated a moment. These men had been out a long time, working steadily. "You can go to town," he announced. "I'll be at the hotel and you can get a check if you want some money. I don't think I'll be in town long."

"Goin' to fly the eagle!" An anticipatory grin spread across Cuff's bearded face. "I can stand some time in town. How about you, Nebraska?"

"You don't want one of us to go in with you?" Nebraska drawled, looking at Lane.

"No." Lane was very positive. "Get the outfit home. Ben, you go with it. There's no need to ride herd on me like you've been doing."

Both Cuff and Nebraska appeared startled, but Israel did not change expression. "How'd you know that?" Cuff demanded.

"I know you three." Lane smiled tightly. "This time Ben goes home. Let's get at it before the rain starts. Here come the horses."

The horses were penned and mounts roped out. As Lane saddled Soldado he gave a few last instructions. Cuff and Nebraska mounted and rode along the fence, one west, one east. Israel nodded his graying head to the last of Lane's orders and

spoke a warning. "You be careful, Mist' Lane. It's rained a heap an' that sand along the bosque is awful quick."

"I'll be careful," Lane agreed and swung up to his saddle. He lifted his hand to Israel, reined Soldado sharply and rode southwest. The big bay was full of vinegar, showing that he wanted to run. There was activity at the camp north of the fence and Lane smiled sardonically as he controlled Soldado. Seay wasn't wasting any time and neither were the others. They had what they wanted and were leaving. Finding that he couldn't run, Soldado struck a steady saddle gait.

LANE'S mind was busy as he rode. Something had happened. Just what he couldn't imagine, but some pressure had been put on Crosby Agnew to make him call off the receiving. Seay was behind it and from pondering the problem of Agnew's change in plans, Lane fell to considering Seay.

The man was clever, unscrupulous and dangerous. Abstractedly Lane considered his own position with regard to Manville Seay. He had never liked Seay, had distrusted him, believed that Seay was not entirely straight, and yet, until recently, he had done nothing about his dislikes and beliefs. Seay and the Secate Ranch had been neighbors for some time, but until now Lane had not turned a hand either way, for or against the man. But now here he was, riding to Aspinwall, thinking about Seay and finding himself stirred and angry. Why?

Lane's mental process hesitated, gathering itself for this introspection. There was first the fact that he simply didn't like Seay. There were some men like that, men whom it was instinctive to dislike and dis-

trust, just as a man was filled with dislike and cold and purposeful destruction when he saw a poisonous snake. Seay affected Lane that way. And then Seay's talk in the Orient had been taunting and irritating, and it was instinctive for Lane to rise and take it out of him. The object of Seay's taunts had been Judith; it all came back to Judith.

A small, thin smile hovered on Lane's lips. Jud Warrend had warned him that Judith was going to make a lot of difference in his living, and Warrend had surely been right. What he ought to do, Lane told himself, was turn south and head for Casa Alamos where he belonged. Agnew had made this decision for reasons of his own and Lane should accept it, but he knew he could not. He was in this deeply, too deeply to back out, and if he could stop it, he did not intend to let Seay get away with a thing. Lane had to go to Aspinwall and find out why Agnew had called off the counting.

With the first spatter of rain Lane stopped Soldado, dismounted and put on the slicker he had tied behind his saddle. He had to fight Soldado who pretended fright at the crackling yellow garment. Then, mounting again, Lane rode on.

IT was dark and still raining when Lane reached Aspinwall and stopped at the hotel. Mrs. Tindler was surprised to see him, and eyed the dripping slicker with displeasure. Agnew, Mrs. Tindler said, was not at the hotel. He had gone out.

"You'll likely find him at Judge Morton's," Mrs. Tindler informed. "That's where he spends most of his time." There was a sting in her manner of conveying the information.

"I'll put up my horse and get something to eat," Lane announced.

"If Agnew comes in before I get back, will you tell him I want to see him?"

"I'll tell him," Mrs. Tindler agreed. "You're goin' to stay here tonight?"

Lane nodded and went out to take Soldado to the Star wagon yard. From the Star he walked back through the softly falling rain until he reached the Orient. There were only a few men in the saloon, Boss Darby, Yelland, a few others assembled at the bar. They stopped talking when Lane entered, welcomed him, and made room for him in their midst.

"You've come in about Pryor?" Darby asked, setting out a drink for Lane.

"No." Lane tossed the liquor into his mouth and followed it with a drink of water. "What about Pryor? Has something happened?"

"You ain't heard?"

"I haven't had any news from town."

"Pryor," Darby announced, staring hard, "went out to serve warrants on Nosy Harmon an' Clay Garret. He's been gone a week. His horse was found tied to a rack in Junction an' Buntlin's sayin' that Pryor lost his nerve an' pulled out of the country."

"That doesn't sound like Guy Pryor to me," Lane declared. "I'd be more apt to think something had happened to him. Who swore out warrants for Harmon and Garret?"

"You don't know?" Yelland asked the question.

"I wouldn't ask if I did."

"Judith Warrend swore out complaints against 'em," Yelland said flatly. "We thought you knew about it."

"Judith Warrend?" Lane could not believe the words.

"That's who I said. She swore

'em out a long time ago, right after you went out to receive them cattle. You didn't know about it?"

"I said I didn't!" Anger tinged Lane's voice. "Buntlin gave Pryor those warrants to serve? How was that? Pryor was the marshal, not sheriff."

PRYOR was Buntlin's deputy," Yelland stated briefly. He outlined the happenings in the sheriff's office. "An' Pryor took 'em an' went out," Yelland completed. "We know he left town, but we don't know where he went. All we know is that his horse was found in Junction. Buntlin says that Pryor lost his nerve an' hopped a freight. Jack's swelled up like a poisoned pup about it. There's nobody goin' to run against him for sheriff now."

Lane said nothing and Boss

Darby, leaning on the bar, asked: "What are you goin' to do about it, Lane?"

"What am I going to do about it?"

"That's what I asked you."

Lane stared at the men around him and they returned that look, steadily and questioningly. "We were goin' to send out for you," Darby said. "It was yore girl that swore out them complaints."

Slowly Lane's eyes traversed the circle and still he did not speak. "An' Pryor was yore friend," Yelland reminded. "You were backin' him for sheriff. It looks to me—" He broke off.

Without a word Lane stepped away from the bar and Yelland fell back to give him room to pass.

"Them warrants was for Nosy an' Clay, don't forget that," Yelland said. "What with Judith Warrend

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swearin' 'em out an' the trouble you've had with those two it looks like—" He, too, stopped.

"It looks like what?" Lane demanded, turning.

"Nothin'."

"Like what?"

"Never mind, Lane," Darby interposed. "Mebbe Pryor will turn up."

"You started something that you didn't finish!" Lane's hand shot out and caught Yelland's shirt front. "I asked you what it looked like."

Yelland's face showed his discomfort. "None of us here have said it," he assured hastily. "We all know you better; but there's been one or two give up head. They say that you was scared of Nosy an' Clay Garret, an' that you got the girl to swear out the complaints, an' Pryor to do the dirty work."

Yelland staggered back under Lane's push. Lane's eyes were thin, molten slits as he glared at the men. "You—" he began, and then without finishing the thing on his mind, wheeled and strode out of the Orient.

CHAPTER XXIV

GUN-SMOKE CHORE

FROM the Orient Lane crossed to the hotel. Mrs. Tindler was still in the lobby. "Mr. Agnew ain't come in yet," she began. "He—" The woman stopped, and Lane, wordlessly taking his key from the rack beside the desk, climbed the stairs to his room. Not bothering to light the lamp or to remove his slicker, Lane sat in the chair beside the window, staring out at the street. Light from the Orient and White Palace splashed in the puddles, dappled by the drizzling rain. For a long time Lane sat staring; then, rising, he mechanically pulled off the slicker and his hat, letting them drop

to the floor. He had barely seated himself again when he heard Agnew's voice.

"In his room? Thank you, Mrs. Tindler. I'll see."

Lane went to the door. Agnew had just reached the stair top and came striding down the hall. "Hello, McLain," he greeted uneasily. "Mrs. Tindler said you were looking for me."

"I am. Come in." Lane stepped back from the door, fumbling for a match as he moved. Agnew paused in the opening while Lane lighted the lamp, adjusting the wick carefully as the oil caught.

"Come in," he repeated impatiently.

Agnew entered and, closing the door, remained standing in front of it. Water dripped from the coat over his arm and his hat was wet. "You just came in?" he asked, refusing to meet Lane's eyes.

"This evening. I got the letter you sent by Seay."

"Oh, yes. That!" Agnew looked at Lane now and, lifting his hand, removed his hat. The hand was still bandaged. "Seay convinced me that there was no use in any further counting, McLain. I thought I would hold down expenses."

"Seay convinced you?"

"Yes. He convinced me that they really had twenty thousand head of cattle and that we had just been wasting our time."

"Agnew," Lane said slowly, "we put fourteen thousand six hundred head through the gate. That's the tally. I've ridden the country north of the fence and so have Porter, Raoul and Harbury. There aren't a thousand head in it. You haven't got over sixteen thousand head of stock. Do you believe me?"

"Mr. Seay has cattle back in the hills," Agnew said stiffly, again turn-

ing his eyes from Lane's steady stare. "You didn't see them all."

"You're throwing away about eighty thousand dollars, maybe a hundred thousand," Lane warned.

"It's my money." Sudden anger twisted the Easterner's face. "Besides the cattle are there. Seay tells me that they are."

"Seay convinced you," Lane drawled. "You wouldn't care to tell me *how* he convinced you? I'd like to hear his argument."

"I think," Agnew answered coldly, "that is a matter between myself and Mr. Seay."

"I see." Lane's voice was as cold as Agnew's. It warmed suddenly. "If it's some jackpot you've got into, Agnew, maybe I could help."

For just an instant Agnew hesitated, his expression changing. Then his face hardened again. "I'm in no jackpot, as you call it," he declared. "It's late, McLain, and I know you're tired. I'll not keep you longer." He turned the doorknob.

"I've laid it on the line to you," Lane said wearily. "You know how the deal stands."

Agnew did not answer. "Good night," he said stiffly. "You'll be here tomorrow?"

"I'll be here tomorrow," Lane agreed. "Good night."

A GNEW went out, closing the door carefully, and Lane returned to his chair, kicking his slicker aside as he passed. He sat down, rubbed his eyes wearily and stared out at the street. Whatever Seay's hold on Agnew, it was strong, too strong for Lane to break in so brief a time. He tilted the rocker, resting his head against the antimacassar on its back, and ideas and conjectures revolved endlessly in his brain.

Presently he shook his head as though to clear it and, bending, began to tug at a wet boot. He was tired, too tired to think. But tomorrow he would not be tired. Tomorrow he could talk with Crosby Agnew and tomorrow he would hunt down and stop the gossip about those warrants.

Morning was long in coming. Lane slept fitfully, dreaming when he did doze. When light streaked the east he gave up and, turning on his back, lay staring at the ceiling, thinking. The sky was still gray, forecasting more rain. After a time Lane got up and dressed, struggling into his damp boots. He had made very little sound and as he pulled open the door and stepped out, he bumped into Beth van Brimmer bearing a tray laden with dishes and a small coffeepot.

Recovering from the step he had taken to avoid the girl, Lane caught her arm with a supporting hand to keep her from falling. "I'm sorry, Beth," he said quickly. "I didn't hear you." Then noting the tray: "Is someone sick?"

Beth's face was pale and her eyes wide. She stammered, "I'm taking it— Yes. Someone's sick."

"The coffee smells good," Lane commented. "I'm sorry I bumped into you. Excuse me, Beth." He stepped away, smiling. "I think I'll ask Mrs. Tindler to give me some coffee."

"She's in the kitchen," Beth said.

Lane nodded and turned toward the stairs while the girl waited in the hallway. Only when Lane disappeared did she move on.

Mrs. Tindler was in the kitchen when Lane arrived. "I passed Beth upstairs," he said, "and her coffee smelled so good I had to have some."

"Help yourself." Mrs. Tindler

opened the oven and inspected the biscuits.

"Who's sick upstairs?" Lane poured coffee into a cup.

"Sick?"

"Beth said that she was taking coffee up to a sick man."

"Oh, him!" Mrs. Tindler slid a pan of biscuits out of the oven. "Yes. We've got a sick man upstairs."

"Anybody I know?" Lane sipped the hot black coffee.

"Nobody that'd interest you."

"You've had it in for me lately," Lane drawled. "What have I done to make you mad, Mrs. Tindler?"

The woman shrugged plump shoulders. "I ain't mad," she said. "I'm just disgusted with you."

"Why?"

"I always thought you stuck up for your friends."

"You're talking about Neil," Lane said levelly. "You don't understand about that."

"I understand aplenty. Neil was your friend an' you went back on him."

"Neil quit the Hatchet." Lane put down his empty cup. "He got out of line here in town and Pryor asked me to talk to him. I tried to and Neil made some nasty cracks. I hit him."

"An' then quit him. When he got into trouble you never turned your hand—"

"How could I? I don't know where he is. He's never been found. He—" Lane stopped. His eyes were very keen as he stared at Mrs. Tindler. "Is it Neil upstairs?" he asked quietly.

The panic in the woman's eyes was answer enough. Lane said: "It is. You and Beth have been hiding him."

"What are you going to do?" Mrs.

Tindler asked hoarsely. "Are you going to turn him over to Buntlin? Pickles brought him in an' we hid him. He— What are you going to do, Lane?"

For a long minute Lane did not answer. Then: "I'm not going to do anything. Not now." He looked thoughtfully at the frightened woman beside the stove and then walked deliberately out of the kitchen.

AS Lane went back to his room, there were the small stirrings of sleepers wakening and dressing to be about the day's business. Lane closed his door and sat down in his chair. He had many things to think about, too many. Agnew's sudden change of heart, Guy Pryor's disappearance, the warrants Judith had sworn out, and now Neil. Lane rolled a cigarette and forgot to light it as he sat staring out of the window, not seeing the street at all. After a time he left the room and went heavily downstairs. He needed the advice and counsel of Judge Morton; but more than that he needed to see Judith, needed her with a desperate ache that filled him completely. Leaving the hotel, he walked along its side and began the climb to Morton's house, the wet grass swishing at his trousers legs.

Molly Morton answered Lane's knock. He asked: "Is Judith up, Molly?" and Mrs. Morton answered: "I'll see. Wait, Lane." She hurried away and Lane stood, holding his hat, waiting for the girl to appear. A murmur of voices came to him, the judge's bass rumble, and then Judith appeared. She hesitated in the entrance, then crossed the room swiftly, finding haven in Lane's arms, holding him as though she would never let him go, her face upturned for his kiss.

Lane held the girl almost fiercely, pressing her to him as though for reassurance. Then Judith put her hands against the man's chest and pushed him away so she could look at him.

"When did you come, Lane?" she demanded. "Are you through? Have you come back to stay?"

"Last night," Lane answered heavily. "I'm done, Judith. Agnew's stopped the work. I'm through for good."

Morton entered at that moment, his voice rumbling a hearty greeting. Lane relinquished Judith to shake the judge's hand and answer his question.

"No. I've not had breakfast. Just a cup of coffee at Mrs. Tindler's."

"Then you'll eat with us," Morton announced. "What brought you to town, Lane? Are you through at Blocker Gap?"

"I'm through," Lane answered. "Agnew's stopped us. I want to talk to you."

"Sit down," Morton commanded.

Lane sat on a couch, Judith beside him, and Morton took a chair. "Now tell me," the judge ordered, and Lane plunged into his story. During the tale Morton shook his head from time to time and when Lane finished, the judge was silent for a moment.

"I don't understand it," he said finally. "I don't know what's got into Crosby. I'll talk to him. It doesn't seem reasonable. You say the cattle aren't there and yet he seems to be more than willing to take Seay's word. What about Porter and the others?"

"I'd hate to see them hurt," Lane declared. "I'd hoped that Agnew would be willing to settle with them and just pay for the cattle he actually received. I think that Porter and Raoul and Harbury were honest

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in the number they turned in."

"And you think that Seay wasn't?"

Lane did not answer, and Molly spoke from the door. "Can you come now?"

Breakfast was a silent meal, both men abstract and the two women not intruding on their thoughts. When they were finished Morton said: "I'll talk to Crosby. I'm sure there's some explanation, but I think you'd better stay here and let me see him alone."

WHEN the judge was gone, Molly lingered a few moments and then departed, leaving Lane and Judith together. They were in the living room and Judith patted the couch beside her. "Sit down, Lane," she invited. Lane seated himself and Judith hesitantly sought an opening. Finally: "I've something I want to tell you," she began. "It's worried me. Crosby and I—"

"Why did you do it, Judith?" Lane interrupted. "Tell me. Why did you?"

"Then you know?" Judith was startled.

"I heard last night. Why did you, Judith?"

Looking into Lane's eyes, Judith was frightened. She had never seen him look like that. "But there was no harm!" she said hastily. "Of course, I know that I shouldn't have gone riding with him. Molly has scolded me about it and I've scolded myself. It was foolish of me. I wanted to tell you that I was sorry. I certainly didn't think that Mr. Seay would talk."

"What are you talking about?" Lane's eyes widened. "Riding with Agnew, and Seay talking? What do you mean?"

"You said you'd heard," the girl defended. "We slipped away from Molly Friday night and went riding. That was all. And we'd

stopped to see the moon rise when Mr. Seay appeared out of nowhere. Of course some gossip monger might put it in an ugly light, but really there was nothing wrong. Mr. Seay told you, of course."

"Seay told me nothing." Lane's voice was tight. "This is the first I've heard."

"I wanted to tell you," Judith said. "I'm glad that no one else did. I don't want any secrets between us, Lane. I'll admit that I was foolish, but nothing was wrong." She paused while she scanned Lane's face. Still the eyes alarmed her. "If you hadn't heard, what did you mean?" she demanded. "You asked me why I'd done it. Done what?"

"Sworn out those warrants for Harmon and Garret," Lane said quietly. "That's what I was talking about. Why did you, Judith?"

"Because I was afraid for you!" Judith placed her hand possessively on Lane's arm. "I was afraid of those men. They'd threatened you. I saw that man's gun as plainly as I can see you. And Crosby said that if they were arrested and put under bond they'd have to leave you alone."

"I see." Lane's voice was thin. "Agnew again. You seem to have seen a great deal of him, while I was gone." He was skating on a thin edge of anger, holding his temper with an effort. "You made me promise you I'd leave Harmon and Garret alone. Then you swore out complaints against them. Do you know what you've done?"

Judith's anger rose to meet Lane's. "Of course I know. I was protecting you. Let's not quarrel, Lane. Please. You wouldn't understand—"

"I understand," Lane drawled. "I understand a good deal more than

you do. You meddled. You swore out those complaints and warrants were issued. Buntlin gave Pryor the warrants to serve and Pryor went out. He hasn't come back and here in town they're saying that I got you to make the complaints and that Pryor went out to do the work I was afraid to do myself. They say I've been hiding behind your skirts!"

"But, Lane, that isn't so!" Judith sprang up to face Lane who had risen. "Of course it isn't true. You didn't know what I'd done."

In the pause that followed, a knock sounded startlingly loud upon the door. Lane wheeled and strode across the room, jerking open the door. Judith heard a man's voice, excited, panting.

"They said you were here, McLain. Pryor's been found. He got washed up from an arroyo. Patrico Maes just brought him in. He's shot to ribbons. Somebody got him right in the face with a load of buckshot."

Judith's hands flew to her breast. She saw Lane step back and pick up his hat. The door slammed, its glass rattling, and Judith gasped. Molly, entering the room, saw the girl's white face and staring eyes and hastened to her.

"What is it, Judith?" Molly demanded. "What is it, child?"

"I—" Judith began. "What have I done? Oh, Molly, what have I done?" She broke, and, turning to the older woman, sobbed upon her shoulder.

WITHIN an hour Lane came back, Morton with him. They entered quietly and found the women seated together on the couch in the living room. Judith's face was tear-stained, and Molly showed

her strain. She sprang up, going straight to the judge and the big man put his arm around her shoulders.

"Is it true?" asked Molly. "Is Guy Pryor—"

"It's true," Morton said heavily.

"But—I can't believe it. He visited us, Henry. He— You liked him. He was your friend."

"And I killed him when I issued those warrants," Morton said heavily.

"No." Lane's voice was almost gentle. "Not you, judge. Judith, can I talk to you?"

The judge, with Molly still circled by his arm, walked toward the hall. "I'll go back with you, Lane," he said. "Don't cry, Molly. Please don't cry." They disappeared down the hallway and Lane turned so that he looked down at the girl on the couch.

"When did you and Agnew go riding?" he asked gently. "What day was it?"

Judith looked up. "Are you angry?" she asked, snatching at a straw. "Please, Lane—"

"Tell me the day!"

"On Friday. A week ago. Lane don't—"

"And Seay saw you? Tell me, Judith. What did you see?" There was desperate intensity in eyes and question. "Think, Judith."

"Why—we'd stopped on a hill. I remember. And we were talking. There were two men riding in the moonlight. I saw them down below us, two men, and they had another horse."

"You were on the Handout road? The road we used when you and Jud and I came in?" Still that fierce intenceness in Lane McLain.

"That was the road. Why? Why are you asking?"

Lane's shoulders slumped and he

seemed to relax. Deliberately he withdrew two pieces of paper from his shirt. They were damp and ink blurred them, but the printing had not faded. Judith, rising, saw the heading:

The Territory of Arizona
To the Sheriff of Aspinwall County,
Greetings:

"What are those?" she demanded.

"Those," Lane answered very quietly, "are the things that killed Guy Pryor. You said that there were two men and that they led a horse. Then Seay passed you. That was what I wanted to know, Judith."

JUDITH stared in fascination at the warrants. Lane folded and returned them to his pocket. The girl looked up into his face. Lane's eyes were thin-slitted, their blueness speculative. About nose and mouth the lines were deep and the stubble of beard he wore accentuated the hard, bold outline of his jaw.

"You hate me, don't you?" Judith demanded, reading that face.

"No," Lane answered almost wearily. "You didn't know, that's all. I don't hate you. I love you, Judith. You're in my blood." He smiled faintly and the girl, taking courage from words and smile, reached out and clung to him.

"Lane!" she breathed. "Oh, Lane, I was so afraid!"

The man bent and almost absently brushed her lips with his own. His hands were strong on her arms as he released himself. "I'll go now," he said. "There are things to do."

Alarm sprang back to Judith's face. "Go?" she demanded. "Where, Lane? What must you do?"

"Those warrants," said Lane. "You had them issued. Pryor was killed serving them. And that

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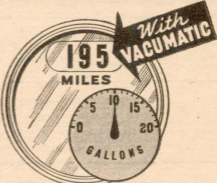
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Continued from page 160

makes it a personal matter, don't you see?"

All of Judith's assurance was gone now. She caught Lane's arm. "You're going to find those men," she accused. "I won't let you! You can't go."

"I've got to," Lane said patiently, almost as though he was explaining something to a child.

"I won't let you go!" Judith was wild with her fright. "You don't love me or you'd stay. You wouldn't leave me."

"I've told you that I love you."

Judith freed his arm and stepped back. She was fighting fear, fighting to keep Lane with her and she used the only weapon at her command. "I won't let you go!" Her fingers tugged and twisted at her ring, freeing it. "If you go now you needn't come back," she challenged. "If you loved me you'd stay."

"You don't understand, do you?" Lane said slowly. "Loving you has nothing to do with it, Judith. I'm sorry. I've got to go." He turned and took two slow steps.

"Lane!"

The man paused, facing toward the girl again. Judith held herself erect, her hand outstretched, the ring in her palm.

"You'll be sorry if you go. You needn't come back."

It seemed to her that she had won. Lane's face twisted for an instant and then settled into heavy bitterness. She thought he would return. Instead he wheeled and, this time rapidly and without a word, walked to the door.

How is Lane going to deal with Manville Seay? Will Neil be able to escape from Aspinall without a tangle with Buntlin? What will Judith do? Don't miss the smashing conclusion of MAN TRACKS in your next Western Story.

How to Make YOUR Body Bring You FAME

... Instead of SHAME!

ARE YOU
Skinny?
Weak?
Flabby?

Will You Let Me
Prove I Can Make You
a New Man?

I KNOW what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs. I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

But later I discovered the secret that turned me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I'd like to prove to you that the same system can make a NEW MAN of YOU!

What "Dynamic Tension" Will Do For You

I don't care how old or young you are or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a Vase-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a size new, beautiful cult of muscle!

Only 15 Minutes A Day

No "ifs," "ands" or "maybes." Just tell me where you want hands, nose, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gaunky? Are you short-winded, peeps? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about "Dynamic Tension" and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HB-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely

NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun. "Dynamic Tension" does the work.

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvellous physical specimens—any way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through "Dynamic Tension," you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DOMINANT muscle-power in your own body—watch it increase and multiply into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "Dynamic Tension" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.



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Atlas

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As he looks to-
day, from actual
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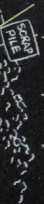
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