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SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

Cover by H. W. SCOTT

Editor
JOHN BURR

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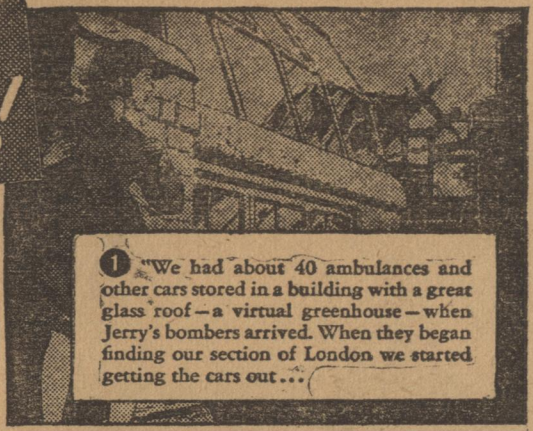

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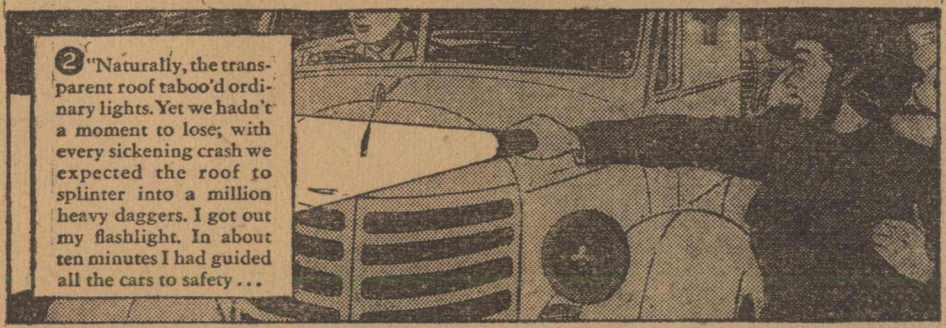
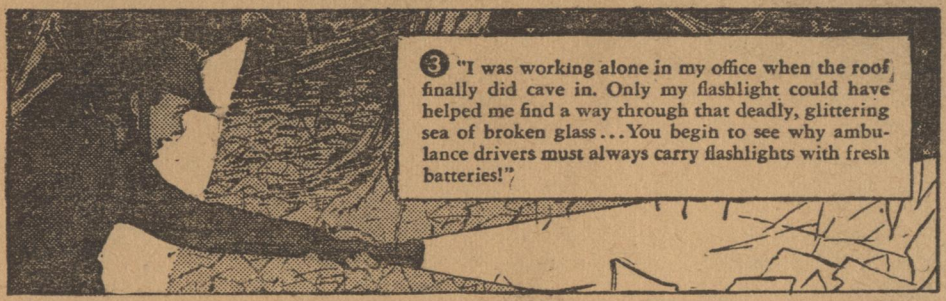


2 "Naturally, the transparent roof taboo'd ordinary lights. Yet we hadn't a moment to lose; with every sickening crash we expected the roof to splinter into a million heavy daggers. I got out my flashlight. In about ten minutes I had guided all the cars to safety . . .



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SKELETON VALLEY FEUD

by Walt Coburn

Warring factions threatened Bill Slocum with a searing cross fire when he rode into that forbidden range

HEAVILY loaded freight wagons had cut the ruts hub-deep in the softer stretches along the fifty-mile road from the railroad junction to Skeleton Valley and the sleepy little cow town of Painted Rock. No signs were posted along that wagon road, which linked the remote valley with the railroad and nearest law, to warn a stranger that he was not welcome, that Skeleton Valley was forbidden range and that the Bishop clan and the McGinnis tribe were locked together in fighting grips.

Arizona took it for granted that even a rank pilgrim would know about the range war between the Bishop and the McGinnis outfits and would have sense enough to stay away. And anyhow the warring cow

outfits were too busy with their feud chores to put up warning signs—even if old Pete Bishop or Lige McGinnis knew how to print a sign or read one that was nailed to a post. There was a war going on here and if a man did not want to get mixed up in it by hiring out at fighting wages, or unless he wanted to get killed for trespassing, he had better stay away from Skeleton Valley.

"Where nobody lives," Bill Slocum told himself grimly as he crouched on the wide flat rimrock that looked down on a short stretch of the wagon road, "and the dogs bark at strangers."

Bill Slocum had come in from the other side of the mountains over an almost trackless trail. For two days now he had eaten dry jerky, washing it down with creek water, and had bedded down on the bare ground with his saddle for a pillow and the sweaty saddle blanket his only cover against the cold mountain night. He had slept with a six-shooter in his hand and his saddle gun alongside him. Bill Slocum was traveling light and he wasn't building a campfire, which might be sighted by the tough brush-popper cowpunchers who worked for the Bishops' Lazy B or the McGinnises' Big Square outfits. Until Bill Slocum found out just how and where he stood in this range war where no man could declare himself neutral, he'd better lie low and play his cards close to his lean belly.

Bill Slocum's nights had been uneasy and nightmarish. Cramped and chilled, he would wake from his fitful sleep, sitting up, his gun gripped in his hand, his slitted bloodshot eyes staring into the black shadows, wondering what had wakened him. And it would not be until he had identified the night sound as harmless that he would lie down again under his sweat-stiff saddle blanket.

Now he was awake again, cold and shivering, his aching muscles stiff. It was getting daylight and there was a gray, cold drizzle and the mountain fog billowed up from Skeleton Valley below the Rim. The fog had a trick of magnifying sounds and distorting the shape of things. Bill Slocum's eyes ached and he listened to every little sound. For a while he could see nothing but the rocks and trees and the billowing fog that hid everything. And the only sounds were the dripping of rain from the scrub pines and the rustling in the leaves and dead pine needles as the smaller animals like mountain rats moved about. But some sixth sense kept warning him that this was no false alarm that had jerked him awake from a rain-chilled, fitful sleep. Then he heard the voice of a man. It sounded so close down below the rimrock that he jumped.

"It's this damned waitin' that gets a man."

The voice sounded young, like that of a boy whose voice is changing.

"He'll be along directly," rasped an older man's voice. "Don't lose your guts. After your first un, it comes easy as shootin' fish."

"But it's like uncockin' a salty bronc of a chilly mornin', Rube. A feller likes to git it done with, rode

or throwed. Bushed up here and the rain crawlin' down the back of a feller's neck like ice water. Not light enough to line your gun sights."

"Quit that whinin' bellyachin' or I'll bend a gun barrel between your short horns, button. You give up head like a calf at a brandin' fire. Your sights will line theirselves and he'll loom up in this fog bigger'n a skinned mule. Yuh can't miss."

"But if a feller did miss, Rube—"

Back in the pines Bill Slocum's picketed horse chose that untimely moment to nicker.

The rasping voice of the man below the fog-shrouded rimrock cursed. The younger voice broke, excitement changing it to a boyish treble.

Down there in the gray-white fog a horse broke brush. Shod hoofs sounded against the rocks on the steep trail. Then the man's harsh voice rasped like a rusty file yanked hard across a saw.

"Git 'im, boy!"

It might have been only one gun, or two or three guns. The fog ballooned the gun roars and the mountain country tossed the echoes around, and through the confused din the rasping voice of the man called Rube cut like a broken-toothed saw.

"Let's git!"

Bill Slocum was on his feet and running. He got a heavy shower bath as he dove into the rain-laden manzanita thicket and crouched there, hidden, gripping his saddle gun with both hands. The brush had torn off his hat and the rain water soaked his thick, wiry black hair and trickled down his neck. He could see his frightened horse fighting its picket rope and he could hear the crashing of brush and loose rocks and gravel dislodged by shod hoofs as men on horseback spurred away into the fog-shrouded dawn.

After that there was an empty and ominous silence. Bill Slocum's horse had calmed down some, but was still too spooked by the shooting to go back to grazing. Bill could see the big gaunt-flanked sorrel gelding standing there, head up, ears cocked forward. Then the sorrel nickered again. And from somewhere in the fog below the Rim another uneasy and restless horse gave reply.

Bill Slocum crouched lower and cussed under his breath as he found his hat and yanked it down on his sodden head.

"When you two lodge members git done givin' one another the password—" Bill Slocum's white teeth bared in a flat-lipped, mirthless grin.

The big sorrel gelding had tangled one hind leg in the picket rope and was wisely and slowly moving, kicking cautiously to free the rope. A well-trained rope horse has that kind of savvy.

Bill Slocum wiped his saddle carbine clean of wet dirt and leaves and waited for the owner of that other horse to make the first move, providing the man was still alive.

It might have been several minutes or that many seconds. Then Bill heard a man groan as if in mortal pain. But a wounded man can still shoot to kill. It was a while

longer before Bill Slocum moved with slow caution through the little tunnel he had made in the heavy manzanita brush. Back across the flat rimrock, he lay flat on his belly, his gun ready, and peered over its edge.

The fog was thinning and breaking up. Bill Slocum saw a big brown horse, saddled, bridle rein dropped, there on the wagon trail. Lying in an awkward sprawled shape no conscious man would be in, motionless as a corpse, was the horse's owner. He was no longer moaning. His rain-sodden hat lay on the ground. Bill saw that the man's hair was a thick snow-white mat and his face was white-bearded. There was a long-barreled six-shooter gripped in a large, bony hand.

Bill quit the rimrock and made his way cautiously down the steep slant. He had to slide part of the way and hang onto brush to keep from falling. Then he was down on the wagon road where the deep ruts were filled with rain water. His denim jacket and leather chaps, his spurred boots and his free left hand were mud-smeared. The big brown gelding whistled softly through uneasy nostrils, but stood in its muddy tracks.

Bill Slocum squatted on his hunkers. The bushwhacked man looked dead. There was blood on the back of his old canvas jacket and on the shoulder of his faded old blue flannel shirt. The thick white hair on the man's head was oozing blood from a scalp wound. He looked dead until a pair of bloodshot eyes opened to slits under ragged, shaggy white brows. The narrowed eyes were as green as old deep-winter ice.

Bill had to move before he had time to think. He grabbed the barrel of the six-shooter and shoved it aside as the gun exploded with a loud crash that made the gelding whirl and jump. The gun's heavy recoil kicked the weapon from the old man's hand. The white-bearded lips moved as the wounded man cursed Bill Slocum in a creaky whisper.

Bill Slocum shoved the old cowman's six-shooter into the deep pocket of his chaps.

"You dang near shot your own horse, old-timer. If you'll quit fightin' your head I might take the trouble to patch you up. An old rannyhan with fight in him like you got is too ornery tough to die."

"I'd ruther die," snarled the old cowman, "than be beholden to a McGinnis. You bushwhacked me. Now finish the job an' git along. You won't live long. You'll stop a Bishop bullet with your name on it."

"What makes you think I'm a McGinnis?" Bill Slocum grinned, but there was not the least trace of humor in the grin.

"Ary man that works fer the Big Square is a McGinnis. Shirt-tail kin of some kind."

"Well, I don't work for the Big Square."

"You don't work fer the Lazy B."

"I ain't hired out to either side."

"Then what in the name o' hades you doin' here?"

"Just lookin' over the country. Outside folks is commencin' to tally

the dead and what's left alive. They figger that when the Bishops and the McGinnises kills one another off down to the last curly wolf, it'll be a right good cow country to move into, and nobody left to stop 'em. Why, they're lined up with fast grain-fed horses ready to fork when they race for Skeleton Valley like they raced when the Cherokee Strip was throwed open for settlement. I might be a leetle previous, but them that soonered into the Strip before the big race started, got the best pick-in's. Now, mister, if you'll lay back an' grind your teeth I'll git to work on you."

"You know who I am?"

"You couldn't be nobody but old Pete Bishop, the old he-wolf of the Bishop tribe. I'll have to cut away your shirt." Bill opened the long, sharp-pointed blade of his big jackknife.

"Who are you?"

"Bill Slocum." He unbuttoned and yanked off his denim jacket, rolled it and shoved it under the white-maned head for a makeshift pillow.

"Never heard of yuh."

"No?" Bill cut away the old cowman's shirt and red-flannel undershirt. He had removed old Pete Bishop's canvas coat and spread it under his shoulders. "Hang onto your hat, Pete. I'm goin' after the bullet I kin feel lodged under your hide. I didn't shoot you, mister. I was camped on the Rim. Heard the shootin'. They done a sorry job. This slug never broke the bone. The other cut your scalp. My horse nickering must've spoiled their batter. Crowded 'em into shootin' too fast and too wild. Here's the slug. Bleedin' cleans away the poison. Now I'll wrap 'er up tight."

Tough old Pete Bishop did not groan or wince, though pain glazed his hard green eyes. When the wound was bandaged with strips of the red-flannel undershirt, Bill helped the old cowman back into his canvas jacket.

The cowman's leathery hide looked grayish. He told Bill Slocum to unbuckle the flap on that little scabbard on his saddle and he'd find a pint bottle. The scabbard, Pete said with a faint grin, was made to hold a bottle of medicine for doctoring screw-wormed cattle. But the bottle in the scabbard now held nothing but good corn likker. He could stand a shot of it, Pete declared. And a dram wouldn't hurt Bill Slocum.

"You done a fair-to-middlin' job, young feller."

The corn whiskey was raw and potent. But on a rain-soaked early morning it was the proper medicine.

"It's a ten-mile ride to my home ranch in the valley, Slocum," Bishop rumbled. "Git your horse. And gimme back my hoglaig. It ain't safe fer you to be prowlin' alone."

Bill Slocum grinned faintly and said that from what little he'd noticed, it wasn't safe for even old Pete Bishop to ride alone.

The old cowman grunted and cussed. He said he couldn't figure it out yet. He was on his own range. And the McGinnises were all on their roundup above the Rim.

"My outfit's still camped in pairs, range brandin'. I was on my way up to one of the range-brandin' camps, kind o' checkin' up. My nephew, Rube, an' that stepson of hisn ain't bin brandin' enough mav'ricks here lately. Rube Bishop's a good cowhand, as long as he's workin' under a boss. Left alone, he's lazy as a pot houn', an' his kid, Joel, kin go to sleep standin' up. Their camp ain't more'n a mile from here, but I'll bet they're still snorin' with their tarps pulled over their heads. Well, don't stand gawkin', Slocum. Rattle your hocks. Git your horse an' we'll mosey along."

"Yeah." Bill Slocum started climbing back up the slant. He had almost blundered.

Old Pete Bishop's mention of a nephew, called Rube and a boy, had fitted the bushwhacker pair. It looked as though some of tough old Pete's own Bishop kinfolks were after his hide. Bill had caught himself just in time, before he blurted it out that he'd bet a new hat it was Rube Bishop and his stepson, Joel, who had bushwhacked the old he-wolf and botched the gun job.

II

Fate or luck or whatever a man wanted to call it had thrown Bill Slocum in with old Pete Bishop. It might be just the deal Bill wanted. He had to take sides in this feud, one way or the other, if he hoped to stay here on this disputed range. And his job was to move in here and hang and rattle. Both sides of the feuding cattlemen were stained with the same blood-wet brush. A lot of the killing had been bushwhacking murder. Now and then a Bishop and a McGinnis would meet face to face with the odds even and they would shoot it out, man to man. But mostly they traveled in pairs or bunches and there was no such thing as fair play or any kind of code of honor. Though it had long ago been agreed that when old Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis fought it out, that would be an open gun duel with the odds on the level. Let their sons and nephews and cousins fight from the brush until their guns were empty. Old Pete Bishop and the grizzled Lige McGinnis fought in the open. Prideful as sin, both of 'em.

That was what now hurt old Pete Bishop far worse than the pain in his bullet-ripped shoulder. Somebody had broken just about the only fighting rule left on this blood-spattered range. Somebody had shot old Pete from the brush. Until now Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis had ridden when and where they wanted to go, alone and unprotected by any of their gun-toting kin.

"By Satan," growled old Pete Bishop, eying Bill Slocum with cold suspicion as they rode down the wagon road into Skeleton Valley, "it's got to be some outsiders that bushwhacked me."

"Don't look at me thataway," said Bill. "If I wanted you, I could have potted you from the rimrock. I laid up there watchin' you, before I slid down the slant."

"You said that outsiders is wait-

in' fer us to kill one another off here. That you soonered into the country. There ain't but a leetle handful of us left, on either side. It's rough, broken country. A lone man could hide out almost anywhere. Pick us off, one-two at a crack. It'd take a tough hombre. He'd have to use his brains. You got the earmarks of a tough hand. Brains behind them eyes of yourn. I never heard of no Bill Slocum, but you shore look like some man I've knowed somewheres along the back trail. Mebbeso your real name ain't Slocum?"

"Mebbeso." Bill Slocum grinned. "But this is the first time you ever laid eyes on me. I'll gamble on that. And I never saw you in my life till I sighted you lyin' there in the muddy road. And that was *after* you'd bin bushwhacked."

But the subject was getting uncomfortable and Bill changed it by pointing to the tracks left in the muddy ground by two shod horses.

"That's where two men left the place where they waited to kill you, mister. One feller chewed tobacco. They waited long enough for the other to smoke half a dozen cigarettes. There's a couple of empty .30-30 shells on the ground, and deep tracks where their horses dug in when they made a fast getaway. You seen me come down off the rimrock while you laid there playin' possum. I couldn't be two places at once. And I shore ain't triplets. Want to follow their sign?"

But old Pete Bishop's shoulder was giving him a lot of pain. He shook his white head and cussed and said he'd take care of 'em later. He pulled the cork on his pint bottle. Bill shook his head.

"It's a big bait of hot grub and strong coffee I want," he said.

"And then what? After you git the wrinkles out o' your belly, young Bill Slocum?" came the shrewd, hard-bitten question.

"Danged if I know," declared Bill Slocum. Truthfully, at that.

The going was slow. They had to stop two or three times because the bandage kept working loose from the old cowman's shoulder wound. A less tough man than old Pete Bishop could never have stood the ten-mile horseback ride. He must have lost a lot of blood and he was bound to be suffering a good deal of pain, but he never showed the faintest sign of dizziness or fainting or nausea, and not once did he complain. Tough as an old cowhide boot, Pete Bishop. And his green eyes were restless and dangerous. He kept looking back across his shoulder and he watched the broken skyline on all sides. Whenever the trail narrowed he motioned Bill Slocum to ride in the lead.

"So if there's a gun trap set, young feller," he explained callously, "you'll spring it."

Bill rode with his gun in his hand. And whenever he spurred his horse ahead along the narrow, twisting, brush-flanked trail, there was a spot along his backbone, up between his wide shoulders, that actually ached and burned as if that section of vertebra were already bullet-burned.

His eyes stared ahead, watching for any slight movement in the brush or rocks that could be a bushwhacker. And he was willing to gamble all he had at stake on this dangerous mission that they were being followed by men who were experts at setting a dry-gulch trap. And Bill knew that old Pete Bishop shared that same uneasy suspicion.

This was new and unfamiliar country to Bill Slocum who had never even sighted the valley below the Rim because he had slipped through the mountains by luck and guesswork after dark, and the dawn had been blanketed with fog and gray rain. So he had no way of knowing which bend of the wagon road might be brushy and dangerous or more open and safe. And Pete Bishop was telling Bill nothing.

There were places where there was plenty of room for them to ride side by side. But the old cowman would motion Bill ahead and drop back in behind him about twenty or thirty feet, his long-barreled six-shooter in his gnarled, brush-scabbed old hand. And a bend in the road would be spotted on either side by heavy brush or big boulders that could hide half a dozen bushwhackers. All the time Pete Bishop's six-shooter would be carelessly pointed at Bill Slocum's back. The hard-bitten old hellion had not troubled himself to thank Bill Slocum for bandaging his wounded shoulder. And without putting it into words he gave Bill to understand that he was a stranger and a trespasser in a forbidden country and therefore no more than an armed prisoner. Bill wondered just what the old granddaddy of the tough Bishop clan would do if Slocum did spring a gun trap.

They were out of the broken hills now and the wagon road passed between split-rail fences that inclosed hay meadows and pastures where the grass was belly-high to the horses Bill saw grazing there. Back from the road and along the river where giant cottonwoods grew, were log buildings and pole corrals. There were fruit orchards and truck gardens where the corn stalks grew so high a man on horseback had to reach up to grab an ear of tasseled corn. Strawberry patches and the berries showing like scarlet blood spots against the green. Giant pines. The tinkle of cow bells. White banners of smoke coming from large stone chimneys. Kids doing ranch chores. Now and then a woman or girl in a gingham dress or apron opening a kitchen door, a broom in her hand. But not a man on foot or on horseback.

"That's my son Tom's place we're passin' on the right," old Pete Bishop would say. "Tom got killed three years ago. His oldest boy, Bob, taken his daddy's place."

Or he'd point his long arm. "My oldest son Harry's layout where you see the big log barn. The McGinnises bushwhacked Harry one night on his way home from town. They laid in behind the rail fence on each side where Harry split his pasture and made a lane fer the road to git through. Harry's two boys an' his

cousin, Rube, was with him. Him an' Rube was kind o' drunk. Rube got shot twice an' they got three of the McGinnises. But we had to bury Harry an' his two boys. That was the same spring we got Lige's two oldest boys. Like the sayin' goes, an eye fer an eye and a tooth fer a tooth. But Harry Bishop was worth a corral full of McGinnises."

Skeleton Valley was large and fertile and the mountains behind it were well stocked with cattle. The river that irrigated the valley lands was not one of Arizona's dry or underground streams. Even during dry years it ran plenty of water. And the feed and water back in the mountains was unsurpassed in any country.

Time had been when Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis had been partners in the cattle business. Both of them Texans, they had crossed the Staked Plains of Texas with a big trail herd. They had fetched this pool herd to New Mexico over the Goodnight and Loving Trails to Fort Sumner, then had taken the Jim Stinson Trail west to Soccoro and Magdalena. From there on into Arizona. It was a long, grueling, dangerous cattle trail. Indians and rustlers had preyed upon the trail herds. Of the four or five Texans who had pooled their cattle and put them in a common road iron for the trail, only Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis survived. The other three Texans, who owned three fifths of that big trail herd, had been killed along the way. And the cowhands who had started with the trail herd had been killed or had quit before the herd reached its destination.

Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis and a short-handed crew of cowhands from nowhere had pointed the trail herd onto good feed and water in the fertile Skeleton Valley, so named because of a wagon-train massacre by Indians who had run off the livestock, burned the wagons and left the skeletons of the scalped dead men, women and children to bleach in the sun.

Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis had been born and raised in the same part of Texas. Perhaps, when they were boys, they had been friends. They had worked for the same big cow outfits as they grew old enough to make top cowhands. Both of them had ambition. Neither had ever been hobbled by honest scruples. They had cattle savvy and plenty of guts. They got hold of a little outfit, built it up with sure loops and running irons that never got cold, and fought back to back against any and all men who tried to dispute their claim to what they branded. When Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis and three cowmen neighbors of the same tough breed got mixed up in the fence-cutters' war, the Texas Rangers told them that as big as Texas was, it was too small to hold the five of them. The Rangers ordered them to gather their cattle and hit the long trail and never come back.

That was the trail herd that left Texas and grew in size as it traveled. And when Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis pointed their trail herd down

into Skeleton Valley, theirs was a dark and dangerous partnership that was bloodstained and powder-burnt. If there had ever been any real friendship between them, it had died back along that grim trail. Neither could have been more than twenty-two or three years old when they claimed Skeleton Valley. But they were old and seasoned cowhands who knew all the tricks of rustling and gun fighting.

Skull River split the valley in half. It made a natural dividing line for these two tough young Texans when they agreed to sever their partnership. But before they dissolved that partnership of crime they had a chore to attend to. There were half a dozen ranchers already settled in Skeleton Valley. Those little ranchers had to be bought out, run out, or killed off.

Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis had no money to buy out even the smaller outfit in the valley. The short-handed crew of cowhands who had joined them along the trail were all related by blood to either Pete Bishop or Lige McGinnis. They were equally matched for number and for toughness, the Bishops and the McGinnises.

The night after the trail herd had been spilled into the upper end of the valley, Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis led a night-rider outfit down the length and breadth of the fertile valley. Soot from the Dutch ovens and skillets blackened the face of every man. Those whose guts needed warming were drunk with raw corn whiskey. Every man of them was heavily armed. The Bishops rode down one side of the river. Lige McGinnis led his clan down the other side of the wide stream. Those men had their orders.

"They're just a scatterment of Jack Mormons," Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis told their tough cowhand kin. "Six-eight, a dozen at the most. Just moved in, with their cattle drive. They ain't sent for their wimmin-folks and kids yet. Don't leave ary man alive to tell the tale. So far as it'll ever be knowed fer certain outside this valley, they died off of a smallpox plague. Let's go!"

That was at sundown. The crimson-streaked dawn of the following day found them all gathered in the big, half-finished log building on the river bank in the middle of the large valley. The ridge log had been laid only the day before. The cross-beam logs were piled. The newly peeled log walls were not yet chinked. Hand-adzed floor planks were stacked crisscross to dry and season. Tools were neatly put away in a temporary shed. The building was being constructed for a meeting house, school and church.

The owners of those tools would never again grip them in work-calloused hands. The men who had come here with a drive of cattle, divided the valley into ranches, helped one another build cabins and corrals and fences, and plant orchards, peace-loving, hard-working, friendly men, were dead. Dead and buried during the blood-spattered night. No headboards marked the graves.

Corks were pulled from jugs and bottles there in the crimson-streaked dawn. That unfinished log building that was to have been a place where men and their families would gather for prayer now held a crowd of heavily armed men whose faces were streaked with black soot and whose hands were caked with the dried blood of murdered men. They swilled down the raw, potent whiskey in celebration of last night's raid. They showed one another the spoils they had snatched up along the way. A gold wedding ring. A big gold watch with a nugget chain. Things like that. Laughing, joshing, singing, quarreling.

"It'll make a good store, this buildin'," declared lanky Pete Bishop.

"Or a saloon," said Lige McGinnis who was short and barrel-chested and swarthy. His hair was coarse and black and his deep-set bloodshot eyes were an opaque black that glinted with tiny red high lights in the crimson dawn.

Pete Bishop stood six feet six without his high-heeled boots on. His hair had been a rusty-red color then, and his skin a mass of large freckles and his eyes as green as glass. The Bishops were all lanky and raw-boned, with reddish, sandy coloring.

Even a rank stranger could separate the black McGinnises from the red Bishops.

"A store," decided both of them for a compromise, "and a saloon."

There was a huge boulder down by the river bank. A reddish-gray boulder covered with ancient Indian markings. It was called the Painted Rock, though its coloring had been made by nature.

There in the big unfinished log building Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis made their deal. They would, they finally decided, turn the building into a general mercantile store. Let a saloon be built at least a couple or three hundred yards down the road. They were both going to marry and raise big families to carry on their names and their cattle ranching. So the women would want a store. And the store had better be gunshot distance from the saloon.

A store and a saloon then, for a start. And they'd call it Painted Rock.

III

For perhaps twenty-five years the Bishops and McGinnises got along as well as could be expected. Skull River divided their ranches. It was a respected border. They ate one another's beef and branded a few mavericks that they should not have claimed. Pete Bishop had his Lazy B brand. Lige McGinnis had his Big Square iron. Each ruled his tough clan with a steel hand. Each had a large family. Their sons and daughters grew up. They attended the dances at Painted Rock. Bishops swung McGinnises through the quadrille and Virginia reel. Now and then a Bishop would waltz with a McGinnis. There were quarrels and many of the dances ended in big free-for-all fights. Now and then there was a cutting or shooting scrape. A few killings.

But there was no feud during

those years. And no man or woman in that Skeleton Valley broke the unwritten law that Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis had laid down from the start: That no Bishop should marry a McGinnis.

Perhaps no feud would ever have started if Wild Bill Bishop, first and oldest son of Pete Bishop, had not run off with Lige McGinnis' oldest and prettiest daugher, Jane.

Wild Bill Bishop had always been a rebel. Jane McGinnis had been as headstrong and willful as she was beautiful. Two of a kind. For several years they had been meeting secretly at night. Both saved all the money they could get hold of. They planned to meet at the big Fourth of July celebration and dance at Painted Rock. Ride away from there.

It was Rube Bishop who learned their secret somehow. Rube's face had been slapped once by Jane McGinnis. The second time he had bothered her, Wild Bill Bishop had beaten his cousin into a groveling pulp.

So it had been Rube Bishop who told Lige McGinnis that Jane was running away with Wild Bill Bishop.

"I'd ruther see a daughter of mine dead than married to any of that Bishop outfit," raged Lige McGinnis. "But it's Wild Bill Bishop I'm killin'."

Rube took that message, along with the news of the secret elopement, to Pete Bishop.

"Let Lige McGinnis keep his girl at home where she belongs," Pete growled. "He's got to kill me before he gits to my son, Bill. When I'm done with Lige McGinnis I'll tie that whelp of mine to a snubbin' post and skin him alive with a bull whip."

"You and Jane better hit the trail," Rube took the news to Wild Bill and Jane who were dancing a waltz together. "Pete an' Lige has found out that the two of you is runnin' off to git married."

"I reckon," Wild Bill Bishop drawled, "I kin guess where they got the news." And he knocked the lanky Rube down in the middle of the dance floor, and headed for the door with Jane.

Lige McGinnis loomed up in the doorway, a gun in his hand. Wild Bill jerked his six-shooter and shot once. His bullet broke Lige's gun arm. If it had been any other man but Jane's father, Wild Bill would have gut-shot him.

Wild Bill Bishop and Jane McGinnis made a fast getaway. Harry, Wild Bill's younger brother, shot young Ed McGinnis when Ed tried a snapshot at Wild Bill. The fight was on. And Rube Bishop, crouched out in the darkness behind the wagons, kept the fight going with occasional bushwhacker shots.

Half a dozen Bishops and McGinnises were dead or wounded when Pete Bishop got there from the saloon down the street. Pete's bellowing roar and his six-shooter put an abrupt end to the gun fighting.

But the feud was on. Wild Bill Bishop had taken Jane McGinnis out of Skeleton Valley. They never returned. No word from either of them ever got back to either family.

They had broken that unwritten law laid down by Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis. There was one and only one penalty for such law breaking. Death.

Pete Bishop was never heard to mention the name of his son again. The Bishop clan, men, women and kids, were forbidden to speak Wild Bill Bishop's name or the name of Jane McGinnis. Lige McGinnis voiced that same stern and forbidding law in no uncertain terms.

That had been about twenty-five years ago. Pete Bishop now had grandchildren nearly as old as Wild Bill had been when he ran away. He had never mentioned the name of Wild Bill. He had always spoken of Harry as his oldest son. As he did today when he rode past dead Harry Bishop's place and his grave.

"How old," Bill Slocum broke a silence, "are you, mister?"

"A year older'n the devil in hell." White-bearded Pete Bishop grinned wolfishly. "Me'n' Lige McGinnis is the same age. Yonder is Painted Rock. We'll rest our saddles."

Bill Slocum said nothing. He knew that the tough old cowman was stopping here in hopes of cutting the sign of the two bushwhackers. There were a dozen or more saddled horses standing at the long hitch rack in front of the saloon and almost as many more at the other end of the street at the hitch rack in front of the store. The street was no more than a widening in the deeply rutted wagon road. As they rode down the muddy street, old Pete Bishop's ragged brows were pulled into a heavy scowl and his hard green eyes read the brands on every horse.

Bill Slocum read those brands and decided that there were as many McGinnises as there were Bishops in town. For some reason the Big Square roundup had pulled in. And Lazy B cowhands had come in from their range-branding camps. Their meeting here was not planned ahead or in the calculation of old Pete Bishop.

"What in thunder fetches them brush poppers into town when we're short-handed and behind as always?" Pete Bishop muttered.

Bill Slocum wondered if Rube Bishop and his stepson, Joel, were here.

IV

In the early morning that was saturated with gray, cold drizzle the owners of the saddled horses were inside the store and saloon. But Bill Slocum knew that eyes inside the store watched through the rain-splashed windows as he and Pete Bishop rode past. And the old cowman's hand was on his holstered six-shooter.

They halted at the hitch rack in front of the log saloon. Pete Bishop's bellowing voice brought out the men who had been watching them as they rode up.

"Pile out in the open air!" the old hellion's creaky bellow shattered the peaceful silence. "Stranger in town! Git out here an' look 'im over!"

Bill Slocum had not expected anything like that. This old son of a snake was acting like a man who

had roped a colt-killing mountain lion and dragged it into camp. Bill's hand dropped to the butt of his six-shooter. Old Pete's green eyes saw the move and his white-bearded lips flattened back in a yellow-fanged wolfish grin.

Men came out through the swinging half doors of the saloon. They were careful not to crowd or elbow one another. Because some of them were lanky and rawboned and reddish or sandy-complexioned. Bishops. While others were shorter, darker-skinned, black-haired.

As they came out they formed two groups. They eyed Pete Bishop's bandaged shoulder and arm, then stared hard at Bill Slocum.

Other men had come out of the store, forked their horses, and now were riding slowly down the street. More Bishops and McGinnises. Old Pete Bishop swung his horse around so that no man could get a shot at his back.

Now the swinging half doors of the saloon parted and a short, heavy-paunched, barrel-chested, bull-necked man stood there on short, bowed legs. He wore brush-scarred chaps and a faded old denim brush jumper. His thumbs were hooked in a sagging cartridge belt, his gnarled right hand only an inch or two from his gun. His square, thick-jowled face was swarthy with a red undertone. A ragged, drooping, tobacco-stained iron-gray mustache hid the corners of his traplike mouth. A shock of coarse iron-gray hair showed from under his slanted hat. His eyes, under jutting iron-gray brows, were reddish-black, opaque, glittering like the eyes of a dangerous animal. Though Lige McGinnis was, like Pete Bishop, somewhere in his seventies, crowding eighty, there was a lot of animal power and bull strength left in his burly frame.

"Save your paw and beller, Pete," Lige McGinnis growled. "Who tried to kill me last night?"

Pete Bishop lifted his bandaged shoulder and his yellow fangs bared in a snarl.

"Somebody's bustin' the law, Lige. I'm lookin' at yuh."

"Then you better git measured fer a pair of specs. My last son, Jimmy, was ridin' my big white horse when he come to town fer the mail. The bushwhackers mistaken Jimmy fer me, him ridin' alone on that big white geldin'. There was two of 'em, from the sign they left. I'll tell a man somebody's bustin' the law."

Then that pair of black eyes, like live coals, was glaring at Bill Slocum.

"Who sold *you* chips in the game, stranger?"

Men on horseback, hard-eyed men with their hands on guns, blocked the road on both sides and behind Bill Slocum. A tough-looking pack on foot was eying him with ugly scrutiny. But Bill stared back into the burning black eyes of old Lige McGinnis and grinned flatly.

"I'm no dirty bushwhacker, mister." Bill Slocum's voice was quiet and a little contemptuous. "I travel alone and fight in the open."

"There's one law in Skeleton Valley," rasped a nasal voice that belonged to one of the men on horse-

back who had ridden down the street from the big log store, "that no Bishop or McGinnis would bust unless he was cravin' to be hung. Pete Bishop an' Lige McGinnis ain't to be shot at."

Bill Slocum's grin twisted crookedly. That was one of the voices he had heard in the heavy mountain fog at daybreak. The voice of old Pete Bishop's nephew Rube. Bill turned slowly in his saddle to get a look at the man.

Rube Bishop rode the longest stirrup in Skeleton Valley. The upper part of his seven-foot rawboned frame hung forward across his saddlehorn so that his long, lantern-jawed face showed just above the ears of his horse. Sparse, dirty sandy whiskers covered the lower part of the long-jawed face. Above it the man's skin was the color and texture of an old strip of jerked beef. Dank graying sandy hair hung down, untrimmed, from under the crown of a shapeless old sweat-marked hat. His pale eyes were bloodshot and as green as the eyes of a rattlesnake. His old flannel shirt, patched denim jumper and chaps were slick with dirt and grease. His huge hands were scabbed and dirt-caked, with broken dirty nails. The man looked like a middle-aged human animal that never in his life had used soap and hot water.

Bill Slocum's eyes cut a hard, quick look at the boy on the dun-colored horse behind Rube. A tall, skinny, unkempt youth about sixteen with carrot-colored hair that needed cutting, dark-yellow freckles that stood out like dirt spots against an unhealthy pale-yellow skin. Pale-green eyes that shifted uneasily as the youth aped Rube's every action, even to the tobacco spitting. A cat's-claw limb had raked the boy's long-beaked nose and it was swollen and scratched. He was wearing a gaudy new purple silk shirt that was several sizes too large and he must have just bought it at the store because the rain had not dampened it. He had put it on over a filthy dirt-caked wool undershirt that had been white once. His loose-lipped grin was that of a half-wit.

"Why'n't yuh take your barlow knife, Rube," leered Joel, "an' cut the polecat down to my size fer me. I'll spill 'is guts in the mud."

Joel pulled a big bone-handled knife from the pocket of his chaps. A skinny thumb pressed a button on the handle and the knife's whetted four-inch blade sprang open.

Rube was staring fixedly at Bill Slocum. Bill knew that this seven-foot renegade bushwhacker and the unsavory Joel had watched him ride down from the Rim with old Pete Bishop. Rube was cunning enough to figure it out that Bill owned the horse they'd heard nicker up on the Rim, just before they botched their bushwhacking job. And Bill was sure that Rube meant to kill him because he knew too much.

"Clean 'is plow, Rube," called a tipsy member of the Bishop clan. "Drag i'm off his horse an' rassle 'im down in the mud."

"Mebbeso," put in a short, swarthy, bowlegged McGinnis cow-

hand, "Rube ain't man enough."

"Back that with foldin' money, Mac," Rube leered.

Bill Slocum's eyes took in every man of them with a swift glance. He needed no more than that brief appraisal to convince him that he had them all to whip before he could hope to ride away from here alive. Even old Pete Bishop was not lifting a hand or saying a word in his defense. There was not so much as one drop of mercy in the blood of these clans that feud-fought one another, but ganged up on any invader.

There was only thing to do and Bill Slocum did it. His horse snorted and jumped toward Rufe as Bill's spur rowels jabbed. The two horses collided and Bill quit his saddle as though he was bulldogging a steer. One hand gripped the front of Rube's shirt while his other hand grabbed and held onto the long dank hair. Bill's one hundred and eighty-five pounds of bone and hard muscle swung like a pendulum, dragging the lanky Rube from his saddle. They landed in the mud as the two horses shied off.

Bill landed on top. He slammed Rube's head and face deep into the slimy muck and brought one knee up and all his weight was on it as he drove it deep into Rube's groin and belly. Rube coughed and choked as mud and slimy water filled his mouth. Bill yanked the man's face out of the mud and his fist smashed against the long hawk-beaked nose. There was the cracking crunch of smashed bone. Blood spurted. Rube let out a choked howl and a sodden quid of tobacco rolled out of his gaping mouth. Bill was shoving the bloody, mud-smeared face back down in the deep mud when he felt a sharp stab of pain in his shoulder and was thrown forward by Joel's weight on his back.

Bill ducked his head sideways as the long blade stabbed at his face. He grabbed the wrist above the fist that held the knife and held on. Twisting sideways, he yanked the boy's arm up and over his own wide

shoulder and heaved. Joel's legs went into the air as Bill flipped him over and spread him on his back in the mud. He drove his fist hard and deep into the kid's belly. Joel's pale eyes rolled back in his head and his underslung jaw dropped open.

Grabbing the knife, Bill flung it away and staggered to his feet. But he had no time to get balanced. Two lanky cowpunchers of the Bishop clan were on top of him. A fist slammed into his face and sharp pain cracked inside his nose and into his eyes. He went down on his back and his arms hauled a man down close on top of him. The stench of bad whiskey and chewing tobacco seeped into his nostrils through the blood. The man's teeth clamped onto his left ear and the sharp pain did no more than clear Bill Slocum's brain. He kicked both legs free as he lay on his back, clenched both arms around the man on top of him. Then his legs swung into the air, bowed, and when they came down, his spur rowels dug deep into the lower part of the man's long back. He kicked both spurs free and his legs jackknifed again and again. His spur rowels tore through the cloth and deep into the hide and flesh beneath. The man groaned and grunted with pain. Frantic, mud-slippery fingers gouged at Bill's eye and face and clawed at his hair. He kept spurring.

Heavy hands were grabbing now at Bill's legs. He pulled both feet back and kicked. Kicked low and viciously at some man's belly. The man groaned and went down. Rolling out from under the man, Bill clawed for his gun as he got onto one knee. Through a smear of mud and blood he saw a lanky man charge him, swinging his gun like a club. He was almost on top when Bill thumbed back the hammer of his six-shooter and pulled the trigger. The man lurched and stumbled and fell over on top of him almost knocking Bill's wind out.

The limp, lanky dead weight was pinning Bill down on his back when he saw a long, ugly, grinning face. He twisted his head sideways as a gun flash blinded his eyes. For a moment the explosion deafened him and stinging, burning gunpowder bit through the mud mask into his face. He fired point-blank at the ugly grinning face that blurred a few inches above his eyes.

Like a man in the grip of some horrible nightmare, Bill heard the low, growling voice of old Lige McGinnis saying: "By Satan, Pete, the warthawg's done throwed you shorthanded!"

Bill Slocum was no more than partly conscious when old Pete Bishop kicked the gun out of his hand and hauled and dragged him out from under two dead Bishop cowpunchers.

Pete Bishop's white-bearded mouth was cussing in a creaky voice and his eyes were glass-green. He hauled Bill up onto his feet. A paunchy man, wearing a dirty bartender apron, shoved a half-filled bottle of almost colorless corn whiskey at him and told him to drink it all.

Two men were dead. Another lay

in the mud, the back of his wet denim jacket, his shirt and undershirt ripped to shreds, his back bleeding and spur-ripped.

Rube was sitting in the mud, his huge hands trying to paw the gritty mud from his pain-blinded eyes. His His breath was coming in choked sobs and he kept mumbling that he was blind for life. Joel was crouched beside Rube, shivering like a whipped mongrel.

"Fought, by Jehoshaphat," growled old Lige McGinnis, "till he run plumb out o' Bishops."

Old Pete Bishop grinned like a gaunt, white, green-eyed wolf.

"His name is Bill Slocum, Lige. He's throwed me short-handed. He'll take their jobs."

"He ain't done here yet, Pete," sounded old Lige McGinnis' low, deep-chested growl. "If he's the bushwhacker that killed my boy, Jimmy, mistakin' him fer me, he shore ain't ridin' away from here."

"The same bushwhackers that killed your whelp, Jimmy, laid fer me under the Rim. Parted my hair with a bullet and winged me with another pot shot. Bill Slocum had no part in it. You kin gamble on it."

"Who is he, then? Where'd he come from? What's he doin' here? Blast it, Pete Bishop, if you're hirin' outsiders—"

"I'm hirin' no outsiders," said Pete Bishop flatly. "If Bill Slocum turns snake, I'll be the first man to kill 'im. He's set me afoot fer cowhands. I'll work his guts out. You know me better'n ary man on earth, Lige. I never do nothin' without I got good reason. It's breakin' the law to hire ary outsider. But I'm claimin' Bill Slocum fer a mav'rick."

Lige McGinnis started to say something. Then his mouth clamped shut so hard that his big ivory-colored teeth clicked like the jaws of a steel trap.

Bill Slocum stood there on widespread legs. Wide-shouldered, lean-flanked, blood-spattered and unwhipped. There was a flat-lipped grin on his battered mouth and his slate-gray eyes watched the two old he-wolves of Skeleton Valley. He stood their cold-eyed, merciless scrutiny without flinching.

"A mav'rick," growled Lige McGinnis. "By Jupiter, you could be right, Pete. But don't claim him too quick. And when you git patched up and after I git my last boy, Jimmy, planted, meet me here. Alone. There was queer news in that mail sack I picked up by Jimmy's murdered body."

"What kind o' news? You ain't the only man that gits mail."

"I've heard tell," growled Lige McGinnis, "that some Jack Mormons once claimed this valley."

"Seems like I heard about them Jack Mormons. I'll meet you here tomorrow night. Me'n' you. Alone."

"Alone," growled Lige McGinnis, "don't include that stinkin' Rube ner that locoed Joel."

"Ner ary of your breeds, Lige. But if I got to keep an eye on Bill Slocum—"

"Don't show up here *without* your

Bill Slocum, Pete. If you have to fetch his dead carcass."

Old Pete Bishop nodded. He walked over to where Joel was crouched and shook him hard. Then he pulled the seven-foot Rube onto his feet.

"Plant the carcasses of them two things before they commence stinkin' up the valley," Pete ordered. "And the next ruckus you start, Rube, finish it or I'll gut-shoot yuh."

Bill Slocum stooped and picked his six-shooter out of the mud. He wiped it off on the shirt of one of the dead Bishops. Then he ejected the two empty shells and shoved fresh cartridges into the chambers. And all the time the six-shooter seemed to move a little so that it was covering both Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis. He was battered, groggy, but there was still plenty of fight left in him.

"Fork your horse, Bill Slocum," creaked old Pete Bishop. "We'll git yonderly."

V

There was no doctor in Skeleton Valley. As old Pete Bishop put it, a man that didn't have the warp and toughness wasn't fit to live. Any Bishop that couldn't stand the pain of a bullet hole or two and let himself die of lead poison wasn't fit to take along, nohow. And Lige McGinnis felt the same way about his tribe. Those who gave up and cashed in their chips were given a hole in the ground and a pine-board box and were buried without a word of prayer or the shedding of a tear.

The present generation, on both the Bishop and McGinnis side of Skull River was about the age of Bill Slocum. For the most part its men were ignorant and brutal and vicious and treacherous. The women were slovenly, weak-minded and shiftless.

Old Pete Bishop told Bill Slocum that what Skeleton Valley had needed for a long time was a pestilence that would wipe out every man, woman and child in the whole valley.

"Like that smallpox," he grinned wickedly, "that wiped out them Jack Mormons." And from under the low-pulled brim of his battered old sweat-marked hat, the old hellion's narrowed green eyes cut the husky young cowpuncher a sidelong, searching look.

"In one night," added Bill Slocum quietly, his hand on his gun.

"How'd you know it was done in one night? That was fifty years ago."

"It takes longer than fifty years," Bill Slocum told the old he-wolf of the Bishop clan, "for a story like that to die out, even if it's against your law here in Skeleton Valley to talk about it. Outside the valley the story still lives. Back in the Mormon country where those men came from, there's a big granite boulder with the names of the dead Mormons of Skeleton Valley carved deep in the rock. It's called the Skeleton Valley Massacre Monument."

Old Pete Bishop shifted a little in his saddle and Bill Slocum stared back into that pair of ice-green eyes. He met the glint of suspicion and murder in their hard scrutiny without flinching.

"You ever see that monument?" asked the old he-wolf.

Bill Slocum nodded. If he had to kill Pete Bishop or get killed trying, now was as good a time and place as any. Back yonder at Painted Rock this same old white-whiskered hellion had sat his horse and looked on without lifting voice or hand to keep his ornery outfit from killing the stranger who had come to his aid when his own kin had bush-whacked him. Bill Slocum had listened to the talk of this snake-blooded, ruthless and merciless renegade old Texan and there was cold hatred in his cowpuncher heart that sounded now in the flat tone of his voice.

"I was born and raised there at that big Mormon settlement."

"Then you're a Jack Mormon." Old Pete Bishop spat out the words like an ugly accusation.

"No. I grew up with 'em. I know 'em and respect 'em. Accordin' to my lights, they're the finest people on earth."

"A damned Jack Mormon!" old Pete Bishop snarled. "I'd orter gut-shoot yuh!"

"I'd kill you before you got that old hogleg of yours into action," said Bill Slocum. "Better have Lige McGinnis sidin' you when you make that gunplay."

Old Pete Bishop's gnarled hand came slowly, reluctantly, away from the wooden butt of his long-barreled six-shooter.

"Mebbeso you're right. But you won't git shot. You'll hang!"

Bill Slocum grinned faintly. "Not a man among you Bishops or McGinnises has ever ridden out of Skeleton Valley since the night you wiped out the Mormon settlers. Those of you who tried to get out, got turned back. You can't trail your cattle to market. You and Lige McGinnis and your tribes are no more than prisoners. For fifty years the Mormons have kept you penned up here. They didn't call on the law to punish you for murder. They knew a better, slower way. They knew that sooner or later Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis would lock horns. That your sons and grandsons, your nephews and cousins would fight and kill one another like so many mangy, mongrel, hydrophobia wolves. And when your feud has wiped you all out, down to the last man, the Mormons will move back into their Skeleton Valley.

"The sons and grandsons of those twelve Mormon settlers you and Lige McGinnis murdered will bring in their wives and families. They'll prune and trim the neglected orchards, repair the log buildings and the fences your shiftless outfits have been too lazy to keep in decent repair. Their roundups will gather the wild cattle up on the Rim and they'll trail out big drives to the market that's bin denied you and Lige McGinnis. And there on that big Painted Rock will be chiseled the names of the twelve Mormon settlers Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis murdered when they spilled a big, stolen trail herd of Texas longhorns into Skeleton Valley. You and Lige McGinnis won't be here to see it. Be-

cause you'll both be dead."

"Who," asked the white-bearded old he-wolf of the Bishops, "is a-goin' to kill me'n' Lige McGinnis?"

Bill Slocum stared coldly into the glittering ice-green eyes that mirrored the terrible, unrelenting hatred in the old cowman's heart. They had reined their horses to a halt and this was the place where they parted company, one way or another.

VI

"I don't want to kill you here and now," said Bill Slocum. "I want you to carry the news back to Lige McGinnis that your time to die with your boots on is about here."

"If we die, it'll be because we've laughed ourselves to death. We're hangin' you to the ridge log that juts out about ten feet over the saloon door. That's the buildin' your damned Jack Mormons was puttin' up fer a gospel meetin' house. It's the buildin' where Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis made their bad medicine. It needs a good hangin' to put the finishin' touches to it."

Old Pete Bishop's white whiskers semed to bristle as he pointed a long forefinger at Bill Slocum.

"I read your brand from the start. When I opened my eyes and seen you bent over me. I knowed yuh! I'd have gut-shot yuh then only you was too fast fer me. Your name ain't Bill Slocum. Your mother was Jane McGinnis! Your father was Wild Bill Bishop!"

Bill Slocum nodded. He knew that both Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis had suspected who he was. He showed no trace of surprise now. Only a cold and quiet defiance and hatred and contempt.

"When Wild Bill Bishop and Jane McGinnis escaped from Skeleton Valley," said Bill slowly, "they got stopped by the Mormons on guard beyond the Rim. The man who took 'em prisoner when they told him they couldn't turn back or they'd be hung, was named Matthew Slocum. His father had been murdered here with the other Morman settlers.

"Matthew Slocum was the same bearded man who stopped you and Lige McGinnis that early dawn when you were trailin' Wild Bill Bishop and Jane McGinnis with the sworn promise to shoot your own son and daughter where you caught 'em. Matthew Slocum turned you back. He and his men sent you back to Skeleton Valley, as cold-blooded a pair of murderers as were ever stopped in their tracks.

"Matthew Slocum took Wild Bill Bishop and Jane McGinnis to the big Mormon settlement. Prisoners. To stand trial for the black crimes of their fathers.

"They stood trial there," Bill Slocum continued. "It was a fair trial, tempered with the mercy of a peace-loving, kindly and just people. They were satisfied with the verdict of that trial.

"Wild Bill Bishop and Jane McGinnis had only one request. That was that they be married by a man qualified in the eyes of the man-made laws and in the eyes of God to make them man and wife. And

Matthew Slocum granted them their one request. He married them.

"Wild Bill Bishop and his bride were alloted land and cattle and horses and farm machinery. Mormons helped them build their cabin. They lived there among the Mormon people. They were allowed to live in peace and happiness. Their only child, a boy, was named William Slocum Bishop. Neither the parents nor their son was ever urged or even asked to join the Mormon faith. They were treated well. They were content. They were told not to leave their ranch or go farther than the settlement or where the roundups took Wild Bill Bishop on the big range. Never at any time were they treated as prisoners, or as the son and daughter of Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis, murderers. They died during a plague of black diphtheria. Died while they were helping nurse others who were dying. Their death was happy. They were given a decent Christian burial.

"Life went on for young Bill Slocum Bishop. Before they died, his father and mother told him for the first time the truth or as much of the truth as they knew about Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis. And it was an ugly story for a growing boy to hear. Its telling left a raw wound in his young heart that never healed.

"Nobody among the Mormons had ever told young Bill Slocum Bishop about the Skeleton Valley Massacre. Youngsters never heard of it. It was never told them until they were grown to manhood and womanhood.

"Young Bill Slocum Bishop went to Matthew Slocum after the plague had worn itself out. He told Matthew Slocum that when he was old enough, he was goin' into Skeleton Valley. That he was goin' alone. Matthew Slocum didn't try to talk him out of the notion. He didn't ask young Bill Slocum Bishop what he aimed to do when he got there. All he said was to wait till he got old enough to make the trip."

Bill grinned mirthlessly at old Pete Bishop who had listened in scowling, green-eyed silence.

"I'm here," Bill Slocum Bishop said quietly. "I aim to do the job I swore I'd do. Take the story, every word of it, back to Lige McGinnis. I'll meet you both there tomorrow night at moonrise. Have your guns in your hands."

Old Pete Bishop's white beard bristled and quivered with an almost insane fury. In a croaking, rasping voice he cursed young Bill Slocum Bishop. Cursed him and his father and his mother until his terrible fury spent itself.

Bill Slocum Bishop listened with a deadly calm that seemed to madden the white-whiskered old hellion. Then Pete Bishop whirled his horse and rode back toward Painted Rock in a shower of mud.

Bill Slocum Bishop sat his horse there in the muddy road until the old he-wolf had ridden out of sight. The drizzle had quit and the gray sky was broken up into patches of fleecy clouds in a rain-washed blue sky. A meadow lark sat on the broken split-rail fence and warbled its morning song to the sun. There was

the smell of pines after the rain. And when old Pete Bishop had ridden away and out of sight and hearing, it was hard to believe that such a thing as death could come to blot out this beauty of a cattleman's paradise.

But other men had seen and heard and smelled the peaceful valley. And death had taken them with a ruthless, bloody hand. And death would strike again.

The meadow lark ended its song abruptly. Bill saw its swift flight into the protection of the wild roses where its nest was. The swift-moving shadow of a sparrow hawk dove down. Then the hawk, having missed its prey, swung and wheeled in the air and was gone beyond the tops of the tall pines.

From beyond a bend in the road came the indistinct sounds of men on horseback and the rasping, ugly voice of Rube Bishop lifting in a shout.

"Scatter out, you McGinnis fellers! Ride in pairs! Orders is to ketch 'im alive! The Jack Mormon son of Wild Bill Bishop an' Jane McGinnis! Whet your pig sticker, Joel! You git 'is ears!"

Neither old Pete Bishop nor Bill Slocum Bishop had suspected that the boy Joel had trailed them, that the boy had bushed up and overheard every word spoken between them and had carried his story back to Rube and the others who were drinking at the saloon. All save old Lige who had ridden away alone.

Bill Slocum Bishop was trapped there in a muddy lane. A crooked split-rail fence along either side. And nothing but wide open pasture and hay meadow. And before he could spur his leg-weary horse to a run, the riders burst into sight.

Young Joel was riding in the lead. His half-witted brain fired by excitement, he was a great, tough hero in his own eyes and was guiding Rube and the others back to where he had hidden in the brush and overheard the talk between Bill and old Pete Bishop. Joel was waving a saddle gun now and yelling, his changing voice shrill. He sighted Bill and his voice rose to a shrill scream. The cocked gun he was waving exploded with a sharp crack.

Bill Slocum Bishop did not hear the sound of Joel's gun because the bullet from it traveled faster than the sound. And the bullet had knocked Bill's hat off and ripped his scalp where it grazed his skull. Bill toppled from his saddle, knocked out cold, and landed heavily in the mud. The half-witted, slack-jawed Joel's wild shot had turned the trick.

Rube and the Bishop cousin with the spur-ripped back and half a dozen McGinnis cowpunchers had Bill roped to his saddle when he came awake. His head was splitting with pain and his blinking eyes stared at the lantern-jawed, tobacco-spitting Rube and the half-witted Joel. Joel was brandishing his long-bladed knife. Rube's drunken laugh was worse than his cursing. The swarthy, tipsy McGinnises were surly and silent.

Old Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis had met somewhere and had

ridden back to the saloon. They stared at the riders and the grim-lipped prisoner they had brought in. Rube was fashioning a hangman's knot in the end of his catch rope.

The rope with its hangman's knot was around Bill Slocum Bishop's neck. Drunken Rube Bishop threw the other end of the rope over the jutting ridge log.

The heady success of that wild shot that had captured the tough Bill Slocum Bishop, had twisted Joel's half-witted brain. His pale eyes were wild, bloodshot, as he brandished his long-bladed knife and spurred his horse against Bill's.

"Rube learnt me!" Joel's cracked voice shrilled. "We bushwhacked that McGinnis on the white horse. We got the wrong McGinnis. We'd've got ol' Pete only the light was pore. But dang it, I shore got this Bill Slocum. He's my meat. Rube said to git 'is ears. Me'n' Rube is the toughest, orneriest humans that ever bushwhacked a McGinnis er a Bishop!"

Bill ducked his head sideways as the long blade flashed in his face. His hands were tied behind his back with Rube's hogging string. Bill's horse jumped sideways. The noose jerked tight around his neck. The hangman's rope, tied hard and fast to the ridge log, was dragging him out of his saddle. He was hanging, choking to death. Joel's knife was slashing at his ears. His eyes caught a brief glimpse of Joel's insane face, Rube's lantern-jawed grin beyond.

Then two six-shooters roared at almost the same split second. Joel's thin scream choked in a death rattle. Rube jerked convulsively in his saddle and toppled sideways as his horse reared. Ht was dead before he hit the ground.

VII

Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis, their smoking guns in their hands, grinned faintly at each other. Then old white-whiskered Pete leaned from his saddle and picked Joel's long-bladed knife up from the ground. One quick slash and he'd cut the taut rope, dropping Bill to the ground with a jarring thud. Then the old he-wolf of the Bishops cut the hangman's knot and the hogging string that tied Bill's hands.

"I got a strong stummick, Lige, but seein' the only real man in the valley hung by that pack, made me sick."

"It taken a Bishop and a McGinnis," growled old Lige, "to give us a fightin' grandson."

Bill lay there on the muddy ground that was steaming in the heat of the morning sun. He pulled the clean air into his lungs with big gasping gulps. The rope had left a raw red welt around his neck. Blood from the bullet rip in his scalp matted his wiry black hair. Pain and dizziness made him groggy as he got slowly to his feet and stood there, legs braced, trying to grin.

Old Pete Bishop walked over to where Rube lay dead. Bill's ivory handled six-shooter, the gun that had once belonged to Wild Bill Bishop, was shoved in the pocket of Rube's chaps, its white handle showing. The

old he-wolf of the Bishops got the gun and handed it, butt foremost, to Bill Slocum Bishop.

"You'll need it directly," he said in his creaky voice.

Lige McGinnis still had his gun in his hand as he stood there on his short bowed legs and spoke to the sullen-eyed McGinnis men.

"The Jack Mormons is a-comin'!" Lige's voice was a deep growl. "I got notice. It was in the mail sack Jimmy was fetchin' to camp when Rube and that Joel kid bushwhacked him. Pete Bishop got the same kind of notice. He was on his way to fetch me the warnin' when that same Rube an' that half-brained Joel shot 'im from the brush.

"This big feller here you aimed to hang is Bill Slocum Bishop," Lige continued. "His daddy was Wild Bill Bishop, who had the guts to pull out o' Skeleton Valley. He taken with him the one daughter of mine who had the same kind of nerve and was purty as a wild rose. Bill Slocum Bishop is their son. And he soonered into the Skeleton Valley to play a lone hand agin' the biggest odds a man ever tackled. He's reppin' fer them Jack Mormons. And he got his job done. Git your families and pull out!"

"You got a law, Lige," snarled one of the McGinnis tribe. "You an' Pete Bishop made that law. It gives us the right to hang this Bill Slocum Bishop. You two old wore-out things has played your strings out. Nobody's runnin' us out o' Skeleton Valley. You've cussed us out and whupped us around fer the last time. Git 'em, boys!"

It was as if this thing had been smoldering for years and now a whirlwind had fanned it into a sudden blaze. They had, the men on both sides of Skull River, been plotting and planning to kill off the two old he-wolves who had ruled them at the end of their long-barreled guns since they could remember. Now they were taking over.

Bill Slocum Bishop's head had cleared. His ivory-handled gun was in his hand. Old Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis had just saved him from hanging. Bill's gun was the first to spit fire.

His first bullet hit the spokesman for the McGinnis tribe in the chest and tore through his heart. Before the exploding gun dropped from the dead man's hand, Bill had shot again and shot to kill. And then old Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis were pulling their gun triggers. And the renegade McGinnises and the spur-ripped Bishops were returning the gunfire, and it was a wide-open fight with no quarter given.

The spur-torn man had shot at Bill and the bullet had struck Bill in the thigh, staggering him. Bill's shot caught the Bishop cowhand in the belly and the man's long legs buckled and he went down.

Riderless horses lunged and pitched and bumped into each other in their panic. One McGinnis man, the last of the tribe left alive, tried to make a getaway. Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis shot at the same time. Both bullets hit the man in the back

and he pitched sideways and backward out of his saddle.

The gun fight was over. Even the saloonman, one of the McGinnis tribe, lay dead in the saloon doorway, his gun still gripped in his lifeless hand and blood staining his dirty, white-flour-sack bar apron.

Only Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis were left on their feet. And both of them were wounded.

Both of Bill Slocum Bishop's long legs had been hit. He had been knocked down by the second bullet that had made an ugly rip in his other thigh. He sat there on the muddy ground. Now that the gun fight was over, as suddenly as it had started, that dizzy, sickening pain was throbbing inside his bullet-creased skull again. He felt weak and dizzy and lightheaded. His ivory-handled six-shooter was empty and his unsteady hands worked clumsily and with a fumbling slowness as he ejected the six empty shells from the gun. Then he began pulling fresh cartridges from the loops of his cartridge belt and reloading the gun that had once belonged to Wild Bill Bishop.

Old white-whiskered Pete Bishop stood on his long legs and reloaded his empty six-shooter. His skin was as gray as the lead in the cartridges. His bloodshot green eyes glittering like the eyes of a snake, he grinned at Lige McGinnis.

"Me'n' you, now, Lige." His voice was a croaking whisper.

"Me'n' you, Pete," growled Lige McGinnis, his eyes red coals of hate.

Short, thick-set, bloodstained, Lige McGinnis stood there on his stumpy bowed legs and shoved fresh cartridges into his six-shooter.

They had cut hard, quick glances at Bill, then watched each other like two old gray wolves. It was as if they had forgotten their fighting grandson. Their killer memories went back across the years. Back along that blood-spattered cattle trail to Texas. Back to their boyhood of youth when their partnership had begun. Even then they had hated each other. And that hatred had grown and strengthened with the long, tough years. These men had thrown in together to work as a wolf team, hamstringing and killing, stealing cattle, killing men who got in their way. They had fought back to back against any odds, shared stolen bloodstained profits and they had distrusted and hated each other more and more. Slowly that hatred had warped their brains and shriveled their hearts. And now they were facing each other for the last time. They were playing their tough hands out. This was the moment they had waited for all these years. They had no fear of death. To kill each other was their one and only thought. Not more than five long paces separated them. Their guns were loaded and cocked. Their nerves were taut as steel wire. Both men were dead shots. Neither would miss.

"Stand on your laigs, Bill," creaked Pete Bishop. "And shoot at the sky."

"Git up!" old Lige McGinnis growled. "Shoot in the air."

Neither of them looked at Bill Slocum Bishop. The two old he-wolves were watching one another. Neither of them saw him as he got slowly onto his feet and stood there, swaying.

Bill Slocum Bishop tilted the long barrel of the ivory-handled gun skyward. The gun that had once belonged to Wild Bill Bishop. He thumbed back the hammer. His squinted slate-gray eyes focused on the two old renegades who were his grandfathers.

"I'm proud," Bill's voice was low-pitched, steady, "to claim you both."

He pulled the trigger of the ivory-handled gun.

Their two guns blazed from no higher than their sagging cartridge belts. Bill saw the grins frozen on their seamed faces, watched the two old hellions go down slowly, as though they were too weary to stand any longer on their legs. They lay there dead on the muddy ground, their smoking guns in their hands.

The ivory-handled six-shooter slid slowly from Bill Slocum Bishop's hand. He swayed on his bullet-ripped legs, then went down. He lay there, partly on his back. His slate-gray eyes were closed and there was a faint grin frozen on his battered, blood-caked face.

VIII

That was how the white-bearded Matthew Slocum found Bill Slocum Bishop a little while later when he rode into the Skeleton Valley and Painted Rock at the head of his armed Mormons.

"Dead or alive," said Matthew Slocum, "William Slocum Bishop has paid his father's debt. He has balanced the scales of justice. He is one of us. Pray to God in His heaven that he lives. Amen."

There was a doctor among them. He gave the badly wounded man one chance in a hundred to live. Bill opened his pain-seared eyes and his lips moved.

"That's all the chance I need," he said, and his eyes closed again.

Matthew Slocum bent over the dead body of old Pete Bishop. His hands were a little unsteady as he unfastened a gold nugget chain and lifted its heavy gold watch from the dead old he-wolf's pocket. He snapped open the back of the gold case. His eyes read the inscription engraved there: "To John Slocum. From his sons."

Matthew Slocum put the watch in his vest pocket and fastened the nugget chain to a buttonhole.

From the dead hand of Lige McGinnis, Matthew Slocum took a plain gold wedding ring that had once been worn by John Slocum. Matthew Slocum put it into the same pocket with the watch.

There were graves to dig and the dead to bury. And then began the unpleasant job of moving a few slatternly women and their unwashed, unkempt children out of Skeleton Valley to wherever they chose to go. Matthew Slocum gave each woman a sack heavy with gold coins. He told them to get in their loaded wagons

and drive out of Skeleton Valley and never return.

Those women, long inured to violence and death, shed no tears for their men who had been killed. They had money enough to live on. They left the valley without regret. Never, said Matthew Slocum, were the dead less mourned.

Two deep graves were dug at the base of Painted Rock. Two pine coffins made. And at sundown Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis were buried there, side by side.

The saloon was emptied of its kegs and bottles, its poker tables and bar taken out, smashed and burned at a huge bonfire. Pails of hot water, mops and lye soap were used to scour ceiling, walls and floor. A huge tub of whitewash was mixed and the log walls were covered inside and out with gleaming white paint. The clean odor of whitewash obliterated the stench of spilled whiskey. The log building that had begun as a house of worship had endured its years of sin and crime and again became what it had been intended for when its logs were peeled and set up.

There at sunrise of a new day Matthew Slocum and his Mormons knelt inside its whitewashed walls and the white-bearded old man led them in prayer.

Bill Slocum Bishop lay between clean blankets and fought for his life. He battled his way from the shadow of death into the bright sunlight of a new life.

Log cabins, barns, sheds and fences were being repaired and scoured and whitewashed. Wild hay was cut and stacked. Fruit trees were pruned and trimmed back to healthy growth. Women in clean, fresh gingham laughed and sang as they made their new homes. Red-cheeked, scrubbed-looking youngsters played. Sixteen-mule freight teams hauled strings of heavily loaded wagons into the valley. Cowpunchers gathered the wild mountain cattle above the Rim and drove them down into the valley to fatten.

Matthew Slocum told Bill that he would be the ramrod and head cattle and ranch foreman. He had been given the ranch claimed by Pete Bishop, and the ranch across the river from it that Lige McGinnis had claimed for his own. Both places had been put in excellent repair.

"I can't live on two places, sir," Bill protested.

"Choose the one you want, Bill. I'll live across the river from you on the other place."

Matthew Slocum had a deep, mellow voice and a pair of sky-blue eyes that sparkled when his bearded lips smiled.

"You are one of us now, William. You are free to marry. It's been a brave struggle you have made against a terrible temptation. My granddaughter has told me of your love for her and how she has returned that love. How you had both been sorely tempted to run away and find your happiness somewhere. And how she had been eager to run away. But you had stood firm and decided against it. Because I had befriended

your mother and father before you were born. Your firm stand in that matter took far more courage than most brave men have. Honor and courage. It was a braver thing than your coming here alone into this valley of death. I am proud of you. I speak for us all who have known you since you were born. It is my wish that you marry my granddaughter, Martha. It is my prayer that you will both be happy."

When he had gone, Martha Slocum came into the whitewashed cabin. She had curly hair the color of placer gold in the sun, and dark-blue eyes. Her smile was something that Bill had remembered when everything in the world had seemed dark and hopeless.

Bill Slocum Bishop, grandson of Pete Bishop and Lige McGinnis, had killed men. That preyed on his mind. He had given the ivory-handled gun to Matthew Slocum and told the gray-bearded Mormon that he would never handle a gun of any kind again.

Martha Slocum's red-cheeked, tanned face was perhaps a little pale when she took the gun from under her apron and laid it on the bed near Bill's hand. Her dark-blue eyes were shining.

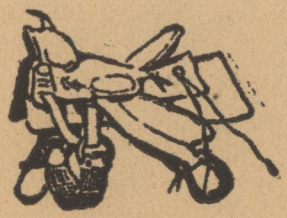
"You've done nothing to be ashamed of, Bill." Her voice was husky. "You had to use a gun. Grandfather and my father have been forced to shoot men. I hope and pray you'll never have to use this gun again. But if you do, I've loaded it for you."

She picked up the gun and shoved it into the open holster fastened to the cartridge belt that hung from a wooden peg on the whitewashed log wall.

A week later Martha Slocum and Bill Slocum Bishop stood side by side in the big whitewashed log building that was again a place of worship, and Matthew Slocum pronounced them man and wife.

Outside a meadow lark sang. No sparrow hawk swooped out of the blue sky to threaten its gay warbling. Its nest was safe in the wild rosebushes.

THE END



SIX-GUN SANTA CLAUS

by Lee E. Wells

Todd Tolliver's first Christmas present blew the lid off a rustling plot that had the law baffled

It was still a little early, but already the Christmas firecrackers had been exploding in San Rio's sand-blown streets for more than a week. It was fun to hear them, and to see the stripes of multicolored bunting that the merchants had strung from false-front to adobe across the single block of business houses. Even though Christmas had never meant more than this to young Todd Tolliver, he still managed to get some of the excitement of the season in his blood.

This year it would be even better. Gaudy posters, showing lions, ladies

in tights, tigers and elephants, announced the coming of the SHOW OF THE CENTURY just two days before Christmas itself. It was the first circus that had ever come to the little Arizona border town and Todd Tolliver knew he would have to see it.

Todd was tall for his fifteen years, scrawny and awkward. His bony wrists hung far below his shirt sleeves. His straw-colored hair was a tousled thatch above a high-boned face. Some day the cheeks would fill out and the long jaw become hard and firm, but right now there was a suggestion of hunger in Todd's lean face and wide blue eyes.

Todd's eyes devoured the colorful posters as he worked around his uncle's gambling hall. He made plans to get the price of admission, made them without much hope of carrying them through. Ace Garland had never yet, in all the years he had been Todd's guardian, given his ward so much as a dime to spend on "kid foolishness."

The circus came into town and Todd couldn't slip away from the house in the early dawn to see the canvas go up and the wagons unload. He had to get breakfast for his uncle. Not once during the morning did he have a chance to slip over to the circus lot. His hope of watering the elephants or feeding the horses for a pass went glimmering.

Just after the hot noon hour Todd at last found his work finished until midafternoon when Ace came home for his whiskey and siesta. Todd ran like an awkward scarecrow to the lot.

The SHOW OF THE CENTURY was a wonderland. Todd looked up in awe at the peak of the main tent, and heard electrifying sounds from the animal tent. The bark of the spielers before the little side show held him spellbound. He hung around the ticket wagon watching most of San Rio buy the bits of pasteboard that admitted them to the hidden wonders of the performance. Enviously he watched boys he knew pass their silver coins under the wicket and disappear behind the brown canvas.

Todd walked slowly away, hands deep in his pockets, broken boots kicking aimlessly in the sand. He circled the big tent, touched the thick ropes, the splintered head of the pickets, rubbed his hand down the coarse brown texture of the canvas.

Todd's thin, wide lips suddenly set in a determined line. He threw a quick glance toward the front of the tent. No one could see him. Dropping to the ground, he raised the edge of the canvas. Instantly the music from the main tent became louder. He had a swift glimpse of the boards above him, of scuffed boot soles.

Flattening himself on the ground, he started to wriggle through. He had nearly made it when he felt someone grip his ankles. Panic surged through him, but he didn't try to escape as he was pulled back to the outside. The fingers left his ankles and Todd slowly twisted around, looking up.

The man was the most dazzlingly dressed cowpoke that Todd had ever seen. The boy's jaw dropped as his eyes took in the big cream-colored Stetson, the crimson neckerchief, the royal purple shirt with white pipings at pockets and tight cuffs. Crossed gun belts circled the lean waist and the ornate holster held Colts with mother-of-pearl handles. Black broadcloth trousers looked sleek against the long, muscular legs and were stuffed into tooled boots with high shining heels.

"Bub, you sort of got your trails mixed. That ain't no way to get in," the cowboy said.

Todd pulled himself up and brushed the sand from his wrinkled trousers and faded shirt. "I shouldn't have tried it," he admitted. "I'll not be troubling you again."

He turned away, but the cowboy's tanned, lean hand dropped on his shoulder. Todd turned, waited. The man looked down at him, puzzled.

"Ain't you got four bits?" The cowpoke's voice was deep and the question friendly. The straight gray eyes searched the boy's face.

Todd shook his head. "Nope."

"Can't you get it from your folks?"

"Nope. I reckon I'll be getting along, mister. I'm sure sorry I tried to sneak in the tent."

His blue eyes bleak, Todd turned away, climbed over one of the ropes and walked toward the front of the tent. Then he heard swift steps behind him and the cowboy stopped him again.

"Look here, bub, you'd really like to see the show?"

"I'd mighty like it," Todd admitted. "But I won't get no fifty cents from Ace."

"Ace is your pa?"

"Nope."

The cowpuncher scratched his lean, sun-tanned jaw. He looked to be about twenty-five. His nose was long and straight, the lips wide in a generous mouth. He took a step back and looked over Todd more carefully, from the unruly corn thatch to the broken-toed boots. His eyes softened.

"Here, bub, come with me. I reckon there's a whole heap of trails inside that tent."

He led the boy around to the ticket booth, approaching it from the back. Todd straightened when he saw the surprised and envious looks of some of the San Rio boys. The cowpoke spoke to the man at the door.

"Here's a friend of mine, colonel. I'm giving him an Annie Oakley."

Colonel Bragg looked around. He wore a long black coat over a checkered vest. A shiny stovepipe hat sat at a cocky angle on his round head.

"Nevada, you plaster me with paper every town we play," he said in an exasperated voice. "It's always some passel of kids or a stray, gangly pup like this one."

Nevada grinned. "Take it out of my pay, colonel."

The colonel impatiently waved Todd inside the tent. "Take one of the blues, boy, them chairs right over there."

Nevada called after Todd: "Come back to the dressing tent after the show, bub. Ask for me—Nevada Banion."

Todd nodded and lost sight of the lean cowboy as Nevada hurried through the crowd. The "blues," he discovered, were a bank of chairs placed right before the single performing ring of the tent. He felt self-conscious when he discovered that he sat with the son of the San Rio mayor and some of the wealthy mine promoters of the district.

The Grand Parade made Todd forget everything. His excitement mounted when the red-uniformed band came marching into the tent, circling the ring, music like thunder in his ears. In dazzling succession came the equestrians dressed in glittering spangles and tights, riding proud steeds with arched necks. Clowns made Todd laugh, the elephants stalked by in swaying, ponderous dignity. The acrobats, high-wire artists, the tumblers and trapeze troops, and then Nevada Banion, supple and straight on a magnificent black stallion.

Todd's eyes widened and he watched the cowboy ride around the ring and out again. In the back of his mind he saw Ace Garland, equally as tall and slender, equally as graceful, but there the comparison ended. Nevada was friendly, the sort of hombre a fellow would want to be like. Ace Garland was nothing like that. Then the ringmaster came out, his clear voice cutting through all the noise of the tent.

Todd forgot time, San Rio and himself. He sighed regretfully when the last act had finished. But as he worked himself through the crowd and out of the tent, a sinking feeling gripped him. A hasty glance at the sun told him that Ace must have long since returned home. Todd had a twinge of fear. But Nevada Banion had let him see the circus and Todd wanted to thank the man. Throwing back his shoulders, he circled the big top.

Nevada Banion hailed Todd and led him to a little tent set apart from the rest. Pulling up a folding chair, he made the boy sit down and asked how he had liked the show.

The boy squirmed a little, his face glowing. "It was the prettiest thing I ever seen, Mr. Banion. Gosh, the way you shoot plumb takes my breath. I wish I could shoot that good, or had a six."

His eyes roved to an open trunk lid. A heavy six in a tooled holster and belt lay atop the colored silken shirts. Nevada laughed.

"It just takes practice, bub, and a little teaching. If we had time, I reckon I'd soon have you better'n most."

Todd's face glowed with the thought of it. Then he became serious. He traced an aimless design with his toe.

"Ain't many has been so nice to me, Nevada. I ain't never had much to thank anyone for. But I'll never forget today . . . or you. Christmas is day after tomorrow and I reckon I'll count this like it was my gift."

Nevada sobered. He had been

wiping make-up grease from his face and he stopped short, giving the boy a sharp look. He pitched the towel aside and sat down in another chair. His voice was sober.

"Tell me, bub, where're your folks?"

"Dead," Todd answered simply. "I hardly remember them, it's been so long."

Nevada leaned forward. "Who takes care of you?"

"I do, amigo. Name's Ace Garland."

Todd jumped to his feet and Nevada Banion whirled around. Ace stood just inside the tent flap. His pinched face was white and the nostrils flared angrily. His blazing black eyes jumped from Nevada to Todd and his thin, bloodless lips curled back. The flush in his gaunt cheeks told Todd he had been drinking again.

Ace moved with the speed of a striking snake. His long arm shot out and his hand caught Todd across the face. The boy fell backward, tangled in the chair and crashed to the floor. He lay sprawled there, looking up at the angry face, the bristling little line of black mustache above the cruel lips.

"I'll teach you to run out! I'll teach you to let your work go while you waste your time at a blasted circus!" Ace raged.

He raised his foot and the black-pointed boot gleamed wickedly in the light. Todd set himself for the kick that was to come, determined not to cry out.

Abruptly Ace Garland whirled about, roughly propelled by Nevada's strong fingers. The cowboy's eyes blazed at the gambler, but he kept his voice calm and steady.

"Hombre, I reckon I'm the one that should take that slap and kick. I told the kid to go in and see the show."

Ace slapped off the man's hand. "You stay out of this, friend. I reckon I can punish my own nephew with no help from you."

He turned toward Todd, who had pulled himself to one knee. The boy hastily came to his feet, his face drawn and white, but no sign of cringing in his lanky body. Ace smiled and his eyes glittered in anticipation.

Before Todd could move a muscle, Garland's fast-moving arm had shot out. His fingers whipped across Todd's face, leaving streaks of red on the cheek. Todd flinched, but said nothing. Ace pulled back his hand for another slap.

Nevada growled angrily and stepped between the boy and the man. His gray eyes glinted dangerously and his fists doubled. His craggy chin jutted out.

"Hombre, leave the kid alone."

"Nevada," Todd said between set lips, "stay out of this. I . . . I'll only get it harder."

"That's right, cowpoke," Ace purred softly. "The more you stick your chips in this game, the madder I get."

Nevada shook his head stubbornly. "I've bought in, amigo, and I'll be in town awhile. I don't like the way you dab your loop on the but-

ton. I don't like you, and this is my tent. Now git—pronto."

Ace Garland's smile became set. He took a step back and his hand raised toward his shoulder, the finger sliding under the lapel of his long black coat. Todd gasped in sudden fear.

"The gun! He's gonna—"

His words died in his throat. Moving with amazing speed, Nevada stepped toward Ace. Steel fingers wrapped around the gambler's gun wrist and the deadly shoulder derringer was held frozen in the spring holster. Nevada smiled coldly and whipped his right fist into Ace's angry face.

The gambler catapulted backward, hit the canvas and bounced forward into Nevada's pistonlike punch. It caught Ace on the chin, snapped his head back, threw his body into an unconscious heap in one corner of the tent.

Todd stood paralyzed, eyes wide and staring. Nevada bent over the dark figure and calmly pulled the double-barreled derringer from the hidden holster. Holding it in his wide palm, he looked down and disgust showed in his face. Contemptuously he tossed the weapon into his trunk where it landed beside the heavy .45.

Bending down, Nevada picked up Garland's limp form by shirt front and belt. His muscles ridged as he pitched the man through the door. Nevada turned, stopped short when he saw the stricken look on Todd's face.

"I reckon I've piled trouble on you, bub. But I plumb lost my head."

Todd managed a ghost of a smile. "It's all right. You didn't know."

"I know this, bub: So long as I'm in town, he ain't touching you. Run along now and get your work done. I'll see that your uncle treats you like a white man."

Todd sighed and slipped out of the tent. Ace Garland had just sat up, but his eyes were still blank and groggy. Todd gave his uncle one swift look and fled for home.

Ace Garland had a low, rambling adobe house out at the edge of San Rio, and it was Todd's job to keep it in order. The boy had to cook the meals for Garland or any of his friends who came, loose-mouthed with liquor. Each morning Todd had to swamp at his uncle's saloon and gambling hall, the Lucky Chance. In what little free time he had, Todd could find boys his own age in San Rio. It was a hard, harsh life and had left its mark on the boy, so that he had come to expect little else but curses and kicks.

He fully expected them now, despite Nevada's promises. Once home, Todd hurried through the work, clearing the bottles and glasses off the kitchen table, sweeping the floor. Time passed and each moment he expected his uncle to come storming in. But Ace did not come.

Todd prepared his own supper and gulped it down. He washed the dishes, lit the lamp and waited. Still Ace Garland didn't return. Todd grew restless. Finally he blew out the lamp and went out into the soft

San Rio night. He heard the calliope from the circus grounds and a little thrill chased down his scrawny back.

The boy hesitated, then turned slowly toward the center of town. Lamp light blazed from the stores and saloons, lighting the streamers of Christmas bunting overhanging the street.

Up until this year, Christmas hadn't meant much. It was just a day when Ace stayed at the saloon because people were pretty free with their money. Ace always returned home late, with a full pocket. He'd drink, either alone or with some blear-eyed friends. Todd would have to stay up until the dawn in case they'd want to send him to the saloon for more liquor.

But this year Todd had seen the circus—his first. He'd met Nevada Banion. It wouldn't be so bad now when he saw the gifts the other boys got from their parents.

He was in front of the jail. Sheriff Red Carver leaned against the door of his office, talking to a couple of men. As Todd hurried by, he caught a part of their conversation.

"—rustling's bad," Carver said. "I've rode the hills until I'm frazzled, but I can't get a sign."

"Maybe the cows are sold beyond the mountains—" one of the men suggested and then Todd was out of earshot.

His interest quickened for a moment and then he forgot it as he thought of the circus. He was close to the Lucky Chance and his pace slowed. The place was crowded. A tinny piano banged a tune that drowned the distant call of the calliope. For a while Todd watched the crowd stream in and out, then he turned away.

"I've been looking for you, bub," Nevada's voice boomed.

Todd stopped short. Nevada had appeared out of the crowd blocking his way, smiling down at him. Instinctively Todd gave the Lucky Chance a quick look, but Ace Garland wasn't in sight. Smiling, Todd fell in beside Nevada as the circus man took his arm and started him in a slow walk away from the crowd.

"Tomorrow night's Christmas Eve," Nevada said, "and the show will be on the move all day Christmas. So the colonel is giving a Christmas blowout tomorrow evening in the big tent. I want you along."

"Me!" exclaimed Todd. "But I ain't part of the circus."

"No," Nevada agreed, "but I figured maybe you'd like to be there. You'll get to meet all the performers and right after the feed we give our last show. You'll be able to see it again."

Todd's face brightened. His sober lips slowly broke in a wide smile as he walked along picturing what it would be like in the tent. Nevada watched him.

"Well, can you come?" the circus man asked at last.

"Gosh, yes!" Todd exclaimed. Suddenly his eyes clouded and his voice faltered. "That is, I think I can. Ace is generally busy and don't come home until late. I don't reckon he'd need me for anything until then."

Nevada laughed. "That's it then, pardner. You come to my tent about five. I got to talk to you about something before we eat. I'll be expecting you. Adios, bub." He veered away, heading back toward the circus lot.

Todd swung around toward home, hardly aware of the distance. Lighting the lamp in the kitchen, he sat down to wait for Ace. His eyes became dreamy as he stared into the lamp flame and saw spangles and elephants, a flying trapeze and a buscadero in a purple shirt who could make flying .45 slugs do tricks. Todd pulled his knees up under his chin and hugged his legs.

It would sure be swell to be able to shoot that way. Shucks, it would be swell even to own a gun—like that heavy six he had glimpsed in Nevada's trunk. Todd's bony young face tightened and his eyes grew determined. Some day he would have a gun just like that. Some day he'd be grown up and Ace couldn't order him around. Then Todd would wear a royal purple shirt with white pipings. Everybody in San Rio, Todd bet, would sure stand up and take notice when he did tricks with his shooting iron.

The door slammed open and Todd jumped. He heard Ace's stumbling step and slipped out of the chair. He waited. Ace would still be mighty mean about the beating Nevada had given him.

Ace stood in the doorway, slim and dark in his long coat and pointed black shoes. His slender hand toyed with a thick watch chain across his flowered vest. His black, narrowed eyes blazed at Todd. The thin, bloodless lips were like a harsh cut across the pointed face.

"I'm going to beat the hide off you," Ace announced quietly.

Todd said nothing, but held himself a little straighter. Ace still stood in the doorway, glaring at his nephew. He whirled the watch chain with greater speed.

"I ain't going to bother with you tonight," Ace continued. "But I sure know one Christmas gift you're going to get. You won't be able to walk until after New Year's. I reckon then that dressed-up jaybird won't be around to protect you."

Ace gave the boy a last threatening look. He turned away, giving an order over his shoulder. "Get coffee on the stove right now or I won't wait until Christmas."

Todd silently obeyed. He remained across the room as Ace drank the brew between venomous glances at the boy. Ace said nothing and the silence in itself was threatening. At last he pushed back from the table and left. Todd heard him preparing for bed. The boy felt a sense of relief, but it wouldn't last long. As soon as the circus and Nevada had left San Rio, Ace Garland would carry out his threat.

Todd cleared the kitchen, blew out the lamp and slipped silently to his own cot in the cramped quarters behind the kitchen. He stared miserably into the darkness a while and then turned so that he could see the

bright stars through the narrow window. He wondered idly which was the one the Wise Men had trailed and then his eyes closed in tired sleep.

He awoke with a start. Ace was stumbling around the kitchen. Hastily Todd scrambled to his feet. He pulled on trousers and shirt, pushed his feet in his boots. It was still dark, but a glance at the stars out the window told Todd it was close to dawn.

Ace cursed at Todd as he came out and hastily started the breakfast. Todd expected cuffs, but none came, another ominous sign. Ace wolfed the meal silently, then, standing before a mirror, adjusted his string tie and smoothed his mustache. Finished, he turned, picked up his tall hat and glared at the boy.

"Stay away from that circus. I won't need you at the Lucky, but stick close here. I might bring some friends home."

Todd nodded and watched Ace leave, swinging jauntily up the street in the first long red rays of the sun. Todd cooked something for himself and ate, dreamy-eyed again as he thought of what the afternoon would bring. Ace would not be back until long after midnight.

At last the long day wore away and Todd was scrubbed and ready. He grabbed his battered hat and streaked for the front door. He had it open when his heart dropped to his boots. Ace Garland and two gun-hung hombres turned in at the gate. The plank sidewalk rumbled to their booted steps. Todd held the door a split second, a lump forming in his throat. He gulped it down, darted back to his hole behind the kitchen. Snatching off his hat, he threw it on the bed.

Ace and his friends entered the house and pushed through to the kitchen. Todd recognized the men. The hulking giant of a man with the thick lips and the crescent-shaped scar on one cheek was Tex Ritter. The other man was small and seemed to walk in a perpetual crouch. His long arms were always crooked, the splay fingers never far from the holsters he wore on each hip. Slick Riley was a hanger-on at the Lucky Chance and no one in San Rio had ever seen him or Tex work.

Ace pulled up chairs and stood a nearly empty bottle on the table. He grinned at his friends. "Pull up, amigos. We ain't going to be bothered here."

Slick sat down on the edge of his chair, clearing his guns for a quick draw. Tex lowered his bulk and the chair groaned in protest. Ace held up the bottle, measured the thin line of liquor.

"Todd," he growled, "git your lazy bones up to the Lucky and get a full bottle. Hurry back. We ain't got time to fool."

Todd moved swiftly across the room and out. At the walk, he turned to look back. He felt a sudden surge of anger at his uncle. Why did Ace have to come back this afternoon? Todd kicked hard at the boardwalk and muttered under his breath. Then he remembered that Ace might be

watching from the house and he broke into a run.

He was nearly at the Lucky Chance when he slowed. He could run to the circus and tell Nevada he wouldn't be able to come to the supper. He owed that much at least to Nevada for all he had done for him. Todd hesitated only an instant, then his long lanky legs propelled him in a run to the circus grounds.

There were only a few people on the lot. The fronts of the concessions had been lowered; no one stood barking before the side show, and the ticket wagon was tightly locked. Todd streaked around the big top toward Nevada's tent. Nevada wasn't there. Turning, Todd ran toward the big top.

He saw Nevada at the entrance talking to Colonel Bragg. Just beyond, Todd had a glimpse of the long tables set up in the huge ring beneath the high wires and trapeze. Someone had made a huge holly wreath and it hung directly over the table and the double row of empty folding chairs. There was a small space roped off and inside was a pile of gayly wrapped boxes and bundles. Todd had only time for a brief look and then Nevada turned. He smiled in welcome.

Todd set his lips and held tight onto his feelings. He couldn't let his disappointment show, and blubber around like a kid in front of Nevada.

"I . . . I can't be here," he blurted. "Ace came back. I . . . I gotta be with him."

Nevada's clear face instantly showed his disappointment. But he didn't ask questions and Todd was grateful for that. Nevada only nodded in understanding.

"Wait a minute. I'll be right back," he said briefly.

He started into the tent toward the roped-off bundles. Todd was acutely aware of time passing. He had to be back home with Ace's bottle without any more delay. He touched Colonel Bragg's arm.

"Tell Nevada I couldn't wait. I . . . well, shucks, I just got to run. Nevada'll understand."

He pivoted and streaked back toward the Lucky Chance. He got the quart of liquor and ran all the way home. Ace and his friends paid him little attention as he came in, still breathing heavily from his run. Todd stopped short.

The table before the men held stacks of greenbacks, and Slick was counting the money out into three piles. Ace and Tex stared silently, an avid look in their eyes. Slick leaned back, grinning.

"There she is, amigos. That's a heap of dinero. Ace, you sure get your share for spotting them herds for us. This keeps up, we'll be rich in a year."

Ace grinned. "We sure will. Let's drink on it." He turned when Todd placed the bottle before him and his eyes narrowed. He grabbed the boy's arm. "You ain't seen this money, savvy?"

Todd nodded, frightened. Slick pushed his body forward over the table. "Sure he won't spill his head, Ace?"

The gambler laughed and shoved Todd away. "Not him. I keep him too scared."

They downed the drink and then froze. A knock sounded on the door. Todd ran instantly to answer, afraid of Ace's wrath if he delayed. Dimly he heard Ace shout something, knew he had not moved quickly enough. He wrenched at the knob, threw wide the door as Ace and Slick came running from the kitchen.

Nevada Banion stood just outside and behind him was Sheriff Carver. Nevada held the heavy six Todd had seen in his trunk. It was in a holster strapped to a wide gun belt. Nevada held it out, grinning.

"Your Christmas, Todd. You run off so the sheriff had to show me where—"

A cry of alarm from Slick Riley cut him short. Todd's head jerked around and he jumped wildly as he saw Slick's Colt slide up out of leather. Tex Ritter came rushing into the room, plowed to a halt when he saw the lawman at the door. His hand dropped down to his six.

Slick fired. Nevada had jumped within the room and to one side as Slick started his draw. He moved with blurring speed, like a mountain cat striking its prey. The sheriff dropped as Slick's gun roared. Nevada palmed his own Colt and blasted across the room. Slick doubled up as Tex swung around, gun blazing. Todd crouched, stunned and amazed, deafened by the rolling drum of shots in the little room. Powder smoke burned at his nose. His eyes widened in horror.

He saw Nevada jerk as Ritter's slug hit him. Then Nevada fired and Tex dropped from sight behind the kitchen door. Ace Garland fired wildly and then seemed to get control of himself. To Todd's horror, Nevada slowly fell sideways, hit the floor and went limp. An ugly stain spread on the shoulder where Tex Ritter had scored a hit.

Ace cursed madly, circled a chair and then deliberately raised his gun, aiming down at Nevada's still form. Sheriff Carver lay sprawled half in the door and half out. Todd's throat convulsed at what his uncle was about to do.

"No!" Todd yelled. He jumped to Ace and threw himself on the man. Desperately he pulled down the gun arm as the Colt exploded, kicking up splinters a scant inch from Nevada's head. Ace wrenched around to throw the boy off, but Todd clung. Ace pounded at him with his fists.

They shook Todd and bruised him. He felt the numbing shock of the knuckles, but he hung on. The two whipped around the room and Ace stumbled over a chair. The gun jarred from his fist and hit the floor. Throwing Todd clear, Ace reached for the gun. Desperately Todd flung himself across the floor, clawing fingers stretching for the weapon. He couldn't let Ace murder Nevada Banion. Ace kicked viciously and Todd doubled up. In an agonized haze he saw Ace grab the gun. Todd knew he had lost and despair was greater than the pain.

Then dimly he heard a new voice. "Drop it, Ace."

Ace Garland froze. Slowly his fingers opened and the gun hit the floor. Todd twisted around and came to his feet. Sheriff Carver stood in the door. Blood dripped from a scalp wound on his head, but the gun in his fist was steady.

Abruptly Nevada moved and moaned. He rolled over and sat up. His gray eyes swept the room. Todd heard Tex Ritter moaning in the kitchen. Nevada came to his feet, stood swaying a moment, and a wave of relief swept over Todd.

Carver picked up Ace's gun, looked in the kitchen and saw the money on the table. He turned to the boy. "What were they doing?"

Todd swallowed and spoke with difficulty. Ace stood silent and angry, saying nothing. Todd finished at last and Carver smiled with satisfaction as he turned to Ace.

"I guess that'll put you and Tex behind bars for a whole heap of years, hombre. Slick's dead or he'd be with you."

Ace cursed venomously and glared at Todd. Nevada crossed the room and his arm went around the boy's shoulder. "Sheriff, what about the button here?"

Carver scratched his head. "Hanged if I know. He ain't got no folks and Ace looked after him, such looking after as it was. I reckon San Rio will have to do something about the kid."

"I got a plan, sheriff," said Nevada. "I'll adopt the button and take him with me. He'll be a heap better man than he'd be with that rustling tinhorn."

The sheriff looked at Todd. The boy's face was bright with hope, dazed surprise, and there was joy in his eyes. Carver grinned at Nevada.

"All right, Santy Claus. I reckon Judge Fair can fix things up so you can slap your brand on the younker."

Todd moved dazedly, following the procession down the street. He heard the calliope from the circus lot, and Christmas firecrackers banged closed by. His chest swelled out and he dropped back so Nevada couldn't see his eyes. Nevada'd think he was a sissy if he saw how misty they were. But dawggone it, the circus—for always! Gosh, Christmas *is* a happy time!

THE END

SADDLEMATES RIDE FOR JUSTICE

by Tom W. Blackburn

The Christmas Kid didn't know what it was to be hunted until a drifting puncher unwittingly set off a flaming range feud

I

JOHNNY BENNETT was fit to be tied. He glared accusingly through the wicket at the postmaster. The old gent looked uneasy and as if he wasn't more than half listening.

"Search through your bins again!" Johnny ordered. "I tell you, there *had* to be mail for me on that train!

I left three horses and a work saddle with a buddy on the last spread I worked. He was going to peddle them for me and mail the cash ahead so's I could pick it up here. He had a buyer when I left. I know blamed well he sold the stuff. You must have missed his letter!"

The man behind the wicket shook his head. His eyes were still uneasy, but he spoke flatly.

"Son, there's no mail for a gent named Bennett. There's no use looking again."

Johnny pushed his hat back.

"That ringy, two-timing son!" he said hotly. "He's peddled that stuff and kept the mazuma. Mister, if I ever get back in that country again, I'll run that gent from here to Christmas!"

The postmaster heard this promise with widening eyes. He stared with sharpening uneasiness at Johnny for a moment, then ducked swiftly. As he ducked, he hit the stop on his window. It rattled down. Johnny heard him run swiftly across the back room and apparently on out the alley door. A fool business! But then, maybe it was closing time anad the old boy wanted to get home to his meal.

Johnny felt the tightening emptiness of his own belly and tried to remember just how long it was since he'd had a solid feed. Three days, he guessed—three days which hadn't been too hard to take when a man could look ahead to picking up a letter and four hundred bucks here in Rock Hill. He swore again at the bunk mate who had pulled this coyote trick on him. He had been a blamed fool to pull out before he'd collected for the sale of his extras himself. But every so often he got stung by a drifter bug. When he did, he ran a fever until he was on the move. And he couldn't stick anywhere after he'd decided to move on. Waiting was poison, then.

Still muttering in anger, Johnny crossed the lobby of the post office and stepped out into the twilight-shadowed street. He'd have to ride along for another night without the meal and the round of drinks he'd been anticipating. But he'd get a fair night's sleep. Usually a man could talk a livery man into a hay bunk, which beat a saddle on the open grass seven ways from Sunday.

He rolled himself a smoke on the steps of the post office, noting ruefully that his makings bag was almost empty. It looked as though this drift was about done. By tomorrow night he'd be working on one of the spreads lying about Rock Hill. He'd have to be. He was too young to starve.

The livery was at the far end of the street. Johnny's eyes found it and he started slowly along, walking the edge of the gutter and leading his horse. He passed a pair of stores and half a dozen townspeople who stared at him with uncalled-for curiosity. He wondered if he looked as hungry and plain ornery as he felt. Maybe that was it.

Coming abreast of an opening past the second store, he heard a quick, nervous voice chatter suddenly:

"That's him! And I heard him say it . . . 'from here to Christmas'!"

Another voice sang out on the heels of this, a voice with authority which brought Johnny up short.

"Bennett?"

Johnny turned a little. The postmaster, pasty-faced, was huddled against the store front. Much closer, within an arm's length of Johnny, a tall man with a star on his vest and a gun in his hand was poised cautiously. Bewildered, Johnny realized it was this man who had sung out his name.

"That's me!" he agreed. He started a grin. It died.

The tall man with the star raised his gun and stroked swiftly with it. Johnny saw the blow coming, but he was flat on the heels of both feet and couldn't dodge. The barrel of the gun whistled a little and smashed the crown of his hat. Then his head exploded.

Johnny's head was still exploding with nauseating regularity when he came around. He put his hand up and found the welt raised there. He concentrated on steadying his thoughts, but he couldn't see sense to any of it. What kind of a game was the tin star of Rock Hill playing, anyway? He sat up truculently, choked off a groan at the increased hammering back of his eyes, and opened them. Directly in front of his face was an iron grating. Beyond it, sitting in a chair tilted back against the wall of an office, was the tall man with the star. The man looked up when Johnny stirred and grinned mirthlessly.

"Hello, Kid," he said without friendliness. "How you like it in there, for a change?"

"I don't!" Johnny said curtly. "What in thunder are you, a welcoming committee? Does every stranger to hit your town get a free bed in your calabozo?"

The sheriff stretched and spoke lazily.

"Not as a rule," he answered. "I'm a patient gent, but I've been waiting a long time to see the Christmas Kid back of my bars. He's there, now, and he's going to stay. Take it quiet and I'll send down for some grub directly."

"The Christmas Kid!" Johnny exploded. "Why, you leather-brained numskull! Didn't you ask me if my name was Bennett?"

The sheriff nodded.

"And didn't I own up to it?"

The sheriff nodded again.

"Then why—"

The sheriff stood up, impatience beginning to show.

"Listen, Kid, you've had your turn. You've turned my county inside out the last two months. You've burned more powder than six like you are worth. And you've chalked up enough blood for a tribe of Sioux. You put the tag on yourself in the post office tonight when you told Gabe Hartzell you'd run somebody from here to Christmas. If you didn't like the phrase so well, you'd still be on the street. Gabe tipped me off when he heard you say it. A man in your business oughtn't to

use the same way of sayin' something more'n once. Folks remember it. It was your stumble and you've got no gripe coming. Now, shut up. I'm going uptown. I'll bring you back a feed. Need makings, too?"

Johnny nodded wordlessly. Plainly Rock Hill wanted a certain gent badly. Equally plain was the fact that this gent used one of Johnny's own phrases. The Christmas Kid! Shucks! Johnny shrugged helplessly. Maybe tomorrow he could make somebody listen long enough to wire down into Colorado and find out that a drifter from down there had as much right to his own way of saying something as a Rock County killer. There was a cot in the cell. And the sheriff wouldn't listen. With a feed and sleep maybe things wouldn't look so bad in the morning.

The sheriff hooked his hat down off the wall and started across the room to where his gun belt hung from a chair back. As he moved, a man appeared in the door. A big man with a flat expanse of thick muscle across his belly, and hard, gray eyes. He stepped smoothly into the office and dropped into the chair toward which the sheriff was heading. The sheriff pulled up, a fine line of concern running down between his eyes.

"Want to see me, Meredith?"

The big man nodded.

"Come along, then," the sheriff suggested. "I've got to get a feed and some makings for the prisoner. I was just heading uptown."

The big man shook his head.

"I reckon we'd better stay here, Hyatt. Right here."

The line between the sheriff's eyes deepened. He glanced at the belt behind the seated man's shoulder and scowled.

"You're sitting on my gun," he pointed out sharply. "What's on your mind?"

The big man smiled.

"Sheriff Tim Hyatt—and his prisoner—are going to have some company, directly. Honest and lawful citizens of the county, too. And they're coming before some of those snapping nester coyotes that've been hiding the Christmas Kid out the last pair of months come in to spring him. You're a bit stubborn, Tim. So I came down ahead of my boys. I wouldn't want you to try holding off your fellow citizens when they come after the Kid, there!"

Sheriff Hyatt's face drained of color.

"The law caught the Kid. The law's got him. And, by dang, the law'll take care of him, Meredith!" he said tightly. "I've never lost a prisoner yet—to citizens or nester outlaws, either one. You better call off your crew or there'll be some Axhead hands that won't sit saddle tomorrow!"

Meredith leaned back against the belted gun on the chair and grinned wider.

"You're sure of that, Tim?"

Watching all of this, Johnny Bennett's skin tightened. It tightened further a moment later when voices broke with sudden loudness up the

street. He crossed swiftly to the cell's single window. Up in the heart of the town the doors of a saloon were standing wide and a bunch of men was pouring through them, angling purposefully down the street toward the jail.

II

Bennett laced his attention back to the two men in the sheriff's office. Meredith was up out of the chair in which he had been lolling tauntingly. The sheriff was moving with slow grimness toward him. Johnny sucked at his breath. Lawmen were a stiff-necked lot in his opinion, more of them upheld by the badge they wore than holding up the badge themselves with their own sand. But Tim Hyatt was a different breed. He was going after that gun on the chair back and the devil take Meredith if he stood in the way. Bennett watched in fascination.

Meredith poised his solidly packed weight, and eagerness showed in his eyes. Suddenly Hyatt's slow, grim approach turned swift and reckless. He dived forward, low down and with one hand reaching out while the other fended sharply at the man before him. Meredith stroked cleanly with one of his big hands, bringing the sheriff up onto his toes. He struck a second time and Hyatt staggered back against the grating of Johnny's cell. The sheriff should have dropped after that, but he didn't. He hung against the grating, shaking his head for a moment. Then he staggered out against Meredith again.

Johnny didn't see all of what happened next. And there was a good reason for it. When he came back against the cell door, Hyatt's keys, hung to his belt over his hip pocket, had dropped across one of the bars and hung there. When the sheriff surged away, they caught. The loop thong which held them parted. And they fell inside the cell.

Johnny scooped them up, fingered out the huge cell key, and stabbed it out through the bars into the lock. When the tumbler turned, he glanced up to see Hyatt stumbling across his desk, his face streaming with blood. Meredith's eyes were on Johnny and the opening cell door, but he seemed unconcerned. The battered sheriff straightened and made another lunge at the man in the center of the office.

Johnny was already half through the opening door. Meredith had a choice. Unaccountably, he chose the already nearly helpless sheriff, turning his back on the opening cell gate for an instant. And that was enough. Johnny drove the point of his shoulder into the center of Meredith's back, spilling both Meredith and Hyatt in a loose heap. Wheeling, he caught the sheriff's belted gun up from the chair back near the door and hurtled into the night.

As he hit the walk, a single shot sounded behind him. Meredith, he judged, throwing a belated slug at the escaping prisoner he had aimed to see hung by moonlight. Fifty yards up the walk the lynchers from the saloon were passing under the wooden awning over a store front. At the sound of the shot in the jail

office, the foremost of these broke into a ragged trot and one of them shouted hoarsely. Johnny saw a horse at a rail across the street.

He raced across the dusty open space and vaulted into the saddle. Guns on the walk snapped uncertainly at him. But there was no further sound from the jail. He wondered if Hyatt and Meredith were still tangling after the prisoner over which they had mixed was gone. It was a wry thought and brought a twisted grin to his lips.

Johnny wheeled his borrowed horse sharply and drove it between two buildings toward the haven of open country, beyond. Behind him the troop from the saloon reached the jail and more shouts raised. Johnny thought he could identify Meredith's voice among them. Presently the silhouettes of riders appeared against the receding backdrop of the town. Johnny Bennett bent far over in his saddle and grimly set to the work of outriding those behind him.

But the odds were bad. The horse between his knees had no bottom. It was badly winded at the end of a couple of miles. Pursuit was drawing closer. Johnny changed his course a little, heading for a notch sawed into low hills to his right. It was bad-looking country and might afford shelter.

In about twenty minutes he was into the notch and the riders behind had drawn close enough to open up with rifles. This was no aimless shooting, such as had been snapped at him in the first moments of surprise on the streets of Rock Hill. There was something else, too. The lynchers from the saloon—Meredith's Ax-head riders—had been augmented by other forces from the town itself. Johnny judged a score or more men were in the posse behind him. And whatever the strange business of Meredith and the sheriff at the jail, these men were riding for blood.

Slugs bit close to him. Then one of them stung his horse. The winded animal leaped forward with new speed, racing ahead in a burst of terror. The trail began to wind a little. Suddenly something hot and swift buffeted Johnny in the back, high and almost on the crown of his shoulder. It hurt and the pain made him sick. For reckless seconds he fought to stay in the saddle. His horse leaned into the twists of the trail. And on the second turn, nausea gripped Johnny. He left leather helplessly, sailed through the air, and landed in a trailside tangle of brush, crashing through it to the stony ground underneath.

The horse, still bolting from the sting of a rifle bullet, thrashed on up the trail without a break in stride. The impact of landing shook Johnny and served to clear his head. But his muscles were dead, refusing to answer stunned nerves. Unable to move, he sprawled among the roots of the Brush thicket while the posse raced toward him. They approached, reached the place where he was, and hammered on. He realized dully that he was hidden, that his pursuers had

not seen him leave his saddle, and that he was safe so long as his riderless horse managed to stay ahead and out of sight of the crew behind it.

When the next turn of the trail hid the riders from town, Johnny painfully worked his way out of the brush and started on foot up through scrub timber toward the summit of the ridge behind him. He was still sick. He had a hole in his shoulder, which was bleeding freely. And sleeplessness and the hunger he had brought into Rock County with him were taking their toll.

There had been talk in the jail of nester friends of the Christmas Kid. The poor country through which Johnny was working looked like nester land. He wanted to see this Christmas Kid. He was mighty tired of playing double to a first-class hunk of gallows bait.

Twice toward dawn, in one of his increasingly more frequent rests, Johnny heard the circling of the posse in the valleys and cuts below him. But he stayed on high ground and finally found haven. His feet were agonizingly heavy and his head light. He knew he was staggering and made little effort to keep from it.

Yet a natural caution must have been riding his subconscious, keeping him silent, because he walked out of a patch of timber into a little open and full into a man's camp. The man had heard him coming, but only an instant before. He had barely time to sit up, snatch his rifle across his blanket-draped figure, and snap one word.

"Sing!"

Johnny pulled up wearily. The man crossed swiftly to him on stockinged feet. Johnny gathered an impression of a man with a strong white face under a shock of jet hair, and a vague resemblance to someone he knew or had seen troubled him for a moment. Then the man punched the rifle savagely at him.

"What in thunder you looking for?"

"A nester," Johnny said raggedly. "Anybody with a blanket to share and an extra pot of beans. By Satan, I'm about fed up!"

The man with the rifle peered closer.

"You're about done up, too," he said dryly. "You've got a hole in you. Who the devil are you?"

There was still hostility in the voice. Probably, Johnny thought, he was one of the hillmen who sympathized with the outlaw the town below wanted so badly. He thought this hillman wouldn't take to a townsman or a stranger, even if he did have a hole in him. It seemed likely that the tag Rock Hill had hung on him would stick up here—until the real McCoy turned up—and it might pay off in friendliness.

"The Christmas Kid," he answered the man.

The man lowered his rifle, honest surprise showing on his face. Then a smile showed. He put out his hand.

"The Christmas Kid! The devil! I'm Bert Lafferty. Sit. I'll break camp and we'll get deeper into the

ridges. That posse is wild down below. So far you've just had the Axhead against you. But killing Tim Hyatt in your break tonight puts the whole county on your heels. We'll have to hide deep!"

Johnny dropped onto the man's blankets. The hills and the night and the vague light of approaching dawn was whirling inextricably together in front of his eyes. One thing, only, would come into focus out of it. That shot at the jail!

Meredith, whatever else he might be, was a curly wolf! He had fired that shot. He had deliberately tangled with Hyatt so the prisoner could escape. And when escape was certain, he had killed the officer he had already reduced to groggy helplessness with his hands. Johnny began to realize vaguely that whatever the count and whatever the bounty had been against the Christmas Kid before, it was loaded with buckshot, now. He wondered if the real Kid, wherever he was, would hold a drifter named Johnny Bennett responsible for the added indictment against his name.

III

Most of the twelve hours after he hit Lafferty's camp were a blank to Johnny Bennett. He had hazy recollections of certain things. Lafferty brought in two horses. Johnny had tried to mount Lafferty's own animal because it looked so much like the one he had ridden into Rock Hill that the similarity confused him. There was a wild ride through the shag of the night and well into the sunlight of the next day. The rough scrub hills had become wilder until the country was nearly impassable except for a vague threading of trails. They had finally stopped at a cabin set in a little bowl which completely hid it.

After the places was reached, after Johnny's wound had been dressed and some hot broth of some kind had been poured down him and he had been dumped into a bunk, other men came to the cabin. There was much talk about the rough table and Lafferty did most of the talking. Through all of this Johnny slept fitfully and with little interest in what went on about him.

It had been dark again for several hours when he roused to find much of his weariness and unsteadiness gone and his wound only a dull ache through one shoulder and arm. Lafferty was tending some steaming grub on the stove across the room. Johnny studied him.

There was an intangible recklessness in the way the man held his body. His movements were swift and sure. Johnny felt again that tug of recognition. It puzzled him. He knew he had never seen Lafferty before the moment he stumbled into the man's camp. Finally the answer came with a rush. No wonder he felt the man was familiar to him! Bert Lafferty and himself, for build and coloring and cast of features, might easily pass for brothers.

Johnny thought about this. He thought about the two horses which looked much alike—Lafferty's and

the animal he himself had ridden into Rock Hill. He thought about his coming to Rock Hill and he realized how the old man at the post office wicket could have coupled an unusual phrase on a stranger's lips with the horse and the strong resemblance and so have made a mistake. It was easy enough to see, now. And so was Tim Hyatt's conviction that he had the right man locked up in his jail.

Lafferty had been camping lightly on the ridge where Johnny stumbled into him. He had been camping like a hunted man. And this hidden cabin was like a hunted man's headquarters. Johnny's lips tightened. He saw he had made a bad mistake, claiming the name Rock Hill had hung in error on him.

Bert Lafferty was—and the knowledge was a ringing sureness in Johnny—the man he had himself claimed to be. The Christmas Kid!

Lafferty puttered about the stove for some time, finally setting hot dishes on the table. He crossed to the bunk. Johnny held his eyes closed and his breathing long and heavy. Lafferty stood above him for a time, then moved back to the table. Under cover of his lids, Johnny watched him eat. Once or twice he came near to sitting up and having it out with Lafferty, trying to straighten out the tangle and get his own feet to solid ground.

But he didn't know Lafferty, and that made him cautious. Certainly men in Rock Hill, cool men like the sheriff, had handled the hombre they thought was the Christmas Kid with obvious caution. Lafferty was likely bad business. And Johnny wanted none of him. He wanted, in fact, none of Rock County. He aimed to get out as soon as he could. So he lay silently and waited.

Lafferty finished his meal, scrubbed his dishes in a pot of hot water from the stove, and stacked them to dry. As he finished, a man whistled in the night and Lafferty went to the door. Johnny could hear the man without seeing him.

"They're on the move again, Bert. Twenty or so, in two bunches. One is coming around the foot of Haystack. The other's holding right up Mill Creek."

"How about the posse?"

"The Rock Hill bunch has gone back to town. The Ax-head boys have joined these two bunches."

"Where's Meredith?" Lafferty spit his words out coldly.

"With the bunch on Mill Creek," the man at the door answered.

"Moving cattle?" Lafferty asked.

"Not from the Ax-head, Bert. But both bunches'll cross Hub and Windmill grazes before they bore into the hills. They might pick some up."

Lafferty grunted.

"All right. Swing by Winslow's and Carter's. Send them down to trail the bunch at the foot of Haystack. Then cut north and see if old man Leevining and his two boys are home. Pick them up and drop down Mill Creek along the ridge till you meet me."

"You're leaving your double?" the man asked.

Lafferty grunted again.

"He'll wait to morning. He's out. Hasn't moved all day. He'll sleep till sunup. I'll be back by then."

"It must have cost Meredith plenty to find a ringer for you and bring him in!" the man in the door guessed.

"He wasted his money!" Lafferty said sharply. "He got Tim Hyatt and hung that killing on me. But that's all. By the time I'm finished with this gent he'll wish he never saw Meredith. And I've a hunch Meredith won't be happy about hiring him, either!"

There was a long pause. Lafferty stepped out into the yard, apparently moving with the man to his horse. Their voices were fainter, but still clear.

"Bert," the nameless man said, "if we had twenty men tonight, we could cook Ax-head's goose in one whack!"

"We haven't got twenty men!" Lafferty said brusquely. "And the rest of you boys have got women and kids at home. You stay out of the smoke, all of you. I'll handle this like we've done the rest! I'll be watching the ridges above Mill Creek for you and the Leevinings in about an hour and a half—"

There was a creak of leather and the soft drum of a carefully ridden horse dropping away from the cabin. Lafferty came back through the door, picked up his hat, lifted a rifle from a rack on the wall, and stepped into the night again. Johnny heard him saddling. Presently, Lafferty also drummed quietly into the night.

Lafferty had snuffed out the light before he left. Johnny waited in the darkened cabin until all sound was gone from the bowl in which the battered little building lay. He got out of the bunk, then, reached under it for his boots, and pulled them on. He judged the hole in his shoulder didn't amount to too much. At any rate, Lafferty or one of the other men who had come to the cabin had competently bandaged it. Aside from a painfully sore stiffness, the member worked well enough.

Pawing his way carefully through the gloom, Johnny dragged open a drawer from which he had earlier marked the trailing belt of the gun he had taken from Tim Hyatt's chair in the jail. There was another Winchester on the rack from which Lafferty had lifted a weapon. But its magazine was empty and Johnny prowled for minutes before he found ammunition on the back of one of the shelves over the stove.

Finally equipped, he went out to the makeshift corral behind the shack. Three or four horses were in the inclosure and a pair of weathered saddles and gear were astraddle the top rail. He picked a rangy, big-boned animal and saddled. About twenty minutes after Lafferty had pulled out of the bowl, Johnny swung up and headed off by dead reckoning in the direction he judged the notch leading to lower country might be.

He felt uneasy and hampered by his lack of knowledge of the country. Because he wanted to get clear, he would have given much to know

which of the many valleys in this broken ground held homesteaders' claims and where Haystack and Mill Creek might be. As it was he had to ride blindly, traveling on rougher ground where others were not apt to ride.

He had picked a good horse. That much pleased him. And at the end of half an hour, the country was opening a little, indicating he was fighting his way out of the hills. Shortly after this, he came down a gentle slope to a patch of grass and rode to within a couple of hundred yards of a cabin much like the one in the bowl above before he saw it. The place was entirely dark and he was about to cut on by it, assuming it was empty, when he heard the soft ruffle of voices in the darkness surrounding it.

He pulled abruptly up and waited. The voices continued for a moment. Then, like shadows, three mounted men swung away from the house and rode due north into timber-blanketed and lowering country. Johnny watched them go with a sudden easing of tension. He realized that he had intended to ride in that direction, and but for the accident of hearing their voices, he would have ridden fully into them.

Nesters. He was certain of that. The little place showed the marks of the hard labor of earnest men who had little to work with. The house was silent and dark behind them. Probably the men were going out to one of the rendezvous Lafferty had named. And the house would be empty. Johnny thought of the circling trails he'd have to ride to get out of the county unseen. And he suddenly wanted a sack of grub tied to his horn to take with him. This would be a good place to pick it up.

He started his horse forward. As he did so, two things struck his senses at once. There was a faint, oily smell of smoke in the air. And a vague light now showed in the cabin. He turned, then saw that the light was uncertain. And he knew the answer. Fire!

He stung his horse forward, rode swiftly up to the door, and swung down. The panel was barred from the inside and a stick of wood had been thrust through the wooden pull handle on the outside. It was an odd precaution. He raced around the building and found a huge wood box dragged tight against the back door. It took him minutes to shove it away. Just as he kicked the back door open, a rifle spat behind him, from the direction of the shadows into which the three riders had disappeared. The slug went past him into the inferno raging already through the back part of the house.

Johnny had a confused impression of a stream of fire running from a stub candle on the floor in one corner out into the center of the room to where the heart of the blaze roared about an overturned can of kerosene. The thought hit him that this was no accidental carelessness but a carefully planted set fire in which the candle had been a fuse burning toward the spilled oil. Then another slug whined past him. Wheeling, he saw the three riders who had ridden

away moments before hammering back toward him, stabbing rifle flame ahead of them.

Johnny ducked around the house to his horse. He freed his rifle, but before he swung to leather, a sound from the house arrested him. It was a queer, muffled moan. A quick sweat hit him. He knew he had stumbled into something. Those three men didn't belong to this house. They had fired it—and left a victim inside!

Cradling the rifle, he slid back to the rear again. The riders were close, now. Using a corner of the building for a rest, he spaced out three even shots. A horse went down, throwing its rider heavily. The other two dropped quickly, and all three opened up at the rear wall of the cabin. The moan from inside came again. Johnny snapped another shot and ducked in the door. The back room was empty. So was one of the two in front. The other held three beds. Two of them were loaded. One held a large, graying woman. On the other were two kids. All three of them were tightly bound and gagged. As Johnny plunged in, the woman was fighting savagely against her bonds and she moaned again through her gagging.

He palmed his knife, snapped it open, and cut her free. She sprang up, tore the blade from his hand, and staggered to her children. In moments they were free. No whimper came from them or their mother. Johnny led the way back through the house to the rear door. As the four appeared in the opening, silhouetted against the fire at their backs, the three men out in the grass opened up at them. Singing lead stung a crease across Johnny's forearm. He thrust the woman and the youngsters back.

"Ax-head!" the woman said in a quiet and terrible voice. "We were alone and they knew it. First they tried to burn us under our own roof. Now they'd shoot us down from the dark!"

"Why?" Johnny demanded.

"Because my husband and the boys have gone to help the Christmas Kid again—and they've found it out!"

This must be Leevining's wife. The boys were her sons. Johnny flung a quick glance behind him. Heat was blistering his shoulders. Shelter in the house would be gone in moments. The fire would drive them out. He caught the woman's shoulder.

"Listen! I'm going out. I'll try to keep them busy. As soon as their fire's drawn from the door, get the kids out and run—fast! My horse is out front. Hold him in and he'll carry all three of you. Get out of here, quick!"

The woman nodded. Then a swift thought crossed her face. She tugged at Johnny's arm.

"Wait!" she begged. "Leevining will want to know—"

"Who I am?" Johnny cut in on her shortly. The same sudden devilment which made him now want to plow under the riflemen out in the dark also made him claim once again

the tag which had first been laid on him by the postmaster at Rock Hill.

"The Christmas Kid pays off for help!" he said swiftly. "Tell your husband that."

IV

Johnny shot out the door like a ricocheting bullet, dodging and doubling crazily to shake the aim of the killers waiting on their bellies in the grass. His eyes photographed the blackness ahead as he ran.

He raced raggedly on, his belt gun held ready in his hand and a tight, cold wall building up in him against the inevitable impact of a slug against his body. Muzzle flame from the three rifles was a ragged line of winking light, ahead. Lead searched close for him. But the luck of the Bennetts rode high. He heard a startled oath from the prone men and knew the woman at the cabin was making her break. He snapped his hand gun at the winking rifles to cover her as best he could. Then the three riflemen came to their knees to catch his silhouette more plainly against the glow of the flames eating the heart out of the cabin. Only then did he flop.

He went down hard on his face, skidding and rolling through the grass for a dozen feet before he stopped. The rifles slammed again. Lead stripped sod from the place in which he had dropped. One man was momentarily clearly lined in front of him.

He fired and rolled swiftly again. When answering fire came, biting vengefully for him, it came from only two rifles. Johnny grinned flatly and threw another shot six inches below and ten inches to the right of the flash of a Winchester. That rifle roared again almost instantly, but its flame spat skyward. There was silence for a moment, then the sound of running feet. Johnny surged up and faced after the sound. He saw the man after a moment, low and running desperately.

Locking his stride, Johnny flung his gun up once more. The running man held on for half a dozen reaching strides. Then his arms swept limply wide and he went down. Johnny turned, looking back toward the cabin. The flames had already eaten through the thin ceiling and were pluming out through the shakes of the roof, making a beacon which would soon be visible for miles.

He reloaded his gun and doubled back to where the riflemen had first crouched. Two of them lay but feet apart. He recognized the face of one as having been at the forefront of the lynch party which had started down from the saloon in Rock Creek with the intention of hanging Tim Hyatt's prisoner. The woman had been right. Ax-head!

Johnny didn't look at the last man he had dropped, but pushed on in the direction in which the man had been running. He found the three Ax-head horses at the fringe of the timber. Chosing the best of these, he swung up and slanted off toward lower country again.

Johnny Bennett still wanted to get out of Rock County as fast as he

could. But a drifter's gods seemed bent on crossing him up. Six or eight miles off down through the dark from Leevining's place, he worked down a steep shoulder into a narrow valley. And just before he hit its floor, he pulled up short. The floor of the valley from one steep wall to the other was crowded with a mass of moving cattle. They were splashing back and forth through a little creek threading it and moving with swift steadiness deeper into the hills.

He glanced at the slope behind him, judged it was too slanting to work back up, and decided his best bet was to sit tight until this drive passed him. The cattle rolled under him for about fifteen minutes. Then the end of the drive came into sight and he picked out half a dozen riders fanning the stragglers. The drovers were almost under him when four riders suddenly broke through the brush at the foot of the opposite wall of the valley and wedged in between the drovers and their herd. Johnny heard one of the drovers sing out in sudden fear:

"It's the Kid!"

Then a hell of gunfire broke out among the milling men. Johnny nailed his eyes to the men from the brush and recognized Bert Lafferty as the foremost of them. Lafferty rode with a gun in either hand and he shot like a madman. The rest of it dropped into place for Johnny. This was Mill Creek. The three others with Lafferty were Leevining and his two grown boys. The men behind the cattle were Ax-head hands. The cattle, themselves, were the heart of the battle which was shaking Rock County.

For the first time the owner of the Ax-head fitted into the pattern of the violence which lay about Rock Hill. The man was using his own ranch as a blind behind which to rustle his neighbors' stock. He was using a cattleman's usual distrust of hill nesters to hang the rustling on the nesters—and their leader. He wanted them clear of the hills to keep his highway for stolen stock open.

Lafferty and the hill men were fighting back the only way they knew how, meeting violence with violence. Johnny thought about the whole deal. He thought about the way Meredith had shot Tim Hyatt when Johnny was making his escape from the jail. That removed the law and stuck the Christmas Kid—and his nester friends—with another count of violence in the eyes of the unknowing town. Johnny thought about the carefully set fire trap which was to have been a funeral pyre for Leevining's wife and his two smaller children. And having thought about these things he felt rage growing in him.

A moment later, he was dropping on down into the valley, his own gun drawn. Lafferty, with only his hiding of his identity behind the name of the Christmas Kid as a barrier between himself and defeat, was fighting Meredith and his crew the only way he could—hit and run. And this time, by the looks of the tangle below, Lafferty could use another gun!

Lafferty, according to what was obviously a prearranged plan, drove straight into the faces of the Ax-head drovers. Leevining and his two boys spread a little and stayed behind Lafferty with the obvious intention of covering him as he plowed into the drovers. Johnny saw that it would have worked, save that the Ax-head had apparently been expecting an attack. With the first crash of gunfire, a shrill yell sounded down the canyon and half a dozen other riders hammered into view, unlimbering guns as they came. Leevining and his boys drew back a little and doubled up their fire, trying to keep a clear way cut for Lafferty. But the Ax-head worked like a smooth team and they boxed him.

Johnny hit the floor of the valley about a hundred yards ahead of the arrival of the Ax-head's reinforcements. It was obvious to him that Leevining and his boys could work clear, but that Lafferty was done. He made a fool try to reach the man. He knew it was a fool try and that none of this was skin off of his knuckles. But after the way he had been knocked around plenty since he'd hit this county, with Ax-head doing most of the knocking, he wanted a little hide himself.

He put four even shots ahead of him, dropping a man out of his way and breaking up the attention of the drovers. He thought Lafferty would be able to wheel away then, but the man's horse was milling uncertainly and he didn't try to make the break. Johnny swore and held on, crashing up alongside Lafferty's mount. Then he saw why the man hadn't taken the chance. Lafferty was hard hit and barely able to cling to his saddle. A drover skittered in from an angle, levering a Winchester as he came. Johnny fired across his chest at the man and saw his face vanish.

He reached across, then, and with other guns reaching at both Lafferty and himself, made a clean pickup. Lafferty's body was half limp and he was heavy, coming out of his saddle. Johnny felt a stabbing of hot, hard pain through his wounded shoulder as he swung the injured man across to his own kak and wheeled his horse.

They made a ride of it, then, with the three Leevinings covering them from timber. Johnny's horse took a bullet and limped, but the animal kept on lifting powerfully. They reached the place where the Leevinings crouched and passed them. The old man and his two sons lagged long enough after they had passed, to put a merciless screen of lead into the men below, checking pursuit. Then they remounted and came on. Leevining took the lead, crashing up through a brush gully and switching over a barren hogback into a little depression a couple of miles back of the main course of Mill Creek. They all swung down here, pulled Lafferty from Johnny's saddle, and stretched him flat. The wounded man forced himself half upright, driven by an inner urgency.

"Get me a horse!" he begged. "This is the first real big herd Meredith's tried to move. He really

thought he had me in jail in town. He thinks that with Hyatt's death nailed to my skirts and half the county looking for me, I'll lay low. It's time for the Christmas Kid to ride out on his big job. Leevining, you make a circle of the homesteads. Get every man out. Send one of your boys over to the foot of Haystack to bring in those that are watching along there. That bunch was a dodge Meredith pulled to leave us off trail. It'll take him a couple of hours to get that bunch of cattle to the pass at the head of Mill Creek. We'll jump him there. And tomorrow we can show the whole county proof of what that double-crossing's sons been up to on the quiet for months!"

Old Leevining had been bent over Lafferty's wound. He straightened slowly, now.

"You're through riding for tonight, Bert," he said heavily. "Close to being through with it for good. My place is closest. We'll get you there. But we'll have to let Meredith drive this herd on through the pass and to his other spread in Finlay County."

Lafferty groaned.

"Once he gets them on that other ranch of his, every brand will be reworked in three days. And we won't have a thing on him. After the size of this herd, the other spreads will join up with Meredith's boys and really clean us out. We've got to stop this drive, tonight!"

Johnny pushed forward, drawing the attention of the other four men for the first time. He nodded at old Leevining.

"You won't take Lafferty to your place," he said.

"No?" Quick distrust flamed up in the old man's eyes. His two boys moved in close.

"Why?"

Swiftly Johnny told of the fire at the homestead and of the woman and children who had been roped in their beds. When he finished a cold sweat stood out on Leevining's head.

"Those rotten devils! Listen, Bert, we've done enough—all of us! We can't buck a son of Satan like that! What are we fighting for—a place on a little hunk of ground! Ground ain't worth that much. Not to me!"

Lafferty started to protest, then stopped as though there was unanswerable truth in Leevining's arguments. He turned eyes dull with pain to Johnny.

"You've got thanks coming for down there, brother," he said. "When you rode into my camp last night, I thought you were a poser sent in by Meredith. I aimed to be a mite rough with you. Glad I didn't have time, then."

He swung back to Leevining.

"I reckon you're right, George. I was a fool to think when I came in here and found my dad dead that keeping myself hidden and using a phony name and hitting from the dark could cut down a curly wolf like Meredith. We're done. Get me back up to dad's shack. I'll get by, then, And you'd better tell the rest in the

scrub that we've quit trying and they're on their own!"

"You think you've got Meredith a little worried over the Christmas Kid?"

Johnny asked the question quietly.

Lafferty shot him a quick look. "I don't know about the big wolf," he said. "But I know danged well I've got every Ax-head hand plenty worried about these attacks and who the Christmas Kid might really be. Not only that, the name means something to the rest of the 'steaders in the hills. They'd follow the Christmas Kid to hades. If I could ride, we'd beat Meredith yet!"

Johnny squatted down.

"Maybe you can't ride, Lafferty. But the Christmas Kid can! Nobody from the hills will know the difference as long as it's dark. We look that much alike. And the Ax-head would pick me over you as the Christmas Kid any time. Most of them saw me in town when Tim Hyatt slapped me in a cell."

Lafferty sat up again, hope brightening his eyes.

"You'll do it?" he breathed.

Johnny nodded.

"Any ground's worth fighting for if a man's worked on it and built a house on it. If riding your saddle will keep the Leevinings and others like them from knuckling under, I'll ride it!"

Lafferty sighed with relief and turned to Leevining.

"Slap a pad over this hole to stop the bleeding, George. You've got a water bag on your saddle. Leave it. I'll be all right here till morning. Get the bunch up from Haystack. Round up the others. And ride like blazes behind . . . ah—"

Lafferty paused with a wry grin.

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Johnny Bennett."

"—and ride like blazes behind the Christmas Kid—all of you!"

V

George Leevining sent his two boys out as messengers. One of them was to round up the three or four homesteaders detailed to watch the Ax-head crew which had been reported circling Haystack Mountain. The other was to ride circuit of all the small spreads, rousing out every available man for the meeting at the head of Mill Creek. The old man busied himself with Lafferty's wound. Johnny watched him and saw that with Leevining's expert bandaging, Lafferty would be all right until some of them could get back to move him on to better quarters.

Not more than twenty minutes after the broken attack on the herd in Mill Creek Valley, Johnny was moving again toward the summit of the hills with Leevining beside him. The old man spoke only once, apparently his own effort at expressing gratitude.

"Before the Lafferty place was raided by the Ax-head and old Tom killed, he used to brag about his boy, Bert. Said he was a deputy for some sheriff in New Mexico and do-

ing fine. When Bert come in here to see why he wasn't gettin' letters from his old man any more, we was glad to see him. Tim Hyatt was a tolerable fair man. But hill folks need a hillman to rod the law. We're goin' to make Bert sheriff of this county if we come out on top. You stick close, Bennett. He'll need him a deputy."

Johnny grinned. A drifter turned up some mighty funny job, and he heard about them in mighty funny ways. But this beat anything he'd hit before. At the same time, it didn't sound so bad, either.

"I'll stick, Leevining," he promised. And they rode on.

In an hour they had reached a boulder-humped shoulder of the divide. North of them less than a mile, the divide dropped to the headwaters of Mill Creek. When they pulled up, the dead night air carried the faint sounds of moving cattle. Johnny glanced at the lowering dipper among the glazed stars and judged they had about two hours until sunup. A man could stop an awful lot of lead in two hours. He could throw a little, too.

They lost another half-hour, waiting for the rest of the 'steaders to come in. Leevining kept Johnny a little apart from the others and all of them accepted the fact that the man with Leevining was the Christmas Kid, Bert Lafferty, son of Tim Lafferty, their dead neighbor.

When the time came beyond which waiting would be bad business, about fifteen silent men were bunched on the rocky shoulder. Under Johnny's orders Leevining split them into two bunches. One he put in command of his oldest son. The other bunch was to ride with the Christmas Kid. They separated and filed off to form the jaws of a wide trap, set to spring from either side of the pass heading Mill Creek.

It was slow work, inching across the bald faces of the ridges to the slopes above the pass. The better part of an hour was gone before Johnny was certain both parties were in place. By this time the Ax-head had brought their drive of stolen cattle into a tight bunch in the meadow under the pass and were hazing them on toward the last rock quarter mile which would take them through the hills into the badlands of the next county.

There were ten men with the herd, now. And they made tempting odds. But a queer caution kept tugging at Johnny. After the earlier attack Meredith would be cautious. He would know that if the homesteaders did bunch against him, ten men weren't enough to get his herd through the notch. Johnny had a strong hunch that Meredith had more men hidden in the shadows to throw as surprise reinforcements if there was an attack at the pass.

Meredith was plainly visible among his men, and after a little he drew off to one side of the slowly moving herd with two other men. Johnny eyed them a long time. Finally he turned to Leevining.

"We've got to flush out the whole bunch before we hit, or we're apt to hit in the wrong place. I'm going down like I aimed to parley with Meredith. He won't be able to take that bait. He'll signal the others out to make sure of getting me. The minute they show and you can see where they are, signal our other bunch across the pass and come down, hard!"

Leevining nodded. Johnny put his horse in motion, angling down across the slope toward Meredith. Two thirds of the way down, far enough to keep stray attention from his men above, he halted and shouted at the boss of the Ax-head.

"Meredith!"

The man wheeled and shot a quick glance up the slope.

"I'm giving you your chance. We've got you boxed. But we've had enough trouble. Maybe we can make a deal!"

Meredith spoke swiftly to one of the men with him. The fellow drifted away. Meredith raised his voice.

"Who is it?"

"Bennett!"

"All right, Kid. But no tricks. Come down where I can see you—and alone!"

Johnny edged his horse on down the slope. He freed his gun and put it across the pommel of his saddle, its barrel thrust under one thigh and its butt up where he could reach it with little perceptible motion. Meredith watched him come. As distance diminished, Johnny could see the man's eager grin and he knew he had figured right. When there was just over a hundred yards between them, Meredith pawed his gun up. He made no convincing effort to tag Johnny. The shot was a signal, instead. Half a dozen men broke from the shelter of a jumble of boulders at Johnny's right. Two similar bunches appeared on the far slope of the pass. And several in each bunch, carrying rifles, opened at the horseman edging toward their boss.

Close on the heels of Meredith's signal, another shot sounded farther up the slope. And then the homesteaders broke cover, careening down the two ridges toward the exposed Ax-head hide-outs.

Johnny saw these things and peeled from his saddle. How the fight went depended on the hillmen, now. He had to save his own skin. And the odds were thin. As he hit the ground he saw Meredith standing alone. He darted under his horse's belly, straightened to rub his eyes stung by sand a smoking bullet had thrown, and swung on toward the boss of the Ax-head. Meredith fired twice at him in the first half dozen strides. Then he seemed to think better of wasting his powder and eased back as though expecting his scattered rifleman to tally the swift figure darting for him.

Running through a hail of lead, Johnny began to think that the luck which had carried him through a similar screen at Leevining's cabin would hold up here, too. He wanted a close shot at Meredith, close enough to see the hurt on the man's

face. So he held his fire. And he held it too long. Bennett luck had never been any great shakes. It was strained too far by the terrible fire the Ax-head poured at him.

The split bunches of homesteaders still lacked yards of being close enough to divide that fire. And Johnny was hit. It was a funny feeling, not at all like the tagging he had gotten outriding the posse from town. It was a sharp jolt, a quick, searing pain, and a numbness. The numbness spread slowly through him. He could feel it travel. It was in his arms. He couldn't hold his gun up. Then it hit his hips and he began to stagger. When it reached his knees, they folded under him and he went down.

He fell on his face, both hands stretched out before him. One of them still clung to his gun. Across them he could see Meredith, his lips parted triumphantly, running toward him. Meredith was carrying his gun low and ready. Johnny saw what that meant. The man was coming up for a finish shot, for the pleasure of putting one chunk of lead into the carcass of the hillman who had nearly beaten him.

With an effort which shook every fiber of him, Johnny forced dead muscles to slow life. His fingers tightened and the gun raised a little out of the grass. It kept raising until it looked to him as though Meredith was running right down the channel of his sights. Then the gun blasted. Meredith stopped running. The triumph faded from his face. He fell limply and didn't move. Johnny Bennett saw this. He saw, also, that the hillmen no longer needed the leadership of the Christmas Kid. They were converging on the milling Ax-head in the pass like two flame-edged mowing knives, dropping everything before them.

Johnny Bennett sat at a desk in front of the cell gate in Rock County's jail. There were three papers on the spur-scarred surface before him. His eyes ran through each in turn:

Sheriff,
Colfax County, New Mexico

Your chief deputy, Bert Lafferty, took the morning stage out of here for Raton. He refused nomination as sheriff of this county, preferring to return to his old job. I thought you should know. Better raise his pay. He's worth it—

PROCLAMATION:

Real estate, improvements, and personal effects of Asa Meredith, deceased, to be offered at Public Auction July 6th—

Sheriff,
Routt County,
Colorado

WARRANT: For the apprehension of one, Deuce Spellman, employed at the Osage Ranch, your county, for the misappropriation of monies received from the sale of three horses and a work saddle belonging to one, John Bennett, formerly employed on the same ranch. Bennett here. Please communicate.

Johnny grinned widely. Lifting a pen he signed all three papers with the same flourish:

J. Bennett, Sheriff, Rock County, Wyoming.

THE END

CHRISTMAS ROUNDUP

by S. Omar Barker

Although the rules for workin' cows on diff'rent ranches vary,
To hold a roundup Christmas week ain't noways customary.
You round up cattle in the spring, the summer or the fall,
But gosh! A Christmas roundup! Why, it jest ain't done at all!
The calves have done been branded an' the beef steers cut an' shipped,
Dehornin's long since over, an' the ticky cattle dipped.
But this year, dog my doojits if the Boss ain't give the word
To git the wagon ready for a cow work with the herd!
The saddle-hoss remuda will be sort o' winter-thin,
But the Boss has called a roundup, so I've got to drift 'em in.
"Make sure you fetch some wild uns, too." The Boss, he winks an eye.
"We'll want a few good buckers!" So I up an' ask him why.
"Look here!" I says. "We're short of hands with Bud gone off to war.
I wisht you'd kindly tell me what you want them broncos for?
An' while you're at it, mister, I would sort o' crave to learn
The purpose of this roundup that is six months out of turn?
I've took your orders willing, now, for close on thirty years,
But this here Christmas roundup is a thing that slips my gears!
Your boy, he's in the army, an' whenever he comes back
I'd hate to have to tell him that his pa has jumped the track.
But holdin' Christmas roundups, seems to me, is plenty proof
You've done been eatin' loco weed till you're crazy as a goof!"
The Boss, he kind o' grins an' says: "Well, Tom, of course it's true
A roundup looks plumb crazy when there ain't cow work to do;
But if you'd been a cowboy fightin' on the road to Rome,
I'll bet you'd like a roundup when you get a furlough home!
So git the wagon ready, Tom, an' run them broncos in!
Bud's comin' home on furlough—an' he may not come ag'in.
But this time, while he's with us, let's forget the gloomy side
An' give this cowboy soldier all he wants of rope and ride!
We'll find some slick ears left to brand, some broncs that he can bust—
For nothin' suits a cowboy like the smell of livestock dust!
'Twill be his Christmas present—an' a Merry Christmas Eve—
To bed out with the wagon! Bud is comin' home on leave!"

PETE ON THE WARPATH

by George Cory Franklin

PETE, the longhorn trail leader, was anything but pleased with the set-up. To be sure Bart was with him; and Dale Carter himself had ridden for an hour or two in the rattling stock car with Pete during the two-day railroad trip from the Circle C, in the San Luis Valley, to the big ranch on the Lower Frisco in Arizona.

Carter had bought a thousand head of white-faced stock cattle on the Frisco, and the herd was to be trailed north through the Indian country, a distance of five hundred miles. Of course, that part of the plan Pete knew nothing about. All he was conscious of was that he had been routed out of his comfortable winter quarters on the Circle C, trucked to the railroad and shipped south for two smoke-filled, noisy, jolty days. Now he was being kept in a tight corral behind a ranch-house while Bart and the motley crew Carter had hired road-branded the herd that had been gathered and made ready for the trail north.

Nothing seemed natural to Pete. The smell of mesquite and greasewood was different from that of pine and sage; the water was warm and bitter; the hot, dry air was not at all like that of the mountains, where he had lived for six years. All these things irritated the none-too-placid disposition of the big brindle steer. The men, too, were different; at least the ones Carter had hired to help trail the herd north were not like the cowboys that rode in the San Luis country. They were a rough, smelly bunch that drank a lot and talked loud and boastfully.

Pete had rested from his experience in the railroad car and he wished Bart would hurry up and get the herd ready. It seemed as though it was taking longer than usual to brand the cattle, and for some reason that Pete did not understand, both Carter and his foreman appeared worried. They were talking now as they stood near Pete's corral.

"I don't like the layout, boss," Bart told Carter. "This fellow Daly you hired in Clifton don't act like a cowhand. He rides fairly well and knows how to do what I tell him, but he's more like a tinhorn gambler than a cowboy. Red isn't any better. He's lazy and drinks too much, when he ought to be stone-cold sober if he's going to be any good on a night herd. And the rest of the crew are Mexes and breeds."

"I know," Carter admitted. "I wasn't stuck on either Daly or Red when I hired 'em, but they were the best I could get. I guess we'll have to make out some way. We've got to, because the spring grass won't last more than a month, and we'll have to get these cows into the mountains before the hot winds come along and dry up the waterholes. Otherwise I'd send back to the valley for men."

Bart put his hand through a hole in the fence and pulled Pete's long silky ears. "Well, we've got one member of the crew we can depend on. I wouldn't trade old Pete for the whole kit and kaboodle of 'em when it comes to trailing a herd."

"He's the greatest trail leader I ever saw," admitted Carter, "but he can't do it all. Keep your eyes peeled and if you see Daly make any suspicious move, bend a gun barrel over his head."

That night was to be the last one the herd would be held under fence. Tomorrow the long drive north would begin and the men would have to night-herd. Pete had slept until near midnight when the smell of a human body awoke him. Daly was standing on almost the same spot where Carter had been a few hours before. He seemed to be waiting for someone, because he kept looking off toward the ranchhouse on the river. When, a few minutes later, a horse splashed through the shallow water of the stream, Daly stepped out of the shadow so that the rider would be sure to see him.

This man, whom Daly called Holden, had a black beard and smelled of sheep, an odor that Pete detested more than any other one.

"I've got everything fixed, Daly," Holden said. "You and the breeds try to get hold of the best horses in the cavvy. Don't do anything to make Carter suspicious until after you leave the Little Colorado River near St. Johns. I can't find out yet whether Carter intends to drive east by way of Cocorro and up the Rio Grande, or only go as far in that direction as the old southern trail, and then drive north by way of Gallup. That would be the shortest way, but the water is uncertain."

"I sure hope he takes the Gallup trail," Daly replied. "The country west of Zuni Village is just made for our play. Once we get a part of the

herd scattered in those rincons, Carter couldn't get men enough in the whole Mormon country to regather them."

"Yeah, I know, but on the other hand, if he goes up the Rio Grande you can manage to lose a lot of cattle in the willow thickets and it will be easy to get them to the market in the East. Either way, we can't lose, and we'll clean up enough to make our jackpot."

The men talked a long time, but since Pete couldn't understand what they said and didn't like the smell of their bodies, he slouched to the farthest corner of the corral and lay down there.

Shortly after daylight Bart came out of the ranchhouse and sent a couple of the half-breeds after the horse herd. Pete knew by the actions of the men that the start was to be made that morning and he was keener than anyone to be out in the open with the big herd bawling at his heels.

After breakfast the outfit wagon and extra horses started north. Then Dale Carter himself came to the corral to let Pete out.

Pete accepted the charge of the herd with a threatening shake of his head and a grunt of satisfaction that rumbled up from his mighty chest. Carter opened the gate and Pete shuffled through to have a look at the long line of cows and yearlings strung out across the pasture. Bart came up and headed Pete toward the north. He waved one hand to Daly, who was riding on the near swing. Daly yelled an order to the breeds who began feeding cattle into the line that formed behind Pete.

Pete's sense of direction was not yet thoroughly awakened, but his homing instinct was strong and soon it would come to him, clear and unshakable. Then he would know the direction in which lay the Circle C, and nothing would be able to stop him from taking the most direct line to the home ranch.

Bart came up beside Pete and slapped the ends of his bridle reins on the flap of his chaps. "Shake a hoof, old-timer," he told the steer. "You'll get your bearings pretty soon; then we'll really go places."

Pete lowered his head, sniffed at the ground and started off. It took him most of the first day to orient himself, but about midafternoon his memory began to work. He thought of a little mountain park on La Garitta Creek where he had eaten sweet grass the year before. The imaginary smell of sage and the whistling of groundhogs was more real to him than the sting of cactus spines or the bruises of the malpais that cut long deep furrows in his hoofs.

Bart, who had been watching Pete's actions for some time, nodded and rode back to where Carter was forcing the laggards to keep up.

"We're O. K. now," Bart told the cowman. "Pete has got his bearings and is headed for home. It took him longer than usual to get his homing instinct to working, but he'll go on now, straight to the Circle C."

Three days later Carter ordered the herd thrown off the trail at the

edge of the Apache National Forest. He wanted to ride into the nearest settlement to talk with some of the old-time stockmen he had once known on the Puerco.

Pete wondered why the herd was stopped while the sun was yet three hours high. He wasn't tired in the least; in fact, he never felt more like going a few extra miles. He shook his horns menacingly at Pancho, the half-breed whom Daly had sent up beside Pete to push him off the trail.

Pancho knew nothing about the short temper of the big trail leader, and made the mistake of striking Pete a stinging blow on the nose with his quirt. With the speed of a wild cat and the easy power of a grizzly, Pete lowered his head beneath the belly of Pancho's horse and tossed it over the edge of a bank into an arroyo. Daly rushed in, dragging at his gun. Bart dug his spurs into the ribs of his horse and dashed up in time to knock Daly's gun out of his hand before the angry straw boss could shoot the second time. The first bullet had glanced off the base of the horn, stunning Pete a little but failing to knock him down.

Bart leaned from the saddle and retrieved Daly's gun. "I ought to bend this over your fool head," he said angrily. "If you'd killed that steer, Carter would have filled your carcass so full of lead it would have sunk in Crater Lake."

Pancho had fallen clear of the saddle and was now riding back toward a cross gulch up which his horse scrambled. Bart ordered him back to the wagon and told Daly to draw his pay as soon as Carter returned.

Daly realized that if he lost his job there would be no chance of scattering the herd, as he and Holden planned, so he tried to soothe Bart's anger. "I was all wrong, boss," he admitted. "Pancho was to blame. I didn't try to kill Pete; I only shot close to his head to turn him off the trail and keep him from following Pancho. I wouldn't hurt that steer any more than you would," Daly went on. "He's the best leader I ever saw. I don't blame you for bein' sore; I won't do it again."

Daly's meek attitude quieted Bart's rage somewhat. Besides the crew was not large enough now for the night riding that would have to be done from here on, and the loss of two men would mean longer hours in the saddle for men who were none too willing to do extra work. Bart yielded to what seemed the only thing to do and told Daly he needn't quit.

By this time Pete had gotten over his burst of temper, the familiar sound of Bart's voice helping him to forget his injuries. He had been turned off the trail by the shock of Daly's bullet, and seeing a shady spot a short distance away he went to it and lay down. In a few minutes the herd was grazing quietly and Pete, too, began to browse.

Bart thought it best to say nothing to Carter about the incident. The cattleman had enough to worry about as it was. He was in better spirits when he came back after dark.

"I met a sheepman over in the village," Carter told Bart. "He said

he had just brought a big flock of Navaho woollies from over in the San Juan country. He says the grass northwest of Gallup is good and the waterholes are all full. I've decided to go that way. We'll get a good start tomorrow and make up the distance we lost today."

Daly, who had been seated near the campfire, overheard Carter's decision. A few minutes later he offered to ride an extra hour and relieve one of the Mexicans who had been watersick and had objected to doing an extra turn with Red. Bart accepted this gesture of friendliness, supposing that Daly was trying to make up for his show of temper that day; so Daly got the chance he was after, to tell Red that their plans had worked out satisfactorily, and the deal to steal the major part of Carter's herd was in the bag.

The day after the affair at the arroyo Pete kept a dozen yards ahead of the fastest-walking white-face in the herd. He shuffled along in a running walk that at intervals broke into a swinging trot.

Bart had replaced Pancho on the point with a Mexican named José Campus, the most trustworthy rider in the crew. Pancho was put back in the dust of the drag where he would be directly under Carter's eye. Red and Daly rode first swing behind Campus and a Mexican boy, Manuel Cortez, in his early teens. Manuel, while lacking the experience of the white man, would at least do as Campus directed.

Now, with Pete pressing on at top speed, the other cattle had no time for straying out of line and were pushed on at the rate of about three miles an hour. By sundown the edge of the foothill country was reached and the herd was turned loose to graze for an hour before being bedded down for the night. Pete, as usual, selected the best grazing for himself, and when he had mowed away a huge supper he lay down under a tree a short distance outside the bed ground.

It was past midnight when Pete was awakened by a small herd that had been thrown off the bed ground and was being drifted toward him. He wondered why the cattle were being started so early, but got up at once and took the lead. Daly rode up beside him and turned him off the course he had been following, and down into a heavily timbered brake which led into a narrow valley between high walls of sandstone. In less than half an hour fifty head of Carter's cattle had been stolen and placed in a safe hide-out, to be picked up later by the riders Holden would send to follow up Daly's work.

As soon as Daly thought the cattle were safely hidden he called to Red to let them go, and the two hurried back to bunch up any stragglers that might have tried to leave the bed ground.

Pete did not go a hundred yards down the valley, after the men left him; he was as conscious that he was off the course he had been following toward the Circle C as any air pilot would have been when he discovered that he was not on the beam. He

turned around immediately, while his instinct for direction was hot, and started back toward the trail. The gentle Herefords trusted Pete more than they did their own judgment and they followed, somewhat slowly but still keeping their line fairly well.

Before long Pete's instinct led him to cut a corner. Instead of going directly back to the herd through the screen of trees that Daly had chosen for protection against being detected, Pete yielded and turned off at an angle that would take him back onto the established course a mile or more north of the bed ground. The sleepy Herefords continued to follow slowly and by the time Pete's instinct for direction was satisfied, they had almost stopped walking. One old cow selected a spot to lie down, and in a few minutes the rest followed her example. Pete went on another fifty yards or so, then, having decided that the others were going to call it a day, he lay down, too, and slept until the bawling of the main herd awakened him.

Pete got up, stretched his muscles and bowed his back like a work ox. Then, twisting his tail, he bawled a sharp, angry signal that, translated into the language of the cow country, meant: "Get up, you lazy wallopers, and hit the trail."

The stolen cattle got up and began to graze along slowly in the direction Pete was leading them. Carter and Bart, riding ahead to get the regular morning count on the herd, saw the fresh tracks and noticed that Pete was well out in front.

"Old Pete is getting anxious to go home," Bart observed. "I'll let my horse jump out a little and get ahead of him."

Carter nodded approval and dropped back to where Daly and Red pointed the main herd. The old cattleman, accustomed to judging men by their reactions, saw amazed wonder spread over the faces of the riders when he told them that Pete was already on the trail and had taken about fifty head with him. Neither Daly nor Red made any reply.

"Two more days' travel and we'll cross the valley of the Puerco and turn east onto the Continental Divide. Then the grass will be good and our troubles over," Carter prophesied to Bart.

In the meantime Daly and Red were exchanging guesses on how the cattle they had hidden so carefully could have been brought back into the herd in time for the count. They decided that for some reason Holden had failed to pick them up in time, and that the cattle had merely strayed back.

That night another attempt to steal the cattle was made, and again Pete succeeded in leading his charges back. Daly was furious when he saw his chances of scattering a large percentage of the herd into the piñon-covered brakes fading. That day he laid a plan that was air-tight. He took Pancho into his confidence and told him to pick another half-breed to go with him, and stay with the cattle until Holden came to get them. Since they were far short of the number they had hoped to scatter, they drove a hundred and fifty head a

mile off the trail and left them in an open park where the half-breeds could easily guard them.

Pete was getting annoyed with all this monkey business. For three nights he had been forced to do extra work. He was tired and wanted to sleep and, besides, he did not like the manner in which Bart and Carter had deserted him and left him to be handled by strangers. When Daly and Red turned to go back to the herd, Pete walked around the park once, sizing it up. He stopped under the protection of a scrubby cedar and stood looking at the rider a yard or two distant, on the other side. The scent from the man's body was the same as that of the one who had beaten Pete over the head with a quirt.

The short hairs on Pete's neck began to stiffen and his eyes flashed green in the starlight. Pancho lazed in the saddle, his left leg straight and stiff, his right foot swinging idly above an empty stirrup. Pete took a stealthy step nearer. He had never attacked a man who rode for the Circle C, but if there was any sense of loyalty to his own crew in his heart, the memory of Pancho's blow overshadowed it. With an angry bellow, Pete charged through the brush. The horse had seen Pete standing there and must have read the danger. Perhaps the scent that all animals throw off when angry had already reached him, or he may have felt the touch of danger instinctively. At any rate, he sprang sharply to the right when he heard Pete's war whoop.

Pancho, taken completely by surprise, struggled frantically to regain his balance, but the suddenness of the unexpected plunge threw him far away from the horse, and his clutching hand failed to grip the saddle-horn. Pete had leaped as he bellowed, head held low, his long, sharp horns at exactly the right angle to pierce Pancho's body. The breed emptied his six-gun during the few seconds he was impaled on the horns of the maddened steer, but the sting of hot lead only served to drive Pete crazy. He was now out to kill anything human that came within reach of his blood-smeared horns. The other breed came rushing up to be met by a thousand pounds of battering-ram that bowled his horse over and turned to trample its rider into the sand.

When Pete tired of pawing the shapeless mass, he started home. The shooting and smell of blood had come as near to stampeding the cows as it is possible to do with stock cattle. They wanted to run and did in an awkward rolling fashion, following Pete out of the park in the direction of the main herd. The faked stampede lasted only a fraction of a minute. The cows and yearlings quickly slowed down to a trot, but they kept up a racket that brought Carter, Bart and Campus and the other loyal Mexicans charging past the main herd, and out to meet Pete and the cattle he had recovered for the third time. It took fast work on the part of all the riders to hold the herd until the excitement died down enough so that Carter and

Bart could back-trail Pete to the park and read the sign there.

Holden and two other men rode up as they were investigating the bodies of the two breeds that Pete had killed. Furious at what he thought to be Daly's repeated failures, Holden began to cuss before he realized that he was not talking to his confederates.

"What the devil is the reason you haven't done what you agreed to, Daly?" he stormed. "Here I've wasted a week waiting for you to rustle a few cows, and so far we've seen nothing but a few cold tracks."

The barrel of Carter's gun flashed in the dim starlight as he covered Holden. "So that's the explanation!" exclaimed the cattleman. "Well, you may be a smart sheepman, but you'll have to learn a few things before you can outfox Colorado cattlemen. That longhorn trail leader of mine blocked your game and has just knocked out two of your helpers. Bart, here, will take your guns and we'll go back to the herd and get Daly and Red. The jail in Gallup will hold what's left of your gang until court convenes."

Two weeks later Pete was feasting on the sweet bunch grass on the slope above the Circle C. Carter and Bart rode by and Pete moved back out of sight and stood screened by a thicket of aspens.

"Pete thinks he's hid," Carter remarked. "Let's not disturb him. A steer that can pull the plays that Pete does is entitled to get away with a bluff once in a while."

THE END

RANGE SAVVY

BY CARL RAHT

One of the unaccountable occurrences in Nature, yet vouched for as a fact by many mountain-lion hunters, is the ability of a lion to do away with his scent while stalking his prey. When dogs become baffled by losing a lion's trail, the hunter begins a search for other game which the lion might be stalking. If his search is rewarded by signs of a deer or other prey, he calls off the dogs, makes a wide circle, and again tries to pick up the trail.

While the American Indian had neither ax, hatchet nor saw of steel, he managed to fell trees in the forest, even to the mightiest pine, fir or oak. First he selected the trees necessary for his purpose. After clearing away all entanglements, he built a fire around the base of each tree, ringing the trunk higher up with wet clay to keep the flames from climbing too high. As quickly as the flames charred the trunk, the Indian hacked off the char with his stone ax or hatchet, permitting the replenished fire to bite deeper into the trunk. By firing several trees at a time, the process of felling them was expedited.

In the Mogollon Mountains of Arizona, just before a rainy season, gnats and other insects swarm in thick clouds. Pestered by these insects to the point of exasperation, some enterprising cowhand conceived the idea of carrying a smoking cow chip in his hand, waving it about his head. It worked, and soon it was a common sight to see a rider, armed with a burning cow chip instead of the usual rope, riding after the half-wild mountain cattle, a trail of pungent smoke in his wake.

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, 11, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

TROUBLE STRIKES THE BAR H

by C. K. Shaw

Peace and good will vanished from the Bar H when Champ Garrison was rounded up for a Yuletide wedding

There hadn't never been such a winter since I, Windy Bill Wicks, and my pard, Bluey Beck, hit Champ Garrison's old Bar H. The cattle was comin' through in good shape, but trouble had struck below the belt just the same. One woman like Champ's sister, Emmy, was enough to drive a bunch of punchers crazy, but when you double that and add some more for good measure, you got Mrs. Isabel Dobs, Emmy's friend. Mrs. Dobs had come a-visitin' at the Bar H for the do-or-die purpose of makin' Champ Garrison her third husband.

It was the mornin' of the twenty-fourth of December, with Christmas

Eve on our hocks, that things took a turn for the worse. It looked like Mrs. Dobs was goin' to marry Champ that night at the party her and Emmy was givin' at the ranch. Us punchers couldn't see ourselves a-stayin' on the Bar H with no buck-toothed, pin-eared lady like her a-bossin' us, so we had met in the office for a powwow. There was me and Bluey and Simp and Alf and Dick, and we was all lookin' down long noses.

"How does havin' a sprained ankle keep you from thinkin'?" Alf Newell snapped at me. "Don't you use your head for that?"

I was layin' on the horsehair sofa, which is why the meetin' was in the office instead of the haymow, or some place where ladies couldn't get. My foot was all swole up, and the only way I could walk was by shovin' a chair around with my knee on it.

"When you got as much pain as I have, your brain is plumb numb," I answered Alf, tart.

"I ain't usual in favor of nothin' you think up to get a man out of trouble," Bluey said, " 'cause it's mostly worse than the trouble, but nothin' could be worse than marryin' Mrs. Dobs. Champ is a-shiverin' out in the stable, a-waitin' for word from this meetin'. He's half froze, and cussin' a blue streak and about to give in. What you got thought up?"

That was a long speech for Bluey, and I knew thereby he was mighty worried. "The only place Champ would be safe from Mrs. Dobs," I said, "is in jail. We'll have Ham Nolen come out and arrest him for burnin' Chuck Edwards' barn down."

"Did Champ set that barn on fire?" Dick yelped, his eyes rollin' around on his face like a pair of stray marbles.

Dick Muller is the kid I and Bluey is raisin', and if I do say it myself, we ain't doin' no slouch of a job. The kid's thirteen, and while he's still a little lean through the withers, he's sound as a dollar and plenty smart.

"Champ didn't burn the barn," I explained to him, "but Sheriff Nolen is touchy about havin' the law used except in bonyfide cases, so I'm goin' to have Champ confess."

Just then there came the plunk of Mrs. Dobs' heels across the dinin'-room floor and she knocked on the office door. "Boys, I have some tea for you," she called, kittenish, and turned the knob.

Bluey had thought to lock the door, but we couldn't just set and let a lady be locked out. I gave Dick a sharp look.

"I told you to keep her safe away while us men talked," I said.

Dick swallered and wagged his head. "You've had me keep her away a lot 'cause your ankle's been painin' you too much for to talk with a lady, and 'cause you're tired of tea. But I couldn't think up no more excuses—so I'm goin' to get rid of her!"

"Open the door quick," Mrs. Dobs called, not so kittenish.

Alf unlocked the door, and Mrs. Dobs came in with a bosomy sweep, packin' a wood tray that Champ had always used for stray bullets and odd

buckles. She had a pitcher of tea on the tray, covered with a folded cloth.

"We'll start our Christmas every year with nice hot tea," she said. "Champ thinks the world of you boys, and you're soon going to be my boys, too." She snickered, tryin' to act bashful.

Dick was on the floor with his back to all of us, workin' with a box he'd fetched in with him. Sudden he turned around, and by the dads and holy cats if there didn't enough trouble bust in that room to stop an eight-day clock. A rat as big as a fair-sized rabbit leaped at Mrs. Dobs and she threw the wood tray into the air, tea and all, and took for the dinin' room. The tray cracked down on my sore ankle and the hot tea lit on Alf and Simp. Bluey lifted a pistol and killed the rat just as Mrs. Dobs and Emmy was lockin' themselves in the kitchen.

Dick threw out his chest. "I got rid of her," he said. "Now you men can talk in peace. I'll go tell her to stay out till we're sure there ain't no more rats around."

"Talk in peace!" Alf growled as the kid left and shut the door. "I got enough tea burns to make me look like I had smallpox!"

The front door opened cautious and Champ Garrison tiptoed in. "Did I hear a shot?" he asked.

"Champ," I said, severe, "why didn't you stay at the line camp where I sent you, till this party was over? Now I've had to think up another plan."

"Somebody had been by and burned all the wood and et up all the beans," Champ said, glum. "And then my gun went off and shot me in the arm and I had to come back."

Bluey had already told me the wound wasn't much, but Champ set down like he was tuckered out.

"Cheer up," Alf told him. "Windy's goin' to get you in jail."

Champ brightened. "I'd be safe there," he said. Then he shook his head. "But Ham Nolen wouldn't let me use his jail."

"You got to tell him you burned Chuck Edwards' barn," I said.

Champ took it like a man. "Fine!" he bellered. "Mrs. Dobs is always talkin' about how I'm an upstandin' man like her first two husbands. I wouldn't be so upstandin' if I burned a barn and went to jail!"

The meetin' busted up then. I was sittin' alone there in the office, and in a little while I heard Champ's sister, Emmy, a-talkin' loud in the dinin' room.

"Champ Garrison, you never stole a herd of cattle and fought a posse!"

"Emmy," came the kittenish voice of Mrs. Dobs, "can't you see he's just teasing us? The sheriff told me Champ was the most upstanding man in this community."

Dick come in soon, bug-eyed over the things Champ was tellin' the ladies, and I explained Champ was just buildin' himself a tough rep.

"Keep your eyes peeled," I warned Dick. "Mrs. Dobs has talked about how mellow folks get on Christmas Eve. She's even baked two kinds of pies!"

"They smell good," Dick whispered. "Punkin an' mince!"

"There you go, gettin' mellow. Don't be took in by a few pies."

"I can eat some without bein' took in, can't I?" the kid asked.

"Yeah," I admitted, "I might even eat some myself, but it won't mellow me none."

"Me neither!" Dick said, stout.

He left then and I shoved my chair toward the dining room. The two ladies held up strings of popcorn they said they'd made to decorate the Christmas tree.

"But we ain't got no Christmas tree," I pointed out.

Mrs. Dobs wagged a finger at me. "While you boys have been too busy to get us one, we girls solved the problem alone. You'll feel like a tiny boy again, William, when you see the Christmas we're giving you." Then she turned to Emmy. "We must hurry with the decorations. Twilight is already setting in and I love that mellow hour. So romantic." She give Champ a buck-toothed smile. "Homey, isn't it, with us girls stringing popcorn and roast turkey a-smelling from the oven?"

Just then there was a rap on the kitchen door fit to wake the dead, and Ham Nolen and a strange sheriff shoved their way in. The other sheriff was Handlebar Higgens from down Alkali way, and a tough hairpin when he wanted to be.

"Seen anything of a bank robber with a bullet wound?" Sheriff Nolen asked, just like Emmy wasn't sweepin' the snow from around his feet.

Mrs. Dobs' eyes got wide when she heard how a robber had stold five hundred dollars from the Rimrock bank, and Emmy got so excited she just let the snow melt on the floor. Dick came in breathless to listen, his eyes sharp as tacks.

"And the robber got away with my horse!" Handlebar snarled.

He had been on his way home from trailin' a killer into Idaho, and his horse had been tied in front of the harness shop. The robber had grabbed Handlebar's horse when Ham got the lead flyin' too thick for him to get his own.

"Now I got to help Ham get his robber in order to get my horse," Handlebar said, plenty ugly.

"I don't need help," Ham told him. "I'll send your horse home to you when I get him."

"I ain't budgin' an inch on this piece of crowbait you loaned me," ol' Handlebar declared.

Champ Garrison had been signalin' me to hurry up and get him arrested, so I cleared my throat. I didn't like rushin' things for fear of gettin' Ham suspicious, but I could see Champ was goin' to start confessin' burnin' the barn in a minute, so I took the bull by the horns.

"Ham," I said, long-faced, "I'm sorry about Edwards gettin' his barn burned—"

"I got more to worry about then that!" Ham snapped.

"Yeah, we tracked that desperate bank robber to within a mile of this ranch," Handlebar put in. "He's close, depend on that!"

The women clucked over a desperate man bein' so close, but I

started again about the barn burnin'. "I know who done it," I said, "but I can't understand what made him."

"I can!" Ham stated, flat. "He's full of such tricks!"

"What?" roared Champ, comin' out of his chair.

Ham took time off from his thinkin' to look surprised. "You ain't stickin' up for Lew Springer, are you?" he asked Champ. "I found his tracks near the barn and when I cracked down he confessed."

Champ sunk back in his chair, his chin fallin' into his shirt neck. I could see he'd suffered a terrible blow. I wasn't too cheerful myself, with Christmas Eve a-settin' in 'as you might say, and the preacher on his way.

Ham sniffed toward the kitchen. "We might eat a bite," he said, "if there was anything ready."

Both Emmy and Mrs. Dobs swung their hips toward the kitchen, and began to talk about whether they dared cut into the turkey yet, and whether the pies had cooled enough to eat.

Sudden there came yells from the pantry. *"Thieves!"* yelled both of them ladies. *"Robbers!"* They came divin' back to the dinin' room yellin' and wavin' their hands.

"The bank robber!" Mrs. Dobs panted.

Ham and Handlebar was movin' for the kitchen door.

"Which way did he go?" Ham asked the ladies.

They waved their arms in all four directions, but seemed to point most general toward the pantry window. Out the door went the two laws, and Champ grabbed his rifle and follered. I got my chair to the back step, but there the snow stopped me. Dick come a-tearin' out with his .22 as ready as two rabbits, but I made him stay on the porch with me and the ladies.

Ham and Handlebar started to circle for the thicket on the crick below the pantry window, and Ham yelled for the robber to give himself up. Bluey Beck had arrived by now and was crowdin' Ham's heels, which was nice for Ham, Bluey bein' the Bar H gunny. Alf and Simp came a-chargin' up soon and when I told them the lay, they decided to get to the upper end in case the robber tried to escape that way. There not bein' any shelter for them to get behind, they started to belly-crawl and was shovelin' them a little ditch as they went in the snow.

It was a half-hour 'fore Ham and Handlebar and Bluey closed in on the thicket and found it empty. Ham came back a-shakin' his head. It was clear country all about that thicket and how the thief had got away was a mystery.

"Which way was the man runnin' when you saw him?" Ham asked the ladies.

"We didn't see him," they both said, and kept right on talkin'. They said they'd set out six pies, three mince and three punkin, on the pantry window to cool. Now the pies was gone! They knew it was the desperate bank robber.

Dick give me a poke in the ribs

and whispered in my ear: "I stold the pies!"

"*You!*" I choked.

"Yeah, I got to thinkin' they might make the men too mellow, so I slipped up and got them."

"Ham's gone to look for tracks," I said, uneasy.

"He won't find none. I laid boards down from the trail to the window, and walked on them."

Ham came back with his eyes squinted up too tight to suit me, and Handlebar Higgens was a-chewin' on one of his mustaches. "Don't say nothin'," I warned Dick. "Ham and Handlebar has a lot on their minds and wouldn't want to be bothered with the pies."

The kid must've done a good job at coverin' his tracks, for everybody decided it was the robber stold the pies, and that he'd done it in time to get clean away 'fore they was missed. Alf got down his shotgun and Simp whetted his jackknife, 'cause they was both fond of pie.

The ladies said supper would be ready purty soon, so the sheriffs decided to wait for the regular meal instead of grabbin' a snack. The robber was already too far gone for a hot chase, and another hour wouldn't cut much ice. Simp wells hustled to the barn to water the horses 'fore dark and in a jiffy he was back with his tongue hangin' out from pantin'.

"What kind of a horse did you lose?" he asked Handlebar Higgens.

"Brown with a snip nose and two white front socks!" ol' Handlebar bellered.

"He's in our box stall!" Simp announced.

That was near the jolt that took the rag off the bush. That robber's stole horse in our box stall! Nobody would believe it 'til they'd looked, which they all did, trampin' on heels and toes to get out the door. I shoved my chair out on the porch and the ladies came and waited with me. Everybody was solemn as they came back and now ol' Handlebar was chewin' on both his mustaches. Ham was a-squintin' and a-shovin' out his jaw and a-fingerin' his six-gun. He said that robber had beat them to the ranch quite a stretch, due to him and Handlebar havin' to stop often to track. The only thing that pleased him was that the saddle, which had been hung on a peg in the stall, had blood on it.

"You can see I got him!" he said to Handlebar.

"You didn't get him soon enough to stop him from stealin' my horse," Handlebar came back. Then he looked everybody over slow. "Can you all account for your time last night and today?" he asks.

Champ bellered at him plenty loud that none of his men done that bank robbin', and that the thief had just hid his horse here for a blind. Handlebar said it was a mighty poor blind since none of our Bar H horses was missin', and the thief had left himself afoot. Everybody argued with ol' Handlebar who was gettin' hotter under the collar every minute, but our own sheriff didn't join in. When Handlebar finally said he was stayin' right on the ranch the rest of

the night, or 'til he found how his horse got in our box stall, Ham said he guessed he'd stay, too. The way he said it without lookin' at nobody, made me bust out in goose pimples.

After supper was over and the ladies had washed the dishes, Mrs. Dobs tittered at us, standin' in the office door. "Your Christmas is waiting," she said. "Come and see what a beautiful tree busy hands have made for you!"

I guess we was all bug-eyed when we saw what them busy hands had done. They'd opened Champ's old iron safe and filled the inside with boxes all done up in ribbons, and had strung popcorn over the whole layout.

Champ let out a roar. "Who opened my safe?"

"Remember this morning when I asked you for the combination to get some of my things out?" Emmy asked, pleased. "That was just a blind to get the key and fix you boys this tree!"

Handlebar's head was a-wabblin' on his long neck. "Don't you ever keep valuables in that safe?" he asked Champ.

"The hundred dollars I owe Bear-oil Billy Collins for that horse I bought is in there," Alf said. "And Bluey's poker winnin's for the whole winter."

We set around and waited for the preacher and his wife to come, which wasn't long. Mrs. Dobs said she bet one of the doodied-up packages was for me, 'cause a little bird had told her Santa was goin' to remember me.

The preacher and his wife came, a little while later. After he'd got out of his overcoat and mittens and earmuffs and rubbers, the preacher shook hands with Champ and told him he sure knew a good thing when he saw one. Mrs. Dobs snickered and flounced her hips.

There come another knock on the door and when Simp opened it, in walked Gumboil Georges and two of his men, one bein' Bearoil Billy Collins who had stopped by to get his hundred dollars from Alf.

"I'm goin' on a high lonesome," he explained, winkin'.

Gumboil Georges and Champ Garrison was old friends, and Gumboil was purty glum at seein' the preacher in his marryin' clothes. Alf pointed to the safe and told Bearoil that his hundred dollars was in at the back of them fancy packages some'er's and would he set down and wait 'til Santy had give them out to us good little boys. Bearoil was deep impressed with how the safe looked and said he'd wait.

I saw the two ladies leadin' Champ from the room, one holdin' each of his arms, and he looked at me plumb scared. Dick whispered that they was takin' Champ off to dress him up for Santy.

"They had me get that old red coat I used for a bed for my pet squirrels," he said, "and I unraveled some rope for whiskers, and I got some clean gunny sacks for Champ to pack and they're goin' to ring sleigh bells outside so's we'll all think he just come from the north pole and—"

I stopped him 'fore he busted a blood vessel. "What'd you hunt that coat out of the attic for?" I asked, sharp. "Have you forgot you're helpin' Champ, not Mrs. Dobs and Emmy?"

He answered out of the corner of his mouth as the preacher come over to ask about my sprained ankle. "I'm helpin' Champ! Wait and see!"

"Are you having a chill, Windy?" the preacher asked.

"Nope," I answered and settled my nerves by clampin' my jaws.

As soon as the preacher drifted on, Bluey Beck set down beside me. "Have you got a plan?" he asked, worried. "Did they just take Champ away to get him into his weddin' clothes?"

"He's bein' Santy," I said. "Be ready to act when I signal you."

"*Santy!*" Bluey whispered, and was so took up by that idea he didn't ask no more 'til Emmy come up and it was too late. I was glad to get out of talkin', for I needed the time to think, and I knew Bluey wouldn't be for nothin' Dick thought up after the rat and hot tea. I was worried, too, but the kid had gone to help the ladies and there was no chance to find out what he'd planned.

When some sleigh bells started to jingle outside, Alf jumped up and started for the door, thinkin' we had more company. Mrs. Dobs and Emmy was back now and they shook fingers at Alf and told him he mustn't peek or Santa might sail right on by the Bar H. Alf set down kerplunk. The door opened and in came Champ in the red coat and rope whiskers.

Mrs. Dobs led him to the tree, which was the old iron safe, and Dick come bouncin' in to help hand out the doodied-up packages. Seemed he was to do all the footwork, and Santy just call off the names.

I got a pair of socks three sizes too small and Alf got some purty smellin' soap and Simp got writin' paper with a blue edge. Dick got a book of poems and mittens, but he kept lookin' toward the corner at the new bridle me and Bluey had give him. Santy was hurryin' and didn't seem to be havin' a very good time. Gumboil Georges got the idea of havin' Santy give Bearoil his money like it was a Christmas present, and he slapped his leg and laughed as he yelled at Champ.

Time was a-slippin' like greased lightnin', and still I didn't see no way to stop that weddin'. I never thought faster nor harder in my life, but I still hadn't struck pay dirt when I noticed a commotion at the safe. Santy was havin' trouble findin' the hundred dollars Alf owed Bearoil.

It was Handlebar Higgens that first stood up and said flat that the money had been stold. Ham Nolen stepped up to help with the hunt and Champ tore off his rope whispers so's he could see better. There wasn't no box there like Alf had put the money in, nor there wasn't no tobacco sack there with Bluey's poker winnin' in it. I looked at Bluey to see if he'd noticed this last, and he had.

Champ swung around and bel-

lered at everybody: "Where's that money?"

"Ladies," Ham said to Emmy and Mrs. Dobs, "did you take anything out of the safe when you made it into a Christmas tree?"

They both said they'd put everything onto the bottom shelf, but now there wasn't any money there.

"*The bank robber!*" Mrs. Dobs says, scarin' herself so bad she let out a scream.

"How long has this safe been unlocked?" Ham asked Champ.

Champ looked at his sister, and Emmy said just since they'd hung the popcorn on it. "That pill box you're looking for was there," she said. "I myself put it on the lower shelf!"

"Bluey's poker money is gone, too," Dick put in.

Champ looked sicker than ever. He tore off the red coat and started to jam it in the drawer of his desk when Handlebar leaped at him and snatched the coat.

"What's this in the pocket?" Handlebar yelled, and tarnation and froghair if he didn't pull out the box with the hundred dollars in it!

"Looks like Santa was takin' a present for himself," he said through his nose. "I been hearin' stories about what a heller Champ Garrison was in his younger days—stealin' a whole herd and fightin' off a posse single-handed. Looks like he ain't improved much."

Ham Nolen shoved Handlebar back. "This has gone far enough!" he roared. "Champ didn't steal that hundred dollars. This is my business and I'll run it to suit myself, Handlebar."

"Don't forget that we found my horse in Garrison's stable!" Handlebar snorted.

Ham began to walk toward him, and for a second I thought the two laws was goin' to tangle. Then Handlebar backed to the wall, signifyin' Ham could handle things.

"Champ," Ham said, "what's this about you stealin' a herd of cattle and fightin' off a posse?"

Champ looked around, gazin' the longest at Mrs. Dobs. "It's the helltootin' truth!" he roared.

"Things is goin' good!" Dick whispered to me, and in a flash I saw what the kid had done. He'd hid that money so's Ham would take Champ to jail. I realized we was skatin' on mighty thin ice, but so long as Champ had backed the play, I decided to do the same.

Ham Nolen came up to me and asked in a whisper if Champ had gone crazy.

"These women might have done it," I whispered back. "Search Champ for Bluey's poker winnin's."

Ham Nolen was a hard man to fool. His eyes opened a trace, then squinted for keeps. "Wicks," he said, and he always called me Windy unless things were mighty tight, "don't try none of your schemes to get Champ out of this weddin'. He led the lady to think he'd marry her. Don't monkey with the law to help him break his bargain."

I felt my breath tanglin' with my windpipe, but I never blinked a eye.

"I ain't pullin' no trick," I said. "You better search Champ for the rest of the money."

Ham Nolen toe-stepped back to Champ, which was a warnin' for everyone to go easy. He didn't find the rest of the missin' money, which I thought was queer. I don't recall just how they started to cross the hall to Champ's bedroom, but maybe 'cause old Handlebar Higgens was so set on searchin' the whole place. Us fellers all followed and stood in the hall while Ham and Handlebar done the lookin'.

They picked up a saddle in the corner and shook it, and fished in the pockets of a slicker hangin' on the wall and then went to the mattress. They hadn't searched there long 'til Handlebar Higgens let out a yelp.

"Look at that!" he cried at Ham. "Now what do you say?"

Ham was kneelin' with his back to us, and he rose slow with something in his hand. He walked toward Champ who was standin' in the door, and held it out.

"The five hundred stold from the bank," Ham said grimly.

We had to stretch our necks, but we all saw that sack with "Rimrock Bank" printed on it, and Ham Nolen had a roll of bills in his hand. Champ looked like he'd been hit on the chin with a rock, and his stomach shook some.

"I . . . I don't know how it got there," he said, hoarse.

Ham looked at him with nails in his eyes. "You said you was at a line camp last night," he snapped. "Got any proof of that?"

Champ stood up straight. "I reckon not," he answered.

"I know he was there!" I said. "I sent him there!"

"Wicks," Ham warned, "keep out of this. Champ, did you meet anybody while you was on the road?"

"Nope," answered Champ.

"And your gun went off and wounded you?" Ham continued sternly.

"Yes," Champ said.

Ham took a deep breath, and his hand inched closer to his gun. "I'm arrestin' you for robbin' the Rimrock Bank," he said.

I don't think in my entire life I ever had words knife deeper than them. Ham reached slow into his hip pocket with his left hand and brought out a pair of handcuffs. He gave them a shake and they clanked like ghost chains rattlin' in a graveyard. Bluey slid past me toward ol' Champ, and Alf and Simp was sidin' him.

"Maybe you don't want them iron cuffs, Champ," Bluey said, quiet.

But Champ turned slow to face Bluey. "Thanks, boys," he said, chokin', "but I better let Ham put them on."

Ham Nolen worked fast with the cuffs, for he knew that room wasn't a healthy spot for the law. Us fellers had stood back when Champ asked us to, but the fallin' of a pin could've started smoke to rollin'. Ham pushed Champ out of the door ahead of him and onto the porch, callin' back for Dick to bring a lantern to the barn.

"Dadburn the law and Ham

Nolen!" Gumboil snorted, leadin' his men toward their horses. "I don't believe a dadburn word of nothin'. Windy, if you need me to help hunt down the real bank robber, let me know."

"Yeah," I said, vacantlike, as he rode away.

"The robber planted the horse in our barn to fool the law," I said to Bluey, "and he hid the money under Champ's mattress for the same purpose."

"Uh-huh," Bluey agreed. "But he ain't got nothin' left to show for robbin' the bank."

"That's why I didn't mention that it was all a blind, to Ham," I said, worried. "It don't make sense."

Mrs. Dobs was settin' on the sofa moanin' about how she's thought Champ Garrison was an upright man, and the preacher had Simp Wells bring some water so's if the lady fainted it'd be handy.

Ham and Handlebar, with Champ a-ridin' between them, rode past the house and down the lane to the road. The trot of their horses and the squeak of saddle leather sounded loud in the night. We all of us stood in the door and watched 'til we couldn't see or hear no signs of them, all of us but Mrs. Dobs. She'd gone upstairs to pack her valise because she was leavin' with the preacher and his wife.

"Windy," Champ's sister said to me after Mrs. Dobs had left, "you and all the boys must stand by Champ. Something terrible has happened. He couldn't have done this robbery!"

"Ma'am," I told her, "we'll stand by Champ 'til hell freezes over and skate on the ice."

"That makes me feel better," she said, and went to her bedroom.

Dick was steppin' around lively, and occasional he gave me a nudge. I was too busy thinkin' to bother with him. I was tryin' to figure out who had robbed that bank and hid the money under Champ's mattress. Bluey came and set close beside me.

"Think who and where that robber is," Bluey snapped at me. "Get your brains to foggin' the dust!"

"I know!" Dick said, stepping back important as a game rooster.

"Huh?" I gulped and me and Bluey leaned forward.

"He's back of the horse corral on some blankets," the kid said. "He fell off his horse from loss of blood and I tied him up and then got some blankets so's he wouldn't freeze."

I yanked the kid up close. "Did you put that horse in the barn?" I demanded.

"Yep," he said, proud, "and as I was hangin' up the saddle I found the money and hid it under Champ's mattress so's to be sure and get him arrested." He winked at us. "Then when they found Alf's money in the red coat where I'd hid it, I whispered to Handlebar that likely Bluey's poker money was under the mattress, 'cause Champ hid near everything there. I couldn't get no chance to talk with any of you fellows so I worked it out alone."

Alf and Simp was listenin', too, and at last it sunk in what the kid had done. Bluey tore out to see

about the thief, and Simp and Alf went with him. It wasn't long 'til they was back, I reckon, but it seemed like a year, for I knew if that robber had busted loose we was in a tough spot. Simp and Alf came to the house, but Bluey had saddled up Ranger and was goin' after Champ and the sheriffs.

"He confessed," Alf announced. "He thought Bluey was the law and he never made no effort to fight."

"They was sure suspicious, Handlebar and Ham," said Dick. "You said it would have to be a bonyfide case before Ham would arrest Champ, so I never left a thing out."

"Nope," I agreed. "The only count they're not holdin' Champ on is train robbery." I patted the kid's shoulder. "I can see all my trainin' ain't been wasted."

The two sheriffs and Champ and Bluey came a-booming in the door, and while Ham was purty mad at Dick, you could see he was relieved. After he talked with the robber and realized he was out of the woods complete on the bank robbin' job, he thawed out quite considerable. He said he'd rather do a lot of other things than hunt bank robbers on Christmas Day.

Emmy come out of her bedroom and put cold turkey on the table. She was glad, she said, that Champ had found Isabel Dobs out as a fickle-hearted woman before he had married her. Bluey grabbed Dick by the arm and asked where his poker winnin's was, and the kid dug them out of a drawer in the desk. He had figured the lawman 'u'd search the desk and find them and have that much more against Champ.

Ham looked at the kid as we was finishin' eatin' and said as long as that robber had been so wounded he'd fell off his horse, who could have stold the pies?

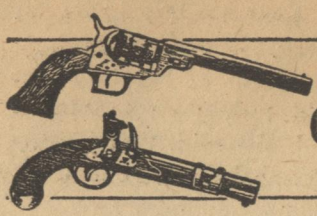
Dick explained how he was afraid they might mellow folks up, so he'd hid them under Simp's bunk. He went and brought them in and Emmy was mighty happy.

"Which will it be, Windy?" she asked. "Pumpkin or mince?"

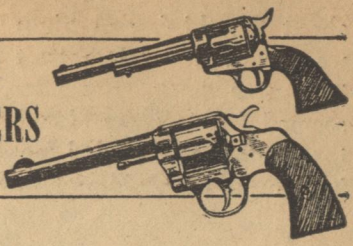
"Both," I says.

Sheriff Nolen broke down and really smiled. "Me, too, Emmy," he said, and sudden it seemed like Christmas.

THE END



GUNS AND GUNNERS



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

WITH all of this newspaper praise of the Army's Garand semiautomatic rifle, one hears little about that old friend of millions, the famous "Springfield" it replaced. But that rifle is not dead. It is still being manufactured; it is still in active military service; it is still widely used by American sportsmen.

The famous Springfield has an interesting history. It was made, during its official life, *only* at the United States Armory at Springfield, Massachusetts, and at Rock Island Arsenal, Illinois. Although called the "Springfield," the official name is "United States Magazine Rifle, Caliber .30, Model 1903, for Model 1906 Ammunition."

Let's look at its birth.

In 1892 the Army adopted a new gun—the Krag. This was unique in several ways. It was the Army's *first* small-bore rifle. It was a .30-caliber bolt-action repeater as compared with the .45-70 single-shot which it replaced.

It was the Army's *first* official repeating rifle, although during the Civil War early repeaters such as the Henry, Spencer, and many others had been used, along with every type of gun, breech and muzzle loader, the government could gather in.

The Krag was also the Army's *first* smokeless-powder gun. Prior to this we had used nothing but black powder.

The Krag went through several improvements and model numbers until the end of the Spanish-American War. We wanted a better and more powerful gun. The Krag had pointed the way.

In 1901 the Springfield rifle was born. Samples were made that year and tested. It was a modification of the German Mauser, and until we entered the war with Germany in 1917, Uncle Sam paid royalties to Germany on every rifle made.

The Krag had a rimmed case. The new Springfield rifle uses a rimless case like the Mauser. But it has the same old round-nose 220-grain Krag bullet. The rifle was officially adopted in 1903, and the ammunition became known as the Model 1903 ammunition. The Krag dropped this bullet out of the muzzle at a velocity of 2,000 feet per second. In the Springfield, the velocity for the same bullet was 2,300. But with the

powders then available, barrel life was very short—less than 1,000 rounds. So velocity was cut to 2,000 feet per second—no improvement on the Krag.

Meanwhile Germany had adopted their *spitz* bullet. Translated, that word means "pointed." We also developed a pointed bullet, and thus pointed bullets became known as "spitzers."

The new ammunition used the old Model 1903 cartridge case, but the long neck holding the 220-grain bullet was trimmed off about 1/10th inch. It was not needed for the shorter 150-grain pointed bullet. Velocity was 2,700 feet per second, a great improvement. The cartridge became known as the Model 1906.

While this would shoot in the old Model 1903 chambers for the longer-necked cartridge, all guns were called in and Springfield Armory cut 1/10th inch from the breech of the barrels and rechambered them.

Thus was the famous Springfield born.

Naturally this gun did not remain the same throughout its years of manufacture. New steels, improved methods, all went into making it the finest and most accurate military rifle in the world. Original receivers were case-hardened for strength. This made them brittle, but few ever blew up in service. The First World War was fought with these old receivers.

Thousands of questions reach gun editors demanding to know the meaning of a "star-gauged Springfield." Simple. The Army wanted to pick super-quality barrels for match shooting, sniping, et cetera. A special micrometer gauge with little fingers shaped like a star was designed *only* for the Springfield. With it the land and groove diameter is measured. A star-gauged barrel is one that has been measured every inch of the bore from muzzle to breech and the figures must not vary more than one ten-thousandth of an inch. A card, bearing these measurements, is attached to the gun if it passes, and a small asterisk (*) is stamped on the muzzle for identification.

It is doubtful if any military rifle has been custom-converted into a sporter in such quantities as the Springfield. The first one was made in 1910 by Louis Wundhammer, noted gunsmith of Los Angeles, for Stewart Edward White, international big-game hunter, explorer, and writer. Since then many thousands have been converted through custom stocks, sporting sights and minor refinements.

After this war, with the Springfield again in production by private makers now building them for the military, you'll see the famous Springfield available as a sporter at ordinary commercial rifle prices. A grand gun!

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. He will continue to answer all letters from readers. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, 11, 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

To the early frontiersmen some sort of concentrated food was often a necessity. These pioneers needed something that could be easily carried with them when they were traveling light. Besides being "packable" the food had to be sustaining so that men could live on it, perhaps for long periods of time when they were away from their base camp and regular supplies.

As a rule this meant pinole or jerky. Sometimes both. Pinole, an old favorite in the Southwest and known to the Indians for centuries, is simply Indian corn parched to a light brown and ground into coarse meal.

Jerky is merely raw, lean meat strips sun- or fire-dried to remove the moisture. It is much lighter than the original meat, just as nutritious, and it keeps for a long time in most climates.

In Alaska and the Far North trappers, prospectors and explorers frequently use quantities of pemmican, a fat-filled concentrated food that supplies essential body heat as well as nourishment for the person in an arctic climate. It keeps well in the North, but would spoil rather quickly farther south.

The original "Hudson Bay" pemmican was prepared from buffalo meat. It can be made from beef, or in the woods from deer, caribou or any meat that is available. The base of pemmican is jerky. The meat strips must first be dried until they are hard and brittle. They are then ground into a meat "flour." Meantime the fat and marrow from the animal—the more marrow that can be extracted from the bones the richer the pemmican—are melted down and mixed when warm with the powdered dried meat to form a gooey paste. This paste is then poured or stuffed into cloth bags and the whole allowed to cool and harden.

A fair-sized chunk of pemmican scooped up in one hand will make a meal for two men. If you have flour along you can make a thick pemmican soup with it, guaranteed to stick to a man's ribs till next meal time. Pemmican can also be fried when it is mixed with a little flour and water.

Pinole, jerky and pemmican have been the standard concentrated foods of the outdoorsman for generations. They still stand up as far as nutritive value and ease of transportation are

concerned. But tomorrow's campers, the men, yes, and the women, too, who will hit the back country and the far places in future, have something new in the way of concentrated food and emergency rations to look forward to—the famous newly developed Army K Ration, which provides a healthful, tasty and varied menu in compact form.

G. C., writing from Atlanta, Georgia, says he is interested in all sorts of concentrated food items for campers and others who plan to be out on their own in real virgin wilderness territory. "—and not always," his letter adds, "within reach of camp. Can you list some of the standard concentrated foods? What is the Army K Ration?"

Up until recently, G. C., not much information was given out about the Army K Ration. Not so much because it was a military secret as because it was still being experimented with. The ration was developed during the present war to fill certain specific emergency food needs. The Army wanted something for paratroopers, desert fighters, the mountain corps and the members of the mechanized units to have along with them when they were out on missions ahead of the field kitchens. The ration serves other important uses as well.

A lot of work by practical Army men and food experts in the Quartermaster Corps went into the preparation of this highly important ration before its final make-up was decided on. Now as the Army furnishes it, and after the war it will probably be available in similar form to campers, hunters and outdoorsmen in general, a day's meals—consisting of three separate units, breakfast, dinner and supper—come in three fiber containers each about seven by three and a half by one and a half inches. The packets, which together weigh roughly two pounds, are wax-treated to keep out moisture and dampness.

The breakfast unit might contain portions of a meat loaf, a nutritious "defense" biscuit, coffee powder—soluble—malted milk, sugar, and chewing gum. The dinner unit might be similar, barring the coffee and with a larger portion of a different meat product. The supper unit may provide lemonade powder and a chocolate bar along with a smaller amount of meat. "Defense" biscuit, a specially compounded hard cracker, and chewing gum are standard items in each meal unit.

The exact contents of the separate units are varied to provide a menu that does away with the tiring sameness of the older concentrated foods like pinole and pemmican. Each meal in the K Ration contains a measured and sufficient amount of calories in the different food forms, fats, proteins and carbohydrates.

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. 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, 11, N. Y.

MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

METAL mining in the East is booming. Deep in the Adirondacks, in the shadow of some of the highest mountain peaks in New York, scenes are being reproduced reminiscent of some of the mining rushes in the West. But there is this difference. The Adirondack boom has modern trimmings.

Tractors and bulldozers have been pushing new paths through the dense woods. Old log bridges across mountain streams have given way to solid steel and concrete structures that can withstand the day-and-night pounding of heavy, ore-laden trucks.

Today, in war time, metal needs are a vital consideration. The objective of the present mining activity in upper New York is neither gold nor silver. What are being mined are tons of ore containing iron, titanium and some vanadium.

The Adirondacks project is a large-scale production proposition. Tremendous tonnages of the ore are handled daily. The metals are there in huge quantities. Virtually a "mountain of ore" has been uncovered at Sanford Hill. The iron is magnetite, high-grade. Approximately two thousand tons of it will yield one thousand tons of iron.

Perhaps even more important are the titanium deposits associated with the iron. The ore of the latter is ilmenite, a hard, iron-black combination of iron and titanium oxide, one of the two minerals that can be used as a commercial source of titanium. The other commercial ore of titanium is reddish-brown rutile, a mineral that looks much like cassiterite, the ore of tin, and sometimes because of its glassy appearance resembles dull, unpolished dark garnet.

Before the present war the United States imported most of its titanium ores, ilmenite from India and rutile from Australia. Domestic production never met our needs. Titanium, or rather titanium oxide, the latter the form in which the metal is most commonly used, is classed as a "minor" metal. Compared to such metals as iron and copper, lead and zinc, actual tonnage requirements each year are small. But the amount that is needed is needed badly.

Today, thanks largely to the new development in the Adirondacks, the United States has attained, or at least is well on its way to attaining, complete self-sufficiency in the matter of domestically mined and minable ti-

tanium ore. It just happened that this rich deposit was situated in the East instead of in one of the mineralized mining districts out West.

T. N., who wrote from Paducah, Kentucky, recently, seems to be skeptical regarding the possibility of any *new* metal mining enterprise of any real scope being opened up in the East at this late date. "I have heard," his letter declared, "that some big mining operations for titanium were being carried on in the Adirondacks region in New York. Is it true? It seems hardly possible that new metal deposits of importance could be discovered in the East after all these years."

As far as the big mining operations are concerned, T. N., what you have heard is plenty true. There are probably fifteen million tons of ore, according to estimate, in the deposit near Tahawus now being opened up by open-pit, bench-mining methods. Even handling the stuff at the planned rate of *four thousand tons a day* it will be years before the ore bed is worked out.

The deposit was not, however, a new discovery, though its development and exploitation are among the most recent important events in the annals of mining in the United States. The existence of iron and titanium ore in this particular part of the Adirondacks was known and reported on as far back as 1826.

Believe it or not, the chief reason the deposit was not opened up before has been because of the inaccessability of the region. Yet it lies right in the heart of New York State, just about a hundred miles from Albany, the State capital. The mountain wilderness in which the deposit is situated is still virtually as primitive as it was in 1609, when Hendrick Hudson first sailed up the river that now bears his name.

In 1826 an attempt was made to mine the deposit. Another try was made some twenty-five years later, and a third in 1912. Each time transportation difficulties encountered in getting machinery in and the ore out proved insurmountable.

Titanium itself is used in a few special steel alloys. Titanium oxide is utilized as a pigment base in paints. The navy uses a great deal of titanium oxide paint, and it is also used for special aircraft camouflage lacquers. Military requirements are absorbing virtually all of the material at present.

Some quantities of titanium ores, both ilmenite and rutile, have been mined recently in Arkansas, Florida and Virginia. A new deposit was being opened up a short time ago near Elma, out in Washington. Production figures are at present not available. But the really important project right now is the mining enterprise in the Adirondacks.

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, 11, 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; please keep them as brief as possible.

GUN-SMOKE BRAND

by William Colt MacDonald

PART II

How will the Three Mesquiteers deal with a badge toter who plays the game of bushwhacking gun-slingers?

The Story So Far:

Riding into the town of Blue Cloud, the Three Mesquiteers, Tucson Smith, Lullaby Joslin and Stony Brooke, become involved in a strange mystery. As Tucson stops near the jail to remove a stone from his horse's hoof, a prisoner throws a sack of tobacco out the cell window. It hits Tucson in the face and, opening it, he finds a bill of sale for the Horseshoe N Ranch, bearing his name as buyer. The deputy sheriff, Ben Canfield, emerges from the jail and attempts to force Tucson to give up the paper, but Tucson refuses to part with it. Questioning the deputy, Tucson learns that the prisoner who threw out the tobacco sack is suspected of murdering the owner of the Horseshoe N, a man named Clem Norton. His suspicions aroused, Tucson demands to be allowed to see the prisoner, and Canfield reluctantly agrees.

VI

TUCSON and his pards waited, after Ben Canfield had departed through the doorway in the back wall of his office. There was a narrow corridor out there, with four cells on each

side. A cell door clanged shut, after a time; then Tucson looked up to see Red Sherry entering the office. High on the right side of Sherry's forehead was a long, jagged cut, now black with dried blood. An ugly bruise marred one cheekbone.

Canfield ushered the young fellow into the room. "Here you are, gentlemen. Sherry will tell you he's been well treated."

"The devil he will!" Sherry laughed harshly. He bent his keen gaze on Tucson. "I was listening right close a spell back, when you and Canfield's skunk friends were having that little ruckus outside. Did I understand you to say your name is Tucson Smith."

Tucson nodded. "These are my pals, Lullaby Joslin and Stony Brooke. We own the 3 Bar O, over near Los Potros."

"This," Sherry said, "is plumb elegant." He grinned widely. "Maybe I'm just lucky— Oh, yeah, my name's Sherry. My friends call me Red."

"I wonder why," Lullaby drawled, eying Sherry's brick-colored thatch.

"That's not the name signed to a paper I was reading a while back," Tucson smiled. "Howsomever, we'll let that pass. Right now we're craving to hear why you're in jail, accused of murder."

Canfield cut in: "I told you about that. There's no reason why Sherry should—"

"I want to hear Sherry's side," Tucson said coldly.

"You'll get it," the readhead said promptly, "but first, could I borrow the makin's? I'm plumb parched for a drag."

Tucson extended a sack of Durham and papers. "That's your own tobacco, Sherry."

Sherry said thanks and started to manufacture a cigarette.

Canfield started toward the door. "You gentlemen just make yourself to home. I've got some business outside—"

"You'll stay here, Canfield," Tucson said sternly. "I don't know what you intend doing, but you'd better stick around. I've a hunch I'm going to hear a different story than you told me. "Besides"—smiling thinly—"you wouldn't want to go 'way and leave your prisoner with strangers, would you?"

"Well," Canfield said nervously, "I hadn't thought of that." He slumped back to a seat on his desk.

Red Sherry laughed softly, scratched a match and inhaled deeply, as he lounged back against the wall. "Looks like you hombres have the Indian sign on one Deputy Canfield," he observed.

"We're waiting for you to start talking," Stony hinted.

"Exactly." Sherry nodded. "Let me see, I reckon I'd better go back to yesterday noon. I was passing through here on my way farther west. I hoped to find a job with . . . well, we'll let that pass for now. Enough to say I was nearly flat broke. I had three dollars and some odd change. I dropped off to get a bite to eat, then stepped into the Sunfisher Bar for a drink. The Sunfisher's just a step from here.

Maybe you noticed it. There's a picture of a cowhand bustin' a bronc painted on the false front, over the door."

"I had a drink there, myself," Stony put in, "when we first hit town. I don't know about the liquor, but the beer was flatter'n a stale *tortilla*."

"The liquor is pretty raw." Sherry smiled. "Anyway, just as I was going out, a couple of hombres—they were named Shorty and Frank Something-or-other—asked if I didn't want to play a little poker. Well, I didn't have much to lose, and I thought I might pick up a few dollars. I was wrong. They cleaned me out in two hands."

"That the same two we had the ruckus with a spell ago?" asked Lullaby.

"I think so," Sherry said, "though I couldn't see very well from my cell window. Anyway, when my part in the game was finished, I climbed back in my saddle and headed on. Last night I made a dry camp 'bout eighteen or twenty miles west of here. I was dang nigh asleep, when two masked hombres—and I could swear they were Shorty and Frank—snuck up and threw guns on me—"

"It couldn't have been Shorty Davitt and Frank Ettinger," Canfield interrupted. "They're not crooks. You're mistaken, Sherry."

"Look, Canfield"—Lullaby sounded annoyed—"will you keep your big gab out of this? We're listening to Sherry, now. You had your say."

The lawman fell silent, though his eyes gleamed balefully at his prisoner.

"The two masked hombres offered me twenty dollars to sign as a witness to a property deal," Sherry continued. "I wasn't keen on doing it, but their guns persuaded me otherwise. I was blindfolded and taken to a shack some place—"

"You don't know exactly where?" Tucson asked.

Sherry shook his head. "I haven't the least idea, but I do know it was west and south from where I'd been camped."

"It could be Wagon Springs," suggested Lullaby.

"I'd know the place if I saw it again, I think. I had a short look when I was leaving," Sherry said.

"You haven't told us what led up to said departure," Tucson urged.

From that point on, Sherry told what had happened to him the previous night, ending up: "I knew dang well that girl didn't want to sign that bill of sale. They'd taken my gun, or I might have acted differently. As it was, there was nothing for me to do but make a run for it, which same I did—"

Canfield snorted. "I've never heard such a pack of lies. Why he had his gun on when I found him—"

Stony drew the six-shooter from his holster. "One more interruption out of you, Canfield, and I'll bend this barrel over your cranium! Go on, Sherry, what happened to the girl, this Molly Norton, you mentioned."

"I don't know for sure." Sherry frowned. "I heard a horse going

hard in the other direction. I think it was the girl. Anyway, I hope so. But I couldn't waste time to see. All I wanted to do was make a getaway with that bill of sale. I figured I could return it to her later. Not having a gun put me in a fix. My pony had traveled a lot that day. I was afraid he'd tucker out and I'd be caught. I didn't have time to stop and hide that paper, any place, so I did the next best thing. I folded it small and stuck it in my Durham sack, under the tobacco, hoping if I was caught, it wouldn't be found."

Tucson smiled. "That must have been a job, riding the way you were. Managing a running bronc and fumbling with that paper—"

"I made out." Sherry grinned. "And just in time. Next thing I knew a bullet had hit my horse and I went flying over its head. My own head hit on something and I went out cold—"

"There's a lie right there," Canfield said angrily, then paused at the menacing look in Stony's eyes.

"How you figuring that's a lie, Canfield?" Tucson questioned.

"Sherry's horse was right along side him, out front, when I found him," Canfield replied.

"Where's this horse now?" Tucson asked. "We'll see what Sherry has to say about it."

"The horse and rig is at the livery. Naturally," the deputy sneered, "after a tale like this, Sherry will deny it's his horse."

"It'd be easy enough to get another horse if this took place at Wagon Springs—" Lullaby pointed out.

"Blast it!" Canfield protested. "You talk like you believed Sherry—rather than me, a duly authorized officer of the law."

"What do you think, feller?" Stony chuckled.

"Go on, Sherry," Tucson said.

"I don't know how long I was unconscious," Sherry continued. "When I came to, I found myself tied across a horse's back. I was right groggy, but I felt my ropes being tightened. I tried to talk, but somebody hit me on the head and I passed out again. When next I came to, I was in a cell out back. The deputy, here, and that other hombre named Limpy started accusing me of the murder of some man named Norton—whether he's a relative of Molly Norton, I don't know. Naturally, I denied the charge. But Limpy and Canfield told me if I'd give up that bill of sale, they'd drop the murder charge. Otherwise they were going to take me to the jail in Chancellor. I told 'em I didn't know anything about a bill of sale. They got pretty mad—"

"By Jehoshaphat!" Canfield jumped from the desk, his face crimson. "This is the damnedest bunch of lies I've ever listened to in all my born—"

"You don't have to listen, you fat slug," Stony snapped, waving his gun barrel menacingly. Instantly, Canfield closed his mouth and relaxed, the color swiftly vanishing from his features.

"After a time they left me alone," Sherry went on. "I figured they'd bring me some dinner, but they didn't. Then, in the afternoon, Limpy and Canfield came back and announced they were going to search me. I didn't put up any argument, until they started to take my sack of Durham. Then I broke loose from 'em and tossed it through the window. What I was trying to do was reach out and toss it atop the building, figuring maybe I could get it later, but that failed. They both jumped me and dragged me back, then Canfield went tearing outside. I give 'em a good fight for a couple of minutes first, though. Limpy started after Canfield, but Canfield told him to come back and watch me. While Limpy was gone, I looked through the window and saw what was happening. Then he and I mixed it some more, when he returned. I got in a couple of punches, but he slammed me over the head with his gun. I wasn't much good for a few minutes. And . . . and . . . well, I guess you know the story from there on."

Tucson looked at Canfield. "You've been r'aring to talk, Canfield. Now what you got to say for yourself?"

"Just what I've been trying to say all along," Canfield growled. "That yarn's made up out of whole cloth. It's the damnedest passel of lies I ever heard. Limpy knows what happened here. He'll back me up—"

"He didn't seem in a hurry to back you when he pulled out of town in such a rush. Sure, he'd tell the same story as you. I'd expect that of a couple of crooks."

"It's one man's word against two," Canfield said boldly.

"Yeah, it is," Tucson conceded. "You say you're holding Sherry for murder. Have you made the proper charges to the justice of the peace, here? Reported the matter to anybody?"

"We-ell"—Canfield flushed—"I've been so busy I haven't had time yet."

"You claim to have the murderer of Clem Norton, yet you haven't had time to do anything about it." Tucson sounded skeptical. "Either Sherry is guilty and should be brought before the J. P., bail set if necessary, and a time for his trial set, or he isn't guilty. Now which is it, Canfield?"

"I tell you he's a suspect," Canfield hesitated a moment, then added: "I aim to take him to Chancellor."

"It's you who's the liar, Canfield," Tucson said sternly. "This whole thing is an attempt to frame Sherry. You know he had that paper, but you couldn't find it. So you tried to make a deal with him: if he'd give the paper to you, you'd drop the murder charge. Isn't that right?"

"Now, look, Mr. Smith—" Canfield began.

"Don't try any more lies, Canfield," Tucson said sternly. "Either you're going through with this in a proper legal way, and bring Sherry to trial, or you're going to let him loose."

"I can't see, Mr. Smith," Canfield protested, "why this is any of your business."

"I'm making it my business," Tucson replied with grim humor. "First because I don't like frame-ups. Second, Sherry and I both have the same color hair. Us redheads have got to stick together. Now if you want to hold Sherry, that's O. K. with me, but it's going to be done legally. I aim to go his bail. I'm also sticking with him through the trial—"

"That's your business if you like," Canfield said sullenly.

"—and I'm going to get in touch with the governor and ask for an investigation down here—"

"The governor!" Canfield gasped.

"I don't know of a better man to appeal to for help in this State," Tucson said flatly.

"But . . . but—look here, Mr. Smith," Canfield stammered, "that won't be necessary. No use bothering the governor with these petty matters."

"Do you call murder a petty matter?" Tucson asked sternly.

"No, but . . . but I might have been hasty in my suspicions. I don't want to make trouble for anybody needlessly. Suppose we just drop the matter for the time being."

"Nothing doing," Sherry put in, though the corners of his mouth twitched. "I insist on having a hearing at once, Canfield. You accused me of murder. I want my name cleared. I'm perfectly willing to stay in your cell while you take the proper steps, and Mr. Smith follows the course he mentioned. That way, we'll have everything legal and aboveboard."

"No, no," Canfield protested hastily, perspiration streaming down his face. "Now that I think things over, perhaps I was mistaken."

Tucson chuckled inwardly. "But certainly you had some right for your suspicions, Canfield. After all, you did find Norton's wallet in Sherry's pocket."

"Yeah, that . . . that's something that can't be overlooked, I suppose," Canfield gulped. He had a sudden idea. "Of course, it wasn't really me that found that wallet. It was Limpy. I couldn't swear *I* found it."

"What? You couldn't?" Tucson looked amazed. "Well, Canfield, you have practically no evidence at all, have you? Do you suppose Limpy would swear to finding the wallet?"

Canfield squirmed. "I really couldn't say."

"Then you haven't one witness you can count on, have you?" Tucson pursued.

"I . . . I reckon not," Canfield confessed weakly.

"And yet," Tucson's words cracked like rifle shots, "you've held Red Sherry in a cell for a number of hours. Not only that, you've refused to feed him and you've had him beaten. And you haven't any evidence against him whatever."

"He . . . he was drunk when I found him," Canfield said weakly. "Plumb passed out of the picture—"

"That's a lie," Sherry said quickly. "I haven't had a drink since yesterday noontime."

"Well, I took it for granted you

were drunk," Canfield quavered. "I guess I was mistaken."

Tucson turned to the prisoner. "Sherry, it looks to me as though you have a mighty good case against the State. You can sue for false imprisonment and make yourself some money. I'll be glad to act as your witness and testify as to what Canfield's just admitted, that he didn't have a shred of evidence to hold you on."

"Cowboy, that sure sounds good to me," Sherry grinned.

"Of course," Lullaby said gravely, "Deputy Canfield will want to do this thing legal. He can make a statement before the J. P. then ask for proper release papers and—"

"Oh-h-h," Canfield groaned, as though in great pain. He had turned a sickly green color. "Can't we just let—"

"Look at Canfield!" Stony sounded alarmed. "He looks like he's having a severe bilious attack. Maybe we'd better get a doctor."

"That's right," Canfield gasped. "I don't feel well. Just go 'way and leave me alone."

"You don't want to hold Sherry any longer?" Tucson asked.

"No, no, get out. It's all a mistake. Just go away—out o' my office. We can talk this over . . . another time when I feel better."

"Well, if you insist," Tucson smiled grimly. "I wouldn't want to interfere with the law, you know. But if you feel Sherry should be released, get his things together and we'll be on our way."

Half staggering, Canfield got Sherry's sombrero and gun. "Your horse and blankets are at the Otero Livery Stable," he choked. "Sorry this happened. All a mistake."

Scarcely able to restrain their laughter, Tucson and his pards escorted Red Sherry from the deputy's office, hearing, as they departed, Canfield's long-drawn sigh of relief.

They walked a few paces in silence, then Sherry could hold in no longer, "Gosh, Mr. Smith"—wringing Tucson's hand—"you're great. You sure got me out of a tight!"

"Forget the 'mister,'" Tucson said. "I'm aiming to call you Red. And try shaking Lullaby's and Stony's hands for a spell. I might want to use this dewclaw of mine sometime."

Fervently, Sherry shook hands with the other two, grinning widely the while. "You three certainly made Canfield eat his own words—"

"Eat!" Lullaby said blissfully. "That's the word I was trying to think of. I've been wondering what gave me this hollow feeling. C'mon, let's find some chow."

VII

The four went first to the Otero Livery Stable to take a look at the horse which Canfield said belonged to Sherry. It turned out to be a rawboned dun with spiritless eyes. Tucson, seeing the look on Sherry's face, said: "Not yours, eh, Red?"

"Holy mackerel, no! I had me a *horse*. This crowbait—"

"You say this ain't you bronc?" asked Stan Ramsey, owner of the

livery. Ramsey was a lantern-jawed man, partially bald. "If that's the case, you'd better talk to Deputy Canfield. That's the horse he brought here, said it belonged to Sherry. You're Sherry, eh?"

"I'm Sherry, but that's not my pony."

Ramsay frowned, considered his words. "Well, gents I wouldn't want to be repeated, but I wouldn't trust Ben Canfield as far as I could throw a brick house."

"Everybody in Blue Cloud feel that way about Canfield?" Tucson asked.

"Just about nigh everybody," admitted Ramsay.

"That being the case," Stony said, "I don't know how Canfield ever got elected."

"He wasn't," Ramsay said. "Canfield was appointed by Sheriff Rafe Quinn, almost as soon as Quinn took office, over to the county seat, at Chancellor. It really looks to me like Canfield was run by Santee Lombard—"

"And Lombard and Quinn have some sort of tie-up, I suppose," Lullaby put in. "What kind of an hombre is Lombard?"

"If you stick around, you'll find out," the liveryman replied. "Folks don't like him, but it ain't healthy to talk. Me, I'd just as soon not say anything more on the subject. I got a business to look out for. Wouldn't said as much as I have, only I heard that you fellers sort of took Canfield and three Dollar Sign L hombres down a peg today." He changed the subject abruptly. "Sherry, there's a bedroll was left with this horse. Maybe you'd better take a look at it and see if it's yours." He led the way into his office, near the front entrance of the livery.

The bedroll proved to be Sherry's, all right. "But it's not my horse," he insisted.

"You'd better accept him as yours until you can get another one," Tucson told him. "I don't reckon there'll be any trouble about riding the wrong horse, so long as Ben Canfield swears this dun pony belongs to Sherry. Matter of fact, I don't think that dun would be a bad horse with proper care and feeding. Ramsay, you see he gets a good feed, curry him down; take a look at his hoofs, too. Have any shoe work done that's needed. I hate to see a horse neglected—"

"Look here," Sherry protested. "I've told you I was broke."

"Can't let a horse go to rack and ruin just because you're broke," Tucson smiled. "Forget it, Red. I've got a hunch you'll get a job right soon."

Before they left the livery, Sherry washed the cut on his head. Ramsay, luckily, had a piece of court plaster which he gave the redhead. After Sherry had used the razor from his bedroll, he began to look more presentable.

"Better bring that bedroll along," Tucson said. "We'll see what the local hotel has to offer in the way of rooms." Then to the liveryman: "Ramsay, you'll find three more broncs standing on Holbrook Street, right next to the jail. I'd appreciate

it if you'll send somebody for 'em and see they're fed and watered."

"I'll take care of it, Mr. Smith."

The sun was low on the horizon by the time they left the livery. On the street, once more, Tucson said to Sherry, "Red, how'd you like to take a job with us, on the 3 Bar O?"

"Jiminy!" Sherry grinned with pleasure. "That suits me right down to the ground. "To tell the truth," he confessed, "I was on the way to your place to ask for a job, when I got into that scrape last night."

"Why our place?" Tucson asked.

"Well, that's sort of a long story." Sherry flushed. "You see, I've heard about you three fellers for a long time and I always thought it would be nice working for you, if you'd take me on. Some day I want to own a spread of my own—"

"What cowhand doesn't?" Stony said dryly.

"Well," Sherry continued awkwardly, "a man needs money to buy his own outfit. I heard you fellers paid top wages. I figured I could save more working for you and at the same time learn the right way of doing things. Is it true that the 3 Bar O cuts its hands in on a share of the profits?"

"Correct," Tucson replied.

Sherry shook his head in wonder. "I'm surprised you're not swamped with help."

"It isn't everybody we'll take on, Red," Tucson said.

Sherry colored with pleasure; then, "Thanks," he said appreciatively.

They entered the lobby of the Blue Cloud Hotel to arrange for rooms. Learning that supper was being served, they entered the dining room through a door that opened off the lobby. The four men had scarcely seated themselves, when a voice behind Sherry said calmly: "Mr. Sherry, I believe you have a paper belonging to me."

Sherry glanced around, then leaped to his feet. "Miss Norton!" he exclaimed. "This is luck! Sure, I've got that paper—or rather, Tucson—Mr. Smith—" He broke off and introduced the girl to the three men.

Already favorably impressed, Molly Norton, upon learning who the three were, immediately became friendly. "Why, I've heard my father speak of you men," she said, shaking hands. "No, I don't think he ever met you."

The girl was dressed in some sort of dark woolen dress with white lace at the throat. Tucson and his friends realized she was decidedly pretty.

"Look here, Miss Norton," Tucson invited. "Why don't you eat with us? We've a lot to talk about and you're concerned in the business. There're a few things we'd like to get straightened out."

"Thank you," Molly said. Sherry procured another chair from a vacant table and the five sat down. A waitress came to take orders for roast beef, potatoes, stewed tomatoes, apple pie and coffee.

"First," Tucson asked, when the waitress had departed, "we'd like to know what happened to you last night."

"I just left in a hurry," the girl smiled, "while they—those masked men—were busy running to catch Mr. Sherry. I though I'd better get out as soon as possible and hope that paper would show up later. I suppose Mr. Sherry told you about last night's little adventure."

Tucson nodded. "A lot more has happened since." Briefly, he sketched for the girl the train of circumstances that led down to the present moment. By the time he had concluded, and Molly Norton had expressed her amazement at the turn events had taken, the waitress arrived with platters of steaming food. They ate in silence for the first few minutes, then Tucson asked: "If you'll give us a line on what's happening hereabouts, Miss Norton, perhaps we can find out what's going on. Red's a stranger here; my pards and I have been out of the country for quite a spell. Last time we came through Blue Cloud it was just a stage station. The town has grown fast."

"That's due to the coming of the railroad," Molly explained. "Things have picked up quite a bit. There was a mining boom on for a time, but the strike petered out. However, it's good cattle country and business has kept up fairly well." A worried look entered the girl's dark eyes. "Now I'm not sure just what will happen."

"Suppose you tell us what you know. What about the ranches around here? Do you know all the owners well?"

"Commencing to the west and moving clockwise," Molly said, "there's the O Slash P Ranch, the 21 Bar, the Dollar Sign L, the Horseshoe N—that's our place—" She paused a moment before continuing: "Due north of Blue Cloud lies the Rafter L, then to the east comes the Coffeepot and Bell outfits. You see the various ranches sort of radiate fanwise around Blue Cloud. To the south of town is the Mexican border. All the stock raisers are good friends of ours, excepting Santee Lombard. I feel sure he's back of our trouble, though I can't prove it."

"Rustling?" asked Stony.

"Some," the girl admitted, "but I don't think anybody has had serious losses yet. You see, something over a year ago Lombard, and his foreman, Dave Politan, arrived in Blue Cloud. The day after he arrived Lombard made an offer for the old Lewis outfit, the Dollar Sign L. Lewis was old and he was glad to sell. He got a good price for the place, too. Lombard took possession and immediately commenced hiring a mean crew of hands, most of them suspected rustlers. One or two of the owners suggested to the sheriff, Quinn, at the county seat that a sharp eye be kept on Lombard, but the sheriff didn't seem to pay much attention to the idea."

Molly took a sip of coffee and went on: "About six months ago, Lombard made us an offer for our place. It wasn't a particularly good offer. We didn't want to sell anyway. We said 'no.' Since then he's made other offers. I always told dad we didn't want to sell. You see, the ranch is

in my name. Perhaps I'd better explain that. Dad is really my stepfather. When mother died, she left the ranch to me. Dad had always insisted she do just that. He's been as good as a real father to me and I've tried more than once to make him part owner, but he always insisted he was satisfied to get a living out of the Horseshoe N and run it for me. However, everybody took it for granted he was the owner."

Tucson nodded. "Why should Lombard want your place?" he asked. Is it a better spread than the Dollar Sign L?"

Molly shook her head. "We have more acreage, but most of our land is semidesert stuff. It's not good grazing, except for the smallest third, near the mountains. All of Lombard's land is good grass. We've never been able to carry a herd the size of the Dollar Sign L's."

"What about water?" Red Sherry put in.

"We both have good water," Molly replied. "Cougar Creek heads up in Twin Sisters Peaks, back of our place, flows across our property and across the Dollar Sign L. The 21 Bar and O Slash P water on Cougar Creek, too. The stream runs on down past Blue Cloud and across the Mexican border."

"I remember when we entered town we crossed a plank bridge, just before we reached the first buildings," Stony said. "The water looked right muddy."

"It's clearer farther north," Molly explained. "No, it's no shortage of water that makes Lombard want our place. And it can't be grass he wants. As I said, we run just a small herd. Dad and three hands took care of things. I kept house and cooked. During branding and beef roundup we usually hired extra hands, but that was all. The first trouble we had—" Molly paused. "To make a short story of it, it was about a week after we'd refused Lombard's offer the second time that one of our hands was found dead on the range. Lombard made a third offer. Again we refused. Another puncher was found shot. He's in the hospital at Chancellor, now. They give him a fair chance of pulling through. He'd been shot in the back, like the first man. Didn't know who did it, of course. That left only dad and our third puncher, Steve Maxwell."

"Nice bunch of coyotes in this country," Lullaby growled, through a mouthful of roast beef.

"Two weeks ago," Molly went on, "dad failed to come in at the end of the day. He'd been out on the range. Steve hadn't seen him. I reported the matter to Deputy Canfield, but we've heard nothing. I feel sure dad isn't dead, or . . . or his body would have been found."

"I think you're right," Tucson said consolingly.

"Yesterday," Molly continued, tight-lipped, "Steve failed to show up by sundown. No, don't ask me what happened to him. I don't know. I haven't heard a thing."

"That left you alone on the ranch?" Tucson asked.

Molly nodded. "Last night, shortly

after sundown, a masked man showed up at the ranch and told me if I'd sign a bill of sale for the ranch, dad would be returned. I didn't feel right about it, but I was willing to try anything. The masked man insisted on blindfolding me, when we left. I didn't know where I was being taken, but later I learned it was a place in Wagon Springs—" She looked at Sherry. "That was when you made the getaway with that signed bill of sale. I left in a hurry and returned at once to the Horseshoe N."

"You didn't recognize the masked man?" Tucson asked.

Molly shook her head. "He took me to that shack in Wagon Springs and turned me over to a second masked man, then left immediately. Later, two more masked men brought in Mr. Sherry and . . . well, you know the rest of that story."

"What brings you to town?" Tucson asked.

"I stayed at the ranch most of the day, trying to decide what to do," Molly explained. "I don't want to be there alone. I finally decided to come to Blue Cloud and live at the hotel until I could hire a woman to go back and live on the ranch with me. At the same time I intended to report to Deputy Canfield what had taken place last night."

"Did you?" Lullaby asked.

Molly shook her head. "Just before I arrived at the deputy's office, I saw Canfield riding out of town. It's my guess he's going to see Lombard for further orders."

"You think he's in Lombard's pay?" Tucson asked.

"I feel sure of it." Molly's eyes flashed angrily. "But I can't prove it."

Tucson took the bill of sale from his pocket and laid it before the girl. "I reckon this is your property. You never received anything for your ranch, I take it."

"Not a cent. And I'm certainly glad to get this back—" Molly stopped and looked at Tucson. "Why, this has your name filled in as buyer? I don't understand."

"Neither do I," Tucson smiled. "I've been wondering if Reginald—I mean Red—can throw any light on the subject."

Sherry flushed crimson. "Now don't you start kidding me about the name signed to that paper. Miss Norton will tell you that was forced out of me."

"Did you fill in my name as buyer?" Tucson asked flatly.

Sherry nodded. "I had a stub of a pencil in my pocket. I wrote the name in hard, so it couldn't be easy erased."

"But, why?" Tucson demanded.

"Did it in my cell," Sherry explained, "shortly before Limpy and Canfield came to take my tobacco away. I knew you had a good rep in this country. If that paper had been taken away from me, with the buyer's space left blank, no telling what name might have been put in there. With the name written in, there wasn't much chance it could be removed, under legal inspection. If somebody—whoever is trying to

get the Horseshoe N—tried to register a new deed, your name would be almost bound to crop up and you'd hear about it eventually. I knew once you were dragged into the matter, you'd be interested enough to get to the bottom of the trouble."

"I think you're sort of smart," Stony said, grinning.

"Not me," Red denied. "I just get an idea now and then."

"We're pretty sure," Lullaby said slowly, "that Lombard must be at the bottom of this. Do you suppose it was intended to fill in his name as buyer?"

"I doubt it," Tucson said thoughtfully. "Any name could be filled in. Red, as witness, was a stranger here. I think they must have decided to get rid of him, if he didn't leave the country. For instance, the name of John Doe could have been filled in as buyer. Later other bills of sale could have been made out, always transferring the property. Eventually Lombard's name would have gone on a bill. He could have sworn he didn't know who the original seller was."

"But would all this stand up in court if I protested it?" Molly Norton asked.

"It probably would, if you had accepted money, as you were ready to last night," Tucson said.

"Even if I explained that the bill of sale was practically forced out of me?" Molly frowned. "I was just going to do it to insure dad's return."

"I'm afraid," Tucson said, "the court might not consider why you signed the paper, only that you *had* signed it. That would depend largely on the judge, the sort of attorney you had and the sort Lombard hired. At best the affair would be tied up in litigation. To avoid expense you'd probably have to settle out of court. I think, Molly Norton, you owe thanks to Red, here, for saving your bacon, or your ranch."

"Forget it," Sherry said, confused.

"I don't intend to forget it," Molly declared earnestly.

"Look, Molly," Tucson broke in, "suppose you let me keep this paper so I can show it around a mite."

"Why"—Molly looked surprised—"of course, but what are you planning to do?"

"We'll let Lombard think I've really taken over your ranch. Then he'll have to come to me. I'm aiming to get at the bottom of this trouble and learn what's what. You can have the paper, of course, any time you like."

"Golly," the girl said, "I don't want to load my troubles on you, Tucson Smith, but I've got to admit the idea sounds mighty good to me—"

"Miss Norton," a new voice broke in.

They looked around to find the owner of the hotel standing near Molly's chair. "Miss Norton," he said awkwardly, "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you— No, it's not about your father."

"You might as well tell it, Mr. Jameson," Molly said, white-faced. "I promised I won't faint or do anything silly."

"Steve Maxwell worked for you, didn't he?" the hotel man asked.

Molly nodded. "What about Steve?" she demanded.

"He was just brought in by an old prospector. He was found out on the range, shot in the back. He's been dead a day or more."

VIII

The following morning, Deputy Ben Canfield, accompanied by Limpy Fletcher, Shorty Davitt and Frank Ettinger were loping their ponies toward Blue Cloud. It wasn't more than eight o'clock and the bright morning sun made shining points of fire on the upper ridges of the San Mateo Mountains at their backs.

Canfield was riding next to Limpy, his heavy features streaked with dirt and perspiration from the dusty ride. He mopped at his face with a soiled bandanna. "Whew! It's going to be hot today."

Limpy turned his unshaven face toward the deputy and grinned. "You mean we're going to make it hot for Smith and his pals. Thunder, Ben! It's a good thing you rode out to the ranch last evenin'. From the way you acted when Santee told you what we'd planned, I guess it was lucky the boss was able to give you your orders direct. You didn't act like you thought much of the idea."

"I still don't," Canfield said heavily. "Only that Santee made it an order, I wouldn't go through with it."

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! You act like you was afraid of Smith."

Canfield shook his head. "I ain't afraid of him. I just don't like to tangle with him, that's all."

Shorty, riding on the other side of Limpy, sneered: "You talk like a fool, Ben."

"Mebbeso," Canfield conceded, "but I had all of that Smith and his pards I wanted yesterday. You don't know what I went through."

"Well, forget it," Ettinger said impatiently.

"All you got to do when we get to town is swear out the warrant for resisting an officer and walk Smith past us. We'll be waiting in that passageway between the Blue Cloud and Tornan's Photograph Gallery."

Canfield nodded glumly. He still didn't like it. When the four arrived in town, the three cowboys repaired at once to the Sunfisher Bar to wait until the deputy notified them he'd made the proper arrangements for the arrest.

Meanwhile, Tucson and his friends had had breakfast at the hotel. He said to Molly Norton as they rose from the dining room table. "You just run along, Molly, and see about that woman you're aiming to hire. I'll go along to the undertaker's and make the arrangements for Steve Maxwell's funeral. You'd better leave that to me. I know you were fond of Steve, but you can't help things any by causing yourself more pain. We'll meet you back here and have dinner together."

"I really appreciate this an awful lot, Mr. Smith—"

"Look here, Molly Norton," Tucson said with assumed sternness, "I

told you last night to forget that 'mister' stuff. You and I are due for a big argument if you insist on being so formal."

"Yes, Tucson." The girl smiled faintly.

"All right, run along then."

The others said good-by and Molly departed, Red Sherry looking longingly after her. "Gosh, she's a pretty girl," he sighed.

"That's a masterpiece of understatement if I ever heard one," Lullaby drawled.

The four men sauntered along the shady side of the street, crossing over to reach the undertaking establishment which was located between Lamy and Austin Streets. While Tucson entered the building, the other three waited out in front, Sherry listening with wide-eyed glee to the insulting remarks Stony and Lullaby were hurling at each other.

"Say," Sherry chuckled, "don't you two ever stop wrangling?"

"Only when we're asleep," Stony grinned.

Lullaby yawned. "That means all the time for Stony. I never saw a man before that could sleep on his feet with his eyes wide open. It's some sort of disease probably."

"If it is," retorted Stony, "I caught it from you."

Lullaby smiled good-naturedly "Aw, you go to blazes. Here comes Tucson."

Tucson had just emerged from the undertaking "parlors."

"Learn anything new?" asked Stony.

"Not much," Tucson replied. "Maxwell's body was stripped. I had a look at the wound. The bullet entered under the right shoulder blade and ranged left through the heart. The doctor probed it out last night. It had hit bone and was pretty much battered, but I'm guessing it was a .45."

"Not a rifle slug, then," Lullaby said slowly. "Probably the killer was up fairly close. It must have been somebody Maxwell knew—that is, he wasn't expecting trouble from whoever did it. That's a guess, of course; the killer could have been hidden close in some brush."

Tucson shook his head. "You've forgotten that prospector who brought Maxwell in, said he found the body on open range."

"That's right." Lullaby nodded.

"Maxwell's hawgleg was in his holster when he was found," Tucson went on. "Well, we'll have a job of running down to do. Meanwhile, the funeral's tomorrow in the morning. Just to sort of impress Lombard and his crowd, I think we ought to have a good attendance at the burial."

"The town will probably turn out," Red Sherry said.

"That's not what I mean," Tucson said. "We need somebody closer to Maxwell, like the crew of the Horseshoe N."

"Which same there ain't none," Stony pointed out.

"There's going to be one," said Tucson.

Red Sherry put in. "There's us four and Miss Norton."

"Look, pards," Tucson said, "to make it look like we've really bought

the Horseshoe N, we've got to hire a crew."

"Stony chuckled. "I know. And the best crew you know of—"

"—is the crew of the 3 Bar O," Lullaby finished. "I think that's a mighty good idea. Who do you thing we'd better bring over, Tucson?"

"I've been thinking of that," Tucson said. "Right now there really isn't much doing on our outfit. Jeff and Caroline can see to the rodding, as they've been doing for some time anyway."

Stony shook his head. "Jeff is sure going to be sore if you leave him out of a ruckus."

"Serves him right for getting married and becoming a foreman." Tucson smiled. "Besides, I don't like to get married men into fights, if it can be avoided. For one, we'll use Ananias Jones. That old coot is always good in a scrap and he's plenty cow country wise. Then, Rube Phelps, Tex Malcolm and Bat Wing. I wonder how big a crew Lombard carries on his pay roll."

"Feller in the Blue Cloud Saloon, last night, was telling me Lombard has a right sizable gang," Lullaby said.

Tucson considered. "There'll be use four and the four men I named."

"Hey, Tucson!" Lullaby sounded alarmed. "Aren't you going to send for Sourdough George? My stomach's delicate. We'll need a good cook."

"For the sake of your delicate stomach," Tucson said gravely, "we'll send for Sourdough. That settles things then."

"What next, pard?" Lullaby asked, looking relieved.

Tucson said, "It's about time we spread it around town I bought the Horseshoe N. Where's the best place to spread news, do you figure?"

"A restaurant," Lullaby said promptly.

"A barber shop," Stony stated.

"A barkeep sure meets a lot of people," Red Sherry put in. "He has lots of time to talk, too."

"I think Red's got the right idea," Tucson nodded. "Let's head for the Blue Cloud Saloon. That looks like the best place in town."

They strolled along Main Street until they reached the Blue Cloud, run by Titus Shaw, a middle-aged, genial individual with a freckled face and an extremely neat appearance. They had made Shaw's acquaintance the previous evening and liked him.

"What'll it be, gentlemen," Titus asked from behind the bar as they pushed through the swinging doors.

Tucson took a cigar, the other three bottles of beer. The saloon was a long narrow room, with swinging doors at the entrance and a rear door and one window at the back. To the left stretched the long, hardwood bar, with its customary brass rail. The rest of the room was given over to some straight-backed chairs and round tables for those who liked to play cards or sit down with their drinks.

"Ben Canfield was in here about fifteen minutes ago, asking for you," Titus Shaw informed Tucson.

"That so? What did he want?"

"He didn't say. Just asked if you'd been in. I told him I hadn't seen you since last night. I understand you and your friends sort of took Ben down a peg, yesterday."

"We tried," Tucson admitted, smiling.

"I wonder what the potbellied polecat wants of you, Tucson?" Lullaby pondered.

"Maybe," Stony surmised, "it has suddenly occurred to him he should arrest you, pard."

"That," Tucson chuckled, "would certainly break my heart. "No, he probably heard I was going to raise cattle in his district and wanted to make friends."

Titus pricked up his ears. "You buying a ranch hereabouts, Mr. Smith?"

Tucson took from his pocket the bill of sale. "This tells the story, Titus."

Shaw rapidly glanced through the writing on the paper. "Horseshoe N, eh? I'll be sorry to see Miss Norton leave. She's a darn nice girl. Her dad was all right, too."

"I don't figure Molly will leave at once," Tucson explained. "She wants to stay around until something more definite is settled about her father's disappearance. We've arranged it so she could stay at the ranchhouse, after she finds a woman to stay with her."

"Well, that sounds like a good idea," Shaw said.

The others had finished their beer. Tucson said: "Let's drift over to the railroad depot. I'll send a telegram to Jeff Ferguson telling him what hands we want sent on."

"Here comes Canfield," Red Sherry exclaimed.

They turned. Deputy Canfield was just entering through the swinging doors. He stiffened a little as he saw Tucson, then came on, his features endeavoring to assume a grim expression.

"I've been looking for you, Mr. . . . er . . . Smith."

Tucson swung around to face the man. "What's on your mind, Canfield?"

"I got a painful duty to perform." Perspiration commenced to form on Canfield's forehead. "The fact is—" He paused, clearing his throat—"the fact is, I'm aiming to put you under arrest. You coming peaceful or not?"

IX

Tucson didn't reply at once. Then he laughed softly, while Canfield squirmed under his penetrating gaze.

"What's the charge, Canfield?" Tucson asked finally.

"Resisting an officer," Canfield said. "You remember, yesterday"—hopefully—"you and I had a little misunderstanding?"

"Seems like I do, now that you mention it." Tucson's eyes twinkled.

"Maybe we'd better do some more resisting," Stony cut in angrily.

"The quicker the better!" Lullaby snarled.

"I'm backing your play, Tucson," Sherry said loyally.

His face paling, Canfield backed a

couple of steps. "Now wait a minute, you hombres—"

"The deputy sheriff is right, pards," Tucson cut in. "After all, like he said, he's just doing his duty. Canfield, you've a warrant, I suppose?"

"I sure have." Canfield tapped a paper that protruded from one hip pocket of his pants. "Look here, I'm not trying to be disagreeable about this. If you'd only listen a minute you'd see. But I've the law to uphold. Several people who witnessed our trouble yesterday have insisted I make an arrest—"

"Meaning Santee Lombard, I suppose," Tucson put in.

Canfield tried to look surprised. "Lombard? What's he got to do with this?"

"Perhaps I'm mistaken," Tucson said quietly.

"But, pard—" Stony commenced.

"You let me handle this, Stony," said Tucson. "I don't imagine there'll be much to it, except a formality."

Canfield was perspiring freely. "That's right," he said eagerly. "It's just something we've got to go through with, if the law is to be upheld. This is a law-abiding community. I'm making it as easy as possible, Mr. Smith. I not only got the warrant, but I've arranged the amount of bail. You'll want to give bail, of course. I know you won't want to stay in jail. Day after tomorrow, you'll have your hearing before the justice of the peace. There won't be anything to it. Small fine, maybe. Frankly, I didn't want to do this, but some civic-minded folks insisted. After all, I'm a servant of the people."

"Of course you are," Tucson said heartily. "I appreciate the fine way you've handled this."

"You'll come peacefully then?" Canfield's relief was evident.

"Of course I will."

"That's fine. You're taking the right attitude. It won't take five minutes at my office to get this squared away."

"Good," Tucson replied. He turned to his pardners. "You see, you were getting all het up about nothing."

"Reckon we were," Lullaby drawled sleepily. Stony nodded. Sherry looked from one to the other in surprise. This thing was being

handled much more peacefully than he had expected.

"Well," Canfield said uncertainly, "any time you're ready, then."

"If you're not in a hurry, Canfield," Tucson proposed, "I'm going to have a drink. I'd like to have you join me."

"Well, thanks," Canfield nodded, regaining some of his confidence. "Just so we don't waste too much time."

Tucson spoke to his companions. "What you boys having?"

"I'll take another bottle of beer," Sherry said.

"Nothing for me," Stony replied. "I think I'll drift over to the railroad depot and send that telegram we were talking about."

"That's a right idea," Tucson nodded. "Just tell the 3 Bar O we've bought a ranch here and won't be back for a spell."

"Wait a minute, Stony," Lullaby said. "I'll go with you. "Sometimes they have sandwiches at depots. Tucson, we'll see you in a little while, when you've finished your business with the deputy sheriff. So long, Canfield."

"So long," Canfield echoed.

Stony and Lullaby sauntered lazily out the rear door of the saloon, in the direction of the depot which was almost directly back of the drinking establishment.

Titus Shaw served the drinks Tucson had ordered. With a glass of whiskey before him, Canfield commenced to feel more and more sure of himself.

Tucson set down his beer glass. "Well, let's be getting along. Our deputy is probably anxious to get this detail settled, so he can get to his other duties. Red, do you want to walk along to the jail with us?"

"Dang right I do," Red exclaimed so emphatically that Canfield's eyes suddenly narrowed in concern: this blasted redhead would have to be watched close. If he wasn't stopped quick he might kick up a lot of resistance. Involuntarily, Canfield's fingers twitched toward his gun butt.

Tucson didn't miss that movement; he said quietly: "I don't suppose you're going to insist on taking my gun, Canfield?"

The deputy had planned to do just that, but something in Tucson's eyes warned him he'd better not push the point. "Shucks, no," he growled. "I reckon that won't be necessary. Come on, we'll get started if you're ready."

Taking Tucson by the arm, he headed toward the swinging doors, followed by Sherry. As they were leaving, Titus Shaw said: "Come in again, gentlemen. "You, too, Canfield."

Canfield didn't miss the insinuation; that was something to be stored up for future reference when he'd take Shaw down a peg or two.

"Thanks, Titus," Tucson spoke over his shoulder. "I will be in again."

Inwardly Canfield laughed. Like the devil you will, he thought. You'll be dead as a doornail within the next few minutes. He tightened his grip on Tucson's arm. The three men passed through the entrance.

The instant Stony and Lullaby had stepped through the rear door of the Blue Cloud Saloon all appearance of indifference had vanished. Lullaby was swearing softly under his breath. They paused but a brief moment as the door slammed at their backs. "They'll be some place between here and the saloon," Stony whispered swiftly. "Walk easy."

The expected assailants were far closer than the pards realized. Peering cautiously around the corner of the saloon building, Stony and Lullaby saw Limpy, Shorty and Ettinger standing, guns in hand, in the narrow passageway that ran between the Blue Cloud Saloon and a photograph gallery that stood next door. The three men were tense, their faces toward the street along which Tucson and the deputy were due to pass any minute.

Lullaby was about to start toward them, when Stony's hand clamped down on Lullaby's gun arm and drew him back.

"Wait." Stony's lips barely formed the one warning word.

They backed a few paces. Stony glanced up the rear wall of the saloon. A couple of empty beer kegs stood there, and a stack of empty beer-bottle cases.

"Try not to be clumsy for once in your life," Stony whispered. "We can get up on that flat roof."

"If I was as clumsy as you I'd be afraid to go up on that roof. C'mon, steady those cases."

Stony stood on one of the beer kegs, placed a restraining hand on the stack of wood cases. The bottles in the cases rattled, but so intent were the men waiting in the passageway around the corner they failed to hear the noise. The next instant, Lullaby's muscular fingers had gripped the edge of the roof and drawn his lean body to the top. "Hurry up," he whispered.

Stony eyed the beer cases dubiously. With no one to steady them, his weight would be certain to bring them toppling down. "Wait a moment." His lips formed the words rather than spoke them. He glanced quickly around. A short distance away on the platform of the railroad depot stood the station agent, watching Stony and Lullaby with a puzzled frown.

Stony turned and ran toward him. "Got a rope, mister?"

"Yeah, I reckon there's a rope somewhere about. But what you and that other feller—"

"Quick! Let me have that rope. You'll see some fun. Just keep quiet about it. But get that rope."

The agent vanished inside his building, returned almost instantly, bearing several coils of three-quarter-inch hemp rope. "Here you are."

To Stony the word "rope" meant a lariat, but this would have to do. "Thanks," he said, and sprinted back to the building where Lullaby waited impatiently. Lullaby couldn't see the street from where he stood because of the high false front above the porch entrance; at the same time, passers-by were unaware of what was taking place on the roof of the Blue Cloud Saloon.

By the time he'd sprinted back to

the rear wall of the building, Stony's nimble fingers had quickly fashioned the knot that formed the hondo in one end of the rope. It required but an instant more to make a loop. Into the loop he thrust one foot, then tossed the other end of the rope to Lullaby, above.

While Stony held tightly to the rope, Lullaby commenced to haul him to the top of the building. They both moved as cautiously as possible to avoid making undue noise, Stony fending his body away from the wall as he ascended. Finally, he reached the top and stepped out of the loop.

"I'll swear you're all dead weight," Lullaby whispered disgustedly.

"Now maybe you're glad I don't eat as much as you."

Both men slipped off their boots, and tiptoed in sock feet near the edge of the building so those in the saloon below wouldn't hear them on the roof. Reaching the side, they threw themselves face down and peered over the edge.

There, below in the passageway, waited Limpy, Ettinger and Shorty Davitt, six-shooters clutched in fists, eyes glued to the street. Limpy stood in the middle; the other two stood slightly behind at either shoulder. Their whispers ascended to the waiting pair on the roof above:

"Why in tarnation don't Ben hurry?" Limpy growled cautiously. "Somebody'll be seeing us here."

"I'll tell him a few things, later," Shorty rasped.

Footsteps were heard on the plank sidewalk a few scant yards from the waiting men. They tensed. A woman passed by, holding a sun parasol over her head. As she passed she caught a brief glimpse of the waiting gunmen. Her eyes widened.

"Not a word, lady," Ettinger said swiftly. "We're playing a joke on a feller."

The woman gulped and hurriedly passed from sight, her footsteps sounding even more rapidly on the sidewalk now.

"If Ben doesn't hurry up—" Limpy began.

At that moment, Canfield's voice was heard at the saloon entrance: "This ain't going to take but a minute, Smith. I aim to hurry things up and get this finished."

It was the signal Limpy and his friends had been waiting for.

"Here they come," Limpy hissed. "Shoot the minute you see the sidewinders!"

The guns of Lullaby and Stony were already out of holsters.

"You mean us?" Stony spoke clearly to the men below.

"One move and we'll do the drilling, you lousy two-bit snakes!" Lullaby warned.

Limpy and his companions tensed; then, their guns still held before them, turned their heads, jaws slack, in the direction of the voices. A lurid curse burst from Limpy's throat.

"Talk all you like, but don't pull triggers," Stony said, laughing. "And don't make a move. We're fair honin' to let daylight through your ruddy carcasses!"

By this time Tucson, Sherry and Ben Canfield had drawn abreast of

the men. Instantly Tucson's gun was out. Sherry wasn't far behind in the draw he put on Deputy Canfield.

"It's a trap, Tucson!" Sherry exclaimed.

"It *was* a trap," Tucson laughed. "Canfield, you got a nerve trying to pull an old trick like this on us."

"I swear I don't know what you're talking about," Canfield quavered. "Limpy! What you hombres doing there?"

Limpy and his companions stood rigid, not daring to move.

"Pretty sight, aren't they?" Stony grinned. "Just like statues. Hey, you hombres, what you posing for, Custer's Last Stand?" He raised his voice, "Come one, come all, see the living statues in famous poses. Their heads are carved from pure granite, folks, their spines are made of jelly. Don't miss this thrilling tableau. It'll be something to tell your children—"

"You talk too much," Lullaby growled, as people commenced gathering to learn what caused the commotion. "Get a crowd here and we won't dare shoot if those three run for it." Swiftly he seized the rope used in hauling Stony to the roof, widened the loop and made a quick cast.

The loop settled about the shoulders of the three men, drawing them tightly together. The guns dropped from their hands as the loop became tight and started cutting into their arms.

"Hey," Limpy protested, "what foolishness is this?"

"It *was* foolish, wasn't it?" Stony chuckled. "You should have known better."

"What we going to do with them?" Lullaby cut in.

"String 'em up!" Stony said, with a grin. He pointed to an outjutting roof beam, extending beyond the edge of the roof, which some carpenter had failed to remove when the building was completed.

Lullaby's lips twitched. "Once in a while you get an idea, pard. Come on!"

Together they hauled on the rope, drawing the protesting gunmen into the air.

"Ben, stop them!" Shorty wailed.

"What can I do?" Canfield said helplessly.

When the three bound figures were well above the earth, Stony quickly took a hitch about the extending beam, and made the rope secure. "I call this a good day's work," he chuckled. "C'mon, let's go down and see how they look."

He and Lullaby drew on their boots and joined the rapidly gathering crowd on the street. There was a great deal of laughter by this time. The woman who had passed a while back had returned and was telling all who would listen that she had seen those "three ruffians" waiting for somebody with drawn guns.

Through it all, the three men were cursing fluently and begging to be let down. They called on Canfield to help them. The deputy turned to Tucson.

"You just let 'em stay there, Canfield," Tucson said sternly. "You cut 'em down and you'll answer to

me. By the way, where's that warrant you had for my arrest?"

Canfield produced it with trembling fingers. "You really don't want to serve it now, do you?" Tucson asked.

"I . . . I reckon not," Canfield gulped. "This has been a bad mistake, I guess."

"You guess right," Tucson said grimly. "So you planned to shoot me from behind, you and your friends."

"No, no, you're mistaken!" Canfield protested. "I was only doing my duty. I don't know what Limpy and his pards were doing there. I didn't even know—"

"Liar!" Tucson's single word cracked like a whip. Canfield fell silent and slunk away. An angry muttering ran through the crowd as Tucson's words were passed on.

"Let's really hang 'em!" a man yelled.

"What? And spoil our fun?" Stony replied. "Nothing doing—" He broke off suddenly, having spied a small boy carefully cradling a paper sack in his arms and looking on, wide-eyed.

"Hello, sonny," Stony spoke to the boy. "Don't tell me those are eggs in that sack."

"Yes, sir. I'm just taking them home."

"I suppose they're fresh?" Stony continued.

The boy nodded. "That's what the man in the general store said. Two dozens, all laid recent."

Stony said gloomily, "I was afraid of that." He took the sack from the boy's arms and handed him a bill. "I'll buy these from you. You can get more for your mother. And see if the general store doesn't have some old eggs. Maybe you and some of your little friends would like to improve your throwing arms."

"I don't understand," the boy said, with a puzzled frown.

"You will," Stony chuckled. "Just watch me." He drew an egg from the sack, his arm came back. The next instant a splotch of yellow spread across Limpy's ugly features. A roar of laughter ascended from the crowd.

"Oh, gee golly whiz!" the small boy exclaimed, a light of unholy glee beaming in his eyes. Turning, he went running rapidly in the direction of Joel Marshall's General Store.

Wham! Another of Stony's eggs splashed across Frank Ettinger's chin.

"Lemme have some of those eggs!" Lullaby yelled. His hand darted into the paper sack. The next instant Shorty had received a splatter of hen fruit over one eye. Lullaby and Stony continued throwing, to the intense joy of the crowd.

"Aren't you two ever going to grow up?" Tucson called to Lullaby and Stony.

"Not until these eggs are gone," Stony laughed. "Lullaby, look, two bits I can part Limpy's hair."

"You're on!" Lullaby chuckled, drawing back his own throwing arm. He won two bits on Stony's throw, which, nevertheless, was very successful.

The three men suspended in the

air were splashed completely with yellow and smashed shells by this time. They roared, twisted, kicked, trying to dodge the eggs that came flying at them, but all movements seemed to avail them little. Sherry, at Tucson's side, chuckled.

"Danged if you three don't run as smooth as clock work. I never suspected, but you three knew instanter what was up when Canfield came to arrest you. And this egg stunt—Shucks, this is better than shooting the polecats. Sometimes ridicule will work when bullets fail."

"It's good to have dependable pards." Tucson smiled proudly.

"Hey, Stony!" An anguished wail from Lullaby. "This is *good food* we're throwing at those scuts!"

Stony chuckled, as his throwing arm released a final egg. "I wondered how long it would take for that to dawn on you. Anyway, they're gone now— But look!"

Coming on a run along the street was the small boy from whom Stony had got the eggs. With him were two more youngsters. Each carried two bulging paper sacks. "More ammunition!" Stony laughed.

Tucson put in: "Pards, I figure it's time we headed over to that railroad depot and sent the telegram to the boys. After this, we're going to need a fighting crew, or I miss my guess." He turned, spoke to the crowd at large: "If Canfield should come sneaking back with the idea of cutting down his friends, please tell him I said it wouldn't be advisable."

Nodding to his three companions, Tucson led the way along the pas-

sageway, in the direction of the depot. Above them hung the three dripping, egg-bespattered gunmen, yellow-smeared features twisted with mingled hate and fear, their closely bound forms turning slowly at the end of the hempen rope.

X

After sending the telegram to the 3 Bar O, Tucson and his friends walked from the depot to Lamy Street, and thence to their hotel on Main. Glancing along Main, Stony chuckled. "Still a crowd down there, next to the Blue Cloud Saloon."

They were standing on the porch that fronted the hotel. At that moment Tucson sighted Molly Norton just ascending the steps to the porch. The girl looked puzzled, as she greeted the men and added: "Did you see what's going on, down there? There are three Dollar Sign L men suspended on a rope from the roof of the Blue Cloud Saloon."

"Is that right?" Tucson said seriously. "What's the idea? Who are they?"

"The three known as Limpy, Shorty and Ettinger," Molly answered, with a frown. "No one seems inclined to cut them down. They're all smeared and there are eggshells all around."

"Maybe somebody has been making an omelet," suggested Stony.

"Or running a shell game," from Lullaby.

Red chuckled explosively. Molly glanced suspiciously at the others. She said suddenly: "You men had something to do with that."

"Yes, Molly, we did," Tucson confessed. He told the girl briefly what had taken place.

Molly began to laugh, then turned serious. "This may not seem so funny when Lombard hears about it," she warned. "And I don't see how you can accept all this so calmly. After all, Tucson, those men might have killed you—and Red—I mean, Mr. Sherry."

"Red suits me." Sherry grinned with pleasure.

"Look, Molly," Tucson said, "we're giving this as much serious thought as it requires. We're not overlooking any bets. I'm not sure, but I think those are the three men who held you and Red in that shack, night before last. You see, we read some sign along the road, on our way here. Do you think you could identify them?"

Molly hesitated. Red put in: "I feel right sure they're the men. One was quite tall, one quite short. Of course, they were masked and had on different clothing."

"Did one walk with a limp?" Lullaby asked.

"I don't know," Red said. "He was standing by Molly all the time. I didn't see him walk."

"Neither did I," Molly admitted. "The voices I heard didn't sound quite natural, either. Still, I feel almost sure they're the same men."

"Would you be willing to swear to it in court?" Tucson asked.

Molly shook her head. "I'm not certain enough for that."

"I feel pretty much the same way," Red admitted.

Tucson pondered. "Voices could be disguised, of course—probably were. I reckon, for the time being, there's no use bringing charges against those three. We'll let things ride for a spell, until we get more proof."

Molly frowned. "I feel there's going to be a great deal more trouble before we get further proof. And I don't like the idea of just you four against the Dollar Sign L. Lombard has always pretty much bullied this town. He's not going to like being opposed. And with his whole crew gathered—"

"Don't worry about us being outnumbered," Tucson cut in. "I've sent a telegram to the 3 Bar O for some of our own hands. They should be here tomorrow morning on the train; it gets in around eight, I'm told."

"Can they get here so soon?" Molly asked.

Tucson nodded. "After all, Los Potros is only fifty or sixty miles from Blue Cloud. My telegram should reach the ranch this afternoon. The men can catch the early morning train. They won't have horses, of course."

"There are plenty of good mounts out at the Horseshoe N," Molly said quickly.

"That's fine," said Tucson. "We can hire enough broncs at the livery to get the boys out there. Oh, by the way, Steve Maxwell is to be buried tomorrow morning. Our crew

will be here by then. It's all fixed up, Molly."

Molly's eyes filled suddenly. "Tucson, I don't know how to thank you . . . and you others—"

Tucson cut in quickly: "By the way, Molly, did you ride to town or drive a wagon?"

"I rode my horse in. Why?"

"We'll need a wagon to take supplies out to your place. We can hire that at the livery, too, I suppose. I think, Molly, we'd better go eat dinner now. After dinner, you and Red can see about getting a wagon and buying supplies."

"That's a right idea." Red smiled broadly.

"How about that woman you were going to hire?" Tucson asked the girl.

"I couldn't get the woman I wanted, but I've hired a young Mexican girl. I think she'll be all right. She'll be ready to leave tomorrow, too."

When they finished dinner, they once more returned to the hotel porch. Lullaby sighed deeply, "That was a tasty little snack, but I'll be right glad when supper time comes."

"You'll never wait that long," Stony retorted.

"Here comes Deputy Ben Canfield," exclaimed Red.

"I certainly do dislike that man," Molly stated, as the others glanced out toward the street.

Canfield approached rather meekly. "Could I speak to you a minute, Mr. Smith?" he said humbly from the foot of the porch steps.

Tucson nodded. "I don't know why not. What's on your mind?"

"Well, you see," Canfield commenced hesitantly, "it's like this: Limpy and Shorty and Frank Ettinger are still hanging down there—or maybe I should say up there—"

"And you want permission to cut 'em down?" Tucson asked.

"That's it. You see, I've . . . I've had a complaint. Titus Shaw in the Blue Cloud, and that gent in the neighboring building—you know, the picture taker—they don't like it. They claim them three, hanging there, ruins trade. It's the smell—"

Tucson frowned. "I don't just see how that—"

"It's the eggs," Canfield explained. "Some of them eggs was overripe. And Mrs. Deakens—she raises chickens for selling—Mrs. Deakens, she tells me somebody robbed her settin' hens, too." Canfield paused to mop his brow. "You see, that egg-throwin' idea sort of caught on and some other fellers who didn't like Limpy very well—"

"I get the general idea." Tucson repressed a smile.

"And it don't smell so good in the vicinity of the Blue Cloud Saloon and the photo gallery," Canfield finished. "So if you think it would be a good idea to cut down those fellers, I'll be glad to do it for you."

"You will, eh?" Tucson's voice sounded chilly. "Canfield, you said something yesterday about finding Clem Norton's wallet on Red."

"I explained that it was really Limpy that found it. Matter of fact"—Canfield stalled for time by clear-

ing his throat—"I talked to Limpy later and learned that he didn't really find the wallet in Sherry's pocket. It was lyin' in the road near where we picked up Sherry, so you see we were mistaken about that, too."

Tucson said dryly. "You certainly are willing to please, all of a sudden. We want that wallet, Canfield."

"Yes, sir," Canfield said. He produced a worn leather wallet from a hip pocket, and extended it to Tucson, moving up a few steps to do so.

Tucson accepted the wallet and turned it over to Molly. "That your dad's?"

The girl nodded after an instant's examination, then opened the wallet to extract a couple of cards and three old letters. "Yes, this is dad's, all right."

"You wouldn't know how much money was missing?" Tucson asked.

Molly shook her head. "It couldn't be very much, though."

Tucson turned back to Canfield. "That's all, Canfield. You can return to your office."

"Yes, sir. But about them three hanging—"

"Cut 'em down," Tucson said brusquely. "They've been smelling up the town long enough. And tell 'em for me they won't get off so easy next time. For the rest of the day they'd better be ready to draw fast if they cross our trail."

"I'll tell 'em. Fact is, I think they're plumb eager to get out of town. And I'll cut 'em down to once." Turning, Canfield hurried off along Main Street.

Red Sherry laughed. "You've certainly got the Indian sign on that windbag, Tucson."

Tucson nodded grimly. "I aim to put the Indian sign—and a lot more—on Lombard's whole gang before we get through with 'em. I just can't abide a crook. And, Molly, quit worrying about your dad. We've got his wallet. I feel sure he isn't dead. We'll be finding him one of these days, soon."

XI

The following morning, shortly after eight o'clock, a group of eager-eyed 3 Bar O hands alighted from the train at the Blue Cloud depot. On hand to meet them were Tucson, Lullaby, Stony, Red and Molly. The men came piling out of the caboose of the train, carrying burlap sacks and saddles. Wild yells of greeting filled the air. There was considerable "kidding" back and forth. Most important among the newcomers, in Lullaby's mind, was Sourdough George Jenkins. Jenkins was a lanky, dour-looking man, with a long red nose, who was forever complaining of his trouble with corns.

Lullaby said, when greetings were over with: "Sourdough, this is the saddest day of my life. Just when my stomach is getting back to normal, you have to arrive. I don't think I'm going to be able to take your cooking . . . but . . . er . . . you didn't happen to bring a pie or cake along with you, did you?"

"No, I didn't. And if you think cooking for you again is any treat for me, you're mistaken, cowboy."

"Tucson, Jeff Ferguson is plumb put out at having to stay behind," Ananias Jones put in.

Ananias was spare, grizzled, with sweeping white mustache, sharp blue eyes with shaggy eyebrows and a leathery frame that reminded folks of a length of rawhide. He was the typical old-time cowman and possessed a fund of amusing yarns, the facts of which were considerably exaggerated.

The other three arrivals were Tex Malcolm, Rube Phelps and Bat Wing.

Red was accepted wholeheartedly by the crew: anyone hired by Tucson was certain to be all right. Tucson explained briefly what had happened and Molly added a few words. If the seriousness of the situation impressed the newcomers it failed to show on their faces. They told the girl, confidently, that they'd see to it, if possible, that her father would be restored to her and Lombard's nefarious activities stopped.

Within a short time, they all strolled over to the livery where horses were hired for the 3 Bar O hands. By this time it was after nine o'clock. The funeral of Steve Maxwell was set for ten. Molly went back to the hotel to change to riding clothes, as she had decided to accompany "her crew" on horseback.

The funeral was held at Blue Cloud's cemetery, located at the end of Spruce Street, the residential thoroughfare, northeast of the town. Though there was no sign of Limpy, Shorty and Ettinger, Lombard and a large number of Dollar Sign L

hands were there, and were pointed out by Molly to Tucson, together with many citizens of the town, friends of Maxwells.

Riding back to the center of town, later, Molly said to Tucson: "Well, Santee Lombard must realize by this time that I'm not entirely without friends."

They arrived back at the hotel in time for dinner. When the meal was concluded, Tucson ordered the men to accompany Red and Molly out to the Horseshoe N and get settled. Sourdough George drove the wagon with, beside him on the seat, the young Mexican girl whom Molly had hired. The girl's name was Maria Lopez; she was pleasant-featured and looked capable. Behind Maria and Sourdough, in the bed of the wagon, were the supplies Molly and Red had purchased the previous afternoon. Lullaby, Stony and Tucson had decided to stay in Blue Cloud a few days to see if anything further developed from Lombard's direction.

"It's sure good to be doing something again," Lullaby said, as he stood with Tucson and Stony at the hotel hitch rack, eying the dust cloud that followed the departing riders out of town. "Things are commencing to shape up so we can get our teeth in 'em."

"I never saw anything you couldn't get your teeth into, whether they shaped up or not," Stony said. "I'll bet that—"

"If it wasn't for getting poisoned," Lullaby cut in, "I'd sink 'em into

one of your ears."

"Jumping catfish!" Stony complained. "Give me a chance to finish what I was saying. They should invent a new kind of punctuation for you and call it an interruption mark."

"They should invent, they should invent," Lullaby growled. "That's all I ever hear from you. Why don't you invent something yourself, instead of always waiting for somebody else to do it? But, wait, I know why you don't. Inventing requires brains, and I don't think—"

"Stop right there," Stony snapped. "You've said it all; you don't think! You didn't need to tell me that. I always knew it. If your brains was made of TNT and it exploded, your Stet hat would only settle a mite more firmly on your head."

"For two cents I'd set something firmly on your head," Lullaby said belligerently, doubling up one fist.

Stony drew a dime from his pocket and tossed it to Lullaby. "You owe me eight cents."

"Eight more on top of the scent you already got won't help none," Lullaby said placidly. He tossed back the dime. "Go find a bar of soap."

Tucson, who had been smiling silently at the two, cut in to say: "How about you two calling a truce while we go over and sample some of Titus Shaw's brew."

In the Blue Cloud they ordered beer. Titus Shaw set out bottles and glasses. "Santee Lombard was asking for you a while back, Tucson," he announced.

"That right, Titus?" Tucson asked. "What did he want?"

Titus shrugged his shoulders. "He didn't say. Him and his gang hang out down to the Sunfisher Bar if you want to see him."

"If he wants to see me he can look me up," Tucson said.

"That would be my idea," Titus replied. "No, he didn't hang around long. Nick Armitage was with him."

"Who's Nick Armitage?"

"Works for Lombard. Some say he's Lombard's trigger man, does all his dirty work—but nobody says it out loud. But if I was you I'd keep an eye on Armitage, just in case."

"Thanks, Titus. I'll remember what you said."

A couple of minutes later Lombard pushed through the swinging doors, followed by a medium-sized, wiry individual with an unshaven jaw and mean eyes. The man had a six-shooter slung at either hip and an eagle feather, dyed crimson, stuck in the hatband of his Stetson.

Lombard came directly to Tucson. "You Tucson Smith?"

"That's correct," Tucson replied quietly.

"I'm Santee Lombard. This"—jerking one thumb toward his companion—"is Nick Armitage." He stuck out one hand, which Tucson failed to see as he turned toward Lullaby and Stony.

"My pards," Tucson introduced, "Brooke and Joslin."

The men nodded. There was no clasping of hands.

"Titus said you wanted to see me," Tucson went on. "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing in particular," Lombard said smoothly. He paused to touch match flame to a long, thin black cigar. "I heard you bought the Horseshoe N. That makes us neighbors. I thought we should get acquainted."

"Yeah," Armitage said meaningly, "it's always wise to get started right with new neighbors. Sometimes it means trouble when a new outfit gets off to a bad start."

"Trouble?" Stony said innocently. "Trouble for who?"

"You'll plenty soon understand," Armitage said harshly, "if you get off on the wrong foot with the Dollar Sign L."

"Hush it, Nick." Lombard frowned. "Nobody's starting any argument." He turned to Tucson. "Nick's got a perpetual grouch. You have to overlook what he says—"

"I don't know that I do," Tucson said calmly.

Lombard laughed shortly. "Nick don't mean anything. You see, he's sort of put out. It's natural to feel that way, I suppose—"

"Put out about what?" Tucson asked.

"It's like this," Lombard explained. "For a long time now we've been trying to buy the Horseshoe N outfit. Then, suddenly, with no warning at all, Miss Norton sells to you. It did seem as though she should give her old neighbors first chance at the ranch. Would you mind telling me how she come to sell to you?"

"You don't already know what led up to the transaction, eh?" Tucson said quietly.

"How should I?"

"All right, skip it," Tucson replied. "No, I don't see any reason right now, Lombard, for going into that phase of the deal."

Lombard shrugged his shoulders. "Just as you like, of course. Will you have a drink?"

"I was going to suggest it," Tucson smiled thinly. He placed a dollar on the bar. "Name your sluice water."

Drinks were set out. For a few moments nobody said anything. Then Lullaby turned to Armitage: "I note you pack two smoke wagons, Armitage."

"It don't need to worry you, so long as they stay in holsters," Armitage growled.

"It wouldn't worry me, either way," drawled Lullaby.

Armitage's eyes narrowed angrily, but before he could speak, Stony said with mock awe: "Jumpin' catfish! Did you notice the notches in Armitage's gun butts, pard?"

"There's a reason for 'em being there, too," Armitage said meaningly. He cast a contemptuous glance at the guns in the Mesquiteers' holsters. "I don't see nary a notch in your weepons."

"You wouldn't," Lullaby drawled carelessly. "We give up notching a long spell back. You know how it is. A feller's stocks get so filled with notches there isn't room for more. So then you have to buy new stocks. That costs money. When we reached the point of buying 'em by the gross we just quit notching. Of course, you've never had that trouble. How many stocks was it we ordered last time, Stony?"

"I wrote it down," Stony said, grave-faced, "but I don't remember offhand. It was quite a stock of stocks."

Armitage's eyes had started to widen. His jaw dropped. Suddenly he realized the two cowboys were poking fun at him and angry color flooded his face. "Now, look here, you two—" he commenced.

"Hush it, Nick," Lombard said again. He darted a stern glance at the gunman. Armitage subsided, glowering. Lombard turned back to Tucson. "I'll get down to business. How much do you want for the Horseshoe N?"

"One hundred thousand dollars," Tucson answered placidly.

Lombard's eyes bulged. "You're crazy!"

"I probably am," Tucson admitted calmly, "in view of the fact I haven't yet seen the ranch. But that price stands, for the present at least."

"In other words," Lombard said, "you don't want to sell."

"I haven't said that," Tucson countered. "After a few months, when I learn the value, I might—"

"The devil! I can't wait a few months—" Lombard commenced, then paused suddenly. He finished lamely: "Well, think it over."

"Why can't you wait a few months?" Tucson asked shrewdly.

"Why you in such a hurry to get the Horseshoe N, Lombard?"

"Blast it!" Lombard growled. "I'm in a no hurry to get the place. You just don't understand."

"Any more than I understand why you had three of your men try to ambush me yesterday—with Deputy Canfield's help," Tucson said sharply.

"Look here, Smith," Lombard said placatingly, "if you're referring to that little fuss you had with Limpy Fletcher and—"

"You know the three I mean," Tucson cut in.

"Look here, I didn't have a thing to do with that. Those three were sore because of the brush you had with 'em the previous day at the jail. They didn't really mean to shoot you, of course; just figured to throw a scare into you. I've already given 'em the devil for it and told them they got just what they deserved. That egg-shelling idea was all right." Lombard's own laughter sounded a bit hollow.

"And you know, probably," Tucson pursued, "what led up to that fuss at the jail. Sure, I expect you to deny it, but I know danged well that Canfield has given you the whole story, anyway. You tried to frame Red Sherry, after your men had kidnaped him as a witness to a forced bill of sale—"

"By Satan, hombre!" Lombard exclaimed. "You *are* crazy. I don't know what you're talking about. What do you mean, kidnaping Sherry?"

"And shot his bronc from under

him when he was making a getaway," Tucson pursued.

"This is all a mystery to me." Lombard shook his head in pretended amazement.

"It may be a mystery to you," Tucson said, "but I note you sent men over to Wagon Springs to bury that dead horse so it wouldn't be found as evidence. Next time tell 'em not to leave a hoof sticking out of the earth—"

"Well, by Jupiter!" Lombard spun angrily on Armitage. "Nick, I thought you—" He caught himself just in time, and finished: "I thought you said this Tucson Smith was a reasonable hombre."

Tucson laughed softly. "It don't go down, Lombard. I ran a bluff and got away with it, but I know now you did send somebody over to bury that horse. It was the natural thing to do if you wanted to hide evidence."

"Look here, Smith," Lombard rasped, "I don't know what you're talking about. You seem bent on making trouble. You keep on along that line and you and your pals will find it. I come here to talk peaceful to you, but if you don't want peace, that's all right with me. You and your gang will find you're up against somebody that doesn't back down at the first threat."

"That goes for me, too," Armitage snarled. "Any time they want trouble, we'll accommodate them."

"Armitage," Lullaby said, "I'll pluck that red feather out of your hat and stick it down your throat if you don't shut up."

"I wonder who plucked all his other feathers," Stony murmured.

Before Armitage could speak, Lombard thrust out a silencing hand. "I'll do the talking, Nick." He turned to Tucson, "You're making war talk, Smith. I don't take that from any man."

"You know what to do about it," Tucson said coldly. "We're ready any time you are, Lombard. Are you game to draw against me and finish this business right now?"

Lombard shook his head. "You don't work me into that sort of trap, Smith. I wasn't born yesterday. There's three of you against only Nick and me. We're too smart for that game."

Tucson sighed. "I hadn't counted on Stony and Lullaby coming in. I figured this was between you and me, Lombard." He faced his pardners. "Stony—Lullaby! Turn your guns over to Titus to hold for a spell. I want to see just how much nerve Lombard has."

Stony and Lullaby did as he had requested. Tucson turned back to face Lombard, totally ignoring Nick Armitage.

"Now, Lombard," Tucson said coldly, "you can get out your iron and go to work any time it suits you. I'm ready!"

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