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WESTERN STORY

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

JANUARY 8, 1944

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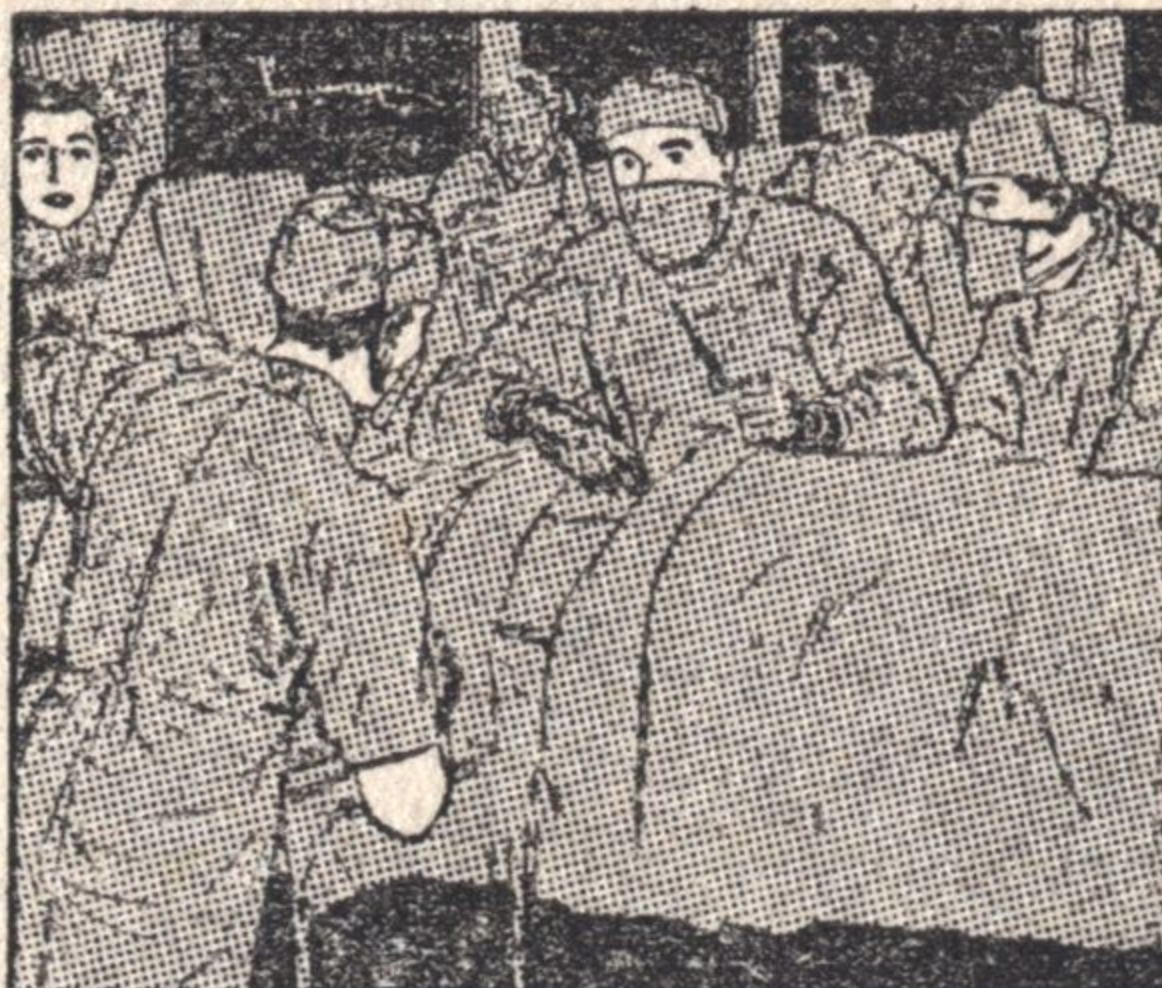
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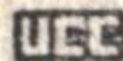


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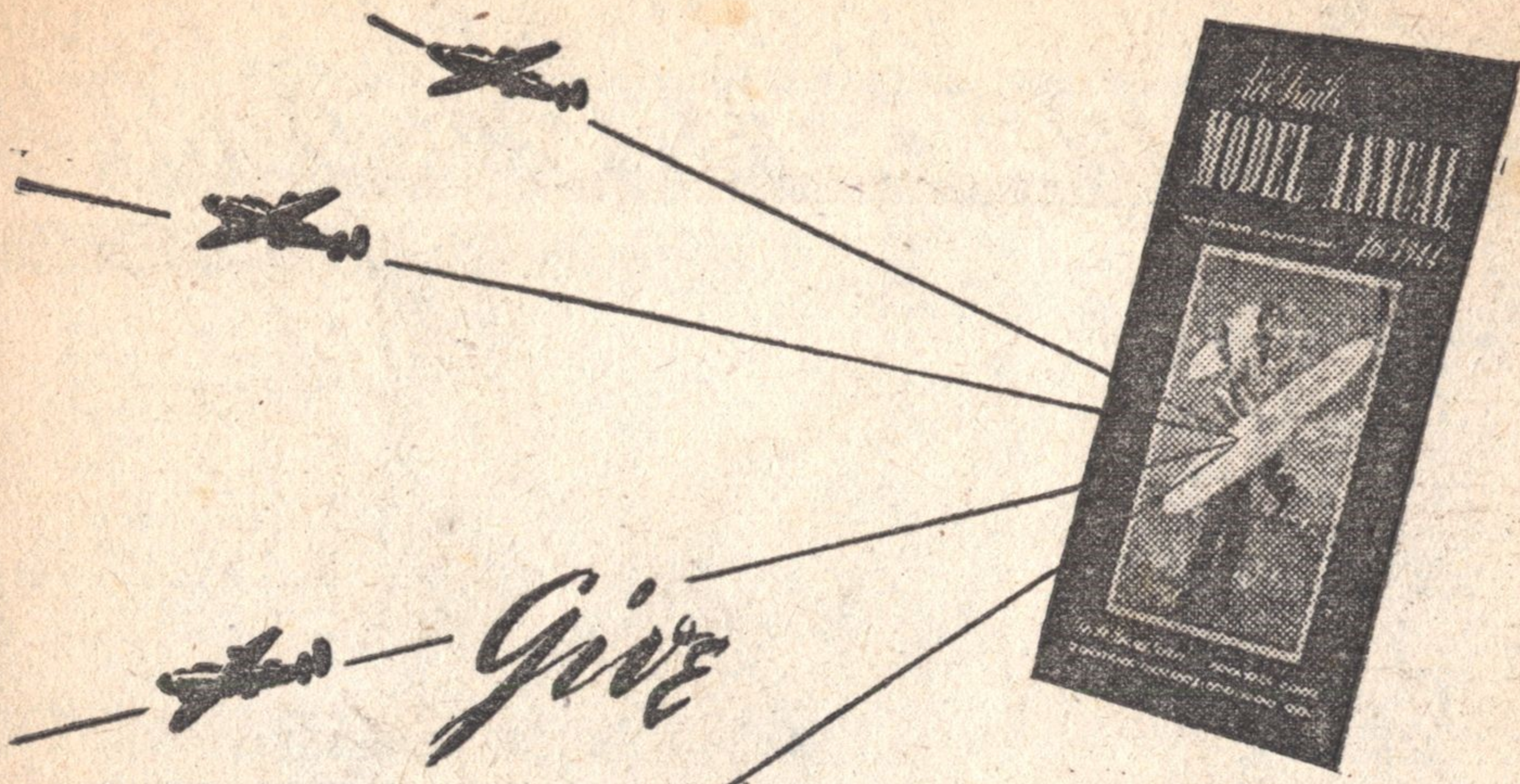


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The desperate partnership of those four hunted men might yield a fortune in buried gold—or a

BOOTHILL GRUBSTAKE

by Ray Nafziger

I

Two husky guards of the Territorial penitentiary at Negras opened the steel door at the end of the corridor and shuffled down the hot, fetid cell row, dragging the limp body of a denim-clad prisoner.

Unlocking the door of the end cell, they pulled the prisoner in and let him fall. His head plopped hard on the stone floor and he lay still with his eyes closed as if he had been knocked out. Dirt-matted sandy bristles covered his face, and his

coarse gray sweat-soaked jumper and trousers were filthy with bits of straw and crusted dirt.

The blond prisoner sitting on his bunk in the cell looked at the new arrival.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Yore stall mate, Gortney," snarled one of the guards. "Meet Mr. Matchell. Sweet-looking and sweet-smellin', ain't he?"

"What's happened to him?"

At that the other guard laughed. "He jist done finished a stretch in the bat cave, that's what's happened to Mr. Matchell." He lifted one high-heeled boot, planted a kick in the ribs of the prostrate man. It produced a faint groan which made the guard laugh again. "Thought you could get out o' Negras pen, did yuh, Matchell? Next time you try that we'll drop yuh in that black hell hole ag'in and forget yuh. For bein' too dumb not to know you can't get out o' Negras, 'fore your time's up 'less you're lugged out in a pine box."

The two guards locked the cell. Their footsteps echoed down the corridor and the steel door at the end of the cell row clanged.

The blond Gortney, clean-shaven, looking dapper even in his prison garb, moved over to examine the new arrival, a young fellow, in his early twenties, Gortney guessed. Rays from a morning sun, already mercilessly blazing down on the black stone prison, shone through a small barred window on the prisoner.

The gray eyes of the fallen man opened and regarded Gortney.

"Anything I can do for you?" Gortney asked. "Want me to help you into your bunk?"

The prisoner merely grunted and, raising himself to a sitting position, hitched himself to the pail of water from which he drank thirstily. Then, sitting against the iron bunk post, head sunk on his chest, he silently regarded Gortney.

"They had you in the bat cave, did they?" asked Gortney. "I take it that means solitary?"

The prisoner nodded wearily. "This cell is an oven, but it's an ice house alongside that hole."

Lifting himself into his bunk, Matchell slept like a drugged man until the cells emptied for the mid-day meal. Helped to his feet by Gortney, he shambled with the rest to the mess hall to take a few bites of the stew and bread. There was no work in Negras Territorial Prison; for recreation and exercise, inmates were allowed a few hours in a big yard, during which they hunted shade from the broiling sun and lay panting like dogs.

Negras, short for Piedras Negras, was a small penitentiary, not much larger than jails in some populous counties, tallying out less than two hundred prisoners.

In the yard today, with the stone paving burning even through thick-soled prison shoes, the Negras convicts lay in the meager shade, eyes fixed on the bare roasted red hills rising about the prison. Those barren hills were walls hemming them in as effectively as the high stone

ones of the prison itself. In those hills there was little water, no food, little cover even to hide. Yet the eyes of the Negras inmates were fixed longingly on the hills. Out there a man was free at least; here in Negras he was a caged animal.

The man released that morning from solitary, Matchell, lay apart from the others. Most of the time his eyes were closed, but sometimes they watched Gortney who was talking to two other prisoners. A raw-boned middle-aged giant and a younger thin-faced fellow, who looked little more than a boy.

The sun was still high and the false promise of night coolness hours away when the convicts were again herded into the mess hall, to nibble at greasy beans from black kettles, washed down with gray coffee. Afterward they filed back despondently to their stifling cells.

Matchell spoke up abruptly after an hour's silence. "Got enough nerve, Gortney," he asked, "to try to get out of here?"

"You didn't get far trying it before," returned Gortney.

Matchell's lips lifted in a snarl. "They thought they found me trying to dig out. The fools—thinking that gopherin' under a wall was the way I intended to break out. I faked an escape so I'd get put in solitary a spell. To give me a chance to talk to a guard that was a close friend of my dad's when he was still alive."

He got to his feet and came over to Gortney and held out his hands. "Look at 'em," he ordered harshly. "Plenty steady, no? Too steady for

livin' thirty days on bread and water in a dark hell hole. I had good grub while I was there—not bread and water. The guard that brung me grub was a man I knew since I was a boy—this man that was a friend of my dad's. Two thousand dollars was what he needed to get me out of Negras. My mother's folks raised it."

Gortney's blue eyes looked into Matchell's gray ones, gleaming from the bristly stubble.

"When I left here I figured to take with me the fellow that was in this cell before you, but he's been pardoned out. I'd as soon take you with me. Unless you're hankerin' to stay here and rot?"

"That depends," replied Gortney, "on the chances I'd have to take to get out. I don't expect to be here long anyway."

Gortney was plainly humoring his cellmate, pretending to take his offer seriously. He watched with uplifted brows as Matchell moved to the adobe wall over his bunk and began chipping away with a blunt knife taken from some unknown hiding place. For five minutes Matchell dug and then the clay wall seemed to give way, revealing a hole. From it, Matchell brought out a six-shooter and a few cartridges.

"That's just to show you I got friends workin' for me," he boasted. "I'm taking a chance on you account I hate to see anyone stay in this hole. It's all fixed for me and my cellmate to walk out of here tomorrow night. And after we walk out it's rigged so no hounds will be able

to trail us. It's all arranged. Bought and paid for. I was going to take Doces Lopez along. Doces was a good Mexican, one that could be depended on. But he's out now. If you want to take his place, you can come with me."

Gortney, sobered by the sight of the six-shooter, sized up Matchell more carefully. Gray eyes sparkled with a reckless light from a face with high cheekbones. There was a flat look about Matchell's muscles; he was the kind who can endure hell fire itself if necessary.

"There's some gamble to it, of course," said Matchell. "What you in here for, fellow?"

Gortney chuckled. "You'd laugh if I told you they got me and two of my friends for stealing a bunch of horses we never even saw."

"Yeah, I'd laugh if you told me that," Matchell said shortly. "Not that it matters."

"Get the three of us out of here," went on Gortney, "and I'll make a deal with you. If you can get us all out, I'll see that it's worth the extra risk. You can pay that guard five thousand instead of two and get back all the money you spent in breakin' out of here, and a lot more. You're not half as crazy as I thought you were, fella. But I won't go out unless my compadres go with me."

Matchell shook his head. "Forget about them; look after yourself. Can't take three more. I've arranged to take just one. It's got to go quick and smooth or it may mean I'll have

to shoot a guard that isn't in on the break."

"I said we'd make it worth the extra risk," insisted Gortney. "Say ten thousand dollars for you. Or we'll cut you in on something so big you'll be rich. You wouldn't believe it—what we could cut you in on. One hundred sixteen turtles. Gold turtles. Sounds crazy, don't it?"

Gortney, lounging on his bunk, grinned. He was plainly a man with a humorous turn of mind. Or maybe he was a little out of his head; after a few months in the close confinement and heat of the ovenlike cells of Negras men usually talked ramblingly.

Matchell's face showed that he was thinking that Gortney's mind had been affected.

Gortney laughed. "So forget the gold turtles," he said. "But the ten thousand dollars is straight—for taking the three of us out. We're all in this block; the other two are in the same cell."

The prisoner shook his head. "Four is too many. Too much risk."

Gortney shrugged. "You couldn't get the four of us away, I know that. So forget it and leave by yourself. We've got friends working to get us out. Word may come any day that we'll be turned loose. Our lawyer has asked for a new trial."

"He'll ask but he won't get it," said Matchell cynically. "But what sort of cock-and-bull story are those gold turtles?"

"Too long a one to tell on a hot

night. Why not take all three of us?"

Matchell mixed water from the bucket and the adobe he had broken from the wall, replaced the gun and cartridges and plastered the hole over.

"I'm offering you a fourth share," said Gortney, "in one hundred and sixteen chunks of gold, shaped like turtles by the Indians that mined it a few centuries ago. That's a big jackpot to play for."

Matchell was silent for a long time. Then he stripped off his clothes and settled himself in his bunk.

"There might be room in the wagon for four men at that," he muttered. "I'll sleep on it and let you know."

He pretended to sleep and finally Gortney began to snore gently. Matchell listened; he had never been wider-awake in his life.

II

So the scheme was succeeding. He would be leaving Negras prison with Dan Gortney, Grady Slater and Lee Devry, the three prisoners who had talked together in the yard. The trio who, Matchell knew, had really been framed into Negras on a charge of stealing a bunch of horses they had never seen.

Matchell lay on his bunk, as motionless as a lizard, grinning wryly in the darkness. The scheme was working—his cousin Ranger Tom Gage's scheme. Lon Matchell was no convict. He had been planted in Negras prison for one purpose—to

make himself a confidante of Gortney, Slater and Devry.

As Ranger Tom Gage had explained it to Matchell, the three had stolen a fortune in Mexico, chunks of gold crudely refined by Indians in the shape of turtles. They had brought the gold across the border and had hidden it. To discover where was Lon Matchell's job. What better way to learn that than to deliver the three men from Negras and become their partners?

"But it's got to be done right," Gage had warned. "So they won't suspect you. They're a smart bunch, at least two of them are—Dan Gortney and Grady Slater. Young Lee Devry lets Slater do his thinking for him. But all three are tough. They've fought together in those little chili-eater revolutions and mined in Yaqui country, risking being skinned alive if they were caught."

It had been almost impossible for Matchell to believe that yarn of the gold turtles which had been dug out and refined by the Indians in the valley of the Pueblos in Mexico. There were ten villages now, their inhabitants far ahead of neighboring northern Mexico tribes in civilization, akin, in fact, to the peaceful Indians of the Rio Grande villages in New Mexico. Over a hundred chunks, each assaying something like ninety percent pure gold and worth around twenty-four hundred dollars, had been stolen by Gortney and the others from a group of Americans that had come into possession of it.

The warden would work with Matchell to make it appear that

Matchell had engineered the escape of the three. Word was to reach the trio on the following day that their appeal for a new trial had been rejected. That was to make them all the more desperate to grasp the chance to escape.

Lon Matchell had undertaken the job on one condition: He was to run the affair after the escape, arranging for the transportation of the quartet to a temporary hiding place. That was to lessen the risk that Matchell ran. There would be a great hue and cry raised after the escape, and Matchell would be in danger of being shot as an escaped convict. Gage had agreed to the condition and Matchell had entered Negras as a prisoner to be held for a short time in a cell with a Mexican who was due to receive a pardon. Gortney had been transferred to the cell after Matchell had ostensibly been sent to solitary. In reality Matchell had not been in the prison at all; he was outside making arrangements for the journey the four would make after the prison delivery.

Matchell slept after a while, to wake to another blazing day with the fetid odor of the cells of caged men in his nostrils. Breakfast and the dragging hours of the long morning and again the yard where Gortney talked for a long time with Slater and Devry, finally bringing them over to meet Matchell.

The rawboned giant, Slater, had a face in keeping with his body, with burning, deep-sunk hazel eyes. A man in his forties, he was still in his

physical prime. The boyish Lee Devry said nothing. Slater was cautious and cunning; he questioned Matchell for an hour. The trio said nothing to Matchell of the news they had received—that their plea for a new trial had been rejected.

“Just one thing,” Matchell said somberly. “The devil help you, if you men aren’t on the square. You’re three: I’m one. Don’t figure to kill me after we’re out. You won’t get far if you do. You do what I say and I’ll take you all to a place where nobody will find you.”

“And likewise,” said Slater, “if you should try to double-cross us, it would go tough with you, Matchell. There’d be a bullet through your back. If you don’t think so, you don’t know me.”

“If you don’t trust me, call it all off,” growled Matchell. “Looking at you, Slater, I don’t know that I can trust you, either.”

“Don’t worry,” said Gortney soothingly. “We need you too much to turn loose of you. You can get enough horses for us all to ride out?”

“Hell, no. I got a Mexican freighter waiting. We’ll be traveling under a load of sacked corn tomorrow, heading north for Tres Rios in San Benito County.”

“For Tres Rios?” said Gortney. “That’s good. You’ll be passing not so far from a place called White Pine on the way.”

“Could,” Matchell said shortly. “But we won’t. You’ll go where I take you. I’m taking no chances and I’m ramrodding the show. I’ve got

the whole thing all worked out."

Slater nodded. "Have it your own way," he muttered, but his deep-sunk eyes flashed with anger. He was one who was used to giving orders—not taking them.

Night came to lay a thick blanket of black over the prison, except for faint spots of illumination under lamps screened against the thousands of desert insects. The exterior of the stone hulk of Negras was lighted by arc lights which illuminated the yards and walls and a surrounding area watched over by riflemen in the wall towers. At night Negras was like a great tomb filled with living men, heavy with silence except for the occasional coughing of tuberculars.

An hour before midnight a key turned stealthily in the door of the Gortney-Matchell cell. There was a similar silent turning of the key in the cell occupied by Devry and Slater. On bare feet the four followed a guard down the dimly lighted corridor of sleeping convicts, and into a dark passageway leading to the warden's offices. Beyond lay a small yard and then the big gate, a high affair of steel, watched day and night by a guard.

The four ran into apparent disaster as they neared this gate, when they came suddenly on a tall guard. He was armed and promptly reached for his gun. Lon Matchell did not hesitate; he threw down on the guard with the six-shooter he had dug out of his cell wall. Gortney had leaped forward to grapple with the guard, but before he could reach

him, Matchell's gun crashed. The man crumpled and fell to the ground, his legs threshing.

Then the arc lights went out and the quartet, slipping through the opened gate, raced desperately across the open space beyond the walls. Guns boomed in the darkness and shots whistled by their heads until the four splashed into an irrigation ditch that supplied a few scrubby prison trees with water.

When the lights came on a few seconds later, the fugitives, led by Matchell, ran along the shallow water of the ditch, protected by the high bank from bullets. Behind them rose the wail of the prison siren, rising and falling, sounding over miles of desert country its warning of an escape.

"You didn't have to shoot that guard, Matchell," growled Slater as they stopped to catch their breath. "That will hang us all, blast you!"

"Too bad," Matchell growled in return. "Me, I don't intend to get caught again. If they ever get me, they're welcome to hang what's left of me."

They waded along the canal for some hundreds of yards farther, to turn and splash into a creek that fed the ditch. Along this Matchell went on a trot, heading back toward the mountains.

Back of them after an interval they could hear the deep bay of the prison hounds and the clatter of hoofs of the horses ridden by pursuing guards. After a mile they came to a waiting rig and team and driver.

For an hour they were carried over a sandy road, with the horses at a gallop. The rig stopped then at the camp of a single freighter, a man with a big wagon load of sacked corn under a tarp cover.

Transferring to the wagon, they lay under the corn sacks, while the rig went on to the west. It was to go for forty miles, leaving a trail easy to follow; the rig was to be found abandoned on the edge of a volcanic stretch where trying to read the sign of the horses would be like trying to trail a fly along a railroad track.

Meanwhile in early morning the freighter wagon went on, with the four fugitives crowded under a platform on which the load rested. The second night found them crossing a little narrow-gauge railroad line. Here they left the wagon. Matchell led them into the brush where, after some search, he located a handcar which he said had been left there for him. This they lifted onto the rails after which they started pumping, rolling along mile after mile through desert country.

The car had been well-oiled, but Slater cursed the noise they made until Matchell pointed out that even if they were heard, they were many miles both from Negras and from the abandoned rig. They passed through but one town, where Slater did something that worried Matchell. Taking Gortney, Slater went up the business street and returned, carrying three rifles, a six-shooter, and boxes of ammunition, obtained by breaking into a general store.

On the handcar again, they traveled steadily, until they came to a station and freight house from which Matchell told them, a branch line led off into the mountains to end at the Canyon Oro mining property. Station, branch line and mining property had all been abandoned for years. The handcar had been taken from the freight house where it had been locked up gathering dust. The rest of the trip would be made afoot, declared Matchell. The handcar would have to be placed back in the freight house just in case a check was made on it by a sheriff.

This done, they proceeded afoot, following the abandoned branch line toward the mountain, stepping carefully on ties. After miles of tramping they came into a canyon up which they traveled, following the windings of the railway until it finally ended, at a clutter of buildings scattered on the canyon bottom and the adjoining slopes—the deserted workings of the big Canyon Oro mine.

Matchell led the way into a small building and, lighting matches, found a bundle of blankets hung from a rafter, left for him with a supply of food. Too exhausted for the effort of cooking a meal, the four spread the blankets and flung themselves down to sleep.

The sun was coming up when an elbow, Slater's, jogged Matchell awake. The door of the shed was creaking open. Gortney and Devry were already awake, sitting up with their rifles in their hands, waiting tensely.

The door swung open and the rifles lifted to train on the figure revealed against the sun. Matchell's jaw dropped. A girl was looking in on them.

A moment the silence held, then Gortney spoke up. "It's all right," he said. "I know her. Pat Millikan. Fancy meeting you here, Pat," he said to the girl.

III

Lon Matchell was shocked to silence at sight of the girl. Seeing anyone here at the old Canyon Oro mine which had been deserted for nearly twenty years was a surprise, but this girl, as fresh and pretty in shirtwaist and brown skirt as the mine workings were old and ugly, was astounding. But, pretty or not, her appearance here had wrecked all his careful plans.

For an instant the girl stared at them, then the bewildered look left her face and she smiled.

"Why, Dan," she exclaimed. "Dan Gortney. Whatever in the world brought you here?"

Gortney, recovering from his astonishment, stepped forward to take both the girl's hands. "Pat Millikan," he exclaimed. "Where's your father? Here with you, I suppose? And what are you doing here?"

"Dad's not here; he's still in the hospital," she answered. "And as to what I'm doing here, I'm helping reopen the old Canyon Oro mine."

"And who are you helping?"

"A man named Fredericks. Jason Fredericks, the mining man. You've heard of him in Mexico."

Gortney laughed. "Yeah, I heard of him. That crook? You're not in with him, Pat?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Just working for him. He's offered me a good salary and I need the money for dad's hospital bills. I have to make it some way."

"And Fredericks is here now?"

"No, I'm alone just now. He's due in a week or so; right now he's on the coast raising money. I'm building an assay furnace and getting living quarters established. Fredericks may have put over a lot of questionable mining deals in the past, but he's in earnest about this Canyon Oro property. He got it at a tax sale."

Gortney turned to the others. "I'd like to present some friends, Pat. Two of them are men I've prospected with for years in Mexico and this country. Mr. Slater, Mr. Devry, you've heard me speak of the Miss Millikan I met in Villa Pedragon when I went there for supplies. And this is Lon Matchell."

Slater moved forward, his face bleak, staring at the girl hard. "You're sure you're alone here?" he demanded. He was jumping with sudden suspicion, suspecting both the girl and Matchell, guessing plainly that since Matchell had brought them here, he must have some connection with Pat Millikan.

"Yes, I'm alone," she said. "I had a Mexican freight up my stuff and help me put in a few windows and hang a door or two on the offices of the old mine." She gestured down canyon toward the huge frame shell

of a building while she looked at them, frowning puzzledly. "But you, Dan, what are you doing here?" she asked Gortney for the second time.

"Passing by," said Gortney lightly. "Let's see your quarters."

Without hesitation she took them past the roofless shed of the old power house to the mill building, a tall structure built on three levels, following the slope of the canyon wall. In old days ore came from the mine tunnel into the upper level to be ground by the stamps on its way to the level of the canyon floor where cars took it to another building for further concentration. The girl had established her quarters in the offices which were connected with the mill building and still in fair repair. She had furnished one room as living room, using old desks and box chairs but giving it the brightness of feminine influence—a few pictures, several Mexican rugs and serapes hung on the bare board walls. In an adjoining room were a little four-hole range, a cupboard with dishes and pans, a neat oilcloth-covered table. In still another room was assay equipment—balances in a glass case, dozens of crucibles, the beginning of an assay furnace.

Matchell, looking about him, shook his head. He had been here less than a week before, to hide a few supplies and blankets. The place had been utterly deserted then. That Pat Millikan should have come in since to settle here seemed more than just chance. Coincidence

worked queer things, but not something like this. Yet no one was to have known of this hide-out except his cousin, Ranger Tom Gage, and Gage could keep a secret.

"How come Fredericks to pick this place?" Slater demanded harshly.

"The Canyon Oro mine is a famous old producer," said the girl. "He's got a list of old stockholders and figures to raise money by assessments for development work."

"What Fredericks figures is to milk a fresh bunch of suckers," said Slater.

"Come, let's not be so harsh, Slater," said Gortney lightly. "We've all done a few things we'd rather forget. You haven't been in town for a few days, I take it?" he said to the girl.

"No," she said. "I've been too busy and I have no horse to use, anyway."

That accounted for the fact that she had not heard of the prison break.

"I'll cook you breakfast," Pat offered. "Had a lot of supplies freighted up for Fredericks and the miners he intends to bring."

"All right. Lee, you help her," ordered Slater, and Lee Devry obediently followed the girl into the kitchen.

The other three withdrew a little.

"All right, Matchell, explain why that girl's here," snarled Slater. "The same girl whose father dug up that turtle gold down in Mexico."

"I know nothing about her," stated Matchell flatly. "I'm as wor-

ried as you about finding her."

"It must be just luck that she's here," said Gortney thoughtfully. "That girl's father is a well-known mining man. He's got a name that Jason Fredericks would like to get to approve a company that Fredericks was promoting."

"Yeah, but her father was in Villa Pedragon last we heard, way down in that Pueblos country where that Indian gold came from," said Slater. "It's too much to ask us to believe she isn't here because she knew we were to come here. How about it, Matchell?"

Matchell shrugged. "Why in thunder would I tell her we were coming here?" he asked. "I never saw her before. She wrecks my plans as well as yours. We've got to get out of here quick before she learns we're escaped convicts. I know a ranch where we can hide—about ten miles away."

"There'll be no hiding for us if she passes the word that we're in this country," stated Slater. "They'll hunt through here with a fine-tooth comb."

"Naturally," agreed Matchell. "All I know about her is that she wasn't here when a friend of mine came to cache supplies for me. She's sure not going to keep still about four escaped convicts."

"I think she will," said Gortney. "She's already in with a crook, that Fredericks. She'll keep her mouth shut if we ask her. I'd stake my life on it."

"It happens that all our lives are

already staked. She'll keep her mouth shut, all right," Slater said ominously. In Slater's mind plainly there was only one way to silence the mouth of someone—death. There seemed no pity in Slater, where his own safety was concerned.

"Look here!" said Gortney. "I tell you she'll keep still. She needs money desperately enough to be working with this crook Fredericks. She's got to have money for her father she said. It's lucky for us that she is here. She's just what we need. Her father is a mining engineer and metallurgist, one of the best. She's been with him ever since she was a small girl, going wherever he went. She's done his assaying for years and she knows metals. And she's got nerve. The hotel man in Villa Pedragon told me she had gone into a tunnel to bring out her father when he was caught in a cave-in. It was the same as suicide—so the Indians said. We can use her nerve and what she knows about metal."

"You fool!" burst out Slater. "You're seeing a pretty girl, that's all. We've got no need for her."

"You're wrong there. That gold has got 'Indian' written all over it. Any two-bit assayer can tell from a sample that that gold was refined



by Indians a long time ago. If we try to sell it, it's going to be known right away that it's the Rio Pueblos gold, and we'll have all hell on our necks. Pat's the answer to that. She can melt down those turtles and refine them so we can send it out from here as new-mined gold."

"Listen," ordered Matchell. Far down the canyon came the faint clatter of hoofs.

Slater looked into the kitchen where the girl was setting a table and his powerful bony hands clawed as if they longed to grip a throat. A slow-moving early-morning wind sighed through the pines and scraped some branch tips harshly against an iron roof. The sound, thought Matchell suddenly, had some resemblance to that which clods make falling on a coffin top. Not such a far-fetched object to think about, either—coffins. If a posse should ride in there would be a fight. The three convicts would fight until they were killed and Matchell would be shot down along with them. The rest were also thinking about posses. Devry hurried in from the kitchen, craning his neck to look down canyon. On Gortney's face appeared a frozen smile. Slater's hand was on his gun, and he stared hard at Matchell. Seconds ticked by and the clatter of hoofs grew a little louder. Definitely the riders were headed for the mine.

"I don't know what to do about Matchell," said Slater, "but at least we can tie up this girl and gag her."

"I say if she gave us her promise,

her word will be as good as her bond," stated Gortney. "Pat!" he called.

IV

"We got to tell you something quick," said Gortney. "The four of us broke out of Negras prison a couple of nights ago. A bunch of riders are coming up canyon now, maybe a posse hunting us. We were put in Negras because we knew where that Pueblos turtle gold is hidden. We saw the gang that stole it from the Indians hiding it and we dug it up later. We'll cut you in for a tenth share if you throw in with us. I told these men your word will be good if you give it. Tell them you'll help us now with these riders and later on working over that Indian gold."

The girl looked at them. "You want me to join you?"

"Yes, and quick," growled Slater. "Very quick. Before those men get here."

"It means a chance for a lot more money than Fredericks can ever give you," added Gortney. "Take my advice, Pat, and go in with us."

The girl hesitated, then nodded. "I'll do it. And glad of the chance," she added bitterly. "What have I to lose?"

"You might get yourself in a very tough spot," Gortney warned her. "We're escaped convicts, remember."

"What of that?" returned the girl. "I'd as soon be in with convicts as with Fredericks. I need money for an operation for my father. For a tenth share in those turtles I'd do

almost anything. And, anyway, I'm not fool enough to go against four like you. It's a deal. I'll stay here with you to help cash in that gold, but don't any of you get any other ideas as to why I'm here. If you do, I'll take a butcher knife and use it."

"And I'll help you, Pat," Gortney assured her. "How about it, Slater? Do we take Pat as a partner? Those horses are getting close."

Slater plainly was the leader of the trio. He considered it for a few seconds. Then, "All right," he growled at the girl. "You talk to those fellows and get rid of them. We'll be hiding where we can hear every word you say—in the mill, behind that wall."

The four retired to the mill through a door; through cracks between the boards they could watch the approaching riders and also the room where Pat Millikan was hastily putting away the extra plates and cups she had set on the table, and getting rid of the extra bacon and biscuits she had prepared for the four men. The horsemen were quite close now, coming toward the smoke that rose from the chimney of the stove. There were eight hard-bitten riders, all heavily armed. They were led by a big man with a sheriff's star on his vest.

Matchell was telling himself that the coming of the party might be only coincidence. The sheriff might be hunting some fugitive horse thief. Even if he were hunting the convicts, so was every sheriff and marshal for a hundred miles around Negras.

"Hello, Miss Millikan," called the big leader gruffly.

"Lo, Sheriff Keyner," returned the girl brightly. "Early in the morning to be riding."

"Looking for some men. Four convicts got away from Negras prison a couple days ago. Shot a guard. Last night a store in Carter was broken into and three rifles and a six-shooter taken. That might have been done by those Negras convicts, and it might have been somebody else. We rode along the railroad tracks, but we didn't see any sign. They'd have kept to the ties, of course, if they had walked. You hear or see anything up here?"

"No," she said. "Everything was quiet all night." She started suddenly. "You don't think those convicts are really around here, sheriff?"

"No," he answered, "I don't. Where I'm really headed is to nose around the White Pine country across the range. A few years ago one of the convicts, Slater, lived over there with his wife's folks. She died but Slater's still got a few relatives around White Pine. I'm finding out if anyone in that settlement has seen any strangers, just in case these four convicts did make their escape along the main line of the railroad. You oughtn't to be in this place alone with four convicts maybe in the same country."

"I don't think there's any danger. And the boss should arrive soon, with some miners. I haven't much coffee or I'd ask you men in for a cup."

The sheriff looked at the coffee

sack, left in plain sight by the girl, and containing only a few beans. "I'll leave you some coffee if you're short," he said affably. "We had breakfast a few miles back at the Boyden ranch, but we brought along a little coffee in case we had to camp."

The sheriff clumped into the kitchen glancing at the stove and the adjoining shelves. He had nothing to be suspicious about; he was just the sort who didn't believe in passing up any chances.

"She could pass some sort of signal to the sheriff," warned Slater in a whisper.

"She knows," returned Gortney, "that would bring her only a chance to collect a share in a few dollars reward money. And Pat's no piker. It's all or nothing with her."

Slater kept his hand on his stolen six-shooter, grimly watchful. He still kept it there even after the sheriff jangled his spurs outdoors and the horses clopped on up the canyon.

"How do we get out of here?" he asked Matchell. "I don't like this place."

"Where do you want to go?" Matchell asked sarcastically. "And how would you like to travel—a Concord coach with six horses or by special train?"

"We've got to get out of here sometime," growled Slater. "The sooner the better. How did you figure to leave?"

"I didn't plan to leave for a spell," Matchell replied. "But I wasn't expecting you three to be with me when I made my plans. What I figured

was to lay low here a few weeks and then go to see a cousin on a ranch thirty miles from here. His people and my mother's come from the Tennessee mountains, and he'd do what he could to help a relative—especially against the law." He was referring to Ranger Tom Gage who had a small ranch and who was to come there to get word from his cousin.

"This mine hide-out looks all right to me," said Gortney. "With Pat to help us get rid of those turtles, a mine is the very place for us."

Slater considered it. "Maybe you're right, if we can get those turtles here. What we need is a wagon or some pack horses. And tonight."

"So soon?" said Matchell, surprised. "I thought we'd wait until the excitement dies down a little."

"No," Slater snapped. "We need money. And we might as well know if we can sell the gold through this girl. We need a wagon and a team. How you going to get it for us?"

"I can get it through my cousin. He'll keep his mouth shut."

"All right, but don't try to bring your cousin in for a share. We've got too many in on this now."

They ate breakfast finally, with Lee Devry keeping a lookout on the canyon.

"There's another thing," said Slater. "We'll have to get rid of Fredericks when he comes."

"That won't be hard," stated Gortney. "That promoter, he's easy scared. But before Fredericks comes, Pat can work a few of those turtles over and send 'em out. If that ship-

ment gets by, she can hire half a dozen men to make a show of working the mine."

"That can be arranged," agreed the girl. "I know the name of a broker who will handle any gold or silver that's sent to him, as long as he's sure it can't be traced. I'll send it to him to sell. When that assay furnace is ready it will be large enough to work over a few pounds at a time. When I'm finished with those gold turtles nobody will be able to tell that Indians ever touched 'em."

"That's it!" Gortney was enthusiastic. "I told you, Slater, Pat could put it over for us."

"That's still to be seen," said Slater curtly. "It's a roundabout way of getting rid of the stuff. I don't like these two in on it with us." He nodded at the girl and Matchell. "And maybe more before we're done. And remember this, Matchell, don't get seen bringing that wagon here."

"Leave it to me," returned Matchell. "I can travel from one end of the Rio Grande to the other, past any number of sheriffs, in broad daylight, if I have to. But I don't intend to leave until night. Right now I need some more shut-eye."

Matchell looked at the girl thoughtfully as he got up from the meal. She might be desperate enough to associate herself with four escaped convicts in a scheme to handle stolen gold. But Lon Matchell was like Slater; he was suspicious of Miss Pat Millikan and the apparent chance that had brought her to Canyon Oro.

Matchell awoke in midafternoon. The mine was quiet as a tomb. Slater and Gortney slept a few feet away from him and, getting up quietly so he would not wake them, Matchell went into the rooms used as quarters by Pat Millikan.

The girl was scraping old bricks to be placed in the assay furnace. Lee Devry was on the second floor of the mill, acting as guard.

When Matchell went into the kitchen to help himself to beans and coffee, the girl followed him. After opening a can of fruit for Matchell, she took a cup of coffee for herself and sat down opposite him.

"It seems to me," she remarked, "that I saw you somewhere before. At a cattleman's convention in El Paso. Dad and I were in El Paso at the time trying to get some mining machinery to ship to a mine he was operating in Mexico."

"Maybe you ~~did~~ see me," he admitted. "But I sure didn't see you or I'd sure have remembered it. I was in El Paso a few times with dad when he still had his cattle ranch. That was before Web Clay brought in a bunch of gunmen to shove dad off the range."

"Web Clay?" she repeated in an odd tone. "You know him?"

"I know him," he said shortly. Clay was a sore subject with Matchell and one he did not care to discuss. "I hate to see you going in with them . . . us on this gold deal. It may turn out tough for you. You'd better get out while you can. If

you're found here in cahoots with thieves, harboring four escaped convicts and handling stolen gold, you'll risk a long term in Negras yourself."

"That's all right with me," she replied coolly. "I know the risks I'm running. But there's a chance of cashing in on that Indian gold and I'm willing to take risks for a tenth share."

Matchell was shocked by the girl's cold resolution and indifference to consequences. His face showed it and she smiled.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's not stealing. My father was promised part of that gold—twenty turtles for finding it for the owners. The odds were big that he'd never locate it and it was dangerous work when he eventually did. He found it and dug it out, and he not only never got a cent, but he was hurt besides."

"The owners went back on their word to him, did they? Who were the owners?"

"The owners were all the Indians in the ten little villages along the Rio Pueblos in Mexico. They didn't go back on their word to dad: the gold was stolen from them. They had been too superstitious to hunt for it themselves, afraid it would bring them bad luck. It brought dad bad luck; he was nearly killed getting it out."

"Gortney said you went into a caved-in shaft for your father."

She shrugged that off.

"And after your father found it these three came along and grabbed, is that the how of it?" he asked. "They never told me how they got

hold of the gold turtles."

"It wasn't Gortney and the other two who took it from the Indians. It was another bunch of Americans. They killed a dozen of the Pueblos, shot them down in cold blood. If white people had been shot down as those Indians were, it would have been called a massacre." Pat's voice was suddenly hot with anger.

"Who did the massacring?"

"A gang of outlaws led by a man named Morg Mattern. He's an old-time bank bandit who was pardoned out of Negras a few years ago through the influence of Web Clay."

Lon Matchell started. "Mattern? Morg Mattern? You mean it? It's known the money that gave Web Clay his start came from a forty-thousand-dollar train robbery that he and Morg Mattern engineered together over twenty years ago. Clay was a small-town lawyer who found out about a big shipment of money and got his distant relative, Morg Mattern, to come in and stage a holdup."

"I don't know about that. But it was Mattern who took the gold turtles from the Indians and killed a dozen of them. Pursuit of his gang was so hot that Mattern had to bury the gold as he fled to the border. That was where Slater, Gortney and Devry came in, just as Gortney told it. They happened to be prospecting in the vicinity and saw Mattern's outfit hide their bloodstained loot. Later they calmly dug it up and headed north to bring it across the line and hide it."

"I guess it wouldn't amount to as much as they claim."

"Wouldn't it? There are one hundred and sixteen chunks of gold all shaped like turtles, each worth between twenty-four and twenty-five hundred dollars, judging by the samples of drillings from them I assayed for dad. It's old gold going back to the days when the Spanish first came to Northern Mexico. When the Spanish came in, the Indians were smart enough to bury the gold and let it stay buried. Only a few priests knew about it and its approximate location and they weren't bothering it until the Pueblos needed a big dam to hold irrigation water. The Pueblos were willing to have dad dig up that gold to build the dam. They trusted my father, and he did find it for them. That's when Morg Mattern heard about it, maybe through some renegade Indian. And it's my guess Web Clay financed Mattern to go down with a gunman gang to grab that gold."

Matchell stopped eating to stare at the girl. "Then Web Clay's behind all this? He'd be trying to get that money back, of course. He was the one who had those three put in Ne-gras?"

"Undoubtedly. He's about the only one who would have power enough to do that."

Matchell silently agreed. So it was his father's old enemy, Web Clay, who had given orders to the rangers to manage the return of the gold. A job that had been turned over to Tom Gage. And he, Lon Matchell, in helping Gage was help-

ing the polecat, Web Clay. In Lon Matchell began to burn a slow rage. Web Clay had wrecked Lon's father, Dave Matchell, had taken his ranch through the use of gunmen and a crooked sheriff in the next county. The gunmen had been ramrodded by Morg Mattern. Lon had fought alongside his father against Clay gunmen, had killed several of the gunmen, for which the Matchells had had to stand trial. They had gone clear, but by then Web Clay had swallowed the Matchell ranch.

The crushing of Dave Matchell had been typical of Web Clay. A fiercely energetic man of fifty, the thin-jawed, sharp-faced Clay had for more than twenty years robbed and stolen, always with the backing of corrupt law courts. A millionaire several times over, he was also the most powerful politician in the Territory. Smooth and cunning in politics, he could also be a fighter who used claws and teeth ruthlessly. He had literally pirated his way to wealth by bold robberies.

Lee Devry came down to drink a cup of coffee and make a sandwich of biscuit and meat. It was hard to figure how Devry fitted in with Gortney and Slater, unless they had taken pity on him. The sharp-spined, thin Devry was like a boy in many ways, but Tom Gage in talking of the trio had told Lon that Devry had no equal with a gun. Devry knew guns, loved them and could use them. He grinned bashfully now at Pat Millikan. His attitude toward the girl was that of a very young boy toward a pretty young teacher, one who was pleased

to be in her company, but was almost too backward to speak to her.

He and Matchell helped the girl construct her furnace, placing the bricks and mixing the cement. While they were working a Mexican family rattled past in an old wagon drawn by a scrawny team, using a little-used trail.

Near sundown Slater and Gortney got up to eat, Gortney with lively talk, Slater in grim silence. The girl served them food while Matchell joined them to have a cup of coffee. Slater growled to Devry to get back to his lookout post. Sheriff Keyner might ride back down canyon.

"You're going to leave tonight to get the wagon?" Slater asked Matchell.

"Yes. I've got a horse not far from here. I'll try to bring back that team tomorrow night, but it may be the next."

"So you've got a horse handy?" sneered Slater. "Everything is very handy. That escape was mighty easy and simple. And I can't forget you shot a guard when you didn't have to—Gortney would have knocked him out the next second. And you're too cool to put your head in a hang noose unless you



had to. By that shot you made us all four candidates for gallows. But I can't figure out why you'd do that."

"Why try to figure it out?" returned Matchell coolly. "What does all this add up to, Slater?"

"That I don't trust you altogether. You don't stack up right somehow. I can't figure you out, and if I can't figure out a man, I don't trust him."

Matchell's and Slater's eyes locked. Slater, reflected Matchell, was shrewd; he was hard to fool and his head was full of suspicions. He tensed for a possible hostile move.

"Maybe you can't figure me out, either?" put in Pat Millikan, sensing that the two men were getting too edgy for safety.

Slater grinned, looking at the girl. "I don't try to figure out women. It can't be done. Two and two don't make four with women, so what's there to figure out with them?"

"What's the good of all this growling, Slater?" asked Gortney. "Don't be so suspicious. You wouldn't trust your own mother. If Lon brings back a wagon for us, we'll be ready next week to make a small shipment."

"It don't stand to reason," said Slater, "that he can ride out without getting caught. Everything's too easy for him."

"I told you I could ride the Rio Grande from one end to the other and not be picked up," Lon said. "Now I'll prove it."

He went out to dig under a pile of scrap machinery, bringing a bundle of clothing and a shaving kit. He took it all into a little shed and

half an hour later he went back into the mill office.

Slater looked up in the dusky light as Matchell entered and his hand fell to his gun. "What you doing here, hombre?" he rasped out.

Then his jaw dropped as he identified Matchell, clean-shaven now, his face darkened a trifle, his close-cropped brown hair stained black as ink. Lon wore a blue shirt, run-over boots, a pair of patched denim pants and a cheap flop-brimmed black sombrero. He looked like one of the many thousands of young Spanish-Indian natives of the Southwest who worked on ranches, farms and in mines. He was no longer Lon Matchell; he was Pable or Pedro somebody.

"I'll be hanged!" exclaimed Gortney. "You could pass anywhere in that outfit. You could walk in and out of Negras itself."

"Yes," agreed Matchell, "I probably could. Anyway I'll get you a wagon. If all goes well, I'll bring it back tomorrow night—the next night at the latest. My cousin might not be home when I get there."

"And don't try to get your cousin in for a share of this," Slater warned him. "There's not enough turtles to go around."

VI

When full darkness came, Lon Matchell headed down the canyon following the abandoned narrow-gauge railroad, stepping on alternate ties. At a low trestle a few miles below the mine he dropped into a shallow creek, wading it to go up a

canyon, and turning off into a little side canyon that soon boxed in. In a small pasture, inclosed by a boulder fence, he had left a sorrel pony, with a saddle and bridle tied in a tree out of reach of porcupines that would chew the leather gear for the salt in it. Cornering the horse, he saddled and rode out.

It was nearly a thirty-mile ride to Tom Gage's ranch in the adjoining county, not far from the big TA Ranch of Web Clay, one of the several ranch kingdoms owned by the millionaire.

Pushing along steadily after he had the sorrel warmed up, Lon crossed a valley and then a wash-board of ridges to come to a canyon in which sat the little log cabin of Ranger Tom Gage. Gage, a bachelor in his thirties, ran a few head of cattle as a side line to his ranger job. The house was dark. Matchell tied his horse and approached the place on foot. Gage was to leave word for him in front of the door. Under a flat stone Lon found a folded piece of wrapping paper on which Tom had penciled a note. Reading it by a lighted match, he learned that Gage would be at his ranch Saturday night. This was Friday. That meant a day's wait.

It would be safer to return to watch the three men at the mine, but Lon had lost interest in recovering the Pueblos gold since learning that he was working to recover it for Web Clay. Tom Gage had known the hatred Matchell held for the millionaire rancher-politician. Lon would have plenty to say to his

cousin when Tom returned.

Picketing his horse back on the canyon slope, Lon took blankets from the house and slept under a pine. No use taking chances on explaining his presence to anyone who might drop in on Tom's house. He loafed away the next day until night fell again. Two hours passed, three and then finally a single rider, Gage, appeared.

Leaving his saddled horse tied in the brush about a hundred yards away, Matchell went to the house. Gage had his windows curtained with blankets, but through a crack, Matchell saw his cousin sitting at his kitchen table playing solitaire while he had a meal cooking. A solidly built fellow; Gage was tremendously strong, and Lon had always known his cousin's love of independence to be equally strong. But to get his job and hold it, Lon judged that Gage had to obey orders without question, which to Matchell's mind was plain weakness.

Gage met him at the door and shook hands. "You make a mighty good Mexican," he remarked. "Got a hot meal coming up from us. How'd it work out?"

"So far so good," reported Matchell. "I've got them holed up."

"They got any suspicion of you?"

"Slater smells something, but he's not sure, and they haven't guessed that I could have been planted in Negras."

They filled cups and sat tilted back in their chairs drinking coffee while meat sputtered in the skillet.

"Just what is behind this deal?" asked Matchell. "Who's going to all this fuss to get that gold?"

Gage looked quickly at his cousin. "You'll know sooner or later. The man who wants this stuff is a big hombre. The biggest in the Territory."

"Web Clay?"

"That's right. The big boss. The same that shoved your father off his ranch." He looked at Matchell keenly again. "But I suppose that's all water under the bridge for you?"

"No," said Matchell shortly. "And you know it, Tom. What does Clay want with this money? He doesn't need it."

"The richer a hog like Clay gets, the more he wants."

"And that outlaw relative of Clay's, Morg Mattern, is in it, too?"

"Yes, he's in it. Mattern stole the gold from a bunch of Mexican Indians. Had a running fight with them to the border, and when the chase got too hot, Mattern had to bury the turtles. That's when Slater's outfit got their hands on the loot."

"What do you figure to get out of it, Tom?" demanded Matchell. "I suppose Clay offered to make it worth your while to find that stuff and turn it over to him? As far as I can see, Slater and Gortney and Devry have as much right to it as Clay. Which isn't much. It really belongs to some Indians in Mexico." His face turned grim. "And all of this has been to help that Clay coyote get back something that never belonged to him? Clay and Mattern

can both go to the devil, Tom, and so can you. What got into you? You don't love this Web Clay any more than I do."

"No," admitted Gage grimly. "Maybe you didn't know it, but that turtle gold means a big pile of money. A thousand pounds of it, assaying around ninety percent gold. Close to a quarter of a million dollars. Why do you suppose I picked you for this job, Lon?"

"I don't know," said Matchell, and then grinned suddenly. "But I'm be-ginnin' to suspect it wasn't to get those turtles for Web Clay. You mean we make a play for this ourselves?"

Gage nodded. "Yeah. That's why I put you into this. If we get away with it, Clay will try to send us both to Negras for it, or more likely have us killed. He might even try to make 'em think you were a real convict and that you shot a guard while escaping. But too many people at Negras know you're not a convict and that you only shot that guard with a blank cartridge and he played dead. I figure when you find out where that stuff is, you and I will just turn Slater, Gortney and Devry over to some sheriff, grab those turtles and vamoose with 'em."

"The set-up now," said Matchell, "has a girl in it." He explained while Gage listened intently. "They've put me in for a fourth share for getting them out of Negras. They're using the girl in a smart scheme they've figured out to sell that gold. I kind o' doubt, Tom, that I'd be willing to turn those three

over to the law. It's too much like double-crossing 'em. My share is only a fraction, but even a fraction of a half ton of gold means a lot of money. I'm no hog. I'll split with you on my fourth."

Tom Gage considered it, grinned. "I'm no hog, either. Let it lay as it is. I'll stall Clay and Mattern off while you stay there for a few weeks to get all those turtles worked over into gold that can be handled. I don't blame you for feeling as you do about Slater and Gortney and Devry; those three fellows were on the wrong end of the dirty deal. Besides that, they're dangerous; they'd kill you in a minute if they suspected this was a fake. It's smarter to work with them. They tell you where they hid those yellow chunks?"

"Not far from Canyon Oro, unless they're fooling me. They want a wagon and team to haul it to the mine."

"We'll ride out and get that little black mule team of mine. You'd better travel at night. Even in that get-up, you might be stopped. Clay may have men trailing me. He's too sharp to trust me to handle this alone. It would occur to Clay that if he was in my place, he'd make a try to grab that loot for himself. And my keeping the place secret where the three went has made him suspicious. Morg Mattern has a bunch of gunmen over on Web's TA Ranch. They're too close for comfort. It won't be easy to put this over on Web."

"No," agreed Matchell. "But I feel good about a chance to try it."

He slapped his cousin's shoulder, but Tom Gage stiffened.

A muffled *clump-clump* of hoofs sounded on the trail below the house. Hastily, Gage put away the extra cup and plate while Matchell went into the adjoining room, leaving the door open a crack.

"I told you," Gage called in, "that Web has a bunch of gunmen over at his ranch. Ten to one, this is some of his outfit."

Eight riders came into the clearing in the dim moonlight to pull up before the door. All dismounted, but only four came to the house. If necessary Lon could escape through a window, but he waited as he heard the thin, sharp, unforgettable voice of Web Clay. The lean rancher-politician, chewing an unlighted cigar, was in the lead of the four men who came in. Behind Clay was a hulking giant with thick black mustache whom Lon identified as the outlaw, Morg Mattern. The quartet took chairs while Tom Gage started a fresh pot of coffee.

"Your man got them out all right," said Clay, "but it raised a lot of excitement. The newspapers that've been against me are smelling something wrong on that escape. They've figured there's a connection there with that Mexican gold, and they've already got me and Morg hooked up with that job. Meanwhile, those Pueblo Indians have complained to the Mexican government about that gold steal and the Mexican ambassador got our state department sicked

on to it. Which means Secret Service men will come in here."

"Can't blame those Indians for trying to get back that gold," Gage said. "In a way I suppose they owned it."

"No, they didn't," rasped Clay. "That gold came out of the ground. Nobody owned it. Whoever got hold of it was the owners. And that was me and Morg here."

"I heard," said Tom, sitting down, "that it was stolen from the Pueblos and a dozen or more Indians killed by the gang that took it."

"Don't listen too hard to what you hear," growled Clay, fastening his colorless eyes on Gage. "But I didn't come to talk about the title to that gold. We'll have to work faster'n I thought. No time to fool around in the hope those three will tell this fellow you got with 'em where they hid that stuff. I've changed my plan. I want those three brought to my ranch. I'll take a chance on making one of 'em tell where they hid those turtles. Where you got those fellows?"

"It was agreed that I was to run this thing my own way," protested Gage.

"But I changed my mind. I'm the boss of this show. I want those three men on my TA Ranch. I'll string them up over a slow fire and make 'em talk. Where are those men?"

"What split do I get out of this?" Gage countered.

"You're paid a hundred dollars a month to take orders," snapped Clay.

"Yeah, but who do I take 'em from?" Gage returned cynically. "I'm not working on this for you, Clay. I went into it as part of my job as ranger to get back stolen gold. And it's a question who the gold was stolen from."

"So that's the way it is!" snarled Clay. "I sort o' thought you might have ideas about those turtles. You get no split from me. You ride with us right now to grab those three."

"I'll work this out in my own way," Gage insisted. "It's either that or you never find those men."

"We really don't need you, Gage," stated Clay. "We're going to know pretty quick where they are, and when we find them, we'll have that gold. Word came to me that no later than last night some men traveling in a wagon dug a hole in a canyon in the White Pine country and later filled it up. There was nothing left in the hole so it's reasonable to assume they took something out. I'm gambling it was Slater and his two pals and what they hauled off was the Pueblos' gold. I've got men trailing that wagon, but meanwhile I'll give you a last chance, Gage, to work with me. Tell me where those men are—or were."

Lon Matchell, watching through the crack in the doorway, suddenly saw one of the men with Clay leaning forward in his chair. This fellow, a wide-shouldered swarthy breed, was at Gage's side, out of the ranger's view. Too late Matchell realized suddenly that the breed was

turning up his six-shooter, still in its skeleton holster, evidently intending to fire at Gage. Matchell had his six-shooter in his hand. Yelling a warning to Gage, he swiftly yanked open the door to fire at the breed who, he guessed, had received some signal from Clay to shoot Gage in cold blood.

Matchell's bullet smashed the man in the chest, sent him reeling from the chair, still clutching the gun in the skeleton holster. Smoke, however, came from the breed's gun barrel, and Tom Gage had fallen sideways from his chair, with a hole welling blood from his temple. Lon tried to get Web Clay with his next shot, but Clay had leaped into a corner of the room out of range of Matchell's six-gun.

Morg Mattern was also moving out of range, although Lon got a shot at him just before the fourth man smashed out the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. Two shots sent at the doorway smashed the door frame on either side of Matchell and he realized he had no chance here. Tom was done for with that hole in his head, murdered in cold blood, but revenge for that would have to wait until later.

Yells sounded outside. The four men left in the yard were running toward the house. Matchell crossed the small room to leap through a window, taking part of the flimsy sash with him as he crashed his shoulder against it.

Outside in the dim light he saw a man just rounding the corner of

the house. From the man's side came the lancing flame of a gun sending a bullet whipping past Matchell's head. Lon's shot was close on the heels of the man's; the fellow grunted, spinning around before he went down.

Then Matchell was fleeing into the brush which grew up to the back of the house, hurdling small bushes in his flight, while guns crashed behind him, using as target the noise he was making. He was purposely running in a direction opposite to the one in which he had left his horse tied. After about a hundred yards he began a quiet circle to the left. Some of Clay's party had mounted to send their horses smashing through the brush after him, but he dodged through them to reach the sorrel. Instead of racing off he led the animal up the canyon side, keeping to ground deeply carpeted with pine needles. Mounting finally, he rode over the ridge, leaving Clay's men, who thought him afoot, circling in an effort to find him.

They had had only a brief glimpse of him through the doorway of the dark bedroom, therefore they would surely have taken him for a Mexican. They could guess, however, that, Mexican or Anglo, he meant danger for Web Clay. They would realize he had overheard the talk with Tom Gage and had seen the ranger killed. His story told at ranger headquarters would be bad for Web Clay and Morg Mattern; Tom Gage had a lot of friends among the rangers and outsiders both. From now on Web Clay would be moving fast.

Lon rode toward the mine, raging silently over the treacherous murder of Gage and his inability to avenge it. He had always hated Web Clay for what the man had done to Lon's father; now that debt had the added blood of a relative.

His best chance of getting vengeance on Web Clay was to join the three fugitives, to become an outlaw in fact and flee with them. Flight was their only chance now; they had no time to have Pat Millikan work over the gold turtles. All Slater, Gortney and Devry could do was to hide the gold treasure again and return later to dig it up.

Escape would not be difficult. Matchell had provided the means, having foreseen the possibility that it might be necessary. At a ranch only ten miles from Canyon Oro he could get horses for all of them—good horses.

There was one alternative to flight: to ride to notify Sheriff Keyner of the killing of Tom Gage and to tell the officer the whole story of the Negras escape. Keyner hated Web Clay and was one of the few officers in the Territory who would not take the millionaire's orders. But the sheriff was slow-witted; he might only see four convicts who had escaped from Negras. Nor was there time to try to find Keyner; the people at the Canyon Oro mine had to be warned of Clay's coming. Granting, of course, that they had returned there with the Pueblos' turtles.

Heading straight for the mine, Lon

spurred the sorrel hard on the back trail to head him finally down over the rim of the canyon. Dropping toward the clutter of old mine buildings, he guessed that he was covered by guns as he neared the mill.

When he pulled up the sorrel, he saw Gortney and Slater stepping out to meet him. Pat Millikan followed the pair.

"Where's the wagon you were to bring?" sneered Slater.

"I heard you got one somewhere else," Matchell retorted. "Couldn't wait for me, was that it? You made a big mistake there. Web Clay knows about that trip you made to the White Pine country and the hole you dug there. You fools, why didn't you send him a telegram?"

"It was a mistake, I guess," admitted Gortney. "We got Pat to hire the team and wagon of a Mexican who passed here. After he'd gone, Slater and Devry and I went to White Pine. But how did Clay know about that?"

"He's got spies around this country," explained Matchell. "Anyway, he knows. I heard him say so. And he's got men trailing that wagon. We've all got to head for the border. I can arrange to get horses at the ranch of a friend of mine. We'll lay over a day there and make the ride across the line tomorrow night. You'll have to come back for your blasted turtles later."

Slater looked hard at the rider, sitting in the moonlight. "Maybe, Matchell," he said grimly, "you'd better be frank with us. We don't

like being herded around blindfolded. How come you heard Web Clay say he knows we're here?"

"I'll turn up my cards for you to read. Clay and Morg Mattern came to my cousin's ranch tonight, with half a dozen gunmen. My cousin was a ranger, Tom Gage. He's dead now. Gage and I rigged up that escape from Negras. No guard was shot; that was a blank cartridge I fired. I was told you were thieves, and I was to get in with you to find out where you had cached that gold from Mexico. You three might be thieves, but not as big a one as Web Clay. His bunch shot down Tom Gage in cold blood tonight, mainly because Clay has had a bad scare thrown into him. The Mexican government has asked Washington to find that Pueblos gold. Which means Secret Service and border men on the job, maybe finding out too much about Web Clay, who backed Morg Mattern to steal that gold."

"That the truth, is it?" asked Gortney.

"I'm handing it to you straight. If you feel you owe me something for my part in this, cut loose your wolf. If not, there's no time to lose. Miss Millikan, you'll have to get out of here. You know too much to be safe with Web Clay. Take my horse and ride to town and put yourself under Sheriff Keyner's protection."

Slater snarled. "I'm damned! And we were fools enough to fall for your game. And now we've got to get out of here just like that? While you slip back here and dig up that gold?"

"How can I when I don't know where you hid it?" countered Lon Matchell. "Me, I'm through with those turtles. All I want is to get Web Clay. But I'll take you out of here first, if you can trust me."

"Why should we trust you, blast it?" demanded Slater, hoarse with rage. "We ought to shoot you out of that saddle."

"What good would that do us?" Gortney put in. "I'm believin' him. He offered to take us to Mexico. I'm in favor of going."

"I'll be hanged if I leave here," stated Slater. "We can't take much of that heavy stuff with us and we can't hide it well enough so it won't be found. I'm not running. We found those turtles and our title is better than Clay's. We didn't kill any Indians to get it."

Matchell shrugged his shoulders. "If you stay here, you're done for. Web Clay's men will come in and kill you all."

"Listen, you Gortney, and you, Slater," spoke up Pat Millikan. "You've got no chance of cashing in on that gold. Then why let Web Clay get it? If you can't have it, why not see that it goes back to the real owners—the Pueblo Indians? You'll be hunted down if you leave here, be escaped convicts the rest of your lives. If we all go to Sheriff Keyner to tell our stories, it will go back to its rightful owners."

"I doubt that will work," stated Matchell. "If we all go in to Sheriff Keyner, he'll consider us just convicts. By the time we get him to believe us, Clay will have those tur-

tles and once he has them nobody will ever get them away from him."

"I'm staying here, regardless," said Slater stubbornly. "I'm going nowhere. And that goes for Lee Devry, too. Gortney can do as he pleases."

"That's it," said the girl. "You men stay here and hold off Clay while I bring Sheriff Keyner and a posse. When you show him those turtles, he'll just have to believe you."

Gortney chuckled. "You don't know what you're asking, Pat—for us to fight just to save that gold for a bunch of Indians in Mexico."

"And what's wrong with that?" she returned. "You'd fight to the death for a lot of things not as important. It's queer what men will fight and risk their lives for, but they won't often fight for what's right, just because it is right."

"You don't get fat fighting for what's right," Gortney said cynically. "Lots of men that have done it got six foot of earth and not even credit for it. But because you ask it, Pat, I'll stay to keep Web Clay from getting that stuff. Only I'll be hoping for a chance to get it for ourselves. But how do we know Keyner won't throw in with Web Clay? Clay's the big boss in the Territory."

"He doesn't boss Keyner," declared Matchell. "If Miss Millikan will ride to get him, he'll come here to help us. When you show him those turtles, he'll see that we get into an honest law court. Once we're there, you can go free from that framed-up charge that put you into

Negras. It's either that or nothing."

"There's something to make it worth your while," the girl said. "The Pueblos promised dad twenty of those turtles if he found that old treasure for them and saw that they got a dam built. I lied about dad needing an operation; he's already had one and is recuperating from it now. Those twenty turtles he was to receive will go to you men if you can save the rest for the Indians."

"You seem to take a lot of interest in those Pueblos," observed Gortney. "Why, Pat?"

"Because they took in my father when he fell sick while mining near their valley and nursed him until he was well. They learned to trust him enough to tell him about their gold treasure. They wanted him to get a dam built for them at the head of the valley, to provide water for the fields of all the ten villages. That dam would give Pueblos the richest valley in Mexico. Those Indians deserve that dam. They're hard-working, peaceful, decent people. Dad still hopes to build the dam for them. That's why I came here to try to get that gold back for them."

"And you weren't here on a deal with Fredericks?" asked Matchell.

"No. I knew you were coming here with these three. I got a clerk's job in ranger headquarters a few weeks ago, figuring the rangers would be asked to get back that gold. I knew Tom Gage had been put on the job and that you were helping him. One of the Pueblo Indians who was up here, trailed you and saw you putting in supplies at this

place. I guessed why and I was here when you came."

Slater laughed bitterly. "So we weren't the only fools, Matchell. You make monkeys of us, but this girl made one of you. Go ahead," he told Pat Millikan. "Ride to get this honest sheriff. And bring him quick. We can't hold out long if we're jumped here by Web Clay and Morg Mattern."

Matchell put the girl on his sorrel and she rode down canyon, taking the trail for the county seat. Meanwhile the four men prepared a defense. Gortney, Slater and Devry were no amateurs at fighting. Gortney, who had been an army officer, although he did not mention the army he had served in, pointed out that a square-roofed concrete water reservoir some twenty feet across would make a stout fort. In the moonlight they set to work strengthening this, taking adobe bricks from fallen walls to make a parapet several feet high about the sides of the empty reservoir, leaving loopholes for guns. On the roof, following a suggestion of Matchell's, they placed a layer of bricks. After that they lugged in cans of water and all the available food, together with fuses and caps and a box of giant powder which Pat Millikan had had freighted up under her pretense of re-opening the old mine. Gortney also picked up a number of tin cans and gathered a box of small scraps of iron, nuts, pieces of bolts. He had an idea in his head for making crude bombs.

Another idea came to Lon

Matchell and was grinningly approved by Gortney. Using old rusted pipes, they ran a little train of powder from the reservoir to the ramshackle three-story mill building, ending it under a pile of shavings and tinder-dry waste. The pipe lengths were covered so they would go unnoticed. If too hard-pressed, they could light that train of powder and set the mill building afire, creating heat that would be unendurable by attackers for a hundred feet about the reservoir. In addition, at night the burning mill would spread a broad belt of illumination about the reservoir.

Daylight found them putting the finishing touches on the reservoir. After that there was nothing to do but wait. Matchell was figuring that by now Pat Millikan had reached town and had talked to Keyner, if the sheriff were in town. If he were absent, a messenger would have to be sent to hunt him and in the big expanse of San Benito County that might take a day.

They were surprised that Web Clay's gang had not shown up. Clay must have wasted hours in hunting for the man who had escaped from Tom Gage's cabin or in trailing the wagon from White Pine. Or he might have waited to bring more men from his TA Ranch.

It was past noon when the first riders, twenty or more, topped the ridge far up canyon, to drop down the slope and disappear into the brush of the canyon bottom. That meant the siege had begun, and one

thing was certain: Web Clay would do all he could to end that siege quickly—to prevent outsiders from interfering. There were too many newspapers which, if Clay ever got into real trouble, would seize the chance to spread on their pages all of Clay's misdeeds. The exposure of Clay's and Morg Mattern's bloody seizure of the Pueblos' gold would be just what Clay's enemies had long prayed for.

Through a pair of battered field glasses he had used on the range, Matchell had a brief look at the riders as they passed an open space a few hundred yards up canyon. Matchell identified many as cowboys working for Clay, most of them outlaws who depended on Web Clay to protect them from warrants out against them. Clay was not with the riders; in charge evidently was the black-mustached Morg Mattern.

In other countries where Clay owned sheriffs' lock, stock and barrel, he would have had his men deputized; here they rode merely as fighting men. Their caliber guaranteed a bloody, merciless battle and they were not long in getting into action, the guns soon sounding from all sides of the reservoir. Starting with a few weapons, more and more guns got into action, hailing in shots from all about the tiny fort. Then after five minutes of this bombardment, at a shouted command, the guns suddenly stopped.

A man behind the rickety structure of the old mill called out in a booming voice: "You got no chance, you fools. Give up!"

"Morg Mattern sounding off," Matchell guessed aloud.

"Morg Mattern, is it?" muttered Gortney. "What terms you givin' us?" he called.

"You're convicts," returned Mattern arrogantly. "You know what we want. Tell us where it is and we'll let you get across the border."

"Your generosity's plumb too much," returned Gortney mockingly. "I take it you're Morg Mattern. We'd trust the word of a rattlesnake before we'd trust yours. Come up closer, you coyotes. We got a lot of poison bait to feed you."

After this defiance the guns began to sound again, rifles crashing out from all about the reservoir—from the iron sides of the shaft building up the slope, from the mill and big ore dump, and from behind the rusted boilers of the power plant—sending bullets that dug harmlessly into the adobe bricks.

The four squatted in the close quarters of the old reservoir and waited cagily until they could line up targets—men who exposed themselves too recklessly for safety. After several men were hit, targets became scarce. An hour of this futile firing and the shooting died, to be succeeded by the sound of hammering. Mattern's men were rigging up a sort of moving wall of sheet iron, laid on timber sledlike runners. This was to be pulled toward the reservoir by a long rope made from a dozen lariats knotted together and stretched down canyon across the ore dump. On the other side of the dump saddle horses would provide

the motive power. Eight or ten men walked behind the barricade as it began moving forward.

The four in the reservoir let the contrivance get within thirty yards, which Gortney judged close enough. He had filled a number of tin cans with bolts and nuts, packed about a half stick of giant powder with a cap and short fuse attached. Lighting the fuse on one of these hand-made bombs, he flung it like a baseball through one of the wider apertures left for rifle fire. As the can landed close to the moving wall, the men behind the barricade, realizing what it meant, fled with terrified yells. The explosion blasted the movable barrier to bits and the defenders were able to pull down two of the attackers before they reached cover.

Angered by this failure, Mattern bellowed orders, and again the guns crashed. Gortney, whistling cheerfully, patted his giant powder bombs.

VIII

The afternoon hours passed with several attempts by men to work their way close to the reservoir fort, crawling advances in small groups. All of these Gortney stopped cold by hurling his crude can bombs. They usually exploded harmlessly in the air, but the whirring hunks of metal terrified men who would have faced guns bravely enough. Unwilling to risk being blown to pieces, the attackers finally settled to a steady firing on the reservoir. Plainly they were marking time until night.

More riders had come down the canyon, until it seemed to the beleaguered that they were encircled by an army. Shots were sent in from every possible angle, even from the roof of the old stamp mill, but the riflemen might as well have been using stones and slingshots for all the damage they did.

Toward dusk, using his glasses, Matchell saw through one of the rifle slits Web Clay riding down canyon, bringing still more men. Clay had come to take personal charge of the battle.

By now he and Morg Mattern would be badly worried. Time was working against the pair. They would realize that a gun battle fought in even so remote a corner of San Benito County as Canyon Oro could not long be kept a secret. Some rancher or sheepherder would be sure to hear the racket and send word to Sheriff Keyner. And Keyner was the last man that Clay wanted to interfere in this affair.

Night came slowly, deepening from dusk. A rush by men from all sides in the darkness could not be stopped by the homemade bombs. As to help, so far there was no sign of the aid which Pat Millikan had promised to send. The sheriff must have been out of town and no one else there with authority to raise a force to ride to the canyon.

When full darkness came, the four decided to fire the mill. All indications pointed to an imminent rush on the reservoir. The pace of the firing had been stepped up.

Gortney lighted the train of pow-

der and with a little hiss the flame disappeared into the pipe. Minutes passed with nothing happening and Gortney guessed that the powder line had been broken. The suddenly a flicker of light showed through the broken windows of the lower story of the mill, a little flame blossoming in the darkness, to grow swiftly in size.

Before the attackers noticed the outbreak of the fire and could move to extinguish it, the whole lower floor of the mill was ablaze, with flames licking fiercely at the bone-dry walls and ceiling. When some of Clay's men did rush into the building to put out the fire, the four in the reservoir shot at the figures revealed by the flames. So dry were the bleached boards of the structure that even without the handicap of the guns, the fire fighters would have failed. In a few seconds the building was doomed, with flames sweeping upward to wrap themselves about the timbered ribs and board skin of the entire mill.

That fire would paint a glare in the night sky which could be seen for miles. Knowing that, while the fire mounted steadily toward the high roof, Clay sent a score of men crawling up on the still dark side of the reservoir. Helped by the darkness, they got close in spite of the tin can bombs that Gortney hurled at them. Matchell identified Web Clay's thin, furious voice offering ten thousand dollars cash to be divided among his force if they got rid of the four within half an hour. There came a sudden rush, a dozen

men running crouched over, firing fast as they came, while the rest tried to send in enough shots to keep the attackers under cover.

Then a huge can of iron slugs exploded before the rush, checking it at least temporarily, but Lee Devry, hit by a bullet sailing through a loop-hole, went down on his face. Slater bent over him, striking a match for a look. Then he stood up and grunted.

"Git up there and give 'em a few more shots, Lee," he ordered in his hard cold voice. "Don't let those wolves git you without you gettin' a few more of 'em first."

Obediently Lee Devry struggled to his knees, muttering to himself, raising his rifle, only suddenly to slump and go down on his face. Gortney cursed Slater for his heartlessness and bent over the thin figure to place his hand over Devry's heart.

"Tell him to get up again," Gortney snapped at Slater. "Maybe you can bring him back to life to fire a few more shots."

"He's only a few minutes ahead of us," snarled Slater. "You don't think we got a chance in a million, do you? Lee ended easy which is more than we'll do if Clay and Mattern get us alive."

"Clay will have a bunch of hot gold to handle anyway," muttered Gortney, and Matchell suddenly guessed that the gold turtles had been buried under the mill. Which meant long hours, maybe a day before any excavating could be done

under the ruins. That would hurt Morg Mattern and Web Clay, but it meant no good to the three fighting for their very lives.

In the narrow confines of the reservoir, the big rawboned Slater took over Lee Devry's side in addition to his own. Gortney flung out another tin bomb at the group crawling along an arroyo. The can fell short, but the group ran as if the concussion had flung them back bodily. As they fled, Slater's rifle knocked down two of the running figures.

"If you ever miss throwin' one of these cans through those holes, Gortney," Slater remarked, "we'll all be blasted to pieces in here."

The flames were mounting to a deafening roar. Gortney and Slater raised defiant yells, trying to shout the loud voice of the flames, acting like men gone insane. Matchell felt half insane himself, as if the thick powder smoke in the reservoir had filled his brain.

Clay and Mattern were adopting Gortney's weapon to turn it against the three. One of their men, crawling along a small ditch on the down-canyon side, suddenly hurled a small bundle of dynamite sticks. They failed to reach the roof for which they were intended, but they exploded near enough to cause disaster. Overwhelming in its force, the explosion all but shattered one side of the reservoir. The shock hurled Slater against Matchell, sending down both men, while a portion of the roof caved in, showering dirt down on them. Lying under Slater for a moment, Matchell had a horror

of being buried alive.

"That got 'em!" he heard a voice yell. "Go in and finish 'em off."

Matchell, gouging dirt from his eyes, fought clear of Slater, shoving the big man off him to get to his feet. A group of men was running across from the dump and Matchell got his six-shooter into action, emptying it at the party, halting them. On the other side the first party was coming again. Gortney was knocked down also, bellowing like a man gone berserk. Slowly, he got up and struck a match to a fuse of a can. He was too weak to throw it and Matchell flung himself on Gortney barely in time. Snatching the can from Gortney's hands, he flung it toward the approaching party. The explosion stopped that rush. Hearing the screams of the wounded men left on the ground, the Clay-Mattern men lacked the courage to make another try.

Matchell dragged Slater out from under the debris, and splashed water over him. The man sat up, cursing, and got weakly to his feet. Despite the fallen portion of roof, they had flung back an attack which would have meant certain victory for Web Clay. Slater fumbled for his rifle, cleaned the dirt from it.

Gortney, Matchell discovered, had been hit in the left arm by a shot and blood was soaking the sleeve. Matchell tied it up for him, with strips torn from his own shirt. With Gortney crippled and Slater all but out, Matchell knew the end was at hand. It had become only a matter of minutes that they could possibly

hold out; sooner or later Clay and Mattern would guess their desperate plight and would persuade their wolves to make the finish rush.

A lull came now in the attackers' fire and the three had a drink around of cold coffee, muddy with dust. The fire meanwhile had wrapped the whole mill building in flame, and the canyon bottom was as bright as noon.

Rage came to Matchell, an insane fury at their helplessness. "Let's go out and get 'em!" he said. "We're done for anyway. No help is coming for us. They'll bury us the next bunch of dynamite they throw. Let's go out and jump 'em."

A little silence greeted this suggestion, then Slater spoke up irritably.

"That's something that only a damn fool would think of," he said. "You're out of your head, Matchell."

"You said, 'Let's go out and get 'em,' I believe," said Gortney slowly. "I wish I'd known you longer, Matchell. That's a good idea, Slater. A damn good idea!"

A growl came to Slater's throat, then he suddenly laughed. "It's an idea, at that. We'll blast a hole through the ring of 'em and get ourselves horses and ride out."

"Not a chance in a million of getting twenty feet," said Gortney cheerfully. "But grab all these cans you can carry and let's start. We're two-legged men—not rats to be pulled out of a hole."

They were crazy, but it was the kind of craziness that sometimes transforms a lost hope into victory.

Before they could act on the wild idea, however, there was a clatter of hoofs on the canyonside to the south and a hail that came from the slope. Dimly seen far above them were a dozen horsemen, headed by a huge rider.

"This is Sheriff Keyner," a voice boomed. "I always wanted to get something like this on you, Web. Come out into the light. You're all under arrest, the whole pack of you."

There was silence for a few moments. The sheriff, Matchell thought, must be a bullheaded fool to imagine that his office carried enough authority to make Web Clay quit. A fool not to realize the desperation in the men he sought to arrest. Only overwhelming numbers would make Web Clay even consider surrender, and in his present position not even then. Certainly he would not fear the comparatively few men Sheriff Keyner had brought.

The Clay-Mattern men turned on the sheriff, forgetting or ignoring the men in the reservoir. The rifles broke out savagely, firing at the horsemen who hastily dismounted to take cover in the rocks and brush.

For this new battle the burning mill provided light equal to that of a blazing noonday sun. The flames, fanned by an up-canyon draft, were now shooting high above the roof, gushing out great showers of embers which fell like the water of an enormous fountain.

The sheriff's party had the advantage of the darkness of the upper slope, but they were badly outnumbered.

Their horses had plunged off through the brush, leaving their riders to take the brunt of an increasing hail of shots, sent from behind ore dumps, sheds, and piles of rusted machinery and boilers.

"What we waiting for?" demanded Gortney hoarsely. "We got Clay's men between us and the sheriff. Let's go out and finish 'em."

He crawled through the opening torn in the roof by the explosion, carrying two of the powder-loaded cans, while Matchell promptly followed him with half a dozen more. Outside, they dropped into a small arroyo that made a crooked route, crawling along it until they were only a few yards from riflemen who were shooting from the top of the ore dump.

Chuckling, Gortney struck a match to a fuse projecting from one of the loaded cans, and Matchell flung it on the top of the dump. It was as though a dozen rifles had opened up at once from close range. The men fled, racing toward the blazing mill, just as a huge section of the structure fell crashing on the canyon bottom. While Clay-Mattern men scuttled about, hunting cover, rifles smashed out from up canyon, and Matchell guessed at once what had happened: Sheriff Keyner had cannily divided his force, to send the greater part of his men up canyon to get behind Clay.

Clay and Mattern were now surrounded on three sides. On the fourth was the burning building which each moment was sending out more intense heat.

Web Clay realized that he was in a trap and took a desperate chance to escape. He, Mattern and a dozen men came from behind the huge boilers in a roofless shed and started climbing the canyon slope of the north wall, racing for the brush. The blazing mill made them perfect targets for nearly thirty rifles and the group went down as if a giant scythe had slashed among them. Sight of this disaster was too much for the other attackers; they bawled frantically that they were quitting.

In an instant the battle was over; the guns fell silent and only the crackling of the flames filled the canyon. Sheriff Keyner marched down the slope, and the men who had come with him began to herd prisoners into a shed.

Matchell and Gortney realized that Slater had not followed them from the reservoir and they went back to investigate. They found Slater's lifeless body lying not far from Devry. When Matchell dragged him out into the light, he and Gortney found blood staining the rawboned body of the man in three places, two of them evidently old wounds judging by the amount of dried blood around them.

"He was a tough one, Slater," said Gortney slowly. "When he told Lee to get up and use his last strength in firing a few more shots, it was only what he himself was doing."

Pat Millikan had followed the sheriff into the canyon bottom. She came up to Matchell and Gortney

just as Keyner strode toward them.

"Out of Negras, are you?" said the sheriff, gazing at them. "It's a queer story Pat Millikan told me when she finally found me. You can tell it in court. Where are those gold turtles?"

Gortney waved at the blazing mill. "When that cools off, you can dig 'em up. They won't crawl away."

"I'm accusing Mattern and Clay of murdering Ranger Tom Gage," stated Matchell.

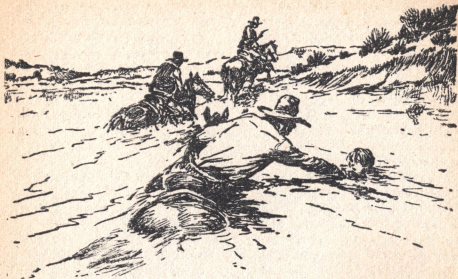
"No good," said Keyner. "Morg Mattern won't live long enough to stand trial. Web Clay is dead with six bullets in him. The more a man gets the hungrier he is for still more. But I always noticed that he finally tries to bite off too big a chew."

Pat Millikan looked at Gortney and Lon Matchell. "You two," she said, "will get your twenty turtles. But you'd better come down and help dad build that dam for those Indians."

Lon Matchell guessed he would go to help build that dam, but not for the sake of some Indians he had never even seen. Pat Millikan would be down there, and when you met a girl like her, you didn't lose sight of her. He looked at Gortney and saw Gortney smiling at Pat Millikan in a way which showed plainly that Gortney would be down there also helping build that dam.

Matchell shrugged his shoulders. It would be another fight, to see which one got Pat Millikan. No matter—a girl like that was worth fighting for.

THE END.



SQUATTER'S SHOWDOWN

by Clint MacLeod

Quitting was getting to be a habit with Highpockets Hardesty until he met a button who stacked up to man size

LONG after he'd loaded his scanty belongings into the wagon, Highpockets Hardesty lingered before the little shack that had been his home these past six months, a lanky, dour figure with the taste of defeat in his mouth. He'd come here broke, and he was leaving equally broke, and all this was as it had been before. You found a stretch of land and squatted on it, but always there was

a big fellow nearby, a man like Tracy York who owned enough acres to give him arrogance, and in the end you got squeezed out. So you loaded your furniture, hitched your saddler behind the wagon and tried it farther west. There had been a monotonous frequency to Highpockets' failures.

Not that Tracy York had come with gun-slinging, fence-cutting riders as other big cattlemen had done

on other ranges. No, York had kept to his own side of brawling Bridger River and had even been curtly polite whenever he and Highpockets had met in Hondo town. But the big fellows hated nester neighbors, and Highpockets reckoned that York, master of the Flying Y, was no exception. The attitude of Sam Birch, Hondo's bank president, had borne that out.

A small loan might have tided Highpockets over the coming winter, helped him hold out till he combed his few H Bar H critters out of the crowding hills and made a sale. So he'd put the matter up to white-haired Sam Birch who'd swapped a saddle for a banker's swivel chair. Fiddling with a pencil, Birch had run his eyes over the lanky length of Highpockets. "A bank wants collateral," Birch had said. "I don't think you've got any assets that would interest me, Hardesty."

Slow in all ways, Highpockets was slow to anger, but that remark had put an itch in his knuckles. No assets, eh? How in blazes could a man get any assets if a range conspired to keep him down? But the bank's window bore the directors' names, and one was Tracy York. This Sam Birch likely did another man's bidding, so Highpockets held onto his wrath, knowing the futility of unleashing it.

But he'd thought things over since, and no matter how often he added up the facts, they fetched the same sum total. Tracy York had beaten him without even lifting a finger. That was why Highpockets Hardesty

had loaded his wagon this morning.

Pulling himself up onto the seat now, he took the reins in his long hands and gave a last backward look at the shack, wondering if he should fire it. But that shack had been here when he'd squatted on the land, a clapboard monument to some other nester's failure, likely. He'd made it livable and he'd leave it that way, he decided, Tracy York might have a use for it, and Highpockets could mention it to the Flying Y man when he made his dicker.

For Highpockets was on his way to see York, and that was the bitterest pill of all to swallow. He had to sell his scattered, skimpy H Bar H herd to somebody. He had to swap those cows for a new grubstake, and Tracy York was the man to pay quick cash. York would set his own price, but Highpockets couldn't be choosy. Now that he'd decided to leave this range, he was impatient to wind up the last detail and be on his way.

Thus he veered southward from his shack, paralleling Bridger River to the ford and striking eastward across that roaring stream. The taste of rain was in the air this morning, the sky hung low and gray, and a look at the river told Highpockets there had been a cloudburst back in the hills. The current buffeted the wagon, the water reaching higher than the hubs, an ominous sign. But he made the crossing, came through the fringing willows and pulled across broken country toward the palatial Flying Y headquarters. He was almost there and it was nearly

noon when he met Tracy York riding up from the south out of Hondo town.

With York were Sam Birch and portly Doc Giddings, Hondo's medico, and a half dozen hands of the Flying Y. York rode in the lead, a tall, powerfully built man, immaculately clad as always, and he swung his saddler abreast of the wagon.

"You, Hardesty," he shouted. "Have you seen anything of my boy?"

Highpockets speculated on the frantic tone of York's voice as he gave an unhurried answer: "Didn't know you had a boy."

"That's right, you wouldn't. Tommy's twelve. He's been back East at school. He came into Hondo on the ten o'clock train last night, and he was supposed to put up at the hotel till I sent for him today. But he's disappeared. Folks saw him talking to two strangers on the depot platform, saddle bums, from the cut of 'em." York's gesture took in Giddings and Birch. "These friends are helping me hunt him."

"I crossed the ford from my place," Highpockets offered. "I didn't see anybody."

York wheeled his horse. "Let's be riding!" he shouted to the others.

"Wait!" Highpockets cried. "I've got business to talk with you."

"Later," York called over his shoulder and thundered out of earshot.

Watching the horsemen until they dipped out of sight into a broad coulee, Highpockets slowly turned

the wagon around. It was beginning to rain, a slow, spiritless drizzle, and his mood matched this dismal day. "Later," York had said. That was the way of the Yorks of the world, to do things in their own good time and fashion. And Highpockets would have to postpone his departure until York finished his search. Probably his boy had started out for the Flying Y on his lonesome, taking a different trail than the one the father had just covered. Kids were like that.

Yet there was something ominous in that story of two saddle bums talking to Tommy York at the depot, and it bothered Highpockets. But the troubles of the Yorks were no affairs of his, he told himself savagely. And so thinking he rolled along, finding the going harder as the rain turned the dirt road into a mire. When he came to a stretch that had been sandy an hour before, the rear end of the wagon bogged down to the hubs. Reluctantly he laid the whip along the horses' backs, forcing them hard against the harness. Wood splintered, and Highpockets climbed down and ruefully viewed a broken axle.

That, he decided wearily, just about made everything perfect. But he'd learned to accept adversity with a certain stoicism. Unharnessing the team, he hobbled the horses to graze on Flying Y grass until his return, and then he dug a hatchet out of the wagon, stowed it in his saddlebag and swung aboard his saddler. Trees grew along the river, and he'd find the makings of a new axle there, so

he veered southward toward the stream. And that was where he found the two men and the boy.

Threshing along a wet tunnel that burrowed through interlacing willow boughs, Highpockets came into the small clearing so suddenly that he almost rode over the small, sputtering campfire. The two men who were crouched beside it came to their feet, a pair of unshaven hard cases, and the boy looked on with round eyes, all three holding silent. *This is them*, Highpockets thought, and his lanky frame tightened. *These are the saddle bums and yonder is Tommy York.*

He had his scarred old Colt at his hip, and he had the feeling that he'd be using it, though he was no great shakes with a six-shooter. When two seedy-looking strangers loped off with a rich rancher's son, those strangers must have had ransom in mind and they'd be primed for trouble. But surprise gripped him when the taller of the two displayed buckteeth in a wide grin and said: "Howdy, mister. Light down and have a cup of cawfee."

Highpockets came out of his saddle, moving like a man walking on thin ice. He wanted to say something, but he didn't know what. "Name's Hardesty," he volunteered. "Highpockets Hardesty."

"Glad to know you," said Buckteeth. "I'm Ike Cuff. My pardner here is Jig Banners. We're strangers hereabouts. The button is Bub, Jig's kid."

That didn't surprise Highpockets. They'd be bound to have some kind

of a story, and if they chose to meet the unexpected in the form of himself with a bluff instead of bullets, he wasn't going to make it harder for them. And now that he'd gotten a good look at the kid, he was doing some wondering. The boy didn't favor Tracy York much, and he didn't look as though he'd gotten off a train last night. He was wearing a baggy blue shirt and bib overalls several sizes too big for him. Those overalls reached to his armpits and were turned up till they were more cuff than leg. Highpockets wasn't too sure about that boy.

Taking the tin can of scalding coffee that was handed him, he had a long swig. "Ridin' through?" he asked.

"Lookin' over this Bridger River country," Cuff said, and Highpockets glimpsed horses off in a thicket. "Bub hollered to come along, so we let him. He's right handy around a camp. Hey, Bub; better fetch another bucket of water. Looks like we'll be needin' more cawfee."

Obediently the boy got a bucket and trudged toward the river. He was in sight all the while, and Highpockets watched as he came back, hugging the bucket close and slopping water over his overalls. Again the squatter's suspicions flamed. That boy was a novice at such work. But Bub handed the bucket to the smaller man, Jig Banners, and said, "There you are, dad."

"Hey, Tommy—" Highpockets said suddenly.

Instinctively the boy spun around, and Highpockets grinned ruefully.

"My mistake, Bub. You favor a younker I knew back in Dakota, and I called you by his name—"

Jig Banners brought a gun into his hand with amazing swiftness, and that gun rammed into Highpockets' stomach. "You know!" Banners snarled. "You figgered to find out the safe way and pass it off as a mistake! It didn't work, mister! You know he don't belong to us, don't you?"

Highpockets shrugged, cursing his own curiosity. Why in thunder hadn't the kid tipped him a wink? "The button's dad is out with a search party," he said. "I met up with 'em this morning. But I wasn't sure about this kid till now."

"Too bad!" snapped Banners. "Likely it will be a rope and a tree and boots dancing on air if we're caught. We can't chance your totin' word back to his dad. You can savvy that."

He eared back the gun's hammer, and it was Highpockets' dismal thought that all the Yorks were bad luck for him. One York had nudged him off this range; another, inadvertently, was going to edge him into eternity. He wanted to tell these two hard cases that he didn't give a hoot how many Yorks they kidnaped, and the more ransom they got out of Tracy York the better pleased he, Highpockets Hardesty, would be.

Yet he knew that he didn't really feel that way. You couldn't blame a kid for being the son of his father, and he had a hunch that Cuff and Banners wouldn't care whether

Tommy came back to his father dead or alive, once they got their ransom. Or was it ransom they were after? Why had Tommy York helped his captors by pretending that Jig Banners was his father? There was a riddle here, but Highpockets reckoned he'd never get the answer. He would like to have gone out fighting, but Ike Cuff had quickly snatched the old Colt from the squatter's holster.

Clearing his throat, Highpockets said: "For Pete's sake, get it over with!"

"Wait!" Ike Cuff said suddenly. "I ain't breathin' easy till we put this river between us and Hondo. Mister, you could maybe show us a ford. The kid don't know the country. He's been back East since he was knee-high."

Highpockets cleared his throat again, sweat starting out all over him now that there was a reprieve. "I can show you a ford," he admitted.

They got their horses from the dripping bushes, and Tommy was hauled up behind Jig Banners. Highpockets pointed north and they started that way, Ike Cuff in the lead, Highpockets coming after him, and Jim Banners in the rear. Hemmed in thus, there was no chance at making a break.

But Highpockets' mind was busy enough, and any way he surveyed this situation it wasn't to his liking. First, there was the menace of Cuff and Banners. They were leaving him alive because they needed him, but once across the river they'd need

him no longer. Also there was the danger that Tracy York and his search party might appear at any moment. York and his followers would find Highpockets Hardesty with these men, and Highpockets, stranger and alien on Bridger River range, might be suspected of being in cahoots with Cuff and Banners.

Even Highpockets' appearance on the Flying Y this morning might seem to have a sinister implication. York might reason that Highpockets had come on a pretext to find out what was being done about Tommy's disappearance. In any case, there wouldn't be much chance for explaining with bullets buzzing around.

So Highpockets kept a wary eye out for the search party, half hoping it would come, half hoping it wouldn't. And in this manner he jogged along to the ford.

The rain was a blinding sheet now, the river roaring bank full, its yellow, frothy crest dotted with uprooted cottonwoods, brush and debris. At the foot of the dugout bank leading down to the crossing, Highpockets gestured mutely. Ike Cuff took a look, spat.

"You call *this* a ford?" he demanded harshly.

But it was the best there was, and they started across, the water rising to the stirrups and then to their knees, the current clutching at them until, long before they'd reached mid stream, the horses were swimming. Highpockets was wondering if he was going to have to slide off

his mount and be tail-towed across. And then, above the roar of the river, he heard a shrill cry of fear.

It wrenched him around, that cry, and he saw Tommy York floundering in the stream, the boy's face a pale, stricken blob. Somehow Tommy had lost his hold on Jig Banners and was being swept downstream. Fortunately Highpockets was below the other two riders, their single-file order broken by the vagaries of the current. Reaching, straining desperately, he felt his fingers close on Tommy's collar. He gave a heave and thought he was going to be unhorsed, but he got Tommy closer and dragged the boy into his arms, holding the youngster with one hand while he clutched the saddlehorn with the other. Then they were floundering on toward the west shore.

His mouth close to the boy's ear, Highpockets said, "What is this, Tommy, a kidnaping? How did you get in with those two galoots?"

"They started talking to me at the depot," Tommy explained. "I thought maybe they were from dad's crew. They asked me all about myself and when I told them my dad had the biggest ranch hereabouts, they said they'd take me there. When we got out of town, they made me put on some extra clothes that Banners had in his saddlebag. Then they said they were going to keep me till dad paid a lot of money."

So it was an out-and-out kidnaping, after all! But: "Why didn't you try tipping me off when I rode into your

camp?" Highpockets asked angrily. "You played like you belonged to 'em and let me blunder into trouble."

"They heard you coming down the trail," explained Tommy. "They said that if I didn't play up, they'd shoot you before you could say 'Jack Robinson.' I had to behave, Highpockets. I just had to, or you'd have been killed!"

The horse splashed out of the water, fought its way up the bank. Just for a second Highpockets tinkered with the thought of sinking spurs into the mount, making a run for it. But Ike Cuff had reached the bank, too, a little north of Highpockets, and Cuff had held his gun in his hand all the way across to keep the water from getting at it. Jig Banners wasn't far behind his taller partner, and there was no chance to make a break.

Lowering Tommy to the ground, Highpockets came down from the saddle. The kid's teeth were chattering, and he was blue with cold. Highpockets said,

"We've got to get a fire started and dry out this boy's clothes. He's wet to the skin and that river was mighty cold."

Cuff skinned back his lips. "To blazes with that!" he said. "We ain't stoppin' till we find a place to hole up. The kid can get warm then, while me or Jig is out makin' a ransom dicker with his paw."

"There's an empty shack a piece north of here," Highpockets volunteered, and didn't add that it had

been his own up until this morning.

"A shack, eh?" Cuff said. "Lead us to it."

Highpockets nodded. He hadn't planned that it would be this way. He was putting a noose around his own neck, probably, for if Tracy York's search ended at Highpockets Hardesty's shack, it would look mighty bad for the alien squatter of Bridger River range. But there was the boy to think about, and Tommy York had suddenly become very important in Highpockets' eyes.

That little talk with Tommy had done it, that talk wherein Tommy had confessed to playing Cuff's and Banners' game to protect the hide of Highpockets Hardesty. The name of York had been poison to Highpockets up till then, for the name had represented broad acres and big houses and all the things that hard years had denied a squatter. But if Tracy York, born with a silver spoon in his mouth, had denied men like Highpockets the crumbs of life, his son had proved of a far different caliber. Tommy had sided Highpockets, and Highpockets was going to see Tommy through. It was as simple as that.

And Tommy was worrying the lanky squatter. The boy had taken to sneezing, and as the miles slowly unreeled, his face turned hot with fever. Highpockets was afraid of pneumonia.

The storm had brought in a premature dusk by the time they reached the shack. The crude structure was stripped of furniture now, but it was

shelter. Carrying Tommy inside, Highpockets stripped him of the ragged clothes the hard cases had given the boy to replace the store-bought garb that might have aroused the suspicion of any wayfarer they'd met. There was a tattered blanket on the bunk, a blanket Highpockets hadn't thought worth stowing in the wagon. Wrapping Tommy in it, the squatter wished mightily for his pot-bellied heating stove, but it was in the wagon. There was an old junk heap of a cooking range that had been in the shack when he'd taken over, and he worked at the tangle of stovepipes, got them into place and started a fire.

All the while, Ike Cuff and Jig Banners poked about the shack, not lending a hand but making a studious survey of the one-room interior as though they smelled a trap. Cuff had a look in the corners while Banners nosed in behind a burlap curtain Highpockets had once strung along the wall to make a closet of sorts. Their examination finished, Cuff said: "I noticed a shed out back. We'll put the hosses in it. I'm keepin' your gun, Hardesty, so don't get any ideas about runnin'."

The two tramped out, and from the bunk Tommy said: "Dad used to have a rifle on pegs over the door. But I suppose he took it along when we moved out of here."

That spun Highpockets around. "How's that?" he demanded. "You mean your dad had this place once? As a line shack?"

"No, he built it for us to live in. That was when I was only knee-high.

By the time I was big enough for school, dad moved across the river. And last year he finished his new, big house. He told me about it in his letters. I'm sure anxious to see that new house."

For a moment Highpockets only stared, hearing Tommy's words but not quite grasping them at first. Yet he knew what they implied. Tracy York hadn't always lived in his palatial Flying Y ranchhouse, hadn't always been a master of broad acres. Tracy York had once lived in this very hovel, had known poverty and despair and all the things a squatter knows. But York had built on such a foundation, for the proof lay across the river for any man to see. It made Tracy York, big cattleman, kin to Highpockets Hardesty, down-at-the-heels squatter. And it drained the last of his hatred for the cattle king out of Highpockets Hardesty.

For it came to Highpockets that he'd never had a real reason for hating Tracy York anyway. A parade of failures had soured Highpockets, making him believe that every man was against him. But maybe York hadn't influenced Sam Birch, the banker, after all. Maybe Birch had refused a loan for his own reasons. But the important thing was that Highpockets had learned a lasting lesson. To be a Tracy York you had to first be a Highpockets Hardesty, but a Hardesty who stuck instead of a Hardesty who quit. The old, self-pitying Highpockets was gone, and the new Highpockets began to grin.

"What's funny, pardner?" Tommy asked.

Highpockets didn't answer. He could hear the *squish-squish* of boots as Cuff and Banners came slogging around the shack and inside. He had served their purpose now, and he wondered if this would be the finish. But apparently the reprieve was being extended, for a while, at least.

Cuff had fetched a slab of bacon from his saddlebag, and Highpockets was ordered to fry it. While he worked, the two asked him about the Flying Y, Banners cursing stridently when he learned the exact location of the ranch.

"I'm not crossing the river again while this storm's on," Banners announced. "The ransom can wait. And I reckon the rain'll keep any search party on the other side of the Bridger."

Highpockets had been thinking about that, too, but he wasn't so sure the river would stop Tracy York. Once the man had combed the country on the other side of the Bridger, he'd make his search on the west bank. But Highpockets wasn't so concerned with the whereabouts of Tracy York any more, or what the cattleman's coming might portend for him. It was Tommy who took all the squatter's attention, for the boy was rapidly getting worse.

Tommy had fallen into a fitful, delirious sleep, tossing and turning and muttering, sometimes speaking of the East and school, sometimes speaking of his father. Ike Cuff, prowling the room again, found a lantern under the bunk, an article

Highpockets had overlooked when loading his wagon. And this gave them skimpy light through the long, dark hours with the rain driving relentlessly against the roof and nerves growing frayed and raw.

There was little Highpockets could do for Tommy. He kept the shack warm and wished mightily for a doctor's skill, but he knew that there'd be no use appealing to these two hard cases to let him go fetch a medico. And then, with midnight near, Banners, who'd been dozing on the floor, leaped to alertness, pressing his face against a window.

"Riders out front!" he said hoarsely. "Eight or nine, I'd say! They've got us hemmed in tight!"

"This kid's dad, likely," Highpockets said quietly. "You've finally tangled your twine, gents."

Cuff was on his feet, too, his gun naked in his hand. Fear and desperation in his eyes, he spun on Highpockets. "We're hidin' behind that gunny-sack curtain," he growled. "But we'll be keepin' our guns on you. Just remember that! You're gonna tell them jiggers that you found the kid on the trail and fetched him here. You ain't seen hide nor hair of anybody but the kid, savvy! Let 'em take the button with 'em. Let 'em do anything. But don't let 'em know we're here, if you want to go on living!"

Then Cuff was sliding behind the curtain, Banners squeezing in with him. Saddle leather squealed as men dismounted outside, and fists thudded at the door.

"Come in," Highpockets called, and the bigness of Tracy York suddenly filled the open doorway.

"Tommy!" the cattleman cried as he spied the feverish, sleeping figure on the bunk. *Tommy!*"

White-haired Sam Birch and portly Doc Giddings were close behind York, the medico moving quickly to the boy's side. "Pneumonia, maybe," Giddings announced after putting his hand on Tommy. "But more likely just shock and exposure. How do you come to have him, Hardesty?"

"Yes," York said grimly. "That's what I'm wondering."

Now was the time for Highpockets to tell his lie, but before he opened his mouth, a Flying Y cowhand thrust his head through the doorway. "There's three hosses out behind!" he announced. "One's Hardesty's saddler; the other two has got brands that don't belong on this range. Boss, there must be two other men around here some place—the two that was seen with Tommy at the depot, likely!"

"How about it, Hardesty?" York demanded harshly. "Where are those other two?"

One wrong word now and guns would be spouting from behind that burlap curtain. One wrong word and hell would be unleashed in this little room. But inspiration had come to Highpockets Hardesty. "They're not in here," he said. "You remember that old root cellar down by the river bank? They're hiding in it."

Complete bewilderment—surprise—dawning understanding—all these had their turns in Tracy York's eyes, and then his glance swept the room as his gun flowed into his hand. "Come out from behind that curtain!" he ordered. "Come out, or we'll blast you out! I know you're there! It's the only place in here where you could be hiding!"

Even then Highpockets thought there'd be gun flame and death, and there might have been if Ike Cuff and Jig Banners had been long enough on nerve. But the strangled voice of Cuff said: "Don't shoot!" The two of them came out with hands upraised, but they must have suspected that they'd been betrayed somehow, for there was venomous hatred in Cuff's eyes as he glared at Highpockets.

"This jigger was in on it, too!" he snarled. "Ain't that right, Jig?"

"Sure," Banners said. "Sure. If we're doing an air dance, you can shake out a noose for him, too. He threw in with us today for a cut of the ransom we figgered we'd get."

Sam Birch's white eyebrows arched. "I believe they're right!" he said. "Tracy, this squatter's been short of money. He tried to get a loan off me lately. And he was siding these jiggers when he told us they was in the root cellar. He hoped we'd all go stampedin' outside lookin' for 'em—which would have given them a chance to skin away!"

"I'm not so sure that was Hardesty's idea," York said slowly. "You see, Sam, you couldn't know

this place as well as I do, because I built it. And you couldn't know it as well as Hardesty, because he's lived in it for months. There never was a root cellar down by the river bank, and there never will be. With the Bridger rising every rainy season, a root cellar would get flooded. Hardesty knew that. Perhaps he knew that I knew it. When he started talking about a root cellar that didn't exist, I knew he was trying to tell me something he didn't dare put in words. That meant these men were hiding within earshot. And the curtain was the only thing that could possibly be covering them."

"Just the same—" Birch interjected.

Over on the bunk, Tommy York opened his eyes and stared deliriously about. "Highpockets," he called weakly, "where are you?" Highpockets put his hand out to the youngster and fingers closed on fingers as Tommy slipped off to sleep again.

Tracy York stared thoughtfully. "I think," he announced, "that I'll wait until my son's recovered enough to tell his version before I pass any judgment. Boys, you can take these two strangers to the Hondo jail."

Doc Giddings never went fifteen paces from his office without toting his bag along. He had it with him tonight, and he went to work, and an hour after the Flying Y cowhands had departed with the prisoners, the medico reported that Tommy would

be up and about in no time. Sam Birch, lingered until then, started shaking hands and bidding good-bys, coming last of all to Highpockets Hardesty.

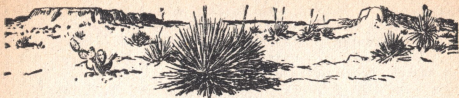
"I've heard what the kid's had to say, and I was mistaken about you, Hardesty," the ex-cattleman admitted gruffly. "Drop into town sometime. I think we can arrange that loan for you."

Highpockets grinned as he shook hands. "I still ain't got any more assets for collateral than I had before," he said.

Sam Birch gave him a long look. "I think you have," he countered. "You see, when I mentioned assets I wasn't meaning houses or land. I mean the stuff that's in a man. No man ever got a loan off me the first time he asked for it. If he hung on without my help, then I knew he was worth his salt and backed him from there on out. I had you pegged for a gutless quitter, but a quitter wouldn't have backed Tracy's kid the way you did today. Your kind of assets are good at my bank."

"I'm thankin' you," Highpockets Hardesty said sincerely. "But I reckon I'll get along without leanin' on anybody. Just give me time. Me, I'm aimin' to put up a man-sized ranchhouse on this side of the river after a few good seasons. And when the time comes, I'll be havin' all my neighbors in for the housewarmin'. I'll ride a piece with you, Birch. I got to get my wagon back from across the river."

THE END



DESERT CACTUS

by Jim West

THE desert country is a strange land of drifting sand and brightly painted mountains, a region of huge rock pinnacles and craggy, sweltering canyons. It is the home of scorpions, Gila monsters, and burning thirst. It is also the place where some of nature's strangest plants, the cacti, grow.

The desert is not all desolate. It is too big, and it has many moods that range from the somber and forbidding to an aspect that is bright and cheerful. When the cacti are in bloom, generally in May, the wastes of sand can be a scene of flaming beauty, splashed with the brilliant reds and yellows and oranges of the gaudy cactus flowers.

The cactus family, the most striking group of all desert plants, is truly American. The geographical center of their distribution is the arid region of the Southwest and on into Mexico. They flourish most widely in the United States in western Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and southern California. But they are adaptable plants. Some species grow

up to timberline in the southwestern mountains. Prickly pears, the common, flat-leaved, long-spined cactus, are widespread. They stretch east into the southern States and *even extend into Massachusetts*. They grow as far north as western Canada.

Cacti, which means more than one cactus, vary from small round tufts of interlaced barbs covering a tiny plant, the pincushion cactus, up to weird "trees" with thick, stiff, thorny-armed limbs standing forty and fifty feet above the sand-swept, sun-baked desert. All of them are so constructed that they can withstand drought and are able to survive in the inhospitable land in which they live.

The root system of the cactus is extensively spread out and lies close to the surface of the soil, where it can drink up the infrequent rains rapidly before the sun again dries out the earth. They store the water in thick, fleshy stems, or round, stubby bodies. No matter where the place or what the season, a thirsty man in the desert can scrape himself

enough water from the pulp of the "barrel cactus" to keep him going back toward civilization, or the camp from which he wandered.

In addition, to keep evaporation of their moisture to a minimum, cacti either have no leaves at all or at best very reduced ones, and the stems and branches have a waxy skin. They are literally paraffin-coated. Another interesting thing about the plants in general is their physical reaction to the local weather conditions. After a rain their bodies are fat and plump and solid, like that of a heavy eater who has just finished Christmas dinner with all the trimmings. During a long, hot dry spell they shrink. The stems of the prickly pear shrivel, and the fluted trunks of the saguaro, or giant cactus, contract between the ridges much like a collapsed concertina.

Perhaps because of its size, as well as its oddly unreal shape, the saguaro, *Cereus Giganteus* according to the scientists, is the most striking member of the cactus family. Whole forests of these cactus trees grow in a few isolated, favored spots in the Southwest. Outside of Tucson, near Pantano, Arizona, in the foothills of the Tanque Verde Mountains, a sixty-three-thousand-acre tract known as the Saguaro National Monument has been set aside by the Federal government to preserve one of the greatest forests of this strange plant.



Saguaro

Some of these corrugated monsters are fifty feet tall, and a hundred years old. Their thick trunks, and thick, perpendicular branches that often stick out from opposite sides of the main stem make them look like huge candelabra, or in the silver glow of the desert moon like stark, silent sentinels of a long-dead world.

As is the case with cacti, the saguaro is a slow grower. Before the tree is three feet high it is about thirty years old. The fifty-foot-and-over stature is not attained until the plant is a veritable Methuselah of a hundred desert summers or better. The bloom of the saguaro, a waxy white blossom appearing on the ends of the branches in May, is Arizona's official State flower.

Next to the thicker, stubbier barrel cactus, the saguaro is the best water absorber of the whole tribe. It can live two full years without rain. Numbers of these trees are found in other sections of Arizona, and in the southern California desert country. They are more common in the arid wastes of Sonora, Mexico. Quite a few are found in the foothills of the Sierra Madres.

The saguaro cactus bears flowers and fruit each year. Many Mexicans and desert Indians of our own Southwest consider the fruit excellent eating. From June to July they gather the strawberry-red, egg-size pulpy fruit that hangs down from the ends of the thick branches of the trees. The outsize berries are harvested by knocking them off the branches with a long pole and then picking them up from the ground.

The crimson fruit, full of black seeds, is eaten both fresh and sun-dried. A saguaro jelly is made by the Indians and can be purchased at some of the Indian trading posts. The juice of saguaro can be boiled into a sweetish, flat-tasting sirup. And the sirup—
man, oh man—
can be fermented into an intoxicating saguaro wine, a beverage of considerable authority.



Barrel

It is one of the remarkable blessings of the desert, where vegetation is scanty at its best, that the fruit of virtually all true cacti is edible. It may taste strange to those unused to it, but it is not poisonous. That is something that is good for every desert traveler to know. It is the sort of miscellaneous item of desert lore that may come in very, very handy some day.

The pulpy fruit of the common prickly pear is both edible and sustaining. Ripe fruit can be eaten raw. Green fruit can be boiled to the consistency of apple sauce—it takes about ten hours—and then eaten. Even when the fruit is not in season, the flat, lobelike leaves of the prickly pear, with the thorns burned off them, can be roasted to make the skin easily removable, and the gooey pulp inside eaten. It has a sweetish taste.

The *bisnaga* or barrel cactus is the one from which the increasingly popular cactus candy sold in the

Southwest novelty stores is made. This fresh-water reservoir of the desert is spine-covered. As is the case with other members of the cactus family, the thorns are nature's protection against too heavy a depredation on the part of the desert's animal life. The name explains not only the function, but also the shape of the barrel cactus. It is a fat, portly fellow rising, when full grown, from three to five feet above the surrounding sand. Its waxy, green hull is fluted. The interior is composed of a queer, spongy, water-holding tissue. The outer skin is tough as whang leather.

To get at the life-saving water, which is generally warm, flat and with a sweetish suggestion of sugar in it, the top of the barrel cactus is whacked off, a job that resembles scalping a gigantic soft-boiled breakfast egg. The plant is no fountain, however. The water doesn't gush forth. With the top off the plant, the pulpy tissue inside has to be pounded with a stick—a piece of dried, dead cholla will do if you have no ax handle handy.

When the inside is a soggy mass, if you must, wet your lips with the moisture first, and then wait until the water gathers slowly in the bowl-like depression that has been made by jamming the pulp down toward the bottom of the plant. As much as a quart or two of drinking water may be obtained from a single barrel cactus. On rarer occasions almost a gallon. Invariably there is at least enough to provide a drink.

The stubby, branched, heavily nee-

dled cholla cactus—the jumping cactus—is generally considered the bad boy of the family. Its thin, sharp spines are covered with microscopically small “fishhook” barbs. They stick into the flesh easily, at the slightest touch or brushing of the plant. But they don’t jump in of their own free will.

Once in the flesh, the fishhook barbs make them difficult and painful to extract. If you are one of those inquisitive persons who dabs a finger at wet paint just to see if it is really wet, touching a cholla is a sure cure. The short outer joints of the plant come off so easily, and the spines dart into your fingers so readily, it takes but little imagination to believe the thing actually jumped at you. Worse, the fallen joints often lie on the ground, and the barbs are strong enough and sharp enough to push through the side leather of a shoe.

Chollas are tall branching plants with a straight main stem, some four inches in diameter, from which the clusters of villainous, stubby, barbed branches extend. The plants may be five or six feet tall. The lower portion is generally a burned, brownish-black from the dead lower joints. The top, or crown, with its thick head of straw-colored spines, often glistens golden in the sun. But all that glitters in the desert is not gold. The jumping cactus definitely proves that.



Cholla

In some places chollas stand alone, or mixed with other desert growths. In other sections they grow in fields, thousands of the plants grouped in a single area. West of Needles there is a field of chollas near Highway 66, the famous road across the southern California desert to the coast. Other groups of them are found in Arizona, parts of Nevada, New Mexico and western Texas.



Ocotillo

Like a lot of other things, chollas bloom in the spring. Then the show they put on with their hundreds of deep-red, bronze, yellow and purple flowers is a sight worth seeing. It makes you forget the spines for a moment. The fruit of the cholla, completely spineless, is small.

Troublesome as the jumping cholla can be to man, cattle in semi-arid sections sometimes browse on the spiny tips, perhaps for the moisture inside the plant rather than the food value they afford. Even so, the thorny fodder causes them to shake their heads, slobber and drool. They act as if they didn’t like it.

With pack rats it’s different. These little creatures habitually dine on cholla stems. They pick up joints broken off by the wind, or accident, and start in on them from the broken end—where they can thrust their noses into a piece that is spineless. Then they eat from the inside out. Smart, those desert pack rats.

We better mention the ocotillo, too, with its flaming red flowers and long, slender, thorn-protected stems that sway in the southwest winds, though strictly speaking it is not a genuine cactus. The botanists—and they should know—say it belongs to an entirely different plant family. They have blessed it with the high-sounding name of *Fouquieria Splendens*. Ocotillo sounds better, and its other name, the coach whip, is even more descriptive.

The desert is a hard country. Everything in it seems strange and unyielding. Yet somehow it always appears a lot more friendly when you have at least a nodding acquaintance with its distinctive plants, those spiny sons of guns, the cacti.

Thorns and barbs they have, it is true, but the cactus plant lives in a harsh country. It had to develop its spikes as a means of self-protection. Without them the green plants, lush and tender in the spring would have

been too welcome food for every bird and animal living in the desert fastness. And the young cactus would have had no chance to survive. It could never have grown to weird and startling maturity.

The cactus has become so much a part of the desert, the vast arid stretches of the Southwest would seem drab without it. Aside from ornament and its own peculiar fascination, the cactus, particularly the common prickly pear, has a definite economic value to the cattlemen ranging their blaze faces on areas where the vegetation is perennially sparse. For them, in times of acute grass shortage, the prickly pear, its spines singed off, makes a substitute forage that has pulled many a head of beef through until tastier, if not more nourishing, grass feed was again available.



Yucca

THE END.

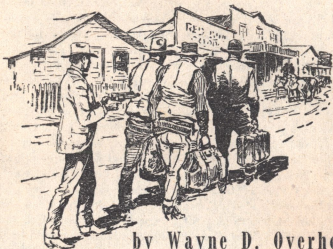
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COLT-LAW ROUNDUP



by Wayne D. Overholser

Unless he could throw lead as well as he could quote Blackstone, Ad Carrick was slated for a quick-trigger finish

I

THE folks of Sink didn't want another lawyer. Ad Carrick knew that, but he didn't know why. He'd left Sink four years ago, and he hadn't been back since. There had been a time—Ad could barely remember it—when Sink had no need of lawyers, for the only law had been the law of the six-gun enforced by a man's fast draw. Then the railroad had come to Sink and the town fathers, aware that the old, easy days were gone, had called in Ad's dad, Link Carrick, given him

the town marshal's star, and told him to clear the hard cases out. That was exactly what Link Carrick had done. Then, when Monument County had been formed, Link had been elected sheriff.

Now, as the train wound down the long Banjo Creek grade, Ad pondered the strange things his father had written in his last letter. He wondered, too, what had happened in Sink during the four years he had been gone. Link Carrick had never been one to write long letters. They had been hardly more than notes

scrawled on a single sheet of paper, telling about the last storm, or the new cement sidewalk they'd laid in front of the bank, and ending by saying he was well.

He shouldn't have stayed away for four years, Ad told himself. He dug his father's last letter out of his pocket as he had a dozen times since he'd left Portland, and read it again, but there was no clue as to what had actually happened. It merely said that it wasn't a good idea for Ad to come back to Sink, that there had been a big change, and that Ad would do better to nail up his shingle in a bigger town west of the Cascades. Then Link had added a P. S.: "To be plumb honest, son, Sink ain't got no use for another lawyer. You'd starve out here, or mebbe stop a slug."

The train rattled across the high trestle over Banjo Creek, and rolled on the last half mile to Sink's depot. Mechanically Ad rose, picked up his bags, and moved down the aisle. He was still thinking of the P. S. his father had added. It didn't make sense. There had been lawyers in Sink before. He remembered Luke Burrows and Joe Catlin. Both had been in Sink for years. A new lawyer had come just before Ad left. A fellow named Fonse Gowdy. Burrows and Catlin had been old. Dead maybe now. Sink needed lawyers. There should be plenty of room for a young man.

Ad stepped down from the car, and paused, blinking for a moment in the bright, afternoon sunshine. Four years had brought no change

to the town's appearance. There was the same dingy depot with the usual knot of men standing beside the platform watching the train come in, the long, dusty street leading to the business block, the sun-drenched, wind-swept business buildings showing Ad their ugly backs.

Ad told himself he wasn't surprised that his father hadn't met him. He had written that he'd be in Sink sometime this week. This was Wednesday. He couldn't expect his father to meet every train for a week, and yet disappointment keened through him. This was a lonely homecoming. Nothing as he had imagined it would be. He hadn't expected a brass band, but he had hoped his father would be there, and maybe some of his friends. He grinned mirthlessly as he picked up his bags. Perhaps, now that he was a lawyer, he didn't have any friends.

It was then that Ad saw the three men striding toward him.

"Put down your bags, friend," the center man ordered loudly. "We ain't sure you're in the right burg."

This, Ad guessed, was what his father had meant. He put down his bags, and waited for the men to come up. The one who had spoken was tall and bony-faced with a vicious twist of a mouth and angry, red-flecked eyes. The man on the right was not quite so tall, and heavier, with a long, beaklike nose. His cold, bright-blue eyes raked Ad as they came up. Both wore two guns, tonged low. Killers, these two, Ad told himself. The third one

was different, a furtive-faced sparrow of a man, with a huge, square jaw and a sly smile that remained thoroughly the same. Despite the fact that he wore no visible gun, Ad pegged him as the most cunning and dangerous of the three.

"Maybe I'm not in the right burg," agreed Ad. "It's been four years since I was here. When I left, this town wouldn't put up with hombres like you."

"You gotta be tough to talk like that," the tall man growled, "and you don't look tough. You're Link Carrick's kid, ain't you, and you call yourself a lawyer?"

"You're correct on both counts," said Ad. "I didn't expect a reception committee like this."

"We heard you was figuring on putting out your shingle here," the tall man went on. "We don't like to have a young buck like you get hurt, so we been meeting every train since Sunday. You're getting back on, Carrick, and taking some more ride."

"Why, now"—Ad's eyes moved from the tall man to the beak-nosed one, and back to the small man—"I think I'll stay."

"The train'll be moving out in a minute, Dobe," the small man said sharply, the smile not leaving his face. "Get him on it."

A gun appeared in the tall man's hand. "You heard him, Carrick. Climb back into the car."

"Looks like you're both judge and jury," Ad remarked.

"We're all the judge and jury this burg needs," snarled the tall man.

"We got one lawyer, and that's a-plenty."

"Who's that?"

"Fonse Gowdy. Now climb up there before I dust you off with a couple of slugs."

The fellow would do exactly that, Ad knew, and his own gun was in one of his bags. The smart thing to do was to pick up his bags and obey, but Ad Carrick wasn't one to back down. He grinned, and nodded as if he meant to obey.

"That iron's a good talking point," Ad said, and moved toward the car.

"Get a move on," the tall man snapped. "She's beginning to move."

Ad had both feet on the first step as the train lurched into motion.

"Give him his bags," the small man ordered.

"Oh, yeah, my bags," Ad said as if he'd completely forgotten them.

Beak-nose stooped to get the bags. For an instant the tall man's eyes were away from Ad. The train had moved forward far enough to put Ad exactly opposite the tall man, and it was in that instant that Ad dived off the step, his right shoulder smashing squarely into the tall man's middle. They went down in a tangled heap of arms and legs. There was the sound of wind being driven from the fellow's lungs. For a moment he lay helplessly on the ground trying to breathe. Ad jerked the gun from his relaxed fingers and twisted around to face Beak-nose.

"Freeze, hombre," Ad ordered. "You'll get more than a dusting off when I squeeze trigger."

Things had happened too fast for Beak-nose. He'd dropped the bags, and reached for his gun. Now, with his right hand halfway to his hip, he stood motionless, his hard, blue eyes on the gun in Ad's hand.

Ad got to his feet, and stepped away from the three. There had been an instant when his back had been to the small man, but that instant was gone. Apparently the small man didn't pack a Colt.

"I reckon I won't take that train, gents," Ad said. "Now you pick up the bags and tote 'em downtown. I think maybe I'll need 'em."

The smile was still on the small man's lips. "You've got guts, friend, and you're smart. FONSE could use you. There's only one side in this town that's safe. That's FONSE GOWDY'S side. You'd better find that out before it's too late."

"And FONSE GOWDY doesn't want competition," Ad said thoughtfully. "Is that why you hombres tried to boost me back on the train?"

"That's about the size of it," the small man admitted. "How about it? You want to get lined up right?"

"I'm tacking up my shingle in Sink as soon as I can find an office and a hammer. You can tell FONSE GOWDY that. You can tell him something else. Tell him I'm going to give him the toughest competition he ever ran into."

"I thought you'd say that," the small man said, and nodded. "Pick up the bags, Salty. We never argue with a gent who holds a gun."

The tall man was on his feet now, sucking in each breath with audible

effort. "What're you aiming to do, Carrick?"

"You gents are packing my bags downtown, and I'm seeing that you get jailed for disturbing the peace. This is the beginning of FONSE GOWDY'S trouble."

"It's the beginning of your trouble," the tall man snarled. "I ain't gonna roost in that tin jail."

"We'll roost there for the moment," said the small man. "Take one of the bags, Dobe. We never argue with a gent who holds a gun."

"Make one wrong move, and you won't have to roost in the calaboose," Ad said, and jerked his head at Beak-nose. "Let's have your iron."

Beak-nose tossed the Colt at Ad's feet.

"Keep in the middle of the street, and head for the jail," Ad ordered. "I hope Gowdy sees this."

"He will," the small man assured him. "Make no mistake about it."

II

They moved down the long street to the business block, Ad behind them, both guns in his hands, past the hotel, and the bank, and on to the jail. Men stopped and stared at them unbelievably. It was a strange scene to be enacted on Sink's Main Street, and Ad, looking to neither side, sensed the drama of it.

Link Carrick was standing in the doorway of the jail building. He looked older than when Ad had last seen him, and a little bent. Like the others, Link stared at the four men who turned from the street toward

the jail, stared as if he saw a nightmare unfolding from a dim and distant past.

"Hello, dad," Ad said softly. "I've got some customers for you."

Link Carrick started to say something, and choked. Then he managed: "What went wrong, son?"

"They tried to put me back on the train," Ad said. "I arrested them for breaking the peace."

The marshal swallowed, and licked his lips. "You ain't a lawman, Ad."

"I'm a citizen, and I made the arrest. That's enough."

Whatever had gone wrong in Sink was worse than Ad had guessed, for this wasn't the way Link Carrick had acted in the days when he'd rodded a tough and lawless Sink as a lawman should. Slowly Link stepped aside.

"Go ahead, boys." He said it almost apologetically.

"You can drop the bags now. I'll take care of 'em," said Ad.

The tall man turned to face Ad, his eyes filled with vicious hatred. "This won't get you nowhere, Carrick," he growled. "We won't stay here long."

"You're wrong, Dobe," the small man said coolly. "It'll get young Carrick more'n he's figuring on, but we won't stay here long. That part of your remark is correct."

They moved across the room that was Link Carrick's office, and through it. When the cell door clanged shut behind the three men, Ad went back to his father's office, and laid the guns on the desk. He heard some talk, too low for him to

make out. Then his father came into the office, and shut the door behind him.

"I'm sorry you did that, son," he said. Suddenly he seemed to remember that this was the first time he'd seen Ad for four years. He held out his hand and smiled crookedly. "I'm glad to see you, boy, but I wish it hadn't happened this way."

Ad shook his father's hand, and what he saw in Link Carrick's face shocked him. There was the shame of a defeated man upon him, and that was something Ad could not understand, for Link Carrick had never been one to admit defeat, no matter what the odds were against him.

"What's happened, dad?" Ad asked.

Link gestured wearily. "It's not what has happened. It's what's going to happen. There's another train goes through tonight about ten after nine. Take it, son. Go back to the Willamette Valley and pick yourself a town. There's no reason for you to stay here and buck a man like Fonse Gowdy. You won't get no law business. You won't get nothing but a slug, or a cut throat, or mebbe a dose of poison. That's what happens to folks who stand in Gowdy's way."

"This is my home, dad. I'm staying."

"Then you'll stay in boothill," Link Carrick said sharply. "I've done my dangedest to keep you in school. You're the biggest and best investment I ever made. I didn't figger on you being a corpse this

soon. The only smart thing for you to do is to pull out."

Ad's jaw set stubbornly. "Then I'm not smart. I'm staying. What's happened to you, dad? Four years ago you wouldn't have put up with FONSE GOWDY five minutes. Or"—he jerked a thumb toward the cells—"that bunch of hard cases we got locked up."

Link Carrick moved around his desk and slumped down in his chair. "Sit down, son."

Ad didn't sit down. He came up to the desk, and leaned across it, his palms pressed hard against the scarred oak surface. He asked again: "What's happened, dad?"

"I don't know for sure what's happened, Ad," Link answered, and didn't meet his son's eyes. "FONSE GOWDY is plenty shrewd, but I don't reckon it's all him. It started when Silk Decker moved in a couple of years ago with them two gun-slicks, DOBE JACKSE and SALTY YERGEN. Decker's the kind of an hombre who can slit a man's throat or slip him a dose of arsenic, and keep that damned grin on his face all the time."

Ad shook his head. "I still don't get it. You've chased tougher gents out of town than this Silk Decker and his bunch."

"It ain't just their toughness, Ad," Link said patiently. "I've never heard of it being worked like this before. You remember when you left there were two lawyers in town, LUKE BURROWS and JOE CATLIN? Well, Decker bought the Top-Notch Café. He runs it and does some cooking.

First thing after he got it, LUKE BURROWS died, quick and sudden. Doc Melock said it looked like arsenic poisoning. I didn't have no clue, so I didn't arrest nobody. I guess Doc talked too much. The day after Burrows died we picked Doc up on the Bear Creek road shot through the belly. A month or so after that JOE CATLIN got his throat cut. I still didn't have no clues, and Gowdy didn't have no other lawyers to buck."

"And since then FONSE GOWDY's been the only lawyer in town?"

"That's right. Doc Quinn—that's the new medico—takes Gowdy's orders. I arrested DOBE JACKSE after he'd shot JOE REEMS in a gun ruckus. Curly Graham was in the Red Bull when it happened. He told me Jackse started it, and that JOE didn't even pack a gun, but when we got into court, Curly wouldn't testify. That's happened half a dozen times in one way or another. If I arrest Jackse or Yergen, Gowdy gets 'em off. It just ain't no use, Ad." Link threw his hands up in despair. "I've kind o' quit trying lately."

"What're Gowdy and Decker after?"

"I reckon it's enough for Gowdy to have a monopoly on the law business. With Decker it's timber, mostly. Up Bear Creek. He's bought a lot. Reems and Fred Nevins wouldn't sell. I reckon that's why they died. The railroad's talking about running a spur up Bear Creek, and—"

"Nevins?" Ad cut in sharply. Fred had been Ad's boyhood pal.

Link nodded somberly. "He got plugged in the Red Bull same as Reems. I didn't even arrest Jackse. Nobody saw it but Decker and Yergen. Same old yarn of self-defense."

Cold fury ran through Ad Carrick's body then. He turned from the desk to the window and stared into the street. There were people here, decent, honest people in this town he called his home. Some had been his friends. Fred Nevins had been his friend, but Fred was dead now, shot by one of the men locked up in a cell. The killer wouldn't stay there long. FONSE GOWDY would see to that.

Decent, honest people here in Sink, Ad thought bitterly, but without the sand in their craw to fight for the honesty and decency they believed in.

"That's the way it's been, son," Link Carrick was saying. "It just grewed on me until I couldn't handle it. I couldn't do no more than I did, could I, Ad?"

There was plenty he could have done, Ad told himself. Plenty he would have done in the old days. Link Carrick was fast enough with a gun. If the law hadn't done its job, Link would have saved the law the trouble. That's what the old Link Carrick would have done, but this wasn't the old Link Carrick. This was a stranger without the guts of the man Ad had left four years ago.

"I couldn't do no more, could I?" Link asked again.

Ad wanted to tell him he could have done a great deal more if he

hadn't gone yellow, but when he turned, he couldn't say it. He opened his mouth to say something, but no words came. He couldn't lie, and he couldn't tell the truth. It was then, as he stood facing his father, that FONSE GOWDY came in.

Ad hadn't remembered how Gowdy looked, but he remembered him now. For a moment the lawyer stood in the doorway eyeing Ad. He was a tall man, taller even than Dobe Jackse, and he had about him the quiet insolence of a man who expects quick and immediate obedience. There was a toughness about him, too, Ad saw, and a shortness of temper that was to be read in his ice-blue eyes. For a long moment he stood there coolly sizing Ad up, and Ad wondered, as his eyes locked with Gowdy's, how much real courage there was behind the man's arrogant manner, and how much was sheer bluff.

Suddenly Gowdy's eyes moved to Link. "You've got some men locked up here, sheriff," he said crisply. "What's the charge?"

"Breaking the peace," Link answered. "Ad here came in on the train. One of 'em pulled a gun on him, and tried to make him get back on the train. You remember Ad, don't you, Gowdy? I think he left after you came to town."

Gowdy grinned insolently. "I remember him, Link. I won't forget him, either. He can count on that."

"Thanks, Gowdy," Ad said somberly. "There're some things I won't forget, either, until they're settled. You can count on that."

"For instance?" Gowdy asked, and raised his eyebrows in mock concern.

"Fred Nevins' death, for one thing. And why a man can't come to town without meeting a gun and being ordered back on the train. I aim to practice law here, Gowdy. I won't be bluffed out by you or Silk Decker or your gun-slicks. I'll take you on in court, Gowdy, and I'll lick you, or I'll buckle on my gun if that's the way you want it. When I get done, you'll be through in this town. You can count on that, too."

"You're talking big for a kid who don't fill no bigger pants than you do, Carrick," Gowdy said, and frowned irritably. "Some things have happened in this town since you left. Stay here and you'll find out about them. You'll be dead, too, if you keep on talking tough. I think your dad will give it to you straight. It's my opinion he'll tell you to leave."

"I . . . I did tell him that," Link said worriedly.

"I've taken talk off you I don't take usually," Gowdy told Ad. "I did it for your dad's sake. He's the right kind of an hombre. He made this town. That was before my day, but I've heard about it. Now I've had enough. Take the night train out." Gowdy wheeled to face Link. "Get those men out and bring them over to Judge Hurly's office."

"Sure, Fonse." Link nodded, and moved toward the cell.

When Link had disappeared, Ad said softly: "You're worried, Gowdy.

You got plenty of reason to be."

Gowdy gave a jeering laugh. "It takes more than a loud-talking kid to worry me. No, sonny. I just don't want to hurt the old man. Jackse would be plumb happy for you to buckle on your gun and try smoking it out with him. So would Salty Yergen. I'll hold them off until that night train goes out. After that it's up to you. Play your string out if you want to. Play it the hard way and wind up in boothill."

"Boothill is big enough for you and your bunch, Gowdy," Ad said, and moved to the door. There he paused and turned. "You're the one that's grown too big for your pants, Gowdy. You're ripping them out at the seams. I know Mr. Blackstone, and I know Mr. Colt, too. It seems that this town still has a court and something it calls law. I've got a hunch we'll use Mr. Blackstone first. Then if you aren't licked enough, we'll finish with Mr. Colt's help."

III

Ad picked up his bags and strode down the side street to his father's house. There could be no backing up for him now, and he wanted none. He didn't know yet what could be done, but he remembered Judge Hurly. If the judge hadn't lost his sand along with Link Carrick and the rest of the town, Fonse Gowdy could be licked in court. That might turn the trick. If Gowdy had built up a legend of invincibility—and it looked as though he had—the breaking of that legend would be enough.

Too, it might restore Link Carrick's lost courage.

Old Mrs. Logan had been Link Carrick's housekeeper for years. Ad saw her sweeping the front porch when he was still half a block away, but she didn't see him until he turned through the front gate and was well up the path. For a moment she stared at him, her mouth open in complete surprise. Then she dropped her broom and ran down the stairs.

"Ad," Mrs. Logan cried, "Ad," and threw her arms around him. "I didn't think you were coming. Link said he wrote for you not to come. He didn't expect you. Have you seen him?"

"I stopped at the jail," Ad said, and hugged the old lady who had been the nearest thing to a mother he had ever known.

Mrs. Logan stepped back, and gazed at him hungrily. "You sure look fine, boy. You've grown taller and bigger. I wouldn't have known you if I'd seen you on the street."

"A lot of other folks wouldn't, either," Ad said wryly. "This isn't the town I left, Sadie."

"No, it isn't," she agreed, and shook her head sadly. "A lot of things have happened, most of them bad."

Ad caught her hand. "Dad isn't the same. What's happened to him?"

"He's older," Mrs. Logan said evasively. "He's got to quit his job. Takes a young man to be riding and shooting and hunting down bad ones like Link's done for so long. It ain't

safe for nobody here no more. You shouldn't have come back, but I'm glad you're here. Maybe I knew you were coming. I've got a pie in the house. Just pulled it out of the oven. Gooseberry pie like you always liked. Come on in."

Mrs. Logan knew him better than his own father did, Ad thought bitterly as he followed her into the house.

"Your old room," Mrs. Logan said, and threw open the door of his bedroom. "Ain't been used since you left. Put your bags down and come into the kitchen. I'll get the pie off the back porch."

For a moment Ad stood in the center of his room, and looked at it. The same quilted bedspread, the same pictures on the wall, the same old Winchester in the corner that his father had given him when he was fifteen. Then he went along the hall to the kitchen, and sat down at the table before the pie and a glass of milk.

It was the same here as when he left. Nothing in the house had changed. Mrs. Logan hadn't changed. The pie tasted just like the pies she had made when he was a boy. Yet somehow it didn't taste the same. One piece was enough now. Four years ago he'd have finished it if he'd had the chance. He drank the milk and pushed the glass back.

"Ad," Mrs. Logan cried, "you aren't stopping now! Isn't it good?"

"It's fine, Sadie, fine. I guess I'm not hungry." He leaned back

in his chair and looked at her. There was something he had to know. "What's happened to dad, Sadie? He isn't like he was when I left."

"No, he ain't, and that's a fact. It's like I said. He ain't well, and he's getting old."

"No." Ad shook his head. "It isn't just that. It's more than that. What's happened to him? He's lost . . . something." He wanted to say his father had lost his courage, but he couldn't put it into words that way.

"It's . . . it's— Why I don't know, Ad. I guess I hadn't noticed."

She had almost told him, and then had changed her mind. Ad got up.

"I'm going downtown, Sadie. I'll see you later."

"You'll be here for supper, won't you?"

"I think so, Sadie. There're some people I want to see." Ad hesitated, his eyes on Mrs. Logan's face. Then he added: "Dad wants me to leave on the night train. Fouse Gowdy has told me to leave, too."

Disappointment was on Mrs. Logan's face. "That's the way with Fouse Gowdy," she said bitterly. "He don't ask folks. He tells 'em."

"I don't like being told, Sadie, and I don't aim to take the night train."

"But if Gowdy has told you—"

Ad laughed shortly. "He's wasted his wind. I've always planned to come back here and stick out my shingle. I haven't changed my mind and none of Fouse Gowdy's threats

will change it for me. See you later, Sadie."

Ad went back to his room, opened one of his bags, and took out his gun belt. He buckled it on, drew the Colt from leather, and slipped five shells into the cylinder. A grim smile was on his lips as he stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him. For four years he'd looked forward to this day when he'd return home a lawyer. There was a box of law books at the depot. He'd planned to rent a room over Ben Lake's store for his office. He'd run an ad in the *Sink Weekly Bulletin*. On Sunday he'd rent a horse from Po Lindley's livery, and ride out to Fred Nevins' place.

Now he was home and he'd do none of those things. Not yet. One of the things he'd never do, for Fred Nevins was dead. He'd have to wait to do some of the others if he'd gauged the town right. Ben Lake wouldn't rent him a room, and probable Sam Thoms wouldn't take his ad for the *Bulletin*. If Link Carrick had lost his nerve, it wasn't likely that Ben Lake and Sam Thoms had kept theirs.

Mrs. Logan was sweeping the front porch again when Ad left the house. She looked at the gun on his thigh.

"Must it be that way?" she asked.

"It's one thing Fouse Gowdy understands," said Ad.

He went down the path to the gate and along the walk to Main Street. Rufe Jenkins was locking up his bank as Ad went past.

"Howdy, Rufe," Ad said, and held out his hand.

The banker looked up, frowned, and glanced quickly along the street. Then he gave Ad's hand a quick shake.

"I'd heard you were back, Ad," Jenkins said. "Just for a visit, I reckon."

"I'm here to stay, Rufe. There should be work here for two lawyers."

"Not in Sink," the banker said. "No, you'll starve out. You'd better take the night train out."

"I've had a ride on the train today. It was enough."

"It's not the town you left, Ad. You won't like it here now." Jenkins looked along the street again as if afraid Fouse Gowdy might see him talking to Ad. "See you later, Ad."

No, it wasn't the same, Ad told himself as he strode along the boardwalk to Lake's store, for Fouse Gowdy's shadow lay long and dark across the town.

Ben Lake came out of the back gloom of the store, blinked at Ad, and slowly recognition came to his pudgy, pink face. He stepped around the counter, gave Ad's extended hand a hasty shake, and stepped back.

"I heard you was here," Lake said in his high voice, a little higher than Ad had remembered. "Lawyer now, ain't you? I reckon you'll be making a name for yourself in Portland mebbe."

"I'm staying home, Ben. I'm not much for making a big name. Folks here need an honest lawyer, and

from what I hear, Fouse Gowdy is far from honest."

Lake shot a quick glance through the fly-specked window. Then he looked back at Ad. Fear was in his faded gray eyes, a deep and terrible fear.

"I wouldn't say that, Ad. Not just out plain that way. Gowdy's plumb touchy. And about staying . . . it'd be a mistake, son. A bad mistake. Gowdy don't like other lawyers. You wouldn't get no business. He'd see to that."

Quick anger rose in Ad Carrick. "What's happened, Ben?" he demanded. "Everybody tells me to move on. I used to think I had some friends here, but I'm beginning to think I'm poison. There always have been two lawyers here till Catlin and Burrows cashed in. There's still room for two."

"Not now there ain't. Look, Ad." Lake leaned across the counter. "We like you, all right. That's why we're telling you. Take the next train out. You got the best of Jackse and Yergen, and you put 'em in jail. They're out now. You can't keep them hombres in the jug, and you sure can't keep Silk Decker there, neither. Gowdy's already passed the word along. You're leaving. There ain't nothing under the sun you can do about it." He jerked a finger at the gun on Ad's thigh. "That won't do you no good. Keep to your law books and you'll live a long time somewhere else."

"Thanks, Ben." Ad's lips curled in contempt. "I'll try my law books

here. I came in to see about renting that front room over the store. It's empty, isn't it?"

"It's empty," Lake said, and looked away. "I couldn't rent it, Ad. Not just now."

"You mean you're afraid to rent it," Ad snapped. "You've gone yellow, Ben. The whole town's yellow. It's Fouse Gowdy's town, and you're taking your orders from him. That's it, isn't it, Ben?"

Lake moved toward the window, and for a moment he didn't speak. Ad saw the red rise along his neck. Slowly the storekeeper turned.

"You put it hard, boy," he said. "You put it plumb hard and straight. Yeah, mebber we're yellow, but we've got reason to be. Jackse and Yergen don't stop at nothing. Silk Decker's a slick killer if there ever was one. You couldn't convict them on any count. Not in this town. Fouse Gowdy's too smart. So what's the use of us bucking a deal like that? All we'd get would be a slug in the guts, or mebber fed some of Decker's poison. Mebber he'd slit our throats. He'd do that and keep on grinning just like he was grinning when you brought him down the street ahead of a gun. Keep out of this, Ad, and let us be. That bunch is all right if you let 'em alone."

"Let them go ahead and run their crooked deals," Ad said savagely, "just like they've been doing. Let them kill Fred Nevins and do nothing. Not me, Ben. I'll get them, and I'll get an office if I have to build one."

"Talk to your dad, Ad," Lake

begged. "He'll tell you how far things have gone. He's arrested Jackse and Yergen, and they've got off scot-free. Link pulled his gun on one of Gowdy's gun-slingers. A hard case named Ace Barger. Barger died, and Link got shot all to hell. He mighty near died, Link did. Don't make him go up against Jackse's and Yergen's guns, Ad. They'll kill him sure."

For a long time Ad looked at Lake, and hope died in him. He hadn't heard about Barger's killing, nor about his father being shot.

"When was that, Ben?" he asked finally.

"About six months ago. Didn't you know?"

Ad shook his head.

"I reckon Link wouldn't tell you," Lake said heavily. "That was the payoff. Link ain't been the same since. His term's out next year. Reckon he won't run again."

"And we'll get a new sheriff," Ad muttered. "Someone who'll take Gowdy's orders and ask no questions."

IV

Ad whirled, and went out into the late-afternoon sunshine. He understood now what had happened to his dad. He should have known it was something like this. He'd heard of men who became gun-shy after being shot to pieces, but he'd never thought such a thing could happen to his dad. Yet, as Ad stood on the boardwalk with the sun upon him and put his thoughts back over the good years, he could find no fault with

his father. Link Carrick was like a sharp and shiny sickle gone dull and rusty with the years.

Fred Nevins was dead, and that was a terrible, irrevocable fact which nothing could change. Fred had died in the Red Bull before Dobe Jackse's gun. Link had said nobody saw it but Yergen and Decker. It was then that an idea came to Ad, smashing into his brain and leaving him breathless with the significance of it. Somebody must have been behind the bar, and the chances were good that it was old Barney Rogan, fat old Barney who had served Fred Nevins and Ad drinks, laughed with them, joshed them about their girls. Barney would never change. If anybody in this town would talk, it would be Barney Rogan.

Ad went across the street in quick strides, and into the Red Bull. The saloon was empty except for big Barney behind the mahogany, as fat as ever, his hair carefully combed as always, a big grin reaching across his round face almost from ear to ear.

"Howdy, Ad," Barney called jovially. "Doggone my ornery, skinny soul. I wondered when you'd get around to show up in here."

They gripped hands across the bar, and for an instant Ad couldn't find his tongue. No, big Barney hadn't changed. There was no part of Fouse Gowdy's shadow here.

"Barney, you're the first man who's been glad to see me since I hit town."

"It ain't the same, Ad," Barney said, and shook his head. "No, it

ain't the same burg you left. Ain't no guts here any more. Even your dad's changed." Barney reached for a bottle and poured a drink. "Here, Ad. Drink up. It's on the house."

Ad stared down at the amber liquor. "I know about dad, Barney. I had a session with him when I brought Gowdy's three toughs in."

Barney rumbled a laugh. "I saw that, son, and a good job it was. I knew they wouldn't stay there long, but they were there a spell, anyhow. You got one thing wrong, Ad. It ain't Gowdy's town. It's Silk Decker's. Most folks don't know that, but I do. Decker owns the Red Bull along with the restaurant and most of the timber land along Bear Creek. Why I keep on working for that hellion I don't know."

Ad gulped his drink and grinned at Barney. "It's like the old days when Fred Nevins and I would ride in from Bear Creek and have ourselves a time."

"Only Fred-won't be having no more good times," Barney said somberly. "I reckon you know about him?"

Ad nodded. "I heard Jackse gunned him."

"He was standing right over there," Barney said, and jerked a thumb across the mahogany. "Dobe Jackse came in. Fred had been augering with Decker and Yergen about his land. Decker told him he had to sell. Fred told Decker to go plumb to the devil. Jackse hollered at Fred, and when Fred turned around, Jackse plugged him."

"Why didn't you tell dad?" Ad demanded.

"And stop one of Jackse's slugs?" Barney asked sourly. "Not me. Link would have arrested Jackse mebbe, but he wouldn't have got no conviction. Not with Fonce Gowdy defendin' Jackse."

"Listen, Barney," Ad said, his eyes locking with Barney's, "suppose dad does arrest Jackse and I get the judge to appoint me prosecutor. Would you testify?"

Barney scratched his cheek, and studied Ad. "I heard you was just visiting till the night train," he said finally.

"That's Gowdy's talk." Ad patted the gun at his side. "I'm staying and I'm fighting Gowdy to hell and back. If I can get him into court, I can lick him. We'll have Jackse in the calaboose. If Yergen gets proddy, I'll swap smoke with him. That's all it will take to bust this bunch. How about it?"

Barney hit the mahogany with a knotted fist. "If you've got guts enough to stick and fight, I'd be a yaller-bellied monkey if I didn't side you. Sure, I'll do it, son."

"I wouldn't count too much on what this jasper says, Barney, was I you."

It was Silk Decker. He had come in and was standing just inside the batwings. The sly smile was on his face exactly as it had been earlier in the afternoon, but there was a murderous glint in his narrowed eyes that Ad hadn't seen before. There was no knowing how long the small

man had been standing there, or how much he had heard.

"I ain't so sure," Barney said gruffly. "I knowed this kid when he was a button."

Decker said something over his shoulder. Jackse and Yergen split the batwings, and followed Decker to the bar.

"You've cut yourself quite a swath since you hit town," Decker told Ad coldly. "Gowdy promised you till train time. I ain't sure you're gonna live that long, now that you've taken to packing a gun. You know how to use it, feller?"

Jackse and Yergen had stopped ten feet from the bar, their lidded eyes on Ad, gun hands close to Colt butts. This was it, Ad thought, and it told him something else. Decker didn't plan to wait until train time. That proved Barney Rogan was right. It was Silk Decker and not Fonce Gowdy who gave the orders.

"I know which end to hold," Ad said, and moved forward along the bar. "I've heard you three are tough. Maybe you are, when you're together. Tough on babies, anyway. You might even be tough on old women if you had Fonce Gowdy to back your play."

Barney snickered, but none of the three turned their heads. Ad moved forward again, and stopped. One long moment of silence then, pregnant with the threat of quick and violent death. There was no sign of fear on Ad Carrick's face, and if the three men before him hoped to break his nerve, they were disappointed, for what he did was not the

thing a man would do whose luck had run out.

Again Ad stepped forward toward Dobe Jackse, utter contempt plain upon his face, and the way he moved bothered the slow-thinking Jackse. The gunman glanced at Decker as if to say he had never seen a man so eager to die.

Decker nodded. "Now," he breathed, but he was a second too slow, for Ad was close now, close enough to reach Dobe Jackse's big-muscled belly with a quick, slashing right fist. For the second time that afternoon Jackse sat down hard as his wind whistled out of him.

Salty Yergen had his gun half lifted from leather when Ad swung toward him, and that was as far as it went, for Yergen's jaw was open to the hammering fist that crashed upward against it. Yergen went off his feet and back against the bar, his head cracking hard against it. He rolled off, and over, and lay still.

Dobe Jackse was on his feet, wobbling a little, and coming toward Ad as he grabbed for his gun. Then he saw that he didn't have time to get his gun clear of leather and he tried to block Ad's punch, and failed. There was the squish of his nose being flattened into a shapeless pulp, a spurt of blood, and a grunt of pain that came involuntarily from his throat.

Jackse lashed out with the barrel of his gun. Ad ducked under it, felt his hat leave his head, and battered Jackse's face with a right. Jackse came at Ad, swinging blindly. Ad felt a paralyzing, hammerlike

blow on his shoulder. For a moment they were close together. Then Ad caught him with a slashing fist on his already flattened nose, hit him again, and again, and Jackse toppled forward. Ad wheeled aside, and watched the tall man go down on his face.

Ad faced Decker, right hand driving for his gun, clutched it, but didn't have to pull it. Decker was watching him coldly, the sly smile still on his lips.

"You're tough, friend," Decker said calmly, "tougher than anybody we've hit in this town, but you can count on one thing. You'll never get a chance to do that again. The boys are going to be a little sore when they wake up."

"And if I'm smart, I'll get out of town and not wait for the train," Ad suggested.

"That's it." Decker nodded. "That's it exactly. I'm just sorry of one thing. We could use you, Fonse and me. You're worth an army of gun-toting slow brains like those two." He jerked a thumb at the two men on the floor.

"I'm still not smart," Ad said flatly. He glanced at the admiring Barney, and grinned. "See you later," he told him and went out.

V

Link Carrick was washing on the back porch when Ad came in. He threw the basin of water over the railing, and reached for the towel.

"Glad you're back, son," he said. "Supper's about ready."

They talked on the front porch for a long time after supper while the sun died and dusk darkened into full night, but they didn't mention what had happened today, nor what had happened since Ad had left, not until the wailing echo of a train whistle came to them. Then Ad said: "I'd like for you to arrest Dobe Jackse for killing Fred Nevins."

Link said nothing for a time. He knocked the dottle from his pipe, and loaded it again. He thumbed a match to life, and by its flame, Ad saw the worry lines deep in his father's face.

"There ain't no use," Link said finally. "I told you that this afternoon."

"It's different now. I had a talk with Barney Rogan today. He liked Fred. The way he tells it it's murder, and nothing else. We'll lick Gowdy in court, and we'll hang Jackse. That's all it will take, dad."

"Barney won't talk when we get him into court," objected Link. "I told you about Curly Graham."

"Barney's made of different stuff than Curly." Then Ad told his father what had happened in the Red Bull.

"I wish you'd taken that train," Link said heavily. He sat in silence for a time. "Sheriffing's all I've known for a good many years, son. Monument County don't pay much. I've got this house, and that's all. I've set a store by you, and now it'll wind up in a mess of gunfire. You've got the best of Jackse and Yergen twice today. Some luck and mostly guts. You can't count on it again."

"I know that. I'm no gunman. I don't intend to get cornered so I've got to match draws with Jackse and Yergen. All I want is to get Gowdy into court. Lick him once and hang Jackse, and the job's done. That's why folks haven't backed you up. They figure there's no use of backing the law when Gowdy always wins in court."

"All right," Link said heavily. "I don't reckon there's any use, but we'll try it."

Link went into the house, and came back a moment later buckling his gun belt. As they went down the path, Link said: "Barney's got a room in the hotel. Chances are Jackse is in the Red Bull. We'll have a talk with Barney and then we'll pick Jackse up. Then we'll get Judge Hurly out of bed. Once we start this thing there's no use fooling around. The sooner we get Jackse tried the better. If we wait, we'll just give Decker a chance to bring in a bunch of gunmen and take the town over, lock, stock and barrel."

It was a white-faced hotel clerk that Ad and Link found behind the desk.

"Is Barney in his room?" asked Link.

"Barney's dead," the clerk blurted. "He got sick a spell ago, and I got Doc Quinn as quick as I could, but Barney died. I reckon it was his heart."

Ad stared at the clerk as his mind grasped the full significance of Barney Rogan's death. With Barney dead there was no case against Dobe

Jackse. Then Ad remembered Silk Decker standing inside the batwings of the Red Bull and listening to Barney say he'd testify against Jackse.

Link looked at Ad. "That's it, son. No use going ahead now."

"Wait, dad." Ad gripped his father's arm. "There's more to this." He turned to the clerk. "Is the doc still in Barney's room?"

The clerk nodded.

"Does Decker or Gowdy know what happened?"

"No," the clerk answered. "I was just going to send word to 'em."

"Don't," Ad ordered. "We want a talk with the medico first."

"But I oughta—"

"Don't," Ad repeated, and drew his gun. He thumbed back the hammer, and let the clerk look into its menacing bore. "If you let Decker or Gowdy know before I tell you to, you'll get a chunk of lead to digest. Savvy?"

"Yeah," the clerk whispered, and swallowed. "Yeah, sure."

"Come on, dad." Ad holstered his gun, and went up the stairs, Link behind him.

The door of Barney's room was open. A lighted lamp was on the bureau. The medico was closing his bag as Ad and Link came in. Without turning, he said: "Barney's cashed in, Silk."

"Only it isn't Decker, sawbones," Ad said bleakly, "and I think you've had a hand in murder."

The medico wheeled, stared at Ad and then at Link, and his face went a pasty-white. He was a middle-

aged, broad-shouldered man with a carefully trimmed black mustache and shifty green eyes that darted wildly around the room as if seeking a means of escape.

"This is Doc Quinn," Link said quietly. "I reckon you've never met him, Ad."

"I'm pleased to meet you, doc," Ad said. "Mighty pleased. You're the man that's going to talk and when you do, you'll put a rope around Silk Decker's neck if I've got this figured right."

"I don't know what you mean when you say I've had a hand in murder," Quinn said hoarsely. "It's not murder when a man dies of heart trouble."

"Only I'm betting it isn't heart trouble that killed Barney Rogan," Ad said curtly. "I never heard of him having heart trouble. Did you, dad?"

"No," Link said.

Ad walked to the bed, and drew back the sheet that covered Barney's face. Then he replaced it, and looked around the room. If Barney had been poisoned, it must have been from food, but no food was in sight, and yet that was the way it had to be. Ad made a quick search of the room while Link watched him curiously, and the medico edged quietly toward the door. Then Ad found it in the bottom drawer of the bureau, a white cake with dark icing. Several pieces had been cut from it. As Ad lifted it from the drawer, the medico made a dash for the door. Link's foot flew out, and Quinn sprawled headlong.

"He's guilty as hell," Ad said, and jerked his gun from its holster, "or he wouldn't have tried that."

Quinn sat up, shook his head, and glared at Ad.

"On your feet, hombre," Ad said sharply, and pronged back the hammer of his gun. "You make another try like that, and you'll have a job pulling lead out of yourself. You'd better talk fast, or you'll have a rope around your neck instead of Decker's"

"I don't know anything about it," Quinn snarled, and got up. "You've been sticking your nose into a lot of business that's none of yours since you hit town. Gowdy said you were pulling out on the night train."

"Gowdy was wrong. I'm here, and I've got a gun that's mighty easy on the trigger. Barney was my friend. If this is murder, I'm going to see that the right man hangs. How about it?"

"It might have been arsenic," Quinn said reluctantly. "I can't be sure. All I know is that the hotel clerk came after me a half hour or more ago. He said Barney was mighty sick. He said Barney had burning pains in his stomach and was heaving plenty. When I got here there wasn't anything I could do but watch him die."

"When you get into court you're going to tell what you just told us," Ad said. "Now you can drift."

"Wait a minute," Link cut in. "What do you plan to do next, son?"

"Find out who brought this cake over," Ad said, "and we'll have a

cast-iron case that even Fouse Gowdy can't beat."

"Get your bag, doc," Link ordered, "and go down the stairs ahead of us. This is what I've been waiting for, and you're not going to bust it. You can pick up Barney's body and take it over to your place later. Bring that cake along, son."

At the desk Link told Quinn to stop. "Take a look at that cake," he ordered the clerk. "Ever see it before?"

The clerk nodded. "It was on the bureau when I heard Barney holler and went up to see about him."

"Who brought it in?"

The clerk hesitated. Finally he said reluctantly: "Silk Decker."

"When?"

"A little after seven."

"All right. Don't forget what you just told us." Link swung back to face the medico. "O. K., doc. Get help and take the body. Come on, Ad. We've got an arrest to make."

This was the old Link Carrick, Ad thought, as he strode beside his father across the street and into the Red Bull, the old Link Carrick who had cleaned up Sink in the days when the railroad had come. Then Ad knew that Link hadn't lost his nerve and he wasn't gun-shy, for the sheriff stood spread-legged beside the bar, his big Colt held rock-steady in his hand.

"I'm arresting you, Decker," Link said briefly, "for the murder of Barney Rogan. Are you coming peaceable, or do I save the county the expense of hanging you?"

Decker had been drinking at the bar with FONSE GOWDY. DOBE JACKSE and SALTY YERGEN were playing poker at a table beside the wall. Decker and Gowdy faced Link as Jackse and Yergen rose from their chairs, hands hovering over gun butts. In that moment talk stopped in the big room as eyes turned to Link Carrick, and Ad, watching Jackse and Yergen narrowly, his hand within an inch of his Colt butt, wondered if this would end in swirling gun smoke before he had a chance to face FONSE GOWDY in court.

"Was I you, Jackse," Link said coolly, "and you, Yergen, I'd give up the idea of smoking it out right now. Your boss goes to jail, or boothill if you want it that way."

"We never argue with a gent who holds a gun," Decker said easily, the sly smile, as always, on his furtive face. "Sure, I'll go peaceable, and you can give that cub of yours a chance to show FONSE how good a lawyer he is."

Slowly Jackse and Yergen sat down, their hate-filled eyes not wavering from the sheriff's face. Ad whipped a look at Gowdy, noted the quiet insolence of the man, and wondered again, as he had that afternoon, how much of it was real courage, and how much bluff.

"I want a quick trial, Carrick," Gowdy said coolly. "There's no use keeping Silk in jail. I don't know why you think he beefed Barney. I know he didn't, and I'll show a jury what kind of a lawyer that pup of yours is."

"Fair enough," Link agreed

calmly. "Come on, Decker."

Decker took a drink, and walked out of the saloon, Link behind him. Ad backed to the door, still watching Jackse and Yergen, half expecting them to go for their guns, but they made no move. Then he was on the walk outside the saloon, and in step beside his father.

As the cell door slammed shut on him, Decker said: "FONSE will make a monkey out of you, kid."

"He'll get a chance," Ad agreed.

"I held Dobe and Salty off tonight because I didn't want them swapping lead with the law," Decker went on, "but the minute the court frees me, you'd better look out. They'll be waiting for you in the street."

"Thanks," Ad said briefly, and followed Link into his office.

"Now we've got to get the judge out of bed," Link said.

"Maybe I'd better sleep here in case they get the idea of breaking Decker out," Ad said.

Link shook his head. "They won't. Decker's too sure Gowdy will beat you in court. He talks a lot about staying within the law. He'll want to beat this legal. Come on."

Judge Hurly's house was dark when Ad knocked on the door. Presently they heard a shuffling, and saw a light. The door opened, and the judge stood there in his night gown, a lamp held high in his hand.

"Sorry, judge," Link said, "but I didn't think this would wait."

"Oh, it's you, sheriff," Hurly said. "Come in."

After they'd stepped inside and

Hurly had closed the door, Link said: "This is my son, judge. You may have heard that he came in today."

Hurly set the lamp on the table, and held out his hand, a quizzical smile on his face.

"I heard about you, all right, son," he said. "I heard that you set Decker's toughs on their ears. That tickled me. Things have come to a pretty pass when we can't even get a prosecutor in this county. The law has become a travesty, sir, a travesty."

"How would you like to break Gowdy's hold on this county, and hang Silk Decker?" Ad demanded.

"I'd like nothing better, my boy, but I see no way it can be done. What has happened is not my fault, nor is it your father's. It is due mostly to fear on the part of the juries, and legal trickery on Gowdy's part."

"It can be done now," Link said quietly. "I've waited a long time for this. Gowdy has kept other lawyers out of this town after he had Catlin and Burrows killed. He hasn't driven Ad out."

Briefly, then, Link told the judge what had happened. He ended with: "It depends on you appointing Ad prosecutor, and calling a quick trial. Make it tomorrow afternoon."

Thoughtfully the judge ran a hand through his rumpled white hair. "It's irregular," he said finally, "but justice in this county has been more than irregular. We'll try it, and, son, you'd better be smart to beat FONSE GOWDY."

VI

Ad didn't understand Gowdy's tactics from the moment the trial opened. Gowdy sat passively beside the smiling Decker, made no objection to any of the jurymen, and refused to cross-examine Ad's witnesses. The hotel clerk and the medico told the same story they had the night before, the medico stating flatly that Barney's death was from arsenic poisoning. Link Carrick told his story. He, as the medico and the clerk had done, identified the cake that rested upon a table in the front of the room.

Decker took the stand and admitted taking the cake to Barney. He said it was Barney's birthday, and he'd sat for a time in Barney's room and visited with him for an hour or so.

"I had a piece of the cake, too," he finished, "and I assure the jury I am very much alive. If I had wanted to cause Barney's death, there are other ways easier than feeding him a poisoned cake."

For all of Decker's smiling assurance and Gowdy's passive insolence, Ad knew he had a case, and as he put the chain together, link by link, he knew the jury was seeing it, too. They were mostly townsmen, men like Ben Lake, Rufe Jenkins, and Po Lindley, the liveryman; men who had lived under fear of Silk Decker and his gunmen, and were now seeing the chance to give Decker the fate that he deserved. Yet that fear might still hold them, for more than one cast covert glances at the back

seat where Dobe Jackse and Salty Yergen sat.

Then Ad stood before the jury, and let his eyes move from Ben Lake in front of him along the front row of jurymen to Po Lindley in the back.

"Before I left town," Ad said, "there were two lawyers here, Luke Burrows and Joe Catlin. You remember how Burrows died. You'll remember Doc Melock saying it was arsenic. There is no proof now, but doubtless that was Fouse Gowdy's first step—"

"That doesn't go, judge," Gowdy roared. He was on his feet and shaking his fist at Ad. "What kind of a court is this that allows testimony absolutely irrelevant to the case, and testimony for which there is positively no proof."

"That's right, Carrick," the judge agreed. "Strike that out."

Ad turned back to the jury. "I hold that what I was saying was relevant to this case, but the court holds otherwise. This part even the defense cannot attempt to contradict. I arrived in Sink yesterday, and when I stepped off the train, three men—one, the defendant—met me, and attempted to force me back on that train. The reason was obvious. Fouse Gowdy has—"

Again Gowdy was on his feet. "Judge, this man is entirely uninformed on court procedure," he sneered. "Perhaps it would be well to send him back to law school."

"Strike it out, Carrick," Hurly said angrily. "Hold your remarks to testimony bearing on this case."

Again Ad faced the jury and gestured wearily. "Gentlemen, you know as well as I do that the things which have happened in this town during the last twenty-four hours or more do have a bearing on this case, but the court will not permit me to state them. Certainly what I am going to say now does. I went into the Red Bull late yesterday afternoon. I talked to Barney Rogan about Fred Nevins, and he told me that Fred had been murdered by Dobe Jackse, and he—"

"Judge," Gowdy's harsh voice cut ominously through Ad's words, "will you put a stop to this talk?"

A smile touched Judge Hurly's lips and fled. "You're out of line again, Carrick. What has this to do with the murder of Barney Rogan?"

"Motive," Ad said heatedly. "The defendant heard what Barney said. I didn't see him come in, and neither did Barney, but he was standing inside the batwings when we saw him, and he must have heard Barney say he would testify against Jackse in court. It was then I went to the sheriff, and asked him to arrest Jackse."

Hurly considered that for a time. Then he said: "Did the sheriff arrest Jackse?"

"No," Ad shot back. "We stopped in at the hotel to have a talk with Barney, and we found him dead as the doctor had already testified. Barney was our one witness. I submit this as unquestionable logic: Silk Decker poisoned Barney Rogan to keep him from testifying against

Dobe Jackse." Ad turned back to the jury. "There it is. Unquestioned motive." He pointed to the cake. "The instrument of death which the defendant admits he brought to Rogan, and we have the doctor's word that the symptoms Rogan had were those of arsenic poisoning which followed immediately after eating the cake. As I see it, gentlemen, you can give no verdict but first-degree murder."

Ad walked back to his table and sat down. He was as certain as he had ever been of anything, that he had won. The noose was fastened around Silk Decker's neck, and nothing Fouse Gowdy could do would change it. Then Gowdy walked toward the jury, and what he did shocked Ad into a numbed sense of defeat.

"Gentlemen," Gowdy said quietly, "you have listened to the ranting of a youthful and inexperienced lawyer. He has attempted to prejudice you, but I am sure you are too fair-minded for him to succeed. Barney Rogan died, certainly, but it may have been heart trouble, or he may have poisoned himself. The prosecution has based its entire case upon this cake. We admit that Silk Decker took Barney the cake because it was his birthday. Decker ate a piece himself as he sat in the room talking to Rogan." Gowdy took a knife from his pocket, opened it, and cut a slice of the cake. "How Rogan died, or why, I shall not attempt to establish, but I will prove that this cake did not poison him, and I'll prove it by eating a piece myself."

Gowdy closed the knife, and put it back into his pocket. Then, with the courtroom as still as death, he picked up the piece of cake he'd sliced off, and ate it. When he was done, he drew a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his fingers, and replaced the handkerchief.

"That should be ample proof, gentlemen," Gowdy said, "that Barney Rogan's death did not result from eating the cake. You can arrive at only one verdict. Not guilty."

Gowdy turned, and walked calmly back to his chair and sat down beside the smiling and urbane Decker.

Ad sat motionless as he watched the jury file out. His mind gripped this fantastic and unforeseen thing that had happened, and found no explanation. Fouse Gowdy wouldn't kill himself in an effort to clear Silk Decker. Then suddenly Ad saw it. He rose, and looked over the crowded courtroom. The medico had gone back to a seat near the door when he stepped down from the witness chair, but he wasn't there now.

Ad walked over to where Link Carrick sat near the aisle.

"He pulled another one out of his hat," Link muttered. "You won't get a guilty verdict now."

"I think I will," Ad said, "or Fouse Gowdy will be dead. Go over there by the door and keep the jury inside for half an hour. That will be enough to show the jury just how poisoned that cake was. The doc isn't in the room. It's my guess he's gone over to his office, and he's getting a stomach pump ready to work

on Gowdy—only Gowdy isn't leaving for a spell."

Link grinned. "I'll keep 'em in there," he promised, and got up.

Ad walked to the front of the courtroom and sat down at Gowdy's table.

"After you've worked at this business a while," Decker said tolerantly, "you'll learn a few tricks. The jury ought to be coming out now. You'll be a dead pigeon when you leave here just like I told you last night."

Ad leaned across the table. As he did so he drew his gun. There was the audible click of the hammer being pulled back.

"This is one time your trick is going to backfire, Gowdy. You're sitting right here until the arsenic works. The sawbones is going to get mighty impatient waiting for you."

Gowdy's face went white. He licked suddenly dry lips, and stared at Ad.

"You can't keep me here, Carrick," he blustered.

"I've got five slugs in this gun that says you're going to stay," Ad said coldly. "Maybe you'd rather have them sit here too long. Arsenic poisoning is a tough way to die. It won't be long till you'll know how Barney felt. When the jury sees that, they'll know the kind of a verdict to give, Decker. You're getting the best of it. A rope is a—"

Then FONSE Gowdy caved. He jumped to his feet, and kicked back his chair.

"Let me out of here," Gowdy

bawled. "Hurly, he's got a gun on me."

The judge stood up and leaned forward. "What's the matter with you two?"

"He's got a gun on me," Gowdy shrilled. "I'm leaving."

Ad was on his feet now, the gun lined squarely on Gowdy's middle.

"Soon as you tell what you're trying to do, you can go," Ad said. "You'd better talk fast. Another ten minutes might be too late."

"The cake was filled with arsenic," Gowdy whimpered.

"Shut up, you fool!" yelled Decker.

But there was no shutting up FONSE Gowdy now. "Decker poisoned Barney with that cake! That's enough, Carrick! Let me out."

Ad holstered his gun, and nodded. "Go ahead, Gowdy. Find your sawbones. You'll need him."

Gowdy ran down the aisle through the stunned crowd and out of the courtroom. The door to the jury room was open. Ben Lake had been standing in it listening. Now he beckoned to the men behind him, and they filed back into the room.

"Guilty of murder in the first degree," Lake said, "and let him hang."

"I'll fix sentence in the morning," the goggle-eyed judge shouted. "Take that coyote out of here, Link, or I'll get down off my bench and feed him some of that damned cake myself."

For a time Ad didn't see his father or Decker, for Lake and the rest of

the jurymen were around him, slapping him on the back, and shouting that he was the best danged lawyer to ever hit Sink.

"Gowdy's done around here," Lake howled jubilantly. "If that sawbones gets his stomach pumped out in time to save his hide, we'll ride him out of town on a rail."

"It isn't done yet," Rufe Jenkins, the banker, said somberly. "There's still Jackse and Yergen to dispose of, and the only thing they understand is hot lead."

Cold fear had its way with Ad then. Out in the street was his father with Silk Decker. Decker who had no hope now of beating the law. Out there, too, were the gunmen who had lifted Decker to the place he'd held.

Ad shouldered, pushed, jammed, and sometimes slugged his way through the milling crowd. Then he was on the courthouse steps, and he saw the thing he had feared.

Link was in the street with Decker. Over in front of the Red Bull stood Yergen. A little farther down the street was Dobe Jackse, and Jackse was going for his gun in a lightning draw. There had been a day when Link Carrick could have beaten Jackse, but not now. He had his hand on his gun butt, and was trying to lift it. He was slow. Pitifully slow. Jackse's gun roared. Link lurched, tugged at the gun, and sprawled headlong.

Then Ad's gun was in his hand, and blazing. Jackse went down with a slug in his chest. Yergen had drawn, and would have put another

bullet into Link's body if Ad hadn't taken a hand. He wheeled toward the courthouse, saw Ad, and pitched a shot. He missed. Ad came down the steps and into the street, firing as he came. Twice, three times, he fired, and Yergen spun back against a hitch rail, hung there a moment, and slid off.

"Decker's getting away," somebody yelled.

Decker had untied a horse, and was trying to run for it. There was more shooting. A man cried, "That got him. He'll hang yet," but Ad was paying no attention. He raced down the street, and was kneeling beside his father. Link had been shot in the chest, but it was high. He was still conscious.

"We did it, son," he mumbled. "We did it, you and me. A lawyer and a sheriff. That's plenty for one family," and then Link Carrick passed out.

"Get that sawbones," Ad yelled. "Get him over to dad's house, and to the devil with FONSE Gowdy if the doc's still working on him."

They helped Ad carry Link to his house and put him on his bed, Ben Lake and Rufe Jenkins, and some of the rest. Then the medico came. Ad whirled away from the bed and grabbed a fistful of the doc's shirt.

"You're going to save him, sawbones," Ad grated, "or, by Satan, I'll kill you. You've been taking orders from Decker and Gowdy so long I don't reckon you know how to work on an honest man, but you'd better remember."

Quinn's eyes weren't shifty now.

They locked with Ad's as he said: "I'll do my best for your father. There's nothing in the world I'd rather do than save his life. Decker knew about a mistake I made once. The only reason I testified today was in hopes that you'd hang him, and I'd be a free man."

Ad released his grip. "I'm sorry, doc. Do your best."

Quinn ran everybody out of the room but Mrs. Logan. For an hour Ad waited in the front yard. Then the medico came out.

"He'll make it," he said, "with proper care. He wants to see you."

For a time neither spoke as Ad looked down at his father. There was a lump in Ad's throat that wouldn't go down with the swallowing.

"I know how you've felt since you got home," Link said finally in a voice so low that Ad could hardly hear it. "I looked plumb yellow. It wasn't just that way, son. I couldn't shut down on Decker till I knew I had a chance in court. I never had that chance till you got home. I couldn't shoot it out with Jackse and

Yergen because I got a slug in my wrist when I traded lead with Barger, and I couldn't draw a gun fast after that. I don't want you to tell nobody. I wouldn't let Mrs. Logan tell you. A sheriff that can't draw a gun is just no damned good. If it got out, I'd have every tough in the State working in this county. I've only got a year to go, and then I'm done."

Ad put his hand on his father's arm. "I . . . I—" He swallowed. "Well, I mean I'm glad I'm back. It's going to be like the old town I used to know, dad. Now you'd better get some sleep."

Then Ad closed the door, and when he went back on the front porch they were still there—Ben Lake and Rufe Jenkins and Po Lindley and the rest—and he saw something he hadn't seen before, something in the way they were looking at him. It was as if a shadow had been lifted, and they realized it was Ad Carrick who had done the lifting—but Ad would never forget how much he owed the fighting old lawman who had backed his play.

THE END.



THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

My boys was brought up "snappin' broncs." Now they're out there in the South Pacific "snappin' Japs." It's up to us to side 'em plenty by buying

WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!

RANGE SAVVY

BY CARL RAHT



Since Hernandez Cortez first brought horses and mules to the new world, pack trains have played an important role in advancing civilization. Even today, in rugged mountain regions, where freight trucks cannot find footing, pack-mule trains are in use. The forest service alone has hundreds of these animals, either government owned or hired. When a forest fire breaks out in some mountain inaccessible to truck or wagon, and fire fighters are recruited by the hundreds, pack trains are used to bring in the needed supplies.



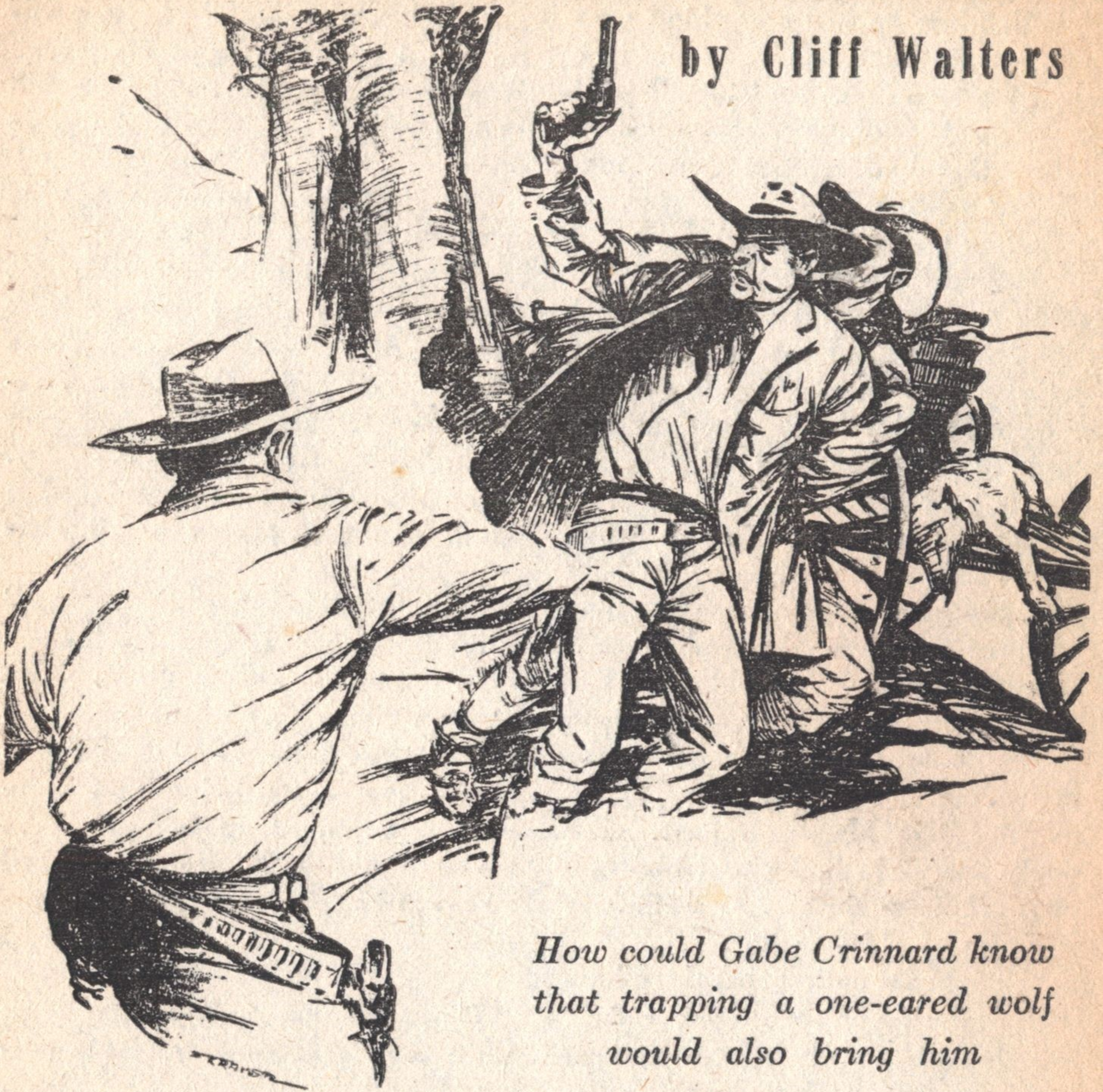
At one time California enacted a law which called for a payment of five dollars' bounty for every coyote killed. The first year bounty was paid on seventy thousand hides. Then the farmers began to complain of jackrabbits. The coyote is the inveterate enemy of the jacks, and with the decrease of coyotes the jackrabbits, which are even greater pests, increased. The bounty law was repealed to protect the farmers.



Many of the early Cherokee Indians swam under water great distances, sometimes as much as two or three miles. This usually was done to escape when surrounded by an enemy or to pass an enemy encampment undetected. The swimmer first set afloat several logs, moored during high water along the river bank. Then, lashing himself to the underside of another log, completely submerged and hidden from the keen eyes of the foe, he held one end of a hollow reed in his mouth, with the free end thrust up through the branches of the log, where it could not be observed. Thus, breathing through his mouth, he floated and swam underwater downstream to safety.

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.

by Cliff Walters



*How could Gabe Crinnard know
that trapping a one-eared wolf
would also bring him*

BADMAN'S BOUNTY

A SCOWL etched harsh lines into the florid face of Gabe Crinnard as his snorting buckboard team shied past the carcass of a steer lying on Cedar Slope. Crinnard knew that steer bore his brand. That was why the squat, gray-eyed cowman savagely jerked his frightened team back

into the little-traveled road, why he growled, "The blasted, hamstringin' killer!" as the old buckboard whisked down the slope on its regular Saturday afternoon trip to Larkville.

Crinnard was still thinking of that dead steer and muttering under his

breath when he saw something over on the next ridge that made him jerk his team to a halt. He had glimpsed a trapped wolf, a big one-eared killer, that had cringed down into the low sagebrush.

In that quick glance Crinnard had recognized the wolf that had wreaked death among the cattle which grazed about his isolated ranch in Willow Valley—the wolf whose right ear had been cropped off by whizzing lead from a cowpuncher's rifle more than a year ago.

Gabe Crinnard experienced a tingling surge of elation as he sat here now, his short, stubby-fingered hands gripping the lines. He had thought—feared rather—that old One Ear could never be trapped. But there he was, a front foot gripped in the unyielding steel strategically planted by Moccasin Marsh, trapper. For weeks Moccasin had pitted his trapping skill against the instinctive wariness of old One Ear.

"I might yet collect that three hundred reward you've offered, Gabe," the lanky, shaggy-haired trapper had said half a dozen times.

Those were the words that Gabe Crinnard heard again as he sat there, his gaze riveted on the opposite ridge. And, recalling those words, Crinnard's sudden elation began to ebb. It was worth three hundred dollars to rid this range of the cattle killer. Still, it was a lot of cash to fork over to a shiftless trapper who would only squander his reward in the Larkville Saloon.

Probably that was where Moccasin Marsh was now—in the Larkville Sa-

loon. Then why should he ever know he had a wolf in one of his traps? Why wouldn't it be simple enough just to relieve that trap of its prize and—

Quickly Gabe Crinnard pulled his gun and started to get out of the buckboard. But he stopped, sat down again and gazed furtively back toward Cedar Slope. Moccasin Marsh often trailed along that broken, cedar-tufted terrain, and he had eyes like a hawk. He had keen ears, too. If he heard the shot that killed a wolf, there *might* very possibly be more shooting.

"I . . . I'd almost bet he's in town," Crinnard growled, torn by indecision. "But I've got to know. And it won't take long. In the meantime nobody else'd be ridin' this range except that blasted ignorant trapper!" Crinnard spoke sharply to his team and the buckboard whisked on toward Larkville, five miles to the south.

It was less than an hour later when Gabe Crinnard, as wary as the one-eared wolf he was thinking about, sauntered casually into the Larkville Saloon. He made his way toward the poker table where Moccasin Marsh was playing cards with Jess Talbott, the plump deputy sheriff, and a couple of other men.

"Better keep away from temptation, Crinnard," called Windy Donahue, the burly, loquacious bartender. "You might fall under the evil spell of rattlin' poker chips and find yourself riskin' one of them dollars you've gouged out o' Willow Valley."

The poker players chuckled and Crinnard retorted: "You tend to your bar, and I'll tend to my own business, Windy!"

"Which business must be good," said the barkeep, grinning maliciously. "I was just thinkin' a little while ago, when I staked Moccasin to five dollars so he could get in that game, about what a sharp businessman you are, Crinnard. Now most cowmen, when they want to grab off adjoinin' range, hires a cowpuncher to homestead it for 'em. They pay him regular wages, and maybe a little extry when he deeds his proved-up land over to 'em. But that wasn't the way you worked it with Moccasin there, was it?"

"It sounds to me like you've been samplin' your own wares too much this afternoon," replied Crinnard bluntly.

"Aw, don't pay no attention to Windy," cut in Moccasin Marsh, a grin on his lean, weathered face. "You didn't notice anything in any of my traps when you drove to town, did you, Gabe?"

"Nope," Crinnard replied. "It's kind o' late in the year for trappin' now."

"That's what I figure," Moccasin answered. "Think I'll start gatherin' up my traps tomorrow mornin'. Oh, maybe I'll try for One Ear a little longer but—"

"I think he's left the country," interrupted Crinnard. "I haven't seen no fresh killin's of his lately. That's why I'm takin' down that reward I've been offerin' for his hide."

"Pullin' down the bounty?" in-

quired Jess Talbott. "You can't very well do that, Crinnard. If that old killer's caught, well—"

"He won't be, not on this range. He's left the country," said the cowman impatiently, regretting that he had entered the saloon. He wouldn't have if he'd known that Moccasin Marsh was in here, and as tipsy as he appeared to be now.

"No bounty welshin' now, Gabe," Moccasin was saying. "And you must be blind if you think old One Ear ain't around yet. Why, not more'n three days ago, I seen a wolf-killed steer of yourn lyin' up there by the road on Cedar Slope. Didn't you see that carcass when you drove by today?"

"It didn't look that fresh to me," Crinnard replied. "But if my cattle *are* bein' wolf-killed, don't think I'll welsh on any bounty! I'll raise the ante another couple hundred!"

"Good for you, Gabe," said Moccasin. "Five hundred! That'd be a stake for me. I could start over and—"

"If you do, don't get in debt to Crinnard again," warned the barkeeper. "His conscience is too slow and his pencil's too fast. That's how come he figured you out o' your place in Willow Valley, and after he'd talked you into homesteadin' and improvin' the purty little spot."

"Now don't try turnin' me agin' Gabe," said the lanky trapper. "Five-hundred bounty on old One Ear! I'll ketch that old killer sooner or later and— By golly, Gabe! I was goin' to stay in town and make a night of it. But now, as soon as I lose these

few chips, I'll tie my old horse behind your buckboard and ride home with you, Gabe."

"I can't wait that long," said Crinnard hastily.

"Well, maybe I'll wait till mornin' then," said the trapper. "Could you loan me ten dollars, Gabe, so I can—"

"So you can get drunker and lose your money faster?" Crinnard snapped. "You've got more gall than—" He caught himself, forced a smile and added: "Sure I can loan you ten, Moccasin. Here you are." He took a ten-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to the trapper.

"Thanks, Gabe," said Moccasin. "That'll last me for an hour maybe."

"Yeah," said Talbott curtly, "if you don't spend it for liquor, the minute Crinnard turns his back, and get run out o' town. The last time you got drunk you—"

"You let Moccasin alone," Crinnard cut in. "You ain't goin' to be wearin' that tin star much longer, Mr. Talbott, so you might as well come down off your high horse. When I was over to the county seat a couple weeks ago, I told the sheriff how you hang around Larkville playin' cards when you should be tendin' to—"

"So you're the coyote that done the howlin', eh?" Talbott kicked back his chair, slammed his cards down on the table and headed for Crinnard.

But before the deputy could lash out with his tightly clenched fist and land a blow on the florid face of the

cowman, lanky Moccasin Marsh had come to his feet.

"Lawman or not, Talbott, you'll lick me 'fore you lay a hand on the gent that just loaned me ten dollars!" Marsh yelled as he tangled with the deputy.

But Moccasin Marsh, tough as he was, seemed too drunk to land a solid, telling blow on the lawman. And Jess Talbott, apparently not wanting to punish a meddling drunk man, merely defended himself for a moment.

Then, angrily, the deputy closed in on the trapper and pinned the latter's long arms to his sides. "You stay here, Crinnard, till after I can lock this drunk up in jail," he growled. "Then I'll be back to settle with you!"

As Moccasin Marsh, struggling ineffectually, was led away toward the town jail, Gabe Crinnard edged toward the saloon door. He was nearly ready to make his exit when the bartender called: "You runnin', Mr. Crinnard?"

"Not from Talbott, but from that star he wears," rumbled the cowman. "I don't want him to throw *me* in jail. I've got livestock to look after out home!"

If the bartender and other men in the saloon hooted at him as he quickly made his way toward his buckboard, Crinnard ignored their jeers. Things had broken right for him, and he meant to make the most of his opportunity. As he trotted his team out of town, he looked back—and saw, much to his pleasure, a deputy sheriff thrusting a still-strug-

gling prisoner through the jail door.

"That's *one* good turn you're doin' 'fore you lose your star, Talbott," the cowman mumbled.

It was near sundown when Gabe Crinnard tied his team to a cedar tree and made his hurried way afoot across the rocky draw. Then, gun ready, he climbed the slope of the ridge beyond and approached the big one-eared wolf that Moccasin had trapped. One Ear lunged frantically on the trap chain before a bullet crashed into his head and bowled him over.

Working fast, Crinnard released the dead wolf from the trap and carried the animal back to the buckboard on the opposite ridge. He had deposited his burden in the buckboard and had started to unhitch his team from the tree where he had tied them when a chill voice said:

"What's your hurry, Crinnard?"

The cowman froze in his tracks as Deputy Jess Talbott, his star glinting brightly in the golden glow of sunset, stepped from behind the cedar.

"I thought I told you to wait in town for me till I got Moccasin Marsh jailed," Talbott went on. "Now I trail you out here and find you lootin' Marsh's trap."

"So you sneaked up that other draw there, eh?" Crinnard's lips curled angrily. "Now you think you're goin' to— But you won't!" The cowman jerked his gun free of leather. "You ain't goin' to tell anybody I was lootin' traps. You're goin' to lose more'n your law job,

Talbott. You're goin' to lose your life if—"

Crinnard didn't hear a pair of moccasins coming up softly behind him. He didn't know that Moccasin Marsh was free of jail bars until a long arm swept out from behind and reached for the gun in his hand.

The cowman fought frantically to retain his gun, but he lost it in that encounter with the gangling trapper, whose body was tough as a strand of rawhide.

"Moccasin wasn't as drunk as he pretended to be in the saloon," Talbott said tauntingly. "Nor he didn't trap old One Ear on that ridge across the draw there. He caught him way over by Antelope Springs early this morning, and staked him out over here where you'd be bound to see him on your regular Saturday trip to town."

Wrath surged through Crinnard as he stood there breathing heavily.

"Yep," said Moccasin, "I thought maybe I could ketch *two* wolves in one trap. You tipped your hand when you tried to welsh on the bounty and when you talked me out of ridin' back out here with you. You tipped it again when you, the stingiest scum that ever crooked an ignorant trapper out o' his homestead, loaned me that ten dollars so I'd stay in town and get drunk. And you fell for the jail trick. Now you can pay me that *five* hundred bounty and—"

With the fury of a maddened animal, Crinnard lunged at the lanky man who had baited a trap for him.

A thick fist jarred to the side of Marsh's head and staggered him a little, but only as a tough pine sapling bends under the weight of force. Moccasin's tough body gained erectness again, and his looping right swing smashed against Crinnard's mouth, crushing anger-curved lips.

This time Crinnard swayed, but regained his balance and lunged again. Riding the high tide of fury, he tried to fell the taller man. If he could only get Marsh down—

But he couldn't. Time after time Crinnard sought to land a telling blow on the trapper's jaw, but each time he was thwarted and punished by bony, rock-hard fists that smashed to face and body.

Crinnard's mouth and nose were bleeding and he was rocking on his boot heels when Jess Talbott called: "Why don't you finish him, Moccasin? He's staggerin' around like a blind bull, and he can hardly hold his arms up!"

"I don't want to knock him cold," replied Moccasin, and shot another stinging blow to Crinnard's face. "He's got to write a bounty check—and sign some other papers."

"Whu-what other papers?" gasped Crinnard, staggering back against his buckboard and clinging there for support.

"Why, a deed to that homestead you're givin' back to Moccasin," said Talbott, producing some papers. "Here you are, Crinnard. It's all fixed up for you to sign. Or if you'd

rather go to the pen for lootin' traps—"

Crinnard swore, tried to hedge. But the sight of that star on Talbott's vest—and the thought of prison bars—were persuasion enough to make him sign the deed.

"You helped Marsh spring this trap, blast you," Crinnard growled, glaring at Talbott. "And if you wasn't still wearin' that star—"

"I'm not," said Talbott, glancing toward the setting sun as he removed the star from his vest. "Thanks to a big taxpayer like you bellyachin' to the sheriff, I'm through bein' a deputy at six o'clock this evenin'. And I guess it's a little past six by now."

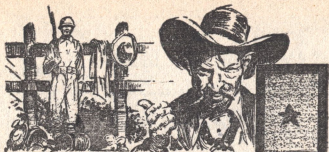
"That's right," Moccasin Marsh told Crinnard with a grin. "Jess is goin' to be my pardner in Willow Valley, now that he's out of a job. But don't never try pullin' another gun on him, Crinnard. Shucks! He could've killed you twice while you was unleashin' your hardware a little while ago, if he hadn't wanted you to live to sign certain papers—and bounty checks."

"Next time it'll be different, all right," agreed the ex-deputy. "In fact, I think it'd be safer for Crinnard to sell out to some *white* man, and move out o' the valley that's goin' to be our new home, Moccasin."

Crinnard swore as he climbed stiffly into his buckboard and drove home. He guessed maybe he *would* sell out and move away—soon. It would be safer, he decided.

THE END.

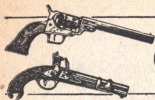
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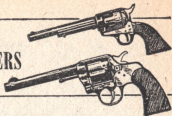
WHERE'S THEM COWBOYS

by S. Omar Barker

*These days the cowman lookin' for a hand to do some work
Had just as well go hire him the nearest ribbon clerk;
For some that claim they're cowboys and apply for jobs like that,
Why, all they've got to prove it is the bigness of their hat.
You ask 'em where's their outfit, and it makes them bat their eyes!
Don't even savvy what you mean. To them it's some surprise
To learn they'll need a saddle and a bridle and a bed,
And also maybe something in, as well as on, their head.
Oj course they've prob'ly got on boots, mostly likely built for looks,
And if they own a pair of spurs, they're big as loggin' hooks.
They'll go and buy an outfit—you advance the cash, of course—
But still you've got to show 'em where's the tail end of a horse.
And if they turn out worthless, why you can't afford to fire 'em.
Until they've paid you back the cash you had to spend to hire 'em.
Now some will quit when they learn how sweaty ranch work is,
But prob'ly some will stick it out and kinder learn the biz.
It sure does make a ranchman want to chew his nails and snort—
Until he gets to thinkin' why the cowboy crop's so short.
Well, then he quits complainin', for he knows, like you and me,
That the crop of comin' cowboys now is fighting on the sea,
Or on the land or in the air, wherever fighting's done,
And cowhands will be scarce at home until this war is won!
The moral here is mighty plain, and also mighty true:
The stuff that makes good cowboys makes good fighting hombres, too!
And, also, these green fellers that you make complaint about—
Might some day make good cowhands—and they TRY to help you out!*



GUNS AND GUNNERS



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

THE Japs have long been known as a nation of imitators. Usually their work is an imitation in design—rarely in quality.

In this war, Japan is again imitating. Rarely are firearms found to be original in design. But the simple job of copying is not the entire story. Their material is frequently, but not always, poor. Their copied designs frequently are "simplified" to make them easier to build, but this does not always improve performance.

Japanese ammunition is by no means equal in quality to that produced by other Axis nations. I've handled quite a lot of it, much of which has been broken down for detailed examination. After tearing apart sample ammunition from many captured lots, the following comments are interesting to study. First, the brass cartridge case.

Cartridge cases are *not* alike. The Jap 6.5 mm. falls at the bottom of the list in quality in the writer's examination of all kinds of ammunition made in this century. It is a semirimmed cartridge of .25 caliber with a cupro-nickel jacket on a long, ballistically poor design of bullet. It utilizes the Berdan type of primer in

which the anvil is a part of the primer pocket in the case. There are two ways of forming such an anvil—from the outside of the case in the formation of the pocket through the use of a concave punch, or from inside the case after the pocket is formed by indenting the inside of the head hard enough to raise a "bump" in the bottom of the primer pocket. Germany uses the former system and gets better results. Japan does it the crude and easy way with varying results.

In the examination of more than one hundred different Jap 6.5 mm. cartridge cases, I have yet to find one that would pass United States inspection standards.

Jap powder is better—but not equal to United States forms in uniform granulation. It is impossible to check it properly for performance in Japanese ammunition due to the quality of the case and the resultant irregular effect on ignition.

Jap bullets are serviceable, but of poor quality, badly designed, poorly balanced, and by no means capable of the accuracy of those made by the United States and even by other Axis nations.

Not so long ago the Foreign Ma-

terial Branch of the War Department Ordnance at Aberdeen Proving Ground, put on a demonstration of captured Axis arms, ranging from rifles and submachine guns to artillery. Newsreel men were there to photograph the display, and were all set to make spectacular pictures. A light Japanese Nambu machine gun was set up on the firing line. Its hopper was filled with clips of Jap 6.5 mm. (.25 caliber) ammunition. Three shots were fired and the gun jammed. A cartridge didn't feed properly. The gun was tied up four minutes while the gunner feverishly tried to dislodge the defective cartridge and finally had to take the gun apart. Eventually it was back in operation again.

A few more shots were fired to see if it would work, then the gun was ready for action. Cameras again started. The first shot got away nicely, then the gun broke down again. This time it couldn't be started. It was withdrawn from the display and I examined it carefully. I found, first of all, that a defective cartridge, almost a complete dud, had started a bullet into the mouth of the rifling at the throat. It stuck there. The back pressure from the defective cartridge broke the firing pin.

It all goes back to poor quality of material, poor workmanship, and poor design. American ammunition

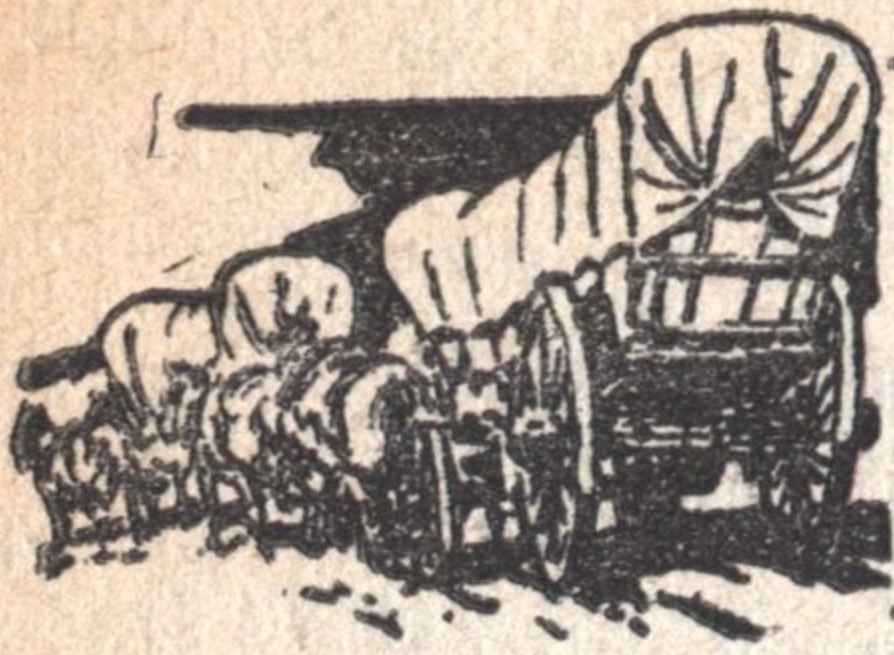
has always been noted for its quality. American machine guns are simple, sturdy, well made, and well designed.

It must not be assumed that Jap equipment is of no value whatever. A man killed with a piece of junk is just as dead as the man who absorbs a precision-made pellet from an expensive gun. But one man equipped with good arms, ammunition and accessories is worth, in the long run, more than two men equipped with poor-quality, unreliable arms and ammunition.

The Japanese method of waging warfare seems to be based on the assumption that all personnel is expendable. If weapons and ammunition fail, it is "regrettable," but the unfortunate soldiers have gone to an honorable death—which seems to be what every Jap lives for. His ancestors can remain proud without considering that the Japanese system of quality control was at fault.

In the United States' system of munitions manufacture, the finest is not considered good enough. Research technicians are constantly seeking to improve quality and manufacturing methods, and, despite the tremendous increase in production schedules, there is never a slackening of precision control and inspection of each individual component, regardless of size, used in either arms or ammunition.

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

HOMESTEADING, the right to earn yourself a hundred and sixty acres of good United States government land simply by occupying it, cultivating and improving it, has been responsible for much of the settlement in our Western States in the past. The process still goes on to a certain extent, and, judging from the letters in our mailbag each week, a considerable number of men now fighting in one or another branch of Uncle Sam's armed services is interested in the possibility of homesteading in the West as a definite part of their post-war plans.

It can be done. In fact, the U. S. Land Office, the branch of the department of the interior controlling homestead lands, has recently announced through its Los Angeles, California, office that more than *three hundred thousand acres* of fertile Federal land east of the Imperial Valley in southern California will be thrown open for homesteading after the war. Veterans, the announcement says, will get first opportunity to file on them.

This is land that was formerly desert country, useless for agricultural purposes because of lack of water. Now, however, with the completion

of the All-American Canal, irrigation of these acres will make them a southern California desert garden spot as are other parts of the Imperial Valley that have already been supplied with water.

The Imperial Valley, much of it below sea level, lies in the heart of a vast, sandy, desert waste. Today it is a great, green oasis turned into valuable farmland through the miracle of irrigation, its principal crops melons, alfalfa, grapefruit, grapes, strawberries, lettuce and dates. On some sections dairy cattle are raised. Though dairying in the desert may sound incongruous, dairying and dairy products are becoming an important agricultural industry in this watered, mild-winter climate region of what was once barren, cactus-studded desert.

Corporal M. B., attached to one of our finest, fighting air arms "somewhere in the South Pacific," managed to find time, according to his letter to us, to do a bit of serious post-war planning. "I think I would like to own a real honest-to-goodness hunk of this grand country of ours I've been fighting for," he wrote. "What about the chances of a veteran homesteading somewhere in the West

when the war is over? I like desert country particularly, and if possible, mild winters. But the land would have to be capable of producing something after I got it developed. Any suggestions? Will veterans get any special considerations from the government as far as homesteading is concerned?"

Corporal, that southern California post-war homesteading project ought to be right down your alley. It will entail hard work, of course, getting started in a new block of desert country. But you are plenty used to hard work in the Army. After you get your tract developed and growing fresh garden vegetables in the winter, or what other crops you choose, you'll really have yourself something—with time out for prospecting in the not-too-distant mineralized desert mountain areas of southern California, or for fishing over on the Colorado River.

You will have to visit the area first, and pick out the hundred and sixty acres you wish to file on from the sections still vacant. This is necessary since land office regulations require prospective homesteaders to inform themselves fully by *personal examination* as to the character of the land they desire. Each applicant is required to swear that he is personally acquainted with the land described in his homestead application.

It is too early in the game to guess what, if any additional considerations will be given veterans as far as their homestead rights go after the war. As the law stands at present they are already granted substantial privileges in the matter of time required to fulfill homestead entry regulations. For instance, the general citizen who files a homestead entry must maintain a residence on the land for three years, in addition to making certain improvements each year before he can submit his final proofs and receive a patent for the land, making the homestead his forever after.

In the case of veterans, however, the three-year residence requirement may be cut as much as two years, leaving just one year for the ex-serviceman to be on the land before it actually becomes his. The time cut is based on the length of service the veteran has put in the Army, Navy, or Marines.

For instance, if you were in the wartime service a year, you are allowed a years' deduction. But if you were in three years, your deduction allowance would still be only two years, the top allowance. These are the veterans' regulations in effect before Pearl Harbor. And there is no doubt that veterans of the present conflict will be included, if they have not already been specifically added to the list.

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

DOWN in South America, Colombia has always been known as a rich gold country. Six years after Columbus, on his last voyage to the New World, discovered the coast of what is now Colombia the first Spanish settlers found the natives using quantities of gold and precious gems.

That was more than four hundred years ago. Ever since then Colombia's dank, vine-covered jungle rivers heading high in the towering peaks of the Andes have been the goal of red-blooded prospectors with a strong streak of adventure in their veins, and the ability to tackle the hardships and dangers of jungle pioneering.

About fifty million ounces of gold have come from Colombia from the days of the first Spanish settlement down to the present time. Most of this impressive total, which makes Colombia the top-ranking gold-producing country in South America, has come from rich gravel bars, and the gold-flecked stream beds of the region's many rivers.

It is hard country to get into. For a long time because of the steepness of the mountain slopes, the Magdalena River in from Barranquilla on the Atlantic side was the

main route into the interior. Today, airplanes move travelers up to the mountain cities, covering in a matter of hours what used to consume days or even weeks of travel. They don't penetrate the still-dense jungle country of the lowlands. They fly over it. Modern roads, too, now connect many of the principal towns and skirt or cut through the jungle in a thin swath that is a triumph of modern engineering.

Prospecting in Colombia affords an adventure trip that has captured the fancy of many American gold and mineral hunters. Latest for us to hear from, with Colombia in mind, was C. M., at present in the Navy and stationed down in Florida. "Am vitally interested in a prospecting trip to Colombia, S. A., after the war, of course," his letter declared. "Anything you can tell me, meantime, about present conditions in Colombia, or the gold locations there, will be appreciated."

We have given you a fairly general idea of what to expect in Colombia, C. M. Now let's get down to cases. In the early days most of Colombia's gold-placer production was obtained by small-scale prospecting methods with a batea. The batea

is nothing more or less than the South American wooden version of a gold pan, which, in fact, it antedates. The batea is a large, shallow, hollowed-out wooden dish, generally larger than a standard gold pan since its outside diameter may range all the way from fifteen to thirty inches across. It is manipulated in about the same manner as a gold pan, but is more cumbersome and usually harder for the average American placer-gold prospector to handle. In addition, instead of having a flat bottom, it is shaped to an inverted apex in the center and the washed-out gold is collected in this central hollow.

Native prospectors in both South and Central America have been accustomed to the batea for centuries. The chances are an American will have better luck if he takes his own gold pan along.

Placer gold is still panned out of the rivers and side streams in the gold-mineralized sections of Colombia, but in several districts where the pay streaks, even if low grade, are sufficiently extensive to warrant the outlay, dredges, hydraulicking, and other methods of handling large yardages have been resorted to. And they have been successful in many instances.

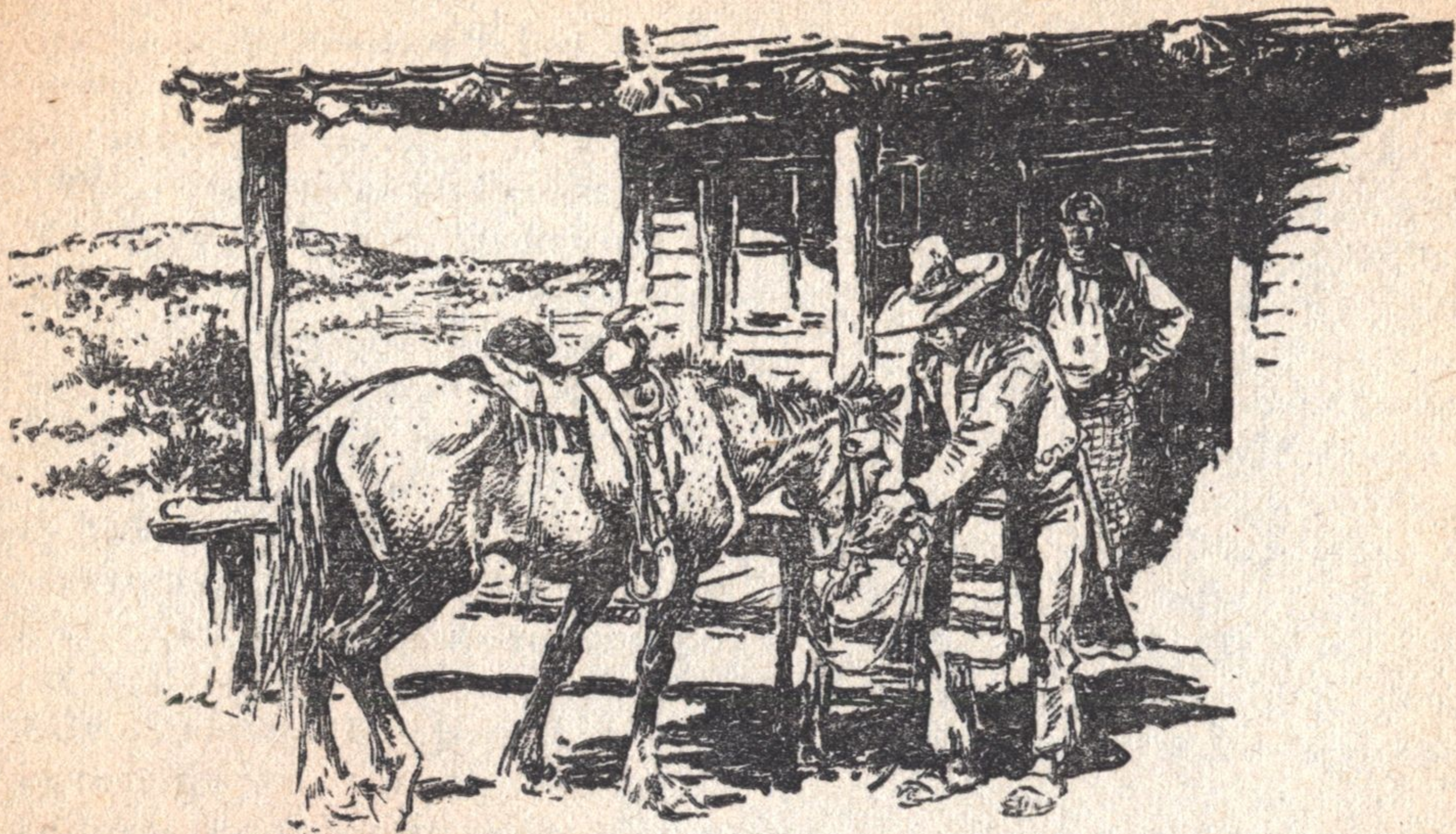
Judging by past performances, perhaps the most productive gold-placer areas have been found along the

Nechí and Porce Rivers in North Antioquia. These streams, which drain a rich gold-lode region, are tributaries of the Cauca River. Many of the tributaries of the Magdalena River, particularly those between Mariquita and Ibagué, another gold-lode section, have proved the source of well-paying gold-placer gravel beds. Where the main streams are worked out or already controlled, it might pay to tackle the lesser creeks in search of smaller but locally rich pay streaks.

Over in western Colombia, in what is known as the Intendencia of Choco, many tributary streams that flow into and form the Atrato and San Juan Rivers contain and have yielded considerable placer gold. Some of them have yielded both gold and platinum. Toward the southern part of the country, down near the Ecuadorean border in the Department of Narino, there is the Telembi River and its tributaries that are important gold-placer producers. North of that there is the Guapi River in the Department of Cauca.

The above are not all the gold-placer producing streams in Colombia by any means. But they are representative of the proven rivers from which a substantial portion of Colombia's millions in placer gold has been obtained in the past, and they give a pretty good picture of where the country's main placer areas lie.

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, 75 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.



PART III

GUN-SMOKE BRAND

by William Colt MacDonald

The Three Mesquiteers figured that ramrodding a kidnaped cowman's spread should give them a chance to brand some owlhoot mavericks

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.

Tucson forces Deputy Ben Canfield to allow him to see the prisoner, a young man named Red Sherry, who explains that he

was kidnaped by two masked men and forced to witness the signing of a bill of sale for the Horseshoe N Ranch by Molly Norton. The girl herself was being coerced into signing on the threat that if she refused, her father, who had been missing for several weeks, would be killed. Sherry had inserted Tucson's name in the hope that the Three Mesquiteers might be drawn into the affair. Then Sherry had managed to escape, taking the bill of sale with him.

After a talk with Molly Norton, Tucson and his pards decide to try to help the

girl find her father and they send for their crew to run the Horseshoe N for her, pretending that they have bought the spread. Santee Lombard, tough, gun-slinging owner of the nearby Dollar Sign L, who had tried to buy out the Nortons himself, hears of the "sale" and picks a quarrel with Tucson.

XII

BEHIND the bar Titus Shaw moved rapidly to one end, ready to duck if lead started flying. Tucson was backed carelessly against the long counter, one boot heel hooked over the bar rail, his thumbs stuck nonchalantly into his gun belt. His eyes were steady, icy cold, on Santee Lombard's face. Lombard took a backward step. His right hand quivered a trifle, but he kept it well away from his .45 butt. He didn't speak; just slowly shook his head.

Beyond Tucson were Lullaby and Stony, their forms tense, ready instantly to jump into the fray if Nick Armitage cut in to help his boss. Armitage had already gone into a half crouch, with clawlike hands poised above holsters for a swift draw. His eyes glittered with a sharp, venomous look as they darted from Tucson to Lombard and back to Tucson again.

A deathly silence hung over the Blue Cloud.

Tucson broke the silence at last: "It's your chance Lombard. You can put me out of your path—if you're good enough. Come on, make up your mind."

Lombard took another step back. He wanted to draw; every instinct urged him to draw, but something in Tucson's steely gaze warned him

against such a move. In the end, his mind triumphed over his more rash impulse. He spoke harshly, as though something made speech difficult. "I'm not taking that chance, Smith—not now. I'm too smart to be drawn into a fight with you—"

"Hang it, Santee!" Armitage cursed. "Let me take on for you. I can—"

"You close your trap, Nick," rasped Lombard. "I'm seeing this thing clearer than you. It's still three against two, maybe four against two. No, wait"—as Armitage started a protest—"I know what I'm doing. Sure, Brooke and Joslin turned their guns over to Titus, but you note the guns still layin' on the bar, and Titus has slipped down to the far end. Brooke and Joslin could grab 'em easy—"

"You talk like a fool, Lombard," Tucson said contemptuously.

Titus Shaw came back somewhat sheepishly. "I was just lookin' to watch out for my own hide," he said. "I'll take these guns—"

"And probably take a shot at me or Nick, eh?" Lombard snarled. "I don't fall for that, Titus, either. You and me are going to have an account to square—"

"Don't take this out on Titus, Lombard." Tucson sounded disgusted. "This is between you and me. Suppose we take our guns outside and settle it, where there won't be any chance of anyone interfering."

"I don't trust you, Smith," Lombard said hastily. "You're too anxious to fight. You've got some trick

in mind. But I'll get you another time . . . when the score stands even all around, and no odds in your favor. Come on, Nick, let's get out of here."

Armitage looked queerly at his boss. "You backing down, Santee?"

"Not backing down. Just showing good sense—"

"Look"—Armitage sounded eager—"let me take this on for you."

"You cut that talk, Nick," Lombard snapped. "I'm not letting you in for a cold-deck play, either. You keep those guns in holsters and come with me."

Tucson laughed softly. "You wouldn't be showing a streak of yellow, would you, Lombard?"

Lombard forced a laugh. "You know damn well I'm not afraid of you, Smith. I'm just smart, that's all—too smart to take a hand in a stacked game. Come on, Nick!"

He started toward the door. Armitage turned reluctantly, and with a look of hate at Lullaby and Stony, started to follow. As he swung around he spat a curse in their direction.

Stony leaped forward. "Just a minute, Armitage."

Turning, Armitage faced him. Stony walked up to the man, a broad grin on his face, hands held well out from sides. "See—no gun," Stony said.

Armitage looked at Stony's empty holster and nodded.

Stony went on: "You're packing two guns."

Again Armitage nodded. "What

about it?" he growled.

"You seem to have a mite more nerve than your boss," said Stony. "I wonder how much more." His grin widened. "I always did crave to get me a red feather."

Like a flash, one hand went out and plucked the crimson eagle feather from Armitage's hatband. An instant later Stony had stuck it in the band of his own Stetson. "How's it look, tough guy?" he asked insultingly.

No man with any fighting spirit at all could stand the taunt in Stony's voice. For just a brief moment, Armitage stood motionless, overcome by this cowboy's brash effrontery. His jaw dropped; his eyes bulged. Then a reddish-purple flush swept across his unshaven features. His right hand darted down, closed about the butt of one .45.

Stony laughed joyously, closed in with the speed of lightning. "So you would draw, eh?" he yelled. His right hand closed on Armitage's fist, just drawing the gun from holster. There was a brief, sharp struggle. Stony laughed again as he exerted a little pressure, bending back the gun in Armitage's closed fist.

For an instant, Armitage resisted the pressure. Then beads of perspiration popped on his forehead, he gave an anguished yell, "My wrist!" His grip on the gun relaxed and he staggered back, leaving the long-barreled .45 in Stony's possession.

For just as instant the two men stood facing each other. Stony was still grinning. Armitage's features were contorted with mingled rage

and pain. Rattler-swift, his left hand flashed to his other gun. Again Stony moved. Before Armitage could draw his second weapon, the long barrel of his gun, in Stony's hand, had cracked against the side of Armitage's head.

Armitage's arms dropped loosely to his sides. A silly, half-dazed expression passed over his face as he reeled back and crashed against the wall. He didn't fall; just stood there, glassy eyes trying to focus on Stony.

Crossing the floor in swift strides, Stony jammed Armitage's gun back in its holster. "You'd better take your little boy out of here, Mr. Lombard," he chuckled. "I don't think he wants to play any more today. And tell him, when he recovers his senses, if any, that he can have his red feather any time, by just coming after it."

Lombard, himself, seemed half-dazed at what had taken place. "By Satan!" He found his tongue at last. "I believe you hombres want trouble."

"We sure didn't come to Blue Cloud to attend any pink teas, or church socials, if that's what you mean," Lullaby drawled.

Tucson didn't say anything, but his eyes followed Armitage and Lombard as the two pushed out through the swinging doors, Armitage being supported by his boss and staggering like a drunken man. Slowly the swinging doors came to a stop as the steps of the two men scraped out toward the sidewalk.

Then Tucson turned to Stony.

"You dang fool!" he said resentfully. "You want to scare the daylight out of us? That was a fool stunt to pull, if I ever saw one. Armitage could have plugged you!"

"Could've, but didn't," Stony replied calmly. "I knew he'd be too surprised to move fast."

"He looked pretty danged fast to me." Tucson frowned. "You were just lucky, that's all."

"It just goes to prove what I've always said, Tucson," Lullaby put in. "Stony's plumb devoid of gray matter."

"Aw," Stony protested, "Armitage couldn't hurt me."

"Probably not," sighed Lullaby. "Where there's no sense, there's no feeling."

"Anyway," Stony chuckled, looking at himself in the bar mirror, "I got me a nice red feather for my hat."

"You'd better get a few dozen more," Lullaby advised, "and get ready to do some flying. Armitage's going to be after that feather—and he won't care how he gets it."

"What did you think I took it for?" demanded Stony. "Things've been too quiet around here. I'd like to see some *real* excitement."

"We'll probably see some, all right," Tucson declared. "Anyway, you ran a bluff and got away with it. So long as it turned out that way, maybe it's a good thing. It'll show Lombard and his crowd we're not waiting to be pushed around—in fact, we're eager to do a little pushing ourselves."

"I'd like to do a mite of food

pushing for a change," Lullaby put in. "Titus, you got any crackers, or anything like that?"

"I can give you a can of sardines and some cheese," Titus spoke for the first time in several minutes. He still looked a trifle pale. "And I've got some pretzels."

Lullaby beamed. "I knew this was the best bar in town. And let's have another beer."

While the bartender was setting out the food and drinks, Tucson said: "Titus, I hope Lombard won't hold a grudge against you. If he does act rough, you let us know."

"He doesn't bother me any," Titus said shortly, though he didn't look at all sure of the fact. "But you fellers are going to have to keep your eyes peeled from now on. You've won that round, but you don't know Lombard and his crowd. Armitage is fast with his guns, but they say that Lombard is even faster. They won't give up easy."

"The sooner they start, the sooner we'll get to the bottom of this mix-up," Tucson replied. He reached over to pluck the cigarette from Stony's fingers, but Stony was too quick for him.

"Roll your own, pard," Stony chuckled.

Tucson smiled and went on as he started to manufacture a smoke. "We learned a couple of things from that little brush, anyway."

"The same being?" Lullaby asked, through a mouthful of sardines and pretzels.

"For some reason," Tucson continued, "Lombard is in an almighty

hurry to close a deal for the Horse-shoe N. Why, we don't know, of course. And we can feel pretty certain that he sent someone over to Wagon Springs to bury Red Sherry's horse. Lombard gave himself away on that point before he thought."

Titus looked queerly at the three. "Say, you aren't detectives, are you?"

Tucson shook his head. "We just stumbled into something here in Blue Cloud, and we aim to stay and see what it is. Lombard's back of some crooked move. I aim to stop him."

"Amen to that," Titus said fervently.

"I had an idea you didn't like him," Tucson commented.

"If there's anything I can do to help," Titus said earnestly, "just let me know."

"Maybe you can help." Tucson nodded. "Just keep your mouth shut regarding any conversations we might have in here."

The three men sipped their beer in silence for a time. Tucson said finally: "Certain things have happened at Wagon Springs. We're pretty sure of that now. It looked plumb deserted that day we came through, remember? There was just that barkeep with the ugly mug there. We wondered then where he'd get the business to keep going. It's not a regular train stop."

Titus put in. "The train stops at Wagon Springs for water, that's all. It'll take on passengers, if anybody is there, of course. But it's practically a ghost town."

"Maybe somebody should haunt it for a spell," Stony put in. "It could be a sort of headquarters for Lombard's gang."

"Why?" asked Lullaby.

Stony shook his head. "I haven't the least idea. I'd like a chance to find out, though."

"Maybe you'll get it," Tucson told him.

"Now that you mention Wagon Springs," said Titus, "I remember hearing various members of Lombard's gang say they were going over there, from time to time. I never did give it a thought, until now. But what would take 'em over there?"

Tucson pondered. "A wandering Mexican might happen to drop into Wagon Springs and do a mite of spying around."

"I'll take the job," Stony said eagerly.

"I was figuring you for it." Tucson smiled. He turned to the barkeep. "Titus, if we go around asking, or buying things, folks might notice us. Do you suppose you could dig up some togs some place. You know, serape, sandals, et cetera?"

"Can do," Titus agreed.

Tucson gazed at Stony. "We'll have to do something about that blond head of yours. It's too bad it didn't stay black."

Lullaby started to laugh. He explained to Titus: "Stony used to have dark hair. But he was always putting some kind of fancy-smelling tonic on it. For a joke, one time, Jeff Ferguson—he's our rod on the 3 Bar O—put some peroxide in Stony's tonic bottle. First thing we

knew, Stony was a blond—"

"Aw, why bother Titus with that old story?" Stony said sheepishly.

"Then," Lullaby grinned, "to get rid of the blond hair, Stony started going without his hat, figuring the sun would make his hair grow faster. What happened? The sun bleached his hair worse than ever. His hair never did turn dark again. Sometime when you got a few minutes, I'll give you all the details. They're really funny."

"Aw, forget it," Stony growled. "Titus ain't interested." To Tucson: "I can fix up my hair, all right. If worst comes to worst I can mix some powder grime with vaseline. We'll need some stain, too—"

"Maybe I can help out," Titus suggested. "A few months back my little boy was in a Sunday-school pageant, over in Chancellor. It had something to do with the life of the Indian. Anyway, my kid was fixed up like a young 'Pache. I think there's still some of the stain and such that we used on him, around the place. I'll look it up when I get home."

"Thanks a lot, Titus. That'll help," Tucson declared.

"Now that we got that settled," Lullaby said, "I'll take care of this red feather for you." He removed it from Stony's hatband and thrust it into his own.

"Hey," Stony protested. "That's mine."

"Sure, I'm just taking care of it for you," Lullaby explained. "Don't you think I might want some fun if Armitage got a sudden yen for the

return of his feather. Shucks, you can't wear it where you're going. It'd give you dead away."

"Well, maybe you're right," Stony agreed, though he looked disappointed.

XIII

As Titus Shaw had said, Wagon Springs, to all appearances, was a ghost town. There wasn't much to the place. Originally it had existed solely as a stage stop on the road between Los Potros and Chancellor. With the coming of the railroad, the stage line had passed out of being, and the few buildings that comprised the settlement were eventually deserted.

Facing the railroad right of way and beyond the ancient wheel-rutted trail stood the old stage station, which in former days had acted as a hotel, and the Wagon Springs Saloon. These were long, narrow buildings with high false fronts and wooden-awninged porches. The painted signs on both fronts were sun-faded and cracked. An individual named Bull Jackson still operated the saloon, though very few people knew from whence came his trade, or why he stayed on. The stage station was, to all appearances, unoccupied. To the rear of the stage station was the old corral, though a close observer might have noticed that one end of the corral had been considerably enlarged through the use of barbed wire. This wire, however, was effectually camouflaged by the vast thicket of mesquite and prickly pear that sur-

rounded Wagon Springs and, day by day, seemed to creep closer to engulf the buildings.

To the rear of the saloon was a scattering of old frame shacks. One had no door; another's door hung listlessly from a single hinge and banged monotonously in the night winds. Other buildings, though they lacked glass in the windows, had blankets over the openings. These buildings, though, were too far back from the road to be noticed by any passing traveler. However, travelers riding through rarely paused at the saloon; if they did stop, Bull Jackson's lack of cordiality soon drove them on their way. And if a horse were heard neighing in the stables back of the stage station, Jackson could always explain it as his own mount—though it was many years since he had forked a pony.

So, on the surface of things, there was little to Wagon Springs: a helter-skelter array of old parched buildings, a great deal of mesquite, cactus and sagebrush; to top that off, wind and sand and flies, not to mention the lizards that darted here and there, and an occasional rattlesnake and horned toad.

In the Wagon Springs Saloon, Bull Jackson swabbed a dirty bar rag along his scarred wooden counter. He was a big-bellied man with ponderous shoulders, piglike eyes and a week's growth of beard. A few wisps of muddy-colored hair stood in disarray on his bald head. The apron tied about his waist might have been clean once, but that was long ago. Bull cursed discontent-

edly to himself. He wished one of the boys would come in and talk to him to break the monotony. He cast a sullen eye about the rough-board interior of the room; there were spittoons that should be emptied and cleaned; the floor needed sweeping, too. Oh, well, that could be left until tomorrow. He'd been telling himself that same thing for the past two weeks.

Bull helped himself to a drink from a bottle of his stock. He shuddered as the fiery liquor scorched its way down his throat, and resumed his aimless swabbing on the bar. "What I should have," he told himself, "is a Mex to swamp up around here. Then I could catch me a nap durin' the day, with him to watch if anybody shows up."

He took another drink from the bottle. "I ain't a-goin' to stay on here more'n another year. By that time I'll have enough saved to buy me a decent bar, some place. Workin' for Santee Lombard is playin' with dynamite—"

He paused suddenly, one hand cupped to a listening ear. There were sounds of an arriving horse outside. It wasn't moving fast. Probably that was how it had got so close before Bull heard it. Bull reached to a point below his bar and found a length of cord which he jerked. From somewhere in the vicinity of the stage-station stable a bell clanged a couple of times.

"They'll give me the devil for wak-in' 'em up," Bull growled. "Probably ain't nobody comin' that matters. Anyway, those hombres have

got their warnin' to lay low." Moving as speedily as his bulk would allow, Bull headed for his open doorway, muttering: "Whoever it is, I figure he won't stay long."

Reaching the porch of the saloon he gave a sudden exclamation of disgust. Just a Mex!

Crawling down from a gaunt, sway-backed gray horse of indeterminate age, was a solid-bodied Mexican clad in ragged white-cotton pants, a cholla jacket from which most of the embroidery had unraveled, and wide-brimmed straw sombrero, from beneath which hung strands of black hair half covering the dark eyes. A worn pair of leather sandals covered the dirtiest feet Bull Jackson had seen in many a day, not excluding his own. The Mexican wore no shirt beneath the jacket.

The Mexican paused to secure a very soiled gray-and-white serape from his saddle—and what a saddle! It lacked one stirrup; what leather there was was dry and cracked, the remainder had long since peeled from the tree. The cattle was entirely devoid of covering and a chunk of it had been broken off sometime in the distant past. It was a fitting rig, however, for the horse on whose back it rested.

"That animal," Jackson mused, "is a flea-bitten nag if I ever saw one."

The Mexican crossed the porch, carelessly tossing the serape over one shoulder. "Hi, amigo!" he grinned, following the words with a sudden burst of fluent Spanish.

"Talk American," Bull Jackson growled. He stood marring the entrance. "What you want?"

"I want of the drink—what else?" the Mexican replied.

"You got money?"

"Een my own country I am ver' reech hombre—"

"You're not in your own country now, feller. Have you got money?"

"Seguro. Why not?"

Grudgingly, Bull Jackson left the door and went back to his bar. The Mexican followed. Jackson rested his hands on the counter. "What'll it be?"

"Tequila—with the lime and the salt—"

"Don't get high-falutin' ideas, Mex. You'll take prime bourbon—or nothin'."

"The whiskee weel do, señor."

Pouring a whiskey glass half full from a bottle, Jackson slid it before his customer. The Mexican downed the drink, shivered slightly. He looked curiously into the bottom of the glass, opened his mouth to inhale fresh air. "Señor," he commenced, "have you ever seen of the volcano?"

"No, I ain't, and what's more, you haven't paid—"

"I'm remind' of the boiling hot lava that flows—"

"Shell out with the cash, Mex."

"First, I weel have the rest of my dreenk. You fill' but half full the glass—"

"Your money, blast it!"

The Mexican shrugged apologetically. "Een my own country I am ver' reech hombre, but now—"

A lurid oath burst from Bull Jackson's lips. For a full minute his flow of profanity was awesome, while the Mexican listened with something akin to admiration. When Bull had ceased for sheer lack of breath, the Mexican said calmly: "Again I am remind' of the flow of hot lava—"

"Damn it, Mex, you cheated me! You ain't got any money."

"Alas"—the Mexican was downcast—"eet is as you say. Eet is to be regret', no?"

"You'll regret it all right," Bull raged, rolling up his sleeves. "By thunder, I'm going to mop the floor with your oily carcass—" He paused suddenly as a new thought dawned. This was exactly what he'd been wishing for—a Mexican to keep the place clean. "Look here, Mex, I'm a reasonable man. What's your name?"

"The name?" Again that flash of white teeth. "The name ees Miguel Puerto de la Dávalos y Cervantes—"

"Whoa! That's enough. You know you're lyin'. I'll call you Mike."

"Is good." The Mexican nodded. "And you?"

"I'm Bull Jackson."

"Ah, the Bool! Once, in the bool-reeng I am the famous picador—"

"Douse it, Mike. I ain't interested in anything but my money for that drink. Two bits, see?"

Mike shook his head. "Eet is impossible to see what I don' have. Am ver' sorry. Soch a small of amount. Only the two beets. Is nozeeng for us to make the quarrel . . . no? One more dreenk 'an' we

call heem square—”

Jackson cursed. “No more to drink until I’m paid.”

“But I have not of the money, amigo Bool.”

“Look”—Bull’s voice was coaxing—“how’d you like to work for me?”

“Work? You mean the labor?”
A pained expression crept over the Mexican’s face and he shied away.

“It wouldn’t be much,” Jackson explained. “This place needs sweepin’ up, and my spittoons need emptying. You take care of that and we’ll call your drink square. I might give you another drink, if you stay on. Three meals a day and—”

“We make the deal,” Mike said suddenly. “I owe you the two beets, no?”

“That’s correct.”

“Is good. I geeve you my so fine *caballo* that stan’ out in front of these so elegant saloon.”

“That crowbait!” Jackson howled. “You’d trade that horse for a drink. Look”—earnestly—“I’ll give you a drink if you promise not to leave that nag behind when you go.”

“You don’ like?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I am regret,” Mike said sadly. “We cannot make the deal. The cleaning of these *cantina* ees work I do not care for.”

Jackson started to speak, paused, then brought up from beneath the bar a sawed-off shotgun which he placed on top of the counter. “You wouldn’t care to reconsider, would you?” he demanded meaningly.

Mike eyed the shotgun, then looked at Jackson. He forced a sickly grin.

“Maybe I am see the point of your argument,” he surrendered. “Geeve me of your broom.”

Jackson heaved a long sigh and a scraggly broom in Mike’s direction. “Get to work,” he ordered.

First, Mike emptied the cuspidors scattered about the floor. He came in to ask for water to wash them out.

“You’ll find water over back of the stage station,” Jackson commenced, then stopped. “No . . . never mind going over there. Just forget the water and start sweeping.”

“*Sí, señor.*”

Mike started to sweep. Dirt and cigar and cigarette butts thickly carpeted the floor of the barroom. Mike plied the broom vigorously. Dust rose in clouds. Jackson commenced sneezing and coughing. Finally he could stand it no longer and called a halt.

“That’s enough, dammit!” he growled. “You can finish up tomorrow.”

“I have the steady job, no?” asked Mike.

“So long as you behave yourself,” Jackson admitted grudgingly. Inwardly he was congratulating himself. He should have thought of something like this long ago. With a little training Mike would be able to do all the work.

“I’m theenk I’m take the *siesta*, now,” Mike stated, dropping the broom where he stood, and starting toward the entrance.

Five minutes later when Jackson moved out to see what had become of his new assistant, he found Mike

huddled on a shady section of the porch, serape high around his ears, sound asleep. The saddle had been removed from the gray horse and the beast, itself, had been tethered in the shade of a mesquite tree.

XIV

Toward evening, when the sun was striking low on the San Mateo Mountain, a thin wisp of blue mesquite smoke rose from the chimney in the stage station. A man in cow togs emerged from the building, yawning widely and rubbing his eyes. He stretched a moment, then scuffed through the sand toward the Wagon Springs Saloon. A minute later he entered the doorway and rapped on the bar. Bull Jackson, dozing on a high stool at the far end, awoke with a start, took one look at his customer and reached for a bottle back of the bar. This and a glass he placed before the man.

"How's it going, Hertz?" he said.

Hertz, a hard-jawed individual, with shifty eyes, said: "Who's that Mex sleeping out on the porch?"

Bull grinned. "I call him Mike. He's got a lot more name, but he answers to Mike."

Sharply: "Who is he?"

Bull shrugged. "Just another wanderin' hombre, I reckon. He mooched a drink and I made him work for it. I figure to keep him on. I work too hard as it is."

"The devil you do!" Hertz said scornfully. "How do you think Santee will take it—you havin' a stranger here?"

"Heck, that feller's not the kind to go snoopin' around. Give him a drink now and then, and that's all he cares about."

"I hope for your sake Santee feels that way about it."

"Santee don't need to know it—unless some big mouth talks out of turn."

Hertz shrugged. "You know me, Bull. I won't say anything. If you think it's all right, that's good enough for me."

"Certain it's all right."

"You haven't forgotten there's a bunch of stuff coming through tonight?"

"How could I with all you hombres here?"

"What's the Mex going to think?"

"He won't think. He's a stranger in this country, anyway. We'll tell him this is the Wagon Springs Rancho, if he asks. Ten to one, he won't even bother to ask." Bull scratched a match and lighted two oil lamps that hung, suspended in brackets, over the bar. "When you go back, tell cookie to fetch me two suppers tonight. I'll have to feed the Mex, I suppose."

Hertz departed, but other men drifted up to the saloon for a before-supper drink. The Mexican on the porch continued to sleep until one of the men, on Bull's orders, went out and awakened him. "Come on in and get your chow, Mex."

"The suppair?" Mike scrambled eagerly to his feet and followed the man inside. By this time night had fallen. Mike finished his meal, placed the tin plate back on the bar

with a "*Gracias, señor,*" and departed for the open air.

He sauntered lazily to his horse, took the reins and led the scrawny beast to a watering trough in the rear of the stage station. A shadowy figure loomed before him. "Who's that?"

"Eet is only me, señor—Miguel."

"Oh, it's you, eh, Mex? What you want here?"

"The watair for my *caballo*."

"Who sent you here?"

"The Señor Bool, he's tell me the watair ces here."

"Well"—hesitatingly—"it's all right, I reckon."

"*Gracias!* And the oats I weel find down in thee stable, no?"

"No!" The single word had an explosive sound. "You keep away from that stable, you hear?"

"*Sí, señor.* But a *caballo* mus' make the eat—"

"Not that bag of bones." The man guffawed. "Picket him out and let him forage for hisself."

After following instructions, Mike returned to the saloon. A number of men had gathered there. Mike made himself generally useful, serving drinks and washing glasses. Now and then he cadged a drink for himself. Bull Jackson swore furiously when he caught the Mexican stealing a drink. Mike blandly laughed off the theft and promised to do it no more. And though Bull watched him closely, the remainder of the evening, somehow the Mexican must have evaded the scrutiny, for he grew

drunker and drunker as the night progressed.

Finally, in a fit of rage, Jackson seized his assistant and rushed him toward the door. At the entrance he hurled the Mexican off the porch. Mike hiccuped once, as he went sprawling into the dust, laughed rather foolishly, then curled up where he'd landed and commenced to snore. Shaking his head disgustedly, Jackson returned to the saloon.

Shortly after midnight the bawling of cows awakened Mike from his position in the dust. He listened intently as the animals were brought to a stop some place out in the rear of the saloon. The creaking of saddles sounded occasionally through the night. "About two hundred head, I reckon," he muttered to himself. Rolling over, he gained his feet and, in a crouching position, went scurrying through the mesquite that surrounded the cattle. It was bright moonlight, now; not too difficult to see a brand occasionally.

A rider loomed up nearby. Mike shrank back in the brush. The rider sat his horse, waiting. Other riders were moving toward the saloon. Then a man on foot approached the rider near Mike.

"That you, Hertz?" the rider asked.

"It's me, Mitch. Want some of the boys to help you put these cows into the corral?"

"No, they don't go in the corral tonight. Santee said to push 'em right through. The way's clear. You can reach Branch City by tomorrow night. You'd better tell your boys

to saddle up and get started. Here're the papers."

Sheets of paper rustled between the two. The man called Mitch went on: "This will be the last bunch for a spell, so return to the ranch when you get the money for these cows."

"How come?"

"Santee's orders. There's something else come up and he wants all the crew to stick close to the home ranch for a spell."

"Trouble?"

"Maybe. Nothing to do with cows, though. I haven't been in on any of it, and Santee hasn't said much. He's done plenty of grousing, though."

"But what sort of trouble?" Hertz persisted.

"There're three strangers in Blue Cloud. They're plumb snoopy."

"I get it. We've got to go easy for a spell."

"That's about the size of it."

Hertz departed in the direction of the saloon. Within a short time a group of riders came loping out to take over the cattle. The man known as Mitch said: "Better wet these cows down before you start, boys. Tanner Creek was commencing to dry up, last time we trailed through to Branch City."

"We'll take care of it."

Horses started into action, the cattle bawled, dust rose. When there was enough dust so that Mike couldn't see the stars overhead, he worked his way back to the saloon porch and sat down near the doorway, with one leg stretched out where the first man to enter would

stumble over it. A puncher came striding up on the porch, slapping dust from his sombrero—and promptly tripped over Mike's extended leg. Mike crawled to his feet, apologizing volubly. The puncher growled at him and went on into the saloon. Mike heard him ask:

"Bull, who's that Mex out there?"

"Feller I hired to work for me. He's all right."

The answer seemed to satisfy the puncher. Mike dozed off again. When next he awakened, the saloon was dark and the cattle were gone. Mike rubbed his eyes, stretched and got quickly to his feet. It was still dark. The moon had gone down. Along the eastern horizon ran a faint pencil line of silvery gray.

"Dawn in another hour," Mike mused. He stepped carefully down from the porch, and made his way silently in the direction of the stable, to the rear of the stage station. His feet moved noiselessly through the thick sand, as he wended his way among the mesquite trees and prickly pear.

Reaching the stable door, he found it shut. He tried to open it, then discovered it was padlocked. At the same instant a voice from within the stable asked: "Who's there?"

Mike didn't reply. He had no time to reply, for at that moment he felt a gun barrel jabbed against his back and a voice asked coldly: "What you lookin' for, mister?"

A second form detached itself from the shadows, saying: "Let him have

it, Howie, if he don't answer pronto!"

Mike didn't bother to raise his arms. In a drunken voice he hiccuped: "Eet eesh of the dreenk I'm wan', señores. For why—*hic!*—ees theese so fine *cantina* make close? Weeth the t'roat like the san'paper, the dreenk—*hic!*—ees of the necesity—"

"The devil!" one of the men growled disgustedly. "It's that blasted Mex, Bull hired. Drunk as a hoot owl—"

"Who ees dronk?" Mike demanded indignantly. "No man—*hic!*—is dronk so long as he can ask—*hic!*—for one more dreenk."

He turned to face his accusers and promptly fell sprawling.

"No, he's not drunk," the man known as Howie said sarcastically. "He's just short of being petrified."

"Last time I saw him," the other man said, "he was snoring on Bull's porch. Brannon fell 'over him once. Probably woke up and felt the need of a drink. Then got turned around and staggered down here in his search for the saloon. Say, listen to that feller snore!"

Mike had again fallen asleep at the men's feet. Howie seized him by the collar of his jacket, jerked him upright and shook him vigorously. "Now get to blazes out of here, Mex," he growled, giving Mike a savage push in the direction of the saloon. Mike staggered frantically to keep from falling again and managed to stay erect as he kept going. A few yards farther on he commenced to sing in a thick, drunken

tenor a song that had something to do with his being a grandee of old Madrid. To the two guards at the stable, it was all very funny. They stopped laughing when the man inside the stable spoke again: "Who was that?"

"Nobody that can help you, mister—just a drunk."

Back on the saloon porch, Mike sat crouched in the shadows. "Who was in that stable?" he asked himself. "And why is it necessary to have two guards on the door? Somebody must be awfully afraid of his prisoner escaping."

The sun was high when Bull Jackson left the stage station and approached the saloon, bearing a plate of greasy stew and a cup of coffee. After kicking Mike awake he handed over the food. Mike ate in silence, then followed his employer inside the saloon, where he placed the plate and cup on the bar.

"My head," he groaned, "is of a size."

"Serves you right for stealing my whiskey," Bull said coldly.

"I am only make the borrow. Some day I'm pay. Een my own country I am the ver' reech hombre. But right of the moment I am in the dire requiremen' of one leetle wheeskey."

"Nothing doing, Mike," Bull said flatly. "Go on down and douse some water on your head."

"Watair?" Mike shuddered. "Watair is only good for the saileeng of the sheep."

Exasperatedly, Bull roared: "Get

out of here, anyway, and wash your face!"

"*Sí, señor.* I'm do heem at once." Mike was suddenly humble.

Every inch of his form showing the extreme depression of a hang-over, Mike left the saloon and headed for the water trough at the rear of the stage station. Here he doused his head in water. The rear door of the stage station was open. Mike glanced inside. He saw four men. One swore contemptuously at him as he passed.

Halfway back to the saloon, Mike's foot caught in a length of stout cord, buried in the sand. He stooped down and examined it. It seemed to run in the direction of the saloon. Acting on a sudden impulse, he gave the cord a jerk. Immediately, a bell jangled somewhere off to his left. Two men came darting from the stage station, crouching low, and made their way toward the stable where they hid in the brush near the stable door.

Mike frowned. "That's dang funny." He dropped the cord and went on.

Arriving back at the saloon he found Bull Jackson standing on the porch, a puzzled expression on his face. "Señor Bool!" Mike exclaimed excitedly. "I have jus' heard reeng-eeng the bells of heaven. Eet was a miracle! I'm trip over the length of streeng and of the immediately these angels bells make the sound so delicious—"

"So it was you!" Bull exclaimed disgustedly. "You leave that cord alone, you hear? That's a signal I

have when I want the boys in the stage station."

"Ees not of heaven, no?"

"No!" Bull snapped and swung back into his saloon. Mike followed him inside in time to see Bull stoop below the counter a moment. Some distance off came the short clang of a bell. "All clear," Bull muttered, half to himself.

"Regarding the dreenk—" Mike commenced.

"You don't get any drink," Bull cut in brusquely, "not until you've swept up."

Mike eyed the broom, standing in one corner, with extreme distaste. "Weeth these head, these is not my day for sweeping. But the dreenk I mus' have. Look you." He drew from some place in his dirty-white pants a handful of small, uncut turquoise stones, and approached the bar. Holding up one of the stones, he said, "I am in your debt for the two beets. Anozzer dreenk ees anozzer two beets. I'm theenk these so pretty stone ees worth four beets."

"Jumpin' catfish! Where'd you get them, Mike?" Bull's eyes gleamed greedily. The stones were rough, it was true, but cut and polished the handful Mike held would be worth twenty or thirty dollars.

"I'm get heem from my oncle who live' in New Mexico. I get the dreenk, no?" Mike placed a stone on the bar.

Bull quickly poured a glass of whiskey and set it before Mike. Mike downed it and shuddered. "At leas'," he stated philosophically, "eet make

me to forget the head when the t'roat sees burn."

"Look, Mike," Bull proposed. "I'll give you a whole bottle for those stones you got there."

Mike shook his head. "I'm not weesh to make the deal," he said placidly. Bull glowered at him, but Mike pretended not to see the look as he crossed the room and perched himself on a wooden table. "Many ridairs, many of the cow, come through here las' night," he commented rather listlessly.

"You never mind those riders and cows," Bull rasped, then changed his tone. "They're friends of mine. They often stop for a drink on the way through."

"You have many friend's, no?"

"Yeah, sure, everybody likes Bull Jackson."

"Theese Bool, he's ver' fine *caballero*," Mike said, flatteringly.

"I reckon I'm ali right, at that." Bull smirked.

"He geeves of the dreenk when hees frien' has none of money," pursued Mike.

An angry look crossed Bull's face. "The devil he does," Bull growled. "And I don't want no more of your salve."

"Ees not salve," Mike said earnestly. "Of all the men I see here, las' night, you are the . . . the . . . how shall I say heem? An' there are not so many of men theese morneeng. Weel come tonight, many more of your frien's?"

Bull shook his head. "You want to know too dang much, Mex," he said roughly. "Let's talk about those

turquoise stones of yours. I know where I can sell 'em. I'll give you two bottles of prime liquor."

"I'm not want to sell theese so fine stones. There is no need. Een my own country I am the ver' reech hombre—"

"Cut out that tripe," growled Bull. He reached below his bar, procured his shotgun and placed it meaningly on top. "Do you still think you don't want to sell?"

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "I am not sure eef you can make the persuade," he replied. Reaching to a scabbard slung at the back of his neck, beneath his jacket, he produced a long thin-bladed knife, which he proceeded to whet on the sole of one sandal.

Bull gulped and stared at the Mexican in alarm. Mike could probably pin his throat with the knife before Bull could raise the shotgun.

"Have I evar tol' you of my brothair?" Mike asked idly. "Weeth the knife he was what you call almos' supreme. At ten paces he could split the fly on the wall." He continued placidly to whet the blade in his hand. "Is truth. To slit the gullet of an enemy is nozzing. But to cut in two piece the body of the leetle fly, that ees, indeed, the art, no?"

"That's dang sharp knife throw-in'," Bull admitted nervously.

Mike nodded. "I know of but one man who was bettair weeth the knife than my brothair," he went on lazily.

"Who was that?" Not that Bull was interested. He'd reached the point now where all he wanted was

to keep Mike talking.

"The teacher of my brothair."

"You mean, this teacher could do better than split a fly at ten paces."

"Sure. I'm do heem at twenty paces. I am the teacher of my brothair."

Bull swallowed hard and managed to get his heart back in place. Cautiously he reached to the shotgun and stuck it back under the bar. "Speakin' of jewels," he said carelessly, "if there's one stone I don't care for, it's a turquoise. Now you take a diamond and you got something."

Mike brightened. He tested the keen edge of his blade on a hair from his head, then asked: "You got some diamonds, Bool? Maybe, after all, we make a deal for my turquoise." He slipped down from the table and, knife in hand, approached the bar.

Bull turned pale. "No, no," he said hurriedly. "I never owned a diamond in my life. I can't say I care for jewelry."

"Is true," Mike agreed, slipping his knife back in its sheath. "Jewels are not for the men, only for the pretty *muchachas*." He changed the subject abruptly. "You want I should make some more of the sweep—like yesterday?"

"Not like yesterday," Bull said, relieved that the knife had disappeared from sight. "You raised too much dust. You come around here and wash some of these glasses from last night."

"Sí, Señor Bool."

Jackson retired to his stool at the

end of the bar and watched Mike rinsing glasses in a bucket of dirty water. This fellow was a queer hombre, he mused, friendly one minute, ready to cut your throat the next. But those turquoises, now. Jackson made up his mind to get those. Tonight. He'd give Mike plenty of whiskey and then when he was too drunk to object . . . Jackson's eyes grew heavy. Leaning his head back against a shelf he went sound asleep.

By the time he awakened, Mike and the gray nag had disappeared. Bull couldn't believe it at first, but a thorough search of the grounds showed no trace of his strange assistant.

"Probably no more than I should expect," Bull grumbled. "He took the job just long enough to get his belly full of food and drink, then gave his benefactor the go-by!" But when he thought of Mike's knife, Bull decided it was just as well that Mike had departed. "Him and me might have had some trouble, eventual," Bull concluded.

XV

"What did you say this stuff was?" Stony asked, running his tongue over a lower lip. His eyes had brightened suddenly.

He was in Tucson's room at the Blue Cloud Hotel, busily engaged in scrubbing from his body the dark stain that a few short hours before had helped in his characterization of a Mexican. Blankets had been pinned over the two windows in the

room. A lighted oil lamp stood on the dresser. Lullaby sat on the bed. Tucson occupied a chair.

"What's this stuff?" repeated Stony. "I got a drop on my lip and it don't taste bad."

"It's called gin," Lullaby drawled. "There wasn't any alcohol to be found in Blue Cloud. Titus said gin would do the job just as well. He had some in a keg that came from New York. It sure removes that stain."

Stony lifted an unlabeled bottle and tasted the contents. "You know," he said seriously, "if I had more time, being a Mexican would be my hobby—"

"Look," Tucson cut in, "you've been here ten minutes and you haven't yet told us what you learned. You talk like you'd had some fun."

"I did, kind of." Stony grinned.

"But what did you find out?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. Lullaby, swab that color off my back, will you?" Lullaby got to work while Stony talked: "Most important of all, I learned there's a prisoner there. Don't know who he is, but they keep him in that old stable, with a double guard on the door. They sure ain't taking any chances of him escaping."

"Could it be Molly's father?" asked Tucson.

"Could be. I couldn't say for sure, though."

"Well, that's a first clue, anyway," Tucson said. "What else happened?"

Stony told them about the herd of cows that had passed through. "They were headed for some town named Branch City. A feller called

Mitch gave another cowhand named Hertz some papers to go with 'em. My guess is they were phony bills of sale."

"Branch City," Tucson pondered. "I know where that is. It's up in Wyatt County, right near the southeast corner where Wyatt edges into Tresbarro County. They've probably got some more of the gang up there to take over the stock when it arrives and dispose of it."

"Did you get to see the brands on the cows?" Lullaby wanted to know."

Stony nodded. "There was a little of everything—Horseshoe N, Bell, Coffeepot, Rafter L, 21 Bar, O Slash P—but no Dollar Sign L animals. There was probably two hundred altogether. There were a

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few other brands, too. Possibly from small one-horse outfits."

"Lombard's playing smart," Tucson speculated. "He's scattering his thieving, so the stolen animals won't be missed so quickly. After all, he's only been in this vicinity a mite over a year. No big outfit is going to miss the first ten or fifteen cows."

"That's the way it looked to me," Stony agreed. "I discovered something else. There's a cord under the saloon bar. Cowbell on the other end, down near the stage station. Whenever any strangers show up in Wagon Springs, Bull Jackson gives the cord a tug as a warning to the rest to lie low until the strangers have departed. There must be quite a gang there from time to time, though if you didn't know what was going on you'd think those buildings were deserted."

"Is there a gang there all the time?" Tucson asked.

"I don't think so," answered Stony. "I think Wagon Springs is just used as a halfway station for the rustlers. One gang picks up the cattle, then turns 'em over to the other gang for delivery. If anybody saw the same men running cattle up to Branch City all the time, he might grow suspicious. The crew that delivered the cows when I was there, pulled out early this morning. Going to the Dollar Sign L, I suppose. Besides Bull Jackson, there were only four men there when I left. The crew that took over the cows were expected to make delivery in Branch City tonight late. That means they'll return tomorrow and probably spend

tomorrow night at Wagon Springs before going on to their home ranch."

From that point on, Lullaby and Tucson asked various questions regarding the setup at Wagon Springs. Stony furnished details and by the time all of the stain had been removed from his body, and his hair was once more blond, the pseudo Mexican had pretty well covered the ground of his adventure. "And," Stony concluded, working up a thick lather of soap and water on his muscular naked frame, "that's about all I have to report. Roll me a cigarette, will you?"

"Look, Stony," Lullaby protested, "just because you've had a mite of success with the errand we sent you on, is no sign we got to wait on you."

"You hombres cut out your wrangling a minute," Tucson smiled. "I'm trying to think."

"It must be quite an effort," Stony chuckled.

"Yeah, it is." Tucson nodded. "Look, Stony, what sort of gang is over there at Wagon Springs. Anybody with brains, that might suspect your abrupt departure?"

"After what I've told you, you should know, pard," Stony said reprovingly. "No one with any sense would have been fooled with that act I put on. But Bull Jackson and the rest at Wagon Springs sure thought I was genuine."

He toweled his body and got back into his own clothing. After buckling on belt and gun, he went swiftly

through the pockets of the dirty white pants he'd discarded and spilled a handful of turquoise stones on the dresser. "Want some pretties?"

"Where'd you get those?" Lullaby asked.

"From a Navaho woman I ran across on my way to Wagon Springs. She had a baby with her and was making her way back to her people. Seems her husband had died. She didn't look like she'd been eating regular so when she asked if I wanted to buy a stone I took her stock off her hands."

"And probably paid twice what they were worth," Tucson smiled.

"I don't owe her anything," Stony said. "She was riding an old gray nag which I got in exchange for that crowbait I left here on. The gray sort of fitted into the part I was going to play. Say, how about my own horse?"

"He's been well taken care of at the Otero Livery."

"That's good. I noticed quite a few hombres in town when I snuk in tonight," Stony said. "Why the crowd?"

"Have you forgotten this is Saturday night?" Tucson said. "Pay night for most outfits, I suppose."

"Well, let's get over to Titus Shaw's and get a drink," Stony proposed. "Then I want to get a bait. I haven't had any supper yet."

"That's a good idea." Lullaby brightened. "Couldn't eat much, myself, for worrying about you."

"Why should you worry about me?"

"Afraid you'd pull a boner over to Wagon Springs and give the whole thing away."

"Shucks, I've never yet given anything away."

"You're telling me?" Lullaby drawled. "I always said you were cheap."

"Maybe so," returned Stony. "But nobody can say I've got the first dime I ever made."

"You know why, don't you?" from Lullaby.

"Why?" Stony asked.

"What you asking me for? Don't you know what you do with your money?"

"Can't say I do. That's more'n you can say. Every dollar you get the eagle loses weight from your squeezing it so tight."

"Hey, you hombres!" Tucson exclaimed. "Let's get going. I suppose you two are happy again, now that you're wrangling."

"How can anybody be happy with Stony around," Lullaby asked. "We've had two days of peace. I don't like to argue, but—"

"Oh, shucks," Tucson said wearily and started out the doorway. Lullaby and Stony followed, still niffnawing at each other.

Out on Main Street the way was thronged with men. All saloons were running full blast. The three pardners started across the street toward the Blue Cloud Saloon. Yellow light shone from doors and windows on either side of the street. There was a bedlam of voices to be heard. Stony suddenly remembered

the crimson eagle feather he had procured from Nick Armitage. Reaching up, he plucked the feather from Lullaby's Stetson and replaced it in his own sombrero.

"Hey, what you doing?" Lullaby made a snatch at the feather, but missed.

"Just taking what belongs to me," Stony said.

"Dang it!" Lullaby grumbled. "I was hoping that Armitage would try to take it away from me while you were gone."

"Have you seen him?" Stony asked.

Lullaby shook his head. "Haven't seen any of that Dollar Sign L crowd in town."

"They're probably in town tonight, though," Tucson said.

Stony cuffed his befeathered Stetson to a jauntier angle. "I hope so," he commented belligerently.

They reached the saloon, mounted the steps and crossed the porch to the swinging doors. The bar was lined with men. Titus Shaw spotted the trio when they entered and called: "Be with you in a minute, gentlemen."

Tucson and his pardners managed to squeeze into a spot at the bar. Titus arrived and took their orders. He looked sharply at Stony. "Glad to see you. Did it work out all right?"

"I haven't heard any complaints." Stony grinned. "I'll tell you about it sometime."

Titus departed and returned a few minutes later with three bottles of beer. He lowered his voice: "Nick

Armitage was in a spell back. He allowed he'd seen Lullaby wearing his feather earlier today."

"He wouldn't have been making any threats, would he?" Lullaby drawled sleepily.

"Only to the effect that he was going to get his feather and that the hombre who wore it would wish he'd minded his own business," Titus replied.

Lullaby grinned. "It's Stony's affair, now. Boy, am I glad I got rid of that eagle trimming."

The drinker standing next to Tucson turned out to be Quint Bell, owner of the Bell Ranch. Titus introduced him to Tucson and his pardners. Bell was an elderly man, with tobacco-stained mustaches.

"I'm glad to be among the first to welcome a new owner into our country, Smith," he said cordially. "I've heard of the 3 Bar O you own over near Los Potros."

The men talked cattle and cattle prices over a round of drinks bought by Bell. Tucson asked if he'd had any trouble with rustlers. Bell shrugged his shoulders. "There's bound to be a few natural losses. Whether I can blame 'em on cow thieves is another thing. There's been nothing to worry about yet, anyway."

They talked on for another few minutes. Then Stony suddenly noticed that Lullaby was no longer with them. Next, he found that the red feather was no longer in his hat. Lullaby had slipped it out without the movement being noticed.

Quickly Stony drew Tucson to one side and told him what had happened.

"That dang Lullaby," he said, concern in his voice. "Where do you think he went?"

"My guess is the Sunfisher Bar," said Tucson grimly.

"That's what I'm afraid of." Stony nodded. "It would be just like him to walk right into a nest of Dollar Sign L men, thinking to keep me out of a fight with Armitage. What do you think?"

"I think we better head for the Sunfisher pronto."

They said good-by to Bell and hurried out.

At nearly the same instant, Lullaby was strolling through the swinging doors of the Sunfisher Bar. Nick Armitage was standing, drinking, at the bar, next to Santee Lombard. Nearby were Limpy, Shorty, Frank Armitage and several more of the Dollar Sign L crew.

The barkeep spotted Lullaby first. "What'll it be, Joslin?" he asked, at the same time passing a signal to the Dollar Sign L men.

"I'm not drinking right now," Lullaby drawled. "I heard Armitage was looking for me."

Nick Armitage, at the sound of his name, swung away from the bar. A hot flush crossed his features as he spotted the feather in Lullaby's Stetson. Savagely he slapped both hands against the holsters at his hips, then took four quick steps that brought him face to face with Lullaby.

"You got guts to come here, Joslin," he sneered.

"That's just an idea of yours," Lullaby said quietly. "You could be wrong, you know."

"What do you want?" Armitage demanded, somewhat taken aback by Lullaby's quiet manner.

"I thought it was you that wanted something," Lullaby said gently. "Word reached me that you wanted this eagle feather I'm sportin'."

"You mean," Armitage said eagerly, "that you've come to give it to me?"

Slowly Lullaby shook his head. "I just strolled down to see if you wanted to try and take it, Armitage. If you saw me with it earlier today and didn't try to take it, I've been wondering if you lacked nerve to try. All I've heard so far is threats. Are you game to back 'em up?"

Armitage ripped out an oath. "I'll show you if I got the nerve," he rasped.

Santee Lombard cast a quick puzzled look toward the doorway. It was difficult for him to believe Lullaby would come here alone. He spoke swiftly to Armitage: "Take him in a hurry, Nick. It's your chance. Both guns to the middle!"

"I'll handle this, Santee," Armitage spat over one shoulder. He commenced to back away from Lullaby, his muscular form going into a half crouch. Three paces—four, five, six. His fingers curved, closing down, above the butts of his twin guns. "Make your draw, Joslin," he snarled. "It's your best bet to try—"

Lullaby laughed softly, thumbs still hooked into gun belts. "You sure you don't want to think twice

about this, Armitage?"

"Damn you, draw!" The half bellow of rage left Armitage's throat even as his fingers closed about gun butts.

And then—no one quite knew how it happened—Lullaby had shifted swiftly out of range. His six-shooter was out, belching lead and flame. Armitage was spun half around by the impact of the heavy .45 slug, as his right gun sent three flaming shots harmlessly into the floor. Armitage's left gun was clear of holster now, too, but it fell from his hand as his knees buckled and he slumped face down on the pine flooring.

For an instant there was a dead silence. Powder smoke swirled around the oil lamps hanging above the bar. Then Lullaby's voice drawled: "Anybody else want to try for this red feather?"

A curse left Lombard's lips. "A hundred to the man who plugs Joslin first!" he yelled.

"Hold it, you hombres!" Tucson's voice filled the room as he and Stony burst through the swinging doors, guns in hands. "I'm boring the first scut who touches trigger!"

"Get 'em high!" Stony snapped. "Reach for the ceiling, you pole-cats!"

By this time Lullaby had moved over beside his pardners. Their guns amply covered the room. Lombard and his men lost little time getting their hands in the air.

"You can't get away with this, Smith," raged Lombard.

"We're getting away with it," Tucson pointed out coldly.

"Joslin shot down poor Nick without giving him a chance," Lombard commenced. "I demand—"

"Don't lie, Lombard," Tucson said sternly. "Just before we came in here, we heard Armitage challenging Lullaby to draw."

"That's right," put in a white-faced man standing in one corner. "I heard it all." He wasn't one of Lombard's crew.

Lombard darted a searing look at the fellow. "Shut up, you coyote."

A crowd had gathered, drawn by the sound of the shots. Deputy Ben Canfield came pushing inside. "What goes on here?" he demanded pompously. Some of the color left his face as his gaze fell on Tucson and his pardners. Then he saw Armitage's silent body crumpled on the floor, with the widening splotch of crimson spreading from beneath. "Great Jupiter!" he gasped. "It's Nick!"

"It *was* Nick," Lombard snapped. "Ben, put Joslin under arrest—"

"You're putting nobody under arrest, Canfield," Tucson interrupted, "unless it's Lombard and some of his snakes. I heard Lombard offering a hundred bucks to the man who plugged Lullaby—"

"That's a lie!" Lombard yelled.

Tucson's gun muzzle tilted directly toward Lombard. He said coldly: "Would you like to back up that statement with your gun, Lombard?"

Lombard hesitated. "Maybe I just spoke in excitement," he said,

laughing nervously. "I didn't really mean to call you a liar, Smith."

One of the citizens of the town spoke up: "Shucks, there's no cause to arrest Jöslin. It was a fair fight. Armitage pulled first. He just wasn't any match, though, for the kind of speed Jöslin packs."

Lombard glared at the man, but didn't say anything.

Stony grinned. "Deputy Canfield, I reckon there's no work for you to do, unless it's cleaning up the mess here. C'mon, pards, let's drift."

They backed slowly through the doorway, guns still covering the crowd. The precaution was scarcely necessary. All the fight had been taken out of the Lombard gang. At the doorway Lullaby plucked the crimson eagle feather from his hat and with a deft flip of his hand, sent it soaring through the air to fall lightly on Armitage's body. "He wanted his feather," Lullaby said quietly. "I reckon he's entitled to be buried with it. At least it was red—not like the white feathers Lombard and his crew seem to be showing."

And then they were through the swinging doors. On the street Stony said resentfully: "Lullaby, you unmitigated idiot! And you called me a fool, the other day, for tackling Armitage."

"You didn't have a gun," Lullaby said defensively.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" Tucson said. "What good would your one gun have been against those of that gang, if they'd drawn?"



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Lullaby laughed softly. "But they didn't, pard."

Stony shook his head. "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

"If you think you and Tucson are angels," Lullaby chuckled, "you got another guess coming. And speaking of angels—"

"I know," Stony sighed. "Come on, we'll see if the restaurant has any cake."

XVI

Tucson and his friends slept late at the hotel the following morning—that is, late for them. It was after eight o'clock before they finished their breakfast and stepped out on Main Street. The thoroughfare looked deserted. Only a few pedestrians were in sight. Broken whiskey bottles were scattered along the way, but the town looked peaceable enough in the bright morning sunlight. Most of the stores were closed, but all the saloons were open, to take care of those who, imbibing too deeply the night before, now found themselves in need of a bit of "hair off the dog that bit them."

"Blue Cloud looks sort of subdued this morning," Tucson commented.

"It was plenty wild last night," Stony said. "What's the program for today? You anything in mind?"

"I figured we might as well drift out to the Horseshoe N and see how everybody is getting along. Say, that looks like Ben Canfield coming."

Glancing down the street, from

their position in front of the hotel, they could see Deputy Canfield just pulling away from the hitch rack near the jail. Canfield had a bedroll behind his saddle and sat hunched despondently in the saddle as he rode along.

"Looks like he's leaving town," Lullaby said.

The horse was almost abreast by this time, not moving very fast. Tucson called: "Morning, Canfield. You going away?"

Canfield raised his head. "Hello, Mr. Smith. Yeah I'm leaving . . . for a spell anyway." His tones sounded bitter. He touched spur to his pony and rode on.

Tucson looked after the man, a frown on his face. "Hm-m-m!" he mused. "That's downright queer. I wonder if Blue Cloud is to be without a deputy?"

"Let's drift over to Titus Shaw's saloon," Stony proposed. "Might be he'd know something about all this."

They crossed the street and entered the Blue Cloud Saloon. Titus was behind the bar. He had only two customers, both of whom were talking at the far end of the long counter, their heads close together. Titus said good morning to Tucson and his friends and took their orders. By this time the other two customers were staring at the Three Mesquiteers. When Titus had served drinks he said: "Gentlemen, shake hands with Phineas Osgood and Sheriff Rafe Quinn—Mr. Smith, Mr. Joslin and Mr. Brooke." The men shook hands. Titus added: "Mr.

Osgood is owner of our local bank."

Phin Osgood was portly, with protruding eyes, a well-curved black mustache and an apoplectic-looking complexion. He wore town clothes, including a "boiled" shirt and black string tie. His shoes carried a high polish. Sheriff Quinn was a lean, thin-lipped man, with narrow shoulders, prominent jawbones and buck teeth. There were a couple of razor nicks on his freshly shaven countenance. A six-shooter was slung at either hip.

"Glad to know you men," Osgood said pompously. "Will you join us in a drink?"

"Thanks, no," Tucson replied. "Titus just served us. "It's a mite early in the day to take any more."

"Quite so," agreed Osgood. "I do very little drinking, as a rule. Just happened to run into our sheriff on the street, and he insisted I come in and imbibe with him." He laughed shortly. "It's always wise to obey the sheriff's orders, you know."

"I reckon," Tucson nodded. He spoke to the sheriff: "We just saw Ben Canfield leaving town. You figuring to appoint a new deputy here?"

"Eventually," Quinn said shortly. "I'm having Canfield handle things in Chancellor for the present. I'll be running Blue Cloud myself, until things quiet down. Canfield didn't look like he was big enough for the job."

"And you are, of course." Stony smiled in a joking way.

Sheriff Quinn's eyes narrowed. "I aim to show anybody that gets tough



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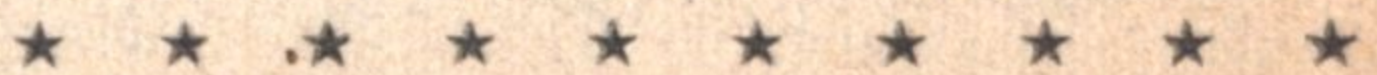
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just where they get off," he stated flatly. "There's been too many killings around here to suit me."

"I killed Nick Armitage last night, sheriff," Lullaby said quietly. "You figuring that needs any further investigating?"

"If it does, I'll let you know," Quinn said shortly.

Lullaby said politely: "Thanks. I'll appreciate that."

Quinn's face reddened a trifle. "As a matter of fact, that's one of the things that brought me over here. The minute I heard about it, I jumped the Limited and landed here this morning."

"Somebody didn't lose any time telling you," Tucson remarked.

"I have ways of learning things," Quinn said darkly.

Phin Osgood looked rather nervous. "I'm sure there'll be no further trouble over that killing," he put in. "As I heard it, Mr. Joslin acted purely in self-defense."

"Did Joslin have to go to the Sunfisher looking for trouble?" Quinn asked peevishly.

"I didn't go there looking for trouble," Lullaby pointed out, "until Armitage started making threats. He drew first and challenged me to draw. What would you expect me to do—take to my heels?"

"It might have been wiser in the long run," said Quinn.

"Meaning just what?" Tucson asked, thin-lipped.

"What I said. Figure it out," Quinn growled. "I'm just telling

you hombres that I don't want any more killings around here. I aim to enforce the law from now on. I'm no Ben Canfield."

"That's certainly welcome news," Tucson smiled. "You intend, then, to find out what happened to Clem Norton, and who killed those Horseshoe N cowboys, and who tried to bulldoze Miss Norton into selling her ranch—"

"You got the ranch," Quinn snapped. "What you kicking about? That ranch is liable to be more trouble than it's worth to you, too. If you take my advice, you'll sell it if you get a chance."

"Look here, Rafe," Phin Osgood intervened, "I think you're giving Mr. Smith the wrong impression. After all, he's a newcomer to our community. We should make him welcome. He's had one or two unfortunate experiences since he and his friends arrived in Blue Cloud, but I see no reason why everything won't be peaceful from now on."

"I'm intending it will be," growled Quinn, starting toward the doorway. "I'll see you fellers some other time." He pushed angrily through the swinging doors and clumped off down the street.

"My, my," Osgood said, "Rafe is certainly upset about the way things have been going here. He told me he had no idea Canfield was so inefficient."

"And yet," Tucson pointed out, "he's sent Canfield over to Chancellor to run the office in his absence."

"Probably letting the man down

easy before he kicks him out," suggested Osgood.

"At any rate," Stony put in, "Quinn sure got here in a hurry. I wonder who in town sent for him."

"I wouldn't have the least idea," Osgood replied. He changed the subject: "By the way, Mr. Smith, I wish you'd drop into the bank and see me some day, at your convenience. I'd like to get better acquainted. It may be you'll want to arrange a loan, in case you're planning to restock the Horseshoe N. I'll be glad to take care of it for you."

"Why, that's mighty nice of you," Tucson smiled.

"Well, gentlemen," Osgood concluded, "it's been nice making your acquaintance. I hope to see you again soon." He once more shook hands all around and took his departure.

When he had gone, Lullaby said: "Shaking hands with that hombre sure made me think of Friday."

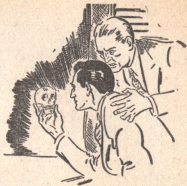
"For once I agree with you." Stony nodded. "When he put his mitt in mine, I thought sure somebody had slipped me a dead fish."

"Anyway, he offered us a loan if we need it," Tucson reminded, with a grin.

"You're a fool if you take it," Titus growled. "He'll not only ask for a pound of flesh for security, but your right eye as well."

"I wonder," Tucson said, "who sent for Sheriff Quinn?"

"That's something I wouldn't know," declared Titus, "but when I



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opened up this morning I glanced down the street and saw Quinn and Osgood just leaving the Sunfisher Bar. The Limited had only been through about half an hour before, so Quinn must have got in touch with Osgood as soon as he arrived."

"Meaning," Tucson said, "that Osgood sent for Quinn?"

"I didn't say that," Titus replied, "but that's what I think. I know Osgood was one of Quinn's strong backers in the last election."

"What do you suppose they were doing in the Sunfisher?" Stony asked.

"Probably trying to find out what happened between Lullaby and Armitage last night," Titus said. "I think Quinn would like to pin a murder charge on Lullaby. Probably couldn't get the right kind of evidence, though. Then they came here and asked me what I knew about the fight. I told them I didn't know anything, except that I'd heard Armitage making threats regarding Lullaby. Quinn seemed plumb disappointed when I told him that. I don't think anything more will come of the matter, though. I heard Phin Osgood tell Quinn he might as well forget the whole business."

"Since when does a town banker tell a county sheriff what to do?" drawled Tucson.

"I've been wondering about that myself," Titus admitted.

"One thing is sure." Tucson frowned. "Rafe Quinn isn't any jelly-spined hombre like Ben Caufield. Quinn is a fighter, or I miss

my guess, and mean as dirt. We'll have to watch out for any move Quinn makes."

They talked a little while longer, then Tucson and his partners said "S'long," to Titus and headed in the direction of the livery stable where they saddled their ponies for the ride to the Horseshoe N. A few minutes later they were loping easily along the trail that ran northwest from Blue Cloud.

XVII

The three riders had scarcely left the outskirts of the town behind them, when Stony said: "I'll catch up to you in a minute, pard. Keep going." Spurring ahead of them, he suddenly turned his pony from the trail and cut at a tangent into the brush.

Lullaby looked at Tucson. "Now what's Stony aiming to do?"

Tucson shrugged. "You've got me. I haven't the slightest idea." They pulled their ponies to a slower gait and loafed along the dusty way.

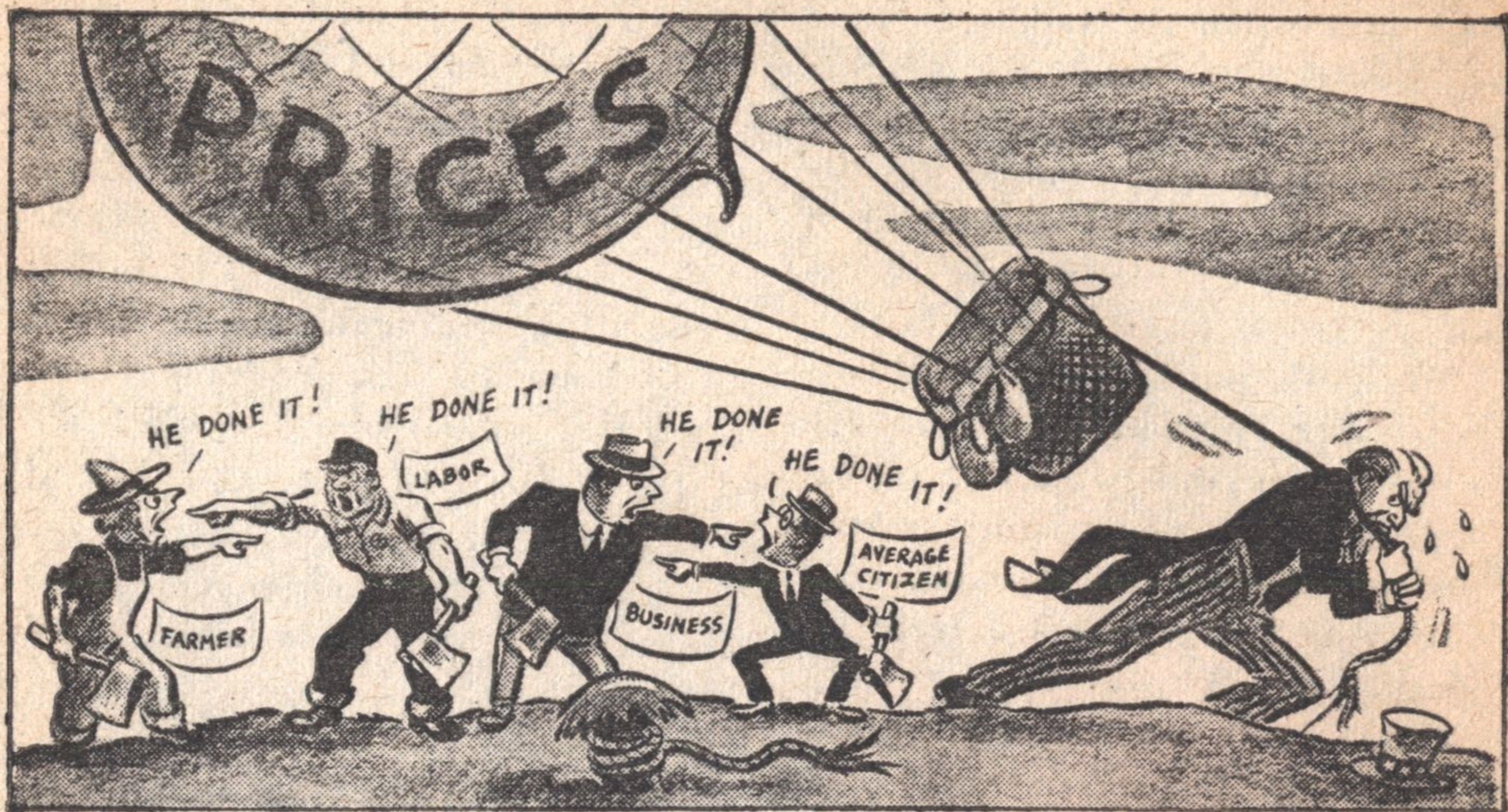
"Just how far is it to the Horseshoe N?" Lullaby asked.

"Molly said it was just about eighteen miles."

"Nice day for riding, anyway. Not a cloud in the sky. The air's fresh as . . . as . . . well, it's like a new-washed shirt. Clean, sort of. And look at those mountains with the sun on 'em—they look like they were headed straight up into the sky."

A sudden yell from behind caused

Continued on page 126



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them to turn in the saddle. Stony was hurrying to catch up, leading behind him a gray nag with an extremely dilapidated saddle on its bony spine. Lullaby looked at it with distaste as Stony rode alongside.

"My gosh, pard," Lullaby said reproachfully, "it would be bad enough to pick up anything like that on the road, but when you go off the trail looking for such things—well, all I can say is you sure got a taste for knickknacks. Why is it, anyway?"

"You don't understand," Stony commenced, "this—"

"I'll say I don't understand," Lullaby said fervently.

"But this is the horse I had at Wagon Springs."

Lullaby shook his head. "You can fool me on a lot of things, Stony, but you can't make me believe that's a horse. You've been robbing some museum of its prehistoric bones. Don't tell me different!"

"Dammit!" Stony exclaimed in some exasperation. "Prehistoric bones don't move of their own accord."

"My point exactly," Lullaby said gravely. "That sack of glue and fertilizer isn't moving of its own accord. You're just dragging it along on that hackamore. What's that thing on its back, some sort of growth?"

"It was a saddle once," Stony said sulkily, "and I don't aim to be ribbed any more. This horse did me a good turn at Wagon Springs and—"

"What did it do—draw the flies off'n you?" Lullaby guffawed. "What do you call it?"

"Look, dimwit," Stony said patiently, "this beast may look like a sack of bones to you, but to me he's a noble charger. I'm in his debt. I'm aiming to see he has a good home for his declining years. And I've named him Lancelot."

Lullaby cocked a skeptical eye at the nag. "If you ask me, I'd say he'd lanced too dang much in his time. He's an equine wreck, if I ever saw one."

Tucson was chuckling to himself. "I reckon, Lullaby, we just can't appreciate Stony's kind heart. Think of him hiding this . . . this . . . this Lancelot in the brush and hiking into town afoot, last night. That's a real sacrifice when a cowpoke actually walks."

"Doggonit!" Stony growled, "what could I do with it? It wouldn't be worth its feed bill at a livery. I couldn't just turn the poor critter loose to fend for itself. It's got scarcely any teeth left. Why, the buzzards were already commencing to circle when I picked it up this morning. So I figured we could take it to the Horseshoe N and put it out to pasture for the remainder of its days."

"Said remainder is likely to happen any minute along the trail, I'd say," Lullaby drawled. "Well, don't expect any sympathy from me in your bereavement."

"Don't be too hard on Stony,"

Tucson said gravely. "This is just more evidence of his big heart."

"Big heart!" Lullaby spat disgustedly. "A mustard seed is a giant compared to what Stony calls his heart. Just do me one favor, Stony. When we get near the Horseshoe N sort of drop behind with that Lancelot critter, will you?—provided it hasn't dropped of its own accord by that time. All those bones rattling around loose thataway might scare the cattle and I wouldn't want Molly to get an idea I had anything to do with the stampede."

"All right, all right," Stony snapped, "but I just want you to remember one thing."

"What's that?"

"When you begin getting hungry as you're certain to do right soon,

don't you start casting any predatory eyes at Lancelot."

Lullaby let out a whoop of laughter. "Lancelot! Jeepers! I'll bet Lancelot is just an alias and Spare-ribs is his real moniker."

"The horse," Stony said in dignified accents, "is man's noblest friend. And Lancelot fits into that category."

"You take a look at Lancelot's bony nobs," Lullaby said, "and you'd realize he couldn't be fit into anything, least of all any word that starts with e-a-t. I've said my last word on the subject."

"If I thought you meant that, I'd be plumb relieved."

"You can't take it, eh?"

And so they argued while the miles drifted past and Tucson put in a chuckling remark from time to time.

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Before they realized it, they had topped a small grassy ridge and were looking down on a clump of ancient cottonwood trees, among which nestled the Horseshoe N buildings. A short time later they crossed a narrow plank bridge over Cougar Creek and trotted down toward the main house.

Molly, seated on the long gallery that fronted the rock and adobe-ranch building, had seen them coming through the trees, and stepped out to meet them, followed by her Mexican girl, Maria Lopez.

"This," Molly smiled, "is a treat. I was wishing you'd come out today. I'm eating down in the cook shack with my crew, or your crew, whichever it is. Being it's Sunday, Sourdough George promised to cook something special."

"How have things been?" Tucson asked.

"I couldn't ask for anything better, if dad were only here," Molly commenced, then broke off. "Good grief, Stony! What's that animal you're leading?"

"He claims it's a horse," Lullaby snickered, "and he's stuck with his story. Its name is Lancelot and it's a noble charger—"

"But why—" Molly looked bewildered.

"I'll tell you about it, later." Stony flushed. "Right now, all I ask is a home for the poor critter."

"Lancelot can have it," Molly smiled. "In fact, you men are entitled to anything the Horseshoe N has to offer. Ride on down to the

corral. Maria and I will be along presently."

The three men reined their horses in the direction of the bunkhouse. A rousing yell greeted their arrival; led by Red Sherry, men came tumbling from the building. Only Sourdough George remained in the doorway, a dour expression on his long features. "Three more hungry mouths to feed," he crabbed. "With Lullaby I might as well cook for six extra."

"Back to your kitchen, you despoiler of good food," Lullaby growled. He spoke to Sherry: "How's it going, Red?"

"I can't kick," Red laughed, and made way for Ananias and the others who were asking puzzled questions regarding Lancelot—questions which Stony, red-faced, succeeded in parrying.

"How've you been, Sourdough?" Tucson asked.

The cook shook his head. "My corns've been frettin' me something terrible. That's an omen of coming trouble, mark my words."

"I hope so," Bat Wing said. "Things are too quiet here."

"Ain't it right," a couple more chimed in.

"Less talk, hombres," Ananias said. "Can't you see the bosses' broncs need puttin' up? You've been aching for something to do. Let's see you get those horses unsaddled and corralled."

The men hurried to obey. A short time later, they were all seated in the bunkhouse, a long, narrow building with a double tier of bunks run-

ning along one wall. In the center of the room was an oblong table, with benches on either side. Beyond, a doorway opened into the kitchen from which came a savory odor of cooking food.

Cigarette smoke filled the room. Tucson sat down at the table and asked: "Ananias, what's been doing since you've been here?"

"We've just sort of been getting settled," Ananias replied. "I haven't had the boys do much riding. Didn't know what minute I might get word from you that we were needed, so I've kept 'em close to the house. There's just one thing puzzling me, and I know I'm speaking for all of us. What was that dishwater-colored quadruped that Stony led in on a hackamore? And why?"

There was considerable laughter at Stony's expense. Tucson said: "We'll give you the whole story when Molly shows up, I don't want to repeat it twice."

"I hope said story," Bat Wing put in, "is the prelude to something doing right soon."

"We're all hoping that," declared Rube Phelps.

Tucson glanced at the men and smiled. "You hombres talk like you're r'arin' for action."

"No mistake about it," Ananias replied.

At that moment, Molly entered the bunkhouse. Ananias gave her his chair.

"Where's Maria?" Tucson asked. "She'll be along when dinner is on," explained Molly. "Maria is one



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bashful girl. All you men fuss her to death. She's really awfully good, though, and has been a big help to me. But, Tucson, tell me what's happened in town."

"Plenty," Tucson replied. "Now that you're here I can get it off my chest, though the story is as much Stony's and Lullaby's as mine." Continuing, he sketched briefly, with certain details furnished by Lullaby and Stony, the events that had transpired. While he talked, Sourdough George was busily engaged in setting the dinner table.

When Tucson had finished, Molly said "Tucson, do you really think that could be my father they're holding prisoner at Wagon Springs?"

"There's a good chance it might be," Tucson admitted.

"Tucson, when do we start for Wagon Springs?" asked Ananias.

"Tonight, I figure," Tucson replied. He turned to Stony. "How many of Lombard's gang do you think might be there tonight, pard?"

"Well, there's Bull Jackson and four others," Stony answered. By tonight the crew that went to Branch City should be back. I imagine there was at least ten men in that bunch. Then there's likely a few more up in Branch City. Lombard gave the word for all to return to the ranch, so the Branch City men will probably be there, too."

"In short," Tucson said, frowning, "we'll have to count on around twenty men at Wagon Springs tonight. We'll have Lullaby, Stony, Red, Ananias, Rube, Tex and Bat—

not counting me. That makes eight of us."

"Hey, about me now—" Sourdough George began from the kitchen doorway.

"I'm figuring you'll stay here with Molly and Maria," Tucson said. This brought a strong protest from Sourdough, but Tucson remained firm in his decision.

Molly frowned. "I don't like the idea of you risking your lives, this way," she said. "Perhaps if you waited, Tucson—"

"Perhaps if we waited," Tucson said grimly. "they might take their prisoner some place else. If it's your dad, we can't run any risk of that happening. Last night would have been the ideal time for an attack on Wagon Springs, but we didn't know what was going on over there. And don't put too much hope in that prisoner being your father, Molly. That's something we don't know for sure."

They talked of other things for a few minutes. "Gosh," Red Sherry said, "I'd sure liked to have seen that fight between Lullaby and Nick Armitage."

"I've a hunch," Tucson smiled thinly, "you may see all the fight you can stand, tonight, at Wagon Springs. That's going to be tough going. Make no mistake about it."

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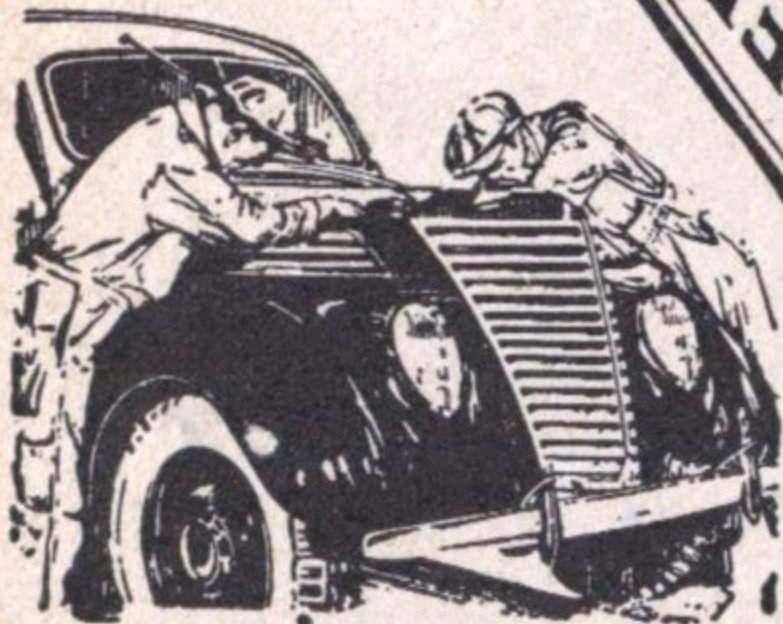
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