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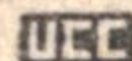
3 "We grouped around the table, giving the surgeon the light he needed to save his patient . . . Because of the highly inflammable ether we couldn't have used a hurricane lamp. This was one of many, many cases where only flashlights with proper batteries could have been used to save life."



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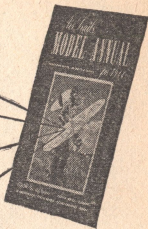


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*A dry-gulch bullet was likely to be
Jim Brian's welcome home if he didn't*

LISTEN FOR A LONESOME GUN

By **ROD PATTERSON**

I

THE paint had long since peeled from the plank walls of the stage station, and wind, sun and rain had weathered its red shale roof to a

rusty gray. Coming up from the floor of the desert to the summit of Wildhorse Pass, Jim Brian saw how small and drab the cabin and its outbuildings appeared against the cap rock that piled up massively to-

ward the timber line and the far-off snow fields of Lost Bear Range. It was noon, yet even at this hour shadows painted by the escarpment of the pass inched slowly down the slope like giant, reaching fingers.

Brian pulled up at the crude wooden water trough in front of the station, and stepped down from the saddle of his jaded little sorrel mare. Standing there against the dun-colored slope, he made a solid, narrow-hipped shape.

Only one detail of Jim Brian's big-boned frame seemed to clash with the harmony of the rest. His face, once obviously a dye-deep bronze, now had a kind of washed-out sallowness, a queer pallor that served to sharpen his flat-lidded eyes and accent the taut prominence of his high cheek bones.

Even the sorrel's sleek coat of hair showed an affinity with its rider's rough trail garb. It was covered with a salt-white film of dust, the same commingling of alkali that powdered the man from the crown of his old black hat to the scuffed toes of his lusterless shin boots. For these two had traveled the long trail across the desert since dawn this day—had come down the rim of the Lost Bears from the town of Monument, fifty miles away.

Brian leaned a hand against theommel of his chrome-colored saddle. "Belle," he said to the horse, "there's more hair on a frog than the welcome I'm gonna get when I walk in there on Joe Parr." With the wry words, he slipped the hand-smoothed rein over the horse's head

and looped it to the pine post beside the trough.

When Brian entered the relay station, Joe Parr, the stage-company man, was standing behind the one-board bar in the corner, in the act of sampling some of his own wagon-yard whiskey.

As Brian moved through the door, Parr stared, choked on his drink and cried, "Jim Brian!" then stood stock-still, his jaw sagging like a loose-hinged shutter.

"Howdy," Brian said in his slow drawl. "How's chances for a bite of chuck? I'm hungry as a chaw-eared bobcat."

"S-s-sure," stammered the old man, but continued to stand there, shocked surprise on his thin-boned face.

Brian took off his hat, picked up a stool and set it down in front of the bar and eased his weight up on it. "What's the matter, Joe?" he asked with a thin smile. "You look like you was seein' a ghost. You must have heard I was headin' out this way. I happen to savvy how good the grapevine works on this here range."

The old man looked uncomfortably at his visitor. "Well," he muttered, "seems like I did hear yore time was nearly up."

"That's more like it." Brian was rolling a cigarette, licking and lighting it with a steady hand.

Parr pushed the whiskey bottle across the bar. "Have a drink. On the house."

"No thanks. Not before I eat,"

Brian said pleasantly. "How's everything over in the Basin?"

Parr pulled the bottle back, splashed two fingers of rye into his own glass. He was now a little more at ease, and his watery eyes were almost friendly. "Ain't yuh heerd? Everybuddy's gone in fer raisin' hosses. Yore Uncle John. Smith Lomax. Judge Croft. Ev'ry-buddy."

"Bide Spengler still runnin' Skull?"

"Yeah."

"No more cattle in the Basin?"

"Nary a one. Not since the big stampede."

Brian gave the old man a completely unresponsive stare. "Five years," he murmured. "It's a plumb long spell, Joe. The Pen is hard to take for an hombre that's had all outdoors for his back yard."

Joe Parr nodded his balding head. "I guess likely." Then, half to himself: "The stampede blame near busted the Basin boys. Never did git back half the steers after that night. Whoever started it done a good job—"

Brian stopped him. "Skip it, Joe. Now rustle me up some grub. I want to hit Porcupine before sundown."

Two men in riders' garb came in, and Parr coughed and said: "Howdy, boys."

The older of the two men was tall and heavy-set with a bland, almost monkish face and teeth that flashed brilliantly when he smiled. His alert black eyes encompassed the room,

then settled on Jim Brian at the bar. The second rider was a squatty fellow, saddle-worn, roughly dressed, with lumpish cheek bones and suspicious eyes, and there was a scar on his left cheek.

Joe Parr one-handedly wiped the counter, his rheumy eyes shuttling nervously from face to face. "You remember Jim Brian, boys, don't yuh?"

The tall man measured Brian with his intense eyes. "Howdy," he said, and moved against the bar. "Set 'em up, Joe."

Parr poured out the drinks. He said to Brian: "This here's Bob Dagget and Jett Ormsby, Skull men."

Dagget looked at Brian and said: "Shore'd admire for you to have a drink with us, mister."

"No thanks," Brian refused bluntly.

Jett Ormsby glanced shiftily along the bar, his gaze touching Brian, then flicking away again. "Since when is a jailbird too good to drink with Skull?" he drawled.

A darkness crawled into Brian's face. Slowly, deliberately, he gathered his legs under him and stood up, and strolled toward Ormsby. Joe Parr threaded anxiousness into his tone. "Not here, Jim! Not here!"

Brian hauled Ormsby up on his toes and slapped him across the mouth with his free hand, then slammed him back against the bar. Ormsby went off balance and lurched sideways in a helpless stagger to steady himself. He jabbed a hand down for his gun, but Brian sledged

him in the temple with his fist. Ormsby's face tilted toward the ceiling and he sagged, shoulders scraping splinters from the bar as he fell.

Bob Dagget had remained indifferently against the bar. Now he said to the man on the floor, "Get up, yuh blasted big-mouth fool!"

Ormsby staggered to his feet, and Dagget handed him his hat. "Come on; let's ride," he said, and grabbed Ormsby and hustled him out through the wide-open front door. Outside, his voice could be heard, saying: "Some day the fool-killer's gonna get yuh, Jett." Then there was the clatter of hoofs leaving. Joe Parr showed Brian a hang-dog uneasiness as he said: "Yuh didn't have to hit him, Jim." He turned and went into the back room, shaking his balding head from side to side. After a while he shuffled back again with a trayful of food. "Help yourself," he said and set the platter of bacon and beans and the plate of bread down on the bar.

Brian picked up the tin fork and iron knife and began to eat. Parr leaned his bony elbows on the counter, his sidelong glance pinned on the young man. When Brian finished eating, the old man ventured to say, "Jim, you'll be ridin' spang into a mess o' high-grade grief if yuh go back to the Basin."

Brian let the match burn away from his cigarette and stared at the stage-company man. "Could be," he admitted. "You see, Joe, I'm headin' home to get the man who shot my brother Ed."

II

The stage road pushed narrowly between the long slow rise from the north and the abrupt fall to the south of Wildhorse Pass. Behind Jim Brian, as he rode on toward Big Smoke Basin, lay a last view of the desert out of which he had traveled that morning; before him the trail dipped down into a sunless gorge, then broke out suddenly upon a wide and rolling plain. Thirty miles to the south, squatting on the timber-stippled hills, lay the town of Porcupine, seat of Piute County and trading center for the dozen or more horse-breeding ranches that dotted the Basin.

It was along the upper reaches of the Basin that Brian now traveled, seeing again for the first time in five years all the familiar landmarks, noting once more the vague imprint of hoof and iron-rimmed wheel in the deep dust beneath the feet of his fast-stepping sorrel.

Life had been very simple in the days when Jim and his older brother, Ed, had come to the Basin from the Dakota plains to work for John Ridley, their dead mother's elderly brother. Neatly bound and tamed by wire today, the open range Jim and Ed knew then was the grazing ground of vast herds of Texas long-horn steers.

John Ridley's JR Ranch had been the largest spread in Big Smoke Basin, boasting a crew of twenty men the year around. Ten miles away, against the escarpment of Lost Bear Range, lay Skull, the ranch of Bide

Spengler, a newcomer to the Basin, and a man whose ruthlessness and secretive ways had isolated him from men who might otherwise have been his friends. It had been rumored that any outlaw could get a job riding for Bide Spengler.

Within a year of the arrival of the brothers at JR, Ed Brian had naturally assumed his place as John Ridley's foreman. Jim, tall and dark, had idolized his older brother. There was but one point of dissension between them: within six months after coming to the Basin, both men had fallen in love with Nancy Hoyt, John Ridley's adopted daughter. Dark-eyed and shy, Nancy had looked upon Ed Brian with a kind of awed respect, almost a reverence, had in the course of time become engaged to him, much to Jim's reluctant chagrin. John Ridley had approved the engagement and had set a date for the wedding day.

Jim had felt the sting of jealousy, and despite his efforts to control it, that jealousy had turned to a consuming bitterness. And so it had been inevitable that Jim and Ed should clash physically over the girl. That fight had occurred finally in the horse corral in full view of the whole JR crew. Ed had knocked Jim silly dumb; it had been a free-for-all, with no holds barred. And yet, later, when hot tempers had had time to cool, they had patched it up, and Jim had humbly tried to make amends for his unreasoning rage.

And then had come the last big beef roundup of Big Smoke Basin. For six weeks, a dozen outfits had

been driving toward the river, gathering the steers in one huge herd. Now the work was nearly done.

Riders galloped back and forth, cutting out heifers and cows with late missed calves, turning back bunch quitters; and through the dust and the din a hundred men good-naturedly rawhided one another. Around the branding fire the heat and dust were blinding.

"How many so far?" Jim Brian hollered above the incessant bawling. Charlie Echol, the tally man, looked up from the baked ground where he sat and pulled his neckpiece down from his face. "About twenty-five hundred," he yelled. He blinked his fiery eyes. A furious growl came from the fire: "Cross T, one calf!" There was a hiss and the smell of burning hair and a frantic bawling.

"Cross T, one calf," the tally man called. He slapped his pencil down hard on his tally book with a grimy hand. Then he looked up at Jim. "What's happened between your brother and Bide Spengler?"

"Why?" Jim stared at Echol through the dust haze. "I ain't noticed nothin'."

Echol watched the calves come in, bouncing over the rough ground, dragged flat by ropes, their hind legs stretched out straight. He hollered: "They ain't been speakin' since the drive started."

Jim considered Echol's words with a hard care. And now he realized that he *had* sensed something wrong with Ed's recent behavior toward Skull. He did not reply to Echol's

statement, however, but moved away toward his horse in a nearby draw.

Ten minutes later, riding on the tail of a JR steer, Jim broke out of a mushrooming cloud of dust directly in back of four mounted men. One of the men was Ed Brian; the others, Bide Spengler, Jett Ormsby and Dutch Hardin, the Skull wagon boss. It was a tense scene, with cattle milling all around those four men. Holding in his cutting horse, Jim heard his brother speak. "Spengler, you been runnin' a slow iron on our stuff!"

Those were fighting words. Bide Spengler's voice lifted harshly above the din: "Feller, are you tryin' to start a private war?"

Jim did not catch his brother's answer, for at that moment a dozen cows pitched past, and the dust increased, swept up like a solid curtain, obliterating the four men from view. Later, he found Ed back at the branding fire. Swinging from the saddle, Jim said brusquely: "Don't be an ornery fool and try to tackle Skull alone!"

Ed Brian swung around, his blue eyes hot and bright. "Kid," he flung out, "if you don't quit spyin' on me, I'll bust you one!"

Jim eyed his brother, the old rage building up in him. "Any time you want to try it, go ahead," he said, and swung on his heel and walked away.

The roundup dance was held in the evening of the last day of the drive. All hands converged upon John Ridley's house at five o'clock

in the afternoon, leaving only a handful of riders to hold the herd.

At seven o'clock, the ranchhouse was crowded and as noisy as a calf corral. The living room, twenty by thirty feet, had been cleared for dancing, but the kitchen was the liveliest and most popular place before the fiddlers got going. Women were gabbing and trying to help the three men cooks, filling the big black roundup coffee pots, icing homemade cakes, cutting pies. John Ridley was there, sampling the food and looking like a cow-country patriarch with his snow-white hair and ruddy cheeks.

Bide Spengler had ridden in with a few of his men about six-thirty. Now he was out on the front gallery with Dutch Hardin and Bob Dagget and Jett Ormsby. The three men were hunkered down on the top step, looking like any other hands except that they kept watch of the open door out of the tail of their eyes.

Inside, the fiddles started up and couples assembled on the floor. "Salute yore pardners!" the caller cried.

"Swing the man that stole that sheep,
Now the one that hauled it home,
Now the one that ate the meat,
Now the one that gnawed the bones!"

Men's cowhide boots and women's high-topped shoes were clicking on the floor. Couples were bowing, sashaying, taking arms, turning, whirling, stepping high, joining hands and circling around the crowded room.

Jim Brian stood idly in the kitchen



doorway, watching Ed and Nancy swing and bow. He had never seen Nancy look prettier. In her light blue gown with the tight bodice, her chestnut hair done up soft and high and spiked with a single pin, she was the object of admiring stares from every quarter. But her violet eyes did not seem happy or pleased; they were dark and round and very wide.

Jim stood it as long as he could. Then, biting down on his teeth, he moved suddenly out on the dance floor, thrusting people out of his way with the impact of his heavy shoulders. Reaching Ed and Nancy, he deliberately pushed Ed to one side and seized the girl in his arms. He ignored her frightened: "Don't, Jim! - Please!" and whirled her swiftly around the room, eyeing his brother defiantly, challengingly. At that moment, John Ridley, who had seen the whole thing, stopped the fiddlers in the middle of a bar.

Everyone was moving off the floor. Everybody but Jim and Ed and Nancy. The brothers faced each other, close together now, and the air around them seemed to vibrate.

"Havin' a good time?" Ed asked in his soft, dry voice.

The stillness of the room made

Jim's tone seem louder. "This here's my dance! Don't try and cut me out!"

Ed stood there, his blond head thrown back, saddle-straight, a little crooked Brian smile on his mouth. But the free, open look on his handsome face was almost gone, and his blue eyes had the cut of cold steel.

"Kid," he said, "you're behavin' like a loco fool. Leggo Nancy's arm."

Jim was seeing Ed's face in a whirling, reddish blur. He spoke in a low and deadly tone: "Go get your gun! I'll be waitin' out in the yard!"

And then the red fog went away, and he was seeing the shocked look in Ed's eyes, was seeing the bleak faces of the crowd back there against the wall. The realization of what he had said to Ed smashed over him. Remorse, shame, came to him, and he tried to speak. But his voice was like two sheets of rough paper rubbing together, and no one but Nancy heard him.

Ed gave him a long, tight stare, then took Nancy's rigid arm and marched her out of the room. Somehow, Jim got off the floor and stumbled out through the kitchen to the rear yard.

Standing there, filled with shame and humiliation, he heard the distant burst of gunfire roll across the night; after that, the ground began to drum. A rider galloped into the ranch yard and a voice howled: "Somebody's spooked the herd! If

yuh want any cows left yuh better come out and hold 'em!"

Forgetting his own troubles, Jim raced for the corrals, saddled quickly and mounted. Steers pitched past him as he spurred forward; the cattle were wild with fright, punching the ground with their big, splayed hoofs, shaking the air with their roaring bellows. Cowboys were singing to the terrified animals, trying to quiet them, and failing. The men were riding their ponies for all they had in them, plunging through the blackness, trying to find the leaders to turn them.

And then came the thunder of twenty or thirty thousand hoofs, and the earth and sky seemed to crack open with the roar of it. The plain vibrated under the deluge of stampeding beef. Pandemonium held the flats in a nerve-shattering grip. No man could know how far the herd would run and scatter endlessly in this pitch-black night. . . .

It was dawn before men began to straggle back to JR Ranch. Jim Brian was among the last to drift into the yard in the pale, smoky light. He booted his horse into the corral with the others and trudged wearily toward the house. In the kitchen, he paused at the big wood stove to pour himself a cup of black coffee. There was a stir at the living-room door, and men clustered in it, began moving forward into the kitchen. Something in their faces froze Jim in his tracks.

John Ridley stepped up. He speared Jim with a cold and merciless glance and said: "Well, I guess

you better tell the whole truth and do it quick."

Jim faced his uncle, a puzzled frown creasing his forehead. "I don't get what you're drivin' at. What's wrong?"

Ridley's thin hard mouth tightened. "Your brother's dead."

Jim stood rigid, all the blood washed out of his face. "You killed Ed—shot him in the back!"

And then Ridley began cursing Jim, and Jim took it, not speaking, not seeming to care. He didn't even struggle when they laid hold of him and dragged him to Porcupine and jail.

The trial had been a short and brutal one. A jury of Jim's former friends found him guilty of manslaughter, ignoring the tearful testimony of Nancy Hoyt; and Charlie Echol, who swore that Jim had been riding with him throughout that wild night. Judge Croft, stern as a bearded prophet, had remanded Jim to the state penitentiary at Butte City under sentence of five years at hard labor.

These were Jim Brian's bitter thoughts as he rode down the trail toward Porcupine. After five years, he was going home, steeled for the task that lay ahead—the task of gathering loose ends, of watching and waiting for the killer of Ed Brian to give himself away.

It was late afternoon when Jim reached town. He felt almost a stranger here, and yet he remembered every alley and byway, every loose plank in the high boardwalk.

He left the sorrel and moved toward the gallery of the Hondo House, pausing a moment on the walk to search the town out of lack-luster eyes, listening for the cry of recognition, searching for the danger he knew would lurk for him in the dark places wherever he went.

III

Three men sat on the gallery of the ranchhouse at Skull. Bide Spengler occupied a chair near the door. The other two men seated there on his right—Dutch Hardin, the foreman, and Steb Yeagel, top hand—were chewing on Spengler's talk and not liking the picture of trouble he presented.

"I was hopin'," the Skull boss was saying in his grating voice, "Jim Brian'd keep clear of the Basin. It only goes to prove you can't figure ahead on what a man will do."

Spengler was a man past middle age, heavy-boned and lean, dressed in a black suit, and big enough in voice and manner to command attention in any company. He had somber, steel-hard eyes and cheeks as flat and smooth as an ax, and he cultivated a bland, unblinking stare that was calculated either to disconcert or anger, depending on his current frame of mind.

"Things never stay the same," was Hardin's gloomy observation. The foreman was a black-browed, bearded man in whom suspicion was second nature and flattery his prime consideration. He added confidently:

"Reckon, though, you can handle him."

"If he'd only made a defense at the trial I'd feel better about it," said Spengler.

Yeagel spoke, a gritty contempt in his tone. "What's he got on Skull? Nothin'."

Dutch Hardin swung around in his chair, peering out across the yard. "Here comes Dagget," he said.

The quick rattle of hoofs lifted against the sounding board of the nearby hills and a moment later Bob Dagget rode past the gallery. He raised a hand in silent greeting, pulled up at the corrals, then dismounted and rolled toward the house. Dropping to the top step in front of Spengler, he said casually: "Well, Jim Brian's hit town."

Spengler's "So?" was cool, abrupt.

Dagget spoke plainly: "He looks tough—and he is. Jett can tell you something about that. He had a run-in with Brian up at the Pass."

Spengler shifted his weight restively in his chair. "Where's Ormsby at?"

"He's in town, too. Tryin' to likker himself into a lather." Dagget showed a white-toothed grin. "When I left him he was talkin' big and loud about what he was gonna do to Brian."

"Well, let him go," said Spengler. "He might be lucky—and save me a lot of grief."

Dagget was building a cigarette and staring up into the iron-hard eyes of his boss. "Bide, I been thinkin' about this. I figure you're goin'

about handlin' Brian the wrong way. He won't be no good to anybody dead. Look"—he spread his hands out and slapped them on his knees—"we been lucky since Ed Brian was took care of. There ain't a rancher in the Basin savvies our little game. But from now on, we're gonna need a screen to work behind. That's where Brian comes in. Why not get to him first, then later, when things get hot for us, you got a man to hold the bag."

Spengler eyed Dagget. "Sometimes it's safer to let the other man reach first," he pointed out.

"Not this time," Dagget argued. "If you let me talk to Brian, in a month's time we'll have him makin' far-apart tracks for timber with the whole Basin howlin' at his heels."

Spengler considered this counsel thoughtfully. "All right," he said at last. "Go ahead with it. But tip me off on how he takes it."

When Jim Brian walked into the lobby of the Hondo House he heard voices in the dining room on his left, and paused a moment, undecided. And then he saw Nancy Hoyt come toward him from the waiting room ahead. The girl was tying the ribbons of her perky little hat, knotting them beneath her chin, when she saw Brian standing there in front of her. She stopped in her tracks, one hand caught at her throat.

Brian took off his hat, and, standing directly before her, said, "Nancy!" in a low, flat voice.

She held out her hands and he took them, held them tightly.

Womanhood had refined Nancy Hoyt into a thin-faced slim loveliness. Her hair was dark, falling thick and curling to her shoulders, and her eyes showed a gentleness that was like a balm to Jim Brian.

"You're here," she murmured, and gave him a thoughtful, almost deliberate inspection.

"Yes," he said, with a trace of gentle derision, "I've come home, Nancy."

They held each other's gaze for a long, troubled moment, and Nancy said, quietly: "I'm glad to see you, Jim. But I'm afraid it will be hard here for you." Her tone was apprehensive, tinged with regret. "They're all against you. Your Uncle John has seen to that."

Jim nodded. "I expected that. But it doesn't matter if you just keep on believin'. Keep on trustin' me until I find the man who killed Ed."

Nancy touched him on the arm, her fingers tightening there. "John Ridley doesn't own me, Jim. Just remember that—if you should ever need me."

He left her quickly, striding at once into the hotel's dining room. Ranchers were gathered at the far end of the room, and somebody's voice was laying its heavy weight upon the group. Brian saw that it was John Ridley who was speaking. The silver-haired owner of JR flung his naturally aggressive voice toward a dozen men bunched around a long table. "I've just got word from Colonel Eggers down at Fort Ketterman. The Remount Service has moved there and will be in the mar-

ket for all the blooded saddlers we can deliver from now on." Ridley paused, seeing Brian in the doorway, and he squinted near-sightedly and threw out his warning: "You're in the wrong place, mister. This is a ranchers' meetin'."

"Can I see you a minute, Uncle John?" asked Brian.

Chair legs scraped the floor; a dozen big hats turned toward the door. A voice cried: "Why, it's Jim Brian!"

With that low-voiced exclamation the air in the room seemed to change—it was like a cold wind blowing on Brian. He felt the pressure of antagonism, seemed to taste it in his mouth.

A tall, angular man with a scrubby gray beard spoke from a chair at the foot of the table. "Brian, yuh shore've got more brass than I give yuh credit fer!"

A stiffness came to Jim's face as he stood there, taking the relentless stares of the men before him.

"You're on wrong ground," John Ridley said bleakly. "Ride on."

Brian put both hands in his pockets and looked above the group, beyond them to an open window.

"It was a long ride up the trail," he said at last. "And it would be a long ride back. I came here to get the man who killed my brother Ed, and that I'll do before I leave. If the Basin means to block me, I'll fight."

He turned around and walked deliberately from the room. Out in the street, he shook the tension out

of his shoulders and paused to roll a cigarette.

The hot hard sun of late afternoon poured its orange light upon the town. For a moment Brian surveyed the dusty street out of brooding eyes. He crossed toward the narrow front of a restaurant, went in and ordered a meal.

Finishing his coffee, he made another smoke and went out to stand in the restaurant's doorway with the low-falling sun in his eyes. Loitering there, he saw riders move into town from Big Smoke Basin, coming fast, singly, in pairs, in groups; and now Porcupine took on new life.

A man came along the walk, looked sharply at Brian, then stopped to speak to him. It was, Brian saw, Pat Madigan, one of the bartenders at the Silver Dollar Saloon, two blocks up the street.

"Howdy," Madigan said. He was a short, strangely expressionless and nearly bald man who moved with a jerky stringhalt gait. "Jett Ormsby's up at the Dollar—says he's gonna kill yuh on sight." His voice was flat, his face blank as his palm. "Thought somebuddy oughta tell yuh."

"Thanks, Pat," Brian drawled. "You can go back and tell him I'll be waitin' here. And tell him to make it quick, or I'll come up after him!"

IV

The sun poured its light through the east-and-west street, and the glare would be in Brian's eyes when Jett Ormsby came out to back up

his boasting. Pat Madigan, having delivered Brian's message, came back and took a stand in the mouth of the alley beside the restaurant, his dead-pan face more expressionless than ever.

Every few minutes some man came out on the gallery of the Silver Dollar and looked down the street toward Brian and each time the onlooker ducked back from the shop doors and windows, to reappear again, watching to see if Jim Brian was still there. Other bystanders were gathering on the porch of Smith's Emporium, just beyond the saloon, and the second-floor windows of the hotel began to show a few cautious out-peering faces.

Brian had no liking for his position out here with half the town watching him; he felt, and was, conspicuous. Besides a shooting fracas might spoil all his plans of the moment, vague though they were. And if he put Jett Ormsby out of action, the local jail might be his address for some time to come.

A flurry of voices up the street interrupted Brian's train of thought. One moment the gallery of the saloon was empty, the next Jett Ormsby was standing out in plain sight with the batwings fanning the air behind him. Silence came down on the town like a lid clapped on noise.

Ormsby lurched out into the street and began his stiff-legged march, his boots scuffing up a cloud of silver dust. At the same instant Brian stepped off the sidewalk, lining out for Ormsby, with his thumbs still

in his belt, his chin pulled in, his eyes pin-sharp, unwavering.

Ormsby saw him coming and stopped short, his hand trailing uncertainly against his gun, as he stared, open-mouthed, befuddled. It was obvious he had counted on Jim Brian taking to the hills. Something seemed to come apart in the Skull rider; he seemed to wilt.

But Brian came on, slowly, implacably, his eyes never wavering from Ormsby's face, walking with short deliberate steps, high heels breaking up the dust around him. When he was within arm's reach of Ormsby, he whipped up his right fist and smashed the Skull hand squarely between the eyes. Jett Ormsby went down like a pole-axed steer.

Bob Dagget loped up the street at that moment, lifting a dust, and stopped his roan with a hard yank of the reins, twisting in the saddle to stare at the scene before him. "You?" he said to Brian. "What you done to Jett?"

Brian gave him an answer in calm, unhurried words: "I've flattened your little pard. He's drunk and you better tote him back to Skull before he gets in real trouble."

Dagget stiffened in the saddle under the slap of Brian's words. Then he spoke in a carefully smooth voice. "Look, mister; I got no bone to pick with you. Shucks, I'd just as lief be friends as not!"

Brian eyed him and said: "All right, let's see you prove that. We'll go up to the Dollar and have a drink and a little talk."

Dagget dismounted and they walked together up the street to the Silver Dollar, leaving Pat Madigan to revive Ormsby. Men's wondering glances followed them as they came through the swinging doors and moved toward a space at the rear of the saloon which had once been partitioned off for a poker game but now was used as a receptacle for junk. There was a table and two chairs against the wall and they made their way through piles of rubbish and broken glass.

They sat down at a table and Brian studied his companion carefully, then said: "Dagget, d'you reckon it was Jett Ormsby shot my brother Ed?"

Dagget's dark eyes took on a questioning glint. "I wouldn't know that, Brian." And then he squinted and shook his head. "No; Jett never done it."

"I don't think so, either," Brian said unexpectedly. "But if he didn't, somebody else at Skull fired the shot. Somebody who was at the roundup dance that night when the stampede started."

Dagget said slyly: "If my memory ain't slippin', 'twas you that salivated Ed. Or have you just been travelin' for your health?"

Brian ignored the remark. "I happen to know that one of Spengler's boys was caught runnin' a slow brand on JR stuff just before Ed was killed. That's why I'm sure of where to look."

Dagget gave his white-toothed grin. "Why pump me, Brian? Why don't yuh ride out to Skull and swap

some tongue oil with Bide? He might be able to help yuh find the *orejana* you're lookin' for."

Brian, seeing the uselessness of further talk, said: "I'm talkin' murder, Bob. And I want the man that done it. I reckon I *will* ride out to Skull."

The sun had dropped down below the rim of the Lost Bears when Jim Brian finally left Porcupine and traveled south on the river trail toward Big Smoke Basin. He had stopped at the Emporium before leaving town, had spent nearly all his money for a second-hand Henry rifle and a few canned rations which he had strapped on his saddle behind him. Rested and fed, Belle, his sorrel, stepped along, light and free, even after the gruelling miles she had covered already this day.

The country into which Brian now rode was rapidly darkening. It seemed deserted, though he knew that ahead of him, to the right, lay John Ridley's ranch and beyond it, on the east fork of the river, the horse outfits of Smith Lomax and Gideon Blake. Brian set Belle into a jog. He had decided to go in close to Skull, then prospect the country a bit before dropping in on Bide Spengler. This plan would accomplish one thing at least. It would keep Skull guessing as to his whereabouts and his intentions.

About five miles from town Brian met a team and wagon on the trail. He reined in, reading the faded sign on the wagon's gray canvas top with

some difficulty: BUZZ DAHLGREN—BLACKSMITH—VETERINARY.

The driver of the wagon said, "Whoa!" and hauled back on the reins. He was a weather-beaten old man with a fringe of red whiskers through which a round small mouth showed like a hole. He wore a big hat with a wide silver band on it, and a calfskin vest and a bright-colored neckpiece; the gun on his hip was pearl-handled.

Brian grinned through the shadows. "Howdy, you old pirate!"

The old man blew out an explosive breath. "Jim Brian—or I'm a brass-faced biscuit biter!"

Brian pulled over to the wagon. "How are you, Buzz?"

Dahlgren pump-handled Brian's arm. "Kid, I'm tickled to see yuh back! Basin ain't been the same since they—" He stopped then said in a low, commiserative tone, "Jim, I never did believe yuh done it. Never c'd savvy how John Ridley c'd be pigheaded enough to think yuh had, either. They run a sandy on yuh, kid, jest as shore as—"

Brian waved it away. "Thanks, Buzz," he said, and settled his weight in the stirrups. "I'm tryin' to forget that part of it, old hoss. And I will, when I find the man I'm lookin' for."

Buzz Dahlgren was as much a part of Big Smoke Basin as any landmark in it. For years he had traveled the trails from Porcupine to the Silver Lodes, using his wagon as a veterinary shop and portable blacksmith forge. He rode around to the ranches once a month, to the nester squats on Fossil Flats. Wherever there were

horses to be shod—and there usually were a score or more each trip—or a case of spavin, colic or heaves, Buzz and his covered wagon were received with welcome.

Now, staring at Jim Brian out of puckered eyes, the old blacksmith made his dire prediction. "Jim, there's trouble comin' to Big Smoke. I been feelin' it in my bones, like rain and rheumatiz."

Brian shrugged. "Things may turn better, Buzz."

"Where yuh figure to stay?"

"Guess I'll be pitchin' a camp on Breezy Ridge while I scout the hills a bit."

Buzz Dahlgren lifted his reins and clucked to the team. "Mebbe I'll be seein' yuh," he said, and drove away.

V

Brian remembered where Bide Spengler's ranch was: it was opposite the two nearby peaks that lifted above the mountain wall and stood up, tawny and snow-capped, above the valley against the sky. A black canyon broke out from between those peaks and through that deep gash ran the tumbling white water of Iron Creek. Where the stream emerged from the canyon stood Spengler's sod house, dug half into the earth on rising ground, and below it was a



round corral of basswood poles and a log bunkhouse.

Brian pitched a dry camp in the pines after loosening the cinch straps of Belle's high, wide-skirted saddle. Groping around in the dark under the trees, he gathered an armful of dead pine branches and piled them for a small fire.

He boiled coffee, drank it from the blackened pot, then rolled up in his blanket and lay quietly listening to the far call of a coyote in the hemming hills. After a while, he heard the thud of hoofs coming toward him along the ridge through the close-ranged trees. The low, filing hum of men's voices came to him immediately, and then a voice called: "Hello, the fire!" It was Dagget's voice. Brian took his time before he answered the hail. "All right. Ride in."

Dagget's voice came again, now only a hundred feet away. "That you, Brian?"

"Yeah. Any law against a man gettin' a little sleep?"

Bridle rings and bit chains jangled as the party moved on through the pines. Brian vaguely counted four riders. But there were other horses in the group—at least eight animals trailing the men on a long halter rope.

The party passed Brian's camp, fifty feet away, and turned along the ridge, vanishing a moment later in the direction of the river. Brian pondered over that string of horses, then turned on his side and pulled his soogan over him again.

Brian dropped into a fitful sleep.

When he awoke it was suddenly, with a violent jerk. He moved his stiff numb body gingerly after that first start, feeling trail weariness in every throbbing muscle. And then he came to his feet with a lunge, casting about in the darkness for what had disturbed him. He saw it instantly. Over against the eastern sky a dull red glow was spreading. As he stared, it grew suddenly brighter, seemed to burst before his eyes like the high flash of an explosion. He knew at once that there was fire at Judge Croft's horse ranch, and that it was no ordinary fire, but a conflagration!

He sprang to his sorrel, standing hip-shot among the trees. Saddling up quickly, he mounted and sent Belle racing through the pines and down the slope in the direction of the fire.

As he topped a rise above the Croft ranch, he saw that the flames had died down. But the red embers still glowed and pulsed against the earth. The vague figures of men darted back and forth in the ranch yard, their hoarse shouts breaking the night. There was nothing left of Croft's huge stock barn but a flat bed of red-hot coals and a pillar of sparks which, even yet, was spraying the nearby earth with a shower of crimson rain.

Brian left Belle, reins looped to a clump of manzanita, and slid swiftly down the ridge to a point close to those shouting men. Poised a hundred yards from the gutted barn, he could feel the tremendous pressure of heat against his face. With his

face and eyes screened by a lifted arm, he inched in closer, straining his ears to catch what the men were shouting. And then, crouched in the scorched brush that rimmed the yard, he heard a voice cry: "Done my best, Jedge! But the fire started in a hundred places, all to onc't! Couldn't git nowhere near the stalls!"

The voice of old Judge Croft lifted in loud lament: "I'm wiped out, Sam! Six of the finest animals in the Basin gone!"

"I done my best—"

"My brood mare!" Croft was wailing. "Worth a thousand in cold cash!"

Hunkered down in the brush, Brian considered his situation, calculated what it would mean to him if it became known that he had visited this spot tonight. The fact alone that he had been camped in these hills might be enough to damn him in the eyes of the Basin people. For he, Jim Brian, had sufficient reason for trying to take vengeance on Judge Croft, the man who had sent him to prison, five years ago. Probably a posse would be gathered at Porcupine to track him down? So now, the best he could do to protect his own freedom of action was to line out for Breezy Ridge before he was spotted by Judge Croft's crew. Literally as well as figuratively this spot was a bit too hot for him.

And so he found Belle and cut the breeze. He reached his camp in the pines a half hour later and settled down once more, troubled in every thought. Why had Dagget and his men taken a rough string into the

hills? Had Skull deliberately set that fire? Brian did not sleep again that night.

The news of the Croft fire and total loss of six thoroughbred horses reached Porcupine that night, and before dawn Sheriff Bill Doane had formed his posse. Fortified by copious shots of Silver Dollar whiskey against the chilled fall air, ten men hit the trail. They came roaring into the Croft ranch just at sunup, with plenty of guns and plenty of threats against the sidewinder who had ruthlessly cremated the old man's stock and destroyed his two-thousand-dollar barn.

Someone had raked through the ashes of the barn when they had cooled enough, and had hauled out twenty-four still-hot horseshoes from piles of charred bones, thus proving to the satisfaction of all concerned that the crime had been arson, and not horse stealing. The name of Jim Brian was heard on every lip, and that name became an epithet. And what had been mere suspicion of a jailbird on the dodge now became a violent and vindictive hate.

The posse scouted the hills, combed every draw and canyon, passing toward nine o'clock within a hundred feet of the spot on Breezy Ridge where Brian stood watching in the pines. It was a bad moment, and would grow worse. For this piece of evil luck, Brian knew, might alter all his future plans, might eventually compel him to leave the country on the run.

Brian waited until ten o'clock, then

mounted and turned Belle south toward Skull Ranch. He dropped the sorrel down to Iron Creek, and jerking her head up when she tried to drink, he came out of the stream in a shower of drops that glittered in the sunlight; a live-oak motte swung by as he pushed upcreek. A moment later he left the stream and climbed a rise of ground, seeing Bide Spengler's hay barn and wire fence in front of him. The water tank and shake roof of the house showed beyond above the peak of the log bunkhouse.

Drifting casually into the yard, he saw that there were three chairs on the front gallery of the house and that all three were occupied by men who appeared to have been deliberately waiting his arrival. He pulled in before the house, sending his bland gaze toward Bide Spengler, Dutch Hardin, Bob Dagget.

"Howdy," he said, and dropped his reins to the saddlehorn.

Spengler watched him darkly, not speaking for a long moment. "Light," he finally said.

Brian dropped to the ground and moved to the gallery and squatted on the top step. He then made his mild comment: "Had a hot time over at Croft's last night. Heard the details yet?"

"No," Spengler answered. "Have you?"

Brian shook his head, reached for his makings. Hardin broke the ensuing silence. "They figure you started that fire, Brian."

Brian lit his cigarette. "I was dry-camped on Breezy Ridge," he mur-

mured. "Guess you boys can vouch for that."

Spengler dropped his easy words: "I don't vouch for no man; it don't pay." He paused, then asked: "What brought you back to Big Smoke, friend?"

Brian flicked his gaze to the big man's face. "Let's cut out the spar-rin', Spengler. You know damn well why I came back."

Spengler shrugged his massive shoulders. "You think the hombre you're lookin' for is here?"

"You got ten men on your payroll," Brian said flatly. "I figure one of 'em shot my brother Ed."

The Skull owner lifted his weight from his chair and moved toward the door. He beckoned, and Brian stood up and followed him into the living room. There was a desk near the door, on the left, and Spengler stopped there and turned and rested one hand on it, surveying Brian expressionlessly.

Spengler slowly twiddled his gold watch charm and the look in his eyes was impersonal, cold. "I always liked you, Brian—always liked your brother, too. You lookin' for a job?"

Brian gave him a curious glance. "I could use one—an hombre's got to eat."

"I'll put you on," the rancher stated in the same cold tone. "Sixty a month and found."

Brian regarded him searchingly. "You can get good men at forty."

"I set the wages," said Spengler curtly. "The Basin's havin' trouble and I look for it to spread out this

way. You don't appear to mind trouble very much."

"Mister," Brian said in a flat, hard tone, "I don't! In fact, I'm looking for it. I'll take your job."

VI

John Ridley confronted Nancy Hoyt in the living room at JR Ranch. The room in which they stood was barnlike, with heavy pine furniture and steer horns hung over doors and windows, and yet John Ridley's bull-like voice filled it with roaring sound. "I say you've got to find Jim for the good of the Basin! He's holed up in these hills and if anyone can do it, you can!"

The girl met his iron-surly eyes. She shook her head. "No."

"If I ordered you to stay away from him, you'd break your neck gettin' to him," Ridley observed savagely. "You'd be out lookin' for him now."

"Yes; I might." Her face was calm though pale and tight. In her eyes was a stubbornness, a defiance, that matched that of the old man's. "I refuse to betray Jim Brian," she said quietly. "He never started that fire, and—"

Ridley flung his words at her as though they were bullets. "You're stickin' up for a man that killed the one you was promised to. What kind of a girl are you? If you was a boy I'd smash you!"

"You've hurt me worse with your tongue," she said levelly.

John Ridley was always a dangerous man when thoroughly aroused,

and Nancy's cool, calm manner seemed to snap his control. He drew a rasping breath and said: "We'll settle this later. If you are not with me, you are against me, and unless you change, you'll leave my home."

After his interview with Bide Spengler, Jim Brian left the sod house and headed for the log-sided bunkhouse at the rim of the yard. Bob Dagget had put the sorrel in the corral and now was standing negligently against the bunkhouse wall, holding Brian's pack and rifle. Jim took the pack and the gun with a nod and entered the bunk-lined room.

Three men sat around the room's small table, a pile of poker chips between them—Dutch Hardin, Steb Yeagel, and the flat-faced Jett Ormsby—but they were not playing. They sat there, staring at Brian as though they had been waiting for him. Hardin and Yeagel seemed to make up their minds at the same moment, both now rising and stepping away.

Ormsby remained, both hands lying flat out on the table. Then something in Brian's stiff-set face made him cry out: "I'll git yore ears!"

Brian pitched his bed roll and rifle into a nearby bunk, then faced Ormsby, moving slowly, deliberately up to the table. He said, "Jett, I can see you haven't had enough," and flung the table over with his arm.

Ormsby jumped up as though springs were under him. He kicked his chair away with a single backward jerk; his right hand fell to his gun and lifted it halfway out of the

leather. But he did not draw it. Brian came at him, half turning as he sprang. Catching Ormsby's arm, he twisted it as he turned and struck him in the middle with a hard-driving elbow. Ormsby's breath went out of him in a hard gust, and he staggered back against the upright of his bunk, and Brian bent his arm back until the bones cracked and the Skull hand gave a high, tortured yell and let go of his gun.

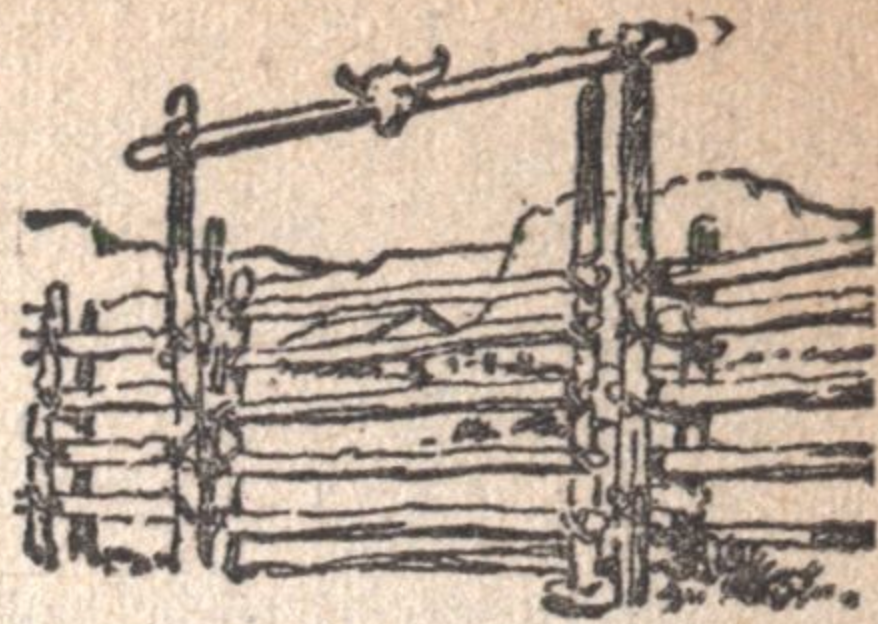
Brian flipped the weapon from its holster and spun it backward over his shoulder. He pulled back and hit Ormsby in the temple with his fist, then stood still, waiting. The chunky rider sagged back into his bunk, his pale eyes swiveling in their red-rimmed sockets.

Hardin and Yeagel stood by the wall, saying nothing. In the doorway, Bob Dagget said sardonically: "You two boys play rough; I hope you've had enough."

Brian turned and went to his bunk, bent over, began slowly to unpack his gear. The Henry rifle he stowed under the straw-stack mattress, his frying pan and coffeepot beneath the bunk. When he had finished, he pulled off his boots and threw himself down, watching Ormsby until the man sullenly left the room.

Brian spent most of the afternoon in his bunk, Hardin having given him no orders. The cook rang his iron triangle at five o'clock and all hands piled into the chuck shack, a building of corrugated tin adjoining the bunk-house.

While the meal progressed, Brian pondered on the fact that he had seen



no stock near the ranch other than the cavvy of work horses. He put the question to Dagget in a purposely offhand way and received a prompt and surprisingly direct answer.

"We run our stuff down the Painted Buttes, about five mile south of here," Dagget said. "It's hard-rock country and good for the kind of stock we raise. All the watchin' them nags need is so they don't drift back here in the Basin and overeat on the gramma. Spengler's sendin' you down there tomorrow mornin' for a while. You'll like it—kind of high and lonesome."

The Basin, Brian knew, was ideal country for the horses that John Ridley and the other ranchers raised; the grassy bottoms and stony hills and ridges making them sure-footed, hard-hoofed, strong. The army liked Basin horses; and so did horse thieves. Brian thought of this; wondered why Bide Spengler ran his stock in the isolated rocky strip at Painted Buttes.

After breakfast the next morning, Brian stripped the soogans from his bunk, gathered up his gear and began making ready to load the pack horse Spengler had assigned to him. It was while he was making fast a diamond hitch on the pack animal that he suddenly remembered his Henry

rifle. He returned to the bunkhouse and looked under the mattress. The rifle was not there. When Bob Dagget came down from the house, he reported the theft and got no satisfaction. Dagget said: "Mebbe one of the boys borrowed it. I'll see about it when I get back from the Buttes."

The Painted Buttes lay at the southwestern edge of the Basin and formed the first stepping stones to a rugged tableland stretching between them and the wall of the Lost Bears. Brian and Dagget lined out for this region as the sun came up, passing over a beautiful land of rolling grass, separated into independent valleys by low ridges.

They came at last to a post-oak cabin squatted in a clearing, rimmed by tall pines. A hundred feet in back of the boxlike building was a small peeled-pole corral and a shed for saddles and riding gear. It was a one-room cabin not more than twelve feet square, with a stove, a bunk and a table. Dagget jerked the burlap from the two windows to let in light.

"Spengler's orders are, don't let nobody past this point," he said. "Nobody but Skull, anyways. If one of our boys rides in he'll fire two shots. So listen for that gun."

Brian, bent above his gear, said: "Where's your horse herd?"

"Up canyon a ways. I'm takin' ten head back to the ranch with me." Dagget moved toward the door. "You'll have a heap of not much to do up here. You can chop wood, though, and there's plenty of grub in the chest."

Dagget went out and mounted his bay horse and drifted on up the canyon. Brian started a fire in the rusted stove and then moved out and put his shoulders against the cabin wall, waiting for Dagget to ride back. A half hour later, the dark-faced Skull man came back through the mouth of the canyon. He had ten horses strung out on a jerk line behind him.

Brian remained a slack shape against the cabin wall. But he was staring, a wondering expression on his face. For Dagget's charges had no resemblance to the blooded stock the Basin ranchers raised; these animals were common mustang range mounts, old, moth-eaten—the worst-looking crowbaits Brian had seen in many a day. Dagget gave his white-toothed grin as the dismal little procession filed past the cabin and down the narrow trail.

When Bob Dagget had gone, Brian put the pack horse in the corral, then swung up on Belle, and rode into the canyon, finding it fenced off about fifty feet from the clearing with a barrier of brush overlaid with light pine logs. He removed a portion of the fence, then pushed on over the rough terrain, coming a moment later to a cuplike hollow, walled in by a rocky caliche cliff. The floor of the canyon at this point was about a half mile square. It was covered with a lush stand of gramma grass, and was stippled with clumps of cedar and pine. Forty or fifty horses were quietly grazing in this hidden cup, moving singly, in pairs, and in groups along the lip of a mountain

stream. Brian observed the herd with blank astonishment. They were a mangy-looking lot; there was not an animal in the whole bunch worth over twenty dollars Mex!

VII

About two hours after Bob Dagget's departure, the sky turned gray and a thin rain began to fall. It came down with a monotonous *drip, drip, drip* and the bleakness of twilight swallowed the cabin at noon. Brian fed the horses, chopped wood in the corral shed, and made a meal of beans and canned peaches and coffee. He dropped in the bunk after that and slept soundly most of the afternoon.

When he awakened it had quit raining, but the mountain air had taken on an edge of frost, and he realized that winter was not far away. He stood outside the cabin for a while to clear his brain of sleep, then reentered the cabin, stoked the fire, and sat down with an old saddle catalogue he had found on a shelf. The sob of the pines droned through the windows, now slightly pushed ajar to admit air. Full darkness came. He turned the pages slowly, absently, not reading but thinking.

What was Bide Spengler's game in Big Smoke Basin? Was he stealing the ranchers blind? If this was true, how was he covering his activities? Did the fire at Judge Croft's ranch point to Skull? These were the questions Brian now asked himself. But he found, at this moment, no answer to any of them. His own problem

returned to plague him. Who, of the ten men at Skull, had fired the shot which had killed Ed Brian? He had by logic and by memory narrowed the probabilities to four men: Bide Spengler himself, Dutch Hardin, Jett Ormsby, and possibly Bob Dagget. Ormsby, Brian decided, could be forced to talk when the time came; he was the weak spot in Skull's armor. The softening up had already begun.

The decision to work on Jett Ormsby had barely left his mind when something outside the cabin—something almost too faint for sound—moved in the dead silence of the night. Brian swung around on the packing case he was using for a chair and crouched low to keep below the line of the windows on either side of him as he moved to the door.

He stepped softly to the corner and peered along the south side of the cabin. He saw nothing, heard nothing. He waited a while, then turned and went back into the shack. He closed the door, shot the iron bolt home, then moved to the stove and the coffeepot simmering on its lid. At the table, he was about to sit down with the steaming cup when the rifle was fired.

Brian jerked his head up and around, hearing the solid "thunk!" of the bullet against the yonder wall. For the space of a long-drawn breath, silence, the slightly deafened silence of numbed ears spread through the cabin. And then, abruptly, Brian batted the candle to the floor and hurled himself after it. With no light except that thrown from the stove's

redly glowing hearth, he wormed his way along the hard-packed earthen floor and found his gun and belt.

Softly, slowly, somebody tried the door. Brian silently cursed himself for having bolted it.

Silence held the cabin after that cautious pressure on the door. At last Brian's patience snapped, and he stood up and crossed the room and flung the bolt back, jerking the door back against the wall. He pulled quickly to one side, his gun laid on the open yard. It was then that he realized that whoever had fired that shot had run, believing his bullet had gone home.

Brian stepped outside and circled the cabin, moving on his toes like a dancer. He was at the door again when he heard the step; it came from the side of the cabin he had just left. Gun lifted, he ran to the corner, cut around it like a flash. A figure was there, a small figure, peering into the cabin through the south window. Brian gasped, "Nancy!" and held his fire.

She came toward him with a rush and a swish of her riding skirt, and gripped him by the arms, her face a pale blur before him. "Jim! I heard the shot! I was afraid—"

Brian stared. "I'm all right. But what are you doin' here?"

She spoke as though out of breath from running. "Do you know who it was, Jim?"

"No. Do you?"

Fear tore at her voice. "Yes. It was Bide Spengler!"

"Spengler!"

"I . . . I was looking for you," she rushed on excitedly. "When I rode to Skull to see if you might be there I saw Bide leave and ride out toward the Buttes. I followed him—on a blind hunch."

Brian said harshly: "He tried to shoot me in the back!"

Nancy lifted her head, eying him steadily; her breath came quickly through half-parted lips. "I came to tell you Gideon Blake is dead and they think you did it!"

Brian stared at her. "Tell me."

"They burned Gid's stock barn this afternoon—destroyed ten Palominos; and they killed Gid in cold blood—with your Henry rifle!"

"Might've figured on something like that," Brian said grimly.

A frozen stiffness held Nancy's face. "Jim, your uncle's driven me out. I . . . I think John Ridley's gone stark, raving mad!"

Brian looked at her, his eyes narrowed and pin-pupiled. "Listen, Nance; I'm headin' for Skull. I think Bide Spengler's the man I'm lookin' for!"

"But—"

"Where's your horse?"

"Down the trail in the brush."

He spoke calmly now, with a kind of deadly self-possession: "Nance, you've got to go down to town. And you've got to stay there where it's safe until I come for you. At the Hondo House, or with Doc Grimes' wife."

She started to argue, to object, but he waved her words away, his face sharp-whipped and keen. "Do as I tell you, Nancy," he said, and went

to the corral and pulled open the gate, returning a moment later with Belle. In the saddle, he reached and lifted the girl up in front of him, supporting her easily, an arm crooked about her slim waist. A hundred yards or so from the cabin, she said, "Right here," and he lowered her to the trail.

"I'll see you in town," he told her flatly, and put the sorrel into a stretching run.

Brian drew rein in front of the Skull bunkhouse, and dropped to the ground. There were three saddle horses tied at the corner of the structure. He moved noiselessly forward and kicked open the door and stepped inside at a single long stride. Stobo and Greevy, two of Spengler's riders, sat at the table in the center of the room, their faces darkly shadowed beneath a hanging oil lamp. The two men stared at Brian, the hardening of suspicion on their stubble-bearded faces.

"Where's Spengler?" Brian demanded in a low, clipped tone.

Greevy, a short compact man with a saddle-hammered frame and pock-marked face, said: "Gone to town. Left twenty minutes ago with Bob Dagget, Hardin and Yeagel."

Brian started to turn around, and at the same instant a fist smashed against his jaw in a glancing blow, staggering him off balance. Brian guessed who his assailant was even as that fist landed stunningly. He whirled and measured Jett Ormsby and let drive. Ormsby, who had been quietly waiting behind the door,

lunged forward with a snarled oath to down his man. That was why Brian's lightning blow connected flush with the point of his jaw. Ormsby saw it coming too late and went pop-eyed as he attempted to avoid it. He stopped as though he had run head-on into a solid wall. Brian's second swing spilled him off his legs. He rolled over, belatedly trying to draw his gun. Brian jumped him and drove a boot toe into Ormsby's wrist and the gun went slithering across the floor. Then Brian wheeled. His own weapon lined on the two riders at the table, he stared down at Jett Ormsby, and his words dropped hard and clear:

"I think you killed my brother, Jett! And now I'm going to kill you!"

Ormsby, sitting up, rocked back and forth, clutching at his wrist. As Brian's threat penetrated his stunned brain, his mouth went slack with terror and he screeched: "I never done it, Brian! I don't know who it was! Ask Dagget—ask Hardin! But don't ask me!"

Cold wrath stamped Brian's face in a grim mask. "Get up!" he commanded. He started backing toward the open door. "Come outside," he ordered, "all three of you!" With his free hand, he jerked a coiled



lass' rope down from a nail behind the door and carried it out with him.

Ormsby, swaying on his feet, obeyed. The two Skull hands came meekly after him, their hands pushed high. Brian kept them covered carefully, beckoned with the muzzle of his gun for the two riders to back up against the trunk of a wind-blasted cottonwood ten feet from the building.

The light from the bunkhouse touched Ormsby's face, showed the fear, the sharp, scheming speculation in his eyes. Jett was calculating his chances for escape. Brian said, "Don't try anything, friend, or I'll put a bullet in your back!" Then he pushed the two Skull hands against opposite sides of the tree, and dexterously lashed them to the trunk, binding their hands and feet securely, drawing the knots up tight enough to make the two men whine with pain.

"What yuh gonna do with *me*?" Ormsby bleated.

The three horses still stood at the corner of the bunkhouse, and now Brian waggled the point of his gun. "Go over and get on one of those horses, Jett."

Ormsby shuffled over to the nearest horse and climbed up to the saddle. Brian said: "Now move on into the yard and stop." Then he paced quickly against his sorrel, mounted it quickly.

Brian lifted his own rope from the horn and shook it out and rode forward and dropped a loop over Ormsby's shoulders. "Pull your arms through," he said, afterward taking up the slack. He had Ormsby held

by the flanks, but his arms were free. "Where's the rest of the crew?" Brian said.

"Off ridin' somewheres," Ormsby answered. Then, fearfully: "Yuh ain't gonna string me up?"

"That depends on you," Brian told him in a clipped voice. "You're goin' to tell me why Spengler started those fires—and you're goin' to tell me who shot my brother Ed!"

"I don't savvy who killed Ed." Ormsby squirmed around in the saddle, staring. And then he blurted: "Bide started the fires all right, though. He done it to cover the steal of them horses, then tried to make it look like you started 'em to git square with the Basin for sendin' yuh to the Pen!"

Brian eyed Ormsby. "You're tryin' to tell me Bide Spengler took the blooded stock out of those barns and put in his own old crowbaits in their places?"

"That's right." Ormsby nodded sullenly. "And he killed Gid Blake this afternoon and planted your Henry rifle."

Brian said flatly, softly: "Jett, when we move, we move fast. So keep your feet anchored in the stirrups and don't try to throw the rope."

"Where yuh takin' me, Brian?" Ormsby asked suspiciously.

"To Gid Blake's spread." Brian was facing the bunkhouse now. "You're gonna tell that story to Doane and the rest before this night is through." He had a fair view of the interior of the bunkhouse from where he sat on Belle, and he could see the oil lamp that hung in its metal

frame above the table. Deliberately, he lifted his gun and fired one shot and blew the lamp to fragments. Afterward, he said, "Come on—we ride!" and spurred the sorrel into a run. The rope snapped taut, pinching a howl of pain out of Jett Ormsby, but the outlaw drove his spurs into his horse's flanks and followed frantically.

VIII

They hit the trail along Big Smoke River, hoofs drumming a swift tattoo in the cushioning dust. Jett Ormsby whipped after Brian like the tail of a kite, eating his dust, clawing desperately at the saddlehorn, screaming curses into the night, fighting the rope that linked him to the man ahead.

On Brian's face was a look of implacable determination; and yet he would rather have charged the devil himself alone and single-handed than face the ordeal that lay ahead. Every mile of the way to Gid Blake's ranch he felt a dread of the moment when he faced the suspicion and intolerance of John Ridley and the Basin ranchers. He tried to tell himself there should be a sense of victory, a feeling of beginning anew in his return, but ironically he could feel no lift. The imponderables were too many and too great. It was true that now he had a witness to the identity of the torch-bearing horse thieves, but Ormsby might conquer his terror in the presence of the ranchers and refuse to talk. And who was the murderer of Ed Brian? Was it Bide

Spengler? Was it Bob Dagget? Or Dutch Hardin?

And why had Spengler tried to kill him, Jim Brian, an hour ago at the cabin on the Painted Buttes? Considering this with a cold detachment, Brian found but one explanation. And that idea pointed squarely to Spengler as the killer of Ed Brian. For a man who had already shot two men in the back—Gid Blake was Number Two—would never have the patience or the courage to go on permitting a third man so dangerous to his own safety to stay alive, especially when the knowledge of his nefarious deeds was shared by so many men he could not completely trust. This, then, was why he, Brian, had been sent up to the cabin to be alone. It had served a double purpose for Bide Spengler. But the Skull man had not dared to wait.

A score of ranchers were waiting where Gideon Blake's stock barn had gone up in flames four hours earlier, and where they had discovered the body of old Gid with a bullet in his back. Brian trotted into the yard with Ormsby cursing on the rope behind him. Most of the men Jim knew; he saw Charlie Echol, John Ridley's straw boss, but he did not see John, himself, and this puzzled him. He saw Sheriff Doane and Smith Lomax walking up and down restlessly before a group that squatted on boot heels and grimly smoked.

A man's edged voice said: "Well, here comes our man. Somebody git a rope."

Brian stepped from the saddle and addressed the crowd. "Well, boys,

here I am. But I ain't the hombre you're lookin' for."

"The heck yuh ain't!" Smith Eomax yelled.

Sheriff Doane walked forward. "You're under arrest, Brian. Lucky thing for you I'm here, or you'd be kickin' your heels at the end of a long hemp rope and deservin' the hangin', too!"

"You're all standin' around primed to hang an innocent man—like you jailed one five years ago," Brian said calmly.

"Innocent?" chorused a dozen voices.

"A fine bunch!" Brian said scornfully. "Law-abidin' citizens!"

Stationed there in the ranch yard that now was so still, all hands heard the clatter of hoofs swing toward them from the direction of John Ridley's spread on the dry fork of the river. A lone horseman approached with flopping legs and elbows across the dust and swung stiffly to the ground. It was Buzz Dahlgren, grizzled, loudly dressed in yellow-checked shirt and wearing his pearl-handled pistol on his jewel-studded belt.

"Howdy, gents," the veterinary said matter-of-factly. He rolled up and shook hands with Brian. "Shore glad to see yuh, kid."

A man's voice lifted from the crowd: "Get a rope, you rannies, and let Bill Doane go to blazes!"

"Here now; none o' that!" the sheriff expostulated. "I'm takin' Brian in!"

Jim Brian said slowly, wrathfully:

"The man you want is Bide Spengler!"

The sheriff reared back, shock on his thin-boned face. "What in tar-nation are you ravin' about, Brian? Why, Bide Spengler's never been—"

But Brian had turned and pushed against Jett Ormsby's horse. He dragged the outlaw to the ground and said: "All right, Jett, tell 'em what you told me at Skull. Start talkin'!"

Ormsby obeyed, all the fight knocked out of him. And when he had finishing his snarling story, Bill Doane turned a befuddled gaze on Brian and said: "I don't git it. We found forty horseshoes in the ashes of Blake's barn this afternoon. That don't tie in at all with what Ormsby's just spied that Bide took the stock out 'fore he set fire to the barn."

Buzz Dahlgren spoke, and his slow drawl seemed to wipe out the sheriff's perplexity. "That there bunch o' Palominos Blake lost today ain't never been shod, Bill. Gid herded 'em in from the north pasture two days ago. I happen to savvy that because I was hired by Gid to shoe 'em. Was due out here tomorrow afternoon to do the job!"

"Why, then," Smith Lomax, tall, taciturn, broke in, "them horseshoes must've been planted."

"The shoes weren't planted," Brian interrupted. "Spengler had a better scheme than that. He substituted ten of his busted-down nags for those blooded saddlers so he could keep on stealin' you ranchers blind without you knowin' it."

Sheriff Doane blew out a long hard

breath. "Why, the blasted savage!" he swore in a loud, outraged voice. "He burnt up ten hosses—burnt 'em alive, to make sure nobody tumbled to his game!"

Jim Brian nodded. "That's right, Bill. And if you're quick about it, I figure you'll catch up with a Skull crew down around the Silver Lodes, movin' fast for the border with those Palominos of Gid Blake's." He beckoned to Buzz Dahlgren. As the ranchers ran for their horses, Brian and the old veterinary swung to the saddle and lined out toward the trail to Porcupine.

The lights of the Silver Dollar Saloon fell on a dusty, almost deserted street. Only a few saddle horses stood at the tie rails, reins dragging as they patiently rolled their bits. Brian and Dahlgren slowed down as they hit Main Street and pulled up in front of the hotel. Brian spotted Nancy Hoyt's roan in the line-up and knew a moment's definite relief. The girl must be waiting in the lobby of the Hondo House.

Walking swiftly up the street toward the saloon, the two men counted five ponies in front of it. Four were Skull animals; the fifth wore no brand at all. Paused on the plank walk, Buzz Dahlgren stared at his friend. "Kid, you're due for the shock of your life. Yuh better not go in there yet."

"Why not?" Brian ran his right hand down along his holster, settling his revolver the way he wanted it to hang. "This here's the night I been waitin' for and prayin' for."

"Yuh think Bide Spengler killed Ed?"

"I got all the proof I need, old hoss. But we'll soon see. Come on, if you're comin' with me."

The two men—one tall and broad, the other short, runty—pushed through the swinging doors of the Silver Dollar and stepped inside. Brian saw at once the man he was looking for. Bide Spengler with Hardin and two townsmen were idling at stud poker for drinks at a table on the left. Paused against the doors, Brian fixed his gaze on one of the men who had his back to the front wall. Something in the width of the shoulders, the tilt of the man's wide-brimmed hat struck him as familiar. And then the breath caught in his throat. For as he stared, the man took off his hat, and Brian saw the massive head and snow-white hair of his uncle, John Ridley!

Brian recovered from his astonishment, hearing his own name spoken in a gust of soft alarm. He saw Bide Spengler glance toward him, then freeze motionless in his chair. The Skull owner's face turned a putty-colored hue, and his tight, pinched mouth grew a bluish white; something seemed to be breaking up inside of him.

Suddenly John Ridley twisted around in his chair, looking toward the doors to see what Spengler was gaping at. When his hard blue eyes touched Brian's still face he stiffened, spilling a handful of cards to the floor at his feet.

Now Brian let his glance swing

around the crowded room. Down at the far end of the bar and back in a shadowy corner he could see a lone drinker seated at an iron-legged table. That man was Bob Dagget.

By the manner in which Brian and Dahlgren had come in here, men seemed suddenly to sense that a fight was coming off. For in less than a minute the barroom had cleared completely, noiselessly, swiftly. The general stampede left Bide Spengler, Dutch Hardin and John Ridley at the poker table near the doors; it left the sallow-faced Dagget at the table



in the far corner. Puzzled by his uncle's presence here with the outlaw owner of Skull Ranch, Brian spoke to him. "Better light a shuck, Uncle John. And do it quick!"

The white-haired rancher started to rise, but Bide Spengler's snarled command dropped him back to his seat again. "Stay put, John! You're in this, too—right up to your blasted ears!"

Brian glanced at Buzz and said: "Let's have a drink—I'm dry, old son."

Dahlgren trailed Brian to the bar, but turned as he walked, to keep his face toward Spengler's table.

Sam Ule, the bartender, poured the drinks. Brian, now turned sideways to the bar, said, "Here's luck," and took his whiskey neat. His face betrayed no emotion at all, but out of the tail of his eyes, he was watching Spengler's table and wondering what John Ridley was doing here.

Suddenly John Ridley rose to his feet, turned and strolled slowly up to the end of the bar on Brian's right. As he reached the mahogany, Bide Spengler flattened his hands out on the table and threw his frantic words at Jim Brian. "I didn't kill Ed! Ridley done it! Ask Hardin—ask Dagget!"

Brian never moved a muscle, but in his eyes there grew a deep, corrosive bitterness. He didn't turn to look at John Ridley at the end of the bar; he continued to stare at Spengler, steadily, unblinkingly, his mouth as thin as a blade, his eyes as hard as nailheads hammered into the saddle leather of his face.

John Ridley wheeled around and started fast for the saloon's side door. But Brian's down-slapping voice stopped him dead in his tracks, his big hands pushing empty air in front of him. "What's your hurry, Uncle John?"

Ridley turned back, face as wooden as a mask. He leaned against the bar again and dropped a bony hand to the top of his heavily loaded cartridge belt. Then boots scraped the floor, and Bob Dagget came around the end of the bar and took up a stand between Ridley and Brian. A cigarette dangled moistly from his

under lip and he was grinning his faintly ironic white-toothed grin.

It was Buzz Dahlgren's voice that yelled its warning whoop at Brian, and the little man had his pearl-handled gun out and was on his way belly-flat against the floor as Bob Dagget drew and fired his gun from the end of the bar. The bullet whipped past Brian's head and smacked into the front wall.

Then, finding himself cross-ripped by Buzz Dahlgren's fire, Dagget fell back toward John Ridley. But the Skull rider was not quick enough. Dahlgren's first shot caught him in the throat and he was a dead man before he hit the floor.

Meanwhile, Brian had pulled his pistol and thumbed the hammer when it was hip-high. Spengler and Dutch Hardin, half crouching behind the table they had just flung on its edge, made their desperate play simultaneously. Spengler punched out one shot. The bullet whiffed wind past Brian's head and whanged into the woodwork of the back bar.

Brian straightened his arm, sighting, then quickly fired. Bide Spengler, his eyes opaque, icy slits, took the slug where the top button of his fancy vest glinted in the light. He fell slowly, ponderously, his tremendous weight jarring the whole saloon.

Boots kicked the floorboards out on the gallery, and Steb Yeagel came bouncing energetically through the batwings, six-gun arcing up. Buzz Dahlgren's second bullet dropped him before he could fire a shot.

Dutch Hardin triggered his piece at Brian, firing blindly, without tak-

ing aim. The slug brought the back-bar mirror down with a resounding crash. Jim Brian's next shot crumpled the Skull foreman like a sack of wet meal; a swirl of blue powder smoke, like a devil's halo, spread out from the muzzle of Brian's gun.

And then it was Sam Ule, the bar-keep, who yelled: "Watch it—watch it!"

Brian knew instantly that the warning was meant for him, and he swung his head in a quick half turn and saw John Ridley on his feet at the far end of the bar, hidden by it partially, his white head showing just above the crown of it. Ridley had his big six-shooter leveled over the mahogany straight at his nephew's chest.

Brian saw it, knew instantly that he was trapped in a cross fire. But he saw it too late, for Ridley's head and shoulders were even now hunched forward as he squeezed the trigger. He couldn't miss, not at that short range. Brian realized in that split second that John Ridley was the killer of his brother Ed. He flattened himself against the bar, meaning to shoot as he went down.

There came a thunderous clap of sound behind him at the same moment he raised his gun, and a crash of breaking glass. The echo reverberated deafeningly through the saloon and John Ridley's contorted face vanished as though it had disintegrated in thin air.

Stunned, staring, Brian looked around. He saw Sam Ule lift a single-barreled sawed-off shotgun from behind the bar. The bartender

blew a long, hard breath into the magazine as he broke the gun.

"She pulls a leetle bit to the right," he said regretfully. "Busted twenty bucks wuth o' booze, by grabs!"

Judge Croft faced Jim Brian and Nancy Hoyt in the lobby of the Hondo House a half hour after the fight at the Silver Dollar. At his side stood the little veterinary, Buzz Dahlgren, grinning from ear to ear.

"I . . . er . . . hardly know what to say, Jim," Croft stated in his booming voice. "But it strikes me the Basin's got a lot to make up to you."

Jim, smiling wryly, gripped the judge's outstretched hand. "Let's forget about it, sir," he said.

"John Ridley," the judge went on seriously, "left no will. But you and Nancy being the only relatives left alive will naturally take over JR Ranch. Of course," he went on, a slow embarrassment in his tone, "you two will have to . . . that is, you'd better—"

Nancy broke in hastily. "I . . . I can't believe John Ridley was a murderer. Even after—"

"Shucks," Buzz Dahlgren murmured dourly, "I savvied John Ridley was playin' it high, wide an'

handsome! Savvied it even afore Ed Brian was shot. I usta run across John ridin' down from Skull late at night when he'd orter been asleep like honest folks. Why, it's plain as the palm o' yore hand that him and Bide Spengler was in cahoots an' rustlin' the Basin, had been for years. And there ain't no doubt about it, John and Spengler planned that beef stampede that like to busted every-buddy. Ed Brian must've found out what his uncle was up to that night. That's why John Ridley had to shoot him."

Judge Croft cleared his throat. "Now, about that ranch. If you two kids want to—"

Buzz Dahlgren slapped his knee with his old gray hat. "Sufferin' catfish, Jim," he crowed, "Mort's apt to bust a gut if I don't say it for him. He wants to know why in tarnation yuh don't up and marry the gal!"

Hot color started at Jim Brian's neck and climbed slowly up around his ears. "Why, I—" he gulped.

Nancy Hoyt slipped a slim hand quickly into his. Jim did not look at her, but closed his fingers around that hand, and felt it tremble once, then grip his hard.

THE END



Big Jake figured that murderous white water would be his ally, but he didn't reckon with

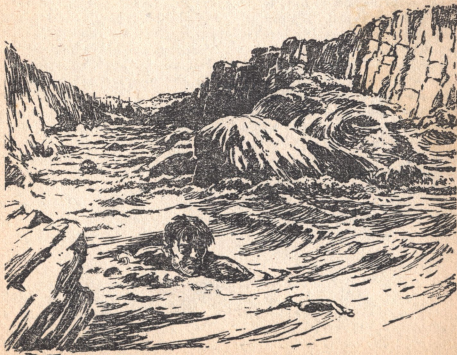
RIVER RETRIBUTION

by Frank Richardson Pierce

BIG JAKE DANZ added four pounds of moose meat to the stew that he was building, then flopped down on the bunk to wait. When the stew started to boil he'd shove more wood into the fire and let the stuff bubble for four or five hours. Big Jake had

slept ten hours the night before, but he was naturally lazy and the bunk felt good. Half closing his eyes, he tackled his greatest problem—an outline of murder.

The crime must be committed in such a way as to make it appear



that the victim had met his death through accident. Big Jake was a coward and he wouldn't take a chance on a gun fight, or even a fight with clubs, picks, shovels or rocks, any one of which was within reach of a placer miner.

He had thought some of dropping a fifty-pound rock on his partner and claiming it was an accident. He rejected the plan, however, when he realized he would be subjected to close questioning by a coroner's jury. Jake was afraid he might give himself away with a slip of the tongue.

Again, to claim there had been a fight and that he had killed his partner in self-defense would arouse instant doubt. Jake weighed two hundred and twenty pounds. He looked even heavier because he liked to eat and his flesh was soft. His partner, Sam Oliver, weighed only a hundred and fifty pounds.

Sam had a family of seven children down in the Puget Sound country. For years he had spent the open season prospecting in Alaska. Occasionally he put in a winter trapping to take care of his family and supply grub for the next season's mining. When he wintered outside he worked in logging camps or on the water front.

Big Jake had only himself to look after. It wasn't much of a job, but he gave it his full time. Playing a hunch, he had offered to supply the grub for half of Sam's clean-up. There was gold somewhere in the Wild River country. With his usual thoroughness, Sam had gradually eliminated the creeks with hungry

ground. The field was narrowed to three creeks, which Sam had named Ickt, Mox, Klone, meaning in Chinook, one, two and three.

Big Jake was confident that Sam would hit big pay either this season or next. He not only wanted to be in on the ground floor, but he wanted all of the clean-up. Now it looked as if Sam was close to his long-deferred goal. At first there had been little more than colors, then very fine gold, and finally nuggets the size of a match head. It was most promising.

Sam had driven a shaft down thirty feet to bedrock, and was now drifting toward an ancient channel. Having encountered boulders too large to be moved without breaking them up with blasts, he was working around them, holding them in place with timbers when necessary. This meant there were places in the tunnel where he had to get down on his stomach and squirm in order to get through.

The dirt he dug was shoved through these same openings, carried by hand to the shaft where Big Jake windlassed it to the surface and dumped it.

Dozing and subconsciously wrestling with his problems, Big Jake was startled to hear the *clump, clump* of Sam's boots, the footfalls of a very tired man. Jake jumped up and busied himself with the stew.

Sam came in and dropped onto the rough bench they had made of split logs. He was covered with a gray muck which stuck to his stub-

ble, hair and mustache. His black eyes were twin spots of dull light in a gray mask.

"Water's cold," he said wearily. "It's beginning to get me. There isn't any way to drain it off, so I'm soaked through." He got up and poured himself a drink of the black coffee left in a battered pot close to the fire. Then he huddled close to the blaze.

"What does she look like?" Jake asked.

"Pretty good," answered Sam, "but we won't take out much pay this year. I didn't expect to. I just want to know it's there, then we can bring in powder, a hand pump and some better gear and do the job right. It's a man killer now." He looked at his partner's hulking figure, but there was no complaint in his voice as he added: "If you were a smaller man you could spell me down there. A man with all that lard on his frame could sure stand a lot of cold water."

Big Jake turned his face because he didn't want Sam to see the change that he knew must be evident. When a man suddenly sees the answer to a problem that has bothered him for weeks, he can't help but reveal something in his expression.

Big Jake repeated to himself: "A man with all that lard on his frame could sure stand a lot of cold water." He drew a deep breath, thinking: "There's the answer—cold water. He can't take it in large doses. I can."

He looked again at Sam. The man's sodden overalls were clinging

tightly to his thin legs. Steam was coming up from them, and where the fabric had dried the muck had turned to a thick crust. Jake could see the dull gleam of flake gold in several places.

A gust of wind coming down from distant peaks shook the cabin. It wasn't much of a place, a temporary structure of split boards and shake roof. "The freeze-up is crowding in," Sam remarked. He stood up as though the thought were prodding him to renewed effort. "Time's passing."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Say, as long as we're coming back next season, why not leave most of our stuff here and go down Wild River in a canvas boat? She'll ride high and we can get through Horse Tail Canyon without an upset. After that it's Muddy Creek and Short Canyon, then Kelly's Landing."

"Horse Tail Canyon is bad," Sam pointed out, "and the water's cold."

"It'd be better than walking. It's a mighty long walk downstream," Jake argued. "We'd have to climb down into canyons and out of 'em again. That's tough going."

"You never liked the tough going," Sam commented. "People are made different, I guess. Me? Horse Tail Canyon's always given me the willies. Maybe because I saw a moose drown in it once."

Sam went back to the shaft and Jake followed, after feeding fuel to the fire. Several moose-hide buckets of muck were ready to windlass up

and Sam was waiting at the bottom of the shaft.

When the muck was up, Sam began crawling through the drift, dragging the empty buckets behind him. On hands and knees he worked, loosening up the gravel, studying the layers of dirt and trying to determine which way the pay lay.

"If there's a dike ahead," Sam muttered, "there'll be plenty of pay behind it."

Sam mentioned the dike to Jake several days later. "We should be getting out of here," he said. "Breakup's coming soon. But I'd like to know for sure if there's a dike."

Luck, Jake decided, was playing into his hands: The longer they delayed, the colder the water. Some of the smaller streams tumbling down from higher country would be feeding slush into the river.

"Let's gamble," Jake urged, "and find out. I wish I could get in there and help you. If there's pay behind the dike, how'll you handle it?"

"Come back next year and drive a shaft down to bedrock at a point just above the dike," Sam replied. He drew a rough sketch with a piece of charcoal. "We'll go down and take out enough pay to buy what we need. Next winter we'll freight it up the river over the ice and be all set for the breakup. We might clean it out in a season or two, or she might run along for several years. We're close to a half million dollars—if there is a dike."

Half submerged in icy slush, Sam scraped away at solid rock. It

crossed the ancient channel and he found a cubic foot of half-frozen muck studded with nuggets. He felt utterly exhausted, but he hacked away at the mass until several heavy lumps fell down. He put them into a skin bucket and relaxed in the muck until his muscles began stiffening from the cold. Then he went to work again.

When Sam got the remainder of the nugget-studded muck, he began crawling back to the shaft, dragging the bucket behind him. He tied the bucket to the end of the windlass rope and started to climb the ladder. After three or four steps he backed down, his knees shaking.

"I can't make it," he muttered. "I might get almost to the top and fall. It'd be queer to hunt gold all these years, find it, then be killed before the family got the use of it."

He called up the shaft to his partner, and after several minutes, Big Jake looked down. "You O. K., Sam?" the big fellow asked. "Figgered you'd knock off an hour ago."

"You'll have to haul me up," Sam answered, "I'm all in."

He secured himself to the line and went up with the bucket of muck. "You pan it, Jake," he suggested, "I'm going to bed."

Jake brought the muck to the cabin and began panning. Every few moments he would utter an exclamation of satisfaction. Sam, resting on his side, with blankets up around his chin and hot rocks at his feet, watched. "Couple of thousand dollars' worth of dust," he said. "The muck had been forced over the dike

by pressure, and got caught in a break in the bedrock below."

"The dike? There is a dike?" Jake began breathing hard from excitement.

"Yeah. Crosses the old channel like a dam," Sam replied. He turned over and went to sleep, leaving Jake to his excited speculations. For a moment Jake's thoughts were on a dam, deep in the frozen ground, holding thousands of nuggets, then he began outlining his plans for the next few days.

They slept late the following morning, and Sam cursed when he shifted his stiff body out of the bunk. He drank several cups of steaming coffee, then ate breakfast. Food seemed to help him shake off the exhaustion that had been on him for days.

"I suppose the sooner we start, the better," Jake said. "I've made a boat."

Sam had wondered what his partner had been doing. "Boat, eh?" he said. "That's good. We'll stop at Kelly's Landing and file on the ground."

This was the last thing Jake wanted. Filing the claim in their joint names would create complications later. Sam's wife would ask for a share in the clean-up, and the chances were good that she would get it. If the claim wasn't recorded, it would be open ground and the first man who staked and filed on it would be the sole owner.

Jake planned to be that man. There was small chances of anyone filing on the ground during the win-

ter. The public, generally, would conclude Sam Oliver had put in another unprofitable season.

"If you want to file," Jake said guardedly, "O. K. But filing will attract attention. Somebody's liable to jump our ground this winter. Why not let 'em think it isn't worth staking?"

"Hm-m-m," Sam said thoughtfully.

"You've worked for years to make a strike," Jake argued, "and it would be tough to have somebody jump your ground. Now you've as much to say about this as I have—more, in fact, because you've worked harder—but say nothing and saw wood, is the way I see it."

"You're right," Sam declared. "Filing would start talk, and after prospectors had traded gossip a month or so there'd be a stampede."

That afternoon Jake brought out his boat. It was made of long strips of well-dried wood fastened with screws and covered with canvas. The canvas had been smeared with hot moose tallow to make it watertight. Unless the boat was torn open by a snag or sharp rock, it would take them to Kelly's Landing without difficulty.

"We'll start at daybreak," Jake said. "We'd better cache everything. If we leave it in the cabin anyone passing will figger we're coming back next year because we're close to pay dirt."

They got up before dawn, and when Sam went outside, there was ice on the quiet pools and some slush

was running in the creek. Sam cached the tools and everything but the bedding and tin dishes.

Meanwhile Big Jake was making preparations to survive the period he would be in the river. He put on three suits of all-wool underwear that was so heavy it would almost stand up by itself. Three pairs of sox went on next and then moosehide moccasins. Jake began to sweat when he got near the stove, so he opened the door, and postponed putting on the two wool overshirts. "Better eat," he suggested when Sam came in. "I've already had mine."

Jake gave Sam a pile of flapjacks and bacon, and placed a cup and the coffeepot handy. "I'll get out the boat," he said. "You bring the stuff down when you're finished."

Sam closed the door. He was wearing a single suit of underwear, two pairs of sox and a wool shirt. The heat from the fire didn't bother him. He ate, cleaned and packed the dishes. Then he made up his bedroll. He lashed it tightly and wrapped it in a piece of canvas which he also lashed, using marline hitches.

Sam found Big Jake waiting for him. The big man was sitting in the stern of the boat, which floated lightly in a small pool. "Put your blanket roll in the middle, Sam," Jake said, "and take the bow paddle. The heavy man rides in the stern."

Sam squatted down on a thwart, which made a poor seat but helped hold the boat together. When the water got rough he could quickly kneel on the bottom and swing his paddle.

"Here we go," Jake said. He twisted his paddle, turned the bow downstream and drove hard. The light craft skimmed out of the pool and into the current.

There wasn't much for either of them to do except paddle just enough to give steerage way. Sam watched for boulders and fended the bow clear with his paddle. They were ice-coated and the sharp points of rock were nicely rounded.

The men did little talking. Sam was thinking that this would be the best homecoming he had ever had. He could tell his family his luck had turned and things would be easier from now on.

Big Jake was also thinking of the future—this one lean winter, then a lifetime of ease. Occasionally Jake's eyes shifted to the poke. It was lashed to one of the boat's ribs and there was three thousand dollars in it. If he could get it out of the country without attracting attention the winter might not be so lean, after all.

They pushed the boat over a couple of shoal places, and a few minutes later they left the creek and were in Wild River.

"Lots of slush," Sam remarked. "That water's sure cold."

The slush began to melt above Horse Tail Canyon as warmer creeks emptied into the river. About three hours after they left camp the river narrowed and they could see the canyon walls ahead. The boat picked up speed. They skirted a log jam and fought their way along the rim of a whirlpool.

"Hang on, Sam; we're in it!" bellowed Jake.

"No chance to back out now," Sam yelled back. Then as if warned by some deep instinct, he looked over his shoulder suddenly and caught the expression on Big Jake's face. It wasn't fear, nor hate. Rather it was utterly ruthless, cold and calculating. "What's the matter, Jake?" Sam asked.

"Keep your eyes in front!" roared Jake. "Want to upset the boat? We're in bad water."

Inwardly Jake was seething. The amazement he had seen in Sam's eyes, told him that his face must have given him away. Nor was he ready to overturn the boat just yet. He wanted Sam in the water long enough to chill and go under, but he didn't relish the idea of being in icy water too long himself. The lower canyon was the place he had in mind.

The river began to boil. Icy spray filled the air and whipped into their faces. In some places the walls were glazed. Sam was paddling carefully. He was down on his knees, doing everything possible to avoid an upset.

They shot between two huge boulders and sped on, the boat bucking like an outlaw horse in a series of rapids. The boulders that made those rapids were close to the surface. Now the boat was in the lower canyon, and Jake could see a change in water far ahead where Muddy Creek emptied its silt into Wild River.

Big Jake put all of his strength

into a sudden twist of the paddle. At the same time he leaned quickly. The right side of the boat went under and scooped up a couple of hundred pounds of water. The water rushed to the stern and an instant later Jake was elbow-deep in the stream. Then the boat overturned.

Sam gasped as the icy water drenched him. Clawing his way to the surface, he looked around. His bedding was floating a yard away. He reached it in a couple of lunges, and got his fingers into the lashings. Wrapped and lashed tightly, it would stay afloat for a few minutes at least.

The boat was floating along, awash, and the paddles were caught in an eddy. Big Jake had grabbed his own bedding roll and was drifting fifty feet away.

"This might turn out to be murder, Jake," Sam called. "You overturned the boat. I knew it was coming. Saw it in your eyes, but we were in the canyon and there was nothing I could do about it."

Jake didn't answer. Sam wasn't dead yet. Jake didn't think it would be long now, but a miracle might happen and Sam would make it to a bar or the bank.

They bobbed along, missing boulders, and emerging from the lower canyon in less than two minutes. Sam's legs were numb and the chill was driving deep. He looked at Jake and the big man seemed to be in good shape.

"With all that lard on his bones," Sam muttered, "he'll make it through. Hm-m-m. Now that I

think of it, his pack was small. Must've put on all his underwear and shirts. That'll help keep him warm."

When Sam thought about Jake it made him forget his own misery. He wished they would drift closer so he could fight it out with the larger man, and take him down with him.

Sam had been carried into the Muddy Creek water. Suddenly he felt heavier. "Must be weakening," he muttered. "Arms are getting tuckered out." He looked at his blue fingers clutched with a death grip to the bedding-roll lashings. They were cramped shut.

It seemed to Sam that he was lower in the water. It came over his shoulders, and sloshed into his face. He had to watch his chance to breathe without drawing water into his lungs. Then his feet struck a submerged rock and he went under and was slow in coming to the surface.

As he shook his head and cleared the water from his eyes, Big Jake's voice seemed to crash against his eardrums.

"Help! Sam! I'm going under! Help!"

Jake's massive face was turned toward the sky, as if he were trying to get it as high as possible above the water. Ripples of water kept washing over it.

"He's going to drown," Sam muttered. "He fixed it to drown me, and now he's going. I should let the sucker sink. I should—" But he tried to paddle over to Jake as he expressed his thoughts.

"Hang on, Jake, I'm coming," he called.

He was about twenty feet away when Jake went under, partly pulling his bedding roll with him. Then suddenly the roll popped to the surface and went bobbing along. The current carried Sam about a quarter of a mile before his feet struck again. He could feel them dragging over the muck where the water was sluggish, and he pulled them up because he knew if he got caught in the silt he'd never be able to struggle clear.

Beyond the spot, the current caught Sam again, and threw his bedding roll against the bank. He caught an overhanging branch and got his knees onto a rocky ledge that was awash. For several minutes he remained on hands and knees, gathering strength enough to work his way through the overhanging growth to a flat spot. It was crisp with frozen grass, but it didn't seem as cold as the river.

Sam's eyes searched the area for dry wood. Even a few splinters would help. Mostly he saw scattered pieces that had been soaked by the fall rains and snow. "Somebody will come," he muttered. "Better save my strength. Couldn't get a fire going anyway."

It seemed a long time before Sam heard men crashing through the brush along the river bank. They were breathing hard from running.

"Here's a man!" one panted. Another said, "We'll go on. There's a second man somewhere."

Sam's rescuers gave him a drink of

whiskey, built a fire, stripped off his clothing and hung it up to dry. One of the men insisted on giving Sam his pants and shirt.

"I'm in good shape," he declared. "A little cold won't hurt me." He said that his name was McGreggor and he mentioned the names of the two men with him.

"We saw a couple of bedding rolls bobbing past Kelly's," McGreggor explained, "and we figured out what'd happened. Kelly said it was about time you boys were coming out and we'd been sort of watching. To tell you the truth, Kelly was worried."

"Yeah?" Sam asked.

"Yeah. He didn't like your pardner. It seems like Big Jake's reputation caught up with him. He has a habit of losing pardners."

"He tried to lose me," Sam said grimly. "He upset the boat in the canyon. I guess he thought he could live and I'd die. It turned out that

I could stand the cold better than he could. He put in a lot of time in a warm cabin while I was in cold water this last season."

"You saw him go under?"

"Yes," Sam answered. "I tried to help him, but couldn't get there. Something seemed to be pulling him down. I felt it, too. A trick of the river, I guess."

Sam was able to walk when the others came downstream. "We found Jake," one of the men said. "Washed up in that muck, he was. We cached the body in a thicket and we're going down to Kelly's for a horse. Big Jake sure must've been afraid of the cold. We never saw a man with so many shirts and underdrawers on. That's what drowned him. The silt from Muddy Creek got in between those layers of clothes and weighed him down. There must've been fifty pounds of it. Life sure is queer—a man dresses warm to keep out of the cold, and that's what drowns him."

THE END

★ ★ ★ IN THE NEXT ISSUE ★ ★ ★

COBURN • FOX • BARKER

GILBERT • WEST

And the concluding installment of William Colt MacDonald's smashing serial—GUN-SMOKE BRAND

RANGE SAVVY

BY CARL RAHT



Mushrooms, considered a delicacy which must be nourished and tended in dark, damp seclusion flourish in abundance in some parts of the West. Above Goldcreek, Nevada, an old ghost placer camp and later a cattle and sheep center, on the Owyhee Indian Reservation, mushrooms grew in profusion. Owyhee Indians, in need of pocket money, often brought woven baskets of them into Goldcreek where, with mountain grouse and sagehens they were considered tops.



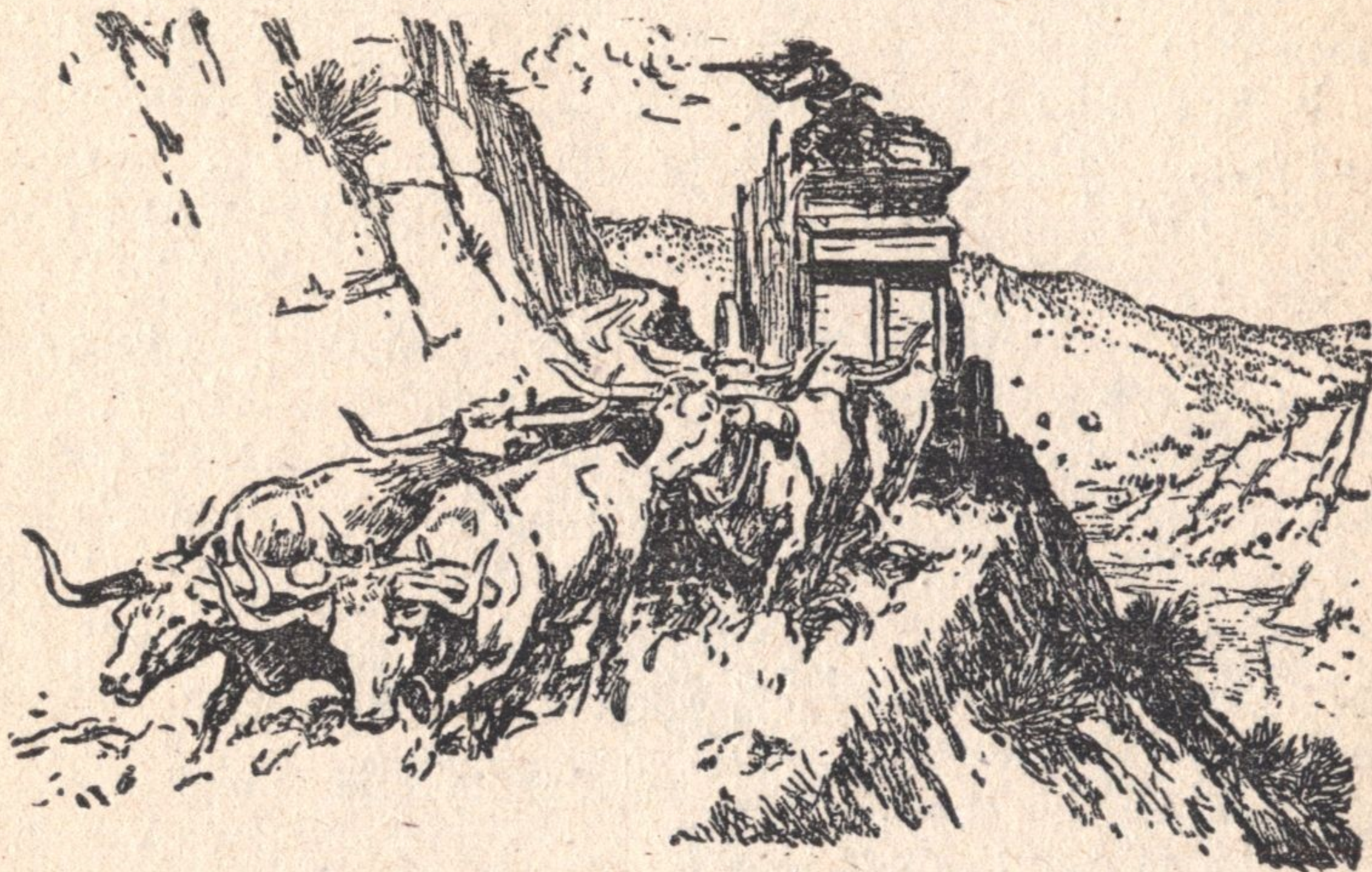
While the Texas longhorn has ever been commemorated in song and romance, there were occasions when he was held in very low esteem. Because longhorns, though themselves immune, transmitted tick fever to other cattle, a law was passed in Colorado, in 1867, prohibiting the bringing of Texas cattle into the State. Nevertheless some intrepid Texans trailed their herds into Colorado. In Douglas County alone a thousand local cattle became "ticky" and died of the fever, and a band of armed farmers stopped one herd, killed some of the cattle and stampeded the remainder. As a result of the bitter difference in public opinion, the prohibitory law was repealed in 1870. The longhorns had won the day.



The Joshua tree, so called by early pioneers because they claimed the thorny plant pointed the way to the Promised Land, is a specie of cactus found in most desert sections of the Southwest. To the Indian the Joshua tree was virtually a general store. He found food in the thorn-protected buds. From its tough fibers large nets were made with which to snare rabbits. From the roots the squaws got their much-loved red fibers used in basketry work. If short of animal sinews for bowstrings, the warrior substituted Joshua fiber. And even the children braided swing ropes from the fiber to make their play time more enjoyable.

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.

DOOMED FREIGHT FOR ELDORADO



by CLINT MACLEOD

His brother's life was the price Lee Brandon demanded for ramrodding that boothill-bound wagon train

I

WHEN he awoke, gray dawn was sweeping into the cabin and somebody was thumping stolidly at the barred door, a steady, monotonous drumming that didn't help Lee Brandon's aching head. Swinging out of his bunk fully clothed, he put his

stockinged feet to the cold floor and called, "Wait a minute!" testily, for his mouth tasted like an old boot, his stomach felt full of feathers, and self-disgust had put a sharp edge to his temper—the disgust of a one-drink man who has taken one drink too many.

That would be Cort, his younger

brother, outside, Lee judged, likely wanting him to help shrink a tire on that Murphy wagon of theirs. And then Lee Brandon came to himself with a start. The freighting business of the Brandon brothers, started on a shoestring and nourished by toil and sweat, was finished, a dream that had been swept into the discard. Blurred memories of the night before came back, and he felt the first faint stir of fear.

Stomping into his boots, he got to the door and opened it. The man who stood waiting was tall and stoop-shouldered, with the wooden sort of face that serves its owner well at a poker table.

"Howdy, Jack," Lee said. "What—what is it?"

Marshal Jack Beasly stepped inside, running his thumb over the nicked badge on his vest. "It's about Cort," he said. "I've got him in jail, Lee. The charge is attempted murder. Somebody shot Abel Glidden last night, and Doc Barstow is just barely keeping him alive. Folks tell it that you and Cort went on a record toot, sort of drowning your sorrows over your outfit going broke. And they also tell it that you were damning Mountain Transportation Co. in general and Abel Glidden, its big boss, in particular. Cort was making gun talk. The sign says he did more than just talk."

This Lee Brandon was tall and sinewy, and he looked as though he could stand up under the kick of a mule, but now he put his hand to the wall and said weakly: "I don't believe it."

Beasly shrugged. "I don't *want* to believe it. But I know you boys took it hard when Mountain cut prices till you couldn't compete, and forced you out of business. You're a pretty steady jigger, Lee, but Cort's always been a little on the hair-trigger side. Where did you leave him last night?"

Lee shook his head. "I don't remember," he confessed. "We were making every bar in Riverport, and by midnight I'd had all I wanted. I tried talking the kid into calling it a night. He told me to go and get some shut-eye, said he'd sleep in our wagon so he wouldn't come bustin' in later and bother me." Suspicion brightened Lee's eyes. "Who told you Cort was making war talk against Abel Glidden?"

"Farley Slayter."

Lee's jaw tightened. "Glidden's business manager, eh? It ain't enough that he's pushed our outfit against the wall. He's still trying to make trouble for us. Yeah, I remember seeing Slayter playing cards in the Nugget. Cort wanted to shove in that long face of his, but I talked the kid out of it."

"You boys sure took it hard," Beasly observed. "Supposing you *have* lost your outfit? It ain't like you'd be missing meals. Half of Montana Territory has stampeded to the new Eldorado diggins over in the mountains. Riverport's beginning to look like a ghost town. You Brandons could have got pans and shovels and an Eldorado claim. Why

did you stick to make an uphill fight against the Glidden outfit?"

Why? Lee Brandon wondered how he could tell this marshal how freighting got into a man's blood. A bullwhacker could know what it did to him when he saw his outfit circled for the night with the campfires like flickering jewels against a velvet back drop. A bullwhacker could know a certain pride in being the link between civilization and the raw frontier, a man who was necessary because he fetched the needings of other men. But Lee couldn't put those things into words, so he only shrugged and said: "Can I see the kid?"

Beasly nodded and Lee broke the thin skim of ice in the wash basin, gave his face a *whoosh* and flattened down his unruly sandy hair with his hand. Buckling on his gun belt, he left the cabin with Beasly, the two men striding toward the town just beyond.

Riverport sat with a huddle of hills at its back and the Missouri at its feet, a haphazard sprawling town of log and canvas and clapboard. There was a packet at the landing, the last from St. Louis this season, and Lee, feeling the teeth of the wind, speculated on the weather, wondering if the steamboat would make it south again before a real freeze set in. But perhaps the packet's crew had deserted to go gold digging over at Eldorado. Most of Riverport had caught the fever.

The house of Abel Glidden stood up on the hillside, remote and aloof, and Lee glanced that way thought-

fully. Glidden was a man who kept to himself, leaving the management of his freighting business to Farley Slayter, and some said that Glidden knew nothing of freighting. Lee knew better. Glidden had been a bullwhacker for the first freighting outfit that had operated between the Platte and Denver, and that made him a top hand in any man's language. But probably Glidden had grown too wealthy to work.

You could tell Glidden had money if you got a look at his daughter, Sue. She'd come up from St. Louis months ago, all silk and satin, and Lee had seen her at the river landing, standing in the midst of enough luggage to break a mule's back. She was mighty pretty, but she was a Glidden. Thinking about her this morning, Lee suddenly felt a curious kinship to her, for it came to him that both of them faced a tragedy. He said: "Just how bad was Glidden wounded?"

Beasly shook his head. "No knowing yet. Cort busted into the house and put two bullets into him. One high in the chest, one along the head. Glidden hasn't recovered consciousness, and I reckon Doc don't think he ever will."

They tramped on silently, passing saloons where Lee and Cort had spent the last of the Brandon money, passing a blacksmith shop and coming abreast of the frame office of the Mountain Transportation Co. Farley Slayter was at his desk beyond the big window, and Lee would have passed without a glance. But Slayter sprang to the door.

"Just a minute, Brandon," he called. "I'd like to talk to you."

Lee swung around. "About what?" he demanded.

Farley Slayter ran to arms and legs, long sideburns making his narrow face seem even narrower. He had the look of a hard-driving trader and an unpleasant nasal twang to his voice. But Slayter was affable enough now. "It's no secret that you Brandons are out of business," he said. "You've got a Murphy wagon and six yoke of oxen you've held onto until the end. I'd like to buy the whole shebang."

A heady anger took hold of Lee, but he kept his voice level. "Cort's in jail," he said. "It's no secret, either, that you come running to blab about the whiskey talk Cort made last night. And now you've got gall enough to try and deal with the Brandons!"

"Personal dislikes are one thing," Slayter observed. "Business is another. Name your price, Brandon. I've got a great deal to do this morning."

"Then I won't waste much of your time," Lee said and let go with his right fist.

A looping blow, it had his shoulder behind it, and his knuckles, cracking against Slayter's long jaw, lifted the Mountain Transportation man off the boardwalk and sent him slamming hard against the office front. When Slayter sagged, he was unconscious.

Jack Beasly spat judiciously, cocked an eye at Lee and said: "Un-

officially speaking, I reckon he had that coming to him, Lee."

"Come on," Lee said. "Come on before you have two Brandons to lock up for attempted murder!"

The jail wasn't far beyond, a log structure which was also Beasly's living quarters. The marshal led the way through his littered office into the corridor beyond where Lee glanced into a cell and saw Cort sitting on the edge of a cot, a sick-looking youngster with the blue eyes, sandy hair and tall frame of the Brandons. Cort came to his feet, grinning ruefully.

"Seems you've gotten yourself bogged down to the hubs, kid," Lee observed.

"I earned the name whether I had the game or not, Lee," Cort said wryly. "Has Glidden died yet?"

"Don't know," answered Lee. "Kid, I've got to have the straight of this right off. You didn't do it, did you?"

"I don't know," Cort confessed dismally. "I just don't know. I had it in me last night to go gunning for Glidden. No use denying that. And I started for his house. But it's all blank from there on. Some drinking men lose their legs before they lose their heads. I keep travelin' after the curtain falls. I found myself in the wagon with Jack, here, shaking my shoulder and telling me I was under arrest."

"Your gun had been fired?"

"Plenty," Cort said. "Don't you remember? We was lettin' our shirt tails flap and shooting at the stars."

Lee's hands tightened on the bars

of the door till his knuckles stood out white. "I was hoping you could tell me something that might help clear you. I see it isn't that way. I don't suppose there'll be a trial till the law learns whether Glidden lives or dies. I'll be working for you meanwhile, kid. Shucks, anybody might have heard you making war talk and gone and pumped lead into Abel Glidden, knowing you'd be blamed. I'll get you out of this, Cort."

Turning abruptly, he strode toward the outer door, for he had made a promise that would be mighty hard to keep and he didn't want the kid to see that he felt none of the surety he'd put into his words. When he came to the street, somebody stood waiting, but he paid no heed till he heard his name called. Spinning around, he found himself facing Sue Glidden, but it took a moment to recognize her. She had swapped silk finery for a man's garb, and freighter's garb at that—a blue shirt, trousers tucked into high boot tops, and a broad-brimmed, flat-topped sombrero that hid her hair.

Lee lifted his own sombrero, but his voice was curt. "Well, what is it?" he demanded.

"I saw you go inside and I've been waiting," she said. "I've got a business proposition to make."

Seeing her dressed thus had given Lee his first shock; her words gave him his second. Farley Slayter had tried to make a dicker too, but Slayter didn't have a dying father in that house up the hill. With studied in-

solence he said: "Do you Gliddens ever forget business? What do you have in place of a heart—a silver dollar? I've got too many troubles this morning to stand listening to any proposal of yours!"

She winced, color flooding her face, and he almost regretted his churlishness. "If you'd only listen—" she began.

"No deal!" he cut in curtly. "I know what you want. And I'd burn my wagon before I'd sell it to your outfit!"

Turning his back to her, he started down the street, but before he'd taken two paces she said: "It's not your wagon I want. Will you hear me out if it means the difference between your brother hanging for murder or going free? Because that's exactly what it means!"

That stopped Lee Brandon and swung him around. "I'm listening," he said.

II

They found a place to seat themselves in a thicket of pine on the fringe of the town. That was Sue Glidden's idea, and Lee followed her silently, a dozen questions fighting for utterance. When they were seated opposite each other on lichen-covered rocks, the girl took off her sombrero letting her butter-colored hair cascade to her shoulders, and Lee noticed then that she had Abel Glidden's own blue eyes except that there was less ice in them.

"What about Cort?" he demanded.

"My room is across the hall from

my father's," explained Sue. "He's been ailing, and I've been sleeping like a cat, jumping every time he stirs. Sometime after midnight, I heard footsteps and thought he was out of bed. When I went to see, I found an intruder in dad's room. There was only a shaded lamp burning, so I didn't get much of a look. And just then the intruder lifted a gun and fired twice at dad. I sprang at him and kept him from firing again. But he broke away from me and ran out of the house."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "He had a scarf over his face. But he wasn't your brother. I'm sure of that. He wasn't as solid as Cort looks to be."

That lifted a weight from Lee, and he smiled for the first time today. "Whatever you told Jack Beasley, it certainly wasn't the whole story," he said. "Supposing I tell him?"

"I'll swear I said nothing to you," she flashed. "And I'll also swear that I *did* recognize the intruder, and that he *was* Cort Brandon."

He gave her a probing look and judged that she meant it. "What kind of cat-and-mouse game are you playing?" he demanded.

"I want you to go to work for Mountain Transportation," she said. "We need a wagon boss who knows the trail to Eldorado."

Nothing she might say had the power to surprise him any more. He was too numb even for anger. Without rancor he said: "I'd rather hire out to the Chink laundryman. Mountain Transportation may be big

enough to buy the moon, but it isn't big enough to buy a Brandon."

"I'm not offering money," she said. "I'm offering you Cort's life. When his trial comes off, I can clear him. Or I can send him to the gallows. That's up to you. Eight Mountain Transportation wagons are ready to roll toward Eldorado this morning. But our wagon boss and half our bullwhackers quit a week ago to go gold hunting. You take those wagons out and I'll save Cort. How about it?"

"Most of your boys have been over the trail. Any of them could probably do a wagon boss' work in a pinch. What makes me so important?"

"You've heard of the Overland Freighting Co.? So far they've worked out of St. Louis, covering runs to Denver and Salt Lake. But they're moving into Montana, and they're after business. The Eldorado miners have formed a syndicate and are contracting freighting business as a body. They're interested in speedy deliveries and nothing else. Their secretary wrote that the Overland people have made a bid, claiming they can cover the hundred and fifty miles between Riverport and Eldorado in twelve days. Dad had Farley Slayter write that we could do it in ten. Now do you see why I need a top-hand wagon boss?"

Lee whistled softly. "Fifteen miles a day and most of it uphill!"

"We unloaded from the steamboat yesterday. We're ready to hit the trail, and I'm seeing that we get that Eldorado contract!"

With her little chin thrust out, she was a lot like Abel Glidden. But such a concern over dollars and cents was beyond Lee's understanding and his contempt soared. "What'll you do if your dad dies?" he asked. "Spend a day dickering with the furniture store for the best coffin at the cheapest price?"

That hit her hard. He thought she was going to cry till he realized it was anger that made her voice tremble. "You don't have to be so confounded smug!" she flared. "When you went bankrupt, you threw up your hands and quit. But I'll fight for Mountain Transportation so long as there's a ghost of a chance! Do you understand me? I'm handling one of the wagons myself on that Eldorado run!"

He put his hands on her shoulders and forced her to face him. "Are you trying to tell me the Glidden outfit is nearly bankrupt?" he demanded.

"I didn't want you to know that," she said. "We've been struggling along for weeks now. Dad's been too ill to handle things, and Slayter isn't much good except for office work. We had to cut prices to get business away from shotgun outfits like yours, and we lost a lot of money in a robbery not long ago. No, you never heard about that. We didn't even report it to Marshal Beasley. What was the use? The money was gone, taken from our office, and we didn't want competitors to know we'd been crippled. But if we're going to stay in the freighting business, we've got to beat the schedule that Overland claims it can make."

Lee's head was whirling, but things made sense that hadn't made sense before. He said: "Maybe I owe you an apology. But the whole deal still sounds pretty cold-blooded. You're taking a wagon to Eldorado. That means you'll be on the trail with your father lying here, halfway between life and death."

"Abel Glidden started business with a yoke of oxen and a Red River cart," she said proudly. "I cut my teeth on a bullwhip, but he wanted to make a lady out of me. He kept me in a St. Louis finishing school and had me dress the part. How do you suppose I felt when I came up river to find that every dollar he'd squandered on me was desperately needed to keep his business on wheels? I owe him something, and this is my chance to repay. Sure, I could stay here and get in Doc Barstow's way. I could watch my father fight his way back to life and be the one to tell him that he hasn't got anything more to live for. But I think I'd rather be out there on the trail, trying to salvage the business he built. Or can you understand that?"

"Yes," Lee said slowly. "I can understand."

"Here's the size of it," she went on. "You're a desperate man. You'd like your brother cleared, but there's no way you can do it. I'm desperate, too. I want a freighting contract to hand my father when he opens his eyes. Help me get what I want, and I'll give you what you want. Is it a deal?"

Half an hour before Lee Brandon would have said no and been sorry her sex kept him from treating her as he'd treated Farley Slayter when that man had tried dealing with him. Now he smiled grimly, remembering the promise he'd made Cort and seeing a way to keep that promise. Yet he couldn't completely lose his hate for Mountain Transportation or the feeling that this girl was as calculating as she was pretty. But he said: "If any Eldorado miners were in town yesterday, they know you unloaded supplies which should be on the way. They'll be ticking off the days, and we've lost part of this one. Let's be going."

"Good!" she said.

Their bargain made, they hurried to the huge warehouse of Mountain Transportation and to the flat behind it where eight wagons stood, Murphys, Espenshieds and Studebakers, with six-yoke of oxen hitched to each, and the Glidden men waiting. Among them was Farley Slayter, his jaw swollen. He was wearing a freighter's outfit now.

"Is *he* handling a bullwhip?" asked Lee.

"We need every man we've got," Sue replied. "Farley may be an amateur as a bullwhacker, but I can appreciate his loyalty."

As they drew closer, Slayter frowned at Lee and bent a quizzical look upon Sue. "We're ready to roll," he announced. "Are you still determined to go along?"

"If I don't, we'll have to rustle another man," she said. "Farley, I've hired Lee Brandon as wagon boss."

She might have dropped a bombshell among them, but of the seven Glidden men who heard her, all held silent, shuffling their feet and frowning, except Slayter. "I don't know how you did it," he said. "But I'm wondering whether you've made a mistake. This man has no love for us, Miss Glidden. I'm thinking he'll scamp us the first chance he gets."

Sue smiled. "He's really very gentle when he's handled properly. I think we'll find him both faithful and efficient."

Lee colored, running his eyes over the men. He knew them all—Six-yoke Sonntag, Jake Webb, Bucky Pendleton, Pete Haley, Bill Mears, and Mulehide Manders—oldsters most of them, men who had freighting in their blood and the kind of loyalty that kept them from listening to the siren call of a gold stampede.

"It's customary for the wagon boss to make a little speech before starting," Lee said. "I won't waste words. I know you boys, and you know me. I've beaten your schedules at times; you've beaten mine. We've been on opposite sides of the fence, and we've had no reason for liking each other. But I happen to want this freight to get to Eldorado in record time, and that's all that counts. String along and there'll be no trouble."

He swung his eyes to Farley Slayter. "I'll say this for you, Slayter: you're loyal to your salt. That's all I'm asking of any man. You said this morning that personal dislikes were one thing, business another.

Just keep that in mind. So far as I'm concerned, you're just another bullwhacker."

Slayter nodded and Lee Brandon swung on his heel, striding toward the lead wagon. He wondered if Sue Glidden would want to make a last visit to the house on the hill, and he thought fleetingly of hurrying over to the jail and telling Cort how things stood. But the minutes were precious and the sun was swinging upward. They had to hurry to Eldorado, and a Brandon was going to show the hated Glidden outfit the way.

III

Ten days to reach a mining camp back of beyond. Ten days to cover a hundred and fifty miles. That meant fifteen miles a day, not a bad average under the best of conditions, but Mountain Transportation was traveling short-handed with no relief drivers and no herders or cooks to lift the burden of extra work from the bullwhackers. With a regular outfit, the wagon boss might have ridden ahead, selecting the best camp sites, finding the easiest fords. Lee Brandon had to attend to such manifold duties and serve as a driver as well.

Moreover, lowering skies hinted at a snowstorm in the offing, and the haul became a race against a blizzard that might block the trails. Thus the first days out of Riverport passed, a monotonous routine of rolling out in the last darkness, yoking up with fingers wooden from cold,

plodding along until midday and then letting the oxen graze while wheels were fixed, tires tightened, and the eternal tarring of creaky hubs was done. After that came the afternoon run and the corralling at sundown. They cooked their evening meals and split the night shift, some men rolling into blankets beneath their wagons, some going to herd the stock.

Sue Glidden made a good hand, and Farley Slayter was quick to learn the ways of a bullwhacker. But Riverport was not far behind when Lee discovered that Slayter's wagon had been improperly loaded, some non-perishables such as canned goods being placed on top whereas sugar and flour, which might suffer at a creek fording, were on the bottom. When he found, upon inquiring, that Slayter had been responsible for the packing, he spoke to the man about it. Slayter admitted his ignorance in such matters and spent his spare time rearranging his cargo.

So Slayter proved more than willing to co-operate; the others took Lee's orders without question or complaint, and the miles unreeled with satisfying regularity. But Lee Brandon slept and worked beneath a shadow in spite of this, a vague premonition of trouble-to-come haunting him.

Desperate to clear Cort, he was therefore desperate to make Eldorado on time, and he couldn't believe that success would come easily. Overland Freighting Co. wanted the Montana business and had bid for the Eldorado trade. That meant the

rival concern probably had representatives here in the north. Upon this single run depended future business that would bring thousands of dollars to the successful concern. Overland wasn't going to forfeit such a prize without raising a hand.

No, this freight was doomed to trouble just as surely as smoke rose. And it was on the fourth day out that trouble came.

They hadn't brought a mess wagon because there was no spare driver and no cook, so they'd stowed food in the other wagons. Lee had asked Sue about that, and she had explained that they could get extra grub at Mike Skaglon's road ranch, almost halfway between Riverport and Eldorado. Lee knew Skaglon. A freighter himself at one time, Skaglon was reputed to have made his pile by substituting Missouri River water for whiskey in the cargoes he carried, and then selling the whiskey on the side. His ranch was a rendezvous for men who rode long trails by moonrise, but it was an oasis in the desolation between the river and the mountains. And when they stopped at noon that fourth day, Lee climbed aboard one of the saddle horses they'd fetched for herding and headed for Skaglon's to get more grub.

The flat, sparsely wooded country was behind now, fir and pine rolling a dark carpet here in the foothills, and in a shallow valley he came upon Skaglon's, a rambling log ranchhouse with surrounding corals and outhouses. There were half

a dozen horses at the gnawed hitch rail, and when Lee strode into the main room, which was a barroom, he found a scattering of men at the card tables. Skaglon presided behind the bar, a big-bellied man who greeted Lee with a snaggle-toothed grin.

"Howdy, Brandon," he said. "Trail talk has it that you're a Glidden man now. What're you drinkin'?"

"Nothing," Lee said and his pulse raised a beat with the knowledge that his name, coming from Skaglon's lips, had sent a faint stir through those men at the tables. He gave them a quick look, decided he knew none of them, but noticed that they were of a pattern, whiskered and gun-hung.

"I'm needing grub for my outfit," he added. "How are you fixed?"

Skaglon shrugged. "Sorry," he said. "I couldn't sell you a thing."

Lee stiffened. It was here then, this trouble he'd been expecting. But he only said: "Yonder store-room looks like it could stand some thinning. Is there anything wrong with Glidden money?"

"Not that I ever noticed," admitted Skaglon. "It just ain't for me to decide, Brandon. You see, I'm just workin' here now. Overland Freighting bought me out, lock, stock and barrel. They're moving into this country, as you've maybe heard. They want this road ranch as a way station, and they want it exclusive. You're competition, so you can see how the big bosses would feel about me selling to you."

For a moment Lee toyed with try-

ing to tempt this money-hungry renegade with a double offer for the grub Mountain needed. But something told him that Overland had bought the man for good. So he said merely: "We'll get along. There's grub in the cargo, but it's consigned. And there's game in the hills, but we're short on time for hunting. Mountain may be top dog before this deal is over yet, Skaglon. I hope you thought twice before you chose sides."

"No hard feelings," Skaglon countered, grinning again. "Here's a drink on the house to prove it."

He hoisted a brimming tumbler of whiskey from beneath the bar, setting it upon the planking, and if Lee had been less alert he might not have sensed anything wrong in such hospitality. But Skaglon hadn't poured the drink in his presence. And Skaglon, seeing him at the hitch rail outside, had had time to get the drink ready. This was no friendly glass set out for a friendly purpose.

Lifting the tumbler, Lee said: "Drink it yourself, you sneakin' skunk!" And he emptied the glass in Skaglon's face.

It brought the men from the gaming tables in a rush. They were onto Lee like avenging furies, a full half dozen of them, and he was slammed back against the bar. Clawing at his gun, he wrenched it from leather, but he only got in one shot and that went through the floor. Someone had a hand on his wrist, was twisting ruthlessly, and he had to drop the gun. He lashed out with his free left fist and one of his assailants

went down. But they were clubbing at him with fists and gun barrels and striving to pinion his arms, and such a one-sided fight could only have one ending.

"Tie him up!" Skaglon panted, still pawing at his stinging eyes.

When they'd gotten Lee's wrists and ankles lashed with a lariat, they lifted him bodily and carried him into the adjacent storeroom where he was dumped upon the floor. Skaglon, coming in with the others, managed to grin again. "You should have drunk the whiskey, Brandon," he said. "It was doped, but all you'd have gotten was a headache when you woke up. This way the boys had to treat you rough."

"What the devil is the idea?" Lee raged.

"Can't you get it through your skull that this is an Overland outfit now? We happen to know that the Glidden bunch is counting on you to make fast time to Eldorado. Hossbackers travel faster than freight outfits, and we get the news. But it looks like Mountain Transportation is gonna have to get along without your valuable services."

Lee thought of Cort and cold fear struck through him. "How long are you keeping me here?" he asked.

Skaglon lifted his shoulders. "We'll let Overland's Montana representative decide that. He'll be showin' up here one of these days, if he's not too busy."

Skaglon and his men backed out of the room, the door was locked and Lee was left alone to writhe upon

the floor. There was a single window, facing east, to give light, but that did him no good for he could see nothing in this room of shelves to help him get free. The knots were tight and when he had exhausted himself fighting against them, he gave himself over to gloomy thoughts.

Overland had finally struck, and a devastating blow it had been. Not only had they cut Mountain Transportation off from anything it might get from this road ranch, but they'd also deprived the train of a wagon boss and driver at a time when a man with Lee's capabilities was sorely needed. Overland was out to win, and the rival outfit was obviously not particular about its methods. And Lee Brandon was as impotent as an ox at a snubbing post.

He could hear Skaglon and his men roistering in the room beyond, and he marked the slow passage of time by watching the light fade through the window. As afternoon gave way to early dusk, he wondered what the Glidden outfit thought of his absence. Sue had known where he was going, and she would also know that he hadn't deserted. Not with Cort's fate at stake. But probably Sue had ordered the train onward, figuring that Lee had been delayed and would eventually overtake them. In an emergency, two of the wagons could be tandem-hitched with twelve yoke of oxen hauling the double load.

And supposing Sue realized something was wrong and sent one of her men to investigate? Mike Skaglon

would have a glib story to tell, probably denying that he'd seen hide or hair of Lee Brandon. Thus Lee reasoned, his worries multiplying by the time deep darkness came and boots scraped beyond the door.

His first thought was that they'd come to feed him, and he realized then that he was ravenous. But when the key turned and the door swung inward, Skaglon stood there empty-handed, his men at his back and Farley Slayter at his elbow.

"You!" Lee gasped. "You blundered into the same trap I did!"

"Not exactly," Slayter said and smiled a thin smile. "I happen to be the representative of Overland Freighting Company in these parts."

That stunned Lee, but not as much as it might have. "You fooled me," he said at last, "and it's easy to see that you fooled the Gliddens. I thought you were loyal to them, at least. But you've always had a skunk smell about you, Slayter. I'm not surprised that you're doing a skunk's work!"

Slayter scowled. "I'd watch my tongue if I were in your boots," he said. "It's for me to decide what happens to you, and I'm not too particular. Miss Glidden was so concerned about your absence that I easily persuaded her that I should come and investigate. It was a trip I was anxious to take, anyway. I was also here last night, when I was supposed to be herding stock, and I arranged the little reception you got. Miss Glidden's charms seem to

have won you over to Mountain Transportation but—”

“Save your speech,” Lee interjected, “and get at whatever you’re going to do!”

“First, there’s the matter of evening up for what you handed me that last morning in Riverport!” Slayter snarled. Stepping closer to Lee, he planted his boot toe in Lee’s ribs, a hard, painful kick. “How does it feel?” Slayter demanded and drew back his foot again.

That was when the glass smashed out of the little window and Sue Glidden’s voice came clearly to them. “Try that again, Farley,” she said coldly, “and you’ll be so dead they’ll have to douse you with brimstone on judgment day to get you awake!”

The first light of the rising moon glinted on the gun she held in her hand, and Lee tasted the irony of a Brandon being almighty glad to see a Glidden.

IV

If Lee was surprised to find Sue here, Farley Slayter was twice as astonished, or so Lee judged from the slack-jawed look of the man. Slayter swallowed twice, and Sue said: “Don’t stand there, Farley. Untie him, and make it fast!”

For a moment Lee was sure that someone would make a play, but the men looked to Slayter for their cue, and Slayter, with a strangled oath, fell to his knees and began plucking at Lee’s bonds. When Lee got to his feet, he chafed his numbed

wrists, then lifted Slayter’s gun and swung it in an all-embracing arc. Sue disappeared and a minute later she was around the building and into the room. Lee grinned warmly at her.

“What fetched you?” he asked.

“After Farley left, I got to worrying and followed. Farley’s a good man at a desk, but I wasn’t sure how he’d stack up if it was trouble that was keeping you here at Skaglon’s. I heard enough through the window to know that Farley has a lot of talents I never suspected—including a fine flair for double-crossing.”

“The whole bunch works for Overland,” Lee explained. “They didn’t want to sell me grub, but maybe they’ve changed their minds. Keep them on ice, and I’ll do some trading.”

Sue nodded, flourishing her gun significantly, and Lee searched behind the bar and found gunny sacks which he proceeded to stuff with food. Toting the sacks outside, he tied them to the Mountain Transportation horse that Slayter had ridden here, then got his own horse which had been put in a stable, and Sue’s mount which he found ground-anchored not far away. He worked rapidly, mindful that Sue was on her own inside, fearful that sheer shame would finally prompt the Overlanders to try jumping her. But she still had them at bay when he returned, and he grinned again.

“All set,” he announced. “Skaglon, check your stock and find out what’s missing. Send the bill to

Mountain Transportation. We'll be more than glad to pay."

"Don't forget to charge us with that broken window," Sue added.

Lee swung his glance to Slayter who stood white-lipped with suppressed fury. "I ought to give you the drubbing of your life," Lee said. "But I can't spare the time. Keep out of my sight, Slayter. I had one good reason for beating Overland before. Now I've got two. I want Overland to realize they picked the wrong man when they counted on you to scamp us!"

Plucking at Sue's elbow, he backed from the room, pulling the door shut and twisting the key. Then he twisted sideways as guns roared and bullets beat against the heavy portal. "Come on!" he cried and sprinted for the horses. "I left them their guns so they'd waste time doing useless shooting. But pretty soon they'll think to wiggle out of that window, one by one. By then we'll have to make ourselves hard to find!"

They flung themselves into saddles and vanished into the night with Slayter's horse trailing behind them. Lee used strategy to shake off the pursuit that might soon come. Maneuvering, back-tracking, finding trails long overgrown and forgotten, they moved across the dark miles as the moon lost itself in the overcast sky, and after an hour of this, Lee became confident that they were safe enough.

"I've been wanting to thank you," he said after he'd told her all that

had occurred. "You handled the deal top-hand style. Say, you must have been a sensation at that St. Louis finishing school!"

Sue smiled. "I was—till they expelled me. Maybe you can understand now why Abel Glidden was trying so desperately to make a lady out of me. Think of the money he wasted!"

Lee smiled, then grew sober again. "I'm sorry about Slayter. It must have been quite a shock when you learned the truth."

"It was," she admitted. "I never liked the man, but dad set quite a store in him. But now that Farley's showed his hand, a lot of things are becoming clear. No guessing how long he's been working for Overland. And all the while he's probably been working to ruin us."

"He cut prices to the bone," Lee observed. "I thought that was merely to get us little fellows out of the game. But he might have been playing both ends against the middle—sweeping competition away and undermining Mountain at the same time. Overland was to have had the whole show when they moved into Montana."

"Dad let Slayter set our price schedules," Sue admitted. "Dad was a freighter, not an office man. And since he's been ill, he's had to rely on Farley more and more. A bad mistake!"

"The money that was stolen from your office!" Lee cried. "Do you suppose—"

"Slayter? We'll never know. He could have done it, of course. And

it was his idea to keep the matter hushed up. Maybe he wanted the money for himself, or maybe the steal was part of his plan to ruin us for Overland's sake. But whatever he's done, he's been clever about it. You can be sure the law can't touch him on any count. What happened today would only be our word against Skaglon's and Slayter's."

"Maybe there'll be a payoff just the same," Lee said grimly. Turning, he looked at this girl with new eyes. He had thought her cold-blooded and calculating, and he had hated her as he had hated her father. But on the trail she'd proved herself of the bullwhacker's breed, and she'd put herself into peril today to help him. Once he'd tried to tell Marshal Jack Beasley why a freighter stuck with freighting, but he hadn't found the words. It came to him, quite suddenly, that Sue Glidden would have understood.

"I've made a big mistake," he said humbly. "I blamed Abel Glidden for the things Farley Slayter was doing in your father's name. I hated Glidden, and I hated you because you were his daughter. I said some hard things to you in Riverport. I want you to know I'm sorry."

"You needn't apologize," Sue told him. "I drove a hard bargain, and I used your brother as my wedge. I told you then I was desperate, and I was. Beasley was kind enough not to question me at first, and that gave me a chance to figure how I could force you to work for us. But before I talked to you, I wrote an account of exactly what had happened,

and I made it plain that I was positive Cort Brandon wasn't the man who shot dad. Doc Barstow has that letter. If dad dies, he's to turn it over to Jack Beasley."

"You did *that*?" gasped Lee. "Then—then you've never really had a club over me!"

She smiled. "You can head for Riverport right now and get that letter. Or you can keep on helping Mountain Transportation make Eldorado."

"I see a campfire yonder," he said. "Is that where you left the train at sundown? I'm thinking we ought to make a night run. If that freight was doomed before, it's really in danger now. Slayter won't be playing it careful any more."

Thus Lee Brandon made his choice, electing to work for the Gliddens of his own free will. Sue had shown her cards and they were good ones, dealt from the top of the deck. Cort was safe, and because she had made that possible, Lee was a Glidden man now. And Overland Freighting, he grimly resolved, was going to get a run for its money.

They found half the crew in blankets under their wagons, the others night-herding. They aroused the sleeping bullwhackers, the fire was stirred to greater life, and Sue Glidden told her men how things were, making her speech short. When she'd finished, Six-yoke Sonntag, grizzled veteran of the out trails, spat and said: "We made our afternoon run with two wagons hitched tandem. If we got along without Brandon,

here, I reckon we can sure get along without Slayter. Let's roll."

And so it was decided. If there'd been disloyalty in the Glidden outfit in the form of Farley Slayter, there was loyalty a-plenty left, and here were seven men to prove it. They yoked up in the darkness, the sleepy oxen balking at this change in routine, and they covered many miles before sunup with lanterns glowing and whips popping, Lee finding a new route calculated to fool Slayter's bunch if they were on the trail.

But the Overland bunch didn't appear that night or next day, so Lee changed back to regular routine. They were high in the hills now, the going was slow, and lost miles could only be made up by cutting down rest periods and pushing onward relentlessly. On their seventh day out of Riverport, they awoke to find a thin blanket of snow, a sky full of feathers and a world transformed.

Here was the storm Lee had been trying to beat, and though it was no blizzard, it slowed them badly. The sun came out at noon, melting the snow for a while and making the trail muddy. Time and again the high-wheeled freight wagons bogged down. They broke an axle on Jake Webb's wagon and had to make a hasty replacement. They exhausted patience and strength against Bucky Pendleton's wagon later in the day and had to unload and reload it before they got it onto firmer ground. They'd put only eleven miles behind them when they camped long after

sundown, and because these bull-whackers were dead tired, Lee chose to do the night-herding alone.

"Get your sleep," he told them. "I went scouting while the grub was cooked, and I've found a dead-end ravine back yonder. I'll run the stock into it, build a fire at the mouth to keep them penned, and still be able to get some sleep."

He went to his lonely vigil an hour later, wrapping his blanket around him and watching the snow waft downward to hiss itself out in the fire. He dozed off twice, jerking awake to find the fire dying, and each time he replenished it, he took a look at the corraled stock. He was striding back toward the ravine's mouth the second time when he saw a dim form just beyond the wavering circle of light.

"Brandon?" a nasal voice queried.

Lee got his gun out from under his mackinaw as fast as numbed fingers permitted. Slayter stood yonder, and that meant his men were nearby. But Slayter, seeing the gesture, flung his long arms wide. "I'm alone and unarmed," he said. "Come and have a look. I want to parley with you."

"There's nothing to parley about!" Lee retorted.

"I think different," countered Slayter. "I've got a trump card, Brandon, and it's up to you whether I play it. You've almost reached Eldorado, but supposing your stock got stampeded in these hills? You'd lose days collecting them. I might have brought my boys and given

you trouble, but that would have meant a gun-smoke showdown. Why take the risk when this is simpler? All I have to do is talk you into turning that stock loose."

"You're crazy, Slayter!"

"Think so? You've gotten awfully fond of Mountain Transportation for a man who once hated the outfit. But there's somebody else you like better than the Gliddens, isn't there? Take a look yonder!"

He pointed off to the left where a clump of pine made a white-shrouded blotch against the hillside, and Lee, peering hard, saw three men beneath the trees. "Go have a real look, Brandon," Slayter urged. "This is no ruse to capture you again. We don't need to."

Lee stumbled forward, floundering through knee-deep snow that today's sun hadn't touched. Now he could see the three more clearly—two men who'd been at Skaglon's ranch and between them a third figure, his arms pinioned behind him. Lee stared, unbelieving, and then a choked gasp came from him.

"Cort!" he cried.

"It took hard night and day riding to make it to Riverport and back," Slayter explained smoothly. "Cort's broken out of jail, understand. Of course Mike Skaglon's boys helped him, but Beasly doesn't know that. We knocked Beasly unconscious from behind and fixed it to look like Cort had handled the break himself. Do you string with us now, Lee? Or are we fetching Cort back to Riverport dead, with a story that he showed up at Skag-

lon's wild-eyed and trying to make a gun play to get something to eat?"

"Cort didn't shoot Abel Glidden!" Lee said. "He's innocent and there's a way of proving it!"

Slayter's eyes narrowed. "Maybe so," he agreed. "But that won't help him after he's dead. Beasly will still think Cort broke jail. And Beasly can't kick about our shooting an escaped prisoner. There's no squirming out of this, Brandon. Take your choice—Cort or the Gliddens—and make it fast!"

V

All this while Cort Brandon had said nothing, but now he broke his silence. "Then it's true that you're working for the Gliddens, Lee?" he asked. "These sons said you were, but I didn't believe 'em."

Lee was within a half dozen paces of his brother, and he took a step nearer, his sombrero brushing a low-hanging, snow-laden limb.

"Slayter works for Overland Freighting, kid," Lee explained. "A skunk outfit that's trying to get the Eldorado business. He double-crossed Glidden and crowded us out for Overland's sake, not for Glidden's. I'm helping Mountain reach Eldorado. At first I was doing it because of the promise I made you in Beasly's jail. There isn't time to explain the hows and whys, kid. The point is that Glidden's fight is our fight."

Cort took a moment to think that over. "And now he wants you to scamp Glidden's chances, eh? You

wouldn't back the wrong outfit, Lee. I know that. And you haven't got any choice to make. Tell him to go to blazes!"

Here was faith, blind and trusting, and it was like a tonic to Lee. Yet he couldn't sacrifice his brother, even though Cort was willing. Blood was too thick for that. But Slayter must have seen Cort's stand as the doom of his own hopes, for he turned, snarling, upon his two men.

"Show them we mean business!" he ordered. "We can tote young Brandon back to Skaglon's ranch just as easily dead as alive!"

Lee exploded into action with bewildering speed. He had to get at those two flanking Cort, and Slayter constituted a menace whether he was unarmed, as he'd claimed, or not. The Overland men were clawing for guns, and Lee had pocketed his own weapon, but he didn't try for it. Instead he leaped upward, snatching at the snow-laden limb overhead. Bending the limb, he let it snap upward, shaking a blinding cloud of snow down upon the group. It was an unexpected ruse and it gave him a moment when the startled men were unprepared for his attack.

Driving his left elbow into Slayter's chest, Lee sent the tall man sprawling. At the same time Lee lashed out with his right fist, a blind blow at one of the snow-shrouded Overlanders. The man went down, his gun booming, and Lee tripped the third Overland man and grasped at Cort's arm.

"This way!" Lee bellowed, and

the two floundered wildly in the direction of the Glidden camp.

Cort, his arms bound behind him, stumbled and had to be hauled erect by Lee. The Overland men were crouching in the snow, firing, and Lee took time to thumb shots at them, not aiming but knowing that gun thunder would serve him in another way. Startled shouts rose from the nearby Glidden camp, as the bullwhackers were aroused by the sounds of the fracas. The makings were here for a showdown fight, but, by his own admission, this wasn't to Slayter's liking just now. Running figures made blue blotches against the snow as Sonntag, Webb, Bill Mears and Sue came floundering to the fight, the other bullwhackers not far behind. But there was no one to fight; the pine thickets had swallowed the Overland men.

"They've got a camp a few miles below," Cort panted. "The bunch was pretty tired after hard riding into Riverport and back, and they bedded down while Slayter and those other two fetched me along in a hunt for your camp. We're safe till they get back with Skaglon and the rest."

As Lee fumbled with Cort's knots, the Glidden men made a ring around him, all of them visibly surprised at seeing Cort. Lee explained, and Bucky Pendleton, youngest of the bullwhackers, was for following Slayter to his camp and calling a showdown.

"That's about what Slayter would like, now," Lee pointed out. "If scheming could scamp us, that suited

him fine. But scheming has failed, and there's nothing left but a gun showdown. If he wants a fight, let him come and make it. Meanwhile we'll be heading toward Eldorado—not toward his camp. And we won't need to run any wagons in tandem. We've got us another bullwhacker now!"

They could see the wisdom of his argument, and they might have pressed on that night except that the snow and the darkness would have made such a run foolhardy. They kept vigilant guard until dawn, fingering their guns and momentarily expecting Slayter and his men to show themselves. But by yoke-up time the silence and the peace still held, and they hit the trail again.

Now it was a race against time and against Farley Slayter as well—a one-sided race in that respect for the Overlanders, moving by horseback, could easily outdistance the slow-moving bull train. Slayter would come, Lee knew. Slayter *had* to come now, and the man was only biding his time until opportunity was at its best. The eighth day brought the outfit over the hump of the hills and here there was no sign of the snowstorm that had mantled the high places. But now the route was all downhill, steep and dangerous.

Lee had put Cort to pacing the first wagon, the one that had been Slayter's, and he'd posted himself to the rear with his own wagon, for the Overland men would strike from that direction. Often Lee took the train off the regular trail to save

miles, and the ninth day passed peaceably, though nerves had grown frayed by the constant tension. The tenth morning found them winding down a canyon, a wall rearing to one side of the trail and a brawling stream on the other. And it was here that Slayter struck.

He and his men were up on the canyon rim, and the Glidden outfit first discovered them when a big boulder came thudding downward, narrowly missing one of the wheelers of Cort's string. Instantly the oxen were bolting wildly, and Cort, who'd been walking to the left of them, his whip popping, swung up onto the wagon. No place here to circle and make a stand. So Lee bellowed an order that sent every bullwhacker to a perch on his wagon. Then the whole outfit was making a wild run down that steep trail.

More boulders came thudding; guns began to pop up above, then suddenly ceased. For Lee and his party it was cling to the wagons and hear the rush of the wind and trust to the sure-footedness of the panicked oxen. But Lee kept his eyes to the rear, for the dwindling gunfire had given him a clue to Slayter's next move. Slayter had maneuvered ahead of them and climbed to the canyon rim, and he likewise knew the way down. He'd be coming soon, and in a few minutes he and Skaglon and the others showed up, riding at a thundering gallop down the trail behind the train, firing as they rode.

Snatching a rifle out of his wagon, Lee cradled the gun against his cheek and hauled away at the trigger. With

the wagon bouncing and jolting, he could only hope for a hit. He'd tried to get Slayter in his sights, but it was big Mike Skaglon who threw up his hands and pitched from his saddle.

Now the trail was leveling, but just below there was a hairpin turn that swung the trail down around the cut bank and to a flat beside the creek. Cort had to make that turn first, and the best bullwhacker in the world could only pray for luck at such a time. The oxen swung as Cort's long whip flicked out to signal them, the leaders doubling back until they were almost abreast of the wheelers, the high-sided wagon lurching unsteadily. Just for an instant it was poised on two wheels, and then, as Lee watched in horrified fascination, it pitched over.

Lee had a glimpse of Cort being catapulted through the air. He saw goods flying every direction, and the oxen becoming a hopeless tangle of harness and bodies. Then the second wagon was making the turn, and the third and the fourth. As Lee's own wagon finally flashed around the bend, Cort was hauling himself out of a clump of bushes, apparently unhurt, and Lee almost keeled over with relief.

No time now for gladness, not with Slayter close behind. "Circle for a stand!" Lee bellowed, but Sue, up ahead, had already issued that order. Frantically the bullwhackers maneuvered each wagon so that the inner front wheel touched the outer rear wheel of the one ahead,

then piled down to unharness the oxen. But before they could corral the stock inside the semi-circle they'd hastily formed along the creek, they had to get under the wagons and start firing, for Slayter's bunch was almost upon them.

Cort came limping along and squeezed in beside Lee. The Overlanders were piling down from saddles, finding shelter behind bushes and rocks, the canyon walls flinging back the echoes of the guns. This was showdown, but Lee was sick with the realization that no matter what the outcome, Mountain Transportation had lost its chance. Making this stand meant wasting precious hours on this, their last day. On another run, Overland Freighting, unhampered, would best Mountain's schedule and claim the contract. Thus had Slayter planned.

"Look!" Cort cried suddenly. "More horsemen coming, a dozen of 'em. From the direction of Eldorado. Overlanders, you reckon?"

Lee lifted his eyes, a fierce hope flaming through him. "No!" he shouted. "Don't you recognize that jigger in the lead? It's Marshal Jack Beasley!"

No mistaking that tall, stoop-shouldered figure. Beasley was here, barking curt commands, and though his authority didn't extend beyond Riverport, he had a gun in his hand to back him. Thus the fight suddenly ended, Slayter and his men coming into the open with guns pouched. Slayter, Lee noticed, was smiling thinly.

Glidden men eased into the open

too, but Slayerter had the first chance to speak. "Glad to see you, Beasly," he said. "As you'll notice, I'm not with Mountain Transportation any more. Lee Brandon has taken over the outfit by pulling the wool over Miss Glidden's eyes in fine fashion, and he had me kicked out when I protested. But I decided that something had to be done and collected these friends to help me when I found that Cort Brandon had joined Mountain. When I left Riverport he was in jail. It follows that he's escaped. You'll arrest him, of course."

"We'll see," Beasly countered grimly. "Cort broke jail, that's true. How he managed it alone, I don't know. But I figured his first step would be to join Lee. And since Lee had headed out with this train I came to Eldorado as fast as a horse could carry me, and by the straightest trail. These gents with me are Eldorado vigilantes. When they told me the Glidden train hadn't arrived, I headed back to look for it."

"You've come straight from Riverport?" Sue asked eagerly. "My father—"

"Sitting up and taking nourishment, miss," Beasly said. "I talked to him just before I left. Doc says he'll pull through fine. Your dad gave me this letter to give you if I caught up with you."

He passed over a sealed envelope, and Sue was opening it when Mulehide Manders, who'd strode off toward the wreckage of Cort's wagon to put the wounded oxen out of

misery, raised his voice in an excited cry. "Here's a chest busted open and minted money scattered all over! I didn't know we was packin' anything like that!"

"Money!" Sue cried and hurried to have a look. "Why—why that must be the money that was stolen from us weeks ago!" Her eyes swung accusingly to Slayerter. "This was your wagon; you loaded it yourself! You stole this money! You kept it hidden in Riverport till you saw this chance to get it out of town. This is another reason why you never intended this freight to reach Eldorado!"

Beasly frowned. "How about this?" he demanded.

"Lies!" Slayerter snapped. "She can't prove any part of it. I might as well admit that I've been working for Overland Freighting. But that doesn't make me a thief!"

"You're worse than a thief," Sue cried, "and this letter proves it." She shook out the folded sheet. "Dad says he got a good look at the man who tried to shoot him. That man was—"

With a strangled oath Farley Slayerter clawed at his gun, tipping it to spear a shot straight at Sue. But Lee had been watching, and he moved quicker. Leaping sideways, he elbowed Sue out of the way just as Slayerter's gun boomed, the bullet clipping Lee's sleeve. At the same instant Lee fired, and Farley Slayerter dropped his gun, put his hands to his chest and buckled at the knees, going down in a heap.

Jack Beasley stared down at the dead man. "I'd say he sure admitted his guilt," he observed. "But when I talked to your father—"

"I know," Sue said faintly. "But ever since I found out that Slayter worked for Overland, it's kept growing on me that Slayter *might* have been the man with the gun. Killing father would have helped Overland, and Slayter had a splendid opportunity since Cort had been threatening murder that very night. But I was bluffing. Dad only wrote this letter to wish me luck."

Lee caught her as she started to reel. "Get those oxen gathered up before they're scattered all over creation," he shouted over his shoulder. "And divide the cargo of Cort's wagon and pile it onto the others. We've still got to make Eldorado by sundown, and we're wasting time!"

Sue Glidden was waiting for Lee in the shadow of a warehouse in that brawling boom camp, Eldorado, at

midnight. He said: "The wagons are all unloaded, and we've made schedule. More than that, we've nothing to fear from Overland. Once the story gets around that the Eldorado vigilantes had to banish some Overland men from Montana today, that outfit will never show its face in this section. And you've got the stolen money to help rebuild Mountain Transportation."

He opened his arms, and the way she came into them seemed exactly as it should be. They were both silent for a long time until she whispered: "I wondered when you'd find time for this. I can hardly wait till we tell dad. But I suppose people will say that I'm marrying you so the Gliddens can hang on to the best wagon boss they ever got."

"And they'll probably say that I'm marrying you in order to get a life job," Lee countered, with a grin.

"Oh, to the devil with 'em!" said Sue Glidden and raised her lips to be kissed.

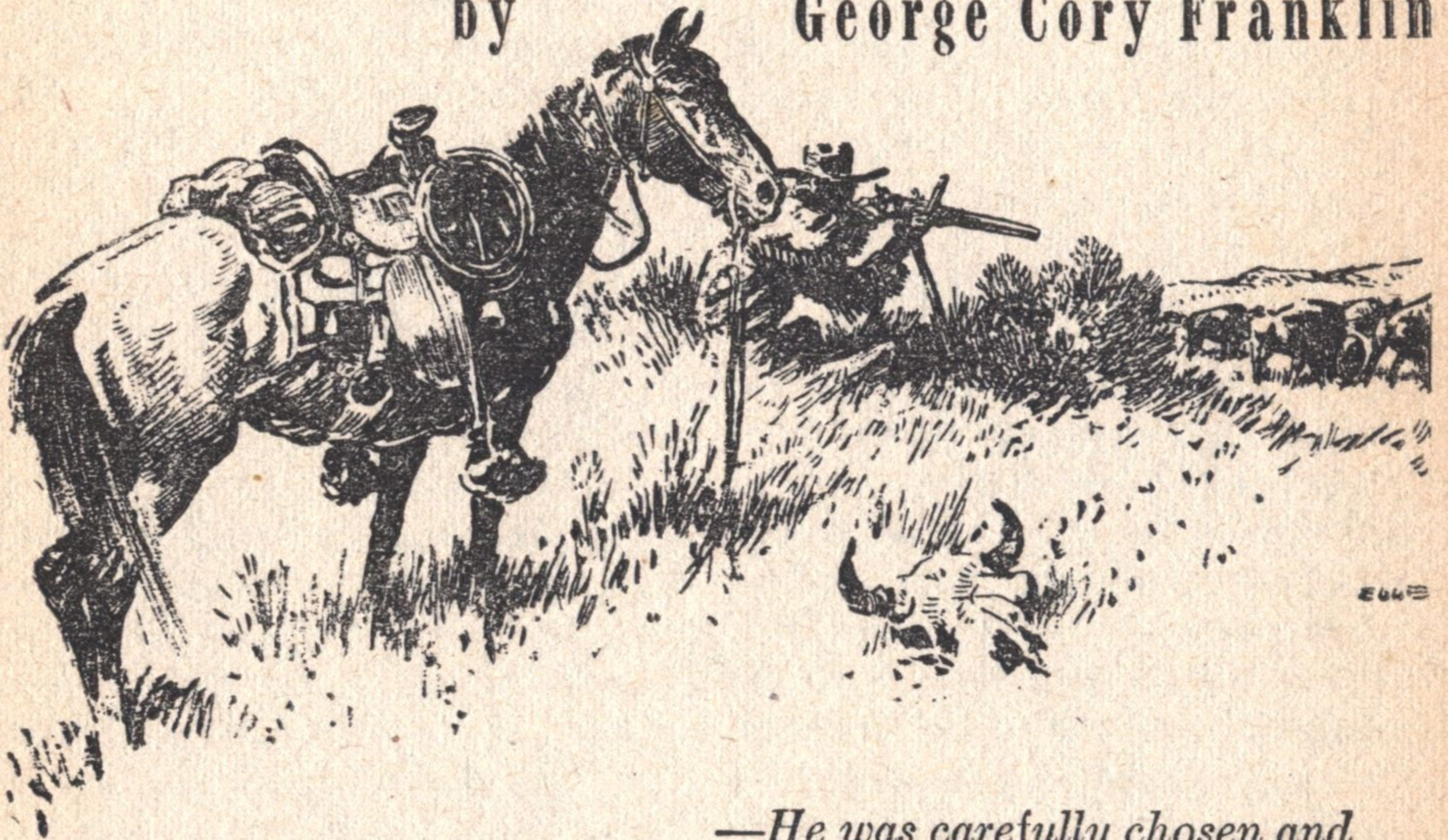
THE END

CATTLE roundups, as conducted by the Papago Indians each year on their San Xavier Reservation, are a little out of the ordinary from roundups generally. After the head men of the tribe meet and plan the part each Indian cowboy is to play, a long column of riders leaves the village in pairs. Certain posts are assigned to each pair of riders for a twelve-hour period. These posts are the waterholes where the cattle must come to drink. Patiently the Indians watch for the half-wild cattle to venture down from the mountains to drink. With their thirst quenched, the cattle are suddenly startled by Indian cowboy yells and are stampeded toward the corrals built near the village. Once all the cattle are corraled, branding proceeds, and the animals chosen for beef are cut into a separate corral, while the stock cows and newly branded calves are freed to return to the range.

WHITE MAN'S HUNTING HORSE

by

George Cory Franklin



—He was carefully chosen and trained because he had a mighty important job to do.

WHITE men rarely joined the Indians in their buffalo hunts, partly because they did not possess horses trained for the purpose, and partly because even the most experienced pioneers had little skill with the bow and arrow, and less with a spear.

The hunting horse of the white men, however, played a large part in the life of Westerners, and while not as spectacular as the buffalo runners of the Indians, these humble

ponies required patient, careful training.

When a pony was selected for a hunting companion, the slowest, laziest one in the little herd of pack and saddle horses or ponies was chosen. Such an animal is generally less likely to be gun-shy; and since powder and lead was the most valuable possession of the early trapper and hunter, it was not to be wasted for the purpose of accustoming a

horse to the noise. Sometimes a horse was gun-broken by shooting a cap-and-ball pistol near it, and if there was any target practicing to be done, the animal was tied just far enough away so that he might not be terrorized. Another method of teaching horses that sudden explosions of sound are not necessarily dangerous was to slap two thin boards together, making a noise not unlike that of a small-caliber gun.

This lesson learned, the hunting horse was taught that the man was able to protect him at all times. For some reason not too easily understood, all horses, even those who live on the range, are suspicious of wild things. Deer, especially a doe with fawns, may be tolerated, and even permitted, to graze with a band of horses day after day, but once let a horse catch the fear scent from the glands of any creature and his suspicions are aroused. Undoubtedly this is the reason why a gentle, well-broken horse will stampede and go haywire at the scent of a frightened deer.

The white hunters of buffalo days usually killed their game by approaching under cover of an arroyo or small natural obstacle, until the game was within range of a large-caliber rifle. The hunting horse was therefore trained to stand nearby while the shots were fired so as to afford the hunter a sure means of escape in case the buffalo should stampede in his direction, which frequently occurred.

Some animals were trained to graze quietly toward game, especially

antelope, affording moving protection or cover for the hunter who crawled on the ground behind the horse. Some white hunters followed the Pawnee method of hunting buffalo. This was a derivation from the one formerly used by all the Indians who had horses trained to put the hunter up close enough to the game so that a bow and arrow could be used effectively. The Pawnees were the first Plains Indians to come into possession of firearms—fifty-caliber rimfire Spencer carbines which they used in the same manner that they had formerly used bow and arrows or spears.

The white hunters, having rifles of much greater accuracy and killing power, were able to employ a combination of the Indian method and that of the still hunter. This did not require horses of the same type as those used by the Indian hunter. Any gun-broken horse fast enough to lope along on the flank of a slow-running buffalo herd would serve the purpose.

This was the manner of hunting that Buffalo Bill Cody employed with such success when he was supplying meat to the builders of the Union Pacific Railroad.

The mountain men of the Rockies employed their hunting ponies in an entirely different manner, using them too as mounts while hunting elk and deer in the forests and parks of the mountains. Such ponies were trained not to be afraid of the report of a gun, but to stand absolutely rigid while a rifle was being fired by the

man in the saddle. Some of these ponies became famous for their ability to find game by the scent and to indicate by their actions where the deer or elk was hiding. The owner of such an animal would merely ride through the country where the game he sought was likely to be found, keeping his rifle in readiness at all times for quick action. Instead of watching the distant opening for running game, the hunter paid strict attention to the action of the horse he rode, watching the animal's ears and noting any sign of interest or nervousness.

One advantage of this way of approaching game was that the scent from a sweating horse would absorb to some extent the man smell. Often deer that would have run from the first taint of human smell would stand until the mounted hunter was within easy shooting distance.

When the game was seen, the hunter would stop the horse by a gesture or whispered word, and shoot from the saddle. This manner of hunting was particularly successful in killing elk. The market hunters, who had contracts to supply mining

or construction camps with meat, depended to a large extent upon the sagacity of their hunting ponies not only to find the game but to aid them in getting near enough for a successful shot.

During the early days of the frontier towns the entire meat supply was brought in by market hunters. Even after the herds of buffalo had been wantonly destroyed by hide hunters, there was an abundance of antelope on the prairies, and deer and elk in the foothills, so the hunting pony not only carried its owner to the hunting grounds each day, but returned at night loaded with fresh meat, which might include prairie chickens, quail and water fowl.

At late as the early '80s horses were used by the French goose hunters along the tributaries of the Mississippi. A man on foot, or hiding in a flat-bottom boat in the tules near the banks, had difficulty in getting within range of the immense flocks that migrated along the tributaries of this river. Here the pony, trained to graze over the natural meadows in the direction of the birds, was almost standard equipment of that period.

THE END.



THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

We used to go on the prod after a hard case and "smoke 'im up." Come on, pardners, let's "smoke up" Hitler and them Japs by buying more

WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!



DON COYOTE by S. Omar Barker

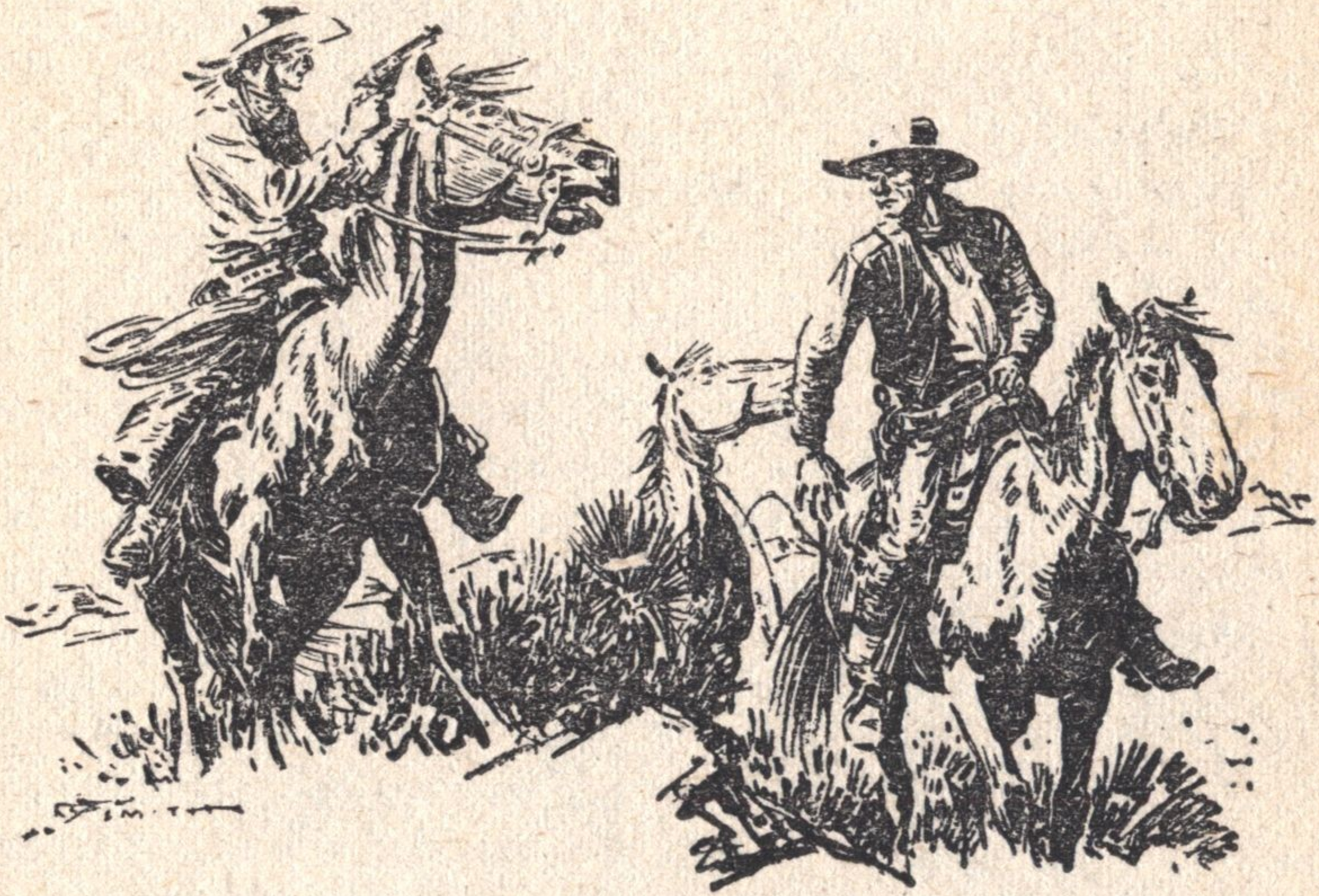
*They asked me: "What's a coyote?" . . . It's a Mexkin word that means
 A little wolf that habitates a heap of Western scenes.
 He roams out on the prairies and he hunts up in the hills,
 And just to hear him howlin' gives a greenhorn's spine the chills.
 The Spanish natives use the word to mean "a half-breed," too,
 And they pernounce it diff'rent, but for us Kl-ote will do
 To name this so-called prairie wolf that wears a bushy tail
 And runs off kind o' sidling when you sight him on the trail.
 Unlike the big gray lobo (wolf) whose nose is thick and blunt,
 The coyote's beak is pointed, and the way he likes to hunt
 Is more by craft and cunning. You can see it in his eyes
 Of greenish-yaller color, that he's wary and he's wise.
 When rangin' in the mountains he acquires deer-killin' habits,
 Büt out upon the flats he mainly thrives on rats and rabbits.*

*The way two coyotes ketch a jack is something mighty smart:
 One of them keeps him circlin' and the other, for his part,
 He cuts across the circle—and the jack ain't got no chance.
 (There's some who ain't that smart among us fellers wearin' pants.)
 Though coyotes share the buzzard's fare and also kill some veal,
 And sheep's a critter that they love to slaughter and to steal,
 What all their foolish stummicks crave, there simply ain't no tellin'—
 They also eat grasshoppers, apples, corn and watermelon!
 One lonely coyote yappin' sounds like four or five together—
 The Mexkins claim they mainly howl to foretell changin' weather.
 Some Injuns claim their eerie call is what brings up the dawn,
 And there's other superstitions that I won't enlarge upon,
 But speakin' as a feller that has heard him, boy and man,
 I'll say no banshee ever squalled the way Don Coyote can!*

*They asked: "What's a coyote?" . . . He's a Western native son
 That does a heap of damage, and when all is said and done,
 To them that's raisin' livestock he's a wolf that ain't no help—
 But if he ever quit us—how the West would miss his yelp!*

LOOT OF THE LAZY J

by John G. Pearsol



Even blazing lead, Mike Spicer discovered, couldn't silence the one witness to his cold-blooded bushwhack murder

MIKE SPICER was an evil little devil; crooked as a snake, utterly unscrupulous, vicious and cruel. As far back as anyone could remember, all of Mike's relatives had either been hung or gone out on the hot end of a bullet. The last of them, Mike's uncle, Big Dutch Spicer, had gone to the pen a few years ago. When this happened, Mike, too lazy to

work, sold the Lazy J, the little ranch which the Spicers had maintained as a sort of blind for their rustling, stage robbing and other criminal activities. Mike sold the ranch to young Bud Blair, squandered the money in a few weeks, and when he couldn't steal anything, did a few odd jobs around Sage City.

Then Big Dutch Spicer broke jail,

came back home and got a bullet in his brisket trying to get away again. Before he died he talked to Mike. "You was always either too lazy or too yeller to be with us on any of our jobs, Mike," he whispered. "But since everybody else is gone I'll tell you where the money is at."

Mike's black, snakelike eyes glowed in his pale face. He hadn't known there was any money. Big Dutch said: "It's under the stones of the hearth in front of the fireplace. About fifty thou—"

Big Dutch stopped. He lay there with his mouth and eyes open, as dead as he would ever be. Mike, looking more than ever like a vicious, long-armed spider, stared at his uncle, cursing mentally because Big Dutch hadn't told him before about the money. How in blazes could he get at the fireplace when the Lazy J belonged to Bud Blair!

For a week Mike worried. His brain formulated one plan, then another. No matter which way he looked at it, he had to take the chance of being shot when he stepped on Bud Blair's ranch. That Bud would shoot him Mike had no doubt. For Mike, not long before Dutch had talked, had taken a little ride out to Bud's place and roped a nice pinto pony he'd taken a fancy to. Before he got it far enough away to sell it, Bud had overtaken him, pointed a big-bored shooting iron at Mike's middle and said: "Listen, you ugly son of Satan, the next time I see you

on my land I'll shoot you. Now take that as gospel!"

Mike did take it as gospel, believed it implicitly. Bud Blair meant what he said. And Mike was worried sick. He was yellow, and he didn't like to take chances. But he knew he was going to try to get that money, which Big Dutch had started to say amounted to fifty thousand dollars. That much dinero was worth a lot of risks.

So Mike stuck a snub-nosed six-shooter down inside his shirt, got a pony and rode to the Lazy J Ranch. It just happened that luck was against him. The gun inside his shirt kept slipping down as he rode along. He stopped near Blair's place and took the gun out, intending to put it down inside his boot so Bud Blair would not see it. But while he had it in his hand, Bud came around a bend in the trail. Mike made a sudden motion with the gun, trying to get it out of sight. But Bud thought Mike was trying to get the gun up in line to shoot it.

Bud brought his six-shooter up from his side. It blared thunderously. Mike felt a hot iron run through him, filling him with agonizing pain. He fell from his saddle and his horse ran away.

Bud came over and looked down at him, bleak-eyed. Mike, face twisted in pain, asked weakly: "How come, Bud? I . . . I wasn't gonna do anything to—"

Then he passed out. He woke up in bed. Bud Blair was beside him. There was no sympathy in Bud's cold

eyes, but he said: "I still think you're a dirty so 'n' so, Mike. But if I shot you for no reason, I'm sorry. I'll take care of you till you get well."

Bud went out and brought back some soup. Mike, hungry and weak, drank it noisily, all the while thinking of the money under the hearth. Now, lying here, he could think things out more clearly. He didn't want to get the money and run away all of a sudden, because Bud Blair would take one look at the busted-up hearth and take out after him. If he tried to get the money, then patch up the hearth while Bud was gone, Bud would probably return and catch him in the act. Mike had to figure it out so he could stick around, then leave at his leisure.

His wound was pretty bad. The bullet had smashed up his side into a nasty mess. He lay there a long time and learned that Bud left for a few minutes each morning, that he stayed in the kitchen for a certain length of time when he prepared the meals. But he never stayed away long.

Bud evidently had a parrot. Mike often heard it squawking and talking. "Hiah, Bud," it would say in a husky voice. "Hiah, Bud. Gimme a drink. Gimme a drink." Once in a while the bird would say, over and over again: "You're no good. You're no good. Some day I'm gonna shoot you."

Mike smiled wickedly when the bird said that. Some day he might

shoot Bud Blair. That bird might be a prophet.

What the bird said gave Mike ideas. Once, while Bud was out at the corral, Mike pushed himself up out of bed and stood in the doorway to his room and looked things over. The parrot was a big, brightly-colored bird that stood majestically on a perch over near the table. The parrot ignored Mike completely, which didn't bother Mike any. What held his attention was a holstered pistol hanging on the wall; he felt satisfaction in looking at it.

Mike went back to bed, weak from his exertion. But he had more definite ideas now. Though he was getting stronger, he still pretended he was very weak.

Curt Hill, the sheriff, came out one day and talked over some kind of business with Bud Blair. They talked out in the yard. Mike heard the sheriff say: "I'll be back and let you know about it day after tomorrow. Want me to send a wagon out to get Mike Spicer into town?"

"No," Bud answered. "I'll take care of him till he gets able to ride."

The sheriff left. Bud came into the house. He went into the kitchen and soon Mike could smell the coffee and bacon. Mike got up slowly, quietly. He stood in the doorway, watching Bud's back as he worked in the kitchen. Mike stepped slowly toward the gun on the wall, hoping the parrot would not squawk. His heart beat high, so fast he broke out in a sweat. He closed his fist over

the gun, drew it from the holster with a deep breath of satisfaction.

Glancing down at it, he saw that it was loaded. Mike raised the gun, pointed it at Bud Blair's back, cocked it. Just then Bud turned, startled perhaps by the sudden click of the gun. His eyes widened as he saw Mike with the gun in his hand. He called: "Mike! Don't shoot me! Mike, you—"

Mike pressed the trigger. The gun boomed, filled the room with thunder. Bud fell to the floor and didn't move. Mike smiled. Then his eyes found the parrot. Whirling through his mind was the thought that parrots repeated things they heard. "Mike! Don't shoot me!" What if the parrot said that sometime? Mike raised the gun again. With its crash the parrot flopped down off its perch, feathers flying every which way. It lay with only its tail showing from behind the table.

There was no sound. Mike grinned, great satisfaction in him. He dropped the gun on the floor near Bud Blair, making it appear as though Bud had held the gun, had dropped it when he fell. Then, leaving everything just as it was, Mike went back and got into bed.

He smelled the bacon burning. He was hungry, but he didn't get up to eat. He lay there the rest of the day, the next, and then he heard hoofbeats. He smiled and began to yell:

"Hey! Help! Help!"

Boot heels clumped on the porch. Mike kept on yelling: "In here! In the bedroom! Help!"

Sheriff Hill came to the door, looked at Mike. "What's goin' on here?" Mike demanded. "There's trouble. Look things over, will you, sheriff?"

Hill's sharp eyes seemed to be probing Mike Spicer. "What makes you think there's trouble?" the sheriff asked.

Mike thought: "The poor fool." Then he said: "Day before yesterday I heard somebody come into the yard. Not long after you left, it was, sheriff. I heard boots hit the porch. Bud Blair yelled. There was four shots. Then the boots run away and a pony got away from here fast. I called and called, but I couldn't raise anybody. I smelled the bacon burnin'. I been hungry as a wolf, but I couldn't get up."

Curt Hill nodded. "I see," he said slowly. "Well, Bud Blair's dead. That fellow you heard, shot him!"

"Dead?" Mike exclaimed. "That's the devil of a thing! I liked Bud. He played square with me, took mighty good care of me after he realized he'd made a mistake shootin' me."

Curt Hill nodded. He asked: "How many shots you hear, Mike?"

"Four," answered Mike. "I heard 'em plain."

Mike had to make it four shots, because they'd discover that two shots had been fired from Bud Blair's gun. Then there was a bullet in Bud Blair and one in the parrot. That would add up to four—two

Bud supposedly had fired, two the unknown killer had fired.

Sheriff Hill went, "Hm-m-m," then went out into the other room and walked around for a long time.

When he came back in where Mike lay, he said grudgingly: "Well, I guess for once in your life, Mike, there's trouble where you are and you're not implicated in it."

Mike hid his elation. "Of course I'm not implicated in it," he said soberly. "How could I be, laid up like I am, not able to move?"

"Well, I'll take Bud into town in the buckboard," the sheriff said. "Reckon you feel like ridin' in with me?"

Mike shook his head. He looked quite pale and weak and wan. "I guess I better not tackle a ride that far just yet," he said. "I'll get along here, if mebbe you could send some Mexican or somebody out to help me for a while till I'm able to get about."

"I'll send somebody," Sheriff Hill assured him.

Mike's bed was up next to the window. He lay there and watched the sheriff hitch up a wagon. Hill carried Bud Blair's body out and laid it in the buckboard.

Mike said, hypocritical concern on his ugly, ill-featured face: "Poor old Bud. I'll bet that parrot misses him. They seemed to think a lot of each other."

The sheriff straightened up from laying Bud Blair's body down. He looked at Mike. "What's that, Mike?" he asked.

"The parrot," Mike said. "I bet it misses Bud. Bud used to bring it in to see me, squawkin' and talkin', hollerin' about gimme a drink an' all that stuff." Mike smiled.

"Oh, yeah," Curt Hill said. "The parrot. Yeah, Bud thought a lot of Belzebub."

Mike nodded. Then he frowned. "That reminds me. I ain't heard the parrot since I heard the shots. Somethin' happen to him?"

Sheriff Hill looked at Mike again. "The dirty son that shot Bud shot the parrot, too!" he explained.

Mike let the air out of his lungs in a disgusted sigh. "If that don't beat hell. Some people are just plumb cruel, ain't they?"

Hill nodded. He got up on the wagon seat and said as he slapped the lines on the horses' backs: "Yeah, Mike. Some people are cruel as hell. You get to know that in my business."

The team moved off. There was an ugly grin on Mike's face as he watched Curt drive up across the rise.

When the wagon was out of sight, Mike got up out of bed. He felt pretty good now. He had some strength, and his legs didn't shake as he walked. He went into the kitchen and found a stove lid lifter and used it to pry up the flat stones on the hearth. He hurried, even though he knew it would take many hours for the sheriff to get to Sage City and for somebody to get back here again. By the time anybody

could get here, the hearth would be cleaned up. Nobody would be able to tell it had been disturbed. Mike could hide the money either on his person somewhere or outside the house in a place that he could get at any time he wanted to. It didn't make much difference now, since he had Curt Hill fooled so completely.

Mike chuckled a lot to himself as he dug at the hearth. He'd sure played everybody for a sucker this time. Kill a man, then lay down and let the sheriff come and prove to himself that somebody else did it! Clever stuff. Took a man with brains to work that one out.

Mike pried up another stone. He sucked in his breath as he saw a black metal box lying in a hole which had been dug under the stone. He lifted the box up, pried it open. The bills in it bugged his eyes. Hundred-dollar bills! Stacks of them!

Then Mike froze suddenly, imagining he heard a sound. He whirled, but nobody was at the door. He went to the door and looked outside, but he could see no one. Everything was quiet. Nobody was on the trail from town. The countryside was empty.

But Mike was jumpy now. The sight of the money inflamed his mind. He saw the gun he'd used to kill Bud Blair, picked it up and laid it beside him on the hearth. He worked fast, putting the stones back in place. Sweat popped out on him. His hands shook. He reckoned he'd

take a trip to South America. He'd light big, black cigars with hundred-dollar bills. There'd be music, liquor and—

Suddenly the voice of a parrot squawked out in the silence. "Hiah, Bud. Hiah, Bud. Gimme a drink. You're no good. Some day I'm gonna shoot you!"

Mike Spicer did not move. He was a veritable statue, literally frozen with fear. It seemed, for a moment, that even his heart stopped beating. From where he squatted in front of the hearth, he could see the parrot, almost all of it in view now, evidently dragged out from behind the table by Sheriff Hill.

But the parrot wasn't moving. That parrot wasn't talking. Yet Mike heard it say, clearly and distinctly: "Gimme a drink. Hiah, Bud. Some day I'm gonna shoot you!"

Stifling a scream in his throat, Mike whirled about. His staring eyes fastened on the figure of Sheriff Hill in the doorway. Beside Hill, next to the door, an old phonograph ground away on its cylindrical record: "Hiah, Bud. Some day I'm gonna shoot you."

Then it stopped. The scratch of the needle at the end of the record was the only sound.

"How much was in the box, Mike?" Sheriff Hill asked quietly.

Mike didn't move, didn't speak. He flicked out his tongue to wet his suddenly dry lips. A tight band of fear wrapped itself about his head and made his temples throb.

"You just talked too much, Mike," Sheriff Hill said. "You already had me fooled. I believed you. I thought you couldn't move. I didn't think you had brains enough to figure out a play like this, anyway."

Still Mike was silent. This was all so crazy, so unreal, so weird. It was a house of cards crumbling down in utter confusion about his head, to bewilder him.

The sheriff's voice droned on: "Bud sure did like his parrot. But it died years ago. He liked it so well that once on the West coast he had some records made of the things it said. Then when the parrot died he had it stuffed. He kept it here on its perch, and once in a while when he was lonesome he'd play the records. Even at that you'd have been all right, Mike. It was O. K. to think the parrot was alive. But you got all mushy and overdid it. You tried to put on too good an act, sayin' that Bud brought the parrot in to talk for you. Right then

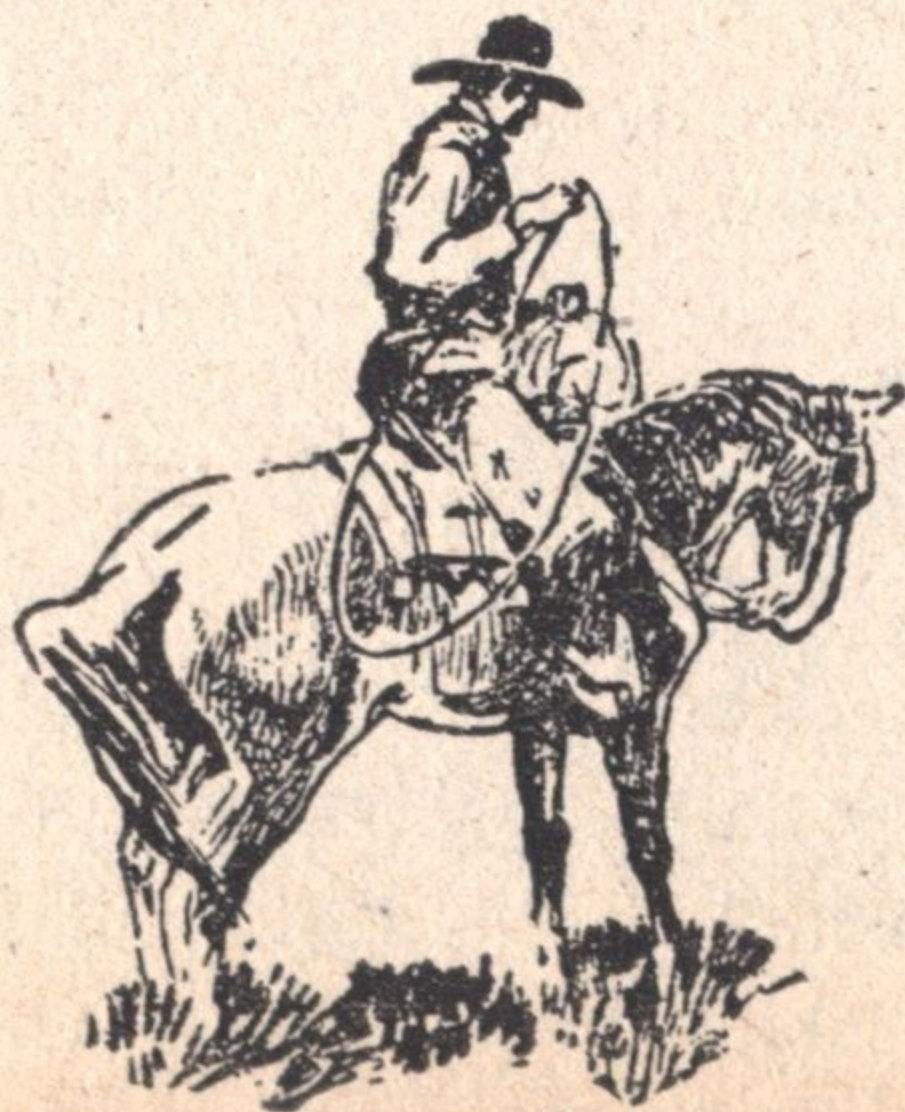
I knew you killed him. But I didn't know why. So I drove off, got over the rise out o' sight, then came back to see why!"

The phonograph still ground out its *ruumph, ruumph, ruumph*, at the end of the record. The scratch of it seemed very loud in the silence.

"So you see, Mike, you're sunk!" Hill said softly.

Mike Spicer made a sudden desperate dive for the gun on the hearth. His fingers closed over it. He whipped it up. Sheriff Hill moved his right hand. A tongue of flame leaped out from him toward Mike Spicer. The agony of red-hot fire seared through Mike. He straightened up, then fell down on his face with a sodden thump. The jar of his fall jumped the needle on the phonograph. Into Mike's dazed consciousness, as the light of life faded from him, he dimly heard the parrot squawking huskily through the old phonograph horn: "Some day I'm gonna shoot you. Some day I'm gonna shoot you."

THE END



PAYOFF ON GHOST MOUNTAIN



by **TOM W. BLACKBURN**

*Jerry Bain took that lookout job to
dodge gun trouble but where there's
fire there's sometimes powder smoke*

GHOST MOUNTAIN was the highest promontory in the range of grim and rugged hills which fringed Verde Valley. The weathered little lookout building hunkered on the Ghost's bare crown was a forlorn place. A man's eyes saw only emptiness, even when they tipped down into the val-

ley. Jeremy Bain was no hermit and the emptiness troubled him. Sometimes he sang, loudly and out of tune. Sometimes he talked to himself and the marmots sunning on the rocks around the base of the tower. But there were days when this was not enough. Days when the emptiness

and the silence and the faraway valley were too much for him. Days when he thought he had been a fool, volunteering to take over the summer lookout from a short-handed and bankrupt State forestry service.

That recurrent feeling of having been a fool was the more bitter because there was time on the mountain for Jerry to think of what folks in the valley were saying. They were laughing in their dry, scornful way at young Bain:

Rabbit! That's what he is. A yellow belly without enough sand to hold land in our valley. Helping hand be hanged! Young Bain ain't up on the Ghost because he's afraid the timber'll start goin' with nobody in the lookout to spot it. He's crawled up the mountain to get clear of the trouble between Farnley's Hub and the Duke boys. He ain't fooling anybody.

The valley had been, since the beginning, a place of strife and lusty men. If neighbors couldn't agree, they quarreled. If they quarreled, they fought. And when they fought, they made their own rules. It was natural, then, that when Gus Farnley decided to extend Hub range across the broken country the Duke boys had always claimed, testiness became anger and anger became hatred overnight. That was the valley way. If a man was a close neighbor to Farnley, he joined the Hub faction. If he bounded the Dukes' place, he sided them. Common sense, all of it—except the part Jerry Bain had played.

Jerry had a piece of ground in the

valley. He could see it from the railed deck surmounting the tower on the Ghost. A small, rich quarter section of hay land and hill slope, lying full between Gus Farnley's imposing Hub layout and the headquarters of the Duke boys. It was a fair piece of ground, for which Jerry had many plans. And he had come by it the hard way—at forty-and-found on half the ranches of northern New Mexico before he'd saved its price. Now it was no good to him. His plans were dead and he was salted away on the summit of the Ghost.

Jerry angled a look down the steep slope before him. The Verde lay masked still in a blue haze. He could see the floor clearly only about the roots of the near hills—down where the spidery trail which climbed the Ghost had its beginning. Near eight o'clock he'd seen the first stir of movement down there. Couldn't tell what it was, for certain, then. An hour had brought the climbing speck shape. A horse and rider. Twenty minutes later the rider quit his mount as the pitch increased. And fifteen minutes ago, Jerry had recognized the climbing man.

Ben Holt.

The man on the twisting trail paused a hundred yards below the lookout and waved his hand upward. His voice came thinly in a hail. Then he slogged onward up the ascent. Jerry made no answering motion from the deck of the watch tower. Ben Hold was Gus Farn-

ley's top hand. Verde Valley, which grew them tough, agreed that Ben was the toughest of the lot. Jerry didn't like Holt. And he knew Holt didn't give a damn for the hills. He wasn't a climbing man and he wasn't a looking man. The climb or the view were the sole rewards a visitor to the lookout might find on the summit of the Ghost. So Holt had other business—and Jerry Bain wanted no traffic with him.

Holt came on, puffing up the flight of steps that climbed the outer wall of the tower, and flopping in exhaustion in a chair beside Jerry on the deck. For several minutes the Hub foreman heaved for wind and wiped at the sweat running freely from him, the while his eyes rested on Jerry with a measuring, satisfied look. It was the kind of a look a man wears when he hands you a letter to read, the contents of which he already knows. Holt's presence made Jerry uneasy. If breaking the loneliness of the Ghost meant having Ben climb up here, then Jerry would take the solitude. And the knowing grin on the man's flushed face increased Jerry's dislike.

Ben finally eased his breathing. He leaned back comfortably in his chair, glancing down at the blue haze which obscured much of the valley.

"Can't see such a hell of a lot from here, after all!" he said.

"I can see smoke," Jerry retorted. "That's enough."

"Powder smoke?" Holt queried slyly. Jerry shook his head. If Holt had climbed all the way up here to try bidding him into Farn-

ley's trouble with the Dukes, he'd wasted a lot of wind.

"Too bad!" Ben mocked. "There's quite a ruckus on in the valley. The old man's goin' after the Dukes proper, this time. They jumped a Hub herd last night. It was about near that knoll you was goin' to build your cabin on. We planted Sammy Lopez right about where you aimed your door to be, this morning."

Jerry's expression didn't change. He understood what the man was telling him. Since he'd come up the Ghost, Farnley had pre-empted the grass on his, Jerry's, quarter as a prelude on moving into Duke territory. Ben knew that pre-emption would be hard to take. Jerry had figured on his grass to fatten some culls he intended to pick up for the fall market. It would give him a start and hold him through the winter. But Hub cattle would strip his quarter of grass in a week.

"The old man's sore," Holt went on. "He's goin' to carry the trouble right to the Dukes from here on."

"The breaks on the Duke slopes are deep and bad," Jerry said. "And the Duke boys are handy with their long guns. Gus is going to lose more men than Sammy Lopez."

Ben Holt grinned.

"No, he ain't," the Hub foreman corrected with a chuckle. "Gus ain't a fool. You won't catch him goin' into those breaks after Ed and Bill and Spade Duke. Not on your life, brother. He's goin' to send some-thin' in there after 'em that they can't fight with long guns—some-

thin' that'll herd 'em right out into his paws like gophers from a flooded hole!"

Jerry scowled. Gus Farnley was foxy. And there was enough flint in him to make him a competent general in any tangle. But he couldn't think of anything the Hub owner could cook up which would make gophers out of the Duke boys. Ed and Bill and Spade were a salty crew, themselves.

"What?" he asked.

Ben Holt thrust his feet far out in front of his chair and looked at the scuffed toes of his boots as though they were something highly pleasing.

"You'll see, Bain. When that haze gets up a mite and Gus has got the boys rightly spread, you'll see!"

Jerry thought about that for a while. The breaks back of his quarter, the wild country the three Dukes had claimed for years, were mostly scrub oak and low brush. A tangled matting in which patches of lush grass grew. The breaks were a trap, impenetrable, forbidding. He thought Ben must be boasting out of turn. If Gus Farnley wanted to drive the Dukes out, he'd have to go after them.

Ben was quiet for a time. Jerry thought maybe he was waiting for more questions. Jerry wouldn't have picked a quarrel with Ben Holt. In fact, he'd walk around a big mountain to keep from one. But it gave him a certain mild pleasure to hold in his curiosity enough to disappoint

the Hub foreman. Finally Holt started talking again.

"Dangerous business, watchin' for fires, ain't it?" he gibed. "Nothin' tame like sittin' on your own piece of land and chousin' off anybody that tried to take over what you've paid good sweat and money for, eh? You've got sand, Bain, for a fact!"

Jerry colored under this sarcastic prodding. There had been times in his life when he bitterly regretted that he had been born believing peace was something so precious that the bullying and mockery of other men should be endured to preserve it. This was one of those times. Ben Holt was speaking to him with the scorn of the valley—with the scorn of Jerry's neighbors.

Sitting on the deck of the Ghost Mountain lookout, Jerry began to wonder if he did give a hoot about the dryness of the season and the fire threat the harried men in the forestry office at Santa Fe worried so constantly about. He began to wonder if a man couldn't love peace too well. A man had to have land and a living and a feeling of being roots down in the earth. But before these things, he had to know he wasn't a coward—he had to believe in himself and own his own respect.

Ben Holt's unpleasant ribbing and the fact that he, Jerry Bain, was up on a mountain when all hell was loose on both sides of his quarter section, fired troubled doubts. Jerry was glad when Ben Holt asked him a question, drawing his mind from the valley.

"Supposin' there was a fire off

down there, Bain?" Holt said. "What the devil'd you do from up here? Spit on it?"

The Hub foreman laughed at his own joke. Jerry stood up and kicked open the door leading into the top room of the tower.

"I'll show you."

Holt followed, lazy interest in his eyes. Jerry glanced at his watch. It was a few minutes short of ten and time for the regular mid-morning check signals. But the man in the lookout on Pinnacle Peak, twenty-five miles south, was a regular forestry department man. He knew the watcher on the Ghost was a local man, just as he knew Jerry had to stumble through the code, working from a sheet tacked up on the wall. Pinnacle would acknowledge the check, even if it was a little early.

A feeling of pride held Jerry as he stripped the cover from the gleaming brass and polished mirror surfaces of the heliograph. No wonder the State department was broke. It aimed to do things the best it could. These heliographs, for instance. They cost a sight of money. But it would take a good man and a good horse three days of merciless riding to carry a message the heliographs could flash across this high country in as many minutes.

Jerry calculated his sun angle, beveled his mirrors, and took a sight on Pinnacle. Then he dropped a hand to the shutter trip and fastened his eyes on the code chart above him.

"If I saw a fire," he said to Holt over his shoulder, "I'd tell Pinnacle

about it. Where it was and how big and the easiest way to come in to where it was. There's a forestry camp below Pinnacle. The man there'd wink my message down to the camp. And there'd be a fire crew out in a hurry. Like this."

Laboriously, careful of error, Jerry began flashing the check signal. It took him a careful minute and a half. When the shutter closed the last time, brilliant flashes obscured the top of Pinnacle peak. Little flashes from a set mirror, but looking like huge explosions across the twenty-five miles of blue distance between.

The Hub foreman watched with sharp interest. Pinnacle, flashing code with practised ease, finished acknowledgment of the check. Holt looked narrowly at Jerry.

"Talkin' to him, eh?" he growled. "What'd you say?"

"Nothing. Just a signal to show I'm on duty and everything's Jake over this way. Do it mid-morning and just before sunset."

Ben nodded with interest.

"Won't have to talk to that other watcher again till near dark?"

Jerry pulled the cover back onto the heliograph.

"No."

Holt turned and went back onto the observation deck. Jerry followed him. Ben leaned over the railing and peered down the slopes. Jerry leaned, too, thinking that for all the violence astir in it, there was much beauty in Verde Valley. And, as

always, his eyes drifted toward the place between the flat of the Hub and the Dukes' broken ground where he knew his quarter lay. Ben Holt turned suddenly toward him.

"The wind ain't right. But it'll be changing, soon. When it does, there's going to be smoke down there, Bain. You're going to take it peaceable, ain't you? I've got my orders and they're rough enough to change your mind if you're stubborn. But I've got no belly for a tangle with any man after the grunt of climbing up here!"

Ben's eyes were flat and watchful. Jerry didn't understand for a moment. Then comprehension hit him a sledge-hammer blow. So that was it! That was why Ben had climbed the Ghost to chin with him, why Ben had been interested in the sun-flashing heliograph and the fact that the Pinnacle station wouldn't expect another signal from the Verde rim till sundown!

Gus Farnley wasn't sending men into the breaks after the Duke boys. He was sending fire! Damn a fool who couldn't see anything but his own quarrel! Maybe Gus thought he could check his blaze when he smoked the Dukes out. Maybe he hadn't even thought that far. Certainly he hadn't measured the fact that the brush of the Verde was tinder dry, rich with creosote and resin, and begging to burn. Jerry could vision the line of the fire and how the wind would carry it.

Farnley's crew would set a quarter-mile blaze just below their own boundary. It would run across a

funneling valley and pour into the brushy breaks. Where arroyos and cross canyons branched out, the fire would branch, too. It would get the Dukes. They'd come out. There were only three of them and by the time that quarter-mile fire line had reached them, it would take three hundred men to check it.

It would get the Dukes. But the wind wouldn't die when they staggered out of the smoke and char, hands high and half blinded, toward the waiting Hub crew. It would keep on. The breaks would be swept clean. And after them, the whole eastern face of the Verde. Pinnacle wouldn't spot the smoke haze until it was too late. And Jerry Bain's own heliograph on the Ghost would stay under its cover. Ben Holt had climbed the mountain to see to that.

The whole picture made Jerry sick. And it wasn't till he was near an end of thinking about it that he realized his own quarter section was full in the path of the burn. There'd be neither grass nor shrub nor standing timber on his land by nightfall. Only a handful of charred acres to be scored and gullied into uselessness by the first rains of fall.

Even as he wheeled toward Ben Holt, Jerry knew that something more than self-preservation was driving him. He knew that if the fire Gus Farnley aimed to touch off would cover only his own few acres, he would have knuckled to Ben. He would have sat still on the deck of the Ghost Mountain tower and done nothing. He was, and he saw it

clearly, now, the yellow belly his neighbors named him.

But yellow belly or no, he couldn't sit still on the Ghost. The Verde, the wide, beautiful, blue-hazed Verde was threatened. And no man's cowardice—no man's love of peace—was worth the destruction Gus Farnley's greed would send across the valley.

Ben Holt expected to jolt Bain with this news of Gus Farnley's plans. Jerry saw that. But Ben didn't expect him to wheel like a striking sidewinder.

It was a clumsy, ill-timed blow that did little more than stagger big Ben Holt's balance. But it set strange forces free in Jerry Bain. A wild, suddenly savage pleasure raced through him. When Ben struck back, there was no hurt to the sledging blow which banged against the side of Jerry's head, and instincts long asleep sprang alive so that Jerry danced free of Ben's next swing and stabbed a light, hurting blow into Ben's face.

Holt bored in, hard anger supplanting his scornful tolerance. His wide, square-fisted hands cut purposefully in toward Jerry. But a man's feet turn light when he stands a lookout where there are only two directions—up and down. The fist fight lasted less than a pair of minutes. Then Ben's anger blew its bung. He had a job to do for his boss—to silence the Ghost Mountain lookout. If he couldn't do it with his hands, there was a sure way left. He dropped a clawing hand to his belt.

Jerry saw that dipping reach without having time to feel a fear of the gun toward which it dropped. He had been exultant that he was able to stay out of the Hub man's reach. Now he knew only that he couldn't dance away from lead. And there was only one thing left. He took a quick, reaching step and launched his body in a hard dive. He crashed into Holt when the gun was still half in leather. Ben tried to fend Jerry away, but the lookout struck solidly. Holt took a backward step under the impact, bearing the weight of both of them, and staggered against the rail of the observation deck.

As Holt went back, his free hand locked at Jerry's throat like a vice. Jerry pawed helplessly at the grip, his air shut tightly in and his ears suddenly ringing. Ben started a twisting movement with that iron hand which would have either broken his lighter antagonist's neck or torn the windpipe bodily from its corded channel. But the big man was off balance when he backed against the rail of the platform. And the wood was weak. It splintered slowly. Jerry heard the timbers rending above the roaring in his ears and he shoved harder against Ben in wild disregard of the thirty-foot drop to the rocks basing the tower. Ben Holt was no man's coward. But he screamed and released his grip as the rail gave way. Jerry Bain was a madman. He shoved even farther forward, ramming a balled fist a last time into Ben's face. They went over together.

A satisfaction knifed through Jerry. Ben Holt had muffed his job. The Hub man wouldn't keep him away from the valley and the reckless spendthrift fire Gus Farnley aimed to touch off when the wind changed right. But Jerry had turned over once in mid-air before he realized that a thirty-foot fall could kill two men as easily as one, and that stopping Farnley and saving the Verde was a job for the living. He tried to catch himself. Ben Holt struck limply across a wide, white rock and an instant later something terrible and crushing drove thought from Jerry Bain's mind, wind from his lungs, and blood from his nose and mouth in a fragmentary second between impact and darkness—

The first thing Jerry Bain thought was that it was noon. He could tell because he was lying flat on his back and the sun was directly overhead, beating down mercilessly into his pinched face. He didn't try to move for a long time. The wall of the Ghost Mountain tower rose up beside him. The broken end of the shattered railing waved out, making a dark line across the face of the sun. Ben Holt's knees were under Jerry's elbow. Ben's thick chest looked somehow sunken and he wasn't breathing. There was no movement. The sun was moving toward the tower and a thin edge of shadow was creeping out toward Jerry. He thought how good it would be when that cool shade reached him. He'd just hang on and wait.

Then he was conscious of a touch of breeze. His eyes went automatically to a clump of mountain alder just beyond the tower. Its leaves were stirring restlessly, lying trimly off in one direction for a moment, ruffling, and swinging to the other. The wind—this was the midday break! It was changing. In a little while it would settle from the west, strengthen, and reach across the valley. In a little while Gus Farnley would be touching off his fire to smoke out the Duke boys.

Jerry thought oddly how it was he didn't care about the Dukes. He should. They were a rough lot, but not greedy like Farnley. They were neighbors. But he couldn't feel that—only a sickness at the thought of a blue pall overlying the haze of the Verde and red ruin where tall timber grew. He moved, then.

There was a lot of agony. It was in his chest and back, hot and stabbing and carrying a feeling of great weight with it. It was in one thigh, too, making a cumbersome, unusable thing of one leg. Sweat dampened his face and refused to dry. He was sick, and retching redoubled the hurt. But he climbed the endless stairs to the platform of the tower.

The cover stuck on the heliograph until he tore it free. The code chart wavered hazily in front of him. He wasn't sure he had the sun right on his mirrors. But he fought for steadiness and flung a message off across blue distance toward the Pinnacle. It was a clumsy thing, full of too-long pauses and poorly shuttered flashes. He thought it likely

the operator at Pinnacle was flashing a "repeat," trying to make sense out of it. But Jerry couldn't tell. The haze before his eyes obscured Pinnacle. He couldn't see the mountain and he couldn't tell if his message was acknowledged or not.

He couldn't leave it that way. He could stay here and try to keep on sending. But maybe the Pinnacle man was out of his tower. Maybe he wouldn't catch the call from the Ghost until it was too late. Jerry looked down into the Verde and moved toward the stairs. Gus Farnley had to be stopped.

The Ghost was a tall mountain. The valley floor was far, far away. Jerry shut his eyes to these things and dealt with his pain and kept on—crawling, staggering, sometimes sobbing. But he kept on, working down.

The heels of his hands turned raw and bleeding with hunching himself along, often down the face of a steep slope on the seat of his Levis to cut off a turn or two of the tortuous trail. Something under his belt gouged him. He found Ben Holt's gun there without remembering how he had come by it. He didn't want it, and the gouging troubled him. But he didn't remove the weapon.

Ben Holt's horse, at the bottom of the foot trail, didn't like the smell of hurt and blood about Jerry. A man with only one good leg couldn't mount a nervous horse. The broken things in Jerry's chest cut like scattered knives when he tried to use his arms to hoist his body into leather.

But in spite of the sharp torture, in spite of growing weakness and nausea which threw all things out of balance, Jerry Bain somehow mounted and rode on into the Verde.

Much later Jerry caught the smell of smoke. To a man who hadn't taken a voluntary turn of duty in the Ghost Mountain tower—who didn't understand what flame could do to tinder-dry slopes—the smoke had a good, clean smell.

To Jerry Bain it was a terrible thing. He had lost his track. He was in the Verde—on the floor—but he didn't know where. The smoke was drifting from the right. That was all he knew. He reined sharply in that direction, the heel of his good leg clumping against the barrel of Ben Holt's still nervous horse. He was riding into something. Jerry had a feeling of many things impending, things he had feared. Things he had tried to avoid by volunteering for the post on Ghost Mountain. But he feared none of them, now. Some terrible change had been worked in him. Pain made him sweat, but it no longer held terror. Violence was still against his creed, but he would no longer run. Even a peaceful man had to fight—if not to save his own land from the encroachment of greedy neighbors, then to save the beauty of the Verde from a fool who would destroy it to strike at an enemy.

Reeling in the saddle, Jerry plunged from a barranca and on toward three men, hunkered in a little natural bowl of rock. One of

them raised, his rifle across his chest, and made an unmistakable gesture of warning. Jerry thought dully that Gus Farnley would like to see these three men. These were the Dukes, holed up, desperate and counting no costs but their own skins. That warning gesture had been for Jerry to sheer off, to ride wide around their hiding place. But the shortest way to the source of the smoke lay close past them.

Jerry raised his mount to a full lope. The saddle nearly shook him free at every jump. He sped toward the Dukes like an arrow. The man with the rifle looked astonished and half raised the weapon. Jerry had Ben Holt's gun in his hand. He pulled at the trigger. The piece fired and its slug went whining off at a high angle. Startled at the shot, all three of the Dukes ducked. And Jerry was past the bowl of rocks. One of the men crouched there shouted something. Jerry caught only a part of it.

"Bain . . . he took a shot at me! Farnley's over there somewheres—"

The shouting man was right. Jerry dropped into a swale and saw Farnley—with four of his riders and a bundle of kerosene-soaked sacks—working along the brush. Jerry hailed them twice before they looked up. One of the Hub riders bleated alarm.

"Track, Gus—it's a forestry man!"

Farnley stared at Jerry. Thought moved obviously over his heavy face. Jerry saw realization dawn that Ben Holt had somehow missed fire, that here was young Bain, somehow past

Holt and down the mountain. These things passed in an instant and withering scorn pulled at Farnley's lips.

"Forestry—hell! Forestry ain't got any men closer'n Pinnacle. That's Bain!"

Farnley's voice raised.

"Get out of this, Bain. Get out, you fool—and fast!"

Jerry straightened in the punishing saddle. He had to keep Farnley from seeing he was hurt. If Pinnacle hadn't gotten his message by heliograph, only he stood between the Verde and desolation. His hand tightened on Ben Holt's gun.

"Kill those fires!" he shouted. "Get that oil away and stamp out those fires!"

Gus Farnley stared at Jerry. Suddenly it was time to pull his running horse up or run the man down. Jerry heaved on the reins, slid to a rearing halt, and looked down to see Farnley palming his gun with a thin, untroubled determination. The owner of the Hub had sworn to smoke out the Dukes. Be damned to hills and fools, alike, he'd do it! Ben Holt had missed his end of the deal, up on the mountain. But Gus wouldn't miss, now.

Jerry raised the weapon in his own hand like he'd raise a spade against flame in the timber. When the gun clicked and was empty, he dropped it. Gus Farnley was on his face. But his riders were driving in, their guns outdinning the roaring in Jerry's head. He heard lead come close only once. He knew he was not answering the fire of the Hub

crew, yet one of them went down—then another.

Jerry gripped the horn of his saddle tightly and tried to turn for a look behind him. But his uncertain balance deserted him and he tipped out of leather toward a black pit which obscured the ground. Even as he fell, he fought. Farnley's fires were burning, unchecked. They had to be killed before he quit. But he couldn't make it. The blackness closed around him.

When Jerry roused the sun was gone. And so was the smoke. Jerry was on a service stretcher and his hurts were eased by bindings which held him tight. There were many faces about. Three of those faces were smoke-blackened, rough-cast, but friendly.

The Dukes! It was hard to believe, harder to understand until Jerry remembered the way Hub crewmen had continued to drop when his own gun was empty. The Dukes had followed him out of the rocks against Farnley—and the fire!

Another familiar face was that of the forestry captain from the camp at the foot of the Pinnacle. Some of the others wore forestry uniforms. Jerry knew, then, that his heliograph message had gotten through, after all. The forestry captain bent above him on the stretcher, gripped his shoulder with a friendly hand after a moment's inspection, and spoke to the men in uniform.

"He's come around," he said. "He'll be all right, now, boys. Hoist

him up and let's hit the trail for camp. But handle that stretcher easy! Traveling is going to hurt some till we've got him out where a doc can set some bones!"

One of the Dukes shoved in front of the captain.

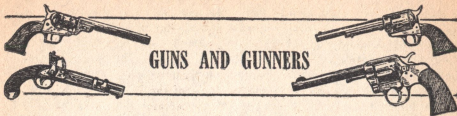
"We put your fire out afore you got here, did we?" he said seriously. "Us and Jerry Bain. Well, you look sharp that Jerry gets took care of right while he's off with you. He's a fightin' son—and a neighbor of ours!"

The captain nodded. One of the other Duke boys grinned sheepishly.

"And don't give that lookout on the Ghost no never-mind," he said. "I don't know how to work that looking-glass jigger you've got up there, but I reckon I could send up some smoke or somethin' if there was trouble. Bain's had his turn. I reckon it's one of ours, now. And I ain't had a chance to look right good at the Verde for a long spell. I'll take his chore till fall cutting on the hay meadows."

Jerry thought there should be something he should say, after this. But he couldn't think what it was. He could only think that the Verde was still green and unscorched and that Jerry Bain could come home to his land—and neighbors. In spite of the care of the forestry men with the stretcher, the first movement brought fresh pain and a returning wave of blackness. But Jerry did not mind. It was a small price to pay for the good which had come to him.

THE END



GUNS AND GUNNERS

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

A MILITARY police car filled with officers was rolling back to quarters at the close of a day of shooting on the rifle range. The merits of various rifles were under discussion when a major brought up the subject.

"You know," he began, "I've always regretted the passing of the old Krag. That was one of the finest rifles ever produced, and properly polished, it still makes a hunting rifle capable of taking care of any game in North America."

The good old Krag rifle *was* a fine gun. I wonder how many of us realize just how important a part it played in American military history.

Back in 1889, the official United States Service Rifle was the Springfield, a single-shot arm handling the .45-70 cartridge. This was a powerful brute—a .45 caliber slug weighing 500 grains (there are 437½ grains to the ounce) was driven by a charge of 70 grains of black powder. But in foreign military circles, there was a new development—smokeless powder.

In 1888 France came forth with the Lebel rifle plus smokeless powder. This radical change also in-

cluded a reduction of bore diameter to 8 mm. (.31 caliber). Other nations quickly followed suit, and the United States saw the handwriting on the wall. The day of the big-bore rifle was doomed.

Ordnance engineers at Springfield Armory, our small arms manufacturing arsenal, and at Frankford Arsenal, our cartridge factory, soon developed an experimental cartridge in .30 caliber. Then came the tedious search for a smokeless powder that would perform properly in this bottle-necked cartridge case.

The first successful powder used at Frankford Arsenal was Wetteren, imported from Belgium. Ammunition was slowly developed while an Ordnance Board of officers was formed to investigate and test all available magazine small arms (repeaters) to determine the type to be chosen as the official United States Standard.

Samples of rifles from foreign nations were examined and tested thoroughly; products of American inventive genius were also impartially tested. After some fifty-five different models had been "given the works," the Board recommended the

adoption of a type submitted by Captain Olaf Krag and E. Jorgensen, of the Royal Manufactory of Arms, Konensberg, Norway.

The recommendation of the Board on Magazine Small Arms was accepted by the Chief of Ordnance and on September 19, 1892, Springfield Armory began tooling up for the Krag rifle, officially known as "U. S. Magazine Rifle, Caliber .30, Model 1892." The first completed rifle was ready in January, 1894. In the years following, minor modifications caused the adoption of the Models 1896, 1898 and 1899.

We hear a great deal about "steel-jacketed" bullets. During World War I, the bullet jackets that looked like steel were made of cupronickel—85 percent copper and 15 percent nickel—the same formula as used in pre-war five-cent pieces.

In the early 1890's, Frankford Arsenal experimented with copper, German silver and cupronickel. They finally adopted a cupronickel-coated steel jacket, developed in Germany, and all Krag ammunition made until 1901 was manufactured with this coated-steel jacket stock imported from Germany. The switch was then made to American-made pure cupronickel jackets. Thus, to refer to all ammunition as "steel-jacketed" is incorrect; yet the name probably originated with the early Krag ammunition. Frankford Arsenal manu-

factured and loaded more than 125,000,000 rounds with these "steel-jacketed" bullets.

Meanwhile the Krag rifle went along, quickly replacing the old .45-70, and firmly entrenching itself in the hearts of the American soldier, the National Guardsman, and the public at large. In 1903 it was abandoned with the development of the Model 1903 Springfield, a modified Mauser (German) with greater strength, and the facilities for loading with a clip of five cartridges as a single operation.

In 1917, the obsolete Krag was revived and went to war. Although no new guns were made, those in storage were issued for training purposes, and millions of rounds of Krag ammunition were loaded on contract by commercial manufacturers.

In the 1920's, with an ample reserve of World War I rifles, the Krag was abandoned, and thousands sold to civilians through the National Rifle Association at \$1.50 each. The boys altered them with new sights and sporting stocks, and for twenty years they have been popular as hunting rifles, annually taking a heavy toll of game.

Officially obsolete forty-one years ago, the Krag rifle is still working; still taking deer, bear and moose; still popular with Americans. It will never die.

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

A STRONG desire to do some post-war trapping in Alaska is what prompted Private First Class L. M., whose outfit has seen heroic service in the Aleutians, to query us about the Bristol Bay area.

"Mister," he wrote, "I've seen Alaska under hard combat conditions, but hanged if the place doesn't attract me. I'm coming back when the war is won. My idea is to get myself a trap line, build a decent headquarters cabin on it as a base, and spend most of my time there a gillion miles away from civilization. I have trapped before. Not exactly professionally but part-time trapping semi-farm-land areas in the winter. Muskrats mostly. Skunk and some fox. It didn't exactly make me rich. I don't expect to get rich anyhow. But it taught me a lot about the game.

"What I want to ask you is this. Do you think the idea practical with my background of trapping experience? And if you do, can you tell me something about the Bristol Bay region?"

The idea ought to be plenty practical, L. M. In fact Alaska with all its pioneer-country opportunities,

one of which is trapping, seems bound to come in for a big play after the war. Fur is still one of Alaska's important industries, the fur-bearer take running to millions of dollars' worth of skins annually. While a few sections may run to less animals than formerly, way back when Alaska was really young, there are hundreds of thousands of square miles of little-explored territory in many sections of which trap lines ought to prove profitable.

The country you mention, for instance, the Bristol Bay area, is pretty much wilderness. It lies over on the north or Bering Sea side of the Alaska peninsula, the 1200-mile-long arm of land that stretches westward from Cook Inlet clear out to the Aleutian Islands. The width of this relatively narrow neck of land ranges from twenty up to fifty miles.

Settlements on the Bristol Bay side are few and far between. They consist mainly of river-mouth salmon-fishing villages such as Nushagak, or Naknek and Ugaguk. What is more important to the trapper the main rivers that empty into Bristol Bay are navigable in summertime by small boats or motor-powered skiffs

for considerable distances inland, and their shores and the tributary creeks harbor the fur bearers that the trapper seeks.

It is inland in the vicinity of these rivers that a fellow ought to establish his base cabin from which to run his trap line. Some of the inland river-reached areas in this section are covered with spruce forest. To the south of the Naknek River basin country, however, the Alaska peninsula landscape tends to be a sort of semi-barren treeless tundra. The tundra is dotted with scrub bushes and produces quantities of berries. It is also, like the woods country north of it, productive of fur bearers.

The distinction between the two types of land is mentioned because in the former, the spruce forest terrain, a man can build his own log cabin out of timber felled and fashioned on the spot. In the tundra country it is necessary to haul in sawed lumber for your headquarters camp.

Up towards the headwaters of the rivers the district is spotted with lakes, large and small. Lakeside sites are traditionally good trapping bases in any region in which fur-bearing animals are found. Largest of these lakes is Lake Iliamna, approximately ninety miles long and better than twenty miles wide. It's the largest lake in Alaska.

In addition Lake Becharof is a fifty-mile long body of water. Somewhat smaller but still sizable as far as mileage length goes, are the Uga-shik Lakes and Lake Naknek. In general it is from the outlet of these lakes in the Aleutian mountain range that the headwaters of the rivers running from the peninsula into Bristol Bay are formed.

There are no towns in the vast interior stretch of the district. Nothing but the scattered cabins of hunters and fur trappers. The chief fur bearer trapped in the section is the fox. The reds and crosses when prime make full-sized pelts that almost invariably bring good prices at the annual fur sales held in Alaska, or from outside buying firms.

As might be expected in a lake-and-water wilderness region, otter is another skin commonly taken, as is mink. Marten and lynx are found in the forest sections. There are beaver and muskrats in the smaller ponds and tributary creeks. Now and then a wolf, or more often a gray-coated coyote may be encountered. And there is no closed season on wolves, coyotes, or wolverines. Beaver trapping is restricted both as to trap limit, season and certain districts, according to sound conservation regulations based on the growth or shrinkage of the beaver population in the district each year.

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

MINING is the second largest industry in British Columbia. And it is continued prospecting that keeps mining alive. That goes for any country rich in undeveloped mineral resources.

With the opening of the Alaska highway—it will be made available to civilian travel after the war—there is a strong possibility that prospecting in British Columbia will be in for a definite upswing. The southern leg of the new overland route angles through a hitherto almost inaccessible and little explored wilderness section in the northern part of the Province.

As far as is known, sections of this region are mineralized, and it is quite possible that important discoveries may be made there in coming years by tomorrow's enterprising metal seekers. The finds may be gold, the readily won placer type that practically anybody can wash out of stream and creek beds with homemade apparatus such as sluice boxes or a rocker. Then again, the discoveries may be lode gold, or complex hard-rock ores of the important industrial metals like copper, lead and zinc.

Those latter metals will be needed

for rehabilitation after the war almost as much as they are needed now. In addition new commercial sources of industrial metal ores would act to replenish the dwindling reserves of the mines now in operation. At any rate it is safe to assume that prospecting for deposits of industrial metals is going to remain an important part of the ore hunter's job for quite a while.

Reader W. Y., of Youngstown, Ohio, busy now in vital war work, has been doing some figuring nights on a little private program of his own. He wants, his letter said, to tackle British Columbia some day on an extensive prospecting trip, perhaps to settle down there.

"It is not only gold I have in mind," his letter concluded. "I have been thinking about other metals as well, commercial metals. Do you think there will be much interest shown in them when the present emergency war requirements are over?"

We sure do, W. Y., and we answered that last question a couple of paragraphs above.

When a fellow makes a prospecting trip out to any big, open wilderness real outdoors country, about

the first thing that surprises him is the number of out-of-the-way places the early-day prospector got to without benefit of modern transportation conveniences. Those fellows had no highways, no gas buggies, and no charter airplane service to cover distances that used to require weeks and sometimes months of overland travel.

But then they expected to be gone quite a while once they started. They made a business out of prospecting. They didn't try to make a ten-day holiday jaunt into a frontier mining country, and come home rich. They went out to prospect and stick at it. Maybe that's why so many who stayed were successful. Could be.

Even those who failed at first may have found it easier to hang on, living off the country and continuing their prospecting in a widening area, than to attempt the long, hard trip back to civilization empty-handed. Be that as it may, the old-timers who prospected the North country weren't quitters. They couldn't afford to be.

Even so, there are many places in the wilderness that have never been visited by the gettin'-around pioneers. There are more places that haven't been properly checked. And still more places in mineralized country that were glossed over by the old-timers, or skipped because the colors

of gold caught in a few test pans didn't seem rich enough, or the ores showing in outcroppings were those of metals it didn't seem possible could be profitably mined on a commercial scale at that time at that particular location.

All these places bear, and certainly should get, a more thorough going over in the future.

Right in British Columbia, though there has been some prospecting in the Cassiar-Omineca Mountain range area, much of the region remains virtually unexplored. There's the country that will be opened up in the region tapped by the Alaska highway. Over in the Stikine Mountains are possible mineral sections hardly touched by the prospector in the past. Large areas along the western flanks of the coast mountains likewise offer virtually unexplored territory.

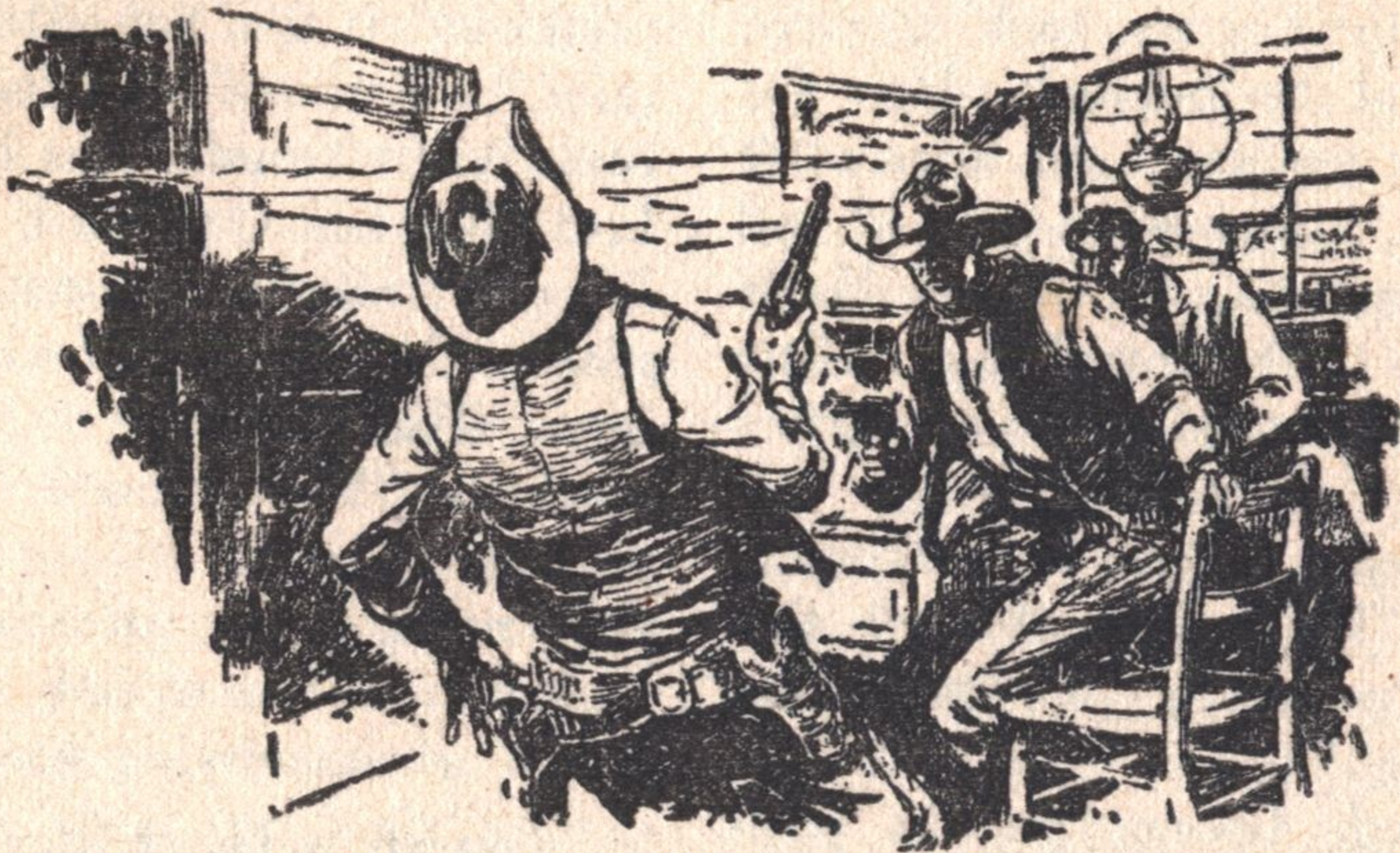
In any of these regions the future British Columbia metal hunter can test his luck, his skill, and his ability to stand the hardships of a real back-country prospecting trip. Take along the tools, supplies and equipment you need. But there are two things you will have to have that can't be purchased before you start. These are stamina and an inborn liking for the lonely solitude of empty mountains.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York 11, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply. Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received; please keep them as brief as possible.

GUN-SMOKE BRAND

by WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD

PART IV



With Clem Norton back on his own ranch, the Three Mesquiteers realize it's time to start a Winchester roundup for renegades

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. He had been knocked unconscious as he attempted to escape, and when he recovered found himself in jail.

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. They become suspicious of a nearby town called Wagon Springs, which appears to have only one resident, a hard case named Bull Jackson who has a saloon there. Disguised as a Mexican, Stony gets himself a job with Jackson as saloon swamper. During the night a herd of stolen cattle is driven through, and when Stony makes the discovery that a prisoner is being held in one of the buildings, he is sure he has unearthed something bearing on Clem Nor-

ton's disappearance. He returns to the Horseshoe N and Tucson, hearing his story, decides to make a raid on Wagon Springs with the crew.

XVIII

AFTER dinner, the three Mesquiccers and their crew took it easy, smoked and formulated plans for the coming venture. An hour after supptime, horses were saddled and the men mounted. Molly and Maria came down to the corral to see them off. Tucson smiled at the concerned look on the girl's face.

"Now don't you go to worrying," he said. "We've been through this sort of thing before. We know what we're doing."

Sourdough George put in wistfully: "You'd have a heap better chance, was I along with you. I got my ol' scatter-gun all loaded and ready to go."

"That's a good idea, Sourdough." Tucson nodded. "After all, we never know what move Lombard will make. I'll feel a lot better knowing you're here to protect Molly and Maria, should anything come up."

Sourdough brightened somewhat. "Well, if you put it that way, Tucson—"

"That's the way I'm putting it. I'm counting on you a heap, cookie." Tucson turned to Molly, "Well, we'll get going. Tomorrow morning early we should be rolling in. I hope we'll have good news for you."

Touching fingers to the brim of his Stetson, he led the way out of the ranch yard, the others following.

Instead of heading toward the road that ran to Blue Cloud, he swung around the cottonwoods surrounding the buildings and headed directly south. Once away from the house, he ordered a brief halt to speak to his riders.

"We're going to cut through the foothills of the San Mateo Mountains," Tucson explained. "The route will take us across Dollar Sign L, 21 Bar and O Slash P properties. We don't want to be seen, especially when we're crossing Lombard's holdings. That's why we're hugging the foothills. I've planned this trip so we should reach Wagon Springs at full noon. Any questions?" He looked from face to face of the seven riders accompanying him.

"You know better than I do, Tucson, but couldn't we sneak in better if we waited until the moon is down?" Red Sherry asked.

Tucson nodded. "We probably could, if we were just going to Wagon Springs looking for a fight. But Stony is the only one of us who is really acquainted with the layout there. We've got to find the stable where that prisoner is held, and get him out in a hurry. We won't have any time to stumble around in the dark. It's going to be a matter of hit and get away, as quick as we can."

"I get the idea," Red said.

"A lot is depending on you, Red," Tucson went on. "You've got to bring up that horse you're leading, and get the prisoner into the saddle. For all we know, he may be weak-

ened by a long captivity. No,"—noticing the sudden look of worry that creased Red's forehead—"you won't be alone, naturally. You'll have plenty help. When we get near Wagon Springs, we'll stop for another powwow and get details straightened out."

Night fell as the men rode steadily on. It was dark by the time they crossed over the boundary line of Lombard's property. Although some distance from the Dollar Sign L buildings, the men rode in silence, pulling their ponies to a slower gait and hugging the shelter of every rise of land that offered. To their right rose the mountainous slopes of the San Mateo Range. Gradually, as they moved south, the peaks of the San Mateos grew less high, and in time dwindled into a series of sprawling foothills. Now, Tucson knew, they were drawing near Wagon Springs. By this time they must have left Lombard's holdings. He spoke to his men and the ponies quickened pace, leaving a cloud of dust as they moved.

Overhead, the night was powdered with stars. Now and then coyotes yip-yipped back in the hills. Through the silent night came the far-off drawn whistle of a locomotive. Finally, Tucson called a halt to rest the horses. The men dismounted, rolled and lighted cigarettes, did things to their saddle cinches.

"Another hour's ride should bring us there," Tucson spoke quietly. "The stars are paling overhead now. It's probably moonlight the other

side of the San Mateos. I think we've timed it about right."

Cigarette ends glowed and subsided in the gloom. The men talked little. Red worriedly inspected the hoofs of the horse he was leading. They were all right, of course, but Red was taking his responsibility seriously. Finally Tucson spoke and the men mounted and again got under way. Gradually, it grew lighter. Off to the east the range was bathed in moonlight, but close to the San Mateo foothills the shadows were still deep.

Three-quarters of an hour later, the riders circled a low rise of ground and saw before them a vast sea of sand and mesquite, with a full moon riding high to the right. They rode steadily for another fifteen minutes, then Tucson asked Stony: "Think it time we stopped, pard?"

"I was just going to suggest it," Stony said. Tucson gave the word and the men again drew to a halt.

"Wagon Springs is only about a quarter mile farther," Tucson said. "Lullaby, Bat Wing and I will wait here. Stony will take the rest of you on to the town. You'll have to move easy and careful. Keep your horses quiet. Stony will point out the stable where they've got the prisoner. I don't know whether it will be locked or not, but it probably will. You'll have to shoot off the lock."

"How about those guards Stony mentioned?" Ananias asked.

"If they put up a fight, you'll have to give 'em what they ask for, but maybe we can draw 'em off?"

"How do you mean, draw 'em off?" Red Sherry asked.

Tucson explained. "After Stony has showed you where the prisoner is being held, you fellers lay quiet in the brush, until you hear shots from the direction of the saloon. When Stony leaves you, he'll come back here where we're waiting. We'll go on to Wagon Springs and start a fight of some sort in the saloon. That should draw everybody up to the saloon. When that happens, you men who are responsible for rescuing the prisoner can get busy. If you get away clean, Ananias and Red will accompany the prisoner and head for the Horseshoe N as fast as horseflesh will carry you. Don't wait for us. If possible Tex and Rube can join us at the saloon—but only after the prisoner is in the clear. Got that straight?"

"It's straight," Red said. "Only I was thinking—" He hesitated.

"About what?" from Tucson. "If there's anything you're doubtful about, Red, now is the time to spring it."

"I was just wondering," Red said, "suppose this prisoner isn't Molly's father, after all?"

"No matter who he is," Tucson returned dryly, "I reckon he'll be glad to escape from Lombard. And if Lombard is holding him prisoner, that means he has some sort of evidence that Lombard doesn't want known—evidence of crooked work, I mean."

Red flushed. "If I had any brains, I'd have thought of that without asking you."

"Don't let it worry you, Red." Tucson smiled. "No one man can think of everything. All right, Stony, if you're ready, you hombres better get rolling."

Stony nodded and touched spurs to his pony. Ananias, Rube, Red and Tex followed. Tucson eyed them as they gradually melted into the surrounding mesquite. Then he rolled a cigarette and lighted it. Lullaby and Bat Wing followed suit.

"I sure hope this comes off all right," Bat commented.

"I got a hunch we might have some trouble," said Lullaby.

"Well, we can hold up our end, I reckon," Tucson declared, "and I don't know why Ananias and the rest can't hold up theirs. How do you like Red, Bat?"

"He's all right," Bat said. "I like him a heap. He doesn't shoot off his mouth, but I figure he'd be a man to tie to in a scrap. He won't scare easy, unless,"—he laughed—"unless that Molly girl is around. Red's sure gone on her, but most of the time he acts like he's tonguetied when she's present."

"I guessed he was pretty sweet on her." Tucson nodded. "How do you think she feels?"

"She sure don't hate him." Bat chuckled. "Looks like to me she gives him plenty excuse to talk to her, but he's been hanging close to the bunkhouse."

"After all," Lullaby put in, "Red's on our pay roll, now. He probably feels he wants to give every atten-



tion to the outfit—at least, until he's proved himself."

The minutes ticked off slowly. Cigarette stubs were crushed out and fresh smokes rolled, the men shielding the match flame from view by bending their heads low behind the horses' necks. The wind had come up and was blowing quite strongly across the sandy waste of mesquite and prickly pear.

"This wind might help some," Bat Wing commented. "It's bound to drown out a mite of noise." He drew out his six-shooter, spun the cylinder, then thrust it back into holster.

Lullaby smiled. "Getting nervous, Bat?" he drawled.

Bat shook his head. "Just eager to get started. Stony seems to be taking a hell of a time to get back here. I hope he didn't run into any trouble."

"I don't reckon he did," Tucson replied. "Remember, Stony and the rest couldn't ride openly into Wagon Springs. They had to sneak in, moving slow, taking advantage of every cover offered. Stony will want to place those four as close to the prisoner as possible, before he leaves them, then he'll likely want to look over the ground, before returning here. That all takes time."

"I reckon you're right," Bat

agreed. He got down from his saddle. "I'm going to stretch my legs a mite."

Tucson and Lullaby followed suit. They hunkered near the horses, conversing in low tones, the ears of each cocked in the direction of Wagon Springs for any unexpected sound.

"I reckon we couldn't hear anything through this wind, anyhow," Lullaby said.

The wind had increased by this time and was whipping the limbs of the mesquite trees. Coarse sand filled the air. Occasionally, fine particles of gravel stung their faces.

"Figure a sand storm's coming up?" Tucson said.

Lullaby shrugged. "Could be, pard. I don't know, though. This section gets a lot of breeze pretty regularly." He spat distastefully. "I don't mind the wind but I sure hate biting on grit."

Bat Wing said, "I figure grit will be the least of our troubles, tonight. I was just wishing I'd brought an extra six-shooter along. I loaned my other gun to Jeff, before we left the 3 Bar 0. He was getting one of his hawlegs repaired."

"I brought an extra, tucked in my waistband," Tucson said.

"Me, too," from Lullaby.

Abruptly Stony emerged, riding from a clump of nearby high brush. Tucson said: "Hanged if you don't remind me of an Indian, at times. What's the layout, pard?" He was getting back in his saddle as he spoke. Lullaby and Bat did likewise.

Stony reined his horse near. "I

left Red, Ananias, Rube and Tex stationed on three sides of the building where the prisoner is held. There's two guards there, squatted in the brush, not far from the door. The padlock is on; I could see it in the moonlight."

"How's the set-up look?" Tucson asked.

Stony went on. "I left my horse in the brush for a spell and did some scouting around. There's quite a gang, there—twenty, anyway—in the saloon. They're plumb bold to-night. No blankets on the windows or anything. There's a cook and one other hombre down in the stage-station building. Aside from them and those two guards on the prisoner, everybody is in the saloon. I guess it's lucky we decided on to-night."

"Why?" Tucson asked.

"It looked like most of the gang was figuring to leave. There were a lot of bedrolls around. Doggone this wind! It's a good thing I don't use eatin' tobacco, or I'd be digesting it with sand."

"I got a gravel pit for a mouth, already," Lullaby growled.

"That so?" Stony grinned. "I always thought it was a grocery store."

Lullaby was unperturbed. "You always did do your thinking with your feet."

"Thanks," from Stony. "You mean that my thoughts are sole-ful, don't you?"

"Tucson," Lullaby groaned, "make him quit. I'm not in-step with such ideas—"

"I'd feel better if you'd both quit," Tucson said. "We've got a job to do. Any reason why we shouldn't start?"

"None that I know of," Stony replied. "C'mon, let's go!"

With the wind whipping into their faces, the four riders started for Wagon Springs at a lope. There was no longer any necessity for approaching secretly. Stony reined close to Tucson, speaking loudly so his voice would carry above the wind. "I managed to cut the string that's tied to that warning bell. The minute Bull Jackson sees us, he'll give it a yank to warn those two guards to lie low. If they don't get a warning that strangers are in the neighborhood, they won't be so alert when Red and the rest strike. And from their location, the guards can't see us approach. This wind will kill the sound of our broncs' hoofs, I figure."

"Good work, pard," Tucson replied. "I think you have it figured correct. Well, I hope we have luck."

The ponies pounded on and within a couple of minutes the riders arrived before the Wagon Springs Saloon. Yellow rectangles of light blazed from the windows and open doorway. There was a great deal of noise inside, laughter, cursing, the clink of glasses against bottles. Light also showed from the windows of the old stage-station building. From the other buildings to the rear there came no sounds. Somewhere, back there in the brush, Red and the

rest were waiting, tense, alert for the first gunshot.

Tucson and the others pulled up before the saloon and left their reins dangling on the earth when they dismounted. Tucson led the way, up the one step to the porch and through the doorway of the saloon. Following him came Lullaby, Stony and Bat. They stepped inside where the air was thick with tobacco smoke, to find the bar jammed with men.

Tucson elbowed an open space at the counter, and the others quickly wedged in. The man Tucson had crowded over said resentfully: "Who you think you're pushing?"

"I never gave it any thought," Tucson drawled.

Lullaby added: "Maybe you'd like to make something of it."

The man failed to accept the challenge. Instead he moved away a trifle and spoke in a low tone to his neighbor. Gradually, the noise in the saloon died down as the occupants realized strangers had entered. All eyes were now on Tucson and his companions. Several men left the bar and commenced to scatter about the room. They were certainly a hard-looking gang; all were well armed and, ordinarily, might have jumped the newcomers on the slightest excuse, but now they were a bit puzzled and waited to see if these strangers had more friends to come in from out front. Stony had already seen Bull Jackson stoop below his bar and reach for the bell cord. Now Bull came, frowning, down the bar.

"What you going to have?" he growled in surly tones.

The men ordered beer. Bull said: "No beer. You hombres better ride on to the next town."

"This is a hell of a saloon," Lullaby drawled insultingly.

An angry muttering ran through the room. Tucson said: "All right, barkeep, set out what you got—probably rotgut."

Bull Jackson flushed, put out a bottle and four glasses. "You fellers act like something got stuck in your craw," he commented.

"Is that any of your business?" Bat snapped.

Bull was puzzled. It was unusual to find strangers like these who were, apparently, spoiling for a fight. A man at the far end of the bar called: "You need any help, Bull?"

"You keep outten this, Marve," Bull replied quickly. "We don't want any trouble here. These hombres will be leaving directly."

"What makes you think so?" Stony queried.

Bull glanced quickly at Stony. "Say, I've seen you before, some place."

"I've been there." Stony smiled. "Where?" asked Bull.

"Some place." Stony poured his drink, tasted it, then set it down unfinished as his companions had done. Bull's face became redder every instant. "Rotten liquor," Stony said.

"Nobody asked you to come in here," Bull growled. "And rotten or no, you've got to pay for it."

Contemptuously, Tucson spun a

dollar on the bar. "By rights, I should get about ninety-nine cents change."

Bull pushed the dollar back. "If you feel that way, you hombres don't have to pay, but I'm asking you to get out—now."

The room tensed, waiting for Tucson's reply. The eyes of the men gleamed angrily when Tucson answered with a scornful laugh. "Jackson," he said, "there's something almighty wrong with you. You must be sick, or you wouldn't speak that way—"

"By Satan!" Jackson exclaimed. "I remember you fellers. Three of you came through here about a week back. You"—speaking to Lullaby—"ate up all my crackers."

"Yeah, I remember," Lullaby admitted, "and paid two prices for 'em."

"Is that all you remember about us?" Stony asked impudently. "Take a good look, Bull."

Jackson scanned him narrowly. "There's something mighty familiar about you, hombre. I'll think of it in a minute."

"I'll help out your memory," Stony grinned. His voice suddenly changed, "Leesten, Bool, een my own country, I am very reech hombre. Deed I evair tell you about my brothair who throw the knife? At ten paces he could split in two the leetle fly on the wall—"

"By damn!" Jackson's eyes bulged. For an instant a stunned expression came into his face as the full import of Stony's words commenced to seep into his mind.

Abruptly he dived below the bar and came up with his shotgun in hand. "Stop 'em, boys! They're spies!"

Even as Bull's shotgun swung toward Stony, Lullaby's long arm reached across the bar: his gun barrel crashed with telling effect against Bull Jackson's head and Jackson dropped like a poled ox, the shotgun exploding harmlessly in the direction of the ceiling.

Tucson sent a shot ripping above the heads of the men in the saloon. "Don't draw, you hombres. We've got you covered!"

XIX

At almost the same instant the guns of Tucson's companions roared. None of the four shot to hit anyone with these first shots. Their job was simply to delay action here, while a rescue was effected a short distance to the rear.

A man yelled: "A few of you get out to Norton—quick!"

At the sound of the name, a thrill ran through Tucson. They had guessed right then. As there was no rear door to the saloon, anyone leaving would have to pass Tucson and his friends.

"We've got 'em bottled up proper!" Tucson yelled.

A leaden slug whined past his body. Tucson fired once, twice. There was a yelp of pain and a man collapsed to the floor. Other guns were barking now. Miraculously, Tucson and his companions went unhit. These men of Lombard's

were badly shaken by the sudden turn of events. Their aim was none too good.

Another man pitched abruptly to the floor. Bullets ripped into walls and the front of the bar. Shooting suddenly broke out some distance back of the saloon. Tucson caught the sounds above the din of firing within.

"We'd better get out!" he said sharply. "C'mon, pards!"

Slowly the four backed toward the entrance. Across the room, from behind an overturned table, came sharp flashes of orange fire. Lullaby snapped two quick shots in that direction. A pair of ragged, splintery holes appeared, as though by magic, in the table top. The gun behind it fell silent.

Beyond the bar an ugly-faced individual had retrieved Bull Jackson's shotgun and was shoving in fresh shells. Stony's gun shifted to one side, roared. The bullet struck just beneath the twin hammers of the double-barreled weapon, tearing it violently from the man's grasp. With a startled yelp the man ducked below the bar. Stony thumbed a second shot through the bar front. He couldn't tell whether he hit anything or not.

The room was swimming with powder smoke now, the acrid odor burning eyes, throat and nostrils. Bat Wing grunted with sudden pain and staggered to one side. His face went white. "You hit bad, Bat?" Tucson yelled.

"It's nothing," Bat gritted through set teeth. He braced himself against

the front wall. Crimson flame spurted from his six-shooter muzzle.

"You get out!" Tucson ordered.

"I'm staying," insisted Bat, and lifted his gun again.

Tucson spoke quickly. "Lullaby—Stony—cover us until we get out, then come in a hurry!"

Bat was still protesting when Tucson swept him up under one arm and half carried him to the outer air and to his waiting horse. "Into that saddle!" Tucson said.

"But, dammit," Bat said weakly, "I can still—"

"Will you get on that horse!" Tucson roared his exasperation, and practically hurled the stubborn puncher into his saddle.

At once the horse, frightened by the gun explosions and unusual activity, went bucking wildly over a large area. Bat had retrieved his reins, however, and was sticking with the frantic animal. Seeing that Bat was capable of staying on, Tucson jumped to his own waiting pony, as Lullaby and Stony came backing from the saloon doorway. Men were following closely, now that Tucson and his companions were showing signs of retreat.

Tucson again got his six-shooter into action. Three men burst from the building and spread out along the porch, sharp flashes of orange flame jetting from their hands. Lullaby and Stony were just mounting. Stony didn't quite make it. Tucson heard him swear as he staggered back and abruptly sat flat on the earth, almost below his horse's belly.

"Stony!" Tucson yelled. He tumbled two swift shots.

From his sitting position, Stony started throwing lead right and left. Tucson's guns were empty now. Swiftly, he plugged out exploded shells and inserted fresh cartridges into cylinders. By the time he again glanced up, Stony was on his feet once more, climbing into his saddle.

A sudden wild yell sounded at the side of the building as Rube Phelps and Tex Malcolm came running to get into the fight.

Above the rattle of gunfire, Tucson's voice reached them: "Did you get Norton out?"

"Yes," Tex yelled back, "but there's hell to pay—"

The rest of the sentence was lost as he and Rube unlimbered their guns. The new arrivals proved too much for the Lombard forces. Immediately, they beat a swift retreat inside the building, leaving one of their number on the porch. For a brief moment the firing fell off, while the men in the saloon slammed shut the door.

"Hell's bells!" Rube Phelps swore disappointedly. "Have we got 'em licked already?" He strode up on the saloon porch, six-shooter in hand and with the barrel of the weapon smashed through the window glass. Here, taking careful aim inside, he fired. A lamp hanging from the ceiling crashed to the floor, splashing oil in all directions. In an instant it caught fire from the still burning wick. There was a sudden *whoosh!* as the flame flared.

A bullet snarled over Rube's shoulder. Now he was aiming at the lamp above the bar. There came a sudden explosion; broken glass and kerosene cascaded to the top of the counter. An instant later the top of the bar was aflame.

Rube laughed as he backed away from the window. "I claim that's a heap better than shooting out lights."

"Good work, Rube," Tucson said. "You had a real idea."

Inside the saloon were startled yells as the men fought to put out the rapidly spreading fire.

"All we got to do is wait until they're forced out, then we can renew the fight," Tex declared gleefully.



"We'd better make tracks as soon as possible," Tucson said. "We're still outnumbered."

Stony and Lullaby swung up alongside Tucson. Tucson looked narrowly at Stony. "I saw you go down."

"Yes, dang it, you did," Stony said peevishly. "Just as I started to get on my horse a slug tore a heel off my right boot. It threw me off balance and I sure sat down hard."

Bat Wing came loping back, his horse again under control.

"You sure you're all right, Bat?" Tucson asked.

"It was just a scratch across the

hip," Bat replied. "Sort of paralyzed my leg a second or so. It's not bleeding much."

Flame was bursting from the roof of the saloon now, fanned by the strong wind. There were no more shots.

"We could pick off a few more," Tucson said, "but we'd better slope fast. Rube, Tex, where are your ponies?"

"Down near the stable where Norton was held."

"Let's go get 'em. Ananias and Red get Norton away all right?"

"Yeah, but he's hurt bad," Tex said.

"Hurt? The devil! Well, come on," Tucson continued. "I'll get the details later."

They swung around the rear of the saloon building and back toward the brush. Tucson glanced back in time to see a shower of sparks erupt from the saloon roof. The wind carried them swiftly toward the old stage station. Flame burst suddenly from an outside wall of the saloon. From somewhere in front of the saloon came wild yells. The sun-baked timbers were burning furiously now.

By this time Rube and Tex had found their ponies and mounted. Tucson looked back. Already one corner of the stage station showed a flickering tongue of leaping fire.

The building where Clem Norton had been held showed an open door and shattered lock. Four still bodies sprawled on the earth near the door. Stony called to Rube and Tex. "You said Ananias and Red got away all right?"

"That's what I said. We had some shooting to do, though."

"Let's go!" Tucson called. "We'll pick up the rest on the way."

Putting spurs to their ponies, the men quickly left the scene of the gun battle.

Five minutes later they caught up with Red and Ananias. Between them rode Clem Norton, tied to his saddle. He was slumped down, only the ropes supporting his sagging body. His eyes were closed. Moonlight picked out the details of his pale, lined face and silvery hair. He was unconscious.

"Everybody all right?" Ananias asked quickly. He and Red stopped their ponies as Tucson and the rest drew abreast.

"We're all here," Tucson replied. "Bat got a scratch across the hip. Leastwise he claims it's a scratch. Stony lost a boot heel."

Red was gazing back toward Wagon Springs where a lurid glow was spread against the sky. "Looks like a fire back there."

Tucson related briefly what Rube had started in the way of conflagrations. "By Jehoshaphat!" Red chuckled. "That was smart."

"You're right," Tucson agreed. "Say, what happened to you? And what's wrong with Norton? Tex said he was hurt."

"Shot twice," Ananias supplied. "Alongside the head and in the back."

"You mean when you rescued him?" Tucson asked. "Let's have a look at him."

"There's nothing more you can do, Tucson," Ananias declared. "But he's hit right bad. It probably isn't doing him much good moving him, but we couldn't leave him there. No, it happened before we got there. Sometime today."

Tucson considered swiftly, then gave orders. "The Horseshoe N isn't much farther than Blue Cloud. If we can get Norton to his home, he'll have Molly to care for him—"

"Providing we can get him there alive," Ananias interrupted. "He should have a doctor—"

"I'm thinking of that," Tucson cut in. "Stony, you fantail to town. There's a Doctor Tuttle there. Get him out of bed and rush him to the Horseshoe N. And don't lose any time. Lullaby, you go with him. When Lombard hears of this night's work, there'll maybe be the devil to pay. I'd hate to have any of his gang catch Stony alone. Those fellers who were left at Wagon Springs will be cutting across the range to get to the Dollar Sign L any time now, I'm betting. Get going you two and don't lose any time with your eternal wrangling on the way."

"I'll be going so fast," Stony stated, "that Lullaby won't even be able to keep up with me, let alone talk, on that hammer-headed crow-bait of his."

Lullaby swung his pony toward Blue Cloud. "Come on, Loudmouth!" he challenged, throwing in his spurs, "Let's see you catch me!"

Stony wheeled his pony; side by side, the two men flashed off through

the Mesquite in the direction of town.

The glow in the sky above Wagon Springs was brighter than ever now. "I'll bet that whole dang set-up goes up in smoke," Tucson commented. "After years of this Southwest sun, that timber will go like paper." He turned to Bat Wing who had dismounted and rolled down his overalls. "Much of a wound, Bat?"

Bat shook his head as he wound a bandanna around his left leg. "Furrow ploughed across, just below the hip. It ain't serious."

"We got off Lucky," Tucson said. "Ananias, what happened at your end?"

"We laid in the brush, waiting for you to start your fracas in the saloon. We could see the guards near where Norton was held prisoner, and could have shot them right then. Howsomever, I figured to see if they'd leave for the saloon when you commenced shooting. At the first shots in the saloon, the two guards tensed like they were going to head that way. We held our fire a minute. Then, sudden, one of them damn mule-eared rabbits come flashin' through the brush, right under my nose. It like to scare the daylights outten me, it was that close. I jerked back quick and one of those guards heard me. He started firing in my direction."

"I threw down on him instanter," Red cut in, "but missed my first shot. The two guards had jumped back in the brush by that time. Ananias gave the word to close in on 'em and we did."

"Red and me rushed 'em," Ananias went on. "About that time two more hombres come running from the old stage station. Rube and Tex took care of them. The lead slingin' was right hot for a minute or so, but we downed all four. Then Red shot the lock off'n the door of the stable where Norton was held and we carried him out."

"Was he unconscious then?" Tucson asked.

Ananias shook his head. "His mind was right woozy though. Just before he passed out cold, he mumbled his name—Clem Norton—and got out a few words about being shot today while he was attempting an escape, but I couldn't get the clear of it. We couldn't leave him there, so the next best thing was to lash him into a saddle and take him away, which same we did."

Tucson's voice shook with anger. "Did you bandage Norton's wounds?"

"Do you think," Ananias said, "I'd use dirty rags like that to bandage wounds? Howsomever, I figured I'd better not remove 'em until we could get fresh wrappin's."

"The dirty scuts!" Tucson said, grim-faced. "Imagine them padlocking Norton in that place, and him wounded this way. They must have been awfully afraid he'd make a get-away. And what does he know that Lombard is so scared will get out?"

"There's something more than just cattle thieving going on," Rube Phelps said, "or I miss my guess."

"That's the way it looks to me." Tucson nodded.

"Think we should get moving?" Ananias said.

"I don't think we'd better move farther with Norton in that condition," Tucson replied. "It would shake the life out of him, tied in the saddle that way. For all we know he may be bleeding internally."

"What can we do?" Red asked.

"I've been thinking of that," Tucson replied. "Ananias, you, Rube, Bat and Tex will stay with Norton. Get him out of that saddle and stretched on the ground as quiet as possible. Keep a sharp lookout for anybody passing this way from Wagon Springs. What's left of those hombres will be riding to tell Lombard what happened—"

"What you aiming to do?" Tex asked.

Tucson explained. "I got a pretty good idea of the layout of this country from Molly, when I talked to her. The O Slash P Ranch, owned by a feller named Ollie Paddock, can't be too many miles from here. Red and I will see if we can't find it and borrow a wagon and some blankets. I understand Paddock is a right hombre, so we shouldn't have any trouble getting what we need, providing we can locate his place. C'mon, Red, let's slope. See you later, cowhands."

"Adios," Bat said. Rube and Tex voiced similar remarks. Ananias added: "You'd better hurry as much as possible, Tucson. I don't like the sound of Norton's breathing." Ananias, with Rube's help was already

unlashing the ropes that held the wounded man in the saddle.

"We won't be wasting any time," Tucson replied. He kicked his pony in the ribs and, followed by Red, quickly disappeared in the vast sea of waving mesquite.

Time passed slowly to the men waiting in the brush. By this time the sky glow over Wagon Springs had died down. The moon was getting low, too. The wind was still blowing but not so hard as an hour before. Once, to the men's listening ears came the sounds of hoofbeats, some distance off.

"Ten to one," Bat said, "that's what's left of the gang hurrying to break the news to Lombard." After a moment he added, "I remember seeing Lullaby knock that Wagon Springs bartender unconscious. I wonder if anybody thought to drag him out of that burning building."

Ananias spat. "Can you imagine any one of that gang thinking of anybody but himself?"

"I reckon you're right." Bat nodded. "That fire sure spread fast. Offhand I'd say it was a good thing, if it helps to break up Lombard's gang."

"Amen to that," Rube said fervently.

Two hours later, when the sky was commencing to gray in the east, the men heard the rumble of an approaching wagon. Then Tucson and Red came loping out through the brush. The wagon was coming behind. When the preliminary greetings were over, Tucson said: "Yeah,

we finally found the place. Ollie Paddock insisted on driving the wagon himself—said his team was a mite skittish with strangers."

"Paddock's all right," Red supplied. "From what he says, he and Clem Norton were right friendly."

Paddock, when he arrived with the open wagon, in the bed of which were spread several blankets and some pillows, proved to be a middle-aged chunky man with sharp eyes and graying hair. Tucson introduced him to the others, then they set about lifting the unconscious Norton into the wagon and making him as comfortable as possible.

Paddock's eyes flashed angrily. "Well, it's something that you've found, Clem, anyway," he stated. "The next thing is to string up the skunks responsible for this. Mr. Smith says Lombard is behind these moves—"

"You can forget the 'mister,' Ollie," Tucson said. "And remember I didn't say I had proof—actual proof—against Lombard, though we're right sure. We do know that he rustled some of your stock. Howsomever, just keep all this under your hat for the present. When we move against Lombard we want to have facts that will stand up in court."

"I'd just as soon it never got to a court," Paddock said grimly, "if I can be handy when somebody produces a rope."

Finally, they were ready. Paddock climbed to the driver's seat. Tucson said: "We'll have to go mighty careful when we cross Lombard's holdings. We'll stay back in the low

hills, like we did on the way down here. Once we get near the Horseshoe N one of us can ride ahead and sort of get things ready. All right, men, let's get rolling."

It was broad daylight by the time they reached the Horseshoe N. Lullaby and Stony had already arrived with the doctor. Molly, white-faced, but steady, met them as they rode into the ranch yard. She ran immediately to the wagon before it had come to a full stop, looked long at Clem Norton, then turned to Tucson.

"Is . . . is he still alive?" she asked.

"Just about," Tucson said wearily. "Doc Tuttle's got a job ahead, I'm afraid."

"I've been talking to Lullaby and Stony," Molly said. "Speaking of jobs, you men did your share last night. I'm in your debt pretty deep, Tucson Smith."

"Forget that," said Tucson. "Just remember this job isn't all cleared up yet. We've still a lot of work to do."

XX

Two days had passed, with Doctor Tuttle never straying far from his patient's side. Clem Norton hadn't yet recovered consciousness. The wound on his head had presented no problem; that the doctor had cleansed and dressed. A little nearer though and the bullet would have entered the head, instead of just ploughing off a section of skin as it passed on. The ugly bullet hole beneath Norton's left shoulder blade,

however, was a different matter. Probing had produced a battered .45 slug from a point dangerously near the heart. Norton had lost a great deal of blood; certain complications had set in before he could get medical attention. Doctor Tuttle refused to hold out much hope to Molly.

"Darn it, girl," he said, "you wouldn't expect me to lie to you. I can't say what will happen. If we could only reduce Clem's temperature it might be a different story, but as things stand I can't give him more than a 75-25 chance—"

"You mean the odds are against dad's recovery?" Molly asked.

"A doctor is only human, girl. I can do so much and no more. After that it's up to nature—and your nursing. Right now there's not a great deal to do except wait. See that he's kept warm enough and . . . well, I've already told you that. But you must remember, Clem is no longer young. He's been exhausted by the ordeal he underwent—" He broke off, scowling, "By Jehoshaphat! If Tucson Smith hadn't requested me to keep this business quiet I'd be inclined to raise a posse and lynch a few people."

"I think we'd better leave that end of it to Tucson."

"Probably. Meanwhile, I'll come back tomorrow. I've just got to get back to my patients in Blue Cloud. If Clem should regain consciousness while I'm gone, I don't want anybody talking to him. I want him kept quiet. Remember that!"

Molly promised to remember, and when the doctor had mounted his

waiting horse tethered near the long gallery that fronted the ranchhouse, the girl returned to the bedroom where her father lay.

It was getting along toward supper time. Ordinarily, the punchers would have still been out on the range, but Tucson had given orders they were to stay close to the ranchhouse in case anything turned up. Tucson, accompanied by Lullaby and Stony, had left for Blue Cloud that morning, just to learn if anything regarding the fight at Wagon Springs had reached Sheriff Rafe Quinn's ears, and what action, if any, the sheriff intended to take.

In Tucson's absence it was understood that Ananias was to be in charge. At present, Ananias was seated in the bunkhouse looking over an ancient copy of the *Police Gazette*. Sourdough George was banging pots and pans in his kitchen, just off the bunkhouse proper, preparatory to getting supper. Rube, Bat and Tex were engaged in their customary baiting of the cook, while Red Sherry looked on, a broad grin on his face.

Sourdough paused in his activities long enough to say, "You hombres think you're all-fired funny. If it wa'n't for Tucson, I'd have quit long ago. I work my fingers to the bone, trying to satisfy you hawgs—me with my corns aching fit to burst—and all's you can do is find fault."

Ananias put down his pink-sheeted magazine. "You work!" he snorted. "On a little outfit like this you don't know what work is."

"Is that so," Sourdough said indignantly, "I've worked on just as large spreads as you ever did."

Ananias laughed contemptuously. "You're talking through your Stet hat, George. You ain't really old enough to know what a ranch was in the early days."

"Are you?" George snapped. "Name me just one real big spread that you punched for."

Ananias smiled and tugged thoughtfully at his sweeping white mustaches. "Now you're asking for it, George. I don't suppose you ever heard of the Ten-in-Texas outfit, did you?"

"Sartain, I did. That was large all right—"

"Hell's bells!" Ananias snorted. "Back in the days I'm talking about the Ten-in-Texas was just considered one of our line camps. We never got to see it more'n once every three-four years."

"Phew!" Red whistled. "You must have had to fence plenty."

"Didn't fence in them days, son," Ananias stated placidly. "Our southern boundary was the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River was our east line and on the west was the Grand Canyon. No cow that lived could ever pass boundaries like that."

Rube and Tex exchanged glances. "What about your north boundary?" Tex grinned.

"You know," Ananias said seriously, "the owners never did get that settled for sure. There was some talk about it being Hudson's Bay,

but like I say, no one was ever sure."

Bat Wing eased his wounded leg to a more comfortable position, then urged Ananias on: "You sure must have had a crew on a spread that big."

Ananias frowned reminiscently and scratched his chin. "Seems like we had upward of three thousand waddies on the payroll. I remember I was foreman No. 499. I hadn't been working there long, of course, but old Farrand Warmer—he was the chief owner—pushed me ahead as fast as possible. Nobody knew how many cows we had. There was no counting them. The herds kept getting bigger and bigger. Finally Farrand Warmer gave up trying to handle those cows with horses. He had tracks laid and every puncher had his own locomotive and one assistant to work the cattle—"

"You meaning to say," Red asked skeptically, "that there was a train for every two punchers?"

"Aw, no, Red," Ananias replied. "You're exaggerating, now. What I mean there was just a locomotive and tender. The roper worked from the tender. We were right proud of our tender beef."

"I haven't heard anything about the cooking, yet." Sourdough George prompted.

"Oh, yeah, the cooking," Ananias replied without batting an eye. "Well, for breakfast we had flapjacks, and the size of the frying pan was something to behold. No greasing it by hand, y'understand. Our cookie—his name was Mack O'Roney

—had bright ideas. Every morning he'd strap a side of bacon on the feet of a herd of steers and the boys would drive 'em across the skillet. In that way, the pan was well greased, by the time the last cow reached the opposite side. Trouble was, those long trail drives every morning, thataway, was plumb exhausting to the herds and they commenced to lose weight—"

"Holy mackerel!" Tex grinned. "What a skillet."

"You're right," Ananias said promptly. "That cook had plenty skill at making flapjacks. But, like I'm telling you, the cattle lost weight and Farrand Warmer told Mack he'd have to think up another idea. That was when our outfit went in for hawg raising. Instead of cows, we

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herded hawgs across the pan. The heat melted the fat off'n 'em as they moved. By the time they reached the far end, there wasn't any fat left. The pan was dry, smoking hot. From that time on our smoked hams was the most popular item the ranch sold. You've probably et some of those hams in your time, Red. We always had our brand stamped on 'em—"

"You didn't tell us what the brand was," Red reminded.

"That's so, I reckon I didn't. Well, we branded a 1-On-U iron. Our earmark was a swallow fork, right and left. Old Farrand got that idea for the earmark the first time he et one of Mack's breakfasts—only it was his knife he dang nigh shoved down his throat."

Sourdough glared at Ananias. "Aw, this is just another of your lies. But go on, I'm interested to see to what lengths you'll carry yore pervarications."

"That's a right big word for you, George," Ananias said reprovngly, "but I'll overlook your insults. You wanted to know about the cooking. Well, when I tell you about Mack's biscuits, you'll never believe me—"

"I probably won't," George growled. "I suppose this Mack O'Roney hombre served 'em on a platter the size of a corral."

"Shucks, no!" Ananias shook his head. "He didn't dare serve 'em. Mack's biscuits was so light they wouldn't stay put. When it come time for the biscuits to be done, us hands would all line up with fish-

nets—you know, the kind of a net that's on a stick. Some folks catches butterflies with 'em. Anyway, there we'd be, lined up with our nets. Then Mack would give the word to be ready and those biscuits would come sailing out of his oven as pretty as you please. We'd have to trap 'em in our nets as they went past. I remember one little feller worked for us, he caught his biscuit all right, but he wa'n't heavy enough to hold it down. He went sailing up toward the clouds, gripping the end of his fishnet, and that's the last we ever heard of him."

"You old liar!" Sourdough said disgustedly.

Ananias' sharp blue eyes twinkled. "All right," he confessed, "maybe I did exaggerate a mite on that last. To tell the truth, the feller came down to earth all right; by eating his biscuit a little at a time, it let him down gradually. Luckily, he had in his pocket a list of supplies needed, that would have taken three days by mail to reach the home ranch—and where do you suppose that feller lighted?"

"The home ranch, I suppose," Red chuckled.

"You're right," Ananias stated.

Sourdough banged an empty pan on the floor. "By thunder!" he exploded. "Something awful ought to happen to anybody what trifles with the truth like you do."

"I ain't trifling," Ananias said in hurt tones.

"You're dang right you're not!" Tex guffawed. "You're just going it whole hawg!"

Hoofbeats were heard approaching. Ananias got to his feet and glanced out the bunkhouse window. "Tucson, Lullaby and Stony comin'," he announced. "I'm sorry I haven't time to tell you more about the I-On-U. But sometime remind me and I'll tell you about a really big outfit I worked for. It was so dang big they had to use elephants to work the cattle. It was a heap bigger than the I-On-U, but it didn't last long after the owner died."

"What did he die of?" asked Tex.

Sourdough George put in disgustedly from the kitchen: "I've heard that one before. It was a disease he died of, Tex—a disease called elephantiasis. And I don't believe that one, either."

"You're just skeptical," Ananias accused. "That's what's wrong with you, Sourdough." He started out the door, to greet Tucson and his partners, just in time to escape the wet dish rag that Sourdough hurled from his kitchen doorway.

Tex, Red, Rube and Bat followed Ananias outside, Bat limping a little to the rear. They were still laughing when they caught up with Tucson and the other two at the corral.

"What's so funny?" Tucson asked.

Tex explained. "Ananias has been spinning another of his windies, and,

like always, it got under Sourdough's skin."

"Sourdough can't appreciate good lying," Rube chuckled.

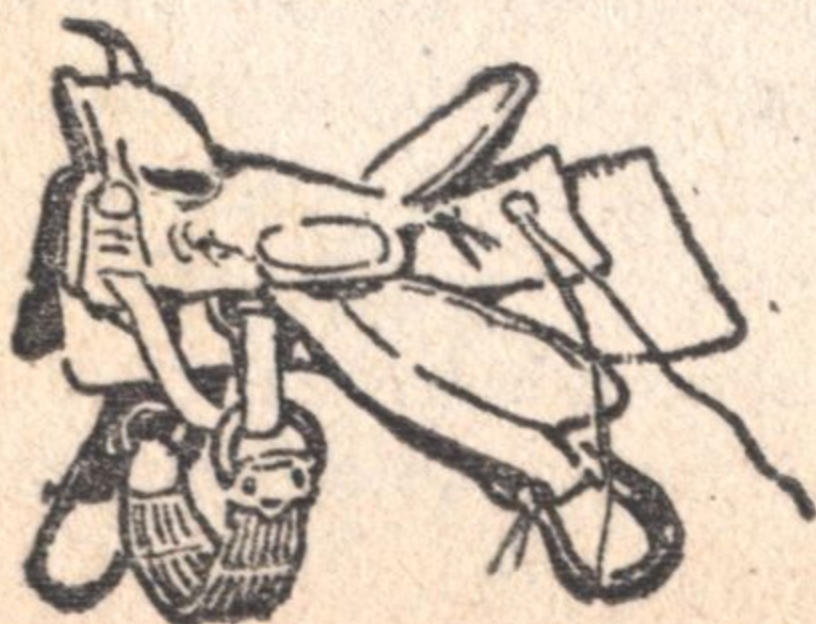
"If you're referring to me, Rube," Ananias said reprovably, "you're all wrong. Every word I uttered was gospel truth—only you want to remember that all folks don't go in for the same gospels."

By the time the horses were unsaddled and the men had entered the bunkhouse, supper was on the table. Sourdough George said, casting a baleful glance at Ananias: "And you won't have any trouble holding these biscuits down without fishnets."

"Iron-heavy as usual, I suppose," Lullaby said despondently.

"By the great jumpin' Jehosophat!" Sourdough commenced indignantly. "Now *you're* starting in on me—" He paused suddenly, "I'll overlook it this time. There's enough chow on the table to keep you famished wolves busy a minute, I hope, while I go up to the house with a pie, which same I baked for Molly's and Maria's supper." He strode from the bunkhouse, bearing a dried-apple pie, followed by the laughter of the men at the table.

For a few minutes there was silence, broken only by the clatter of dishes and cutlery. Sourdough returned, placed more potatoes and beef on the table, then after bringing in a coffeepot of considerable size, seated himself at one end. Now and then he rose to replenish certain platters. No one really had much



to say until the meal was nearly finished and cigarettes were rolled.

Ananias asked finally, "Learn anything new in town today, Tucson?"

"One or two things," Tucson replied. "No"—in reply to another query—"I didn't see anything of Lombard and his gang, unless you include Sheriff Rafe Quinn as one of the gang."

"Which same we do," Lullaby stated.

Tucson went on: "As soon as we got to Blue Cloud, I sent a wire to the governor, telling him the situation here didn't look too good and asking for authority to act in my own way when the time comes—"

"You really do know the governor then?" Red asked, his eyes widening.

"We were kids together." Tucson nodded. "Anyway, I've done a few jobs for him before so I didn't have any trouble getting what I wanted. The governor's telegram reached me shortly before we left Blue Cloud. I am now a special investigator for the State with full authority to make arrests, raise posses, or do anything of the sort I see fit. I've even got the power to arrest Sheriff Quinn if I feel like it."

"Does Quinn know all this?" Tex asked.

Tucson shook his head. "I'm keeping the news secret for a spell until I get ready to act. I told the telegrapher at the railroad station to keep it under his hat, too. So long as Lombard thinks that Quinn is the only lawman in Blue Cloud, he'll act right free, I figure. If he thought I had authority, he might

draw into his shell. That's what I don't want. I want him out in the open as much as possible so we can get proof of what's going on around here."

Tucson stubbed out his cigarette butt in his coffee-cup saucer and continued: "A prospector drifted into town with word that there'd been a fire at Wagon Springs and only one of the small shacks was still standing. The rest of the buildings burned to the ground. The prospector said there were some charred bodies there, too, not to speak of some dead men farther back from the saloon building."

"That's excitin' news," Ananias said dryly.

"I talked a little to Rafe Quinn," Tucson went on. "Quinn allowed as how he was going to make an investigation of that fire and the 'murders,' as he called them. I knew he was fishing for news, so I told him, flat out, to save time and that we'd gone over there to rescue Clem Norton. That sure took the wind out of Quinn's sails. I knew he suspected us, but he never expected me to admit it—"

"I thought we were going to keep quiet about our part in that doing," Ananias said.

"I didn't want the news to get out for a couple of days," Tucson said. "I hoped Lombard would start something, but he didn't. But we couldn't keep what we did secret for long. There were several men at Wagon Springs, that night, who have returned to the Dellar Sign L.

They'd be bound to see us in town one of these days and tell Lombard, anyway. If we can only catch 'em in Lombard's company we'll have a mite more proof to go on, but we still haven't all the evidence we want. . . . How's Clem today?"

"Molly says there's no change," Red replied. "Fever still high. Doc Tuttle had to go back to Blue Cloud this afternoon. He'll be out here again in the morning."

"Wondering about Clem was what brought us back to the ranch," Tucson said. "Gosh, I hope he regains consciousness soon. I've got to return to Blue Cloud in the morning. Banker Osgood wants to see me on business. He left word with Titus Shaw. I tried to catch him at his bank, but the bank was closed and nobody seemed to know where Osgood was."

"Maybe he left for the Dollar Sign L to talk things over with Lombard," Rube said.

"I thought of that." Tucson nodded. "Anyway, I'll see him tomorrow. Maybe he'll drop something that will prove valuable. Or maybe he just wants to pump me and learn how Clem Norton is. I refused to give Sheriff Quinn anything definite when he asked how Clem was. I think the Dollar Sign L gang are counting on Clem's wounds making him too weak to talk much, if any. But I'll bet, right now, Lombard is almost sweating blood, wondering if Clem has told us anything. Of course, we haven't proof that Lombard engineered that kidnaping, but I feel certain he did. Howsomever,

the courts only convict on actual evidence." Tucson rose from the table. "I'm going up and talk to Molly a spell. Red, after a time, you'd better come up and relieve me. Molly won't want to talk to me all evening."

Red flushed with pleasure. "I'll be glad to help out, Tucson."

Tucson smiled. "It will be one of the pleasanter ways of helping out, Red. Pretty quick now you'll be helping out on something a heap more serious or I miss my guess. There isn't any room in this country for murderin' rattlesnakes." He paused and added grimly: "There'll be a job of exterminating to do, right soon!"

XXI

Tucson reached Blue Cloud, the following morning, about ten o'clock. Lullaby and Stony had remained at the ranch, as Tucson wanted a strong force there, should anything come up that required fighting men. As he had said to Stony, just before leaving:

"I've a hunch Lombard is growing desperate. By this time he knows that we've rescued Clem. He doesn't know what Clem has told us. We've got him wondering a heap."

Stony had frowned gloomily. "I'm commencing to think Clem won't ever tell us anything. Do you suppose he'll ever regain consciousness?"

"You heard what Doc Tuttle told me when he arrived this morning. He'll either regain consciousness right soon—or never."

"That's what I'm afraid of. By the way, you haven't any idea what Phin Osgood wants to see you about?"

"Not the slightest," Tucson had replied. "That's why I'm going in this morning—to find out."

Arriving in Blue Cloud, Tucson had left his pony in front of the Blue Cloud Saloon hitch rack and entered the barroom. Titus Shaw was busily engaged in polishing glasses. There weren't any customers at the bar. Titus glanced up and smiled. "Top of the morning, Tucson."

"How's it going, Titus?"

"I can't kick."

"Anything new come up?"

"Well,"—Titus paused, frowning—"I don't know as this would interest you or not. My wife was feeling poorly this morning, so I told her to stay in bed, and ate my breakfast in the hotel dining room. When I came in, I noticed Phin Osgood and Sheriff Rafe Quinn eating together. There were plenty of vacant tables, so they must have had a special reason for being so chummy. Their heads were real close together and they were talking low. Think it means anything?"

Tucson shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe one or the other just wanted company at breakfast."

"I thought of that too," Titus said, "only they acted sort of funny. They didn't hear me sit down at the table next to them. Then, suddenly, Phin Osgood spied me. He jumped like he'd been shot. From then on, he

didn't talk, and in a few minutes he got up and hurried out."

"You didn't hear what they were talking about?"

Titus shook his head. "Nary a word. Quinn finished his breakfast a few minutes later and departed without saying a word to me. I left the restaurant about ten minutes after. When I stepped out on the hotel porch, Rafe Quinn was standing near the tie rail, talking to Limpy Fletcher and Frank Ettinger, who looked as if they'd just rode into town. I heard Quinn say: 'No, you boys ride back to the ranch. I've got my sheriff's badge for authority for anything I do. You tell Lombard I said for you to keep out of this, altogether. Things are bad enough as it is without messing plans up any more.'" Titus paused to explain, "Those weren't the exact words, y'understand, but it was something to that effect. I didn't get it all, because just then, Limpy saw me on the porch and motioned Quinn to pipe down. Quinn glanced around, gave me a dirty look, and lowered his voice. A minute later, Limpy and Ettinger rode out of town."

Tucson pondered. "I wonder what those hombres are cooking up. First, Osgood wants to see me. Then you spot Osgood talking confidential to Quinn. Next Quinn is telling Limpy and Ettinger that he has sheriff's authority for whatever he does. It's mighty queer. What's he planning to do?"

"You got me. I figure he'd be a bad man to tangle with. For that matter, anybody connected with

Lombard would be — especially Limpy and Ettinger. Limpy's the worst of those two—that is, the fastest shot. Until Nick Armitage showed up here, Limpy was considered the best gun sharp in these parts. And Ettinger's not far behind him."

Tucson smiled dryly. "We put the bee on Limpy and Ettinger a few days back. And that Shorty Davitt, too. Or maybe 'egg' is a better word than bee. No, those three don't bother me any. But, Rafe Quinn does. You didn't see where he went, afterward?"

"Not particularly. As soon as Limpy and Ettinger left, the sheriff walked east on Main Street. At the corner of Austin he crossed over and started back. I suppose he was just making his morning round."

"Or," Tucson suggested, "on the way to the bank to finish the talk with Osgood that you interrupted at breakfast time."

"I don't think the bank was open, yet, at that time."

"Do you suppose that would make any difference to Quinn and Osgood?"

"I reckon it wouldn't," Titus admitted.

"Well," Tucson said, "I'm going to drift along to the bank, now. Maybe Osgood will have something to tell me that will prove interesting. I'll drop in later and get a drink, Titus. It's a mite early to start lifting 'em now."

"Shucks, you don't have to buy a drink every time you come in here. I'm glad of the company."

"Thanks. I'll see you later."



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Tucson sauntered east on Main until he reached the corner of Lamy Street where the Stockmen's & Miners' Bank was located. He mounted a short flight of three steps, opened the door and stepped inside. About a third of the way back a partition, with a cashier's grill, stretched nearly across the room. At one end of the partition was a closed door, marked "Private." To the right of the entrance was a small wall desk. A man was engaged in getting some money at the grill. When he had stepped aside, Tucson approached the cashier, who was a middle-aged man with thinning hair and a down-trodden appearance.

"Is Phin Osgood in?" Tucson asked the cashier.

"What's the name?"

"Tucson Smith. He wants to see me on business."

"Just a minute, Mr. Smith." The cashier left the window.

Tucson glanced through the metal bars of the grill and surveyed the rear end of the bank. There was a small desk there and several ledgers. In a far corner was a large iron safe. In the right-hand wall was a closed door through which the cashier had disappeared. He was gone but a moment, then returned with: "Mr. Osgood says to come right in." He gestured to the door marked "Private" at the end of the partition. "That's the entrance to Mr. Osgood's office."

Tucson said "Thanks," and stepped over to the indicated door. Opening it, he walked inside and closed it after him. Osgood stood just within,

waiting to greet Tucson. "Come in, come in," he said with overdone cordiality. "It's pleasant to welcome you to my sanctum of financial worries."

"All worries and no profits, I suppose," Tucson smiled, reluctantly accepting Osgood's dead-fish hand-clasp.

"A banker never has anything but worries," declared Osgood.

In the rear of the office was a tall window, with iron bars protecting the glass panes. Osgood's roll-top desk was placed against the left-hand wall, just beyond the closed door that opened on the bank proper, and through which the cashier had entered to announce Tucson. Placed next to Osgood's desk chair was a straight-backed chair with arms. Built into the right hand corner was a clothes closet, with closed door. A worn carpet covered the floor and here and there were hung calendars from various financial houses.

"Sit right down, Mr. Smith," Osgood invited, indicating the arm-chair, just beyond his own seat. Tucson seated himself, half facing the desk and Osgood, with the clothes closet and window at his back.

"It's rather awkward, this facing the wall and my desk." Osgood laughed self-consciously. "But if we face the other way, I find the glare through that window is rather annoying to the eyesight. I'm always promising myself to rearrange this room, but I never get around to it, somehow. Too busy to find time—"

"You wanted to see me on business?" Tucson cut in.

"Yes, but first, will you have a cigar." Tucson refused. Osgood plucked one from the open box on his desk and lighted it. He puffed strongly a few minutes to get it going. "Ah, yes, business. However, before we get to that, may I congratulate you on finding Clem Norton. I understand he's in a pretty bad way."

"Where'd you hear that?" Tucson asked bluntly.

"Why . . . er . . . I don't recollect, right now. The town's full of talk about the case, you understand. I meet so many people—"

"Among them, Rafe Quinn, probably."

"Who? Oh, yes, the sheriff. Come to think of it, I believe I did exchange a few words with him. You may not know that he strongly disapproved of the action of you and your friends."

"That's going to worry me to death," Tucson said dryly.

"Oh, I don't agree with him, of course. But Sheriff Quinn insists that you and your friends took the law into your own hands. He feels you should have come to him with what you knew and he would have taken the proper legal steps to apprehend the scoundrels who were holding Clem Norton prisoner. As it is, while you rescued Norton, his captors escaped—"

"Not completely," Tucson put in.

"Well, yes and no," Osgood frowned uncertainly. "I understood there were several dead bodies found in the ruins at Wagon Springs. Had Sheriff Quinn been in charge of that

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business at Wagon Springs, he would have taken prisoners, made them talk, and discovered just who was back of that dastardly scheme."

Tucson laughed scornfully. "Clem Norton disappeared long before I ever came here. Ben Canfield made no effort at all to find him. What makes you think that Sheriff Quinn would have been any more efficient?"

"There's a big difference between the men you name, Mr. Smith."

"Correct. Canfield was a fool. Quinn is a coyote, in my estimation."

A fit of coughing overtook Osgood at this point. Tucson smiled thinly, shifted his position a trifle and, taking out his "makin's," commenced to roll a cigarette.

Osgood cleared his throat with difficulty. "I'm sure you misjudge the man, Mr. Smith. However, that's neither here nor there, at present. My aim is to preserve peace between you and our sheriff. You may not know it, but he is strongly inclined to place you under arrest—you and your pardners—for the part you played at Wagon Springs."

"On what charge?" Tucson scratched a match and touched flame to his cigarette.

"On a charge of obstructing justice. Had you given your information to Sheriff Quinn, I'm sure he would have acted differently."

"I'm positive of that," Tucson said coldly. He drew hard on his cigarette and rose to his feet. "If this is the business you wanted to see me about, I'll be on my way. You can tell Quinn to arrest and be hanged—

but warn him that sure as hell he'll get smoked aplenty if he tries it."

"Sit down, Mr. Smith. This all has nothing to do with the business I want to talk over. I merely told you how things stood as an evidence of my friendship."

"Much obliged. Let's drop the subject and get to your business." Reluctantly Tucson again sat down. "What's on your mind?"

"The first day I met you," Osgood said, "I offered you a loan if you planned to restock the Horseshoe N. Are you going to need any money?"

"Not at present," Tucson said shortly. "We have plenty of cows to keep going with, providing rustlers don't clean us out."

"Oh, I'm sure you have nothing to fear from rustlers in this section."

"We won't argue that now," Tucson replied.

"I'm interested to know," Osgood continued, choosing his words carefully, "just how good the title is to your ranch."

"I have a bill of sale, properly witnessed and signed by Molly Norton."

"So I understand. Do you happen to have it with you?"

"Yes." Tucson wondered what this was leading to.

"May I see it?"

Tucson produced the bill of sale and showed it to Osgood. The banker studied it closely, then glanced up, "I see your name, as purchaser, has been inserted in lead pencil. I'm not sure that's legal."

"It's legal enough for me, and it suits Molly Norton."

"May I ask what you paid her?"

"Sure." Tucson laughed. "Go ahead and ask. I'm not going to tell you though." He folded and replaced the bill of sale in his pocket.

The banker frowned. "I'll come direct to the point. Do you care to sell the Horseshoe N?"

"If I can get my price. I've already set a price of a hundred thousand dollars."

"You're crazy!" Osgood exclaimed. "Why, the Dollar Sign L sold, a trifle over a year ago, for far less. And Lombard's ranch is a much better piece of land than the Horseshoe N."

"I'm not interested in that. I've stated my price. If you want to meet it, fine."

"Oh, I had no thought of purchasing. I was asked to look into the matter by a man who deals in ranch properties."

"Who?" Tucson drew deeply on his cigarette.

"I'm not at liberty to state his name," Osgood said peevishly, dropping all pretense of friendliness. "Smith, it might be to your best interest to sell. You already own, with your pardners, the 3-Bar-O Ranch, near Los Postros. Why should you want another outfit in this section? It may cause you trouble in the long run."

"That," Tucson said flatly, "sounds like a threat."

"Take it any way you like," snapped Osgood. "I have no more to say on the subject." As though the words constituted a signal of some sort, he repeated: "I have no



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more to say on the subject. Good day!"

Tucson started to rise from his chair. At that moment the door of the clothes closet banged open and Rafe Quinn stepped out, six-shooter in hand.

"You sit right where you are, Smith!" he snarled. "There's got to be a showdown between you and me!"

XXII

"Sheriff Quinn!" Phin Osgood exclaimed. "I—"

"Cut it, Phin!" Quinn snapped. "There's no need for your talk." He kept his six-shooter covering Tucson, speaking from the corner of his mouth to Osgood, never removing his eyes from the red-headed puncher in the chair. "You, Smith, don't reach for your gun or I'll bore you *pronto!*"

Tucson had settled coolly back in his seat. "This," he said calmly, "isn't as much of a surprise as you think. I had a hunch you were in that closet—"

"Why didn't you mention it, Smith?" Osgood exclaimed in surprise.

"Osgood," Tucson said coldly, "didn't you hear the sheriff tell you to shut up?"

"The devil you knew I was in that closet!" Quinn scowled. "How could you?"

Tucson explained. "I smelled cigarette smoke the moment I entered this office. I know Osgood doesn't smoke cigarettes. Later,

during our conversation, I mentioned you were a coyote. You didn't like that, Quinn. I heard a muffled curse from the interior of the closet. Osgood went into a sudden coughing fit to cover the sound but his acting came too late. Frankly I wanted to see just what you intended to do?"

"You're going to find out," Quinn rasped. "Smith, I'm arresting you for that job at Wagon Springs—"

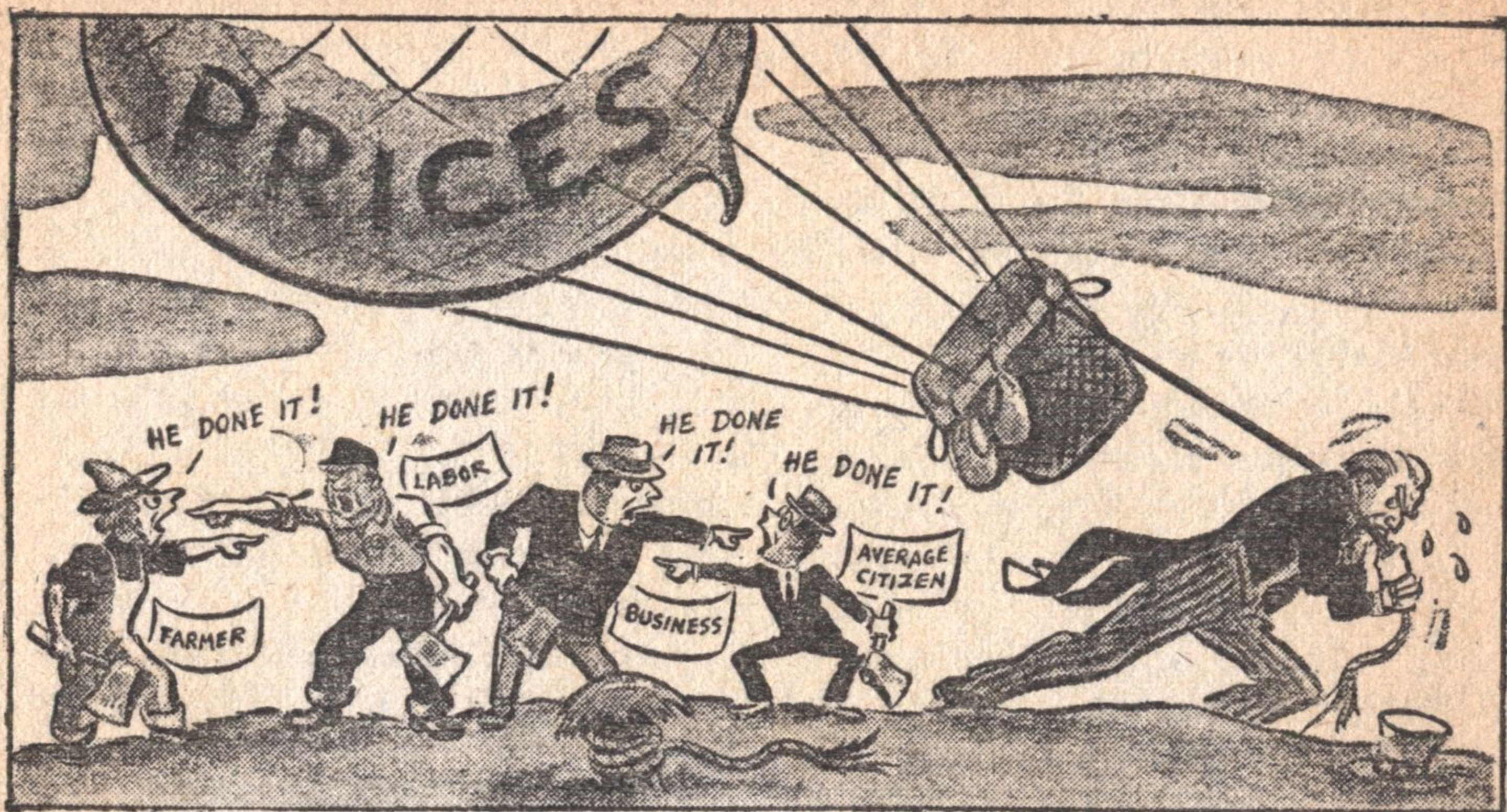
"Just a minute," Tucson cut in. He drew deeply on his cigarette, stalling for time, then lowered the hand holding the cigarette to his right knee. "I'm not quite so dumb as you think I am, Quinn. Of course, you can always claim I resisted arrest after you've shot me. You figure your sheriff's badge will protect you. And when I'm dead, you'll steal that bill of sale from my pocket. But you're forgetting my pardners. Do you think you can get away with this? What'll they be doing?"

"I'm not interested," Quinn interrupted roughly. He snarled a curse at Tucson and tilted his gun slightly.

"Don't pull that trigger just yet," Tucson said quietly. "You want a certain bill of sale. What sort of deal would interest you?"

"Well"—Quinn frowned, momentarily thrown off guard. "I'd have to think it over—"

"Well, think fast, hombre, think fast," Tucson laughed grimly. At the same instant, he flipped the glowing cigarette between his fingers, directly at Quinn's face, "shooting from the knee," as it were.



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The movement took Quinn by surprise. He saw the cigarette butt coming and jerked his head to one side to avoid it. At the same instant Tucson leaped from the chair, two shots from his six-shooter almost blending with the roaring report from Rafe Quinn's gun.

Quinn's shot flew wild and ripped into the pigeonholes of Osgood's roll-top desk. An anguished groan left Quinn's lips, as the gun dropped from his grasp and he clutched at his middle. His left hand pawed at the gun in his other holster, but he lacked the strength to draw. He swayed uncertainly for a moment, then toppled to the floor at Tucson's feet.

Tucson, still moving fast, shoved Osgood to one side. The banker went hurtling against the front wall of the office and sagged there, panting hard. Swiftly, Tucson jerked out the drawers in the banker's desk. In the second drawer he found a short-barreled, nickle-plated revolver. This he removed and stuck in the waistband of his trousers. "I'm not taking chances on you, Osgood!"

There was a heavy knocking on the door that led to the cashier's section of the bank. "Mr. Osgood! Mr. Osgood! Were those shots? Are you all right?" The cashier didn't wait for a reply, but came plunging in, his face white. At sight of the room swimming with gun smoke and the wounded sheriff on the floor, the man recoiled. "Mr. Osgood, are you hurt?"

Osgood straightened up and shook

his head. He was ashen, trembling as though with an attack of palsy. "No, no, I'm all right," he said with difficulty. "Sheriff Quinn was hidden in my clothes closet. He and Mr. Smith had an argument—" He paused, struck by a new idea, and tried to force an angry tone into his words: "Did you let Quinn in while I was out?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Osgood. Besides you haven't been out, since we opened the bank."

"Strange," Osgood snapped. "You must have let him in before I got here."

"Don't you remember, Mr. Osgood," the cashier said earnestly, "you, yourself, opened the bank this morning. I was late, remember."

Tucson laughed grimly. "Let's skip it, Osgood. You can't shift any blame on your employee."

Osgood flushed with anger. He made a strong effort to pull himself together. "Is there anyone in the bank?" he questioned.

"Not at present, Mr. Osgood."

"Get back out there. Someone may come in, any minute. If anyone asks if there were shots fired here, tell him no. Say that those sounds came from the direction of the railroad depot."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Osgood. I doubt the shots could be heard outside." The cashier went out and closed the door behind him.

Osgood turned back to Tucson. "I certainly can't account for Quinn being in that closet—"

"You can, but you won't," Tucson

said curtly. "I can, though. There's no use you lying, Osgood. You were in on this plot to kill me—"

"Smith, I protest that—"

"Protest and be damned. Just keep well away from me, or you'll get what I gave Quinn. I don't trust you, Osgood."

The banker backed against the wall, then made his way on trembling legs to his desk chair where he sat down heavily. Tucson kneeled at Quinn's side, turned the dying sheriff on his back. Quinn's eyes were already growing glassy. With an effort he focused his gaze on Tucson's face. A look of pain swept across his twisted features. He tried to speak, but failed.

"You haven't much longer, Quinn," Tucson warned. "Do you

feel like telling me what's going on here?"

"I protest making that man talk," said Osgood. "He should have a doctor."

"It's too late for a doctor," Tucson declared. "Doc Tuttle's out to the Horseshoe N. If you know of another doctor, in Blue Cloud, run and get him."

"I'm no errand boy," Osgood refused.

Something of the conversation must have reached Quinn's ears, for a look of resentment came into his eyes as they moved slightly to find Osgood. He tried to speak. Tucson bent nearer the dying man's pallid lips.

"Cougar Creek . . . rise in Twin Sisters . . . Mountain—" Quinn man-

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aged. The words were barely intelligible. He tried to say more, but it was gibberish to Tucson's ears.

"The man's wandering in his mind," Osgood snapped, bending forward from his chair. "He doesn't make sense."

Tucson bent still lower, caught one more word, but the rest was choked off by the death rattle in Quinn's throat. Blood gushed suddenly from his mouth. Tucson felt for the man's pulse. There wasn't any. Slowly he rose to his feet and faced Osgood.

"What did he mean, Osgood, by saying Cougar Creek rises in Twin Sisters Mountains?"

"How should I know—or anybody else? He was delirious. Everybody around here knows that Cougar Creek heads up in the Twin Sisters."

"The Twin Sisters on Lombard's property?"

"No, they're on the Horseshoe N—but what difference does it make?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Tucson frowned.

"What else did he say?" Osgood demanded.

Tucson shrugged. "I'm not sure. He was cursing either you or me, I'm not sure which. I only caught the 'damn' part."

"He's the one who ought to be cursed," Osgood said angrily. "Hiding there like that, making me an accomplice, even though unknowingly—"

"Look, Osgood," Tucson said wearily, "you're guilty as the devil. Don't try to tell me otherwise—"

"I resent this, Smith!"

"Resent and be damned! By the time I learn what's going on around here, you'll have a hell of a lot more to resent." Tucson plucked the nickel-plated revolver from his waistband and tossed it on the desk. "There's something to back up your resentment if you've got the nerve."

"I'm no gunman."

"Then don't talk so much." Tucson replaced the cartridges in his depleted gun cylinder, shoved the weapon back in holster and started toward the door.

"Smith!" Osgood exclaimed. "What am I to do with this body? You can't leave Quinn here like this—"

"That's your problem, Osgood. My suggestion would be to call in the undertaker, but it's up to you."

"I'll call in more than the undertaker." Osgood's voice shook with anger. "Just as soon as possible I intend to get in touch with the proper authorities and get a new sheriff appointed here—one who will make you suffer for this crime."

"You'd better leave the law enforcing to me from now on," Tucson said cryptically. He strode to the door, opened it and passed through. As the door closed on Tucson's heels, Osgood drew out his handkerchief and tremblingly commenced mopping nervous beads of perspiration from his face.

On the street, in front of the bank, a knot of men had collected. One of them said: "Hey, mister, was there some shooting in the bank a spell back? The cashier says there

wasn't, but a couple of us heard shots from that direction."

"Nothing wrong with your ears," Tucson said grimly. "The undertaker will be totin' out Sheriff Quinn's body right soon, I expect."

Disregarding the men's exclamations of surprise, Tucson strode back to the Blue Cloud Saloon. He hoped there wouldn't be any customers there when he entered; he wanted to talk to Titus confidentially for a few minutes. His hope was fulfilled: Titus was alone, rearranging bottles on the back bar, when Tucson came in.

"Back again, eh?" Titus greeted. "Say, Tucson, did you hear any shots a while ago?"

"Heard 'em and shot a couple of 'em myself," Tucson replied. "Phin Osgood and Sheriff Quinn had a neat little plot fixed up to wipe me out. It didn't work. I had to kill Quinn."

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" Titus exclaimed. "What happened?"

Tucson told him briefly what had taken place, then repeated Quinn's dying words. "You any idea what Quinn could have been trying to tell me?"

Titus, frowning, shook his head. "It's a riddle to me," he confessed. "Shucks! Everybody knows Cougar Creek rises in the Twin Sisters. So what?" He paused. Then: "You're sure Quinn wasn't just wandering in his mind?"

Tucson shook his head. "No, I'm quite sure his mind was clear. That's what makes it puzzling. Well, I'll



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just have to forget it for a spell. Here." He drew from his pocket the telegram he'd received from the governor of the State. "Read this. I'd figured to keep it quite a spell, but Quinn's death forces my hand. We've got to have a law enforcement officer in Blue Cloud."

Titus raised his eyes from the telegram and handed it back. "Seems to me this makes you the lawman hereabouts," he said.

"I can't stay in town, though," Tucson explained. "I'm going to appoint Lullaby my deputy here, for the time being. Will you take the matter up with the Justice of the Peace? Tell him about this telegram and that Lullaby will be taking over for a time. You're a responsible citizen, Titus, and the J.P. will know this is on the level."

"Sure, I'll take care of it for you. I'll close up the bar and take you down and introduce you to the J.P. right now, if you like."

"I don't want to waste time on that. I've got to get back to the Horseshoe N. I'll send Lullaby in, just as soon as I get there. So long. I'll be seeing you."

Tucson strode from the saloon, rounded the tie rail and got into his saddle. Before the jail and deputy sheriff's office he again dismounted. The office door was unlocked. Tucson entered and walked back along the corridor between the cells. There were no prisoners there. He returned to the office, examined the contents of the desk, but found nothing that would throw any light on the riddle Quinn had voiced with his dying-breath.

"Nothing here but 'wanted' bills, an expense account Canfield forgot to turn in, some rusty handcuffs and some blank forms waiting to be filled out," Tucson muttered, pawing over several scattered papers. He found the key to the office door, stepped once more to the outside, locked the door behind him and, mounting, rode swiftly in the direction of the Horseshoe N.

What action does Tucson intend to take? How is Osgood connected with the kidnaping of Clem Norton? Will Norton recover? Don't miss the smashing conclusion of Gun-Smoke Brand in your next Western Story.



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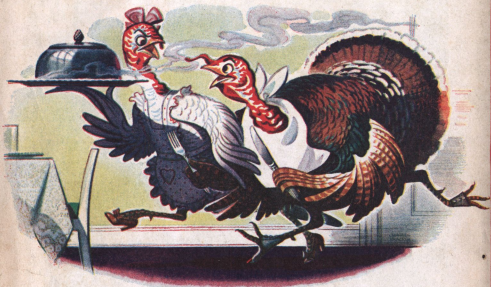
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