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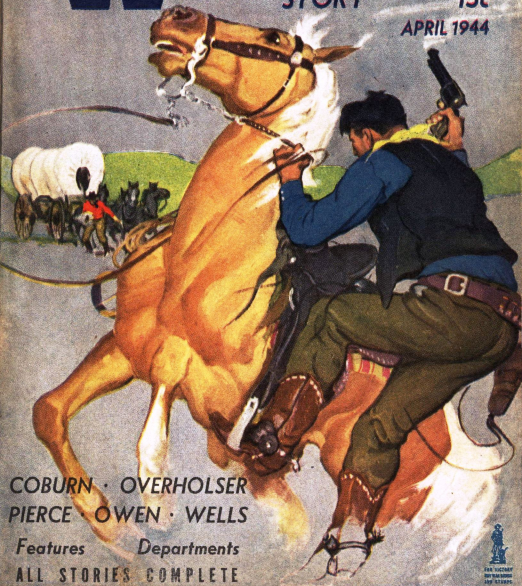
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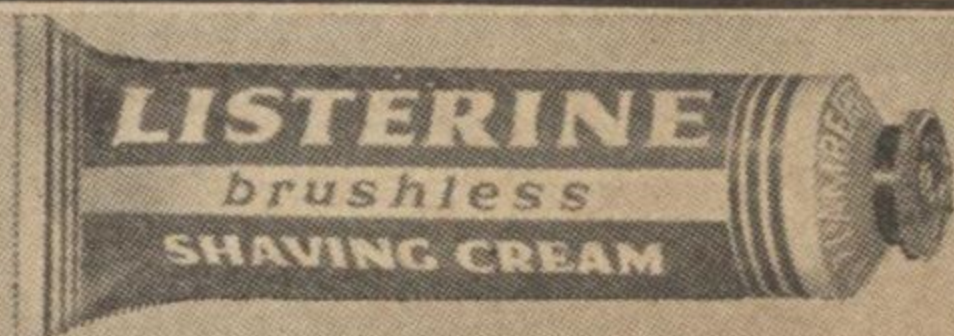
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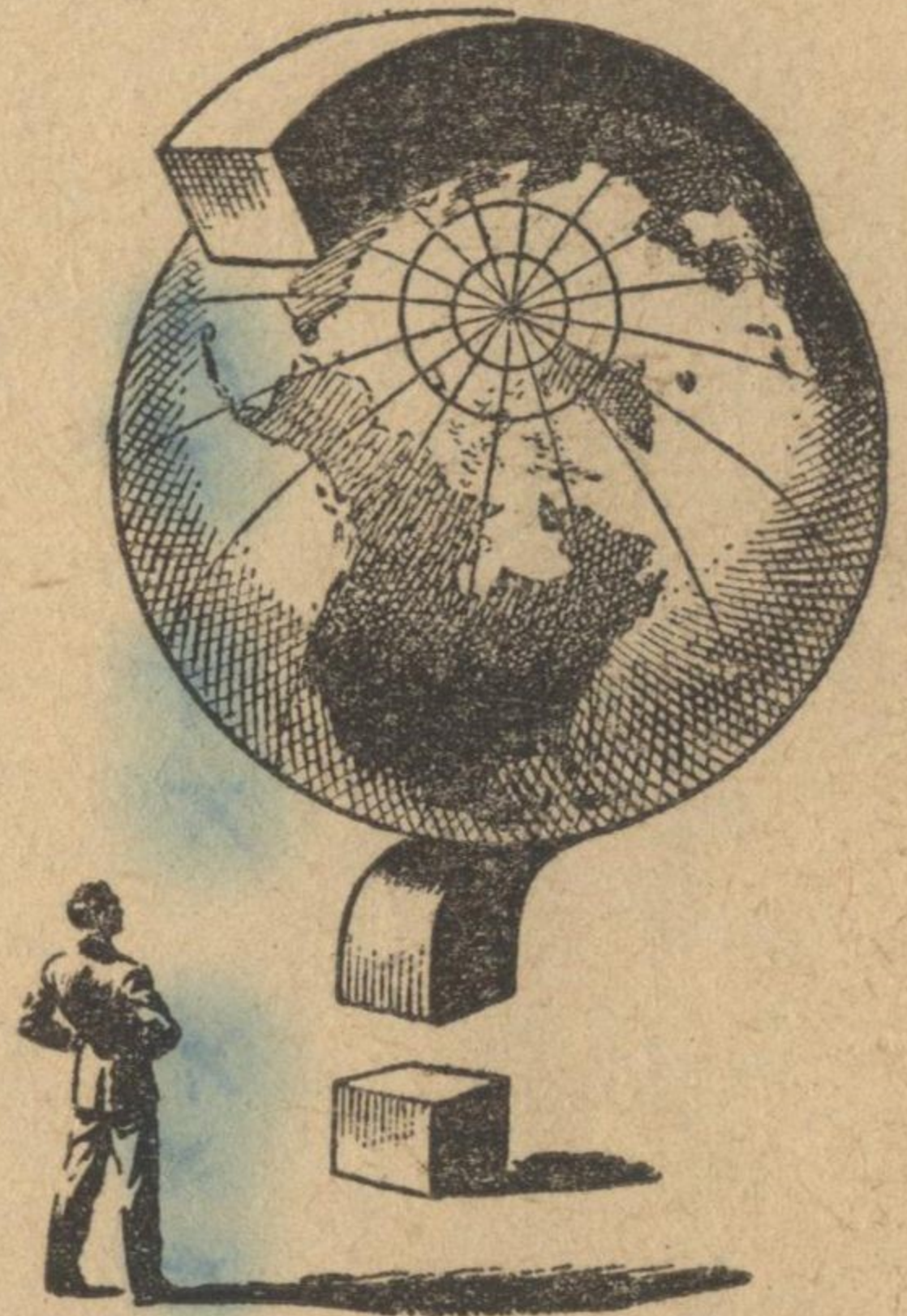
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STREET & SMITH'S
WESTERN STORY

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MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



Walt Coburn

THERE'S the unmistakable brand of a working cowhand in the work of this peerless author of the Old West who "was lucky enough to be born in Montana before the nesters strung barb wire across the roundup trails." Walt Coburn's father pioneered there in '63 and built up the Circle C into one of the biggest spreads in the country which took in the Little Rockies and the Fort Belknap Reservation.

It was here that young Walt became a puncher the hard way. He sums up his rigorous training in these words: "Had to make a forty-a-month hand on roundup when I was a button. Long circles, cutting cattle, roping, branding, day herd, night guard, learn the names of every horse in a remuda of three hundred head, learn to take hunger and thirst and rain and sun.

"Swim a swollen creek or the big Missouri River without drowning myself or my horse, learn how not to freeze to death, how to meet a stranger and read the brand of his horse, know every coulee and creek crossing and waterhole inside a hundred thousand acres of open range—and all the livestock on it. And if you live to be a hundred you can still learn something about the cow business." All of which sounds like a full tally in any man's language!

"I've learned the ways and the heart of the Indian," he says. "And the heart

of the Indian is good. And brave. My old friend Long Knife proved that at Bataan when he got fifteen Japs with his rifle before he ran out of cartridges and finished off the rest of about thirty slant-eyes with hand grenades."

Following a move to Arizona came the outbreak of the last war and Walt enlisted in the U. S. air force. Upon his discharge he went back to riding the range but a big maverick bull piled him up, ending Walt's cowpunching days. From then on life was an aimless sort of gamble—survey gang, boss ditcher on the Colorado River Indian Reservation, running a garage, firing a boiler, life guard and then, after two years' rejection slips, he sold his first yarn.

"But I soon found out," he relates, "that writing is like punching cows—there's a hell of a lot to learn. I'm still trying, after twenty years of story writing to get at a novel of my own cow country and her people—the real story which has never been written."

Meanwhile, here's hoping that many more stories like **WHEN THE SIGN IS RIGHT**, which we feature in our May issue, will come from the Coburn corral.

Also in the May issue: Norman A. Fox, W. C. Tuttle, William Heuman, Jim Kjelgaard, Jim West and many others.

RANGE HOGS CAN DIE

by WAYNE D.

OVERHOLSER

*With nesters invading
Redstone Valley, even
Hugh Latham's six-gun
rep couldn't keep the lid
on a cattle-sheep feud*





FROM where he sat his roan on the north rim of Redstone Valley, Hugh Latham watched the nester outfit break out of the timber and make camp thirty yards or so from the river bank. There was a bearded man on a brown work horse, a woman driving a covered wagon, a boy and a girl in a buckboard, and a herd of twenty milk cows. Nesters all right, Hugh told himself, but not typical ones, with so many milk cows.

Either the bearded man was a fool, or ignorant, Hugh thought as he put his roan down the steep north slope. Only a fool would bring women-folks into Redstone Valley if he knew what lay ahead.

"Evening, ma'am," Hugh said pleasantly as he reined up beside the fire. "You folks going far?"

The woman straightened up, her eyes moving down Hugh's long length from his Stetson-topped head to his booted feet. A brief smile lit her work-worn face.

"Good evening," she said. "My husband bought a place in Horsetail Canyon. We're going there."

Hugh nodded. He didn't tell her that within a few days Horsetail Canyon would be a bloody battleground when Ben Grosset spilled his sheep down the length of it, and tried to invade the valley long held by Redstone Smith and his cowmen friends. He would tell her husband, and if the man weren't a fool, he'd turn back.

"I'd like to talk to your husband," Hugh told her.

"He's down by the river." The woman gestured with a toil-reddened hand. "Supper's almost ready. Come back and eat with us."

"Thanks," said Hugh. "That's kind of you."

The girl moved around the wagon, and stood close to her mother, frightened eyes on Hugh. She was about ten, he guessed. The boy came up to the fire, and dropped an armload of wood beside it. Then, when he raised his head, Hugh saw it was no boy at all, but a girl in man's Levis and blue shirt, a pretty girl with full red lips and gold-brown hair that curled along her forehead under the brim of her Stetson. Her blue eyes made Hugh think of the deep pools in the Redstone River far back in the pines where the water was dark blue and always cold.

As he turned from the fire, Hugh felt the older girl's hostile eyes upon him. There was no semblance of a smile on her lips. He sensed that she had already pegged him as an enemy, and would treat him accordingly.

The man came up from the river to meet Hugh, right hand resting on gun butt. From under bushy brows his eyes raked Hugh. Like the girl's they were dark blue, cold and hostile.

"Howdy," Hugh said, and dismounted. He held out a hand. "I'm Hugh Latham."

"My name's Rubens," the man growled. "Jake Rubens." He shook Hugh's hand quickly, then dropped his own hand back on gun butt as if he suspected a trick. "You one

of Redstone Smith's men?"

"No," Hugh answered, "but I live in Smithville. Redstone Valley's boiling up into a war, Rubens. It's no place to bring womenfolks. I thought mebbe you didn't know."

"I thought so," Rubens said in a surly tone. "You're one of Smith's men posted up here to turn us back."

He lifted his gun, started to thumb back the hammer, and didn't, for suddenly he was looking squarely into Hugh's gun bore.

"Drop it," Hugh ordered, quick anger darkening his gray eyes. "I came down here to do you a favor. Some day you'll try that on the wrong man, and you'll die with lead in your guts."

Rubens let the gun go, and cursed. "I've heard of Redstone Smith and how he runs the valley. But I ain't gonna be turned back. I bought a place, and I'm gonna take my cows and family to it."

"Back up," Hugh ordered. When Rubens obeyed, Hugh scooped up the gun, and slipped it into his shirt. "Redstone Smith runs this country, but he's a square hombre. It's Ben Grosset you've got to worry about. He'll try to drive his sheep past your place. Smith aims to hold it. Think that over, you stubborn fool, and figger what'll happen to your womenfolks."

The bushy brows raised. "Grosset runs sheep in the Dry Lake country. That lie won't get nowhere with me, Smith man."

"He's headed for Redstone Valley," Hugh said curtly. "Some of his gunhands are here already. I saw Crib Lukes this morning on

North Branch. Joel Dance shot a man today on Bill Orke's place. It's war, I tell you."

"I'm going on." Rubens' jaw set under his beard.

For a moment Hugh stared at the man. Slowly the dark anger in him faded. There was nothing more he could do or say. Trouble was close. Tonight, or the next night, and to Grosset's gun hawks a cow was a cow. If it were just Jake Rubens, it wouldn't matter, but here was a woman and two girls, and Rubens was no man to protect them against the kind of gun toughs Ben Grosset hired.

"Grosset sends his killers in first," Hugh said grimly. "They raid a few places, kill some cows, and murder anybody who gets in their way along with some who don't. Your wife asked me to eat with you tonight. I'm doing that, and I'm bedding down here. Mebbe you'll see what I mean before morning."

Hugh wheeled away, the stubborn Rubens glaring after him. After taking care of his horse, Hugh went back to the fire. "I told your husband I was bedding down here for the night, Mrs. Rubens," he said. "My name's Latham."

Mrs. Rubens smiled faintly then, and Hugh wondered if she'd forgotten how to really laugh. "It's been a long trip," she said. "We'll be glad for your company, Mr. Latham. This is Ann." She laid an arm across the younger girl's shoulder. "Carly," she called, "this is Mr. Latham."

Ann curtsied. Carly only nodded coldly, and kept on with her wood

chopping. Hugh moved toward her, and when she carried an armful of wood to the fire, Hugh picked up her ax. Chips were flying into the air from Hugh's long, clean blows when Carly came back to the log.

"Aren't you afraid you'll get cal-luses?" she taunted.

Hugh straightened up and looked at her reflectively. "Nice chin," he said thoughtfully, "with a dimple. She might have a dimple in her cheeks if she smiled, but I reckon she don't know how. Bad disposition. Stomach trouble, mebbe."

"Look, Mr. Latham," the girl said hotly, "or whatever handle you're going by now. We're just ordinary folks who make our living by work, and not by murder. Your brand is plenty plain to read. Why don't you get back into your saddle, and ride a long ways before you stop?"

"Plain to read, my brand is?" he asked softly.

"Yes," Carly's voice was defiant. "I've seen your kind before."

"Just what is my brand if it's so plain?"

"Gunman," Carly said flatly. "That means killer. You've got it written all over you. Long fingers. A quick way of moving that says you could shuck your guns mighty fast. You're wearing them low and tied down. The handles look like they've had plenty of use."

"That all?"

"It's plenty, isn't it?"

"Why no, ma'am, it ain't. Do you see any notches on my gun? Did you ever see a real killer with gray eyes? Do I have the look that

says I'd be plumb tickled to see a man go down before my guns, kicking his life out on a saloon floor mebber? That's killer sign, ma'am. I'd say you wasn't as smart as you allow."

Hugh turned to the log, and finished chopping the limb from the trunk. Carly held her words till he was done. Then she said: "I'll take the ax."

"Ma'am, where I come from this is man's work. Wearing men's duds and packing a gun don't make you one. Acting like a wildcat don't make you that neither. Some day a gent will show up who's man enough to tame you. Mebbe I'm that huckleberry. In any case you'd better behave yourself, or I'll turn you across my knee, and give you the whaling you should have had a long time ago."

Carly's eyes sparked fire. "Mister," she exploded, "if you try that, I'll—I'll—"

"You'll what?" Hugh asked softly.

Carly didn't answer. She stamped a foot angrily, wheeled, and stalked back to the fire, head held high.

Jake Rubens was standing beside the fire when Hugh dumped an armful of wood on the ground.

"Where do you tie into this ruckus if you ain't one of Smith's men?" Rubens demanded.

"I don't tie in," Hugh answered sharply.

They ate in stony silence. Ann stayed close to her mother, casting frightened glances at Hugh and the long-barreled guns riding low on his thighs. She seemed to sense that

her father didn't want the stranger here, but that he was staying anyway, and she didn't understand it. Hugh grinned wryly as he hunkered by the fire and built a smoke. He saw that Carly, too, was wondering why he was staying. She'd told him plain enough what she thought of him.

II

A three-quarters moon was showing over the Blue Mountains when Mrs. Rubens and Ann went to bed in the wagon. Rubens moved around the fire to Carly. "You take the first guard," he said. "I don't figger on any trouble, but in case it does come, it'll hit about dawn."

"All right." Carly nodded, got a rifle from the wagon, and walked away from the firelight.

"Rubens," Hugh said suddenly, "I'm guessing you bought Doke Mitchel's place, and you got it cheap."

"That's right."

"Did the thought ever work into your thick skull that Mitchel knew what was coming and was glad to get out with what he could?"

"I didn't know nothing about this Grosset hombre coming in," Rubens grunted, "but it wouldn't have made no difference with me. I fight for what's mine."

"Sure," Hugh said, "and die. That's your privilege, but it ain't your privilege to take womenfolk into the kind of trouble you're heading for."

"I take what's mine," Rubens said stubbornly, "and my family stays with me."

Hugh threw up his hands. "I suppose you're so danged mule-headed you won't even douse the fire."

Rubens' bearded face set stubbornly. "It'll go out after while."

Hugh handed Rubens the gun he'd taken from the man. "You'll mebbe need that before morning. Just don't try to get tough if Joel Dance and his crew ride in. I'll handle the gun work. Any gent that's as slow with a draw as you are don't have no business getting tough with Joel Dance."

Hugh made his bed under the wagon. Rubens went to sleep beside the fire, but Hugh stayed awake. Perhaps he'd been a fool to stay, he thought bitterly.

He'd been sent to Redstone Valley for a different purpose than to play nursemaid to a stubborn heman and his family, but now that he'd taken the job, he'd see it through. He knew Joel Dance and Crib Lukes, knew how they worked, and respected their gun skill. He knew less about Ben Grosset and his gun-slick brother, Dave, but he'd heard enough.

Hugh had made it a point to check the Grossets' record before he came to Redstone Valley, and, knowing it, he was sure of one thing. Either Redstone Smith and his cowmen neighbors would be driven out of the valley, or Ben Grosset and Dave would be killed. The tragedy was that before the Grossets died, other men, good men, would die, too.

The fire was a bed of dull coals when Hugh first heard the horses. Rubens didn't stir. Hugh crept out

from under the wagon, and stood for a time listening. He guessed that Dance, or whoever it was, was circling the camp and sizing it up.

The valley was bathed in moonlight, but for a time Hugh couldn't see the riders. Likely they had spotted the fire from the north rim, and were keeping out of sight until they knew the size and strength of the camp. Then Hugh saw Carly running toward the fire. Jake Rubens roused, and sat up.

"Men out there," Carly panted. "They forded the river, circled, and crossed it again below."

"Don't tell 'em I'm here," Hugh called softly, and remained in the wagon's shadow.

Neither Rubens nor the girl answered. Warily the men rode up, six of them, and in the bright moonlight Hugh recognized Joel Dance in front. Hugh moved back a step so that Dance couldn't see him as he dismounted, and came up to Rubens and Carly.

For a time Dance didn't speak. He eyed Rubens and Carly narrowly. He was a tall, hawk-nosed man with pale-blue eyes set too close together, and a cruel, lipless slit of a mouth. The killer brand was on Joel Dance, and Hugh wondered savagely if Carly could see the difference between him and the Grosset gunslinger.

"Where you headed, hombre?" Dance said roughly.

Jake Rubens didn't back up. Hugh doubted if the man had sense enough to know he was looking squarely into the grinning face of death.

"Horsetail Canyon," Rubens answered. "I bought the Mitchel place."

"In case you hadn't heard," Dance said, "Ben Grosset is moving sheep into this valley. That means cattle are out. We aim to slaughter your cows, mister. If you get proddy about it, you'll get a slug, too." He looked at Carly again with deepened interest. By reputation Ben Grosset and his men were no respecters of women.

"They're milk cows," Rubens said hoarsely. "They'll do Grosset's sheep no harm."

"I thought you was a boy at first," Dance drawled, his eyes still on Carly, "but by dang, you ain't. You're a woman all dressed up like a man. Well now, that's fine. We—"

"Touch me and I'll kill you," Carly cried. "I know your kind."

"You do, eh?" Dance guffawed. "Boys, she's got us spotted," he called over his shoulder.

"I said my cows were milk critters," Ruben repeated doggedly. "Let 'em alone."

"Anything that looks like a cow is a cow as far as Ben Grosset figgers," snarled Dance. "Boys, you better get at it. If this huckleberry gets tough, I'll ventilate his hide. Bring a hoss for the gal. She's going with us."

It was then Hugh stepped around the wagon into the moonlight. "I reckon you won't do either, Joel," he said softly. "This nester outfit ain't quite as easy as you figgered."

Dance spun around to face Hugh, hands close to gun butts, but he

didn't draw. He peered at Hugh as if he felt something familiar about the tall, sinewy-muscled man who stood before him. Then he recognized Hugh, and a curse rumbled in his throat.

"Hugh Latham," he bellowed. "What in thunder are you doing nursing a bunch of milk cows?" He threw back his head and roared a laugh. "Wait'll I tell Ben the great Hugh Latham is stringing along with milk cows. Had your bottle tonight, Hugh?"

One of the men behind Dance snickered.

"Mebbe milk is a better drink than the hogwash you boys get out of bottles," Hugh answered dryly. "You go ahead with slaughtering them cows or taking the girl, and you'll never live to tell Ben Grosset anything."

"I've never matched gun smoke with you, Latham," Dance said coldly, "but if you figger your rep scares me any, you're batty."

"There's three women here," Hugh said. "Two in the wagon and this girl who's trying to play man. I've heard that Ben Grosset says women don't belong in this country. He's right as far as his bunch of mutton eaters go, but this ain't Ben Grosset range. I'm doubting it ever will be."

For a moment Joel Dance stared at Hugh, his chill eyes narrowing as he made up his mind. Joel Dance had the reputation of never backing up for any man, but he knew too much about Hugh Latham to take him lightly.

"I'm packing a one-way ticket to boothill for you, Joel," Hugh said

evenly. "You can call for that ticket, or mount and ride."

For an interval Joel Dance stood there unmoving. Perhaps he had the feeling that he'd come to the end of his long and bloody trail. There must have been, too, the balancing knowledge that he couldn't ride away, and ever again be the Joel Dance whose name was feared throughout the high country.

So, with the pale, ghostly moonlight full upon them, Dance made up his mind. Suddenly he exploded, one hand sweeping downward for his gun and bringing it up in the lightning draw that had made Joel Dance famous. He fired, a wild shot that missed by ten feet, for he died with Hugh Latham's bullet in his brain.

Hugh wheeled to face the five mounted men, both guns in his hands now. His voice slashed across the intervening space as coldly menacing as the long-barreled Colts he held rock-steady in his hands.

"You can go for your guns, or you can get down, load this carcass up, and go back to Ben Grosset. Which will it be?"

"We'll ride," a man said, and dismounted.

Tough enough, these five, but Joel Dance had been a legend. Now he was dead, and none of the others had the stomach to face the gun that had killed him.

A moment later they rode away, leading Dance's horse with its grim burden, and disappeared into the shadows of the north rim. Neither Jake Rubens nor Carly had moved

from the moment Hugh had stepped into the open. Now they stood staring after the Grosset men.

"I reckon you'll go your own stubborn way, Rubens," Hugh said, "regardless of what I say. You go on up Horsetail Canyon like you're set on doing, and die. That's your business, but if you've got any sense in that hunk of bone you call a head, you'll send your women to Smithville where they'll be safe."

Rubens tugged at his beard. He shuffled his feet uneasily. "I'm thanking you for what you did, Latham," he said.

It was a hard thing for a man like Jake Rubens to thank anybody, and Hugh knew it. His voice was a little softer when he said: "I've been raised to think that it's a man's job to make this a country where women can live in peace and safety. Redstone Smith has done that here, but it means nothing to a range hog like Ben Grosset. You won't have no more trouble tonight. You can get to Smithville tomorrow." He turned to Carly. "If you need me for anything, I'll be at the hotel."

"I'll need you for nothing," Carly cried, and clenched her fists. "I said you were a gunman and a killer. What happened tonight proves I was right."

A bleak smile came to Hugh's lips. "I've heard a wildcat makes a nice pet if you get 'em young enough and tame 'em right, but I ain't real sure about a female. In case you ever get some of the stubborn pride washed out of your pretty little head, maybe you'll get around to realizing that it makes a difference

which side a man pulls his gun on." Then Hugh Latham wheeled away, and strode to his horse.

It was close to dawn when Hugh stabled his roan, and climbed the stairs to his hotel room. Ben Grosset had been struck a hard blow when he lost Joel Dance. He couldn't afford to let it go. Then Hugh thought about Carly Rubens as he had most of the time since he'd left the Rubens' camp, and he wondered if a wildcat ever was really tamed.

III

It was well into the afternoon before Hugh awoke. He shaved, dressed, and went down to the hotel dining room.

"I guess it's time for breakfast," Hugh said, and grinned at the waitress.

"You keep the nicest hours, Mr. Latham," the girl said. "Bacon and eggs again?"

"That's right," Hugh answered, "and coffee so strong it'll float my spoon."

"I thought you'd be in pretty soon," the waitress said, "so I made up a new batch for you. It will not only float your spoon, it will throw it back into your face."

Hugh was finishing his meal when Buck Kendall walked in. Buck was a leathery-faced puncher, typical of the men who worked for Redstone Smith. Most of them could shoot and ride with the best, but they worked for their forty-a-month and beans, and they bore little resemblance to the hard-case bunch Ben

Grosset used to clear the way for his sheep.

"Redstone wants to see you, Latham," said Kendall.

"He knows where to find me," Hugh answered.

"In this country men go to Redstone Smith," snapped Kendall.

"I'm different," Hugh said quietly. "I'm going down to the Gem. You can tell Redstone."

Kendall started to say something, but didn't. He wheeled, and strode out of the dining room.

Hugh was playing a hand of solitaire at a back table when Redstone Smith came in. The cowman stood for a moment inside the batwings, black eyes raking the interior of the saloon until they rested upon Hugh. Then he came directly toward Hugh. He was a heavy man, a little paunchy now with age, but he still insisted he could do anything he asked any of his men to do. He jerked a chair away from the table, and sat down.

"I wanted to see you, Latham," Smith said belligerently.

Hugh lifted his eyes. There was a driving force about the big cattleman that Hugh had always admired. Smith was used to being obeyed, but he had an inherent fairness about him, and Hugh had never heard of him using his small neighbors unfairly.

"You're seeing me now, Redstone," Hugh said coolly as he dropped a red queen on a black king.

"Confound it, Latham," Smith bellowed. "This is my town. Folks don't make me come to them."

Hugh laid his cards carefully on the table, and canted his chair back

against the wall. "Redstone, you've run things here for so long that you figger everybody's gonna come high-tailing to you when you get some kind of a notion. Mebbe it never occurred to you, but you're in for a tough time. Ben Grosset don't come when he's called. He comes with a bunch of hard-riding renegades pouring lead at every jump. Right now I figger Ben Grosset ain't very far away from here."

"Confound Ben Grosset," Smith bellowed. "He won't get into my valley. He oughtta know something about me. I'll hang the first one of his tough hands I get my fingers on."

"Mebbe you didn't know I saw Crib Lukes riding along North Branch yesterday. Mebbe you hadn't heard about Joel Dance riding into Bill Orke's place, and shooting old Curly Shafer. Bill was gone when Dance done the shooting, but he told me Curly never went heeled. Bill was mighty worried. You've told all the valley men you'll see they're protected. How are you gonna do that, Redstone?"

Smith's face went crimson with violent anger. "They know me," he spluttered. "I've never failed to carry out my word."

"But Curly Shafer's dead, Redstone," Hugh reminded mildly.

Smith's anger faded. He stared at Hugh, and for the first time since Hugh had known him, he looked like an old man.

"I can't bring Curly back to life," Smith said with new humility.

"That's right. Bill Orke's think-

ing along that line. Ben Grosset will ride in and make Bill an offer. Mebbe a good one. Bill might take it."

"No, he won't," Smith shouted. "I helped Bill start that ranch. I can count on him."

"But Bill's seen what Grosset will do," Hugh said. "He's got a wife and a couple of girls. Grosset's hard on women, Redstone."

Smith laid his big hands on the table top, and shook his great head. "I know that, Latham. I've got my men riding the valley, but they can't be everywhere."

"And right now you haven't got a good gun-slinger in Smithville," Hugh said pointedly. "You never know what Grosset's gonna do next. He might hit this burg and wipe it out. You'd be done, then, Redstone. You'd have only your own men to fight Grosset with, and you need the valley folks."

"Who are you?" demanded Smith.

Hugh fished paper and tobacco from his pocket, and began to shape a smoke. "Who do you figger I am?" he asked.

"I'm danged if I know," Smith said, suspicion hard in his black eyes. "You've been around here a month or more. You stay in town a day or two, and then you take a pasear out into the valley, and you're gone for a week. You know a hell of a lot about what's going on."

"That's my business, Redstone." Hugh thumbed a match to life, and held the flame to his cigarette. "What have you heard about me?"

"All I know is that you're fast with your guns," Smith answered.

"You move around a lot, and you seem to be in every fight that shapes up like it was gonna be big." His eyes narrowed. "Latham, did you come in here figgering I'd hire you?"

"I don't hire my guns," Hugh said quickly, "and I wouldn't come to you if I did. You haven't got a hired gun-slick on your pay roll. Grosset knows that. He's figgering killers like Crib Lukes and Joel Dance can lick ordinary run-of-the-mill cowpokes like Buck Kendall. He knows the sheriff you've got here looks to you to keep folks in line. Now he's off fishing. Ben Grosset's a gambler, Redstone, but he don't play a card till he figgers he's holding the top hand."

"If he thinks he's holding the top hand this time, he's off his base," Smith bellowed, and tossed a crumpled wad of paper on the table. "One of the Landers kids from the north bench brought this in awhile ago. Latham, it might just be you're one of Grosset's gun dogs."

"It's a free country," Hugh murmured as he picked the paper up and flattened it out. "You got the privilege of thinking what you want to."

Hugh's brows lifted as he read the rumbled note.

There's no use of us wasting a lot of lead, Smith. I'm coming to town today. If you've got the guts they say you have, you'll be in the street at five, and we'll gun it out.

Ben Grosset.

Smith pounded the table with a big fist. "Grosset wouldn't show his face if my men were in town. He's got a

spy right here, and mebbe you're him."

Hugh tossed the note to Smith, and leaned back in his chair, the smoke from his cigarette slowly dribbling through his nose and drifting ceilingward. "Why don't you throw me into the calaboose, Redstone, if that's what you think? Or mebbe give me a rope halter?"

"I ain't sure," Smith snapped.

"Did you ever see Ben Grosset?" When Smith shook his head, Hugh went on: "That's the difference between you and him. You pride yourself on being square. He don't. You planning on meeting him?"

"Sure," Smith thundered. "You don't think I'm yellow, do you?"

"No, and Grosset don't either," said Hugh. "Redstone, you're in a tight, and you can't see it. I came down through Grosset's range. He's overgrazed it, and he figgers this valley can be taken. Otherwise he's licked. I had a little trouble with him and his snaky brother, Dave. Not shooting trouble, but some words. Grosset's a little, dried-up gent with rat eyes and a weasel face. He's tricky as a coyote. It won't be Ben you'll face, Redstone. It'll be Crib Lukes or Dave, and you'll die."

"Whoever comes here has plenty of guts," Smith said. "If I don't get him, Buck will."

Hugh shook his head. "No. When you go down, the killer will vamoose. Buck will be so worked up over you kicking around in the dust, he wouldn't think of going after the killer till it's too late. Redstone, you stay here." He glanced at his watch. "I'll step out in the street in



a couple of minutes.”

“The devil you will!” Smith raged. “I’ll do my own fighting!”

Hugh got up, and came around the table to where Redstone Smith sat. “There ain’t three men in the State who know who I am. That’s why I can move around and see who’s got the right of it. This is my job. I’ll do it.”

Smith didn’t see Hugh’s gun come up out of holster until it was too late. He grabbed for his Colt, and had it half out of leather when Hugh’s gun barrel rapped him across the skull. He went out cold, head and shoulders dropping forward on the table. Hugh spun around to face the barkeep.

“Easy, Mike,” Hugh called, and strode to the bar. “Let me have that scatter gun.” Reluctantly the

Hugh and his companions reined up, aghast at the aftermath of Ben Grosset’s ruthless range-grabbing campaign.

barkeep handed the shotgun to Hugh, his fat face working in sudden fear. “I’m doing a job for Redstone, Mike. He wanted to do it himself. That’s why I slugged him. Don’t try making it hard for me, or you’ll get hurt.”

Hugh took the shells from the shotgun, and threw the weapon across the room. He checked the loads in his gun, gave the cylinder a quick

whirl, and slipped it back into leather. "Remember what I told you, Mike," he said curtly, and went out of the saloon.

It was exactly five when Hugh Latham moved through the batwings. He gave a quick look along the street, saw that it was deserted, and strode around the hitch rack into the dust. In that instant a man came around the corner of the livery stable, and headed toward Hugh. It was Crib Lukes, Grosset's gun hand.

"I'm looking for Redstone Smith," Lukes bawled. "Where is he?"

Hugh paced toward the killer, hands brushing gun butts. "I'm filling Redstone's shoes, Crib."

Lukes stopped. He was a burly, red-faced man, given to doing his jobs alone and from the darkness of an alley, or the brush-covered mouth of a canyon while his victim rode by. Yet it took a cold kind of courage to come here, and for that Hugh admired him.

"Smith's yaller!" yelled Lukes. "I ain't taking you on, Latham. I want Smith!"

"Why didn't Grosset come?" Hugh asked, still pacing toward Lukes.

"He couldn't," Lukes snapped, and backed up a step. "If I can't meet Smith in a fair fight, I'm pulling out."

"Then you'll die with your iron in leather," Hugh said evenly, "because I'm killing you today, Lukes. You should have let Grosset keep his promise."

There was an icy calmness about Hugh as he moved toward Lukes

in long, easy strides. His face was set in hard, bleak lines. He might have been the personification of fate as he came toward Lukes, his feet stirring the dust into tiny, gray blobs that hung motionless in the still air.

"You'd better reach for your hog-leg," Hugh said coldly.

Hugh was close to Lukes now, close enough that he could read the man's decision in his big face, see the tiny globules of sweat break through the skin. Lukes had no stomach for this fight, but he had no choice. Suddenly he made up his mind. Hugh saw it coming, saw the give-away tightening of the corners of his mouth. His gun hand knifed downward. The instant he started his draw, Hugh's hand made a blurring motion in the sunlight, gripped the hard butt of his Colt, and lifted it, all in one lightning, rhythmical movement of coordinated nerve and muscle.

There was a flash of flame, a roar, and the lifting swirl of smoke. Lukes straightened, the unfired gun slacking in relaxed fingers. Again Hugh's Colt leveled, bucked and spat its orange ribbon of flame. With the last spark of life in him, Crib Lukes tried to bring his gun up, tried to prong back the heavy hammer, and failed. He rocked forward and fell into the street, dust moiling up around him.

Men burst out of doorways along the street, and ran toward Hugh. Buck Kendall knelt beside Lukes, saw that he was dead, and rose.

"Who is he?" Kendall demanded, his face dark with suspicion.

"Crib Lukes," Hugh answered as he ejected the empties, and thrust new loads into place. "One of Ben Grosset's top gun hands."

Redstone Smith stumbled out of the Gem, a dazed look on his face as he came up to the men in the street.

"I said you wouldn't face Grosset, Redstone," Hugh told him bluntly. "Ben Grosset never keeps a promise unless it pays him to keep it. That carcass was Crib Lukes, and he was mighty near as fast as Joel Dance. I'm sorry I had to slug you, but you was set on getting yourself filled with lead."

Running a hand over his face, Smith stared at the body. Slowly his eyes raised to Hugh's face. "I'm thanking you, Latham. I reckon you ain't no spy for Grosset, or you wouldn't have done this." Smith's eyes raked the men around him. "I'm aiming to find out who is. When I do, I'll hang him as sure as the devil's in Ben Grosset."

"Mebbe there ain't none, Redstone," Hugh said, and jerked a thumb at the sun-red top of Black Butte. "A man could belly down up there, and with a pair of glasses, see everything that goes on."

Slowly Smith nodded. "That might be," he admitted. "My men have been patrolling the valley for a week. I reckon Grosset knows all right."

"He knows more'n you've been giving him credit for," Hugh said grimly. "It's my guess his outfit has split up, and they're playing fox-and-goose with your boys all over the valley, and the north bench.

Chances are he's got sheep on Bill Orke's place now."

"Look," Buck Kendall said suddenly. "You reckon that's a trick?"

A covered wagon had turned into Main Street from the east valley road, and was slowly rolling toward them. Redstone Smith's hand clutched gun butt.

"If that wagon's got Grosset men in it," Smith rasped, "they could fill us full of lead before we could move. Get to cover, boys."

"It's all right," Hugh said, and saw there was no buckboard with the wagon. "It's a nester outfit I met up with yesterday. You wouldn't see a woman driving if it was Grosset's bunch."

IV

Hugh walked toward the wagon. Mrs. Rubens was in the seat, Ann beside her. Disappointment keened through Hugh as Mrs. Rubens pulled on the lines and spoke to the team. Carly had taken the buckboard, and gone with her father into Horsetail Canyon, or she'd be with the wagon.

"Howdy, ma'am," said Hugh as he lifted his Stetson. "I see your husband and Carly ain't with you."

"No, Mr. Latham," the woman said. "They went on to our place. Jake had me and Ann come on here till the trouble blows over."

At least Jake Rubens had got one thing through his mule head, Hugh thought grimly. He doubted if Rubens could have made Carly come if he'd wanted to.

"There's a little house on down at the end of the street where you can stay, ma'am," Hugh turned and

called: "Redstone, this lady would like to live for a spell in the house Richter moved out of. Buck, will you help her get settled?"

For a moment Smith and Kendall hesitated. Then Smith nodded. "Give 'em a hand, Buck."

After the wagon had gone on down the street, Hugh said: "I'm taking a ride up Horsetail Canyon, Redstone. You'd better come along."

"No." Smith shook his head. "The boys have been gone for a week. I told Lafe to send me word soon as anything happened. He'll come here."

"Have somebody bring you the word out there," Hugh said curtly. "You've got men in the canyon, haven't you?"

"I told Lafe to leave three boys at the Mitchel place," Smith answered. "That's the way Grosset will bring his sheep in. He won't get past Mitchel's."

"Redstone, you haven't been in a good fight for so long you've forgotten what to do," Hugh said angrily. "You'd take a pop gun to go after a grizzly. Grosset won't be far behind Crib Lukes. Come on if you've got any fight left in that big belly of yours. Bring Buck. We'll need him when we get to the canyon."

Smith rumbled an oath, anger rising in his face. Slowly his eyes turned to Lukes' bullet-riddled body. "All right," he said in a subdued tone. "I don't know what you've got in your head, but Buck and me'll ride along."

Ten minutes later they were out of town and riding at a steady, mile-

eating lope toward Horsetail Canyon. Hugh told Smith and Kendall what had happened the night before.

"It's my hunch Grosset may already be in the canyon," he finished. "If he is, Jake Rubens is dead, and the girl's in trouble if she ain't dead."

"I told Lafe—" Smith began, but Hugh cut him off impatiently.

"Shucks, man. You left three men there. You might as well drop a rock in Redstone River to dam the stream."

Smith didn't say anything. He stared gloomily ahead at the niche in the north rim that marked Horsetail Canyon. Finally he said: "Then what can three of us do?"

"That depends," answered Hugh. "If it looks right, we can do plenty. If it don't, we'll round up your boys, and finish the fight one way or the other."

"What about the girl?" Kendall demanded.

"If she's alive, I'm going after her."

Smith looked at Hugh sharply. "I still don't know who you are, and I don't know why you're in this up to your neck if you don't figger on me paying you gun fighter's wages."

"I'm drawing my pay sure and regular," Hugh said, "and now I'm trying to earn it. I looked into yours and Grosset's records before I came here, Redstone. Grosset's done this same thing before. He hogs a range, ruins it with too many sheep, and moves in on somebody else. I'm not against sheep, Redstone. They're here to stay, but you can build a sheep business just like

you can a cattle business if you don't try to hog it all. That's why I'm on your side, and why I'm gonna stop Ben Grosset if I have to kill him."

"You still ain't said who you was working for," Smith said.

"And I won't," Hugh answered curtly, "but I'll tell you this. I'm trying to bring law into this country. When the fight's over, see that you get a sheriff who does his own job instead of figgering on you doing it for him. We'll let it go at that."

It was nearly dusk when they rode into Horsetail Canyon. Hugh kept close to the west wall until they were opposite the place Jake Rubens had bought. Then they angled away from the wall until they came to a ridge that broke sharply down toward the narrow flat that lay along the creek. From the top they could look directly into the Mitchel ranchyard. There, covered by a thicket of jackpines, they reined up, and what they saw brought a deep-voiced curse from Hugh Latham's throat.

Jake Rubens' herd of milk cows had been slaughtered. Their bodies lay scattered between the house and the barn and behind the barn. Jake Rubens lay sprawled in front of the house, lifeless eyes staring at the darkening sky, stiff fingers clutching a gun butt.

"Would your men do that?" Hugh demanded.

"No," Smith answered hoarsely. "Looks to me like that's Al Curtin lying back of the house."

Hugh saw the other dead man

then, and slowly nodded. "Chances are all three of your men are around there somewhere. Grosset might be in the house, but more likely he's got his main camp farther up the creek with the sheep."

"I thought I saw a man's face at a window," Kendall said.

Hugh dismounted. "We'll belly along that wash." He nodded at a gully that cut above the house, "and sneak in through the back. It would be like Grosset to lay a trap here. If he did, we'll spring it."

"There's still only three of us," Smith pointed out.

"But we've got surprise on our side," Hugh said. "There's no trap fast guns and surprise won't spring. Come on."

They left their horses in the jackpines, and crawled down the dry creek bed until they were directly behind the woodshed. Crouching low, they raced to the woodshed, and worked around it to a front corner. A board had been partly torn off at the corner, and Hugh could see through the crack. A man was standing at the edge of the back porch smoking. He got up, stretched, and started for the front of the house. Hugh made a faint scratching sound on the side of the woodshed. The man paused, and turned to look curiously at the woodshed.

Again Hugh made the scratching sound. The man started toward the woodshed, and paused. Hugh grinned. He could almost see the fellow's brain working as he stood there, torn between an innate sense of laziness and the curiosity that was stirring in him. Hugh kicked

the side of the shed lightly. Apparently, then, the man decided he'd better see what kind of an animal was making the racket. He came on to the corner of the woodshed. When he was still one step away Hugh whipped his body around the corner squarely into the Grosset killer, grabbing his throat with one hand and squeezing hard to keep back the yell that was trying to come out, and slashing his gun barrel down with the other hand. The fellow crumpled without a sound. Hugh eased his body to the dirt.

Hugh jerked his head at Smith and Kendall. They catfooted to the back porch and across it.

"I'm getting dang tired of eating this cold grub," a man was grumbling. "Can't even light a lamp to see if I'm hitting my mouth."

"Quit bellyaching," another man snarled. "We can't afford to show a smoke. If that Latham hombre comes—" He never finished, for Hugh turned the knob, kicked the door open, and came in with both guns blazing.

Four men at the table were out of their chairs and spinning toward the door the second they heard Hugh, hands plummeting for gun butts. In that moment it seemed as if the four walls would be torn apart by the violence of Colt thunder that erupted in the room.

Hugh stood just inside the door, guns ribboning the faint light with their jagged streaks of fire. One man pitched headlong across the table, head dropping into a plate of beans. Then he slid off and hit the

floor. Another man lurched forward a step and went down in a pile.

Lead split the door jamb beside Hugh's face. He felt splinters knife into his face, but it brought no pause in the steady trigger squeeze, the pound of the gun butts against his hard palm, the evenly spaced jets of flame that danced from his gun muzzles. A third man had slumped against the wall, head wobbling uncertainly. Then he collapsed sideways. The last Grosset killer dived for a window, smashed his head and shoulders through the glass, hung there momentarily as Hugh's lead drove life from him. Then the weight of his body brought his head back through the shattered glass. He dropped to the floor below the window and lay there.

Hugh paced into the room, holding one loaded shell in each gun, and watched for a movement from the men on the floor. Kendall and Smith were behind him.

"Get the hombre that's outside," Hugh told Kendall. "He's gonna talk."

Hugh examined the men, saw that they were dead, and by the time Kendall and Smith came in with the unconscious killer, he had lighted a lamp. He picked up a pan of cold water from the stove, and sloshed it on the fellow's face. The Grosset man spluttered, shook his head, and looked dazedly around.

"Take a look at your pals, hombre," Hugh ordered, and prodded him with a gun muzzle. "If you look good you'll see they're all done with Ben Grosset's dirty work. Mebbe you'd like to talk."

The man's head bobbed eagerly. "Yeah, sure, I got no reason not to."

"What happened here?"

"We got the drop on Smith's outfit," the man mumbled. "They're dead. Then we got the nester, and killed his cows."

"Where's the girl?"

"Ben's got her at his camp at the forks of the canyon."

"Where's his main outfit?"

"Down in the valley somewhere. They'll hit Jacob's JK tonight. Ben's bringing his sheep down tomorrow. He's got one band on the Orke place now."

Hugh wheeled to face Redstone Smith, his face gray and tight. "Take this hombre with you. You won't have time to find your outfit. You'll have to get your town dudes, and do what you can to hold the Jacob place. No lynching, Redstone. See to that."

"Sure." Smith nodded his big head, black eyes fixed on Hugh. "What are you gonna do?"

"I'm going after the girl."

"It's suicide," Smith bellowed. "You can't do it, man. Wait till you get help."

Hugh's lips were a straight, mirthless line. "I'll take care of myself, Redstone. Grosset won't have many men with him. Just him and Dave, and mebbe some sheep herders. Git moving, Redstone."

V

Full twilight came to the canyon floor shortly after Hugh left Smith and Kendall. Hugh watched the

last bright sunlight fall upon the rim above him, and fade. Darkness, then, complete and impenetrable. It would be more than an hour before the moon came up, and by that time he should be close to Ben Grosset's camp.

Before they left the Mitchel place they had found the bodies of the three Smith men. They had carried them and Jake Rubens' body into the house, and shut the doors. Redstone Smith had stood over the motionless figures of the men who had drawn his pay for years, his big face gray and tight. Then he'd raised his eyes to Hugh, and said hoarsely, "They'll pay for this, every killing son of them. Mebbe you won't come back from the job you're heading into, but I'm promising you this, Latham: Before I'm done, I'll see to it that Ben Grosset won't never hog another range."

Cold urgency rode with Hugh. This job had to be done tonight. Back down in the valley Redstone Smith might be able to gather enough men to stop Grosset's gun crew, but the big job was here, far up Horsetail Canyon. Nobody knew better than Hugh the odds he had to face, but inside his coat was a star that had caused him to face odds as great as this from the moment the governor had pinned it on him.

There was a prospector's cabin just below the forks of the canyon, and Hugh saw the light in its single front window. Ben Grosset would be in that cabin, as always behind the cutting edge of the killer crew he hired. He hadn't put out a guard, and Hugh hadn't expected to run into

one. Grosset would count on the five men he'd left at the Mitchel place to hold back any Smith men who dared invade the canyon.

Hugh reined up below the cabin, and tied his horse. A trail ran along the creek, and he followed it for a time. Then, when he was within fifty feet of the cabin, he cut away from the trail into the jackpines and worked his way to the side of the cabin. There he paused for a time, listening, and hearing nothing but the night wind and a faraway coyote howl. He eased his guns in leather, moved on to the cabin's side, and around it.

It was a small cabin, one room, Hugh guessed, with no porch. Hugh palmed a gun, pushed the door open, and had one quick look at little, wicked-faced Ben Grosset sitting at a rough table, of Carly Rubens standing beside the stove, and Lanky Dave Grosset on the bed, a cigarette drooping from a corner of his mouth.

"Hook the rafters," Hugh ordered. "You're under arrest. You're going to Smithville to hang."

Dave Grosset reared up, cigarette dropping out of his mouth. Ben spun out of his chair and faced the door, hand dropping toward his gun butt and veering away when he saw Hugh's gun. Carly cried out involuntarily. There was none of the stubborn pride Hugh had seen on her face the night before. There was fear, deep and nerve-chilling. Now hope bloomed in its place.

For a time they stared at the gun held rock-steady in Hugh Latham's hand, Ben Grosset from where he

stood beside the table, rat eyes narrowed. Dave still sitting on the bed. Slowly they raised their hands.

"How'd you get by the Mitchel place?" Ben Grosset asked.

Hugh nodded at Carly. "Lift their irons," he said. When the girl came closer he saw the dark bruise on her chin. "Who hit you?"

"He did." Carly jerked a thumb at Dave Grosset.

Hugh's eyes whipped to the younger Grosset. "Sometimes," he breathed, "I'm sorry the law don't have a special punishment for polecats like you."

"Wait." Ben Grosset had moved away from Carly, eyes fixed on Hugh. "Why do you figger we'll hang in Smithville?"

"You've got crimes enough behind you," Hugh said grimly, "to hang you a dozen times. You just went once too many, Ben. You should have been satisfied after you stole the Dry Lake country."

"I had a feeling we should o' gunshot you when we had a chance, Latham," Grosset said. "You ain't no gun-proddy drifter. Who the devil are you?"

Latham grinned mirthlessly. "A lawman, Grosset. That's why I'm giving you a chance at a fair trial. Did you get their irons, Carly?"

"Wait," Grosset said again, and moved away from Carly another step. "I can't make a play with my arms in the air. I want to know how you got past the Mitchel place."

Ben Grosset was stalling for time. Hugh saw that, but he suddenly-realized, too, that he'd made a mistake

in telling Carly to get the guns. Grosset might be able to move fast enough to grab the girl and use her for a shield.

"Never mind about the guns, Carly," Hugh said. "We'll let 'em unbuckle their belts. Might be better if they get a chance to make a play. I'd rather let some daylight through their hides than see 'em hanged."

Slowly Ben Grosset's fingers fumbled with the buckle. "You might get away with this, Latham, but I don't think so. By morning my boys will be forted up on the JK. They'll have a showdown ruckus with Smith's outfit. Then—"

Hugh had heard nothing behind him, but he sensed a difference in Grosset's voice. Perhaps it was the triumphant leer on Dave Grosset's skinny face, or the tightening of Carly's mouth as she looked past Hugh into the night. Or perhaps again it was that invisible monitor in a man's brain flashing its warning signal.

Hugh ducked and twisted with the speed of a striking panther, felt his Stetson leave his head and the partially numbing impact of a blow slashing across his scalp. He'd fired once, and spilled forward on his face as the Grossets clawed for guns and brought them out smoking. Hugh triggered a shot at Dave, and missed. A slug splintered the floor in front of him as Hugh rolled aside. Then his head cleared. He caught Dave's face in his sights, and blasted a bullet through his middle. Dave raised up on tiptoe, swayed a moment, and spilled forward.

Ben Grosset hadn't fired, and Hugh wondered why in the split second it took him to swing his gun toward the range hog. Then he held his fire, for Carly had grabbed Grosset's gun hand, and they were wrestling back against the wall, Carly's body between Hugh and Grosset.

Grosset got an arm around Carly, and twisted her in front of him, his gun muzzle against her back.

"I'll make you a deal, Latham," Grosset panted. "My life for the girl's."

Slowly Hugh's trigger finger slacked. Grosset wasn't much bigger than Carly, his body almost hidden by hers. Carly's eyes were on Hugh. She shook her head.

"It doesn't make any difference about me," she cried. "I saw them kill my father."

Hugh got to his feet, and took a step toward them. "Only a rat would use a girl that way, Grosset."

Grosset's beady eyes glittered with furious hatred. "A rat wants to live, Latham," he snarled. "You've just about cooked my goose with your damned guns. You must've got my boys I left on the Mitchel place or you wouldn't be here."

"That's right," Hugh said, and took another step.

"If it's a deal, Latham, drop your gun," Grosset shrilled.

"I won't make the deal," Hugh said. "Not with you holding a gun in the girl's back."

"Then she'll die," Grosset said evenly. "I know how men like you think. You'll never forget you killed her."

Carly hung limply in Grosset's

arm, her eyes never leaving Hugh's face, and he read the message that was in them. She stiffened suddenly, and flung herself sideways, far enough that Grosset's bullet cut only a bloody gash along her back. For that instant Grosset was uncovered, an instant long enough for Hugh to drive a bullet into his chest and smash life from him.

Grosset sprawled back against the wall. Carly was falling, too, but before Hugh could reach her she was on her feet.

"Hugh," she sobbed. "Hugh."

He put an arm about her, and steadied her. "It's done," he said softly. "Let me see how bad you're hit." He had his look. "You'll lose a little blood, but you ain't really hurt. Carly, this is an old business to me, but I've never seen a braver thing than what you did tonight."

The smile on her white lips was a ghostly thing. "I saw my father die," she whispered. "Now I know the difference between you and these men you fight. As long as I live I'll never forgive myself for calling you one of them."

There was a new humility about Carly Rubens. She was no wildcat now that needed taming.

"We'll let that go, Carly, just like you don't try to bring back water that's gone over a dam. Now mebbe we better ride. Who's the jigger?" Hugh jerked a thumb at a man who lay stretched in the doorway, half in and half out of the cabin.

"One of Grosset's herders," Carly answered. "I saw him behind you. He hit you with a chunk of pine limb.

I tried to warn you, but I couldn't get anything out of my throat. It seemed like an hour that I watched him bring that club back to hit you."

Hours later when Hugh and Carly rode out of Horsetail Canyon, they heard the roar of guns from the JK.

"Mebbe you'd better hike for town," Hugh said. "Sounds like the fight ain't done. I'll ride over and take a hand."

Carly's mouth was set stubbornly. "This is my fight all the way now, Hugh. I'll go with you."

But there was no more fighting for Hugh Latham and Carly Rubens that night. When they came to the JK, the firing wasn't at the ranch, but was fading away toward the north rim. There were lights in the house, and Hugh called. Redstone Smith bulked big in the doorway.

"Latham," he shouted jubilantly when he saw who it was. "Come in here. You all right?"

"Right as rain," Hugh said, as he and Carly came into the lamplight. He introduced Carly, and added: "She's got a bullet burn along her back. Mebbe you got somebody here who can patch it up."

Mrs. Jacobs led Carly away, and Hugh told Smith and the rest what had happened at the forks of Horsetail Canyon. Then he asked: "What went on here?"

Redstone Smith boomed a laugh. "The town dudes, as you called 'em, fought good enough to put that bunch of killers back on their heels. While we was swapping lead with 'em, Lafe and the rest of my boys heard the ruckus, and hit that bunch of lead-slinging varmints from the rear.

They turned up their tails and coy-
oted for the rim. I reckon the boys'll
chase 'em clean out of the country.
Latham, we've licked 'em. There
ain't gonna be no sheep in my val-
ley."

"Your valley, Redstone?" Hugh
asked softly.

The big man's face went crimson.
"Wal now, Latham, dang it, it ain't
my valley no more. It was you that
licked Grosset. You half-licked him
when you got Dance, and knocked
out another quarter when you gunned
Crib Lukes. Tonight, by hokey, you
finished the job. Latham, who in
tunket are you, anyway?"

Carly had slipped back into the
room. Hugh looked down at her
face, and what he saw there helped
him make up his mind. He said:
"Redstone, I reckon I can tell you
now. I've been a special State of-
ficer, a sort of trouble shooter the

governor's been sending out to
places like this where it looked like
they needed an outsider to sort o'
iron things out. The reason I'm
telling you is that the big jobs are
done. I figger I've smelled enough
powder smoke to last me a lifetime.
They're gonna need a man on the
Rubens place, and I figgered I might
give 'em a hand when they start
raising white faces." He looked
down at Carly again, and grinned.
"They've got a mighty purty girl
who's been something of a wildcat.
Mebbe I could help tame her."

"That's great," old Redstone
boomed. "We need men like you in
our valley. It's mostly yours now,
anyhow."

But neither Hugh nor Carly heard
him, for Carly was saying softly:
"I'm not much wildcat now, Hugh,
but I won't mind you taming what's
left."

THE END



"Goshamighty—Buzzards! Lucky we planted Hank this mornin'."



PRAIRIE MONARCH

by JIM WEST

*—The best lands of the West were his domain until
the iron horse came thundering over the range*

BUFFALO: the name given to various wild oxen, especially the North American bison.

That definition, taken from the bob-tailed dictionary on our desk, may do for some people. But it leaves out a lot. The buffalo, the great, shaggy, brown-coated monarch of the Western plains was the biggest and, at one time, the most numerous animal in all America.

Counting wild guesses and the smaller figures of conservative naturalists, no one has estimated the herds of buffalo that thundered across the prairies a hundred years ago at less than *fifty million* animals. One authority states there were that many in Texas alone. At any rate before the white man's civilization

overtook him, the American bison was reputedly the most numerous of all the world's large land mammals.

For centuries this ruminant, bovine quadruped was the economic mainstay of the Plains Indians. Then for a slaughtering, murderous decade or two the vast herds that often darkened the plains for miles provided a Roman carnival and quick money for the professional buffalo hunters who moved in when the railroads opened up the West to settlement by pioneer homesteaders.

After that the buffalo was no more. Its incredible numbers vanished like light snow under a spring sun. As a wild animal it became extinct. About the only place you can see one of these creatures today is on

the obverse side of a buffalo nickel.

There are some live ones of course. In zoos and a few specially set aside Government and private reservations. Perhaps there are five thousand actual buffalo in the country today. Five thousand! A pitiful salvage out of fifty million buffalo that formerly ranged from the plains of Texas to and beyond the Canadian border, and from the Missouri and upper Mississippi clear to the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains.

The reservation herds are increasing. They are growing too fast for range land put by to feed them. So even today, if you are sufficiently interested, you can hunt a virtually tame buffalo once a year in Arizona under Government auspices and strict regulations.

Generally associated with the Western prairie regions where their concentration was greatest, the buffalo was originally by no means confined to that area. Before the coming of the white man to the new world he roamed the mid-west and eastern plains, and cut trails through the forest woodlands of the South. Both the Indians and the pioneers made use of these buffalo windings, one of the most notable being the path Daniel Boone followed when he moved from Tennessee up through the Cumberland Gap to the salt licks in Kentucky.

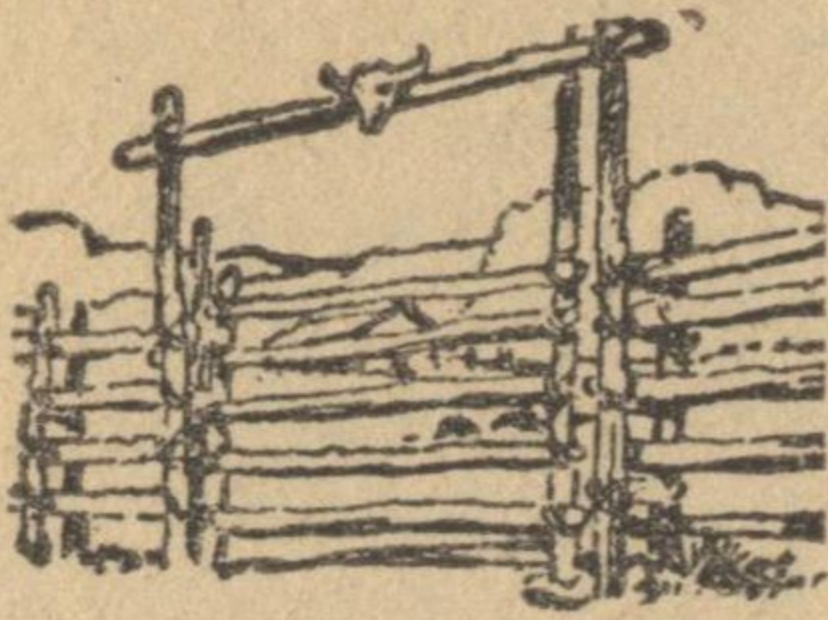
Shortly after 1800 the buffalo had vanished from the American scene as far as the country east of the Mississippi was concerned. His best feeding grounds and his ultimate tragedy lay in the rich grass country further West.

To the Plains Indians the buffalo was a wonderful symbol of nature's beneficence. The buffalo had a part in their religion. Songs were sung and dances held in his honor. Tribal wars were fought over choice sections of buffalo range. The coming of the white man himself did not create among the Indians as much alarm, or stir them to the fury that was aroused when they foresaw the destruction of the buffalo herds as a deliberate part of the newcomers' program.

That it was a necessary part didn't help the Indians a bit. To them the American bison was bed and board, food, shelter and protection. They lived by following the herds, and in an excellent primitive example of practical game conservation killed only the buffalo they needed.

The Plains tribes used buffalo robes to lie on at night. Dressed buffalo skins covered their lodges and tepees. They fashioned parts of the tough hide into shields strong enough to turn an enemy lance or arrow. Out of the smaller bones they made fleshing tools for dressing the hides; from the blades of the larger bones, hoes and axes. They





made spoons and ornaments out of the horns, and cooking utensils from the green hide. Even their bow strings were fashioned from strands of buffalo sinew.

The Indians ate the meat of course, either cooked or dried into hard strips of buffalo jerky. And as a final fillip the dried skin of the bushy, tasseled tail was frequently tied to a stick by indulgent squaws who used it as a brush to keep the flies away from their sober-faced, brown-skinned little papooses.

A full-grown buffalo can be a formidable animal. Standing six feet high at the shoulder, it is about ten feet long and weighs in the neighborhood of a short ton—two thousand pounds. The sharply pointed curved horns set far apart on a broad, strong skull are dangerous and powerful weapons.

Not overly smart, buffaloes have customarily mean dispositions. Angered, they have been known to catch a horse and rider in their horns and carry them a hundred yards before dashing them helplessly to the ground and goring or stomping them to death. Old-timers generally considered the buffalo more dangerous than a grizzly bear.

Perhaps it was some sixth sense,

an inner warning of their approaching doom that prompted them to take particular exception to the thin lines of steel that were laid down as the advancing railroads pushed West across the plains in the decades that followed the middle of the last century. At any rate time and again herds of them stopped the snorting iron horse, and broke the couplings between the cars as they disputed the railroad's right of way. They made match sticks out of telegraph poles that blocked the thick mass of their shoulder-to-shoulder migrations.

When the railroads were building, thousands of buffalo were killed to clear the animals from the line of the tracks and to provide fresh meat for the construction crews. Such slaughter cut down the herds. But it didn't destroy the buffalo.

Colonel Dodge, builder of the Union Pacific, explained the real reason for the buffalo's demise in his "Plains of the Great West" written from personal, first-hand experience. Said the Colonel:

"In 1872 some enemy of the buffalo discovered that their hides could be sold in the market for a goodly sum. By wagon, on horseback and afoot, the pelt hunters poured in, and soon the unfortunate buffalo was without a moment's peace or rest. . . . I myself have counted one hundred and twelve carcasses inside a semi-circle of two hundred yards radius, all of which were killed by one man from the same spot, and in less than three-quarters of an hour."

Though thousands of thousands of skins were thus sent to Eastern mar-

kets, they represented only a small portion of the slaughter. For lack of skill in shooting and lack of knowledge in preserving the hides on the part of green hunters, every hide marketed, particularly in the early years, represented anywhere from three to four or even five dead buffalo.

Figures compiled at the time show that during 1872, 1873 and 1874 white hunters alone killed over a million buffalo yearly on the Western plains. No wild creature could long survive that sort of a blitz. "Congress"—again we quote Colonel Dodge—"talked of interfering. But only talked."

It was not until 1905 when the buffalo, as far as wild herds were concerned, had already vanished that Theodore Roosevelt and others established the American Bison Society, and raised money to create a National Bison Range at Dixon, Mon-

tana, in the foothills of the Cabinet Mountains. That herd, now the second largest in the country, numbers about five hundred. More than a thousand surplus animals have already been removed from the fenced-in eighteen-thousand-acre range.

The buffalo's extermination was gruesomely sudden. Yet sooner or later he had to go. He was a monopolist. The rich lands he pre-empted were needed for the growth and expansion that have made the West the great empire that it is today. Settled on by pioneer cattlemen, farmers and homesteaders, the grasslands that supported the bison now do their lion's share in providing the nation with its beef, sheep and its all-important grain crops.

When the buffalo wanted range land he picked the country's best. Perhaps that as much as anything was the prairie monarch's real undoing.

THE END

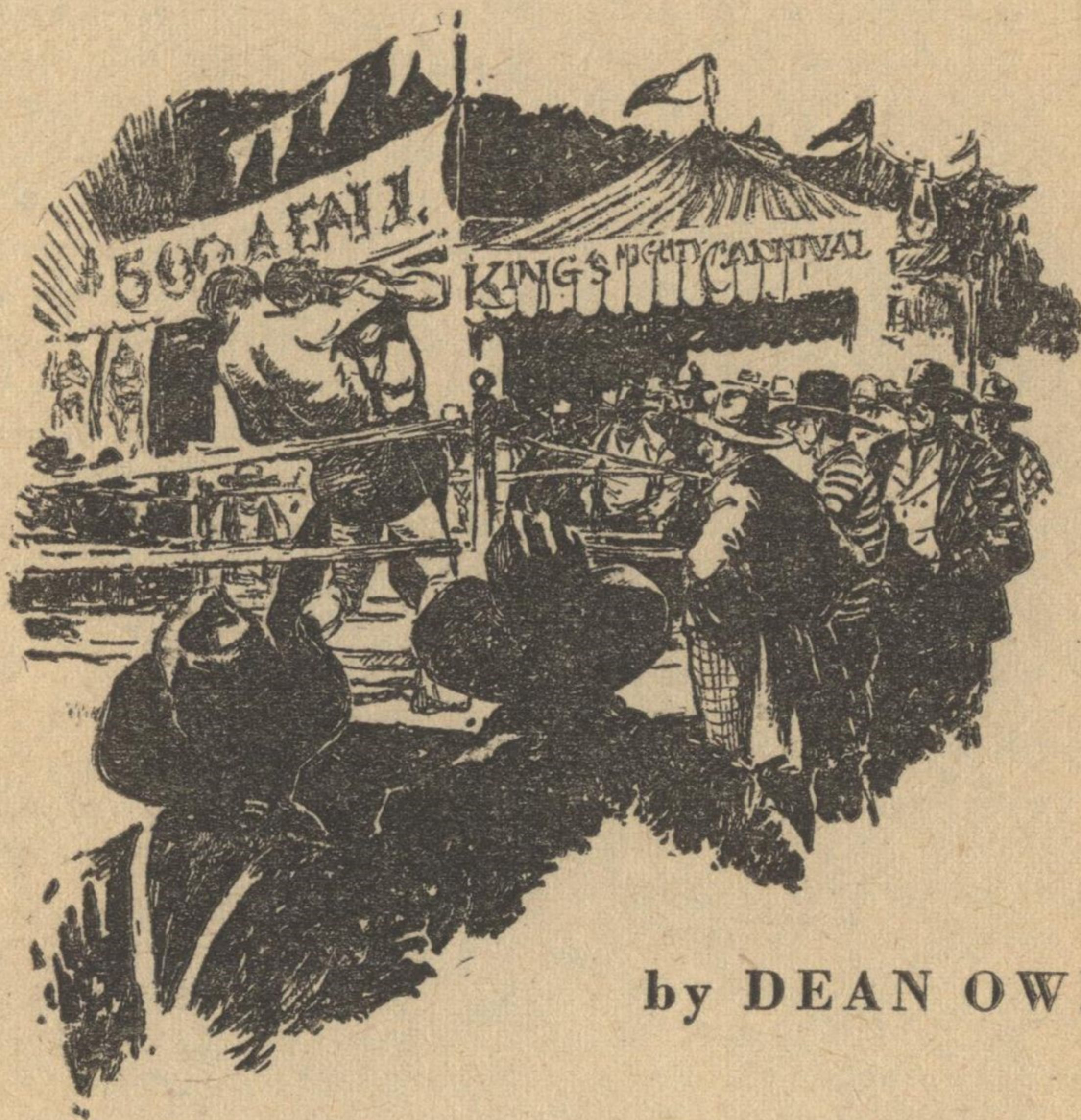


THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

So yuh think you've tangled with some ornery straw bosses in your time, eh. Well, how'd yuh like to have them Nazis and yellow-bellies ramroddin' this range? Make sure that won't never happen here, pardner, by

**BUYING EXTRA WAR BONDS AND STAMPS
NOW!**

TROUBLE BRANDED



by DEAN OWEN

*Whether he won or lost that bout with Curly Jarret
Big Chief Mike Donnegal was earmarked for Boothill*

I

BIG Chief Mike Donnegal would have given a lot to be a hundred miles from this Arizona town of Outpost. Donnegal's nerves were tight and he had a feeling that his past was catching up to him. He was sure of it when he saw the tall man in the black hat.

Donnegal stared at him, through the flaps of the lean-to tent behind the wrestling ring. Torchlights threw a wavering yellow glow over the grounds, faintly lighting the cheap tents and faded banners of King's Mighty Carnival.

For a moment, Donnegal lost sight of the man, as a wave of cowhands

and townspeople swept down the midway. Small boys nibbled on candied apples, excitement showing on their freshly scrubbed faces.

Donnegal had long black hair that was caught by a beaded band. He looked like an Indian with his tanned face and black eyes. His bare torso was bronzed by the sun. He wore wrestling tights, and beaded moccasins on his big feet.

His black eyes narrowed as he saw the tall man again. Cold sweat touched his forehead. The man was standing just beyond the wrestling ring, staring up at a banner which read:

Big Chief, full-blooded Sioux, will meet all comers in the ring. Five hundred dollars to the man who can throw him.

A small boy came by, thumping the canvas tents with a souvenir cane, a slanted cap on his head. Donnegal saw the kid come up and stand beside the man in the black hat. The kid looked up at the banner, then he touched a charm the man wore on a chain that was stretched across his vest.

"Where'd yuh git the gold hoss, mister?" The youngster's voice was edged with excitement.

Donnegal saw the man look down at the boy, then hold the gold charm in his hand. "This is for bein' top money rider at Prescott, son."

The boy was eager now. "What's the writin' on it say?"

The man smiled and his voice was bitter. "It says: To Curly Jarret—"

He got no further. The kid whooped. "You're Curly Jarret, the

rodeo rider. I heard about you. Fellers say you kin stick on a hoss like there was glue in the saddle!"

Curly Jarret patted the kid on the head and moved away. Inside the lean-to tent, Donnegal tensed. He had an urge to go out and shake Jarret's hand and see the bronco rider's warm smile as it had been in the old days. But Donnegal didn't move, for he had a vision of Tommy, Jarret's kid brother, lying in a corral, his body broken and smashed by the hoofs of a killer horse.

That memory brought sweat to Donnegal's forehead. Through the tent flaps he saw Jarret turn and look back. Then he was lost in the crowd.

Donnegal turned back inside the tent. He felt cold and he grabbed the tent pole to steady himself. Tod Canavee, who ran the wrestling show, looked up, his gray eyes resting on his wrestler's tanned face.

"Look like you got the ague."

Checkers Whitley smiled crookedly from his seat on a folding chair. The contempt some little men feel toward big men was plain in his expression.

Canavee sat on a box, a pencil and paper in his heavy hand. There were figures on the paper. He was a solid, compact man with an ugly slash of a mouth and eyes that were cold as gray ice. He wore a brown Van Dyke.

"I got the usual thousand dollars spread around. Sit down and calm yourself."

Checkers Whitley sat alongside Canavee. He was five feet tall and every inch of him was vicious. He

had a twisted smile, an arrogant manner. In the years past, someone had dubbed him "Checkers" because of the fancy vests he sported. He carried two derringers in the pockets of his vest.

Checkers' yellow-specked eyes were turned on Donnegal's face. His voice was high-pitched like a woman's.

"Donnegal's got the shakes."

Donnegal stared down at the little man. "Some day I'm goin' to take you apart."

Checkers Whitley crouched on the folding stool there at the tent wall. His small thumbs were hooked in his vest pockets, just above the bulge made by those one-shot derringers.

Tod Canavee got up and stretched his big arms. "I got an easy mark lined up for you here in Outpost. A dumb cowpoke who doesn't know what time to eat."

Whitley grinned crookedly. "Donnegal's got yellow fever."

Donnegal looked as if he were going to grab the little man in his big hands. Then he unbuckled the belt that held up his dark red tights.

"I'm through, boys. Get yourselves another Big Chief."

Outside, the band was playing "Torchlight Parade." For a moment both Canavee and Whitley stared at Mike Donnegal. Touching Donnegal on the arm to get his attention, Canavee brought his right hand out from beneath his tailored coat. A gun gleamed in the light from the lantern that hung from the ridge pole.

"I thought this might happen. I

reckon you know that Curly Jarret's in town."

Checkers Whitley had a mocking light in his yellow-specked eyes. "It was Jarret's kid brother who was your partner in that hoss ranch at Mesa, wasn't it, Donnegal? You let the kid get kicked to death by a wild hoss. No wonder you wanted to join our show an' run."

Color darkened Donnegal's bronzed cheeks. He stood there, his eyes narrowed until they were thin lines of black. "I've gone a long ways, keepin' out o' Curly Jarret's way. I don't want to kill him and I don't want him to kill me."

The gun in Canavee's big hand did not waver. "You're goin' through with this match tonight. I got a thousand bet around town that you're throwin' a cowhand called Joey Bakewell. After tonight, if you want to run, why all right. Checkers and I are washin' ourselves of King's Carnival anyhow."

Checkers Whitley had one of his derringers out of his vest pocket. The yellow in his eyes seemed to glow as he moved the muzzle in a tight circle, as if picking the best spot to plant a bullet in Donnegal's big body.

Outside there was laughter, music and shouts of the barkers. Donnegal could hear the clatter of hoofs made by Nero and his trained horses. But inside the lean-to tent was death. Neither Canavee nor Whitley were men who would let a thousand dollars slip through their fingers.

Mike Donnegal shrugged his broad shoulders. "Mebbe I'm through run-

ning." He dismissed the possibility of jumping the two men and buckled on his tights. "This is the last night."

Canavee smiled and stowed away his gun. "That's better."

Whitley still kept the derringer trained on Donnegal. He said: "I'm goin' to be in the tent when you meet Joey Bakewell. Try runnin' out and you'll get a bullet."

Canavee looked out through the tent flaps. A crowd was gathering, for it was eight o'clock, the hour scheduled for the match between Big Chief Mike Donnegal and the town of Outpost's hero, Joey Bakewell.

"It's time," Canavee said. "Come out when I give you the cue."

Donnegal watched Canavee slip through the tent flaps and begin his spiel to the crowd. Donnegal had never seen Joey Bakewell, the man slated to meet him. Bakewell was just another hopeful trying to win five hundred dollars. Some of them were tough, some easy.

II

As he waited to go into the ring, Donnegal thought of the old days at Mesa, on the Nevada side of the Sierras. And how Tommy Jarret and Curly had been his friends. He thought of old Greek George, who ran the Mesa Cafe and who had taken an interest in Donnegal and taught him to wrestle. And Donnegal remembered how he had joined Canavee and the carnival when it played Mesa and he had thrown Canavee's current "Big Chief" and collected

five hundred dollars.

That was shortly after Tommy's death. Donnegal had just received that letter from Curly. The Prescott Rodeo was over and Curly Jarret was in the hospital recovering from a bad throw. Curly had written:

When I can walk again, I'm killing you, Mike. You let Tommy die.

And now Curly Jarret was here in Outpost!

Donnegal had thought that days and nights filled with excitement in new towns, would help erase the picture of Tommy Jarret's broken, lifeless body there in the corral of their little horse ranch in the Sierras. Pete Diego was running the ranch now, and Donnegal didn't care if he ever saw the place again, with Curly feeling the way he did.

The high-pitched voice of Checkers Whitley snapped Donnegal back to the present. "Go on, you big ox. Canavee's waitin'."

Smothering his contempt for Whitley, Donnegal stepped out of the tent. He slid through the ropes and stood there, arms folded across his chest, staring beyond the crowd. He heard Canavee introduce him. There were the usual catcalls and yells of derision. It was an old story to Mike Donnegal. No one wanted to see him win. No one smiled, no one called a greeting. The crowd waited for their man, their home-town hero, to enter the ring. At last he came and the crowd lifted a throaty roar to the star-filled sky.

Joey Bakewell was long and lean

and he came lurching through a lane that had suddenly opened. His eyes were wild and long, stringy hair fell across his flushed forehead. Donnegal watched him run at a crazy gait to the ropes where he got tangled up to fall on his face. Donnegal's muscles tensed and some signal of warning kept hammering at his brain. Somehow he knew that Curly Jarret was mixed up in this. Donnegal searched the crowd, his narrowed black eyes sweeping across the bank of faces. A feverish stab of fear went through him.

The crowd was stunned to silence when Joey Bakewell sprawled there inside the ring. Bakewell was trying to pull off his shirt and boots at the same time. Canavee was tugging at his Van Dyke, an uneasy, worried look on his face.

"Bakewell's drunker'n a Comanche in a whiskey barrel," a man in the crowd said.

Curly Jarret was walking slowly down the lane, which had not closed after Bakewell's erratic entrance. Jarret's eyes were blue and hard as gun metal as they stared across the ropes to where Mike Donnegal stood.

Joey Bakewell spotted Jarret and got to his feet. He leaned over the ropes and almost fell down. "Gimme 'nother pull at that bottle, stranger. One more'n I'll make this Injun eat that feather."

He ran out of wind and his knees buckled, but he managed to hold himself upright on the ropes. Curly Jarret stepped inside the ring. For once in his life, Canavee seemed unable to speak. He kept running his

fingers through his Van Dyke, his wary eyes shuttling from Bakewell to Jarret, as if trying to figure the thing out.

The crowd's mood was becoming ugly. Jarret held up his hands for silence. He was a commanding figure there in the ring. He was fully as tall as Donnegal and as broad. But where Donnegal was bronzed, from constant exposure to the sun, Jarret's skin was ruddy, the type that never tans.

Jarret looked at Donnegal, all the hate a man can spawn showing in his blue eyes. Then he turned to the crowd, lowered his hands to his sides, for the muttering had quieted somewhat. He pointed to Bakewell, who still clung to the ropes, his jaw slack, eyes wide and bloodshot.

"The kid here has a snootful. Sorry he got drunk. Thought he could hold his liquor. I'll be willing to take his place."

There was an angry murmur from the crowd and Mike Donnegal tensed, his teeth clenching until knots of muscle showed on his dark cheeks. Then the boy who had admired Jarret's gold charm came pushing through the crowd. His youthful face was flushed with excitement.

"This here is Curly Jarret, champion bronc rider. He'll make this Injun eat dirt."

At mention of Jarret's name, the crowd went silent. Then a roar went up. All this time Donnegal stood there, pressing back against the ropes until the coarse hemp bit into his skin. Sweat poured down over his bronzed body and he suddenly realized that a man can never run far

enough to escape trouble.

Already Jarret was peeling off his coat. Then came his shirt. Two punchers yanked the drunken Joey Bakewell through the ropes, holding him by the arms to keep him from falling on his face. Bakewell was out on his feet.

A short man with a blocky, red face spoke up. Donnegal remembered the man from somewhere, but couldn't place him. The man looked queerly at Donnegal, then said: "I read that Curly Jarret got crippled in a spill at Prescott. Shucks, he ain't in no shape to be wrestlin' this here Injun. Outpost's bet money on this match and we're goin' to git a fair play."

Canavee was standing at the corner of the ring, a scowl ridging his forehead. He looked over Jarret's big body and cast a sidelong glance at Donnegal. The two men were perfectly matched, if size meant anything. Canavee's eyes reflected the worry that was running through his mind. He was thinking of that money he had bet.

He stepped forward, faced Jarret. "This is mighty irregular. I bet that Joey Bakewell would wrestle Big Chief. Either Bakewell gets into the ring, or the bets are forfeit."

Canavee stepped back as if struck with a club, for the roar that went up from the crowd at his words, held an ugly note. A couple of punchers had guns in their hands and for a minute it looked as though trouble might break loose. Jarret was smiling thinly, pulling off his boots. Canavee's face was pale. Then he forced a smile, looked at the crowd

and shrugged.

"If you boys want Jarret, it's all right with me."

He had to shout to make himself heard. Then, as if putting an end to the question of who would wrestle, he picked up Jarret's coat, shirt and boots and stepped out of the ring.

Donnegal still waited there beside the ropes, his eyes fixed on Jarret. Mechanically he pulled out the eagle feather from his hair and took off the beaded band. He dropped them to the dirt outside the ring.

III

With slow, measured steps, Curly Jarret limped toward Donnegal. There was that tight smile on his lips and the hate in his eyes. The crowd went silent. Not a sound broke the stillness. Beyond the crowd, Donnegal could glimpse the faces of the carnival troupe. They, too, sensed that something unusual was going to happen. This was no cut-and-dried bout between the carnival wrestler and a town rough-and-tumble artist. This was deadly.

When Jarret was three feet from Donnegal, he halted and his voice was low. "I swore I'd kill you, Donnegal. Tommy was my kid brother and you let him die."

He favored his right leg, throwing his weight on his left. Donnegal said: "You're a fool, Curly. I didn't want you and me to tangle, that's why I left Mesa. I thought mebbly you'd see the truth in time. Now get out. I don't want to hurt you."

Jarret laughed. "Think of Tommy when I'm beatin' the life out o' you!"

Then hardly had he finished than he smashed a big fist straight at Donnegal's jaw. Donnegal took it, shaking his head, blood running down from the corner of his mouth. The crowd roared. A drunk puncher was yelling: "This ain't no wrestlin' match, it's a fight! Kill 'im, Jarret!"

Donnegal backed up, pleading with Jarret. "Don't be a fool, Curly. The doc said if you ever hurt your leg again you might never walk. Call this off. I'll meet you with a gun, if that's what you want, but not this."

A voice in the crowd cut through Donnegal's speech. "I got twenty dollars on you, Jarret! Cut the palaver an' take this Injun!"

Other men shouted encouragement at Jarret. But Jarret seemed not to hear them. His fist smashed up again, but this time Donnegal pulled his head aside and the blow scraped the side of his face. Jarret plunged in, his teeth locked, lips bared. Jarret's big arms encircled Donnegal's waist. A sort of dazed look of unbelief showed on Donnegal's face.

Jarret had no technique but he had strength. The roar of the crowd was like distant thunder in Donnegal's ears as Jarret tripped him. They both fell to the hard-packed dirt. Donnegal lit on his back, Jarret on top. Curly Jarret, bronc rider, who would never ride the circuit again, was sitting astride big, bronzed Mike Donnegal, whipping his fists into his face. But Donnegal covered up, and, using his legs for leverage, hurled Jarret to one side.

The crowd was yelling, their voices

beating like mighty waves of sound against Donnegal's eardrums. Somebody pulled a gun and fired at the moon, the crash of the weapon adding to the din.

Donnegal whipped over, his brain clearing. He saw his advantage and got a hammer lock on Jarret. He held the man flat, their faces but inches apart. "Quit, Curly. You fool, listen. I couldn't stop Tommy from ridin' that killer hoss. He wouldn't listen to me—"

But while Donnegal talked, Jarret gathered his muscles. He rolled quickly to one side, slipped out of the hammer lock and got a choke hold on Donnegal. The big Irishman lay on his side and that mass of packed faces out there began to waver, then move like a wave. There was a roaring in his eardrums. He got a glimpse of Canavee's strained, anxious face there at ringside.

Jarret put on the pressure, his arm choking the wind from Donnegal. Veins stood out on Mike's forehead like purple ropes. And as he lay there, he thought of how the three of them, Tommy, Curly and himself, had grown up together at Mesa. How they had sworn to be true friends through life. But Tommy was dead. And now Curly, Tommy's brother, was trying to kill the man who had once been his best friend.

Donnegal realized that and the thought penetrated his dimming senses. It seemed that his neck would snap. Then he remembered a trick Greek George had taught him back in Mesa. Suddenly Donnegal let himself go limp and the palm of his hand shot up, caught Jarret on

the chin. Slowly he exerted pressure. He could feel Jarret's hold slipping. Jarret's head went back, farther, farther.

Then the hold was broken. Donnegal leaped free and got to his feet, his broad sweaty back covered with dirt. He was breathing heavily, and he saw that Jarret had a hard time getting to his feet. Curly Jarret's right leg was weakening. He tried to get up, fell back.

Donnegal stared in fascination, saw the light of determination in Curly Jarret's eyes. Hate was putting strength into his body. Slowly he came up. The crowd yelled again, little sensing the tragedy in that small rope inclosure.

Jarret stood there, his eyes fixed on Donnegal. Then he hobbled forward, swinging his fists. It went like that for three minutes, Donnegal backing up, Jarret hammering with bruised knuckles. Now Jarret could hardly stand, his right leg queerly bent.

Donnegal's face was sweat-marked, bloody. His lips were cut, one eye puffy. He watched Jarret and tried to send him some message with his eyes. A message that would tell him to quit.

The crowd was wild. Mike Donnegal looked over Jarret's shoulder and saw the blocky-faced man staring at him strangely. And once again Donnegal felt he should know the man. Just then Jarret hit Mike again, smashed up with the heel of his right hand. The blow caught Donnegal on the nose. Blood spurted over Jarret's hand.

"Finish it, Curly. Finish it." Donnegal dropped his arms to his sides, resignation in his voice. But Jarret either didn't hear him or the thought didn't register, for now he backed away and nearly fell. Donnegal didn't follow and Jarret came back in swinging. A haymaker right whistled up and Donnegal walked right into it. The blow landed on his chin and he went down as if the life had suddenly gone from his big body. He lay there in the dirt, dazed and hurt.

He heard the yells of the crowd and rolled his head a little so that he could see Canavee coming into the ring. Canavee tugged a big watch out of his vest pocket and began counting off the seconds. Twice he halted, looked at Donnegal, as if imploring him to rise and continue the match. But Donnegal didn't move.

Canavee raised Jarret's hand and a roar went up from the crowd. Checkers Whitley came out of the lean-to tent. He leaned over the ropes and spat on Donnegal's prostrate form. Donnegal tensed with rage, but he lay still.

Jarret collected his five hundred for throwing Donnegal. The bets were paid off and the crowd began to leave. Jarret had put on his shirt and boots. He held his hat and coat in his hand. He looked at Mike Donnegal, who had pulled himself up on the ropes.

Jarret was still breathing hard and his face was drawn with pain. He stood in a crouch, his left leg supporting his weight. He stared hard at Donnegal. "In the mornin' have a

gun when you walk out o' here."

That was all he said. He turned and nearly fell. A couple of men grabbed him by the arms and supported him. Donnegal watched Jarret disappear in the crowd. Then he turned and went into the tent.

Canavee and Checkers Whitley came in while Donnegal was changing his clothes. The promoter's face was white.

"You quit on me, Donnegal. You let Jarret beat you. You could've murdered him if you'd wanted to."

Checkers Whitley hung his thumbs in his vest pockets above the one-shot derringers. There was a sneer on his lips when he turned to Canavee. "Donnegal's cost us fifteen hundred dollars. It'll be a pleasure to watch Jarret gun him down."

Canavee stroked his Van Dyke, amusement displacing the anger in his eyes. "But we're not going to be around, Checkers. We have new fields to conquer."

Canavee had to prod the reluctant Whitley out of the tent. Donnegal heard their voices fade in the distance. The carnival was moving on. Donnegal put a gun in his belt. Already roustabouts were pulling stakes on the lean-to. Donnegal got out just before the tent came down on his head.

He walked toward town, seeing the yellow lights of saloons and hearing the tinkle of a piano and a drunk's voice raised in song.

Somewhere in the blackness a girl laughed and a man put down a window. Donnegal washed his face at a pump beside a watering trough.

The cold water seemed to take some of the ache out of his nose and eyes. But the ache within him was still there.

And as he stood there looking up at the stars, he thought of Tommy Jarret, that freckle-faced, bull-headed kid brother of Curly Jarret's. They were alike, those Jarrets. Once they got an idea into their heads it took dynamite to dislodge it. Tommy had wanted to be a rodeo rider like his brother.

"I can ride anything," Tommy had boasted. And once when he and Donnegal delivered a bunch of horses from their ranch to the Rocker H, Tommy had bought a Rocket H horse that had killed two men. The ranchers called the horse "Loco."

Suddenly Donnegal remembered that blocky-faced man he had seen in the crowd during the fight with Curly. It was Sam Fischer, who had been foreman of the Rocker H.

Donnegal went into the Queen High Saloon. He stood just inside the swing doors and braced himself to meet the steady gaze of the men at the bar. And when they turned their backs on him, he felt as if it were a blow; a worse blow than any delivered by Curly Jarret. He walked over and sat down in a chair by the wall.

The barkeep was a little man with thinning black hair. He set out the drinks on the bar and talked in an unusually loud voice. "That Curly Jarret is all man. He fought that fake Injun with a crippled leg. Doc Martin just looked in on him upstairs and said it took a gent with

guts to even stand on that leg, let alone try and fight."

A cowpuncher at the bar tossed down a drink. He said: "Funny how a gent who calls himself a Big Chief redskin can be so yellow."

He turned and looked over his shoulder at Donnegal. Mike felt his face grow hot. He half got out of his chair, then sank back. The puncher grinned and turned to the bar again.

Sam Fischer was standing there at the end of the bar, an untasted glass of beer in his hand. He stood there, staring at Donnegal, his eyes thoughtful, his blocky face betraying none of the thoughts that went through his mind.

After a moment Fischer said: "You can't always judge a man by what he does. Sometimes it takes more guts to quit than it does to fight."

The barkeep looked up. "What you mean, Sam? Have a drink; your beer's flat and so's your conversation."

The men at the bar laughed and Donnegal got up and headed for the door. The barkeep said: "I see the Big Chief's got a gun in his belt. Good idea, 'cause Jarret's goin' to kill him. Look better if the Chief is wearin' a gun when we bury him."

Donnegal stopped just short of the doors and turned. He faced the men, saw their inquiring looks, read the contempt in their eyes. Sam Fischer tossed off a straight whiskey, but said nothing.

Donnegal's voice was bitter. "When this thing between me an' Jarret is settled, I'll take on anybody at the

bar. So save your talkin' till tomorrow."

IV

Outside, the cool breeze from the mountains drove some of the angry heat from Mike Donnegal's face. He started to roll a cigarette, then looked up above the saloon. The barkeep had said that Curly Jarret was up there. Suddenly Donnegal threw tobacco and paper to the boardwalk and went around a corner of the building.

Mike Donnegal was a patient man, but his nerves had been rubbed raw by the happenings of the evening. Perhaps a talk with Curly might straighten things out, he reasoned.

He climbed the stairs that ran outside the building to the second floor. Inside, he moved down a long hallway. It was black as the inside of a tar barrel. Suddenly that blackness was split by orange flame, and the crash of a gun sent echoes bounding down the hall.

The gunshot came from a room at the rear of the building. Donnegal heard two men running. A window was raised. There was the sound of boot heels sliding over shingles, then two men racing in the direction of the railroad tracks.

Donnegal was running down the hall, his gun in his hand. He heard a man groan and stepped in where a door swung open. Men were running downstairs in the saloon, sprung into life by that shot. Boots thudded on the stairs.

Risking a match, Donnegal saw Curly Jarret lying half off the bed. There was a red splotch on his shirt.

Jarret's eyes were closed. His pants were wadded up in a corner of the room, his wallet on the floor. All these things Donnegal saw in the split second before his match went out.

Then men crowded the hall. The cowpuncher, who had spoken his piece downstairs, was in the lead, holding a lantern. Donnegal heard a train whistle blast. Heard a freight slow and then go banging away into the night. And many things began to click in his mind.

It took only seconds for these thoughts to make a pattern that Donnegal understood. Already the patrons of the saloon were rushing down the hall toward him.

The cowpuncher was pulling a gun now. Standing in the dark, Donnegal let him get close, then hit him hard. The man fell back. The lantern went out. Blackness came down like a curtain. Somebody fired and window glass crashed.

For a moment the men in the hall milled around in confusion. Then Donnegal was through the window. He slid over a slanting porch, dropped to the ground and ran. He heard a man yell. A gun flamed, but Donnegal had put a shed between himself and the saloon.

He knew where he had to go, what he had to do. Circling to the main street, he made for a hitch rack and grabbed the reins of a likely-looking sorrel. A second later he went spurting away into the night.

Back of him he heard a man shout: "That yellow wrestlin' gent shot Curly Jarret!"

Donnegal lined the sorrel out along the road. He could hear the steady drum of hoof beats behind and knew that pursuit had been quickly organized. Donnegal cut across open country as the thin wail of a train whistle reached his ears.

He sent the sorrel down a slant, just as a slow-moving freight train came in sight. Riding along beside the train, Donnegal let two or three cars pass, then grabbed the iron ladder of a box car. He left the saddle and climbed to the top of the car. For a moment he paused there, expecting to see a brakeman. But there was no one in sight.

Donnegal made his way along the top of the swaying cars until he came to a flat car loaded with crated mining machinery. He climbed down off the box car. A gun flamed almost in his face. He heard the bullet strike metal behind him and whine away into the night.

For the first time in months, Donnegal actually smiled, but it was a smile that was not good to see. Checkers Whitley and Canavee were there on that swaying flat car, hanging on to the crated machinery.

Checkers had his gun out and was ready for another shot. He fired, but the train hit a curve and the slug missed. Donnegal hung onto the swaying car with one hand and pawed for his gun with the other.

Only seconds had passed since the pair on the flat car had spotted him. Canavee was digging for his own weapon when Donnegal cut loose. Checkers Whitley gave a high-pitched scream. Donnegal saw him claw for

a hand hold on the crates. Then he swayed and fell off the car, rolling into the brush.

Tod Canavee had lost his composure. He fired twice, but both shots went wild. Then Donnegal leaped. For months he had hated Canavee and Whitley. The little man was taken care of. Now it was Canavee. Donnegal wanted to beat Canavee with his bare hands.

Donnegal's fist crashed into Canavee's face and the wrestling promoter dropped his gun and hung on to a crate of machinery, to keep from falling off the car. Donnegal let his own gun drop.

"There's money enough for both of us," Canavee yelled desperately. "We can work our little game with other carnivals—"

But Donnegal was thinking of Curly Jarret, lying back there in the hotel room. He grinned and hit Canavee. Then Canavee went berserk. He was fully as big as Donnegal and he suddenly began to fight desperately. His rush nearly knocked Donnegal off the flat car. Fists crashed into Donnegal's face, but he hung onto a crate with one hand. Then he brought up a big-knuckled hand. That hand smashed into Canavee's nose. The man yelled and hung onto Donnegal.

Donnegal pushed him aside. Then the train began to slow down and Donnegal saw a sign, "Adobe Wells 500 feet," flash by. Canavee had a long-bladed knife in his hand and rushed at Donnegal again. This time he was sure of himself.

Donnegal waited for him, his big mouth twisted in a tight grin. As

Canavee's knife came flashing up, Donnegal seized his wrist. The knife went flying and Canavee howled with pain. He tried to slug it out, but Donnegal hammered a big fist straight at his jaw. Canavee went down and Donnegal had to grab him to keep him from rolling off the car.

The train pulled to a stop and men with lanterns came running up to the flat car. A burly brakeman had a gun in his fist, the muzzle lined on Donnegal.

"Stand put, feller. Station agent here at Adobe Wells got a wire to set the red board and stop our freight. Posse is comin'. You make a move and I'll plant you good."

Canavee was groaning and trying to sit up, when the two dozen riders came surging up a few moments later. They had a rope and at first they were bent on using the loop end on Mike Donnegal. But they changed their minds when they heard the story Canavee told. Donnegal held the promoter with one hand, shaking him until his head bobbed as if it were on a string.

A jumble of words poured from Canavee's lips. He told how he and Checkers had waited until they saw Jarret go to his room above the saloon. They had slugged Jarret, but the ex-rodeo rider had fought back. They had to shoot him. But they got the five hundred he had been paid for the wrestling match. Then Canavee and Checkers Whitley had caught the freight.

Curly Jarret was there with the riders. He had a shoulder wound and he had lost a lot of blood. His

face was drawn and white in the lantern light.

The barkeep was there, too, a sawed-off shotgun resting on his saddle pommel. He turned to Curly. "The big feller got the gents that beefed you, Jarret. You and him still goin' to shoot it out?"

All the men turned to Jarret. Tod Canavee, trussed up like a calf, snarled: "I hope Jarret kills him." By that time some of the riders had found Checkers Whitley, a quarter of a mile down the track. The little man had a hole in his right leg and was swearing at Donnegal in his high-pitched voice as they brought him back.

Curly Jarret just sat his saddle, staring at Mike Donnegal. Then Sam Fischer spoke up.

"I'm usually a gent that minds his own business, but guess I got to say my piece. Last summer I was foreman at the Rocker H spread over near Bishop."

He went on to tell how Donnegal and Tommy Jarret had brought over some horses to sell from their little ranch at Mesa. All eyes were on Fischer. "We had a outlaw bronc we called Loco, 'cause that's just what he was. We was fixin' to kill the hoss when Tommy Jarret wants to buy him. Says if he kin ride this bronc, he'll be ready to hit the rodeo circuit like his brother, Curly. Donnegal and Tommy nearly had a fist fight. Donnegal told the kid to leave the hoss alone. I reckon Tommy was stubborn—like his brother. He took the hoss."

There was a heavy silence, broken

only by Canavee's swearing and the sound of escaping steam from the locomotive up ahead. The barkeep rubbed a hand absently over the barrel of his shotgun.

"I reckon Tommy Jarret rode one wild hoss too many."

Sam Fischer nodded. He looked right at Curly Jarret. "Punchers driftin' through the Bishop country told me the straight of it. Donnegal was in town when Tommy tried to ride Loco. When Donnegal got back, Tommy was dead." He paused, his eyes never leaving Curly Jarret's face. "Funny how a gent kin hear what he wants to hear, and believe what he wants to let himself believe."

An uncomfortable silence followed Fischer's words. Then the barkeep looked at the surly Canavee and the wounded Checkers Whitley. "These gents oughta get about ten years for assault an' robbery."

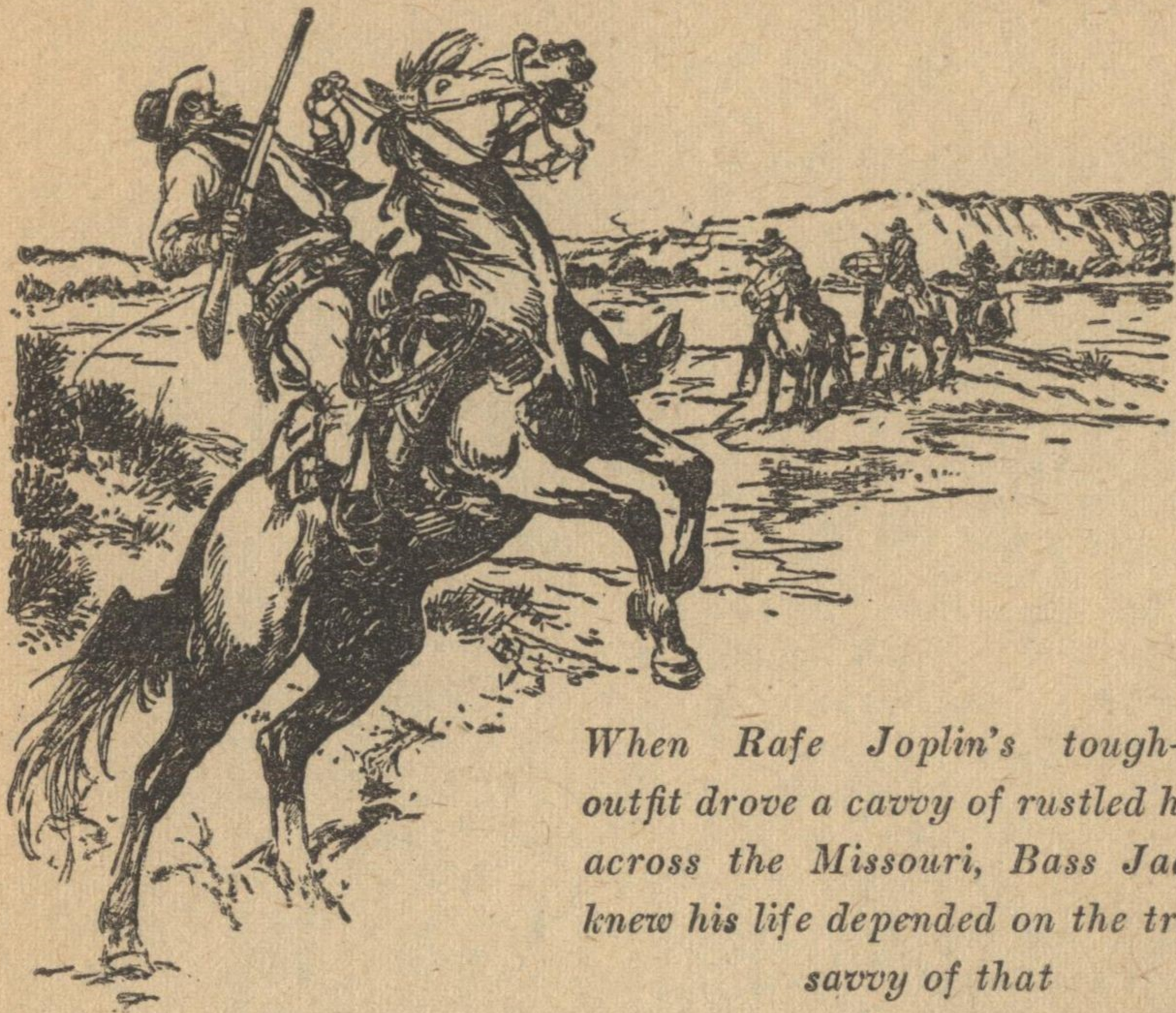
Everybody agreed to that. At last Curly Jarret moved his horse over beside Donnegal. He looked down from the saddle at the big Irishman.

"You let me beat the daylights out o' you in the ring, Mike. You tried to save me, but I was too damn bull-headed to see anything. If you ain't too particular about takin' in a gent with a game leg, how about me'n you tryin' to make a go of that hoss ranch? I reckon Tommy'd like that."

Mike Donnegal grinned. His face ached and his nose felt like a pumpkin, but there was warmth in his eyes.

"Whatever you say, pard," he said huskily. "But you leave the buckin' string to me."

THE END



When Rafe Joplin's tough-hand outfit drove a cavvy of rustled horses across the Missouri, Bass Jackson knew his life depended on the trigger savvy of that

DRIFTIN' COWHAND

by WALT COBURN

I

HE reckoned that at some time or another his folks had given him a first name but he never really thought much about it. He had been called Dusty since he could remember. And the memory of the twenty-three or four-year-old cowpuncher went back to his first pony and a pair of red-topped, brass-toed boots. He had no memory at all of any father or mother. He was just Dusty Rhodes, cow-country range orphan grown into a drifting cowhand.

Dusty Rhodes stood about five feet seven or eight without his boots on and he had the husky build and quick way of handling himself that would have marked him as good heavyweight material by a prize-fight manager. Husky, lean-flanked, blunt of jaw and nose, he had a wide mouth that grinned quickly and rope-colored hair and a pair of gray-blue eyes that sparkled when he grinned or thinned to slivers of steel when he was in a fighting temper.

Dusty Rhodes, drifting cowhand,

claimed that he was as free as the air, without a single tie on earth. He had made up a song about himself that he sang and he was always adding a new verse to it.

I laugh loud when I'm happy
I cuss when I'm mad.
I never bin good
Some folks claim I'm bad.
So I sweat when I'm hot,
And shiver with cold.
I never bin young
But I'll never grow old!

He was humming to himself as he rode up to the little ranch on the south bank of the Missouri River in the Montana badlands. He was riding the grub line and hadn't eaten a hot meal since about daybreak. And it was sundown now. But his saddle horse and the stout mule that carried his bed were not gaunt or leg-weary. Dusty had lazed around a few hours during the middle of the day on a creek where there were feed and water. He'd get supper and spread his bed and pull out tomorrow morning after breakfast. Do enough chores to pay for his grub. Or make the feller take a couple of dollars if he looked as though he needed the money. But it was a good little outfit from what Dusty could make out. Some fat cattle back in the breaks and horses there in the river-bottom pasture; good sod-roofed log cabins and thatched roof cattle shed; pole corrals and a branding chute.

Dust churned up from a round corral. There were the heavy, disturbing sounds that a fighting bronc makes when he's being handled. Thudding of hard hoofs striking or pitching and the short, heavy grunts

a horse makes when it pitches or fights a hackamore rope.

And out of that same heavy, churning yellow dust came the snarling cursing of a man. It was a nasal, rasping voice and the string of ugly profanity wasn't what the cow-punchers call clean cussing. It was distorted and foul and the sound of it, mixed with the horse sounds, wiped the grin from Dusty's tanned face.

Reining up at the pole gate, Dusty dropped the mule's lead rope and peered through the gate poles.

There was a high snubbing post in the center of the round corral. Tied to it by about ten or twelve feet of rope fastened to its heavy rawhide hackamore was a line-backed buckskin horse with black mane and tail. But the animal's real color was darkened by sweat and dirt and blood. And the horse was saddled and there wasn't a dry hair on its lathered, sweat-dripping hide. Its nostrils flared and whistled with every labored breath. Blood dripped from both nostrils and from the soft velvet muzzle. He pawed and struck and crouched and threw himself in the thick dust as he fought the heavy hackamore rope that held him tied hard and fast to the snubbing post.

The man was tall. He looked at least six feet and a half in his boots. His overalls and faded blue flannel shirt were dirty and one shoulder and sleeve of the shirt were torn. The dirty red flannel undershirt beneath it was ripped and there were blood and dirt scabbing the big raw-boned shoulder. The side of the

man's face looked as though the hide had been scraped off, and the dust and sweat was rubbed into the oozing blood and stubble of sandy whiskers on the long-jawed, slab-cheeked, hawk-nosed face. Long, dirty, sweat-matted drab-colored hair hung down from the hatless bullet-shaped head and kept getting across the man's bloodshot green eyes.

A heavy bullwhip was grasped in the man's big scabbed hand. And he had braided a short length of barbed wire into the tail of the bullwhip so that it made a vicious, inhuman weapon. Keeping well out of reach of the fighting buckskin's hind feet, he circled around and swung the bullwhip. And he was as sweaty and dirty and blood-smearred as the terrified fighting horse. Both horse and man were partly hidden in the haze of swirling corral dust.

Without dismounting, Dusty Rhodes leaned from his saddle and pulled the gate pin. It was an eighteen-inch length of hardwood wagon spoke. He kicked the gate open and rode into the corral, still gripping the wagon-spoke gate pin in his right hand. There was a hard twist to Dusty's wide mouth and his eyes were slits of steel as he jumped his roan horse across the corral. The big man did not even see him until a second or two before Dusty hit him over the head with the wagon spoke.

The lanky man's bloodshot green eyes looked glassy and his long lower jaw dropped open, slobbering tobacco juice. The lanky legs hinged at the knees and he went

down on his ugly face in the heavy dust.

Dusty stepped off his horse and straddled the fallen man, glaring down at him, ready to rap him again if he moved. But the man was knocked out and Dusty threw the gate pin back at the open gate, then dragged the lanky limp weight of the man to the side of the pole corral. He tied the man's hands behind his back with the barbed wire end of the bullwhip and left him propped against a corral post while he turned all his attention to the buckskin horse.

Dusty Rhodes had a way with horses. But it took him nearly half an hour to get the sweat-dripping, trembling buckskin bronc anywhere near calmed down.

"It'll be a long time, Buck, before you git the fear an' hate of a man out o' your heart. . . . A long time, son . . . mebbly never—"

II

It was about half an hour before the lanky man came alive. He came out of it fighting but the barbed wire cut into his wrists and he had a hard time getting onto his long bowed legs. His bloodshot eyes were green as glass as he watched Dusty uncinch the saddle from the buckskin's sweaty back and throw it in the dust. And then he started for Dusty, cursing him with a string of profanity.

"Whoever yuh are, yuh damned hellion, I'll kill yuh!"

Dusty grinned twistedly and walked over to his horse. There was a heavy homemade rawhide quirt

looped from his saddlehorn. He turned back towards the man, swinging the quirt by its loop.

"Old crippled Mexican down on the Pecos," said Dusty, "braids reatas an' hackamores an' quirts fer a livin'. This is the first time I've ever found use for this quirt, mister." His voice was quiet but he was breathing hard.

The lanky man tried to kick him in the belly, but Dusty sidestepped. The rawhide quirt slashed up and across the man's cursing mouth. Then back and forth across the man's long slab-sided face. And while the man staggered around, slobbering and snarling and cursing, with his bony wrists tied behind his back with the barbed wire and buckskin tail of the bullwhip, Dusty's quirt slashed and ripped the man's shoulders and back and face. Until the long legs buckled and the man lay begging for mercy in the corral dust.

Dusty hung his quirt back on his saddle and wiped the sweat from his face. Then, ignoring the man in the dirt, he went back to the buckskin horse, talking to the horse as he'd talk to a man.

"You made only one mistake, Buck. After you throwed that big son, you should've tromped his guts out—"

It was another half hour before he again paid any attention to the man.

Then he took a vest-pocket tally book and stub of indelible pencil from the deep pocket of his brush-scarred leather chaps he'd hung across his saddle. He studied the

brand on the buckskin's left shoulder. Then, squatted on his boot heels, he carefully wrote out a bill of sale for the horse and put down the description of the gelding and the brand. "Branded Long S. The Long S worked into what I'd call a Four Leaf Clover," he wrote underneath the brand.

Then, untying the big man's hands, he gave him the stub of pencil and told him to sign the bill of sale.

"Or should I commence once more where I left off?"

"I got all a man kin stand fer now." The lanky man's battered mouth moved and his voice was hoarse as a crow's. He signed his name slowly, laboriously.

"Looks like the name," Dusty studied the scrawled signature, "is Rafe Joplin."

"That's my name. Before I'm done, you'll wish to hell you'd never seen it on paper ner heard of it. No man kin do this to Rafe Joplin an' live long to brag about it."

"My name's Dusty Rhodes. I ain't never had to cover my back trail nowheres, mister. I won't be hard to locate. And don't say I didn't pay you fer the horse."

Dusty grinned and a hard bright sparkle came into his eyes as he fished into his pocket.

"This," he said, tossing a heavy coin into the man's dirty hand, "is a doggoned counterfeit dollar some bright feller passed off on me at Dodge City."

Before he left he tied Rafe Joplin to the snubbing post.

"Work at it hard an' you'll git loose some time tonight, Joplin. I

can't afford to take the chance of your shootin' me in the back when I ride off."

Dusty Rhodes rode away in the early twilight, leading the buckskin bronc and letting his pack mule trail along. The Missouri River looked mighty wide and swift. Dusty loosened his saddle cinch and rubbed the mule's long ears.

"We've crossed 'em all between here an' the Mexican border, Solomon," he told the mouse-colored Mexican mule. "Busted 'em wide open. And we ain't drowned yet. Don't fret. If you can't make 'er, I'll have my barlow handy to cut yuh loose. Of course, if you just let Tecolote outswim yuh—"

"Tecolote" is the Mexican name for Owl. Tecolote was the name of Dusty Rhodes' roan horse. The best rope horse, Dusty claimed, on earth.

The Missouri River there at what was known as Bullwhacker Crossing was wide and, out in the channel, it was swift. But it was as shallow a crossing as a man could find below Fort Benton. Captains of river steamboats cursed its shallow water and sand bars. There was scarcely fifty feet of swimming water. Tecolote hardly wet the saddle skirts. Solomon the Wise Mule, to give the mule his full name, was a water dog. The buckskin swam hard and strong and the cool water must have felt mighty refreshing as it washed off the dried sweat and blood and corral dirt. Dusty's chaps and boots were tied to his saddlehorn. He loved water, had no fear of it at all. His song rose

above the blowing of the mule and two horses.

I'm Dusty Rhodes from No Man's Land
I do my darndest to make a hand.
Then I draw my time and travel along
To a faraway range
With my hungry song.

The big, gray-mustached man with iron-gray hair watching from the north bank of the Missouri, smiled slowly. And slid his .30-30 carbine back into its saddle scabbard. A man's enemies didn't come a-singin', he told himself. Even when they came direct from Rafe Joplin's place across the river.

He rode up out of the fringe of willows as Dusty Rhodes and his two horses and bed mule waded ashore onto the long sand bar. Dusty sighted the big grizzled man on the big brown gelding and grinned like a school kid. Dismounting, he squeezed water from the sodden legs of his faded Levi overalls and sat down on the sand and took his wadded socks from his boots. He pulled on his socks and boots and stood up.

The big man's puckered dark-gray eyes peered from under the heaviest shaggy eyebrows Dusty had ever seen. And Dusty liked the slow grin behind the drooping iron-gray mustache.

"You look dusty from the belt up, all right." The big man had a deep-toned slow voice. "Dampish from there on down."

His gray eyes had taken in the Tecolote roan and the Solomon mule and then the buckskin. Now Dusty answered the question in the big

man's eyes as he fished a sack of damp tobacco from his shirt pocket.

"I paid one counterfeit dollar for Buck. Got the bill of sale in my pocket. If that Joplin feller is a friend of yours—"

"I don't reckon any man calls Rafe Joplin his friend. I'm Bass Jackson. The cottonwoods and brush keep you from seein' my place



from yonder side of the river. Might as well come along. I'll have supper started by the time you git unpacked and your horses an' mule fed. It's a long time since I seen a good Mexican mule. The roan looks like a fast quarter horse."

"Best rope horse on earth. Wiser'n a tree full of owls. That's why I named him Tecolote when he was a

colt. Tecolote is Mex for—"

"I've seen a few tecolote owls in my day, son."

"My name's Dusty Rhodes."

"I was listenin'," smiled the big man, "when you declared yourself out yonder in the channel. You're a good river man, Dusty, for a Texan."

"I learned how to swim in the Colorado, in Arizona. Take one of them flash floods in New Mexico, it stands a man handy."

"I've seen the Rio Grande in New Mexico"—Bass Jackson nodded—"when she was dangerous."

They rode on together. And while Bass Jackson's place was similar to Joplin's, it was far better kept and cleaner-looking. There were no leaning fence posts or tangled barb wire. Corrals, shed, barn and cabins were kept up in first-class repair. And the inside of the cabin where they ate a late supper was as scrubbed and swept as if it had a woman's care. But it was a bachelor outfit. Bass Jackson told Dusty that when he said for the cowboy to take himself a bath there in the creek if he felt like getting rid of his trail dust. That he could skin off his sweaty clothes and no women around to be scared of.

No women to be scared of. But Bass Jackson had his windows painted black on the inside and covered to boot with canvas curtains. And even while he cooked supper, he wore his cartridge belt and six-shooter.

Dusty had cared for his mule and horses. He'd also done the barn chores before he bathed in the creek

and put on clean clothes from his war sack and came to supper. And he insisted on doing the dishes.

He told Bass Jackson of his ruckus with Rafe Joplin. The big rancher listened in silence until Dusty was finished.

"Jop," Bass declared, "is a hard case. He's a bad enemy, son. Treacherous. Ornery. I've had dealin's with Rafe Joplin. I try to keep the wide Missouri between us. But there's times when I have to cross over. He burns that Four Leaf Clover on everything he kin rope."

Dusty showed him the bill of sale for the buckskin bronc. The Long S brand worked into the Four Leaf Clover.

"It showed up plain, sweaty like his hide was. Dried off, it's shore a neat job of brand workin'. But I knowed that Long S brand from Texas. Big outfit."

"They've got some land leased. Threwed in some cattle last year. It's the same outfit," Bass Jackson told him. And he said that Joplin should know better than to monkey with any Long S stock.

"Some outfit like that will hang his ornery rustlin' hide on the fence. Let the Long S alone and they'll treat a man shore white. Bother 'em and you git the worst of it. Shorty Slade is ramroddin' the Long S up here in Montana and Shorty don't fool none when he's riled."

Dusty asked Bass Jackson if he was short-handed for help. "That counterfeit dollar was the last of my life's savin's. Anything from handlin' broncs to shovelin' hay or buildin' fence. I ain't choosey."

"Rafe Joplin either runs off every man I hire," said Bass Jackson, "or hires 'em away from me at rustler an' fightin' wages." He grinned slowly. But his eyes were steel hard behind the shaggy brows.

"Just common forty-a-month wages suits me," Dusty Rhodes grinned back. "And if Rafe Joplin runs me off, you don't owe me a dollar. But I don't aim to be run off."

"It's only fair to warn you, son. I'm expectin' trouble one of these times." Jackson motioned towards the black-painted, canvas-covered windows. "Gun trouble."

"You've still hired a forty-a-month cowhand. Only I don't own a saddle gun. But if you kin dig me up one, I'll pack it."

Bass Jackson shook his grizzled head. He told Dusty he was foolish to go into anything blind. That while the law was still pretty much a vigilante deal here in Montana, it did work fast at times. Vigilante law hung men to tree limbs. And a stranger in a strange land like Dusty here should look long and hard before he jumped.

"For all you know, Dusty, I might be on the wrong side."

Dusty's grin widened and his blue-gray eyes twinkled. "You could be, mister, with a name like Bass Jackson. There was Sam Bass, the outlaw. Two Jacksons in his gang. I know a song about 'em."

"I taken that name in my wilder days," the big man explained. "I taken it from that source, for reasons that don't need to be told. The name stuck to me. I never bothered

too much about sloughin' it off, even when I got old enough and had sense enough to quit a-driftin' and settle down. I git along all right with the vigilantes. Belong to 'em, as far as that's concerned. But Rafe Joplin's bad medicine. The men that use his place for a hangout are tough. Sooner or later I'll have to shoot it out with Jop and his renegades. No, Dusty, you'd be safer to drift along. The Long S outfit is short-handed—"

Dusty Rhodes shook his tow head. "Joplin swore he'd foller me. Kill me where and when he cut my sign. He won't have to ride a horse down to ketch me if I hire out to you. I'd be proud to be your hired hand, sir."

III

A month or six weeks passed before anything occurred to break the monotony and routine of their regular ranch work. And if it had been any other man but the big Bass Jackson, Dusty Rhodes would have been convinced that such precautions as painted windows and packing saddle guns and sleeping with a six-shooter practically in your hand, was just the rancher's groundless fears or an attempt to act tough. But Bass Jackson wasn't the breed of man who spooked easy. And he never talked or acted like he wanted to build up a tough rep. The big rancher never uncovered any part of his back trail for Dusty to read sign.

He talked about Texas like he'd been born there and he knew outfits in Arizona and New Mexico where Dusty had worked. Parts of Utah and Colorado and Wyoming where

Dusty had stopped on his way to Montana. Bass had a way of tying some cow town to an outlaw hide-out. Like when Dusty said he'd stopped overnight at Price, Utah.

Bass had nodded and grinned his slow grin and said Price had seen some wild nights when the boys from Robbers' Roost rode in to paint 'er red. And Vernal, in the upper corner of Utah wasn't too far a ride from the big, rough Brown's Hole Country where the outlaws and rustlers roamed free. And when they got actually bold they rode to Meeker in Colorado to celebrate. Or to Rock Springs in Wyoming. But that the Hole in the Wall gang did their boozing and gambling at Casper and Kaycee, Wyoming. And a hard bright twinkle would lighten the coldness of Bass Jackson's steel-gray eyes, like he was remembering some wild times. But he never talked about any certain incidents or mentioned names of men with whom he might have ridden along the Outlaw Trail. And Dusty Rhodes knew better than to ask any questions.

Bass Jackson pulled the canvas blinds down across the black-painted windows before he lit a light in the cabin. They did their barn chores without the benefit of a lantern light. And when they rode back into the badlands to range-brand what calves the spring roundup had missed, Bass and Dusty rode together and never separated far. And Dusty packed an almost new .30-30 saddle gun Bass had dug up out of an old trunk, scabbard and ammunition.

It was the summer season between the calf roundup and the fall beef

work. Bass Jackson had half a dozen three-year-old colts that needed breaking and he helped Dusty halter-break the broncs and hazed for him when he rode them out. And when he saw how Dusty was gentling the fear out of the buckskin he'd taken from Joplin, he grinned his praise. He liked the way Dusty handled the broncs in his Circle Cross iron too. If a bronc pitched, Dusty rode him. But he never tried to make a bronc buck just to be showing off. And in a month Bass Jackson was cutting cattle on those three-year-olds and roping off them. And Dusty had made a crackerjack cow horse out of the line-backed Buck.

There was no sign of Rafe Joplin. Dusty worried the first couple of days.

"I left 'im tied to that snubbin' post, Bass."

"Jop's got loose from worse, Dusty. Don't fret yourself about Rafe Joplin dead. It's the live Jop you gotta watch out for."

Bass owned a pair of army field glasses. He told Dusty to focus the glasses on Joplin's horse pasture across the river. Get a count on the saddle horses and what each horse looked like. Then the next morning, check on 'em.

There were about thirty head of horses in the pasture. Dusty studied them the way he'd learned to know every horse in the big remuda when he got his first horse-wrangler job as a kid. Remembering thirty head of horses is no hard task for a real cowpuncher. The powerful field glasses brought the horses up close,

and when Dusty checked the tally the following morning he discovered that a big stocking-legged, bald-faced sorrel was missing. But there was a long-legged bay horse in the pasture that hadn't been there the day before.

"Jop changes horses after dark when he gits back late. Eats before daybreak an' pulls out," explained



Bass Jackson. "Makes hisself hard to locate. Spends most of his time ridin' back in the breaks or at the brandin' pen in the deep box canyon in the badlands. Jop and his little crew of brand artists."

Bass Jackson said that it was pretty much happenstance that Dusty had ridden up on Joplin when he was fighting the buckskin bronc. The bronc must have throwed Jop

and the ugly-tempered son of a snake was locoed or drunk or both. If Dusty hadn't interfered, the buckskin wouldn't have been the first good horse Rafe Joplin had clubbed or whipped or ridden to death.

"That ranch of his on the river, Dusty, ain't where Jop spends the most of his time. Leastways not till winter sets in. Then he uses it for a line camp to feed cattle. After this country's snowbound it ain't worth a damn to rustlers. Fellers like Rafe Joplin hole up till the Chinook wind cuts the big drifts next spring. And when the grass gits high and the Missouri drops down below the flood line on the banks, it's open season again for the rustlers."

Bass Jackson was keeping a mighty close watch on Joplin's place across the river. But he did it so unobtrusively that it was a week or so before Dusty became aware of the big rancher's sharp-eyed vigilance. Checking the tally at Joplin's horse pasture was only one of the several ways Bass had of keeping track of what went on across the river. He would ride along the river bank, for instance, every morning before sunrise, cutting for horse sign. Or he'd train the glasses on the far bank of the river where Rafe Joplin kept a rowboat tied to a tree. And check up on his own rowboat where it was pulled into the overhanging bush near the mouth of the creek and chained and secured by a heavy padlock and the oars hidden in another clump of brush. He showed Dusty where he kept the oars and key to the padlock cached.

"Just in case," he said grimly, and he was pleased when Dusty said he knew how to handle a rowboat in fast water.

Dusty began to sense and share Bass Jackson's uneasy vigilance. Any unusual sound outside at night and Dusty would be sitting up in his bunk with his gun in his hand. Across the cabin big Bass Jackson would be wide awake. And if they could not explain away the sound that had awakened them, they would dress and unbar the heavy plank door and slip out into the night with their Winchesters. Prowl around until they made certain nobody was out there and that their horses were safe in the log barn that had a padlocked door.

A couple of times during the following weeks Dusty thought Bass was going to tell him something about what and whom he feared. But each time the big cowman changed his mind. And Dusty never asked a question. Bass would tell him what he wanted him to know when the sign was right. Not before then.

IV

Once a week Bass Jackson would take Dusty along and they would ride ten miles down the river to the Rocky Point Crossing for the mail. There was a ferryboat crossing there at Rocky Point, a little log saloon and store and post office. They would carry what little grub they bought in a couple of gunny-sacks. Once they took the Solomon mule when Bass wanted to fetch back sacks of flour and sugar and some beans

and rice. They would have a few drinks with white-whiskered old Tex Alvord who ran the saloon and pick up the range gossip the old character always dispensed with his whiskey. And if their wicker-covered demi-john needed refilling, Bass took it along, though they drank but little.

Bass Jackson's mail consisted mainly of mail-order catalogues and magazines he subscribed to, the Great Falls and El Paso newspapers, and one letter. Always there was that one letter. Tex would fetch it out from some hiding place and hand it to Bass without a word and Bass would put it into his pocket and hand Tex a letter to put into the mail. The big cowman would go outside and read his letter. And when he came back into the saloon to have a last drink before they pulled out, he would be smiling and his hard gray eyes would shine and he would act happy and sort of relieved.

But today he came back into the saloon scowling and gulped down a drink without waiting for Dusty and old Tex to join him. And when he poured a second drink his big hand was a little unsteady so that the neck of the bar bottle rattled against the heavy rim of the whiskey glass.

"She's comin', Tex!" Bass Jackson's deep, soft voice was harsh. "Comin' here to spend her summer vacation. She says she'll be on her way by the time I git this letter. There's no way to head her off."

"It'll be another week, Bass, till the stage gits here again," old Tex reminded. "You kin meet her when

she steps off the train at Lewiston. Take her to Yellowstone Park fer a couple-three weeks, then ship her back to school. Dusty looks like he's man enough to hold down your outfit till you git back. Have another drink."

"What's the latest from along the line?" asked Bass.

"Joplin's got a couple of jugs last evenin', instead of only one. He talked a lot and said nothin'. Like he suspected I might pass it along. He acted too proud with hisself."

"He was alone?"

Old Tex nodded. "But he filled *two* jugs."

Bass Jackson scowled into his drink. Then his head lifted and he took the letter from his pocket and handed it to Dusty.

"It's from my kid daughter, Dusty. She's at a convent school in St. Paul. Bin there every winter the past eight years since her mother died. Till this year I managed to git away from here a month or so before the beef roundup. Take her on campin' trips in the Canadian Rockies or the Yellowstone Park. Now she's finished school. And she's comin' home, she says, to keep house for me. Them nuns has taught her to sew an' cook an' what not. And she says I need her to look after me. An eighteen-year-old youngster, convent-raised—at Bullwhacker Crossin' where that damned Joplin and his renegades is on yonder side of the river and fixin' to cross. Where there's a gun ruckus a-comin' just as certain as there's a sky overhead. . . . Read it, Dusty."

A photograph came out of the envelope with the letter. It was the picture of a girl with curly dark hair and a smile that made Dusty smile back at the picture and a pair of eyes that looked straight at you. And she looked like Bass Jackson's daughter, no doubt about it. It was a girl's version of the big cowman's slow grin. Dusty read the round handwriting.

Dearest Daddy: I'm coming home! To the little ranch I've never seen. I'll be on my way when you get this and I don't want to be met at the train or anything. Let me find my own way home because it's the way I've always planned it. I know how to get there. I take the stagecoach at Lewistown. Go to Rocky Point. I've got my saddle and I'll get a horse at Rocky Point. I won't get lost.

No more school. I graduated last week. Almost at the foot of the class but I made it. What good is Latin to a cowman's daughter? The *Livestock Journal* and saddle catalogues make better reading. So I'm coming home to darn your socks and cook you a decent meal—

There was more like that and it was signed "Wilma."

Dusty put the picture and letter back in the big square envelope and was handing it back when he saw the name and address on it. The letter had been addressed to Mr. Jackson Crawford, Rocky Point, Montana.

Bass Jackson grinned slowly. "My real name, Dusty. But Tex is the only man around here that knows it." He pocketed the letter.

"She's not to be headed off this time, Tex, by any Yellowstone Park. But I'll meet that train at Lewistown. Put her back on it and climb aboard,

with a couple of one-way tickets to what Dusty Rhodes calls a Faraway range. . . . Drink up and we'll git for home, son."

"You aim to pull out, Bass?" drawled the slow voice of old Tex. "Leave Rafe Joplin both sides of the river at Bullwhacker Crossin'?"

"That young un means more than a world full of Joplins to me, Tex. Let Jop tell it that he's finally run me out o' the country. That's the way I want it. I'm coverin' my trail. Nobody but you an' Dusty Rhodes will know the truth. Let Rafe Joplin tell it that he's run me off. I won't be here to deny it."

Bass Jackson and Dusty Rhodes headed back for the ranch. The big cowman was in a black mood. His puckered eyes were cold with a sort of baffled fury and something like despair, as though he was taking a terrible beating without a whimper.

"We kin gather what cattle's handy and I'll help you out o' the breaks with 'em. Throw 'em onto the Long S range. You kin rep for me when the Long S beef work starts. Ship the steers and sell the cows and calves and bulls to whoever will pay the best price. Keep the money till I send for it. I'm givin' you a bill of sale for my Circle Cross iron and all the cattle and horses in that brand. Likewise a deed to the ranch. But don't stay there alone, Dusty. Joplin will murder you, shore as day. Drift yonderly. The horses are yours. Keep 'em. But don't be fool enough to stay here on the river. You're too young and too good a boy to git murdered. You

wouldn't be the first man Rafe Joplin has dry-gulched. Drift yonderly when I pull out. Throw in with the Long S outfit till you git them Circle Cross cattle sold off. Then ride on with your Tecolote an' Buck an' Solomon mule. Free as the air, singin' your hungry song. You're plumb foot-loose, Dusty. Stay thataway!"

There was a savage sort of tone to Bass Jackson's voice. It puzzled Dusty. And the whole thing seemed too distorted to be real. There was law here in Montana that should be strong enough to protect Bass Jackson from rustlers like Rafe Joplin. It was vigilante law sometimes, but it handled men like Joplin without mercy. It didn't seem in character for a man like Bass Jackson to run from any Rafe Joplin.

"I've got that bill of sale for Buck," said Dusty. "Let me show it to Shorty Slade at the Long S Ranch. Joplin worked the Long S into his Four Leaf Clover iron. That's all the proof the Long S and your vigilantes need to go after Rafe Joplin. I'd like to ride with 'em when they go after that horse killer! Why don't we—"

"My hands is tied!" Bass Jackson's voice was a deep growl. "Rafe Joplin's got me where he wants me. Let it lay, boy. You don't savvy!"

v

But something like savvy was going to enlighten Dusty Rhodes a little sooner than either he or Bass Jackson anticipated. As they neared the little ranch they both saw the horses in the lower pasture. Horses

that had no business being there. Perhaps fifty head, at a quick guess. And half a dozen riders. The lower pasture was a hay meadow and the wild hay was almost ready for cutting. Until the hay was cut and stacked inside barbed-wire hay corrals, Bass Jackson was keeping the lower pasture empty of horses and cattle. And now that bunch of horses had been thrown in there to graze and trample, while men on horseback were standing saddle-gun guard on the stray horses.

Bass Jackson's leathery face whitened a little and he slid his carbine from its saddle scabbard. Dusty's saddle gun was already in his hand. But before they reached the barbed-wire gate three of the riders were headed towards them at a trot. One of them took a dirty white handkerchief from his pocket and tied it to the end of his carbine barrel and raised it for a white flag. The rider with the flag of truce was Rafe Joplin.

"The devil with his dirty white rag." Dusty Rhodes' strong white teeth bared in a flat-lipped grin and he raised his gun.

"Take 'er easy, Dusty. Don't do that." Bass Jackson's voice sounded dry-throated.

Dusty cut a hard, quick look at the grizzled cowman. Bass' face looked gray in the sunset, gray and lined.

When the three riders met them there at the closed gate, Dusty Rhodes got an unpleasant shock. And with it came a little savvy and more bewilderment. Because one of the riders bore a striking resemblance



"This is the first time I ever found use for this quirt," declared Dusty Rhodes, and the horse-abusing rancher cowered under the hard, slashing blows.

to Bass Jackson.

The man was, Dusty made a quick, sure guess, Bass Jackson's younger brother. Six or eight years younger, leaner of build and not quite so gray of hair and mustache. His mouth under his mustache was looser-lipped and his face lacked the strong character etched in the handsome face of his older brother. His eyes were greenish-gray and bloodshot and he was half drunk. There was a strange mixture of shame, defiance and ugliness in his loose-lipped grin.

"Long time no see, Bass. Kind o' suprised yuh, no?" His voice was thickened a little by whiskey and too loud.

"No," said Bass flatly, "I bin expectin' you, Ross."

"The devil yuh have!" He cut a hard look at Rafe Joplin.

Joplin was scowling at Dusty who had slid his saddle gun back into its scabbard and had a six-shooter in his hand. Dusty was grinning a little and the six-shooter was pointed carelessly at Joplin's belly.

"You bin runnin' off at the head, Jop?" Ross Jackson demanded.

"Not me, Ross," Joplin's nasal voice replied. "He must've heard it at Rocky Point. Him an' that damn ol' white-whiskered Tex is too thick."

"I bin back in the breaks, Bass, fer a week. Jop's a tough man to

shave in a horse dicker. Just finished the deal. Good-lookin' bunch of ponies, no?"

"No." Bass Jackson stared hard at his brother. "No stolen horse looks good. 'Specially in my hay meadow. Get 'em out. Now."

"Tuck in your shirt tail, Bass," leered Ross Jackson. "You and this bald-faced hired man of yours is outmatched. You don't see them three men of mine. But they're watchin' you an' your chore boy acrost their gun sights from the buck brush yonder."

"I don't spook, Ross," drawled Bass Jackson. "Neither does Dusty Rhodes. . . . I got you paroled out o' the pen, left you enough money with the prison warden to take you to South America. You gave the warden your sworn promise to go to the Argentine and never come back."

"I had to use every damn dollar to buy my son Lew out o' jail down in Utah. You remember Lew, here. Just a button the last time you seen 'im. Chip off the ol' block. Best damn cowhand you ever seen work. Usin' his left hand, he beat Rafe Joplin's shootin' at a runnin' coyote. Lew'll take along anywheres, Bass. Shucks, I couldn't leave my own son locked up to rot in jail, could I? His mother died. There was only me to look after him.

Bass Jackson eyed Lew Jackson with hard, cold, contemptuous appraisal. And Dusty quit watching Rafe Joplin long enough to cut that tough young renegade a quick look.

He saw a tall, lean, long-stirruped cowpuncher about eighteen. There

was something of a father-and-son resemblance there, but the boy had mud-colored hair and a thin-lipped mouth and a hawk nose, and his eyes were pale yellow. There was a twisted grin on his mouth that matched the shifty look in his eyes. Like his father, he was half drunk. A half-smoked cigarette hung dead and sodden from the lifted corner of his mouth. Lew Jackson looked sneaky and treacherous.

"So that's what your Lew growed into," said Bass Jackson quietly. "I'd 've left him in jail. What's his last name?"

"Jackson." Ross shifted uneasily in his saddle. "Lew Jackson." His face reddened and his voice got thicker. "I kep' my word, Bass. Dropped the name of—"

"Shut up, you drunken, worthless, lyin', yellow-bellied snake. Mention that name with your dirty tongue and I'll shoot you out o' that saddle. Take your whelp and this Joplin thing and that horse-thief outfit of yours and hit the trail. Get them stolen horses out o' my hay field."

Bass Jackson never raised his voice, but there was something deadly about the way he spoke every word, as though he was getting a foul taste out of his mouth.

"You gonna take that, Ross?" Lew Jackson had a rasping whine.

"Ross is goin' to take it," said Bass Jackson. "So are you."

"We'll drift them ponies out," said Ross, "right after dark. We got another bunch back in the breaks, to throw acrost the river. We'll be gone a little after dark. I got a quick market fer 'em. Then me'n'

Lew is South America bound. Honest, Bass. I wouldn't lie to yuh. I'd never've come near your place, only Jop said it wasn't safe to cross 'em at Rocky Point because he don't trust ol' Tex. I'll throw these ponies in your corral if you're so damn fussy about your lousy hay field, leave Lew an' one of my men with 'em. Me'n' Jop an' the other boys will fetch the balance of the horses over before dark. It ain't a-hurtin' your damn two-bit place none. You don't own the river."

"I'd hate to drink river water after you and your kind has crossed it," said Bass Jackson. "All right. Corral your horses. Cross the rest over. Then clear out. And if ever you or this whelp of yourn or Rafe Joplin make the mistake of gittin' on my place again, I'll turn you over to the vigilantes and help 'em hang yuh. Now git busy."

"Ain't I always claimed, Ross," said Rafe Joplin, but his bloodshot green eyes kept watching Dusty, "that Bass Jackson was ornery enough to hang 'is own brother?"

"You're lingerin' on borrowed time, Joplin," warned Dusty Rhodes. "I don't like for anybody to cuss the outfit I work for. And if Bass Jackson is anywhere chicken-hearted about killin' off his brother and his brother's whelp, I'll tackle the job. Proudly."

Dusty grinned. The six-shooter in his right hand flipped in the air. As it left his right hand it was thumbed to full cock and they could hear the click-click of the cocking gun. It was cocked and pointed

again at Rafe Joplin's belly when its wooden butt landed neatly in Dusty's other hand. It was a trick he had learned when he was a kid and practiced until he could do it in split-second time.

"I'd like to take your Lew on some time," Dusty continued, "in a left-handed shootin' match. Playin' for keeps. . . . Clean the muck out o' your ears, gents. The boss man says rattle your dirty hocks."

Dusty Rhodes was grinning wide, but his gray-blue eyes were as hard and bright and cold as winter ice.

Lew Jackson was ornery and just tough-drunk enough to have taken a chance. But the gun in Dusty's hand was pointed at Rafe Joplin's middle and the lantern-jawed Jop still wore the ugly scars of Dusty's quirting, and the scars of fear inside him would never heal.

"Let's git along, Ross," said Joplin. "The sign ain't right fer no gun ruckus."

Bass Jackson and Dusty Rhodes waited there at the gate while Ross Jackson and Lew and Jop started gathering the grazing horses. Ross made a wide motion with his arm and his three renegades rode out of the brush and helped round up the horses.

"Since he was a kid," said Bass Jackson slowly, "there's bin that weak streak in Ross. The older an' bigger he got, the more ornery an' weak-willed he became. When he actually went bad, the first time, I taken the blame for 'im. Pulled out ten jumps ahead of the Texas Rangers. Our mother had died when Ross was ten and I was sixteen. He

was about twenty when he got into his first bad mess. Killed a good man. A Ranger at that. In a drunken ruckus. So I left Ross Crawford there at our ranch on the Pecos. Changed my name to Bass Jackson and went up the Outlaw Trail. Ross gimme his word he'd never make another bad mistake, that he'd g



straight. Ross had the best reason in the world to make good his word. He was married to the finest, purtiest girl in Texas. And she'd given him a purty little baby girl.

"But he'd killed that Texas Ranger in a whiskey row. And I should've knowed he'd never change his ways. . . . I was ranchin' at Brown's Hole when I got word that Ross Crawford was raisin' hell again. He'd killed a feller and run off with the feller's girl.

"I hightailed it back to Texas. Ross's purty young wife died of shame or a busted heart or whatever it is a woman dies of when she can't bear to live on this earth no more. After I buried her I taken the little girl Wilma and went to New Mexico. The Ranger captain told me I hadn't fooled 'em by takin' the blame for my brother Ross. There was no indictment agin' Jackson Crawford in Texas.

"I adopted Wilma fer my own daughter. She don't know the difference to this day. I'd kill the man that told her I ain't her real daddy. I ranched in New Mexico. Kept little Wilma in school. Taken back my real name for a while. Settled down peaceful.

"But not for long. Ross wouldn't let us alone. He'd taken the name of Ross Jackson. We looked alike. He spread the lie that me'n him was workin' together. That I was livin' in New Mexico as Jackson Crawford, honest cowman. But I was slippin' off to rob banks under the name of Bass Jackson. I got arrested. Had a time provin' an alibi.

"I put Wilma in a convent. Hunted down Ross. He had my ranch at Brown's Hole. He'd married the girl he'd run off with and they had this kid Lew. I rode there to kill my brother Ross. But he got wind of me comin' an' drifted. His wife begged me out o' the notion of killin' Ross. So when I did overtake him, I beat him up instead. Made him swear he'd never take the name of Crawford. That he'd never make any kind of claim on Wilma. And left him." Bass Jackson rolled and

lit a cigarette.

"He's kept the promise, Bass?"

"So far as I know. Yes. He's never used the name Ross Crawford. Never tried to see Wilma. But Rafe Joplin was his pardner there at Brown's Hole. They was drunk together a lot. And you never kin tell what kind of whiskey talk a man might make. For all I know, Rafe Joplin might know too much. He's got a sneakin' way of hintin' at things he'll deny when I corner 'im."

"I wish I'd killed 'im," said Dusty quietly.

"You might have to yet, son. He's a snake. . . . I moved here to this place on the river. Put Wilma in the convent school at St. Paul. Settled down. Rocked along peaceful. I heard Ross Jackson had bin sent to the Wyoming pen fer horse stealin'. And then Rafe Joplin located there across the river. Jop tried to to make friends. I told him to stay on his own side of the Missouri. Which he did till one day he crossed over in his rowboat with a white flag. He'd fetched me a letter Ross had sneaked out o' the pen to me.

"It was the kind of a letter I knowed it'd be. Ross said if I didn't want Wilma to find out her real father was in prison, to git him out and give him enough money to git to South America. I got a notion Joplin read that letter before he give it to me.

"Anyhow I went to the warden at the Wyoming pen. Laid my cards face up. Told him the truth. Left the money with him and he got Ross paroled. . . . And that's the story, Dusty. Except that a day or so

before you come across the river singin' your song, I got word through Tex at Rocky Point that Ross Jackson was ridin' the Outlaw Trail. And Rafe Joplin was expectin' Ross to show up at any time."

When they saw Ross Jackson and Joplin and two more riders headed back across the river Bass Jackson opened the barbed-wire gate and rode through and closed the gate and rode on to the barn. The stolen horses were in the big corral. Lew Jackson and a tough-looking renegade with dirty sandy whiskers were squatted on their hunkers with their saddled horses standing, reins dropped by the corral gate. Lew and the sandy-whiskered horse thief were passing a half-empty bottle of rotgut liquor back and forth.

Bass Jackson and Dusty put up their horses in the big log barn. Then went on to the cabin. It was getting dusk. Bass was getting supper and Dusty sat in the cabin doorway with a Winchester across his knees, his eyes watching every move Lew Jackson and the sandy-whiskered renegade made. But when Dusty sighted half a dozen riders coming he got to his feet and went into the cabin and shut the door. He barred the door and lit his half-smoked cigarette.

"I hope"—he grinned at Bass—"no horses git hit by wild bullets."
"Uh?"

"There's about half a dozen horsebackers and they're comin' fast. From where Lew an' Dirty Whiskers set a-nursin' that bottle they can't see 'em ner hear 'em on account of the horses inside the big corral. The

feller in the lead rides like the same Long S Shorty Slade I worked for in Texas. . . . Listen, Bass! Or stop up your ears. Sounds like Long S Shorty and his cowhands is rakin' in the jackpot!"

There was a shouted voice out there telling somebody to throw away their guns. A few shots sounded. Then some cussing and the sounds of men and horses. Bass Jackson slid back the heavy bar and swung open the cabin door. Then the big cowman and Dusty Rhodes were looking into the round black muzzles of three saddle guns.

"Take it easy, Bass!" called Shorty Slade from the back of a sweaty Long S horse. "You an' your hired hand. I don't like this much better than you do. Always liked yuh, Bass. And you damn Dusty! Thought you had more sense. Throw away your guns. Come out a-reachin' high!"

Bass Jackson walked out with his hands up. He had to stoop to get through the doorway. Dusty came out grinning and with both hands on a level with his wide husky shoulders.

Shorty Slade's men had Lew Jackson standing on his long unsteady legs with his hands up. The sandy-whiskered horse thief lay in a crumpled heap in the dirt, a six-shooter gripped in his dead hand. He had been shot through the chest and through the head. Shorty Slade and his Long S cowpunchers were playing for keeps.

"Don't kill me!" Dusty heard Lew's voice, high-pitched and whin-

ing. "I just taken orders from my Uncle Bass. Bass Jackson hired us—"

"That yappin' coyote," cut in Dusty Rhodes, "is lyin', Shorty."

"Mebbyso. Keep them hands up, Dusty. The boys is quick-triggered this evenin'."

"If your shootin' ain't spooked 'em," said Dusty, "your main horse thieves will be fetchin' some more ponies acrost the river."

"Yeah. I know, Dusty. I got another crew acrost the river. Don't start a-squealin' We got this tip off from a feller that really knows how to git a first-rate squealin' job done. They don't talk faster or meaner than Rafe Joplin when he's ketched. And we ketched him last evenin' when he left Rocky Point with a couple of jugs of brave maker. He slipped out o' the hangin' rope with a promise to lead the whole damn horse-thief gang, includin' you an' Bass Jackson and Bass' brother Ross and young Lew Jackson into our horse-thief trap. . . . Keep them hands up, Dusty, or I'll bust both your wings!"

The Long S cowpunchers took the six-shooters away from Dusty Rhodes and Bass Jackson and dragged the whining Lew over to the cabin. Then all three prisoners were herded into the cabin.

"Grub smells good," said Long S Shorty Slade. "Git back at it, Dusty. Build enough supper for about a dozen hungry Long S cowhands an' if there's ary scraps left over we'll toss 'em to the horse thieves. Though what in blazes a man wants of grub when he's a-goin' to hang, I don't know. But you read

in the papers where some convict et a hearty breakfast before he was hung—”

“You always was a comical feller, wasn’t you, Shorty?” grinned Dusty mirthlessly. “How a bone-headed thing like you ever got a ramrod job is somethin’ only you an’ the Long S outfit kin understand. . . . How we fixed for strychnine, Bass? I’ll season their Long S grub shore fancy.”

Bass was grinning slowly. He was watching Lew Jackson. Lew’s face was as yellow-colored as a dirty lemon and he looked as though he was going to be sick.

“Take that stinkin’ whelp out, Shorty,” drawled Bass, “before he pukes on my clean floor. Then git Dusty Rhodes to tell you how he got the only Long S horse you’ll find in my remuda. The Long S worked into Joplin’s Four Leaf Clover.”

“I done heard the story,” said Long S Shorty Slade, “from Tex, at Rocky Point. You used to sing a shore amusin’ song, Dusty. Want to warble it before you stretch a horse-thief rope?”

Dusty Rhodes nodded. “After I git me some new verses made. About a pore locoed thing named Long S Shorty who should have stuck to the shepherd trade he’s built for.”

Underneath the joshing there was a dark undercurrent of grim reality that showed in their eyes. For a horse thief was a man despised. Kill a man in a gun fight and unless it was a cold-blooded murder, you kept the respect and comradeship of other men. Steal so much as one sway-backed, wind-broken, spavined

cayuse and you were a damned horse thief and classed lower than a shepherd, and men eyed you with contempt and loathing.

One of the Long S cowpunchers fashioned a hangman’s knot in the end of a saddle rope.

“Try ’er on for collar size.” He grinned and slipped it over Lew Jackson’s sweat-matted head, where Lew sat cross-legged on the floor.

Lew screamed hoarsely and clawed at the noose around his neck. The cowpuncher jerked the rope and the noose tightened. Lew kept clawing at the tightened rope while he gasped for breath. His eyes bulged and his jaw sagged and the dirty yellow color of his face darkened with strangulation and he kicked around on the floor with the screams torn from his throat whistling and shrilling as he gasped for breath. Then he was retching as he choked and the cowpuncher dragged him out through the doorway, kicking and choking. They yanked the hangman’s noose loose and stood around outside grinning as they watched Lew Jackson being sick.

“Like some yellow-bellied mongrel poisoned,” said Long S Shorty, when Lew lay there on the ground gasping until he got his wind back and sat up, the horrible fear of death still glazing his pale bloodshot eyes.

Long S Shorty Slade motioned the other cowpunchers and they came back into the cabin, leaving Lew Jackson alone and unguarded outside.

Dusty Rhodes jumped Shorty as the Long S ramrod came in the door. His sudden leap caught Shorty

off guard. The next instant Dusty Rhodes had Long S Shorty's gun and was holding the man with tightening strangle hold and using Shorty for a human shield while the gun in his hand swung in a short arc to cover the Long S cowpunchers. They could not shoot at Dusty without hitting their ramrod. Dusty Rhodes' white teeth bared in a flat grin and his eyes were slivers of ice.

"Lay 'em down, cowhands!" Dusty barked. "I'm holdin' aces. There's six of 'em in this smoke pole. I ain't joshin'."

Bass Jackson disarmed them and herded them back into the cabin. Long S Shorty was gasping for wind in the crook of Dusty Rhodes' arm, and whenever the Long S ramrod struggled Dusty kned him hard in the seat of the pants.

Lew Jackson, scared and sick as he was, had a coyote's instinct and he moved swiftly and with desperate, fear-spurred recklessness. He ran for the corral, grabbed his guns from the ground where they lay, vaulted into his saddle without touching a stirrup, and spurred off into the twilight at a run. He was headed for the river bank, for Bullwhacker Crossing and the safety of the badlands behind Joplin's river ranch.

Bass Jackson could have killed his nephew. But he lowered his gun barrel and shook his iron-gray head.

Dusty had his own six-shooter and Shorty's. One in each hand, his back against the log wall. He shoved Shorty's gun in his waistband.

"Two-gun Dusty Rhodes!" His grin was wide. He reached into his chaps pocket and pulled out his tally

book and tossed it at Long S Shorty Slade. "Read that bill of sale for the Buck pony. And don't lose my tally book. I keep track of fellers I've killed, tallied up in it. You'll find your guns at the barn. Me'n Bass Jackson will show you Long S pilgrims how to git a horse-thief roundup job done. You damn Long S Shorty!"

Bass Jackson carried the confiscated six-shooters in a gunny sack. He and Dusty saddled fresh horses at the barn. Then headed for the river crossing.

VII

It was that hour of dusk when deer hunters head back for camp because the light is too dim and uncertain to line their rifle sights. Even as Dusty Rhodes and Bass Jackson tightened their saddle cinches they heard the sudden racket of gunfire across the river and the excited shouting of bewildered men. Trapped horse thieves, calling out to one another; shouted orders from the Long S cowpunchers telling the horse thieves to throw away their guns; horses splashing into the river.

Long S Shorty and his cowpunchers hesitated out there in front of the cabin. Bass Jackson called out to the Long S ramrod.

"Joplin and Ross Jackson and Lew," he warned, "belong to me and Dusty Rhodes. Keep them other renegades off our backs, Shorty. Or do you still believe that lie Joplin's fed you about me'n Dusty?"

"Never did swaller Jop's story," barked Long S Shorty. "We aimed to hang Lew but we was just hooraw-

in' you two. That damn Dusty Rhodes can't take a joke on hisself. My Adam's apple is busted!" He called his men and they headed for their guns and horses.

"You'll cook me'n my boss a supper fer two, you Long S Shorty!" Dusty Rhodes called back across his shoulder, grinning. "We'll toss what's left to you Long S sorry hands!"

Then Dusty, riding a little in the lead on the buckskin horse, sighted the three men on horseback. Two of the riders were splashing through the shallow water and onto the long, wide sand bar. The third rider, Lew Jackson, met them there. The two riders who had just crossed the dark river were Ross Jackson and Rafe Joplin.

"Damn your black heart, Joplin!" shrilled Lew's voice, "You double-crossin' son of a snake!"

"Shut up your bellerin', Lew!" Ross Jackson snarled. "Who's at Bass' place?"

"The whole damn Long S outfit. And this Joplin thing fetched 'em!"

"Don't kill Jop. We need him. Git a tail holt on yourself, Lew!"

Dusty Rhodes and Bass Jackson rode hard now. They reached the edge of the red willows and had Ross and Lew Jackson and Rafe Joplin out there on the wide sand bar, cut off from escape.

"Take on that Joplin!" gritted Dusty, and rode out of the willows.

But Bass Jackson was giving his brother one last desperate chance for a getaway. He rode out past Dusty and into plain sight. His voice was low-pitched so that it carried no

further than across the sand bar.

"I'm givin' you one last chance, Ross. Git goin'. Take your whelp. Hit the river. Let it take yuh downstream a mile or two. Keep a-driftin'. Don't never come back. I'm givin' you this last chance to make—"

It was Lew Jackson who fired. His saddle carbine cracked twice and big Bass Jackson grunted and slid sideways off his horse and fell with a heavy thud on the hard-packed white sand.

Dusty Rhodes had held his fire. If Bass Jackson wanted to be fool enough to give that renegade brother and yellow-bellied nephew of his a chance to get away, so be it. But this was cold-blooded murder and it touched off Dusty's hair-trigger temper.

Lew Jackson never lived long enough to fire another shot. Dusty's saddle gun cracked and the .30-30 bullet tore through Lew's ribs and his cowardly heart. He screamed once, a short, rattling scream. Then his long arms flailed and he reeled drunkenly in his saddle as his horse reared and went over backwards. The frightened horse kicked Lew's head half off before the dead renegade's boot that had caught in the stirrup, slid free. Then Lew lay sprawled there, his blood staining the white sand.

But Dusty was not watching Lew any more. He and Rafe Joplin were swapping bullets now. And if the brutal-tempered Joplin had not been a horse fighter his first shot would have killed Dusty Rhodes. But every horse Rafe Joplin owned feared

and hated him and before Joplin could squeeze the trigger of his carbine the horse flinched and jumped and whirled, then started pitching. So Rafe Joplin's shots were going wild. But he made a hard, bobbing, uncertain target to hit. Dusty emptied his saddle gun at the man, then dropped the Winchester and jerked his six-shooter and charged his scared buckskin straight at Joplin and his bucking horse, shooting as he went and hitting his man. And bullets whined past Dusty's own head like a swarm of hornets.

Dusty Rhodes had not had time to take so much as one shot at Ross Jackson. But a man had ridden up behind Dusty and slid his running horse to a halt and quit his saddle with a flying leap and was now crouched there near Bass Jackson with a saddle carbine that was spitting fast streaks of fire. And big Ross Jackson was swaying like a drunken man in his saddle, shooting wildly.

Joplin's horse threw the lanky renegade high in the air and he was spread-eagled up there with his long legs kicking and both arms flailing limply. The gun slid from his hand and Rafe Joplin landed spread out like that on his face and belly on the hard damp sand bar at the edge of the black water with his little river waves slapping at his skull and his ugly green eyes unwinking and dead and sightless in the dark water.

Dusty Rhodes knew that Rafe Joplin was dead because the lanky renegade was no longer fouling the clean air with his nasal cursing.

And the first thought that came into Dusty's fighting hot brain was that Rafe Joplin would never again abuse a good horse. And that a horse had helped kill the man.

Vaguely Dusty knew that he did not have to take on Ross Jackson, that somebody else was shooting it out with Bass Jackson's renegade brother. And though he'd seen the man only out of the tail of his eye and had hardly heard what the man had shouted at him, he knew that it was Long S Shorty Slade who had come to his aid. And now he recalled what Long S Shorty had yelled as he rode up and quit his running horse.

"You damn Dusty!"

Ross Jackson lay there at the river's edge. He was dead now. He could never hurt Bass Jackson again. Never again threaten the girl whose picture Dusty had seen. Dusty was glad he hadn't killed Ross Jackson. He wanted to meet that Wilma girl some day and he was glad he had not killed the man who was, after all, her real father. Then Dusty remembered about Bass and reined his horse around and started back.

"Fetch your hat full of water, you damn Dusty!"

Long S Shorty Slade was squatted on his hunkers and he looked as though he was holding big Bass Jackson up in a sitting position. Then as Dusty swung from his saddle and waded in above his knees upstream from where the dead Joplin's blood tainted the river water, while he was sloshing the dust from his hat and

filling its high crown to the brim with river water, he heard beyond all doubt the slow, deep-toned voice of Bass Jackson.

"That Dusty Rhodes," sounded Bass Jackson's voice, "is a shore good boy to take along, Shorty."

"Don't let 'im hear yuh, Bass. His head'll swell with Stetson fever and a man won't be able to live in the same cow country with 'im. . . . What you doin', you damn Dusty? Takin' a bath?"

Bass had two clean bullet holes through his tough hide. No bones were broken and neither wound was dangerous. But painful enough.

The shooting across the river had died out. Long S cowpunchers were crossing over to Joplin's place.

"Don't need you here, boys," Long S Shorty told them when they rode up. "Cross over an' see how the other boys made out. Hope they left anyhow one horse thief for hangin'."

Dusty Rhodes and Long S Shorty got Bass back to the cabin. The cowpunchers gathered up the saddled horses and took care of them and the stolen horses were thrown into the horse pasture with Bass Jackson's remuda.

Dusty had come out of the gun ruckus with no more than a couple of shallow bullet rips. But one of those bullets had come close to its deadly mark when it grazed his ribs, and the second bullet had nicked his thigh.

One of the Long S cowpunchers was more than average handy at patching bullet wounds and he was

kept busy for a couple of hours. The Long S hadn't lost a man but five of them had been wounded. They had killed four horse thieves, not counting Lew's sandy-whiskered companion. The others were prisoners and the Long S cowpunchers treated them rough and scared them with hanging threats before they headed for town with them the next morning.

Bass Jackson and Dusty produced a jug of whiskey and one of the cowpunchers cooked steaks and made biscuits and they drank a lot of strong black coffee.

Long S Shorty made Dusty Rhodes a present of the buckskin horse. He delivered quite a speech. And then he coaxed Dusty into singing. They made quite a night of it. And in the morning they buried their dead.

The stolen horses were examined for brands, tallied out and then turned into the pasture again to remain there until claimed by their rightful owners. Though some of those brands belonged as far away as Utah and New Mexico and the horses would be left there, Long S Shorty said, for Bass Jackson and Dusty Rhodes to use until they reached pension-off age.

Long S Shorty maintained, and Bass Jackson heartily agreed, that the Joplin place and its badlands range should now belong to Dusty Rhodes. The Long S outfit wanted neighbors like Bass Jackson and Dusty Rhodes. There was a sizable bunch of cattle in Joplin's Four Leaf Clover iron, and some good horses even after the stolen ones were

weeded out. And it needed a man with horse savvy like Dusty Rhodes to gentle the fear out of that little cavvy.

VIII

Old Tex Alvord showed up the next day. With him was a cow-country doctor. Tex said he had sort of anticipated the need of the Doc down here on the river and anyhow Doc always showed up about this time of the year to do some catfish ketching.

The Doc knew them all by name. All but Dusty. He said Bass Jackson would have to take it easy for a few weeks. He'd be here for ten days or so to look after Bass' bullet holes and take care of the wounded Long S cowpunchers who would stay with Tex at Rocky Point.

"Looks like you'll have to meet that train fer me, Dusty," Bass Jackson grinned slowly, "at Lewistown."

"That damn Dusty Rhodes," chuckled Long S Shorty. "Born with a horseshoe in his one hand an' a four-leaf clover in the other."

Bass Jackson was a little worried, he told Dusty. About his name. Everybody in the cow country called him Bass Jackson. He'd have to explain it somehow to Wilma when she got here.

"Dusty Rhodes is still a-workin' fer yuh, ain't he, Bass?" drawled the white-whiskered Tex.

"Dusty has his own place now, Tex." Then Bass caught old Tex's wink and added hastily: "But I ain't paid 'im off yet."

"Then it looks like you kin give

him his orders to do what explainin' there is to do," Tex declared. "It's a long ride back here from Lewistown. He'd orter be able to git the job done along the trail."

Dusty squirmed and stuttered, but in the end he agreed. But he said that if he took on the job he'd shoot the works. Begin at the start and tell Wilma Crawford the truth right on down the line.

"She'll like as not stumble onto things later, Bass, that'll make her suspect the truth, and while it'll hurt her and I'd shore be proud to pass along the job of tellin' her to somebody like Long S Shorty, I'll tackle it. Do the best I know how."

"You're a white man, Dusty," said Bass Jackson quietly. "Just about the whitest man I ever knowed. Good luck." He gripped Dusty's hand hard and long.

Armed with the girl's picture and dressed in clean clothes, a brand-new pair of shop-made boots and a forty-dollar Stetson, Dusty Rhodes met Wilma Crawford when she got off the train.

"Your dad sent me to meet you, ma'am."

"He's not . . . not dead?"

"Gosh, no. He'd just won three dollars off the Doc, cuttin' high card when I left the ranch. But how'd you know he'd bin hurt?"

"I've been reading all about the horse-thief roundup in the newspapers on the train. And if you're Dusty Rhodes, then you're the young cowpuncher who did a lot of the shooting! Gosh!"

Wilma smiled at him, her eyes large and bright and gray as heavy smoke in the shadow of thick black lashes. Steady, straight dark gray eyes, frank and honest as a boy's. Her hair was black and curly.

Dusty's face reddened. His ears felt hot. He grinned and shifted his weight to the other new boot.

They shook hands awkwardly. An hour later they rode out of town together. Behind them trailed the loaded pack mule.

"The horse you're ridin' is Buck," Dusty told the girl. "About six-seven weeks ago he was an outlaw. He shore likes you, Wilma. So I reckon he's yours from now on. . . . This is Tecolote I'm ridin'. That means—"

"Owl. I studied Spanish at school. One of the nuns came from Mexico. And I think you just gave me a horse. Didn't you, Dusty?"

Dusty's face was getting hot again. Wilma leaned from her saddle and kissed him. It was an awkward, schoolgirl kind of a kiss. And her cheeks were as red as Dusty's.

"I never kissed any man but my daddy until now. I guess it was sort of silly."

Dusty Rhodes told her it wasn't silly at all and it was the first time any girl had ever kissed him. The mule, he went on hurriedly, was Solomon the Wise Mule. Tecolote and Solomon had all the brains in his little family. Buck was mighty wise, too, and proved it when he taken right to Wilma like that. And before long Dusty and Wilma were talking and laughing as though they

had known one another forever. Because they were both young and both sort of range orphans they were sharing an understanding that they did not recognize.

It was an eighty-mile trip and they camped on good feed and water that night and Wilma cooked supper while Dusty cared for the horses and the little mule. She made the best biscuits he had ever tasted. They divided a big can of peaches and Dusty rolled a smoke. Then they piled wood on the coals and sat beside the blaze of the campfire and the moon came up big and round and yellow as cheese.

Dusty held onto Wilma's hand and talked into the campfire. He began at the start and told her what there was to tell. And when he had finished talking they sat there together and Wilma's black curly head was pillowed against his shoulder and he held her quietly like that for a long time. It was Wilma who finally broke the silence.

"The man you call Bass Jackson," her voice was soft and low, "is the only father I've ever known. The finest father in the world. I can't feel any tears in my heart for the other one, my real father. Pity and sorrow, but no real grief. That's all for the man who has been father and mother and everything in the world to me. Nothing else matters, Dusty. And I know that I haven't inherited any of Ross Jackson's mean or weak traits. Bass Jackson taught me how to be his true daughter. The sisters at the convent taught me the rest. I'll never worry about myself

turning out bad. Will I, Dusty?"

"You? Gosh, no! You couldn't be anything but just what you are right now. . . . Gosh!"

"Then let's make another pot of coffee. And we'll keep the fire going all night and when it's daylight we'll cook breakfast and pack up and hit the trail. Or do you want to bed down?"

"On a night like this? Gosh, no!"

"That Long S Shorty told the newspapermen that you sang a song about yourself that you made up and when something happened you made up a new verse about it. So let's have you sing it and if there's cussing in it, that's all right because I've heard daddy cuss. And then let's make up new verses about tonight here at camp. . . ."

All but the morning star had faded in the sky when they broke camp. And as they rode into the crimson-streaked dawn Dusty Rhodes sang his song to the new day.

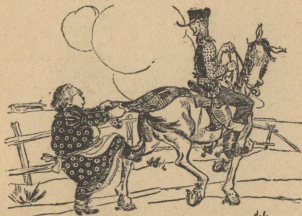
Now mebby this is or mebby it ain't
The end of this cowhand's son.

For the daughter of Bass Jackson has
sawed my horns

That should've stayed sharp an' long.
I'd like to shore hope in my awkward way
That before it comes winter weather
That she'll agree to travel with me
And we'll ride the rest of the long trail
together!

And when Wilma's stirrup touched his and he found himself holding her hand, Dusty Rhodes knew that she had given him the answer to his cowboy's dream.

THE END



J. L.

"Drat them saddle sores, Highpockets, she ain't gittin' Aunt Minnie's quilt!"

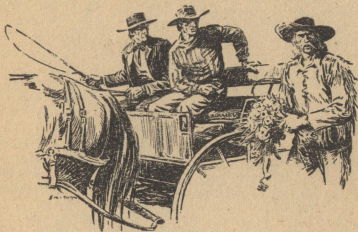
STIRRUP STIR-UP

by S. OMAR BARKER

Now this is the story of Peaceable Pete,
A peace-lovin' gent from his head to his feet.
You could talk to him mean, treat him plumb bad,
An' he wouldn't sass back an' he wouldn't git mad.
Plenty of hands on the ol' Slash Four
Was ready to shoot an' to shed some gore
If all that you did to arouse their wrath
Was to spit accidental acrost their path.
But Peaceable Pete, he seemed to hold
That temper was something to be controlled.
Walk on his bedroll, step on his hat—
He never did flare up at things like that.
Never did cuss when the cattle run—
He sure was a peaceable son of a gun.
But one day a puncher called Middlin' Mac
Borrowed his saddle. When he brung it back,
He thanked ol' Pete, an' Pete says "Gee,
You're always welcome to borry from me!"
But the next time after that saddle loan,
When Pete stepped up on his wall-eyed roan,
He give a snort an' he give a squall,
An' he let in to cuss like dang-it-all.
He hunted Mac up an' he cussed some more,
An' he run him plumb off of the ol' Slash Four!
"You lowdown scrub!" we heard Pete snort.
"You left my stirrups laced up too short!"
Yep, Peaceable Pete was as mild as a pup—
But changin' his stirrups sure stirred him up!
For this is the code of the cowboy range:
When you borrow a saddle, don't make no change
In the length of stirrups, or like as not,
When you bring it back you'll sure git shot!



BOOTHILL CARGO



by NORMAN A. FOX

Doc Comanche wasn't checking off that counterfeit cinero as a dead loss until he collected hot-lead toll

THIS Concha town had provided mighty slim pickings for that veteran pitchman, Doc Comanche, and, more than that, the feeling had grown upon him that trouble was lurking here. Not that he could put his finger on it. They'd rolled in at high noon, Doc and big Oscar Lund, his assistant, wandering in from the west aboard their old Conestoga. When darkness fell they had set up a stand and, with the oil

torches burning, Doc had made his spiel, after a proper show of entertainment, but the number of bottles of Doc Comanche's New & Improved Indian Medicine that had changed hands had been woefully few. Yet it wasn't the skimpy amount of cash they counted at midnight that made Doc decide to shake the dust of Concha from his feet. A man hit lean towns as well as fat ones, but—

"Oscar," Doc Comanche said thoughtfully when they were finally alone, "did you notice two gentlemen in the crowd tonight who watched us very closely? There was a tall one in black who looked like he might be a gambler or a preacher, and there was a short one in range garb who had a long nose, a cold eye, and a sour face."

"Like he'd just bit into a lemon, huh, Doc?"

Comanche nodded, stowed the cash box in the Conestoga and came to a stand in the street, a tall, conspicuous figure in his fringed buckskin suit, with his long silvery hair curling to his shoulders. "The gentleman in black does not overly concern me," he said. "He was not with our sour-faced friend; in fact he was keeping as far away from him as possible. But the little fellow is a lawman, Oscar. I'm mortally certain of it. And he sneaked a peek into our wagon while the show was on."

Oscar Lund was as big as they came, but when the brains were being passed out, he had obviously been busy elsewhere. His bovine face twisted with a scowl, he glanced along the dark, deserted street. "If I get my hands on him—" he growled.

"Violence would hardly be feasible, I fear," Doc sighed. "We are as innocent as babes unborn, Oscar. But there are crooked lawmen as well as straight ones—as you should know by now. Supposing this Sour-face should have an unsolved crime he's trying to pin on somebody? A pair of strangers like ourselves

might serve his purpose all too well. Call it instinct, but I've a feeling we'll do well to get rolling. Hitch up, Oscar."

"I reckon you know best, huh, Doc?" big Oscar said and headed for the livery stable to get their crowbait team.

Waiting for him, Doc Comanche fingered his skimpy goatee and let his restlessness grow. When a man has spent twenty years and more at poking into the odd corners of the West with a medicine wagon, he gets his wits sharpened, but the nimble brain of Comanche held more questions than answers now. There'd been something mighty peculiar about that undersized gentleman with the lawman's look, and something equally odd in the attentive attitude of the dark-garbed man who might be either professional saint or sinner. Doc Comanche had gathered enough trouble in his time to want to walk wide of it now.

Thus he'd made his decision to depart, and when big Oscar returned and got the crowbaits hitched to the wagon, the two men had only to hoist themselves upon the seat and be gone. But, with the reins in Doc's hands, the shadows spewed forth a dark, cadaverous figure.

"Just a minute, gents," said the stranger, and Doc, peering, recognized him as the black-garbed man who'd watched so closely tonight.

"We, sir, are in a great hurry," Doc said. "The ailing and afflicted of Ovando City, some fifty miles from heah, have been waiting impatiently for the miraculous balm of

my medicine. I'm not familiar with this section and will probably make poor time. So if you'll excuse me—"

"Ovando!" said the man in black. "Then your trail will take you through Keg Springs settlement about sunup. Doctor, would you like to make fifty dollars?"

"Eatin' money!" big Oscar chortled eagerly, but Doc managed to give him a sideways kick.

"You can understand, sir," Comanche said, "that a man of my professional standing can't accept any sort of employment."

The man in black laughed, a rusty sound. "It's perfectly legitimate," he insisted. "I'm Calvert Faust, the local . . . er . . . mortician. I've just embalmed the body of Soogan Smithers, deceased owner of the Moonbar Ranch over near Keg Springs. His family's holding the funeral at the ranch tomorrow, and I'd planned on shipping the body on tonight's stage. But my work wasn't completed in time, so I've got to make arrangements to get to the Moonbar. When I saw you make your pitch, it occurred to me that you might be heading toward Keg Springs."

Doc's instinct was to say no, but he'd seen a series of lean days, and fifty dollars had the sound of big money. After all, the mystery of this man's interest in him had been explained away, and feasibly enough, and, in any case, he'd still be putting Concha and the sour-faced man behind him. "See that saloon sign yonder—the Palace?" Calvert Faust asked. "My place is next to it. If

you'll pull around behind—"

Comanche clucked at the team. "My heart bleeds for Mr. Smithers' bereaved family, waiting in vain," he said. "The money is of secondary importance. . . . Fifty dollars, did you say?"

But the shadows had again swallowed Faust, and when Doc tooted the wagon to a stop in the alley, the black-garbed man opened a creaky door and came out toting a rough pine box with the help of two men whose appearance sent a swift thrust of doubt through Comanche. They looked like merchants of death, those two, but not like undertaker's assistants, for both needed shaves and their garb was rough. It took a lot of heaving and panting to get the box stowed aboard the Conestoga, and big Oscar said: "Must've et a lot of spuds when he was alive, huh, Doc?"

Comanche made no answer. He was busy fishing under the wagon seat for his brace of pearl-handled .45s and slipping the guns into his belt. Calvert Faust pulled himself up onto the seat, the two hard-case assistants mounted saddle horses, walking them behind the wagon, and in this manner the party wound out of Concha and took the road to Keg Springs.

It was a dark and dismal ride, the miles unreeling slowly, the old sway-backed wagon rumbling, the men on the seat keeping silent and the horsemen to the rear maintaining a pace that kept them always at the same distance. The hours made their steady march, and crowding

hills to the east were mantled by the darkness before dawn when the group came to where a weed-grown trail forked off to the right, and Calvert Faust called a halt.

"Keg Springs is a few miles farther," he explained as he clambered to the ground. "The Moonbar is just out of sight beyond yonder rise. We'll unload here, and I'll have the Moonbar boys come down and tote the coffin."

The two unshaven men swung from their saddles, the panting and heaving was repeated, and the pine box was put beside the road. Doc passed the reins to big Oscar so that his hands might be free, for the pitchman's thought was that now came the payoff, though in what kind of coin he didn't know. But Faust drew a wallet from his pocket, fished out five bills and said: "My thanks go with these. Good luck in Ovando, Doctor."

Comanche's sigh was explosive. "And good luck to you," he said fervently.

Whatever Keg Springs' excuse for existence was, it must have been flimsy. There was a hotel, a store, a scattering of saloons, a jail, a livery stable and a dozen unpainted frame houses, and Doc Comanche and big Oscar Lund gazed upon this insignificance in the early light of the new day. But fifty dollars can give the world a rosy tint, and Doc's eyes twinkled as they brought the old Conestoga down the single street.

"Ovando will keep," the pitchman decided. "We are going to enjoy the luxury of a bona fide bed and

a bath, Oscar. In short, we stop here and rest."

Leaving the wagon at the livery stable, they bargained for the best room in the hotel and laid down a spanking new ten-dollar bill to show they meant business. They tumbled into a genuine bed and stayed there till a nooning sun aroused them, and then they had the promised bath and a breakfast that made them let out their belts. While big Oscar industriously picked his teeth, Doc pulled a pad of gummed, printed labels from his pocket, sighed and said: "We'd better make up more medicine, and get on our way. There's a time for play and a time for work. You agree, Oscar?"

It was big Oscar's custom to agree to anything Doc said, so they went back to the hotel and mounted to their room. And they found a man awaiting them, seated on the edge of the bed with a gun in his hand—a little man with a long nose, a cold eye and a face that looked as sour as though its owner had just bitten into a lemon.

"You two jiggers," said the little man, his voice as melancholy as his looks, "are under arrest."

Doc Comanche could pull himself up to a high, fine figure when he was so minded. "You realize, sir," he asked, "that I am Dr. Comanche, adopted son of the tribe whose name I bear? I'll have you know—"

"I realize," the little man interrupted him, "that you are a first-class fraud with a shady reputation. That makes no never mind. I'm Steven McCracken, federal marshal, but folks call me So-sad McCracken.

And I'm arresting you for passing counterfeit money. I rode in from Concha this morning and stopped at the jail to confab with the deputy who does the lawing here. That's how I happened to be on hand when the hotel clerk came in with a bogus bill he'd gotten from you. I'm thinkin', Doc, that you belong to Laz Shipley's counterfeiting crew, a gang I've been chasing for months."

With a low, rumbling growl, Oscar Lund took a belligerent step forward, and it was a gesture of Doc's rather than the quick lift of McCracken's gun that stopped the giant.

"Shipley's gang was holed up around Concha," the marshal went on. "I trailed them there, hung around a while and likely got 'em nervous. They've moved out, and the sign says they headed this way. And now I find you passing bogus money. The thought crossed my mind last night that if Shipley had a man like you working for him he could scatter counterfeit bills over considerable country. So I done some nosing into your wagon, but I couldn't get anything on you—then."

"You, sir, are a mighty suspicious gent," Doc observed.

"Sometimes I even get suspicious of myself," McCracken said sadly. "Now where's Laz Shipley?"

"You are laboring under a misapprehension," Doc declared and proceeded to tell of his deal with Calvert Faust. "You can see," Comanche said in conclusion, "that we came into possession of the bogus bills legitimately. And if Shipley was operating around Concha, it is

not strange that Mr. Faust was unwittingly the recipient of counterfeit money."

"It's a good story," McCracken said thoughtfully, "only it's got a few holes in it. First, there's never been an undertaker in Concha, by Faust or any other name. Second, that building next door to the Palace Saloon where you claim you loaded a coffin has been empty for weeks. And last, there's no such ranch as the Moonbar, and no such man as Soogan Smithers, and there ain't nothin' back in the hills beyond where you unloaded that coffin but juniper trees and jack rabbits."

It was a moment when Doc Comanche needed to keep a steady hold on himself, and he managed with an effort. He'd anticipated trouble in Concha, and here in Keg Springs he'd found it a thousandfold. It left Doc speechless, but So-sad McCracken had more to say.

"I've never met Shipley face to face," the marshal continued, "but I know his general description. This Calvert Faust jigger could be him. Which means that Shipley has moved hereabouts, and finding him will be like combing a flea out of a fur coat. Maybe you got mixed with him innocentlike; maybe you're part of his outfit. I got no way of knowing, so I'm gonna jug the pair of you till I find out."

Doc Comanche could make a mighty spiel at times, but there'd be no outtalking the man with the gun, so there was nothing to do but let himself and big Oscar be herded out to the Keg Springs jail. The deputy

in charge was a big-bellied, vacuous-faced individual, not too long on brains from the look of him, and So-sad McCracken said: "Lock this pair up, will you, feller? I'll want to keep 'em handy while I'm hereabouts."

Nodding, the deputy searched the prisoners, finding Doc's pearl-handled guns and dumping them into a desk drawer, then prodding the pair into the tiny cell behind the office. McCracken made a spur-jangling departure, and big Oscar looked around and said: "We've been in better jails than this, huh, Doc?"

Comanche gave him no answer. The pitchman had thinking to do, and all of it added up to the same total: he and big Oscar were in a tight, and they were likely to stay wedged unless So-sad McCracken dabbed a loop on Calvert Faust, alias Laz Shipley, counterfeiter and schemer extraordinary. Doc wished mightily for a moment or two with Laz Shipley himself, but Shipley wasn't likely to be found loitering around a jail. To Doc the situation resolved itself into simple terms: he had to get out of here, and he had to find Shipley.

The vacuous-faced deputy was still peering into the cell, as though prisoners were the exception rather than the rule in this jail. Giving him a look, Doc judged that the deputy's grandchildren were going to hear about today's doings, and he chose weapons to use against this badge toter—the best weapons a pitchman possessed: a gilded tongue and an active imagination.

"Sir," Doc asked gravely, "how

do you manage to attend to your duties, as ailing as you are?"

"Me?" said the deputy. "I ain't been near a doctor since I had the measles."

"I, sir, am a doctor," Comanche said with dignity. "I can recognize the symptoms of solstice of the liver when I see them. It's mighty brave of you to try hiding your affliction from the world. Or can it be that you are not even aware of it? Tell me, haven't you detected a slight palpitation of the heart whenever you run upstairs? And don't you feel inclined to lie down after eating a heavy meal? Amalgamated acropolis in its advanced stages, I'll swear!"

Fear muddled the deputy's eyes for a fleeting moment, and then he guffawed. "I've heard all about you," he said. "You peddle Indian medicine, and you've just hoping I'll buy some."

Doc shook his head sorrowfully. "I'd be an unmitigated fraud, if I told you my medicine would help you," he said. "A year ago, perhaps. But, in honesty, I couldn't touch your money now, sir. Muscular manipulation might help, but medicine would be wasted."

"Muscular manipulation? What's that, Doc?"

"A curative method I learned from the Apaches," Doc explained. "A painless method of relieving aggravated equinox."

"I'd like to try some," the deputy decided. "If it does me any good, I'll see that you get darn well fed around this calaboose. Confound it, Doc, I got to admit you hit the nail

on the head when you mentioned me wantin' to lay down after eatin' heavy. But"—suspicion lighted his eyes—"I'm keepin' a gun in your belly all the time you're working!"

Unlocking the cell, he stepped inside, reaching for his gun as he came. Doc, who'd been holding his breath until this moment, nodded his head ever so slightly and big Oscar went into action. Head down, Oscar charged the deputy, butting into the man and sending him staggering against the wall, the breath going out of the badge toter with a *whoosh*. Instantly Doc Comanche was darting forward, wrenching the gun away from the deputy, while Oscar Lund pinioned the man's arms in a bear-like grip.

"Saw a lariat hanging on the office wall," Doc panted. "Hang onto him while I get it."

They used the rope to hogtie the deputy, the man's own neckerchief serving to gag him. The badge toter trussed and left in the cell, Doc hurried into the office again, got his pearl-handled .45s from the desk and pocketed them. Big Oscar cast a calculating look at the guns.

"Reckon we ought to put that jigger out of his misery, huh, Doc?" he asked. "A gent as sick as him shouldn't be left to suffer."

"Our deputy friend will probably live to be a hundred and ten, con-found him," Doc informed his assistant. "Come on, Oscar."

Out into the street, Oscar looked longingly at the hills. "We'll get them between us and this town, huh, Doc?" he suggested.

"Running won't help, suh." Doc sighed. "I don't crave to have So-sad McCracken trailing us the rest of our lives. I haven't time to explain things to you, Oscar, but we've got to find Mr. Calvert Faust."

"Look!" Oscar cried. "That ain't gonna be hard. There he is down yonder, in front of the mercantile store with a wagon. Me, I'm gonna twist his neck!"

Doc spun around, and saw the black-garbed psuedo-undertaker of the night before. Faust, or Shipley, was here in Keg Springs with a light spring wagon, and he was loading groceries into it. Big Oscar was ready to start for him on the run, but Doc laid a restraining hand on his assistant's arm. "If ever there was a man we needed with his neck untwisted, it's him, Oscar," Doc said. "Do you understand me?"

Oscar became inspired. "We'll drag him to the marshal, huh, Doc? We'll make him tell about that bogus money he give us!"

"McCracken's never seen Shipley, remember. I'm afraid our smooth-tongued friend would just deny he'd ever seen us before, sir. No, Oscar, this requires scheming. Come along, watch those big hands of yours, and keep your mouth buttoned!"

Every minute in this town was like so much time on the lip of a volcano, for there was no knowing when someone would discover that trussed deputy and raise a hue and cry. Also there was no telling whether So-sad McCracken was still in town or not. Yet Doc Comanche strode down the street of Keg Springs like a man untroubled, big Oscar

shuffling along with him, and in this manner they accosted the man in black.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Faust!" Doc said with a great show of surprise, extending a ready hand. "Hardly expected to see you in Keg Springs. And with a wagon!"

The black-garbed man swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "You gents still in these parts?" he said in astonishment. "Thought you'd be long gone to Ovando. The wagon? It belongs to the Moonbar. Those poor bereaved souls have been too grief-stricken to eat, but I borrowed the wagon and came in for some supplies for them. They'll be grateful when they return to normal after the funeral."

"So the funeral hasn't been held yet," Doc said quickly. "I'm mighty glad to hear that, mighty glad. You see, my assistant and I have since decided that we ought to be present at the last rites. After all, we almost feel like we know poor Mr. Smithers, after hauling him all those miles last night. Fact is, we were just about to make inquiries as to the location of the Moonbar, since it was pretty dark when we were thereabouts last night. But with you to guide us—"

"The funeral's to be a quiet family affair," Faust interjected hastily. "I'm afraid that—"

"Ah, come now," Doc said with a broad smile. "Surely if Mr. Smithers ratched in this section, he has many friends hear in Keg Springs. Perhaps some of them will take us along to the funeral. If we'll be in *your*

way, Mr. Faust, we'll just make inquiries elsewhere and—"

"Very well, I'll take you along," Faust snapped. "If you've just got to attend the funeral, pile into the wagon."

"Why, it wouldn't be fitting to come without some sort of floral tribute," Doc observed. "Did I notice wild sweet peas growing in yonder yard down the street? One moment while I ask the housewife for a bouquet."

Big Oscar speared a nervous glance in the direction of the jail, and though his brows were knitted in puzzlement it was obvious that Oscar recognized a need for speed when one existed. "Maybe we'd better not bother with the flowers, huh, Doc?" he said. "Maybe we'd better hurry."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Doc Comanche and was off, heading down the street and nimbly leaping the picket fence that surrounded a flower-fringed house. A turn of a flagstone walk put Oscar and Faust out of his sight, but he was back to the street not many minutes later, a large, bushy bouquet clutched in his hand. "The lady of the house wasn't home," he said. "But I'm sure she'll never miss these."

Calvert Faust was scowling blackly, but he got to the seat and clucked the team into motion without further word. Thus they rode out of town, big Oscar between the other two men, and Doc holding his purloined bouquet. And with Keg Springs falling behind them, Doc had a last backward look. He thought he saw the small figure of

So-sad McCracken come out of the restaurant and head toward the jail-house, but he couldn't be sure. If it was McCracken, there was going to be something stirring in that sleepy settlement in a very few minutes.

Following the regular stage road to the south, the same road Doc Comanche and big Oscar had come over the night before, Faust wheeled off to the left when he reached the weed-grown trail where they'd unloaded the coffin. Now the country became rougher, a land of criss-crossing coulees and draws, with long rocky stretches where even a heavy wagon would have left no tracks. Faust had claimed that the non-existent Moonbar was near the road, but they put miles behind without sign of habitation, Doc holding his tongue and giving no indication that he found this irregular.

"You said it was too dark to notice the country last night," Faust finally volunteered. "I turned off the regular road short of the spot where we stopped before. This is really a shorter way, though the going is slower."

Oscar stared blankly, then opened his mouth to speak, but Doc managed a sideward kick that silenced the big fellow. "Directions have always been confusing to me," Doc said placidly. "Is the Moonbar far from here?"

"Just around the next turn," answered Faust, and then they were dipping down into a bushy coulee and taking that next turn, and here a shack squatted, a half-dozen saddle horses stomping in the peeled-pole

corral beside it.

"Ain't much of a spread," big Oscar observed before Doc could kick him again, but by then Calvert Faust had gotten a gun out from under his coat and was jabbing it into Oscar's ribs. "Trail's end, gents," he said. "Pile down and don't make a wrong move. You wanted to attend a funeral, eh? Well, you're going to. *Your own!*"

At the sound of the wagon's approach, five men came spilling out of the shack. Two were the unshaven pair who'd helped with the coffin in Concha last night; the others were of the same mold, and all of them stared with a mixture of astonishment and anger in their eyes. "What in blazes is the idea, chief?" one demanded. "You went to town to get us grub—not visitors!"

"The gent with the billy goat whiskers is Doc Comanche, the pitchman," Faust said. "The stupid-looking jigger is his assistant. They insisted on coming to Soogan Smithers' funeral, and they gave me no choice but to bring them along. If I hadn't fetched them, they were going to ask others in Keg Springs about the way to the Moonbar. There'd been some excitement in that settlement when they started talking about a ranch that wasn't. And maybe that sawed-off, sour-faced marshal who's been on our tails might have showed up and heard some of that talk. Now get inside, you two! You've got to be silenced for good!"

Prodded by Faust's gun barrel, Doc and big Oscar were herded in-

side the shack and searched. Faust found a pearl-handled .45 in one of Doc's pockets and tossed the gun into a corner. Then the two were lined against a wall, big Oscar, his hands hoisted, blinking in bewilderment, Doc Comanche making a half-dignified, half-ludicrous figure with his long hair flowing to his shoulders and the bushy bouquet still clutched in his left hand. Looking around, Oscar spied a rough pine box shoved over against the opposite wall.

"Look, Doc," he said. "There's that coffin we hauled."

"Correct, Oscar," said Doc. "And I'd like to have a look into it. Will you attend to the opening, Oscar? *Steady, boys!*"

For Doc Comanche, who had done sleight-of-hand tricks while making many a pitch, had done another sleight-of-hand trick here, darting his right hand deep into that bushy bouquet and producing a pearl-handled .45 that was a match for the one that had been taken from him. And now he swung the gun in a gentle, all-embracing arc that covered Calvert Faust and his astonished men.

"Defang them, Oscar," Doc ordered, but the order was unnecessary. Oscar was already busy at emptying holsters and tossing guns through the open doorway. And with this task performed, he turned toward the pine box and began prying at its lid with a gun barrel, Faust and his men watching in impotent anger, Doc Comanche keeping an eye on all of them.

When the last board had been

pulled away, big Oscar lifted puzzled eyes and said: "Shucks, Doc, that marshal jigger was right. There ain't no dead man. The stuff in this box don't make no sense to me."

But it made sense to Doc Comanche, even though he'd never seen an engraver's equipment before, or a small hand press such as this crew used to print their counterfeit money. He said: "That's what I suspected, Mr. Faust. Concha was too hot for you, with Marshal McCracken hanging around, so you moved to this here shack. But your problem was to move your equipment. Even thought you've got a wagon, you had to be careful because you didn't know how watchful McCracken might be, so you left yonder box in that empty shack in Concha till the sign was right. I, sir, presented the perfect solution to your problem, since I was a stranger and wouldn't question the wild story you decided to give me. You even considered it safe to pay me in counterfeit money since you thought I'd at least be as far away as Ovando City before I spent any of it. You, sir, are an unmitigated scoundrel!"

"You outfoxed me, all right," Faust snapped. "And you've guessed most of the answers. Since the box looked like a coffin, the funeral talk to fool you just naturally suggested itself. I wanted somebody to do the hauling job that would keep right on going afterwards, and not do any talking hereabouts, and I figured that Keg Springs was too small to interest a pitchman. Then I was fool enough to haul you out here, thinkin' to close your mouth for good.

But you won't win this hand, Comanche! Turn us in, and I'll swear you're one of my crew who fell out with me and tried a double cross. And I'll make the story stick!"

"But I don't reckon anybody will believe it," said a melancholy voice, and Marshal So-sad McCracken's face was at the window. "I've been a hoot and a holler behind you all the way out of Keg Springs, Shipley. And I've stood outside this window long enough to have heard plenty. Deppity, get in there and help Doc Comanche keep those jiggers covered."

Then the big-bellied deputy was into the shack, and after him came McCracken, gun in hand. Doc Comanche made a sweeping bow.

"I've been expecting you," he told the marshal. "Obviously you found our deputy friend and released him, and I suppose you cut for sign after that. You had no trouble trailing me, I hope."

"Trouble!" McCracken spat. "Shucks, man, I found a bottle label advertising Doc Comanche's New &

Improved Indian Medicine every few feet. A blind man could have followed that trail!"

Doc dipped a hand into his pocket and produced the pad of gummed labels he'd showed big Oscar that morning, a skimpy pad now. "I knew, sir, that Mr. Faust, here, thought he was leading us into a trap, so I was prepared. I had an ace-in-the-hole, or ace-in-a-bouquet, rather, but I saw no harm in blazing the trail for you as well. I presume, marshal, that the law no longer has any claim against me and my assistant?"

"Claim!" said McCracken. "The Secretary of the Treasury will be sending you a letter of thanks for this! And I'll bet he'll be using Doc Comanche's medicine from here on out!"

Doc sighed. "Oscar, if you'll see if you can find fifty dollars in good money in Mr. Faust's wallet, we'll collect our just dues and be on our way. We've got a pitch to make in Ovando City. Remember, I told you there's a time for play and a time for work."

THE END

SIGHT TESTER **THIRST BESTER**

Guess which line is the longer—, but don't bet on it

ANSWER: Neither—measure them

Both are the same—

Pepsi-Cola

5¢ PER BOTTLE

The advertisement features a large illustration of a Pepsi-Cola bottle on the right. To the left of the bottle is a circular graphic containing two horizontal lines of different lengths. Above the lines is the text 'Guess which line is the longer—, but don't bet on it'. Below the lines is the text 'ANSWER: Neither—measure them' and 'Both are the same—'. The bottle has a label that reads 'Pepsi-Cola' and '5¢ PER BOTTLE'.

RANGE SAVVY

BY CARL RAHT



After the cowboy has his bronc saddle and bridle-broken, he begins teaching the animal how to come to a dead stop after a burst of speed. It is natural for a horse to stiffen his forelegs and slide on all four feet when stopping suddenly. This motion jars the rider and throws him off balance. To teach the horse to throw on the brakes by sliding his hind feet only, the cowboy pulls the shoes off the front feet, leaving them tender, and the horse learns to throw his weight on the protected shod rear feet in stopping, thus breaking the jar for the rider.

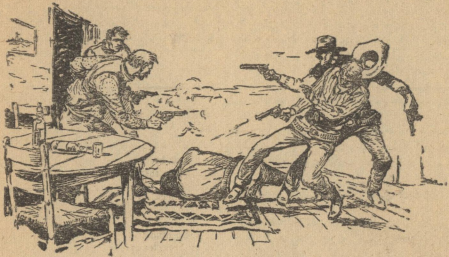


Every chore in sheep raising is distasteful to a cow-puncher, and some chores are even distasteful to the sheepmen themselves. For instance, sacking the wool at shearing time. Unlike cotton, which is sacked in presses that are worked by machinery, the wool is baled by a worker who stands in the eight-foot-long bag, trampling the fleece tight as it is thrown to him. It is a smelly business and one where a man literally starts from the bottom and works his way up.



Many a jobless cowhand, riding the chuck line looking for work, made his tobacco and liquor money off his horse. Every ranch had a running horse on which the ranch hands would bet their shirts. The chuck-line rider, by good bargaining, would get hold of a ringer—usually a race horse barred from the tracks because of some slight blemish. He never groomed his racer, even encouraged the animal to look like an old, broken-down crowbait. He would engineer a race between his horse and the pride of the rancho: result—usually—he'd ride on to the next chuck-line stop over with his pockets full.

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, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.



Insuring Utah Mercer's renegade-ramrodded Rafter M called for a salesman who specialized in gun-swift

COLT COVERAGE

by LEE E. WELLS

THERE were times when Jed Hardin wondered why he had ever stopped punching cows. He had been feeling that way for a week or more and he had even written a letter to Tucson resigning as Territorial salesman for the Eagle Fire Assurance Co. A man gets mighty tired riding over desert, mountain and range land with little to show for his effort.

The letter had been written last night and this morning Jed had torn it up, cursing himself as a locoed fool to be herding fire insurance policies when forty and found could come as regularly as daylight every morning.

He rode out of Galen now, southeast toward the Cochise Peaks and Utah Mercer's Rafter M spread. His sun-narrowed dark eyes were fastened

on the break in the Peaks that marked the entrance to the Rafter M range, but his thoughts were busy checking selling points he would present to Mercer.

Within a short time the main trail curved away from the Cochise Peaks and a smaller lane led directly toward the ranch. Not far away, Jed could see a leaning post and the crude Rafter M painted on a cracked board.

Suddenly a rifle whanged and the bullet whined through the air over Jed's head. He tensed with surprise. A second shot rang out and dirt jumped just a little in front of his horse. Jed pulled up.

"Hey!" he called. "I'm right peaceful."

He waited, long arms held above his head. He caught a glint of sun on metal in the rocks ahead, up near the top of a broken cliff.

"Ride in slow, hombre," a rough voice called down to him. "One of the boys down below will read your brand."

Jed lowered his arms and carefully picked up the reins. Pressure of his knees sent the buckskin forward at a slow pace. He wondered why the Rafter M had gun guards out. Then he shrugged his wide shoulders. From all he had heard about that curly wolf, Utah Mercer, it was like the old fire eater to be cantankerous.

A man stepped out of a jumble of rocks at the mouth of the canyon as Jed approached. He wore crossed gun belts and his young, stubbled face held the unmistakable mark of the gunhawk. Jed glanced up. A

bearded face looked down from the edge of the cliff and the barrel of the rifle projected beyond the rock.

"What's your handle and what do you want?" the young gun guard demanded.

"I aim to see Utah Mercer, amigo," said Jed shortly. "Matter of business."

The guard's eyes jumped to the heavy gun belt Jed wore under the long-tailed black coat, to the polished boots, the white shirt and string tie and then into the long gaunt face.

"What kind of business?"

Jed folded his hands over the saddlehorn. "That's between Utah and me. Do I get to see him?"

"Nope. He's sick. Leastways, he won't see you. Shuck your iron, hombre, and burn leather back where you come from."

The guard's hands taloned out over his guns. Jed grinned slowly. "The name's Jed Hardin," he drawled. "It maybe don't mean nothing to you now, but after this you'll know Jed Hardin ain't giving good Colts to any proddy polecat."

The guard's fingers snapped to his guns. Jed sank a spur deep and the buckskin plunged frantically to one side. Jed's hand blurred to his hip and his six-gun jumped into his fingers. He fired, whirled his horse and sent a slug upward toward the man on the ledge. It kicked rock in the guard's eyes and the man cursed, momentarily blinded.

The young gunnie's left arm hung limp. Spitting curses, he fired at Jed, the lead cutting the air close to Jed's ear. Jed knocked the gun out of the man's fingers with his third

shot. Then, sinking the spurs deep in the buckskin's flanks he pounded away in a cloud of dust toward the distant road. He momentarily expected to hear the blast of rifle fire, but it didn't come. The guard up there was probably still blinded.

He hit the Galen road and didn't slacken his speed until safe beyond rifle range. Then he pulled up, let his horse blow, and looked back.

"Now what caused all that ruckus?" he mused aloud. "Them hard cases meant business."

He watched the distant canyon mouth, half expecting to see pursuers come streaming toward him. But nothing like that happened and at last Jed straightened and rode slowly back to Galen. The whole affair puzzled him but he had no means of solving the mystery unless he slipped through the cordon of guards and investigated the Rafter M itself.

"This insurance selling just ain't a man-sized job," he told the stained wall paper in his hotel room. "I'm going to prod cows the rest of my born days. It's what I was raised for."

He sat down to a rickety table and painfully wrote another letter of resignation, feeling better when that was done. He buckled on his gun belt and left the hotel. The post office was a little barred cubicle in the general store down the street, just beyond the Cochise Saloon and Jed Hardin headed that way.

Jed turned in at the saloon. One drink to commemorate his new freedom and then to the post office to mail his letter. A few men stood at

the long bar, a lonely gambler absently ruffled a deck of cards at one of the tables across the room. Jed pushed to the bar beside a sinewy man with cold suspicious blue eyes. The man grunted and moved aside as Jed pushed in, ordered his drink and downed it with a single gulp.

Jed ordered a second drink and on impulse turned to his neighbor. "Any of the spreads hiring down this way?"

"Might be. You looking for a job?"

"I'm starting in the morning," Jed announced.

The man's thin, sandy brow arched and his eyes grew colder. "Don't monkey around the Rafter M. It won't be healthy, I hear."

Jed's black eyes snapped. "Mister, I know that. It's a couple of gun-proddy hombres on that spread that made me plumb disgusted with my work."

The man turned slowly and his thin lips set in a puckered, angry line. Jed didn't notice the little flame that flickered in the man's eyes for just a moment.

"I was just aiming to talk to Utah Mercer about fire insurance," Jed went on. "It would sure mean a heap to any rancher what has his buildings maybe all burnt up because the cook got careless. But could I even get close to Utah? No! I met a six-gun reception that sure discouraged me."

The man at the bar spoke coldly. "Aim to do anything about it?"

"Shucks, no!" Jed stared at the man. "If the Rafter M is proddy, I aim to leave it alone and mind my

own business. If Mercer ain't progressive, if he don't want some dinero should he get burnt out some night, I ain't going to chase after him."

The man looked puzzled. He had a long, pointed jaw and the stubble rasped as he thoughtfully rubbed his calloused fingers along it. He was a bit shorter than Jed but his body was heavy, hard. He wore a gun belt around his thick waist.

"I don't savvy this talk of yours, hombre. You mean you'd pay Mercer if his building burnt down, or his hayrick?"

"Sure. The Eagle pays right off. Not only that, amigo, but I could arrange to pay any loss Mercer might have was his cows to get blackleg, or rustled."

"You sound like Sandy Claus. I'm Con Ralton. You should have spoke to me before you rode out to the Rafter M. I'm the segundo of the spread."

Jed gulped with surprise, then his lean face tightened. "It was your boys that poured lead at me!"

"Sure," Con said apologetically, "but we've had a heap of trouble out there. Some of our beef has sprouted wings and one of the boys had his hide punctured. Old Utah's been mighty sick the last month or two and I figured guards would keep drifters off our range."

"They sure do," Jed assured him. He ordered another drink. He forgot the letter of resignation in his pocket. If Con Ralton was the Rafter M segundo, maybe he still had a chance to do some business. He ordered a drink for Con, who accepted it with a grunt of thanks.

"Jed," Con said after the second drink, "I reckon I'd like to hear more about this insurance you keep augering about. Maybe you and me can dicker."

Jed smiled widely. "Con, you're an understanding man. I got my rate books and papers at my room in the hotel. Let's go up there for a powwow. Maybe you can get me in to see Utah Mercer."

"Might be," Con answered shortly.

The two men left the saloon. In his hotel room Jed got down to business.

"First thing I gotta know, has the Rafter M got a good well or a heap of water troughs around the ranch buildings?"

"A couple of tanks close by," Con answered.

"Near enough so your men could form a bucket line to any of the buildings?" asked Jed.

"Pretty close."

Jed beamed. "Now that's right good news for Utah Mercer. I can give him a policy at a heap lower cost than I figured on."

"Wait a minute," Con objected. "I thought you was to pay Utah if he had a fire."

Jed hitched his chair closer to the bed where Con Ralton sat. He went glibly into his sales talk, explaining the Eagle Fire & Assurance Co.'s eagerness to pay off fire claims. Jed's glib tongue pictured the company as a group of sainted men who spent their lives looking for poor ranchers who needed their help and money to get out of trouble. Con listened, answered Jed's questions as

to the number of buildings, their probable value.

Finally he tapped the sheet of note paper filled with scrawled figures. "You mean Utah gives you one hundred bucks now. If he has a fire that destroys all the spread, then you give him back six thousand?"

"If every stick burns up," Jed agreed.

Con struck his knee with the flat of his hand. "Hombre, you can just fill out that paper right now. I'll sign it for Utah and give you the hundred dollars."

Jed regretfully shook his head. "Con, I sure wish I could do it that way. But I can't. First, I got to look over the buildings personal. After that's done, then Utah himself has to sign this paper."

Con Ralton frowned, then got to his feet. "Come on. We're riding out to the Rafter M. I'm a man what believes in getting things done."

Jed jammed his hat on his head, hitched up his gun belt. He gathered up his papers, folded them and stuck them in his coat pocket. Then he followed Con out of the room.

Guards stopped them again at the canyon mouth. The young one was gone but the bearded man above was for drilling Jed Hardin without argument. Con Ralton's cursing orders checked him although he glared at Jed from his vantage point above.

At Con's side Jed rode through the short, narrow canyon and came out on a wide, long, hill-locked valley. Jed's eyes lighted with pleasure at the sight of the rich grazing land.

Con Ralton rode steadily toward

the ranch buildings, Jed following him. At the gate another guard put in appearance, a slit-eyed hombre with a Sharps rifle tucked under his arm. His jaw moved on a bulging wad of tobacco and the shallow, dark eyes rested on Jed as though memorizing each feature.

They dismounted before the big adobe ranchhouse. Narrow slits of windows marked the old days of the Apache raiders. Here and there were the pock marks of Indian bullets in the thick walls. Another gun-slinger leaned against the wall near a thick plank door. He dangled a limp cigarette from thin lips and blew smoke from his pinched nose as Con and Jed pushed past him.

Inside, Jed had to blink, blinded by the sudden transition from sunlight to shadow. In a moment his sight returned and he found himself in a long, low room. At one end was a blackened fireplace before which was a small table loaded with bottles and glasses. It was flanked by two big, comfortable chairs.

A giant of a man sprawled in one of the chairs, an empty glass held in one dangling hand. He looked up, his watery blue eyes uncertain. A mane of white hair crested a high, red forehead. His brows were shaggy, the nose beaked like an Apache. The thick lips must once have been harsh and forceful, now they looked wet and slack, seemingly pulled down by the heavy bony chin.

"Utah, this is Jed Hardin," Con Ralton announced. "He's going to talk to you about a new-fangled thing called fire insurance. I reckon maybe you ought to listen right good

and then sign the paper he's got."

Utah Mercer's eyes focused on Jed and, for a split second, Jed thought he caught a look of hope and keen appraisal. But it passed so quickly, the look of dull apathy returned so soon, that Jed couldn't be sure. The old man waved limply toward the bottles.

"Have a drink," he mumbled. "Drink's good for you, makes you forget—"

"Utah!" Con snapped. "Hardin's here to talk business."

The old man wearily passed his hand over his eyes. "Sure, Con, sure. Business."

Jed Hardin sat down while Con watchfully leaned against the fireplace. Jed stared at Utah Mercer. This drunken man couldn't be the rip-snorting, fighting rancher of legend, feared by raiding Apaches and marauding outlaws alike. Jed threw a sidelong glance at Con Ralton. The *segundo* was watching Utah narrowly and, for all his easy stance, Jed sensed something nervous and taut about the man.

Jed sensed the strain, the falseness of the atmosphere. He knew something was wrong, but now was not the time to be curious. He pulled his papers out of his pocket and repeated the talk he had made to Con. Utah only half listened. Jed felt as though he was talking to the cold, blank walls. Now and then Utah would look up at Con, then quickly shift his glance.

"Now if you want this policy," Jed finished, "I'll look over the place, set the rate and you can sign the application."

Utah nodded. "Sure, I'll sign it. Con wants it, don't he?"

Jed looked around in surprise. What had the *segundo*'s wishes to do with what the owner decided? He caught a frown on the foreman's face that quickly wiped off. Con straightened and shrugged.

"It ain't what I want, Utah. It's what's best for the Rafter M."

Utah nodded and pulled his bulk



out of the chair. "I reckon I'd like to make the *pasear* with Hardin."

"No need of it," Con snapped.

Jed intervened smoothly. "I'd like Mercer around when I value the property. That way, there ain't no arguments later."

Con stared hard at Utah and his thin lips pursed with displeasure. But he made an annoyed gesture of surrender.

The three of them went outside. The apathy left Mercer's face and he

stared around the yard almost as if he had returned after a long absence. His voice raised, carried more animation. Con walked silently beside Jed, but he seemed uneasy. Jed first examined the barn.

Utah Mercer started on a long, rambling tale of something that had happened in the past. It concerned a reign of rustling that had hit the valley some twenty years before. Half the time the old man mumbled, again his words came clear. He lost the thread of the story and seemed to ramble along just to hear himself talk.

They moved from the barn to the cook shack and bunkhouse. The buildings were well constructed but the crew must be a dirty, careless lot, Jed thought. He ordered piles of inflammable trash cleaned up before he would include them in the policy coverage. Con readily agreed. Then they went out to the hayricks and the windmill, Mercer still rambling on.

“. . . that hombre was plumb treacherous,” Mercer said. “We all figured him as a good, honest man. He wormed himself into our confidence and there wasn’t a single one of us that wouldn’t have backed him. Brands can sure be blotched sometimes, and again an hombre can wear one that don’t rightly belong to him. Like the time—but, shucks, that’s something else.”

Jed could hardly control the jerk of his muscles. Utah Mercer had given him a sharp nudge and then kept right on blandly talking. Jed listened more carefully but the old man’s tale seemed to have no hidden,

double meanings.

At last they finished and returned to the house. Jed made out the papers, figured the rates and set the amount on the application. He pushed the paper across to Mercer and handed the man a pen that Con had brought.

“When you sign that, the job’s done,” he said.

Utah nodded and his blue eyes became keen. “You don’t know how well it’s done,” he said and signed with a shaking scrawl.

Con Ralton pulled out a roll of bills and counted off the amount of premium. Jed placed application and money in his pocket and arose.

“The policy will be here in about three weeks, maybe a little bit longer. But don’t worry none. The Rafter M is plumb protected right now.”

He shook hands with Utah Mercer and the old man wearily reached for a bottle on the table. Mercer hardly replied to Jed’s good-by and Con Ralton seemed anxious to get Jed out of the house. Out in the yard, Con relaxed and looked pleased with himself. He passed a rough joke with Jed and then signaled the gun-hung man who loafed near the door.

“Saddle up, Wolf, and take Hardin through the Pass. Tell the boys it’s all right.”

“They’ll pass me when I deliver the policy?” Jed asked.

Con grinned wickedly. “If they do, it’ll be on a shutter. You can see me around town and give me the policy. Adios, Hardin. I’m right glad I run into you.”

Jed arrived at Galen about dusk, had something to eat and went to

his room. He prepared the Rafter M application for mailing and then lay back on the hard bed. The setup at the ranch puzzled him. He sat up, rolled a cigarette and stared at the steady flame of the lamp.

"It's plumb funny the way the segundo rules the roost out there," he said aloud. "He's got more say so'n the old man himself. Utah Mercer is sure a heap different than I expected."

Restlessness sent him outside and he strolled along Galen's single street to the end, crossed over and came back on the opposite side. He passed the little jail and sheriff's office. On impulse Jed stepped inside.

"What do you know about the Rafter M?" he asked of Hank Murtree.

The lawman shrugged eloquently. "Danged little, lately. Old Utah has sort of pulled in his horns and turned everything over to Con Ralton. Con says Utah's sick; leastways I ain't seen him."

"I did, today," Jed said slowly. "He sure likes his firewater."

Murtree looked up in surprise. "That's recent then. Utah drank a little now and then, say a glass when he came to town. But that's all."

Jed's fingers drummed on the desk. "There's gun guards at the canyon entrance. Something was said about rustler trouble and that the Rafter M didn't want strangers loping around promiscuous."

Murtree nodded. "That would be like Utah, all right. So long as them guards don't shoot no one, I reckon I ain't got no call to complain. But I've noticed Utah has changed his

brand of cowpoke. Used to be his hands was all peaceful. Seems lately he's taken on a new crew and every buscadero of 'em is a gun-slinger."

"Don't reckon anything's wrong out there?" Jed suggested.

Murtree gave the question some thought. "I reckon not," he said at last. "If it was, Utah Mercer wouldn't be just sitting around. He'd be spitting hot lead so fast, you'd think it was raining bullets."

"But he looked mighty worn out and tired to me," Jed objected.

"Sure, Utah's getting along. But he won't let no one pull a double cross on him and not fight back."

Jed had to be satisfied with that. He left the sheriff's office and returned to the hotel. The next two weeks he rode out to the various ranches around the town. It seemed that the sale to the Rafter M had broken the jinx that had haunted him and he sold policies to two other spreads.

About three weeks later Jed received the Rafter M policy from the company. For a long time he stared down at it. Once this was delivered, he had no further interest in the Rafter M or Utah Mercer.

But curiosity had been gnawing at him. He kept remembering the long, rambling tale Mercer had told. Suddenly, a portion of it that he had forgotten came to him in a flash. Mercer had spoken clearly of treachery, of a man in the dim past whom everyone had trusted but who had turned on those who had depended on him. Jed's eyes widened. He remembered little things now that Mercer had said that supported Jed's

sudden suspicion of Con Ralton. He remembered now it had been Con, not Mercer, who had produced the money to pay for the fire policy.

Abruptly Jed folded the stiff, crinkly paper and placed it in the envelope. He shed his long black coat and checked the load in his six-gun. Stopping at the General Store, he bought another gun and filled the chamber with cartridges.

Outside again, he glanced up at the westering sun. By the time he reached the canyon entrance of the Rafter M, the purple shadows would be thick, a protective covering. He turned on his heel and went to the livery stable. He left the town, riding slowly toward the distant Cochise Peaks.

It was nearly dark when he reached the Rafter M turn-off. Drawing rein, he sat tall in the saddle, listening, eyes probing ahead into the thickening night. He heard nothing, there was no light ahead to guide him. He had half expected the canyon guards to build a fire.

He touched spurs and rode slowly ahead, keeping his hand close to his holstered gun. He left the trail, halting every now and then to listen. At last a blacker shape in the shadows ahead marked the high cliff. He should be a few hundred yards south of the canyon mouth. Jed dismounted, crept slowly along the rock wall, leading his horse.

A match flared with startling abruptness just a few feet ahead. Jed froze and his hand snaked the gun out of its holster. The match faded, but the cigarette glowed, died, then glowed again. Jed dropped the

reins and catfooted forward. Soundlessly he worked himself into position. At last he stood just behind the seated guard. He could see the dim bulk of the man. Jed's lips tightened. He stepped forward and his gun arm swept up and down.

The guard crumpled without a sound and Jed worked swiftly, gagging the man with his own handkerchief. Using the coil of rope on his saddle, Jed then trussed up the man carefully and silently rolled him behind a clump of bushes. There would still be the rifle guard above on the ledge, but the dark night made him almost completely ineffective.

Jed picked up the horse's reins again, stepped into the saddle. He edged along the cliff wall until it disappeared to his right and he knew he was in the mouth of the canyon. Deep sand muffled the sound of the horse's hoofs but each movement of the animal had Jed holding his breath for fear the man on the ledge would hear. But gradually the short stretch of the canyon was cleared and Jed looked out over the darkened Rafter M valley.

Far ahead and a little to the right, he saw a pin point of light. It probably came from the bunkhouse. Jed touched spurs to the horse and sped toward the ranch. For the time, at least, he didn't have to fear discovery. He pulled up by one of the water tanks and slipped afoot toward the adobe ranchhouse. He edged around the corner and saw the lolling guard at the front door. Again, Jed's six-guns snaked from the holster and he slid toward the guard,

flattening himself against the rough adobe of the wall. His gun jabbed into the man's back.

"Lift 'em high and bite off your tongue, hombre!" he ordered in a low voice.

The man stiffened, then slowly raised his arms. Jed shucked the guns from the double holsters. He worked around the man and pushed open the door. Utah sprawled in his chair before the fire. Jed ordered the guard inside and then quickly closed the door.

Utah Mercer looked around. His eyes widened when he saw Jed and the disarmed guard. For a moment his jaw hung slack. Jed grinned at him.

"Maybe I'm tangling my loop, Mercer, but I figured you was a prisoner here. If I'm wrong, you've got my apologies and I'll clear right out."

"Glory be!" Utah breathed. "You savvied the play! Give me a gun. Get that man out of sight. Con Ralton's due back any minute and this time I'll give the orders."

Jed grinned and tossed Mercer the six-gun he had carried in his shirt. The giant fingers grabbed it, broke the chamber and Utah chuckled at the sight of the gleaming brass shells. Jed quickly and efficiently tapped the guard over the head with his gun and dragged the unconscious man into the next room. He had just straightened when the door opened and Con Ralton came in.

The segundo didn't see Jed in the shadows in the room beyond. Utah again sprawled in his chair, the gun out of sight. Con came arrogantly

toward him and stared down at the old man.

"Utah, I'm getting tired of waiting. You're signing over the deed to the Rafter M to me. I've fixed up a receipt that says I paid you a good hunk of dinero for the range. Sign it."

"If I don't?" Utah growled.

"Then I reckon we can salivate you. At least I'll run every Rafter M beef for a good price, enough to pay for the time I've lost."

Utah shook his head. "I'll never sign, Ralton. You can't get away with this."

"You're loco," Con grinned unpleasantly. "You're sick, Utah. We've had rustler trouble. There ain't a soul can reach you unless I want him to. You could be dead for a year before anyone would know it, if I wanted to play things that way."

Jed slipped to the door. Utah didn't look at him, but stared into the harsh face of the renegade segundo. "Con, you made a bad mistake. You got plumb greedy for money and you figured to set the ranch afire after you got the place insured. Bringing that fire hombre in here was sure wrong for you."

"Him!" Con laughed. "What can he do?"

"I can hold a gun mighty steady on your backbone," Jed said quietly.

Con Ralton whirled to face Jed. His face showed stunned surprise when he saw the gun in Jed's hand. Utah came out of the chair, exposing his own six-gun.

At that moment the door burst

open and the two canyon guards bulged in. Utah whirled and Jed's eyes jumped toward them. Instantly Con went into action.

"Blast 'em," he yelled. He faded to one side, his hand blurring to his holster. Jed swung around, his Colt thundering at the rapidly moving figure. He missed. Con's slug ripped the edge of the door by Jed's head. The two in the doorway went for their irons.

Utah Mercer roared curses and his gun blasted like thunder. One man went down, the other dropped his gun and clutched at a broken shoulder. Con swung, sending a shot at Utah. The old man was driven backward, whirled half around. Jed stepped into the room, eyes cold and deadly. Pivoting swiftly, Con fired as fast as he could pull the trigger. A slug ripped Jed's sleeve, but he took that extra little fraction of time and his slug slapped home into Con Ralton's chest. The segundo stumbled backward. His legs grew rubbery and he collapsed.

Utah came to his feet. Shouts

sounded outside. The old man's eyes were twinkling despite the growing red stain on his shoulder. "Let's finish the rest of them polecats," he suggested to Jed.

With Con dead and three others definitely out of the fight, the remaining renegades were easily driven off. Jed and Utah Mercer stood at the edge of the water tank and listened to the fading pound of hoofs as the gunhawks fled from the valley leaving behind three more dead. Utah chuckled and turned to Jed.

"Amigo, I reckon you saved the Rafter M. I sure hope I don't get in another tight like this."

"I reckon the company's got some sort of a policy that would protect you," Jed answered thoughtfully.

Utah laughed. "Hombre, you patch me up and I'll listen to what you got to say—and I'll sure see that a bunch of my friends in the valley listen, too."

Jed sighed contentedly. "You know, sometimes this insurance herding gets mighty exciting. Nothing like it."

THE END

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

All the same except one... which is the odd picture?



Number Five. He is only "two-faced" (ANSWER)



DEADLINE FOR A DEPUTY



by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Tony Baxter had three strikes against him when he made a baseball player pinch-hit as a deputy and take the trail of Wideawake Jackson

I

IN those days nearly every Alaskan mining camp of any size had a baseball team. When a team from a rival camp showed up, everybody would knock off work and watch the game. Sometimes the visiting team would bring its backers along, men

who bet their own gold, as well as that put up by miners who couldn't make the trip. Then there was plenty of excitement. Sometimes a wheelbarrow load of money would change hands. The umpire was in a tough spot.

Cold Deck, our camp, had a good

team. Flapjack Meehan and Tubby Willows were in the money and they scouted around and brought in some good men. Sometimes our team won, sometimes it lost, but, win or lose, we backed it.

Gradually word reached Cold Deck one summer that a roving team calling itself the Klondike Scorchers was pretty good. It had come over the Chilkoot Pass and was slowly moving northward. In those days, "Scorcher" stood for speed. If you scorched on a bicycle, or with a horse, you were tossed into the jug to reflect on your evil ways.

The nearer the Klondike Scorchers got to Cold Deck, the tougher their reputation seemed to grow. Some of us wondered what Tony Baxter, the United States Marshal, would do about it. He was the camp's biggest baseball fan. He had played the game himself in his younger days, and he could spot a good player even if he was having an off day. Some said that he'd been known to give up chasing an outlaw to come to camp to see a ball game.

Well, we were going to find out about that. Wideawake Jackson was in our part of the country, robbing sluice boxes and stealing fur from trappers' cabins. You earned your nickname in those days, and Jackson got his because lawmen could never catch him asleep or off guard. He had laughed at the Northwest Mounted Police, no mean feat in itself, and he sneered at the United States marshals, too.

Tony Baxter tried to swear in some of the miners as deputies when Jackson shot one of the Carrigan boys

and took their cleanup, but most of the men were making too much money on the creeks, and the ones who did give it a whirl quit as soon as Jackson took to the bad country.

You might have thought such deputies were a total loss, but Tony Baxter never figured anything or anyone as a total loss. He asked his exhausted deputies a couple of hundred questions before he got through with them, but he knew why Wideawake Jackson was always getting away—the outlaw had more guts than the men sent after him. I don't mean fighting courage. But Wideawake just kept ahead of his trailers until they got discouraged and quit.

"I think I'll give this a whirl myself," Tony said one night to Flapjack Meehan.

"What about the Klondike Scorchers?" Flapjack asked.

"Oh, I guess I'll live if I don't see 'em play the Cold Deck Nuggets," said Tony. "Er . . . when's the game?"

"The seventh," Flapjack answered.

"Tell me how it comes out," the marshal said, and he added, without much conviction: "I won't be here."

The Klondike Scorchers arrived on the fourth. On the night of the sixth Tony Baxter showed up. He was in worse shape than his deputies had been.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," he grumbled. "It's going to take a special kind of man to run Jackson to earth. I don't know where I can find him. He's a fox. He doubles back, sets down and enjoys himself while you're running your

legs off trailing him. I've never been so discouraged in my life. Now if I was a younger man, I'd—" He broke off suddenly and stared at us. "What you boys so glum about?"

"The Klondike Scorchers are dead broke," Flapjack Meehan moaned. "We figgered to clean 'em ourselves, and they bet their shirts on a ball game at a camp upstream and lost the game."

"Tough," the marshal agreed. "This camp's got plenty of money to bet even if it hasn't got a supply of good deputy marshals. But, after all, the ball game's the thing."

When Tony arrived at his jail, which was also his headquarters and home, there was a letter waiting for him. It was short and to the point. It read:

We shall expect your resignation by return mail. Acceptance will depend on whether or not crime in your area is kept under control.

Most of us felt sorry for Tony. In his time he'd been one of the best lawmen in the West and North. When a man reaches his age he's entitled to a steady job. He's supposed to pick deputies who can do the leg work, while his experience supplies the methods and tricks of running down outlaws. Of course, the big guns back in Washington, D. C., couldn't know that the deputy marshal material in camp was as scarce as fresh eggs. They only knew complaints against Wideawake Jackson were pouring in.

"Maybe you'd better not go to the ball game," Flapjack suggested. "It'll give your enemies a chance to

say that you were having a good time when you should've been out hunting for Jackson."

The old marshal looked pretty sick. "I guess you're right, Flapjack," he said, "but I'd sure like to see that game. I'll stay away unless I can find a good excuse for showing up."

II

We didn't know it at the time, but half of the original Scorchers had caught gold fever and had quit the team at different camps to go prospecting. We weren't seeing the real Scorchers, only the shell of a once-great team.

When Cold Deck knocked the Scorchers' pitcher out of the box, the miners yelled their heads off. The new pitcher, Taylor, took over after warming up. The shortstop, a rugged customer named Kelly, clapped his hands.

"Come on! Come on!" he yelled. "We can beat 'em. We're only five runs down, and it's just the third inning."

Taylor pitched, and the umpire said: "Ball one!"

"It only takes three strikes to get him out of there," Kelly yelled. "The next one will be right over the plate and he'll miss it a mile."

The next one landed out in the tundra and the batter trotted around the bags. "Let's make it one, two, three," Kelly said. "You can do it, Taylor. We've seen the best they have, and it isn't enough. What's a six-run lead?"

"It's enough," a miner yelled.

Kelly grinned and waved his hand.

"Not half enough," he answered.

Someone cheered Kelly, yelling: "You're a real ball player."

It was Tony Baxter, and most of the miners turned around and took a look at him.

"Where's Wideawake Jackson, Tony?" a heckler cried.

"Tony should never have come here," Flapjack Meehan said to me. "The fat's in the fire now."

The Cold Deck Nuggets boosted up the score a run or two every inning, while the Scorchers collected only three runs. But Kelly never let down. Again and again he'd rally the team, and for a few minutes they'd look as good as the Nuggets.

"What's an eleven-run lead?" Kelly bellowed as the visitors came to bat in the last inning. "The game isn't over until they get our last man out. Three home runs, with the bases full, will turn the trick."

He went to bat as if the game was tied, and he hit a three bagger. There he stood yelling: "This is where we run up a score."

He stood for a lot of guying, which is what they called razzing in those days. Finally Tony yelled: "Shut up, you fellows. Kelly is all right."

They left Kelly stranded at third base, and I saw Taylor go over to the manager of the Consolidated. "This finishes the Scorchers," I heard him say. "I'd like a job."

The first and second baseman made a beeline for Adams, manager of the general store. "How about grubstaking us? We want to go prospecting?" the first baseman asked.

I saw Tony push his way through the crowd toward Kelly and I heard

somebody say: "Tony always was a sucker for baseball players. I'll bet anybody an ounce he'll put Kelly on the pay roll."

"Kelly'd better get himself a real job," a miner remarked, "because Tony won't be on the pay roll himself much longer."

I edged over, and sure enough Tony was pumping Kelly's hand. "You're my idea of a ball player," he declared. "My name's Tony Baxter—U. S. Marshal. I hear the team is disbanding."

"That's right," Kelly admitted gloomily. "Where can I get a job?"

"Plenty of them," replied Tony. He was beaming with enthusiasm. "How'd you like to be my deputy?"

"I've done a lot of things between baseball seasons," Kelly said dubiously, "but I've never been a lawman."

"Can you shoot?"

"No. Never shot a gun in my life."

"Good. Then you won't have anything to unlearn. Now, have you spent much time in the woods?"

"No, I always intended to go hunting some day, but things kept coming up," Kelly replied.

"Commencing right now, you're on the pay roll," Tony told him. "Later, figure the toughest game you were ever in, then remember I'm going to send you into a tougher one."

That night Tony wrote to Washington promising to have Jackson behind the bars within ninety days. When the news got around, more than one miner who liked Tony

grinned. Some said Kelly's optimism in the game had affected Tony. Others claimed he was just stalling to hold his job down a few months longer. But if that was the case none of us blamed him.

The next day Kelly was around gathering up tin cans. Flapjack Meehan learned the reason when he investigated some shooting. The cans were suspended from tree limbs on strings. They'd sway slowly in the breeze and Kelly was shooting at them from all angles, and with both hands. It was good practice. He'd see a movement out of the corner of his eye and whirl, then shoot.

That was fine, and so was the rifle practice that Kelly went in for. Whenever the marshal had time, he'd take Kelly into tough country and teach him to be trail wise. A natural athlete, Kelly soon caught onto the tricks. He was rugged and didn't tire easily.

The marshal's enemies made the most of this training period. The decent crowd came right out and said that he should be removed. They overlooked the fact that whoever took Tony Baxter's place would be up against the deputy problem also. There was the knife-in-the-back group that went around saying: "Aw, you can't blame the old buzzard for trying to hang onto his job." Talk like that does plenty of damage. And it was unfair. As badly as Tony Baxter needed the job, he made no effort to hang onto it through political pull. He tended to his "lawmanning," as Flapjack Meehan put it.

One morning Tony sat down with me at breakfast in the Nugget Cafe. "Hank," he said, "you've got a weak mind and a strong back. I've got a job for you."

"What?" I asked.

"Packing. My new deputy is going after Jackson. He's going to run him to earth." I wiped the grin off my face, too late. "Laugh," the marshal growled, "and show your ignorance. Kelly's traveling light. Instead of working out of a base camp, we've figured he can do better work if his base camp follows him around. Your job, Hank, is to pack the stuff and follow him up."

I came out second best in a gun fight a few years before, and the bullet left my arm weak. Oh, I could chop wood or handle a pick and shovel, but I couldn't do a day's work. I had to favor my arm. But I could pack as much as ever, and there was nothing wrong with my legs. It was one of Jackson's men who shot me, so I had a private grudge to settle.

"I'll take the job," I told Tony. For the first time I saw that the old man was feeling the strain. If Kelly was killed the marshal would never live it down. Everybody would be saying he sent an inexperienced man to his death.

"I know what you're thinking, Hank," Tony said soberly. "Everybody is thinking it, but I'm convinced I'm right. Kelly's my choice and I'm going to stay with it. It's tough, though, because folks keep saying to him: 'Kelly, this is no ball game.'"

"What does he say?"

"He just grins and answers: 'I

can't do any more than strike out. Another thing, whenever I go to bat I figure on making a home run. I know the odds are against me. Batting averages show that, but that's my frame of mind when I step up to the plate."

It made me admire Kelly. It made me feel sorry for him, too. It seemed a shame a fine man like him would have to be killed by an outlaw like Jackson.

III

Someone claimed to have seen Wideawake Jackson on Swamp Creek, so we headed there. I figured that it was a good tip because only a wanted man would be hanging around that country. It's mostly black mire, beavers, and mosquitoes in summer.

Kelly packed half of the load, and when I began to tire, he'd say: "Shucks, you're good for another mile or two, now that you've got your second wind." And sure enough I was, though before he started bucking me up I'd have sworn I couldn't have gone another hundred yards.

We bucked knee-deep muck in Swamp Creek, but found somebody's trail. The tracks were full of water and headed toward Glacier River.

"You stay here," Kelly said, when we found a dry spot. "I'll look around." He was gone three hours and when he showed up he said: "Back-track on my trail and you'll come to a clump of timber. That'll be our base camp."

"How do things look?"

"Jackson has done a first rate job

of back-tracking, doubling on his own trail, and taking to water," he answered. "But I didn't expect this would be easy. I don't know how long I'll be gone, but don't worry about me. I won't get lost."

It took me all day to bring up our outfit to the timber. I found a spot where a fire wouldn't be visible nights. We weren't making fires daytimes because the smoke would give us away. Hot grub would go good again.

Kelly didn't show up that night and I slept uneasily, figuring he might be stumbling around in the darkness, or maybe mired down in the swamp. The quacking of ducks woke me up. I climbed a tree and looked over the country. There wasn't a sign of Kelly.

He came in after dark that night—smeared from head to foot with muck, and his face gray from exhaustion.

"No need of hiding that fire," he said. "Jackson knows we're here. I finally found a fresh trail. It led to a bench. Someone stood there a long time watching this camp."

"I kept under cover," I said.

"Yes, and you made a good job of it, but your shadow hit a rock that was visible," he told me. "I saw it."

While I warmed up the mulligan, Kelly washed from head to foot and got into dry clothes. He didn't eat much, because he was so exhausted his stomach was in knots, but he drank a lot of tea.

Well, that's the way it went for ten days. Kelly would go out and be gone a couple of days, then come back. His jaw might be hanging

down from exhaustion, but he tightened it again as soon as he rested up. Maybe he'd say: "Third inning and the tie isn't broken."

So far as I could see we weren't getting a base hit, much less a run. The morning of the eleventh day he left at five o'clock and was back at three o'clock in the afternoon.

"We're pulling out," he said. "I'm just running around in circles. I can't pick up a trail fresh enough to follow."

I thought: "That's the way Jackson intends it—the lawmen run in circles until they're all in, then pull their freight. You lasted about as long as the others. And this finishes old Tony Baxter as marshal. He picked the wrong deputy." Aloud I asked: "What inning is it?"

"The ninth," answered Kelly.

At least the load was lighter. We'd eaten a lot of it. Kelly carried his share and led the way. It was depressing. He had a beaten look and sometimes when we'd push knee deep through the muck, he'd stagger and almost go down.

As soon as it got dark he stopped. "This is tough on you, Hank," he said, "but we're going back. I know Jackson or his men are watching us, and I wanted to make our retreat look good. Jackson might get careless."

I don't know how I ever got back to camp alive, but I did. I must have fallen a hundred times on slippery roots or just plain mud. At dawn Kelly was awake, grinning all over.

"Look here," he said. "See those

tracks? Fresh." He was as full of ambition as a pinch hitter.

There was no doubt of it. A pair of the Jackson men had checked over our camp soon after we'd pulled out. I suppose they had hoped we'd left some grub.

"It looks like we'd go into extra innings," I said.

"I haven't struck out yet," Kelly declared jubilantly. "I might make a home run this inning. Why not?"

The trail was fresh and, for the first time, Wideawake Jackson was careless. There was no doubling back. It was too good to be true, I thought—and I was right.

The trail went almost straight to Glacier River. It kept clear of all mud, and a few hours after we stepped on the grass it would lift again. A rain—and it rained a lot—would wash away all trace of our passing.

I stopped to rest, looking upstream like a man does when he's relaxed. At first I wasn't sure, then I saw a head and shoulders outlined against the sky. The head didn't look much larger than the head of a sulphur match, and a second later it blended with the rocks.

"We're spotted, Kelly," I said.

"The devil you say?" he exclaimed. "Now we won't have to keep under cover as much," he added cheerfully.

"Don't you ever see the darker side of things?" I asked.

"Why should I? The game isn't over until the last man's out. Sometimes the opposing pitcher blows up, and you can get over a bunch of

runs in the ninth, or even the eighteenth inning. What I want to know is, how'd that fellow get up there?"

I wanted to know, also. While on the maps it was Glacier River, many of the miners called it One-way Creek. Ten miles above Swamp Creek the stream was confined to a canyon. The walls fell back from the canyon, but they were so steep a man couldn't climb them. They were badly scarred where slides had come down from the higher peaks. Sometimes these slides sent frothing streams into Glacier River all summer long. Miles up the canyon you came to the glacier proper. It was black on top with debris. The ice was retreating. Hundreds of years ago it had retreated through the canyon. It was known as a "dead" glacier, and the miners told the Chechahcos that it was full of ice worms.

The man high up among the cliffs must have enjoyed the way Kelly hunted on both sides of the stream for the trail that would lead upward. "I think I've found it," he said early the next morning. "It's worth trying."

A goat had gone up the night before, but I could see no place for a man to climb.

"If I can get up the first hundred feet," Kelly declared, "the going will be easier."

He stripped off his boots and socks, tied a coil of light line around his waist and started up. My job was to send his boots, guns and sleeping bag up on the line when he was ready.

There was a pool at the base of

the cliff and it looked deep enough to break a man's fall, or kill him if he fell too far. I watched Kelly feel along the rock with his strong fingers for spots that he could grip, then haul himself up a few inches. Then he'd place his toes carefully and get new hand holds.

He was cool, and I could hear him telling himself: "You can do this if you'll take your time." He was up sixty feet when I saw an outcropping catch his shoulder. You know how it is—something touches your flesh and you instinctively jerk away. Before Kelly could get his balance, he was on the way down. One hand was fanning the air to straighten up his body.

Kelly went in feet first and I thought he'd never come up again. I waded out shoulder deep and tossed him a line. He grabbed it and I pulled him out. For a long time he just lay there, breathing hard, his eyes on the cliff.

"There's another way up," he said finally. "I couldn't see a mark on the rocks, except those left by goats."

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"I'd better rest up," he said. "We're in the twelfth inning now. Tie score."

We made camp well back from the river, and I stayed up most of the night on guard. Kelly had been driving himself and needed sleep. I dozed off at daybreak and when I woke up it was almost noon. Kelly was still sleeping. I shook him and when he found out what time it was

he was sore at me for not waking him.

"Take it easy," I told him. "You were in bad shape when you turned in."

While I got a meal he prowled around looking for tracks. "There was a chance one of the gang might've come down," he said, "but they're playing smart, I guess, and aren't leaving trails to follow. But I'm sure of this—Jackson's hide-out is upstream. When we find the trick he uses to get there we'll have him."

By midafternoon he was convinced Jackson waded the river. He stripped, put dry clothes on his shoulders, and started upstream. He carried a pole, which he wedged in between boulders to help him push his way through fast water.

He worked his way up about three hundred yards, then suddenly down he came. He crawled out, and I salvaged his bundle of clothes.

"There's a ledge along the wall," he said. "If a man could get on it, he could wade. The trouble is, there's a fifty-foot stretch of fast water blocking the way. I hadn't gone ten feet before I was swept downstream."

"Any ropes fastened to the wall to pull yourself over?" I asked. "They might use that trick."

"Not a thing. They cross that stretch, but hanged if I know how they do it." He stood up. "Well, here goes."

I watched him tackle that icy stream again, and I was sure Jackson's men were watching, too. For cold nerve, for sheer determination not to be licked, I'd never seen

Kelly's equal and I'd knocked around the West and North quite a few years.

The river threw him back again, and this time he was almost unconscious. For a long time he lay limp, his eyes on the cliffs and the water gushing from the canyon. "Hank," he said, "I want you to dig a shallow grave, wrap me in a blanket and bury me. Then start back to camp."

"Are you crazy?" I demanded.

"This is the fifteenth inning," he said, "and the tie isn't broken. Hasn't a man reached third. Now don't cover my head up."

I like to think that I made it look natural. I dug the shallow grave, wrapped him in a light blanket, then a tarp, and buried him. A clump of grass that I planted, concealed his head from those above. But I didn't go far. I waited, watching, expecting one of the Jackson outfit would show up. But no one came, and after dark Kelly got out of the "grave" and joined me.

"I think I've figured out Jackson's pitching style," he said. "Call me an hour before dawn. And don't forget."

I didn't have to call him. He was awake. "Light packs of grub, and dry clothes," he said. "Guns. Nothing more."

"Am I going?" I asked.

"You want to see me knock out a home run, don't you?" he retorted.

IV

It was so dark we had to feel our way with seven-foot sticks, and the

first thing I noticed was the river. It was low.

"It came to me last night," explained Kelly. "I figured Jackson's men could easily get to their hide-out if the river was low. Then I remembered that snow and ice on glaciers melt during the day and partly freeze up during the night. This affects the volume of water discharged into the river. Downstream there'd be a lag between high and low water because time is required for the water to flow to the lower country. Here in the canyon the change in flow would be almost immediate. The river should be at its lowest about now."

"You may be right at that," I answered. I remembered that Jackson often vanished at night. The rising water would cover up tracks left on bars. But it struck me that we'd be in a fine jackpot if we got caught in the canyon when the water began to rise again.

As soon as we could see faintly, Jackson speeded up. We splashed through shallows, waded quiet pools, and crossed fords, waist deep in the slow-moving current.

We rounded a bend and saw the glacier ahead, gray and grim in the half light. It was growling as ice shifted and gave way. We pushed through sand and silt for a half mile, then it began to get light. Kelly turned into a thicket about twenty feet above high water mark and I dropped in my tracks.

"Get some dry clothes on," Kelly said.

We changed into dry clothes, at

cold grub, and watched the sun crawl down the canyon walls. When it struck a bench across the river, we saw a snug cabin, a clearing in which vegetables were growing, and a wood lot. An hour later the stream had risen enough to wash away our tracks.

"It's a long game," said Kelly. "This is the eighteenth inning, and I'm just warming up. It's got to be a home run. Nothing less."

A heavily bearded man came out of the cabin, picked up some wood and went in again. Smoke came from a rock chimney and drifted against the canyon walls. We smelled coffee and bacon later, and that did us no good. I was dozing when Kelly said: "There's Wide-awake Jackson."

I rubbed my eyes. There was the fox himself, but he looked more like a wolf now—big, fierce and tough. He must have felt secure for he wore no guns, but he looked at our thicket as if some instinct had warned him. I held my breath and Kelly said, "He won't hear you breathe, Hank. Relax."

"You're tense yourself, mister," I retorted, and he grinned. "How're you going to get the fox out of his den?"

"I've all day to figure that out," he answered. "There seem to be three men."

Early that afternoon one of the outlaws climbed the canyon wall and disappeared, evidently to check on what was doing downstream. He came back three hours later. Night

fell, but it was ten o'clock before the stream began dropping. Kelly had already picked his ford. He led the way and I followed. We changed into dry clothes again, then closed in on the cabin.

Kelly and I looked into the window and saw three bunks, a sheet-iron stove, table and benches hewn from logs, and plenty of tin dishes.

"How you going to get 'em?" I whispered. "The slightest noise will put 'em on guard."

"If that window was open," Kelly muttered, then he almost laughed out loud. He put his pack sack on the end of a long stick and dropped it onto the chimney. Smoke began to pour from the stove and someone swore and stirred up the fire.

"Open the window," Jackson ordered. "See what the devil's wrong, Ed."

As Ed opened the window, Kelly put a fist-sized rock into a sock and nodded toward the outlaw.

I went around the cabin and stood by the door. As Ed came out to look at the chimney, I socked him. His body hit the ground and I heard Jackson growl, "Ed's always fallin' over his own feet."

"Good with a gun, though," another voice said.

"Take a look, Ike, and see what's happened," Jackson ordered.

At that moment Ike must have seen my outline above Ed's body. I've never seen a gun drawn faster, but just then another fist-sized rock whistled through the window and caught Ike on the side of the head. He dropped, his gun exploding and the

bullet plodded into the dirt in front of me.

Jackson pulled over the table and as it hit the floor he was behind it. I couldn't see him and the table protected him from Kelly—he thought. But another rock crashed against the table, and Jackson, all set to fire at the flash of a gun had to move fast to keep the table from tipping off its edge and leaving him exposed.

"You've got the drop," he said, standing up. I couldn't see much except the table and his hands, but I knew that he was dropping his gun. Hands up, he advanced toward the window.

"Turn your back to the window and back up against it," Kelly ordered.

Then I saw Jackson reach his right hand a little higher. A gun hung from a nail. He had that off the nail and was shooting where he guessed Kelly should be. If two men had stood in my place they'd have argued which fired first. It seemed to me that twin flashes stabbed the air at the same instant. Jackson went down, and Kelly came around the corner, a smoking gun in his hand.

"A home run, Kelly?" I said.

"No," he answered; "but I'm on third. Home plate's at Cold Deck."

I knew he wasn't forgetting the problem of taking the trio in. We tied up Ed and Ike and checked on Jackson's wound. Kelly had done a fancy job of disabling, but not killing, and I remembered that was the old Tony Baxter's code of lawman ethics.

We found three caches of gold

nuggets and furs, one large and two small. Evidently the bandits divided their loot after each raid, and Jackson had taken a heavy cut as leader.

I slept until three o'clock, then stood guard while Kelly got some rest. The next morning I built a raft.

We lashed our surly prisoners to the raft, and started as soon as the water was high enough. Until we were well downstream, Kelly and I got wet plenty of times shoving the raft off bars.

I heard afterwards that the marshal had put in most of his time watching the river, while his enemies kidded him about his baseball deputy. Tony must have seen us coming and let the camp know it, because several hundred miners were

waiting on the river bank when we landed.

Tony showed the strain he had been under. As he shook hands with Kelly I heard him say: "It's harder staying home and waiting than going out and getting the man yourself. That's the trouble of growing old—you have to be a picker instead of a getter."

"But how did you happen to pick Kelly?" the editor of the *Cold Deck Nugget* asked.

"I figured any man who wasn't discouraged by an eleven-run lead in the ninth inning would keep after an outlaw until he got him," the old marshal explained. Some of the strain was draining from his face. He was beginning to look like a man who expected to hang onto his job awhile longer.

THE END

HORSE SAVVY

THE comparative intelligence of horses and mules is a question that will instantly start an argument among stockmen. Undoubtedly the mule has some traits the horse could emulate. For instance, a mule will not founder himself on grain, nor will he drink too much when he is overheated—just why, no one has ever explained satisfactorily. Certainly the mule does not inherit his ability to control his appetite from his burro sire, because a burro will eat anything, from the paper label on a tin can to dynamite, and has never been known to quit for any reason except that the food was all gone.

Horses, however, have many virtues not evidenced in mules. They are less excitable and respond more quickly where instant obedience is desirable. In deep snow, for instance, many horses learn to wallow slowly, breaking the snow down with their weight, and, when tired, rest quietly, then tackle the job with patience. Mules are seldom good snow buckers unless they are following a horse that they have learned to trust, as in the case of a pack string. A horse will trust the judgment of a man he knows, even where such judgment conflicts with his own. This a mule never does.

—George Cory Franklin



BULLETS ACROSS THE BORDER

by Hapsburg Liebe

That wild badlands kid didn't even trust his own shadow, yet he walked right into a bushwhack trap

THERE was a McClellan saddle, and a McClellan wagon. Old-timers will tell you that both were good; that both served even as the Colt served, and the Winchester. The badlands kid was named for the wagon, not the saddle.

He was around nineteen, slim as a reed, tough as rawhide and hard as rock. He had to be hard and tough in order to survive. Dressed well, you'd have thought he was at least a cousin of Fauntleroy's, so delicate were his features, so blue his eyes.

These had deceived many a man twice his age and were to deceive many another.

But they didn't fool the somberly clad stranger who found him at a table in the combination hotel and saloon that was the center of things in Triple Buttes. The stranger dropped easily into a chair across from the kid, and watched him tear through a steak as though he hadn't had anything to eat for days.

"Got some business with me?" asked the kid.

"Maybe," admitted the stranger.

"Out with it."

The stranger was tall and lean, close to forty. He had level gray eyes and there was fight in his jaw. After a glance toward the cowboys and miners who thronged the dimly lighted big room, he said quietly:

"You're from Yellow Creek, kid. You're riding to Dos Palmas on the border with a message to a man named Medroso, who poses as a Mexican but isn't. The message is sealed. You don't know what's in it. Gudger Ott sent it. Ott is the biggest cow thief in the Southwest. Medroso is his partner, operating below the line. Ott posed as your friend, and you've never had many friends, so you're hell-bent on getting that message through. I'm right, kid."

"S'pose you are?" McClellan threw back in cold defiance. "If I wanted to know what's in the letter, what's to keep me from openin' it?"

"Plenty," said the stranger. "You never went to school a minute in your life, can't read, and wouldn't

trust any man to read the letter for you."

That was a bull's-eye shot.

"For somebody who never seen me before, you sure know a heap about me!" McClellan flared.

"I talked to people, that's all," the stranger told him. "Everybody knew that an old Mexican woman found you when you were two-three years old, floating down a rampaging river in a wagon bed that had stayed on the surface when the running gears sank. Your folks and the team were drowned, of course. Nothing to identify you, so the old woman gave you the name that was on the wagon bed. You hit out for yourself as soon as you could ride a horse. All this sort of got under my skin, and—"

The kid's six-shooter interrupted. It blasted just above the table rim, not at the stranger but at the nearest of the big, hanging oil lamps. McClellan was suspicious. Nothing was going to keep him from taking that message to Medroso. Semidarkness and thick powder smoke covered his getaway perfectly.

Hard luck had been with McClellan on this trip. Between Yellow Creek and Fireplace his pony had gone badly lame, costing him much time. Otherwise the stranger wouldn't have overtaken him at Triple Buttes. That stranger stuck in his mind as he rode the night. It was true that he'd had few friends, as the unknown man had said. Also it was true that he'd thrown in with Gudger Ott, the big cow thief, because Ott, who had stuck up a stagecoach the

week before, had stood in the role of friend.

At daybreak the kid was red-eyed from weariness and loss of sleep, and the condition of his mount was worse. Twenty miles, he figured, still lay between him and Dos Palmas on the border; it was all desert terrain now, clogging sand, rock, and the eternal pear.

In three hours he covered less than half the twenty miles. The sun was a furnace now. Then he rode around a pear thicket and saw just ahead of him a long-deserted patchwork shanty and a waterhole with a little grass around its edges.

"We'll rest here one hour, hoss," muttered McClellan.

After he'd watered himself and the horse, McClellan staked the animal to the sparse grass, went into the shanty and threw himself down on the earthen floor and in no time was asleep. He never knew how long he'd slept when the nickering of his horse brought him to his feet with his six-shooter ready in his hand.

From the doorway he saw, sitting a fine but much worn, lean bay gelding just beyond the waterhole, the black-garbed stranger whom he had encountered in the saloon.

McClellan jerked his gun up.

"What the devil you follerin' me for?" he demanded.

The unknown was armed. The ivory grips of a long-barreled six-shooter were to be seen under the edge of his black coat. But he made no move toward the weapon. Smiling a little, he said:

"I told you back in Triple Buttes

last night, kid, that you'd sort of got under my skin. I didn't want to kill you, didn't want you to kill me. I knew you'd never believe me if I told you who I am, and I had no proof. You probably won't believe me now, but I'll do my best to convince you. That message to Medroso; I'm not quite sure what it is, but I'm betting that I've got a better idea about it than you have. I—"

"Got a better idea about it than I have, huh?" McClellan cut in hotly.

His gun was still a deadly menace, but the stranger did not seem afraid.

"You never had a worth-while chance," he said, "and you're so hard and dangerous that it's almost impossible to give you one. Though you've started riding with Gudger Ott, there's nothing much against you so far. But if you go on you'll hit the outlaw trail, and you'll never get out of it except by bullet or rope. So I'm asking you to listen while I—"

Suddenly McClellan lost his temper completely at this interference. He lifted his gun to a quick but careful aim. Killing was not and never had been in his line, but he could ventilate the stranger's black hat and order him to hightail. His six-shooter flamed and roared. He was a dead shot. More than once he'd knocked the pips neatly out of a six-spot spade.

A vagrant breath of wind blew the smoke away and McClellan could see again. Over there beyond the waterhole the unknown lay facing upward in the sand, quite still!

The first feeling of dread that Mc-

Clellan had ever experienced ran through him like black lightning now. He hadn't meant to hit the man. But he certainly couldn't have killed him. He just wasn't that bad a shot!

He really wasn't. His slug had grazed the top of the man's head and the man was unconscious, nothing more.

Somehow McClellan couldn't find it in him to leave the stranger lying like that in the broiling desert. He was going to Dos Palmas anyway, to take that message to Medroso from Gudger Ott.

A few miles short of the little border town, the stranger came to and found himself tied across his saddle. The kid was leading the bay gelding. The stranger called to the kid who reined in and dismounted. In about five more minutes, the stranger, with the kid's help, was forking his bay properly.

"Under the circumstances, I . . . I didn't think you'd shoot, McClellan. Didn't try to *kill* me, did you?"

"Me takin' you in," said the slim blue-eyed youth, "is the answer to that. Meant to throw a scare into you and send you hightailin' about your business, if you got any business besides snoopin'. Here's your iron. You can hightail now!"

The tall, somberly dressed stranger took his ivory-butted weapon and leathered it. He said nothing.

McClellan got back into his saddle and rode on. A little rise in the desert terrain soon hid the stranger from his view.

Rested and watered, at least half

fed, the second-rate horse was doing better now. Noon was not long past when McClellan pulled up in front of a Dos Palmas cantina. A Mexican sat drowsing on a bench in the shade of the adobe wall.

"Know where Señor Medroso is, amigo?" the kid called in Spanish.

"That way," the Mexican answered, also in Spanish, and pointed eastward along the hot, dusty street.

So the kid rode eastward. Stone markers told him that he was still in the United States. When he had come to a sprawling adobe house half hidden among pepper trees and palmettos, he stopped and halloed.

The man who came out was squat, dark and slit-eyed, and the six-shooter he carried was low-slung. McClellan stepped out of his saddle, dropped rein and spoke.

"You Medroso?"

"I sure ain't nobody else," the squat man snarled. "Why?"

That talk was ample proof of the fact that Medroso was no Mexican.

"Gudger Ott sent me down from Yellow Creek with a letter to you," McClellan said. "Had the devil of a time gettin' here with it. Bothered a heap by a tall jigger who had on black clothes. You got any ideas about who he is, Medroso?"

"No," the outlaw said. He wasn't interested. "Gudger's letter—give it to me!"

McClellan dug inside his dusty, sweat-stained shirt and produced the now much-crumpled missive. Medroso took it and snapped an end off the envelope. Unfolding the single sheet of paper he read the few lines

hastily. There was no signature. But Medroso knew his big cow thief partner's scrawl very well.

Medroso did an unexpected thing. His mouth popped open, his dark eyes rounded in a stare across McClellan's shoulder, and he barked:

"Look behind you, kid!"

The kid wheeled, reaching fast for his weapon. In that same second a six-shooter thundered from palmettos about thirty yards out to his right. He heard the bullet, but he was not hurt. From just back of him there came the thump of a human body falling, and he turned swiftly to see that Medroso was already dead. But Medroso had drawn his gun, plainly having intended to back-shoot young McClellan.

The black-garbed stranger came running from the palmettos. He snatched the message from the sand, glanced at it hurriedly and consigned it to a coat pocket. Then he seized young McClellan's arm.

"Quick, kid; let's go."

The kid tossed the rein over his horse's head and went up to the saddle in one movement. A few seconds later he was riding northward with the black-clad man. After a little while, the kid spoke.

"You stood in the United States and killed a man in Mexico, to keep him from shootin' me in the back. How come?"

"This Medroso," the stranger explained, "was paid for. Wanted dead or alive in Texas, Nueva Mex, and Arizona, for half a dozen cold-blooded killings. That's why he han-

dled the Mexico end of his and Gudger Ott's sort of international cow-stealing business. But Ott is finished, too. He'd got restless and stuck up a stagecoach. You knew about that, McClellan."

"Yeah," McClellan admitted, "I seen it done. But I didn't take a part in it."

"We figured that. Ott was arrested an hour after you left Yellow Creek. He was going to make sure you didn't testify against him—that's the kind of friend he was to you. But me, I *am* your friend. Meaning, I represent the law. Lost my badge, and felt I'd never be able to convince you without it. Well, kid, I've got a brother on a big ranch in Texas, and I'll send you to him if you'll go. You'll be somebody there. Will you go?"

McClellan was a little bewildered. Always he'd looked upon the law as an enemy, not as a friend.

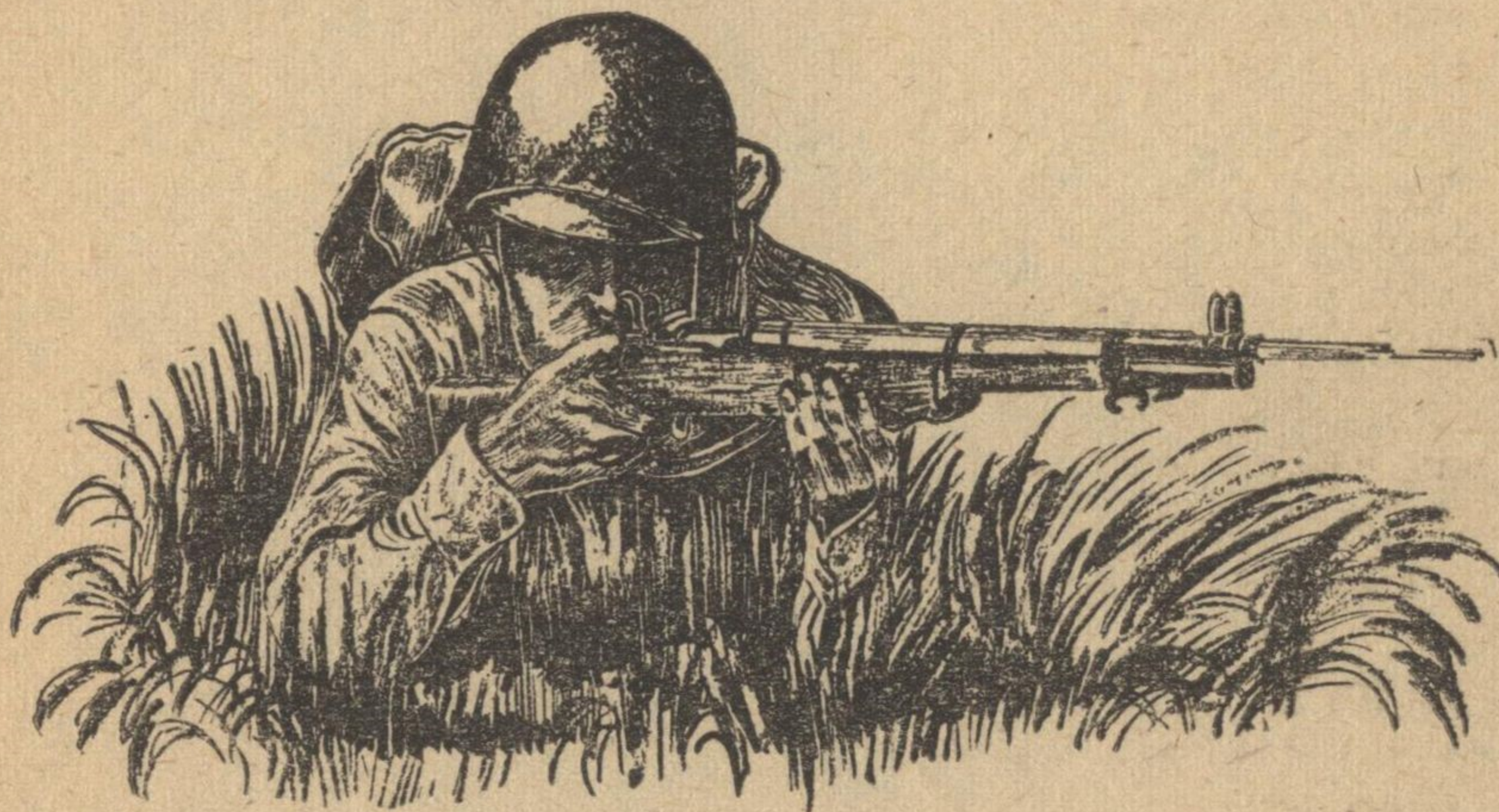
"Who are you?" he blurted. "A sheriff?"

"No. U. S. deputy marshal. Happened there was a mailbag on the stage that Ott stuck up, and he took it, as you must have seen. That message you carried to Medroso, ordering him to kill *you* because you were dangerous, cinches the case against Ott; see why I wanted it, don't you? Now will you go to Texas and a good range job?"

"I sure will," the slim blue-eyed youth who had been named for a wagon promised solemnly and in genuine gratitude, and his hand shot out to seal the bargain.

THE END

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WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

ROADS and settlements are few on the western edge of the Olympic Peninsula where the Pacific Ocean beats against the lonely, tree-fringed shore. It is a wild, primitive area lying a hundred miles west of Seattle, Washington. Much of it is embraced in the Olympic National Forest and Olympic National Park Reserves.

High, sharp-peaked, snow-capped mountains dominate the central part of the peninsula. Glaciers fill many of the upper mountain valleys. The foothills are steep and densely wooded. Deer and herds of elk roam the protected park area. Fish abound in the snow-fed mountain streams. It's real outdoorsman's country.

The entire region is never far from salt water and the ceaseless pound of surf on sandy beaches. Along the coast are a scattered handful of fishing towns and summer resorts. There are lumber camps and, here and there, farms in cut-over timber-tract farming centers. That's all, until you come down to Gray's Harbor at the southern end of the peninsula and the bustling cities of Hoquiam and Aberdeen, seaport centers for the surrounding lumbering and farming country.

There has been a lot of interest in this mild-wintered but sparsely settled region lately. Readers have written in to ask about it. Chaps like J. D., a war worker in a Los Angeles airplane factory who wants to move his family out there when the war is won. And W. B., from Idaho Falls, Idaho, a man of middle years. He's ranched some and farmed. Knows the business from A to Z. In addition he's done a bit of mining in the West, from British Columbia clear down to old Mexico. He's interested, his letter said, in coming to anchor somewhere on the Olympic Peninsula, provided he can find a spot that suits him, "either on the coast, or on the northern shore beyond Port Angeles."

Port Angeles itself is quite a city. Aside from its pulp, paper and lumber mills, it is the center of a growing, local dairying district that already supports several creameries. Across the harbor on the Strait of Juan de Fuca is Victoria, B. C., on Vancouver Island seventeen miles away. Behind the city rise the snow-capped peaks of the Olympic Mountains.

West towards Neah Bay and Cape Flattery at the northwestern tip of

the United States, steep, forested mountains crowd down to the bluffs at the water's edge. Forest roads branch from the main highway. Great blotches of logged-off land stand in acres and acres of naked stumpage, a sharp contrast to the surrounding green woods. Farms are beginning to dot parts of these formerly empty, cut-over sections.

Clallam Bay and Sekiu are logging towns on the road to Neah Bay, the fishing village once known as Poverty Cove that is now headquarters for the Makah Indian Reservation. The site of Neah Bay in the lee of Cape Flattery, incidentally, marks the spot at which the first white settlers reached what is now the State of Washington. A Spanish ship landed there in 1791 and attempted to establish a colony and trading post in the vicinity. From Neah Bay a five-mile trail leads out to the lighthouse on Cape Flattery. Beyond the Cape lies the broad expanse of the blue Pacific.

To make your way south down the ocean side of the peninsula, it is necessary to back-track to Clallam Bay, and take the road to Sappho which follows the Soleduck River through forests and a stretch of burned-over lumber country to Mora and La Push on the sea shore. Mora, with a population of less than a hundred, is a fishing village. La Push has a Coast Guard station, and

a slightly bigger population. It is likewise a fishing center. There is a long beach at La Push and nearby the Needles, picturesque, jagged rocks extend a mile into the ocean.

This is Indian country, too, reservations on which live remnants of the old tribes that used to inhabit the area. Inland where you take the road that continues south is Forks, another logging town, now supplemented by a creamery—solid evidence of expanding farm and dairy activities in the cut-over sections. From Forks the road returns to the sea at Ocean View, passes Queets, skirts over the edge of the Quinault Indian Reservation and, inland again, cuts through one of the largest-known remaining stands of western cedar. Then it runs through more timber and cleared-land farming country and, about a hundred and twenty miles south of Forks, reaches Hoquiam and Aberdeen on Gray's Harbor.

Anyone who doubts there is pioneer country left in the Pacific Northwest has another guess coming. He ought to visit this fascinating western and northwestern portion of the Olympic Peninsula. After that he might want to stay and carve himself out a cut-over timber tract farm, or ranch there. Others have. Still others, quite a few of them, are planning to, once Hitler and Tojo have been liquidated.

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, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.



MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

WITH three-fifths of the Province potential mineral-bearing territory, news of a recent, rich gold discovery in northern Manitoba is not surprising. Meager reports trickling in declare these new gold finds verge on the spectacular.

Except for the fact that Canada is now at war northern Manitoba might be witnessing an old-fashioned gold stampede right now.

Canada, however, like the United States, has certain wartime federal restrictions on gold mining in force. These "duration" regulations in both countries were designed to bring about increased interest and greater production in war-needed metals.

Gold can wait 'til after war. Our armies, our flying forces and the navy need their tremendous quantities of steel and copper, lead and zinc, and a host of other industrial metals now. The bombs and bullets for Berlin and Tokio have first call on our metal output.

That's the main reason why little has been heard about the latest bonanza gold finds in the brush-and-lake wilderness of northern Manitoba. Reader T. K., a Canadian himself from Vancouver, British Colum-

bia, has had an inkling of the new strikes, "via the prospector's grapevine," he says.

"Is there anything to the report?" he asks. "I prospected for gold in the Atlin section here before the war, but have always been anxious to get out where a real strike was being made."

Getting in on the ground floor of a newly discovered promising gold field is just about every prospector's dream. In this case, T. K., only wartime restrictions are holding the enthusiasts back, and delaying actual development of the mines so far found. Ultimate proving up of the discovery and mining of the gold ore will have to wait until the war ends.

There is not much to tell about the strike as yet. But we can reveal where these new deposits were discovered. Ninety miles northeast of La Pas lies Snow Lake. And it is along the rocky, rugged and uncompromising north shore of the lake that the outcrops of gold-bearing ore were reported found. The lake is set deep in the bush, in tangled brush-land wilderness.

The place is roughly seventy miles

east of Flin Flon, site of the Flin Flon Mine, one of Canada's greatest and most spectacular copper and gold producers. Located about thirty years ago the Flin Flon was first found by a group of six prospectors, grubstaked by one of Canada's most famous mining men, Jack Hammell, who told them they could write their own ticket and hunt the wilderness for metal for five solid years, if necessary.

They were to tackle the mineralized country in the Beaver Lake area. They did. But it didn't take them five years to make their bonanza discovery.

According to stories since given out, luck and a peculiar chain of circumstances played a part in the discovery of the Flin Flon. When the six-man outfit set out from La Pas to prospect the brush, one of the men had along a novel about a hero who discovered a subterranean city deep under the surface of the earth. The city was crammed full of gold. The book was pleasant, speculative reading for a group of prospectors starting off on a gold hunt of their own.

One day while hunting moose for fresh meat for their camp larder, one of the party members chanced to scale a large rock outcrop in which he found a small cave. It reminded him of the one that had been the entrance to the book's golden city, and he played a hunch. Setting aside

his gun, he examined the rock, and smiled.

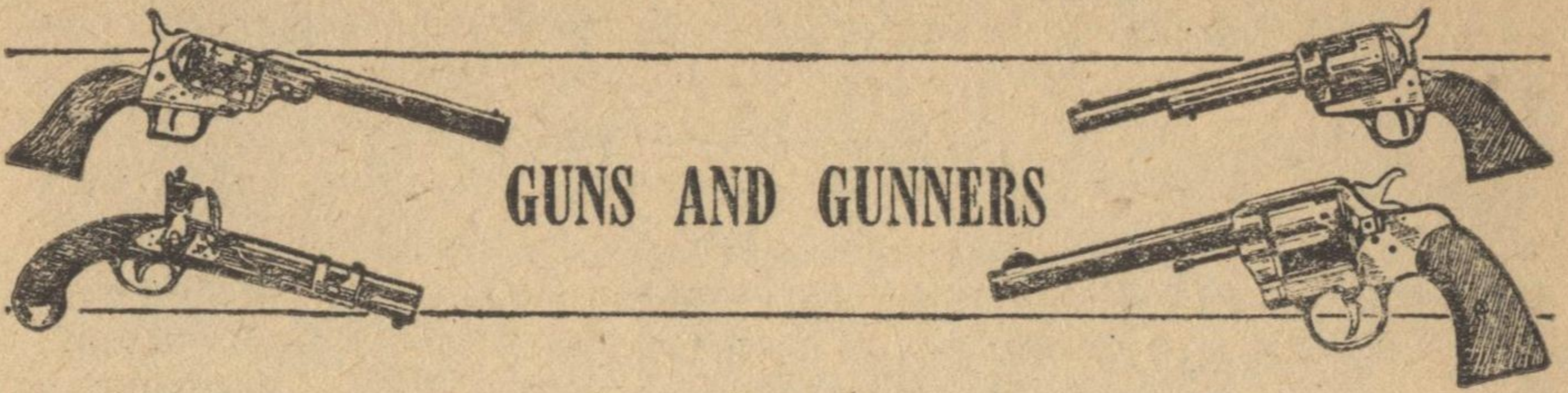
The outcrop, like the one in the story, was mineralized. He moved further along the rock ridge and examined it again. This time his eyes bugged out of their sockets. Mineralized! Why, right there on the surface the outcrop was rich. Rich in copper and gold. The prospector suddenly found himself standing on a potential fortune, on one of the biggest mines ever discovered in Canada's rich north country.

Before he returned to camp that evening the Flin Flon had been staked. Later when Hammell arrived to check the discovery he is reported to have given the six prospectors \$100,000 each for their share in the claims. When it was developed the mine produced millions of dollars' worth of metal.

Now another rich discovery has been reported in northern Manitoba. Just how rich is not definitely known. But when the war is won there are likely to be a lot of prospectors heading out into the bush up there. Whether they trek in or fly in, moved by the impelling urge that makes them prospectors, they'll ferret out new places in which to search for new and valuable deposits of gold and other metals.

But for the present Manitoba's marking time on gold discoveries. Winning the war comes first, in Canada as it does with us.

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, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, 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.



GUNS AND GUNNERS

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

A LONG time ago we warned about private use of military small-arms ammunition unless the user knew exactly what he had. It is well to go into that subject in a bit more detail now, as huge quantities of the ammunition will soon leak into civilian channels.

One of the world's most popular cartridges is the .30 Government Model 1906. In use for nearly forty years, this cartridge is not only the official standard of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps, but also is used in Remington, Winchester, Savage, and other American made, and most of the better foreign makes of sporting rifles. Prior to this war, you could purchase the popular .30-06 sporting ammunition at any civilized hunting outpost in the world—and most of the world's ammunition makers produced it.

In this war, the .30-06 cartridge will be found loaded with standard and special purpose bullets. Standard ammunition loaded with "ball" bullets—the regular metal-jacketed pointed type—can be used for target practice, but should not be used for hunting. An expanding bullet must be used against game.

During World War I the standard

rifle and machine-gun cartridge was this Model 1906, with its cupro-nickel-jacketed pointed bullet weighing 150 grains. The bullets, often misnamed "steel," were of the same color and about the same formula as pre-war five-cent pieces. In the early 1920's, a heavier bullet was desired as a combined rifle and machine gun cartridge. By 1925 the Army had adopted a boattail bullet to replace the flat base, and with a weight of 173 grains. The velocity remained the same—2,700 feet per second—thus the new cartridge, called the Mark I or M1 had more power and performed better at the longer ranges.

With the adoption of the semi-automatic Garand rifle in 1936, a lighter bullet was desired. So the M2 cartridge came into being.

This M2 was the old Model 1906 bullet with a jacket of copper. Since both cartridges used copper jackets on their bullets, a light tin plating, called a "stannic stain" was applied to the M2 bullet. By September 20, 1940, with manufacture of the M1 suspended, the tin coating of the M2 bullet was discontinued. Look for the date on the head of the cartridge.

Military arms ammunition is head-

stamped with initials of the manufacturer and the year of manufacture.

Beware of ammunition having a colored tip on the bullet. This is dangerous to use. Also beware of cartridges having a tin or nickel-plated case. These can be high pressure proof test cartridges. Bullets with colored tips are special purpose types. A red tip indicates a tracer—a bullet which emits a streak of bright red flame from its base while in flight, so machine gunners can see where they are shooting. These can be used in rifles, but will start fires in woods or in fields.

A blue tip is even worse. That is purely incendiary, intended solely to start fires. If you shot it into the woods at one hundred yards, you'd probably have a fire going that would be too big to handle before you could run to it. Yellow tips, sometimes found, are deadly poison. These contain high explosive. If you have one, don't keep it. Drop it into the nearest river or lake.

Black tips indicate armor-piercing bullets. These have a hardened steel core inside of the bullet jacket, intended to pierce steel or other similar objects.

All of these colored tips have no practical use for hunting or target shooting. They do not have the accuracy of the standard ball ammunition, and are unsafe to handle and shoot. They are also very destructive

to gun barrels and will quickly and permanently destroy the accuracy.

You cannot be certain of military ammunition. Colored tips are produced by dipping the bullet nose in lacquer. Rough handling will cause this to chip off, leaving a clean and unidentifiable bullet. I have opened sealed cases of such ammunition and found that many were identifiable only through the box label.

During the current war, .30 rifle, .30 carbine, .45 pistol, sub-machine gun and .50 machine gun cartridges were made with steel-jacketed bullets and steel instead of brass cartridge cases. The bullet jackets were heavily plated with copper to prevent barrel wear, and can be used safely, but barrel life will be reduced. Steel cases may be "brass color" due to their zinc plating covered with a yellow lacquer or varnish. In some lots, steel cases were copper-plated.

The test for a steel cartridge case or bullet jacket is simple—use a magnet. Sometimes a copper-jacketed armor-piercing bullet will respond to the magnet, but its pull will not be as great. Do not attempt to reload steel cases.

Finally, do not attempt to shoot "blank" cartridges of military manufacture. The Army uses special purpose blanks to propel grenades or for similar uses. They should not be used just to make a noise, and if misused, can be dangerous.

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, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.

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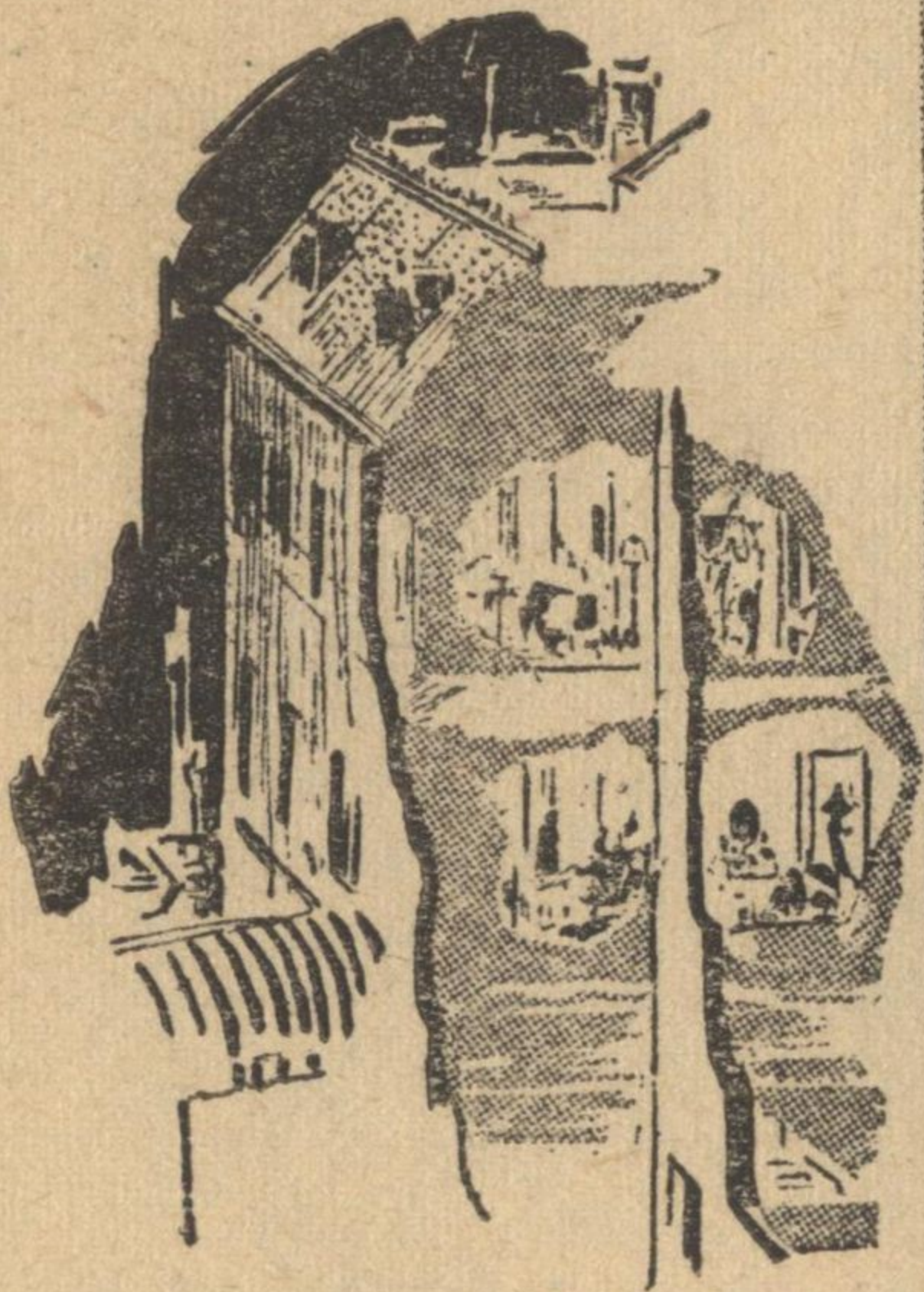
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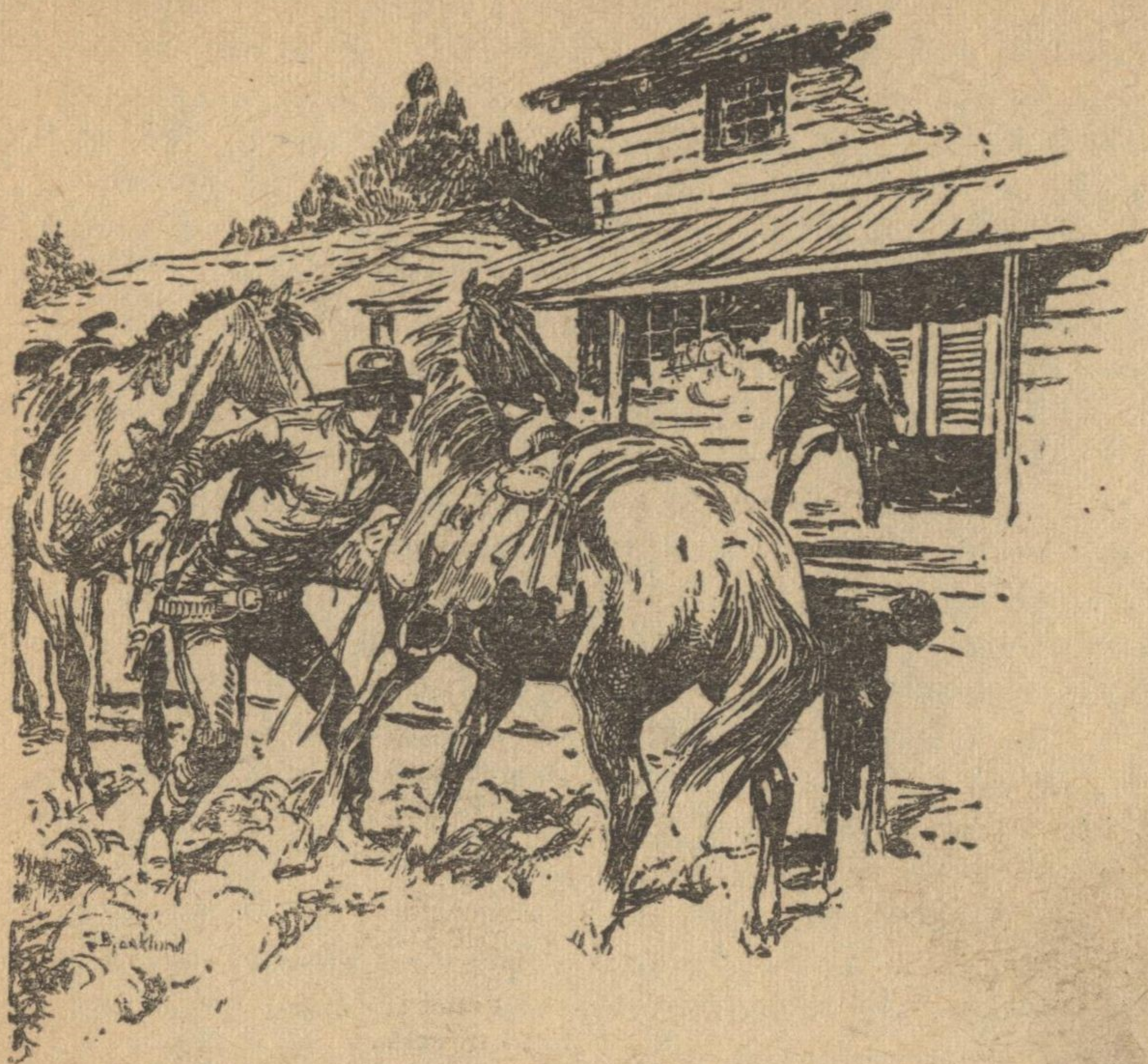
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SHOWDOWN AT SUNDOWN

by RICHARD POOLE

Without chips to buck a high-stake poker game, Kerry Lantham gambled his life on blistering Colt aces

KERRY LANTHAM had trailed south out of Colorado with a cheery whistle on his wide Irish lips. His blue eyes wrinkled in pleased laughter when his fingers touched the heavy money belt around his slim waist

beneath the checkered shirt. He had pushed his wide-brimmed Stetson back on his red hair and looked eagerly down the trail toward distant La Cueva and a ranch he intended to buy close to his old home. The

Colorado mines had been generous to a roving cowboy.

He dropped down out of Raton Pass, singing a roundup song. He was still cheerful when he met a smooth hombre in a long black coat who introduced himself as Brandon, a drummer riding to distant Cimarron. Brandon had a friend, No-luck Jones, a gun-slung hombre who did not set too well with Kerry. Still Jones was friendly and Brandon used subtle compliments that soothed Kerry's suspicions. They were all good trail companions when they reached a little trail-side saloon not far from Colfax.

Now, hours later, Kerry had lost his smile and most of his money. The overhead lamp showed lines of worry and fatigue on his face as he sat at the green-covered table. Brandon sat directly across from him, blank-faced as he stared at his cards. No-luck leaned back in a chair to Kerry's left. He had lost all his money long before. His sharp green eyes shifted from Kerry to Brandon. The saloonkeeper stayed behind his long bar and watched the game from a distance.

Kerry ran his hand along his tanned jaw, discarded pasteboards and held up two fingers. Brandon's lean, dark face broke in a smile as he shot them across the table.

"You're going to be tough to beat, hombre. I'm taking two myself."

Kerry glanced up and caught the quick flick of the man's fingers. His blue eyes turned ice cold and his wide lips set grimly. Deliberately he closed the fan of his cards and dropped them on the table before

him. He edged them to the center with a long finger.

"Deal 'em over, hombre."

Brandon looked surprised. No-luck let his chair come to a full perpendicular position. He caught Brandon's dark, swift look and his hand dropped into his lap. Brandon smiled, the black line of his mustache accenting the gleaming white of his teeth.

"I don't savvy the play, Latham. Why should I deal again?"

Level eyes boring across the table, Kerry spoke quietly, spacing each word. "Where I come from, gents deal from the top of the deck, card slick. Them that don't get salivated."

Brandon flushed angrily and half rose, keeping his hands in sight on the table. Kerry watched him, hawk-like, and forgot No-luck Jones. He shouldn't have.

Abruptly Brandon's hand streaked toward his coat. Kerry jerked from his chair, kicking it backward. His fingers clamped on his holstered six-gun and it streaked from leather. No-luck had stepped back. The barrel of his gun came down in a sharp, chopping blow. It connected solidly with Kerry's head.

The tall cowboy smashed forward onto the table. His body tipped it and he felt himself falling again. Then the room blanked out and he seemed to sink into miles of velvet blackness.

He first tried to avoid the thing that hit his head with thundering blows. Gradually his brain struggled up out of the darkness and he

realized that someone shook his head. Water struck him in the face and he gasped for breath. His eyes fluttered open and he looked blearily upward.

The saloonkeeper stood over him, still holding a staved wooden bucket. His red face was drawn in worry. When he saw Kerry's eyes blink open, his black mustache puffed out with a gusty, relieved breath.

"You sure had me worried, pilgrim. I begun to think I'd have to plant you in my private boothill."

Kerry sat up weakly and then held his head in both hands as sickening pain shot through him. It passed and he gingerly looked up again. The poker table still rested on its side, chairs lay on the floor. Brandon and No-luck were nowhere in sight. Kerry touched the empty folds of his money belt.

"Cleaned out!" he growled angrily. "I was sure the wide-eyed muley calf to walk into that cold deck."

The barkeep grunted. "I could have told you that, hombre."

"Why didn't you?" Kerry demanded.

The man shrugged. "You didn't ask. Three-high Brandon has been playing this stretch of the range from Raton to Taos for years. No-luck helps him in the tight spots, like this one today."

Kerry pulled himself to his feet and grabbed the edge of the table to keep from swaying. He saw his gun lying on the floor and, bending down carefully, picked it up. He held it in his hands a moment, then his lips

tightened. His blue eyes flashed and his angular young face seemed more lean and gaunt.

"Where do you reckon them gents headed?" he asked.

"I was afraid you'd ask that," the barkeep answered, tugging at his thick mustache. "If you take my advice, you'll leave them two sidewinders strictly alone."

"I ain't asking. I just want to know where they went."

"Three-high's in the money, now that he's got your dinero," the saloonman said slowly. "He's a tin-horn but he likes to flash where the big money is. I reckon you'll find him and No-luck between here and Sundown if you ride fast enough. If you don't look in at Maxwell's in Sundown."

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Kerry thrust the six-gun into the holster and picked up his hat. He brushed the dust from it and set it gingerly on his red head. He hitched up his belt.

"I'll be tearing this Maxwell's place wide open. Me and that tinhorn has got some things to settle."

The barkeep shook his head. "You'll get in Maxwell's, but not where Brandon will be. Luce Maxwell has mighty strict rules and he makes them stick. You're broke, and that keeps you from the gambling rooms. Howsomever, you'll be made right welcome in the other parts of the house."

Kerry smiled thinly. "I'm still finding Brandon, friend. How much do I owe you for drinks? I hope the tinhorn left me enough to square the bill."

"Brandon paid for everything," the barkeep answered. His bugged eyes twinkled. "He wanted to be square and honest."

Kerry grunted and left the saloon. Outside, he dropped the reins from the hitch rack and swung into saddle. He rode west and south toward Sundown, but he wasn't whistling any more. His face had lost its carefree look and storm clouds brooded in his clear eyes. He hit a steady pace, knowing the search for Brandon might be long.

The miles slowly unraveled behind him. He stopped at each saloon, hoping he might find the sidewinding pair at the gaming tables. Twice he put up at spreads which extended the open hospitality of the West to him. Early morning

of the third day he rode into Sundown.

Only a blind man could have missed the Maxwell House. It was a huge structure and Kerry stared at it in amazement. He couldn't begin to guess the number of rooms it held. A constant stream of people flowed in and out of its doors. The hitch-racks were lined with horses. Kerry pulled up, took off his hat and scratched his red thatch as he ruefully looked at the place. He whistled soundlessly.

"Brandon could sure stay lost in there for a long time. I reckon I'll look around town before I throw a loop over that place."

Looking around town, particularly in the places where Brandon might be, did not take long. There were a few cheap saloons and gambling halls for those who could not afford the stiff play at the Maxwell House. Kerry learned that Brandon had not been in any of them.

Along toward evening, Kerry rode back to the Maxwell House. Dismounting, he tied his horse to the hitch rack. He looked up at the big bulk of the place, its long length. Light blazed from a dozen windows. Booted and spurred men continued to flow in through the wide doors.

Kerry brushed the trail dust from his clothes as best he could. Then he slipped under the rail and walked with long strides to the door. He joined the throng, expecting to be challenged at any moment. He wasn't.

Inside was a long hall. Kerry felt lost. The crowd split up here, some going to the left, some entering doors

to the right, others continuing straight ahead to a wide staircase that led upward. Kerry tried to edge himself to one wall where he could look things over.

Someone touched Kerry's elbow and he swung around, his right hand dropping instinctively toward his gun belt. He faced a gray-haired man who had a wrinkled face, brown eyes and a wide smile.

"Stranger to these parts?" the man asked.

Kerry nodded. "Just rode in."

"Then you must be hungry. Here, I'll take you to the dining room. We'll soon have the nose bag on you."

Kerry hung back. "Sure sounds good, but I'm broke."

The wrinkles grew deeper as the man laughed. He guided Kerry through the crowd to a wide door that opened on a long room. Plank tables in the shape of a U lined three sides of the room and Kerry was shoved into an empty seat.

"The vittels are on the table, amigo. Help yourself. If you don't get enough come see me. I'm Luce Maxwell."

The man turned and hurried away. Kerry looked curiously down the table, but no one paid him any attention. They were too busy eating. With a grin, Kerry dropped his hat under his chair. His long arm reached out for a platter piled high with meat. Soon his own jaws moved in the rapid cadence of the rest.

Finished, he pushed back and rolled a quirly. He noticed that more men waited at the door for

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space at the table. So he picked up his hat and shoved through the crowd back into the hall. He hesitated a moment and then approached a tanned waddy who leaned negligently against the wall.

"I hear there's some pretty good games in these parts. Where do they play?"

The waddy eyed him, shrugged, and jerked his thumb toward the stairs. "Up there—if you got the dinero. Luce says no man goes out of this place broke."

"That'd be hard to make good."

"Not for Luce. You leave five hundred on deposit at the door. You don't use it playing and it's returned to you when you leave."

Kerry's eyes widened and he swung away toward the stairs. Slowly he mounted. There were fewer men up here. At the top of the stairs he faced a wide door. A small table was set squarely in the center so that only one man at a time could pass it. A pleasant-faced man with a voice of steel accepted the deposits. Luce Maxwell stood nearby smoking a cigar, rocking back and forth on his heels. He saw Kerry and the smile left his face. He met the cowboy as he pushed toward the table.

"You're off your range, amigo," Maxwell said in a friendly voice. "It takes real dinero to get in that room. Go down and have a drink."

"There's a gent in there I've got to see," Kerry said stubbornly.

"You don't savvy, amigo. You don't go in. Me, I like to make folks welcome. I like to help a man out when he's riding the chuck line.

Let's you and me go down, have a drink and talk things over. Maybe I could get you on one of the spreads around here."

"I'm going after that jasper," Kerry insisted.

Maxwell's tone became subtly harder, though he didn't stop smiling. "I've got three men beside the jasper at the table, pilgrim. They each got six-guns that say you don't go nowhere unless I give the word. Now do we have a drink and a talk?"

Kerry's anger choked in his throat. Then he saw the men Maxwell had mentioned. They waited hawk-eyed and silent, intently watching their boss and Kerry. The young puncher suddenly laughed and grinned.

"Anything wrong in waiting outside for that jasper I want?"

"Nothing at all," Maxwell said, "but I was hoping you'd stay here for the night. Come on downstairs, amigo."

They had a drink and Maxwell signaled the barkeep not to make a charge. He asked Kerry a few questions, friendly and not too curious. Then Maxwell placed his glass down on the bar.

"I'll have to be looking after things. You figure on putting up with me, Kerry, but don't try to get in the game rooms again. The boys might be rough."

He waved a friendly hand and pushed through the crowd, answering greetings. Kerry watched him go, wondering what he himself should do. He fully understood Maxwell's attitude and respected it. Still, so

far as he knew, the man who had cheated him out of his money was safely upstairs.

Kerry downed the rest of his drink and shoved his way to the hallway. He gave the stairs a long look, shrugged and turned toward the outer doors. He could always wait for Three-high Brandon to show up.

Stepping outside, he leaned against the wall, out of the path of the crowd. He rolled a quirly, patiently setting himself to wait. He flipped the match away. It was then that he saw No-luck Jones.

The shifty-eyed gunman circled one of the hitch racks and walked slowly toward the door. Kerry's eyes widened and then he threw the cigarette away with a quick angry jerk of his hand. In a few long strides, he had cut between No-luck and the door. The man almost ran into Kerry before he recognized him. Jones recoiled and his green eyes mirrored his surprise.

"I been looking for you," Kerry said flatly. "I got some collecting to do."

No-luck stepped back. His thin lips curled and his hand hovered close to his gun. Miraculously a cleared space formed around the two men, the crowd sensing the tension in their meeting.

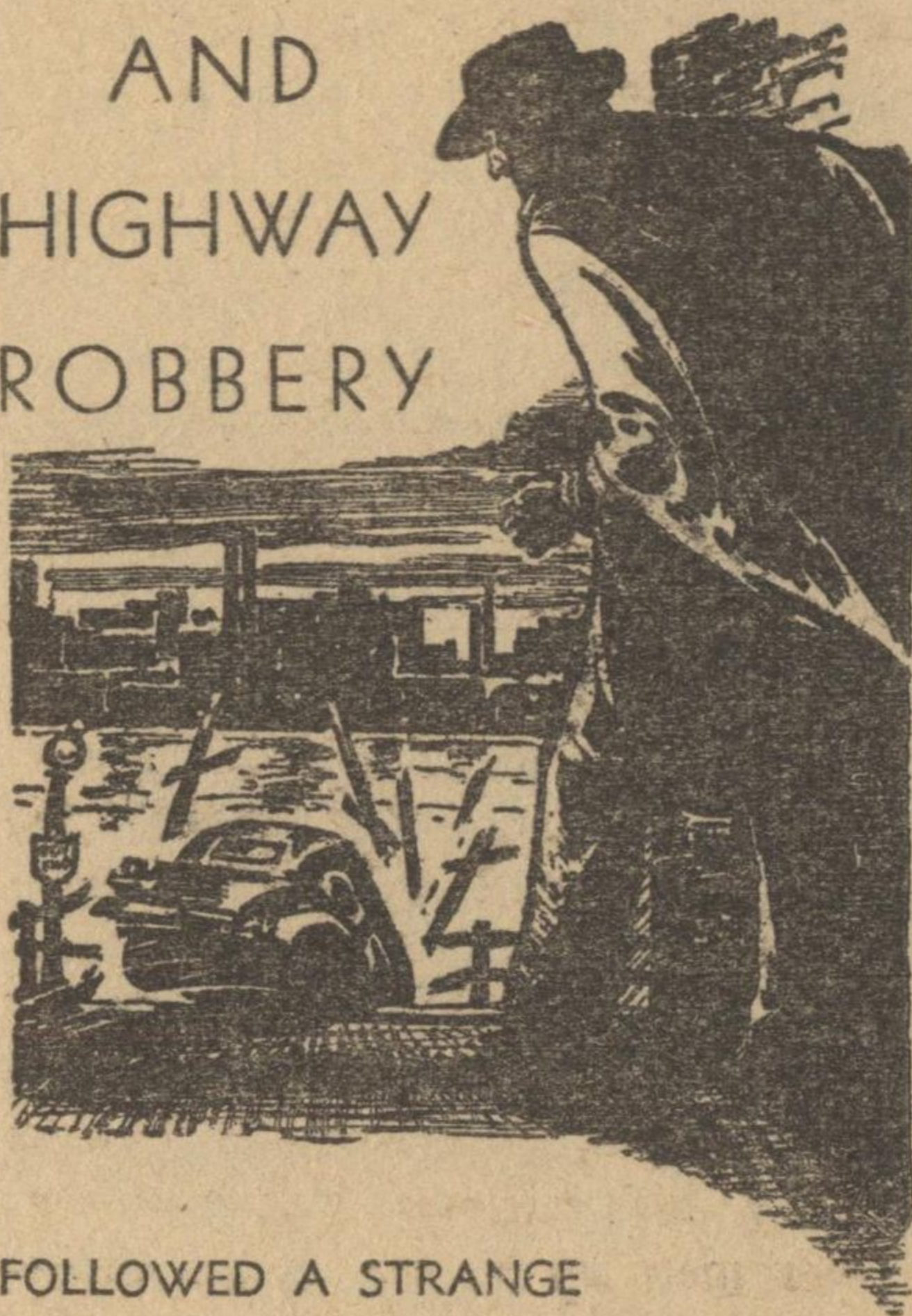
"A man that crowds his luck like you," Jones said, "ain't got much sense. You tangled once and came out loser."

"I don't scare," Kerry answered. "I've come for a showdown and my dinero."

"You'll get the showdown," Jones snapped. "Now!"

SHOWDOWN AT SUNDOWN

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AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

His hand dropped to his gun and the six jerked from the holster. Kerry dropped into a crouch and his own hand blurred down and up. Both men seemed to fire at once. Kerry's hat jumped from his head. No-luck Jones staggered back as the bullet slapped into his chest. He stared in stunned disbelief at Kerry while blood stained his shirt front. Then life seemed to rush out of him and he dropped to the ground.

Kerry looked down at him. The crowd split and Luce Maxwell pushed into the circle. Just behind him loomed an alert gunman. Maxwell's eyes dropped to the dead man and then he turned angrily to Kerry.

"I don't take gun fights in front of my place, hombre. I reckon you'd better cool off in the jail."

"There's two sides to every story," Kerry answered quietly. "Maybe you're missing something."

Maxwell's lips pressed flat in an angry line. "All right," he said swiftly. "Tell it pronto."

Kerry briefly outlined his story, the money he had accumulated, the meeting with Brandon and Jones, and the gun trouble.

"I don't allow card slicks in my place if I know about them," Maxwell said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I never had the chance." Kerry shrugged. "You was too worried about a broke cowboy getting in your game room."

Maxwell stared down at No-luck. His face flamed red in a new upsurge of anger. In a clipped voice he ordered his man to remove Jones' body and place guards at all the exits

to the house but the main doors. Then he shot a quick, searching glance at Kerry.

"I'm taking chips in this game. Come with me."

Turning on his heel, he walked swiftly down the lane to the doors. Kerry followed him. Maxwell strode down the hall and up the stairs. He spoke briefly to the man at the table and looked at the door records.

"He's in there, all right," he said curtly. "Cowpoke, I'm warning you to keep your gun in leather."

"It's your range," Kerry agreed.

Maxwell led the way inside and started threading the card tables. Twice he signaled to sharp-eyed men who unobtrusively flanked him as he walked to the rear of the room. Then Kerry saw Three-high. The gambler sat at a table near the wall. His lean face was expressionless. A big pile of chips lined the table under his hands. He studied his cards, unaware of the men who bore down on him.

Kerry nudged Maxwell and pointed. The old man signaled his guards and they silently came up on either side of Brandon. Maxwell pushed to the table, Kerry beside him.

"No sudden moves, gents. We're taking care of a skunk what slipped in."

Brandon looked up. He saw Kerry, stiffened, started to rise, his hand streaking toward his hide-out gun. Instantly two guns punched him on either side as the guards stepped close. Brandon froze and his eyes looked trapped. Maxwell

pointed to the chips.

"Count out what you stole from this man," Maxwell ordered, "and push it across the table."

Brandon licked his thin lips, seemed about to argue and then changed his mind. Shooting a look of venomous hate at Kerry, he slowly counted out the chips. He pushed them across the table and Maxwell called to a houseman.

"Cash these and bring the dinero here. It belongs to the red-headed cowpoke. Hurry it up."

The men around the table remained frozen as the houseman raked the chips and hurried away. Brandon stood white-faced between the two guards. Kerry waited for the old man's next move. Maxwell picked up an unopened deck of cards and tossed it to one of the players.

"Break it and shuffle," he ordered. "Put the deck in the middle of the table." He looked up at Brandon. "Tinhorn, this is one game you're playing straight."

Brandon licked his lips. "I don't savvy."

"We're cutting high card, you and me. If you get high, this red-headed jasper is leaving the building and Sundown. He'll have his dinero back and he'll be satisfied with that."

"If you get high?" Brandon asked, a suggestion of shakiness to his voice.

"Then you leave just five minutes after the redhead and he'll be by the front door. There ain't no other way you can get out, and my boys will see you leave. I hope you'll have more gun swift than your partner, for he's already on the way to Boot-

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hill. There's the cards. Cut, tinhorn."

Brandon glanced around at the circle of stony, disapproving faces. Reaching out, he hesitated a moment, and then with a sudden gesture, flipped the cards. He displayed a jack and almost smiled.

Maxwell arched a grizzled brow when he saw Brandon's card. He cut in turn and showed a jack. With an impatient gesture he shoved the cards to a player to be shuffled again, then motioned Brandon to cut. The gambler turned a five and, with a quick flip of the wrist, Maxwell showed a nine.

"Five minutes," Maxwell said to Brandon. He turned and guided Kerry toward the door. The houseman came up with a roll of bills that Maxwell gave to Kerry. Down in the lower hall, Maxwell swung Kerry around.

"You can wait for the tinhorn or not, as you please. I hope you wait. Other card slicks won't be so anxious to run their brand on my place. Good luck, cowpoke."

Kerry nodded and sauntered through the doors. The bulk of the money around his waist felt good again. Brandon had probably learned his lesson, and Kerry held no grudge. He decided to ride off and let Three-high worry about a possible meeting that would never come about. Kerry grinned and started toward the hitch rack.

He watched the doors as he untied the reins. Suddenly Brandon came running out the door, black

coat streaming behind him. His face was drawn, the eyes wild like those of a trapped animal. He held a six in his hand. Then he saw Kerry.

The cowboy jumped to keep his horse out of the line of fire. Brandon's gun arm jerked up and he fired. The bullet sang a whining song over Kerry's head. His own six-gun leaped into his fingers and he pulled the trigger.

Brandon's gun jumped from his hand and the man howled. Kerry advanced, six-gun ready for action. But the fight had left Three-high. Kerry's slug had smashed his fingers. The cowboy stared in the gambler's white, frightened face and then made a gesture of disgust.

"Go find a sawbones and then rustle your miserable hide out of the country. From the looks of them fingers you'll never deal slick cards again. I reckon you've got what was due."

Brandon slunk away and Kerry jammed his gun back into leather. Maxwell's hearty chuckle sounded at his shoulders.

"You're seeing the angles, cowpoke. Come on in and put up for the night. I reckon you can buck the poker deals upstairs now."

Kerry grinned. "Thanks, I'll take the place to sleep. But you can have your poker room, Maxwell. I've done got my schooling."

"Smart, too," Maxwell marveled with a grin. "Well, everything's on me. It's worth it to uncover a crooked gambler, and to find a man with savvy enough to know a lesson when he meets one."

THE END.

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