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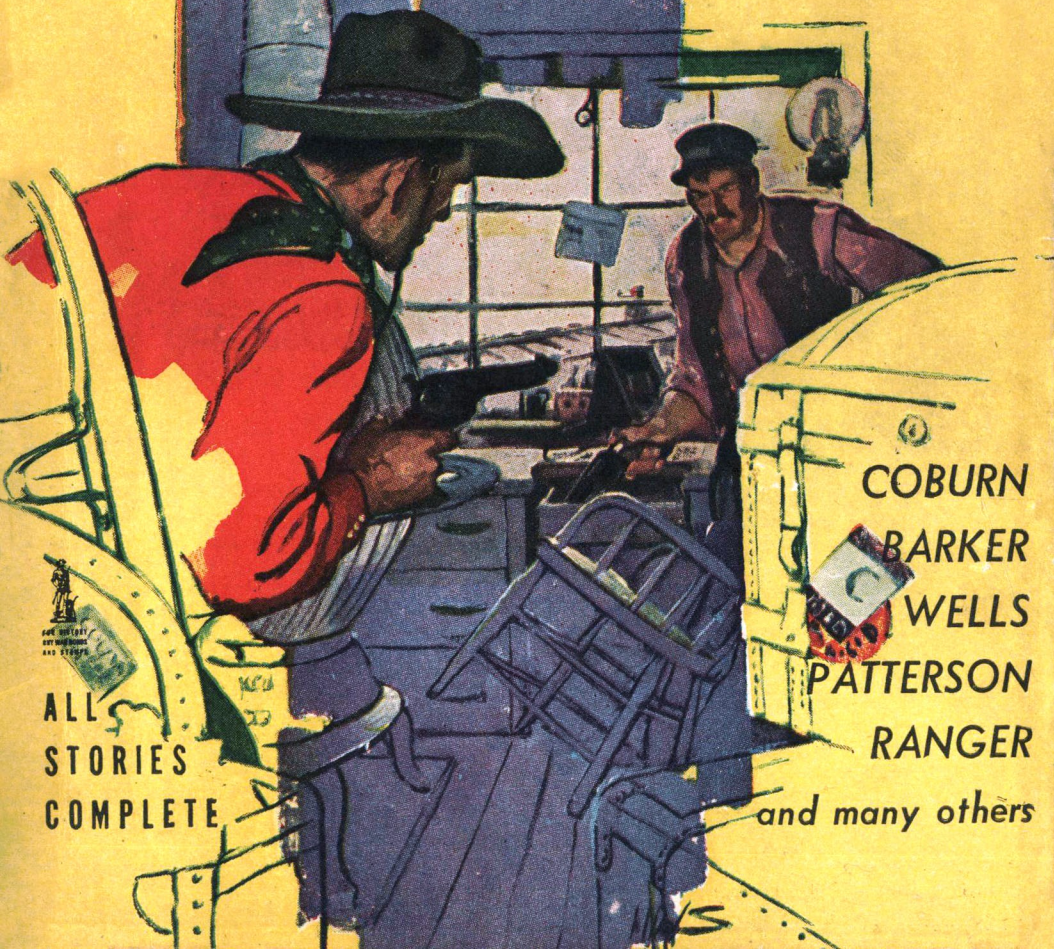
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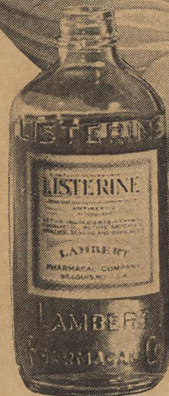
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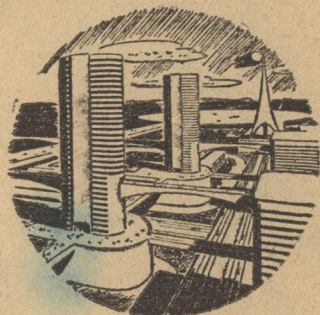
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WESTERN STORY

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

SEPTEMBER, 1944

VOL. CCXI, NO. 5

NOVELS

- LOOTERS OF LOST MILE POST,
by Rod Patterson 6
- STEPSONS OF HATE, *by Walt Coburn* 38

NOVELETTES

- SCOUTS OF EMPIRE, *by Lee E. Wells* 71
- TINHORN OUTFIT, *by Seth Ranger* 113

SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

- BLOODHOUND BONANZA, *by S. Omar Barker* 29
- RANGE SAVVY, *by Carl Raht* 37
- TERROR AT TOOELE, *by Giff Cheshire* 62
- PUZZLE 70
- HARD-BITTEN HOMBRE, *by Melvin W. Holt* . 91
- COVERED TRACKS, *by Cliff Walters* 94
- BRANDS DON'T LIE, *by Mark Lish* 101
- WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE,
by John North 107
- MINES AND MINING, *by John A. Thompson* . . 109
- GUNS AND GUNNERS, *by Captain Philip B. Sharpe* 111
- COVER BY H. W. SCOTT



Editor
JOHN BURR

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Publication issued monthly by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Allen L. Grammer, President; Gerald H. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; Henry W. Balston, Vice President and Secretary. Copyright 1944, in U. S. A. and Great Britain by Street & Smith Publications, Inc. Re-entered as Second-class Matter, February 3, 1944, at the Post Office at New York, under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions in U. S. A. \$1.50 per year; to Countries in Pan American Union, \$1.75 per year; elsewhere, \$2.25 per year. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.



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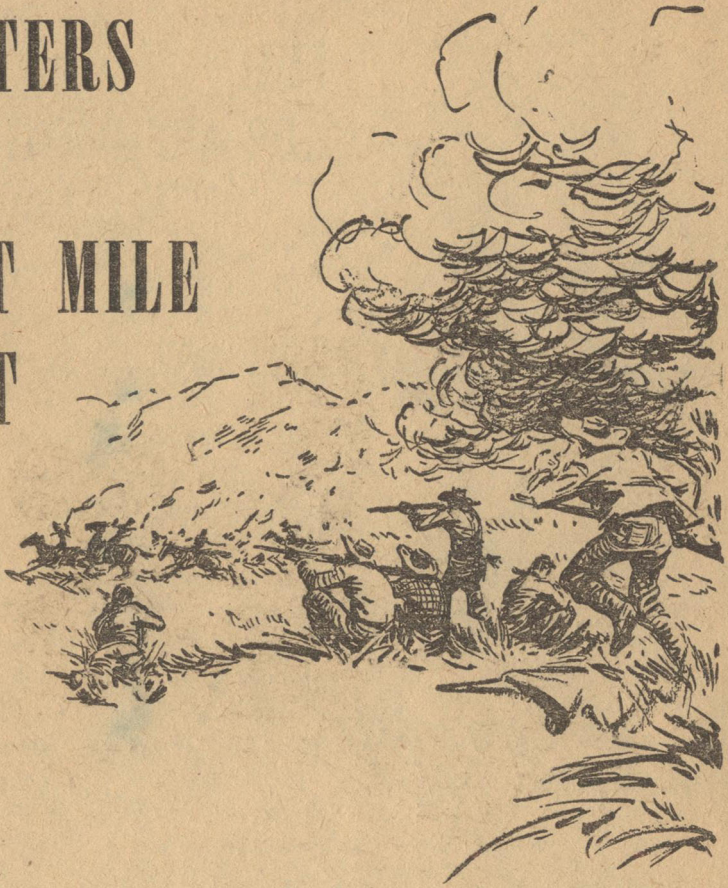
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LOOTERS OF LOST MILE POST



I

DAVE WESTON, on the straw sack seat of his freight wagon, reached out for the long-shafted lash, but the four big-boned blacks needed no urging; they leaned forward in the hames and got the heavily loaded rig rolling faster toward the divide.

Out of habit, Dave looked at the

weather over Totowa Valley toward which he was traveling after a week's absence from Marriner's Lost Mile Trading Post. He saw a cloud-flecked sky above the escarpment of hills that rimmed this land of timber and wild, jumbled ranges. Ahead loomed the Oregon-California Trail, at this point scarcely more than two

by **ROD PATTERSON**

Undaunted by the double threat of warring Indians and white renegades, Dave Weston fought desperately to unmask the leader of that unholy combine



ruts with a hoofed-out groove between.

Dave could find no threat from the weather, and yet the vague uneasiness which had pricked him for the past few hours increased. Some sixth sense warned him that this trip from Ford Hall to War Pass was going to end in trouble.

It was nothing tangible—nothing he could put a finger on—like fear of white marauders or the tricky Shoshone Indians of this region. It was just a feeling. A hunch.

Though he drove with a casual expertness, there was a look of determination on Dave Weston's high-boned, rather serious face, as if

freighting a two-ton load of trade goods across a hundred miles of wilderness was not a feat to be accomplished without thought and constant effort. Both his face and his rawboned, six-foot body were spare, almost emaciated. And the lines around his flat mouth and amber-colored eyes were deeper than those usually seen in a man of twenty-six.

The sober expression he wore, however, did not stem from the fact that he didn't like this job, freighting for Jackson T. Marriner. For he did like it. And besides he needed it. A man had to work to live. And jobs in this remote back country were few and far between.

Dave had come up the trail from Independence a year and a half ago in a Conestoga wagon equipped for the long haul over the Sierras to California. He had invested the savings of ten years' labor in his outfit and had turned his face to the West, determinedly, irrevocably. But fate had dogged his trail from the start and he had lost everything, wagon, horses, grubstake, tools, in a blizzard east of the Willamette. Somehow he had managed to crawl back to the town of War Pass, hands and feet frozen, out of his mind from despair and exhaustion. He had lain for weeks near death at Marriner's Lost Mile Post.

Ironically, it was the memory of his father's parting words that steeled in him the will to live. Old Man Weston had said: "Weaklin's die by the way, son, and cowards never even start!"

Dave had accepted the grim warning lightly at the time. Now, how-

ever, he realized that a man of caliber never surrendered to any force outside himself. He recovered, doggedly resolved to work and earn the money for a new outfit and a fresh start. California was his goal—his grim obsession.

The steady slogging gait of the blacks never varied as they hauled the big-wheeled wagon down the trail. The sun had dropped gradually down toward the western peaks and now the sky turned red and the shadows of late afternoon ran across the land.

At four o'clock he broke out of the timber and saw the campfires of an immigrant camp ahead. Wood smoke was an acrid taint on the wind and the white tops of a score of wagons looked like splotches of snow against the forest green. Dogs barked. The calls of children lifted shrilly in the quiet.

These were people of Dave's own tough breed—people who pushed into the wilderness, hoisted ox carts, feather beds, porcelain stoves, across the buttressed crags of the Sierras into the Sacramento Valley. America was being built by squatter folks with a hankering for far horizons. True, some died by the way, and their flesh was taken by wolves and coyotes, or their bones went to the buffalo grass or were washed white by glacier streams. Others kept going, indomitable, dogged. If a blizzard or a river halted them, they rested, gathered their strength, then drove on to their goal.

Dave pulled the blacks to a halt at the rim of the encampment, ob-

servicing the men and women who looked up as he swung down and sauntered into the semi-circle of trail-battered wagons. Men watched him as he drew near—men with blackly bearded faces and keen eyes, oldsters with gnarled bodies and matted hair, women with red, strong hands and deep-set, somber eyes, the mothers of a race of men.

The leader of the group rose from his hunkers as Dave came up. Tall, stoop-shouldered, taciturn, the man said, "Howdy," and gripped Dave's outstretched hand. "Set, stranger, and eat a bean."

"I've et." Dave grinned. "I'm Weston from Lost Mile Post. I just dropped in to steer you there." He was mindful of the trade these folks would bring to Jackson Marriner before they went on and were swallowed by the limitless wilderness to the west. "Just take the next trail to the right and you'll hit the post in three-four hours."

The old man's faded eyes showed mild surprise. "Friend, we jest now bought up a mess o' stuff," he said regretfully. "We was told they was no tradin' post 'round here."

Dave took the man's startling announcement with a long blank stare. "No tradin' post up here?" he repeated in a wondering tone. "Who told you that, mister?"

"Feller calls hisself Kiowa Clane," the leader said. "He's over there at the seep with his pardner, Hoot Springer. That's their wagon—the one with the yaller wheels."

His eyes following the old man's pointing hand, Dave saw the wagon

which, at this moment, was pulling out of camp behind a span of roan-colored oxen.

"What did they sell you, mister?" he asked sharply.

"Flour, sugar, sorgum, beans," the old man said. "And rifle ammunition. Enough to git us clear to Sutter's Fort."

Dave turned abruptly and started toward the departing freighter. When he reached the wagon it was swinging into the trail, heading back in the direction from which Dave had just come. Two men squatted on the seat of the wagon, under a big-bowed canvas top that concealed a high-piled cargo of trade goods.

The man with the whip stopped the oxen with a quick command. He was thick-set and solid, with pale hard eyes under slanting brows and an unruly mop of coarse red hair spattered with gray. His companion was thin and wiry with small, sly-looking eyes. Both men were dressed in butternut shirts and soiled blue jeans. They wore flat-crowned, big-brimmed hats and carried pistols on their hips.

Dave said with a sharpness only half concealed: "Where d'you two boys hail from? I never heard of Kiowa Clane and Hoot Springer in the trade."

"Who wants to know?" the red-head demanded roughly, staring down out of his washed-out eyes.

"I'm from Lost Mile Post," Dave said. "And you're poachin' on our territory."

The thin man on the seat gave a dry, savage excuse for a laugh. "This here's free land, stranger. You go to blazes!" He nudged his mate.

"Git goin', Clane. Let's belt it out o' here."

Kiowa Clane lashed out with his long bull whip. "Whoo-oh! . . . Hist, now!" The high-wheeled freighter moved ahead, went rumbling slowly up the trail.

Dave thoughtfully watched the wagon until it lumbered around a bend, then he turned and walked back to his own outfit. Whoever those men were, they were illegally cutting in on Jackson Marriner's trade, intercepting wagon trains, stocking them and detouring the settlers away from Lost Mile Post. Kiowa Clane? Hoot Springer? Dave would remember them.

II

Dave reached the divide that was the gateway to Totowa Valley at five o'clock. Westward and below him lay a view of the land as though seen from a cloud. The valley, cutting through its gray rimrock, topped mesas and piled-up granite mountains, had been surveyed by the government for some three years, and the Shoshone Indians driven farther back into the hills by the first settlers to arrive in force.

The best of the rich land lying northward of War Pass had been homesteaded by grangers who had pushed this far over the Oregon Trail, but had lacked the stamina to travel on in their wobbly-wheeled, white-sheeted wagons. And so the town had become the base of supplies, not only for the wagon trains that crawled over the Continental Divide, but for nearby settlers, trap-

pers and ranchers recently arrived from Abilene and Dodge.

The town, a raw, wild, belly-happy settlement, sat in the center of the valley and was made up of a low huddle of log-sided buildings and sheds on a single rutted street that petered out into a flat, dry-grassed plain at either end. From this prairie rose the smell of sage, grama and hot dry dust. Log structures lined both sides of the town's only thoroughfare—the Elite Hotel, the Tincup Saloon, a blacksmith shop, a wheelwright's shack, a dealer in horses, oxen and pack mules.

Cat-a-cornered to the hotel stood Jackson T. Marriner's Lost Mile Trading Post, a long two-storied building. The bark on its hewn log walls had partly peeled away, giving it a rugged, shaggy look.

In the rear of the post sat a log storehouse with a covered passageway connecting it to the main store, and this windowless structure was the heart of Marriner's enterprise, for here were accumulated all the supplies brought in by Dave Weston from Fort Hall. Inside the main store, where sunlight filtered wanly through long, slotlike windows, Jackson Marriner moved with his daughter Ginny behind counters piled with trade goods—sacks of flour, beans and black-eyed peas; coffee, tea and barley meal; barrels of larrup and "long sweetenin'"; drums of pickles, coal oil and wagon-yard whiskey.

In the cooling room hung plenty of game: deer, antelope, quail, wild turkey, an occasional buffalo, slabs

of bacon and lean sidemeat. Down the center of the post, suspended from hooks in the big-beamed ceiling, dangled men's foibles—boots, belts, hats, holsters, firearms, harness, saddle gear. And pervading the whole hodgepodge of dry goods and food-stuffs was the pungency of green hides, the tang of vinegar, and the strong smell of horse sweat and new leather.

Marriner was well on his way toward achieving his goal of prosperity. He had, after three short years, attained a good deal of power in the town, for men knew that it had taken real courage to risk capital in a land where Indians swooped without warning to destroy and massacre and where white vandals roamed the dim and dusty trails without fear of even vigilante law.

Jackson Marriner, tall, silver-haired, stern-faced, was a proud man. He was proud of his possessions, but prouder still of his pretty daughter, Ginny. A Virginian, the traditions of the South clung to him like a cloak. And so he pampered the girl in everything but her choice of friends. The fact that Ginny was attracted to his own freight packer rankled him unceasingly, and he had made it plain to all concerned that the daughter of a gentleman must seek the society of gentlemen.

Only one man in the community came under this category. In a land peopled by earthy folk Lyle Redmond was something of a paradox. Son of a Virginia planter, Redmond had taken advantage of a family friendship to come north to War Pass

some months before, impelled by motives not clear to anyone but himself. Marriner had signed him on immediately as post bookkeeper, had, as a matter of fact, deliberately encouraged Redmond's attentions to Ginny, although the girl, herself, held stiffly aloof from him.

Lyle Redmond was well-built, black-haired, black-eyed. He had a false hard nervous air and the suave manners of the landed gentry. He dressed in tight California breeches and buckskin coat trimmed with fringe and Indian beadwork which set off his narrow waist and broad flat shoulders. Unlike Jackson Marriner who had a great stability about him, Redmond was reckless, headstrong, possessed of a spoiled, unbridled temper.

When Dave Weston hit War Pass at sundown that June night, he slowed the horses to a trot. Gray festoons of dust floated in the air behind and bellied out across the high plank walks. He cut the string into a side lane, and circled the post, coming in from the rear. The horses passed through a gate into a wide yard where empty crates and barrels were stacked. A second gate led into the hard-packed compound and up to the storehouse ramp.

It took Dave twenty minutes to unload the wagon, and when he had the goods piled up and checked, ready for the storehouse flunky to take inside, he made his way through the passageway into the post. It was full dark, and the chain-hung lamps in the store were lit, their wicks making a soft, frying noise in the silence.

Dave stopped just inside the door, held up by the sound of Lyle Redmond's drawling voice. The bookkeeper stood at the grocery counter, leaning over it, speaking to Ginny Marriner in a low, earnest tone. Dave could not catch the words, but the look on the girl's averted face told him of her embarrassment.

It was a source of never-ending wonder to Dave how a girl as frail as Ginny Marriner could stand the rigors of this harsh land. Watching her now, across the merchandise-filled post, he thought that she was more beautiful than any woman he had ever seen. Her dark-brown hair, done up in sleek coils on her finely shaped head, held the colors of the upland—flecks of gold, red and bronze. And it amazed him how she could wrap herself in so many layers of skirts and underskirts and still do her work around the post when other frontier women wore denim and calico. Being a Southern lady, Dave mused, accounted for Ginny's natural daintiness.

Dave moved forward on silent feet, drawing closer to Redmond and the girl. And that was the moment that the black-haired bookkeeper dropped a hand to Ginny's slim shoulder, then let it slide lower as he gave her a gentle slap. The girl gave an enraged gasp and pulled back, hot color rushing to her cheeks. Then she saw Dave, and clapped both hands to her face, blue eyes round and wide and startled.

Redmond swung around, staring at Dave. "Well, what do *you* want, Yank?" he demanded in a bland, deadly tone.

Dave did not speak, but coldly eyed the man as he drew closer, walking loosely, negligently, as though indifferent to Redmond's scornful stare. Then, suddenly, he no longer sauntered. He exploded. His fist shot out and jarred against Redmond's chin, staggering him backward, sprawling him full length over the top of the counter.

III

Silence came down on the post, held on interminably; slowly the bookkeeper straightened up a little, with one hand flattened out supporting his weight. Then, with the agility of a cat, he left the counter and charged at Dave. His was a lithe and wiry strength and he had the speed to match that strength. He reached Dave with piston-driven swiftness. His first blow was aimed at Dave's jaw, but it caught Dave below the right cheek, hurling him backward with its jarring impact.

Dave stumbled, fell. He saw Redmond pull back a heavy hob-nailed boot, saw that boot drive toward his head. His hand shot out and up just in time to fend off that vicious blow. Redmond, knocked off balance, staggered back. Then Dave sprang up. Bracing himself against a high-piled stack of tinned goods, he waited while Redmond teetered slowly on his heels.

In the post a dead hush had fallen. But outside, a voice yelled raucously: "Fight! Fight!"

Boots scraped out on the gallery of the post. Animallike and tense, caught by the swift contagion of con-

flict, a group of watching faces appeared in the door; other avid faces showed in the gallery's barred windows. The rapt attention of those men was riveted on Dave Weston as Redmond moved slowly forward, walking on his toes.

Dave's right foot inched forward as Redmond closed in, and in that split second both men struck out. Both blows hit home. Gasping, Dave took the full force of Redmond's fist, and on Redmond's dark, livid face a darker blotch appeared.

Redmond tried to clinch but Dave threw him back, measured him and hit him in the face. Toe to toe, heads dropped, chins in, arms swinging, they fought across the floor, weaving, feinting, striking, making no attempt to guard until, under a savage hail of blows, Dave fell back. His shoulder bumped a shelf, and a tier of tinned milk dropped with a crash. Glass cascaded as a showcase caved in.

The two men were evenly matched as to height and weight, but Dave's long hours on the trail had sapped some of his stamina; a red fog blurred his sight, and he lifted a hand to strike it away. He couldn't seem to get going—his every move was sluggish and ill-timed. His feet seemed to have taken root in the floor.

A swift blow from Redmond caught him on the chin and he pitched backward, turning in mid-air, and went over a barrel in a long crashing fall that shook him to the bone. He rolled over and came to his knees and with both hands steadied himself while Redmond shuffled closer, the blaze of triumph in his

eyes, a twisted grin of victory on his face.

"How d'you like it, Yank?" It was a goading cry. "Stand up! You're going to get the whupping of your life!"

Dave lurched to his feet. Sweat stung his eyes and the salty tang of blood was in his mouth. He had to fight—had to keep going. Vaguely, as from a great distance, he heard the jeering catcalls of the men on the gallery.

Then, high-pitched, commanding, Ginny's voice rang out. Silent, terrified until now, the girl rushed forward and wedged her slender body between the battling men. She thrust Lyle Redmond backward, beating small fists against his chest.

"Stop it! Stop it, you beast!"

The outcry drew a long hooting yell from the men outside. Redmond pulled up, staring at Dave, then at the girl. Bruised and bloody, he was breathing in great, sobbing gasps, a look of astonishment on his battered face. Then, slowly, he straightened and pulled his shoulders together, and his low, hard laugh stung Dave like salt in an open wound. He took his hat from the counter, turned and strode out of the store without a word.

Dave looked at Ginny in a dazed way. He saw fear and pity in her wide blue eyes, and the effect on him was worse than Redmond's mocking laugh. And he knew suddenly that the people of the town would hold nothing but contempt for a man who had allowed a woman to

intercede for him in a knock-down-drag-out fight.

"Ginny, that was a mistake," he said dully.

A voice said: "Weston, I want a word with you."

Dave turned his head, saw the tall, stooped form of Jackson Marriner standing in his office door ten feet away. The old trader's manner and the way he spoke was cold and peremptory. He had a kind of arrogant power and he used it now to ice down Dave Weston's rising rage.

Dave, stolid and calm-looking though he was inwardly boiling, answered Marriner's demand by walking stiffly toward him. He faced the silver-haired trader in the little office, secretly rebelling under the pressure of the old man's slate-gray eyes.

Marriner sat down behind his flat-topped desk and shuffled a pile of papers. He spoke without looking up: "Weston, you've got some explaining to do."

"All right," Dave said stubbornly. "I started it."

Marriner waved it away. "I don't mean the fight. That's between Redmond and you." He held up a sheet of yellow paper, added in a wintry tone: "Somebody's been trying to bleed me white. Redmond and I took inventory while you were at Fort Hall. The storehouse is short three thousand dollars' worth of goods!"

Dave suddenly quit daubing at his blood-streaked face. "Three thousand short?" He spoke incredulously, "You mean—"

Marriner eyed him and cut in, reading from the paper in his hand:

"Ten barrels of flour . . . five hundred weight of corn meal grits . . . eight kegs of whiskey . . . thirty Hawkes rifles . . . fifty cases of ammunition—" He stopped. "That's only part of it."

Dave's face was blank; only his nostrils flared slightly. "You tryin' to say I stole that stuff?"

The trader shrugged. "I know you need money. You've been plannin' to push on over the Divide as soon as you got it. It looks bad for you, Weston."

Dave stood as though turned to wood, except for his eyes which were bright and dangerous. "You're callin' me a thief?"

Marriner's face revealed the ice and iron that was the core of him. "I can't prove it," he said harshly. "I've never checked your loads at any time. I've taken your word the shipments were complete. How do I know you haven't been fleecing me?"

"I guess I'd better drift," Dave said tight-lipped. His eyes were hard and clear. "If you was a younger man—" He didn't finish it, but turned abruptly and wheeled out of the room.

"You can keep your job, but I'll hold you accountable for every load you haul," Marriner called sharply after him.

Ginny stopped Dave as he strode down through the store. "Dave—I'm sorry I interfered. But Lyle—"

"Forget it," he said with corrosive bitterness.

She spoke in a small, faint voice. "I heard what dad said to you. I

know it's not true, Dave."

He didn't look at her; the darkness on his face increased. "I'm pullin' out."

Ginny seized his arm, her quick breathing stirring the firm lines of shoulder and breast. "But what about your plans? You haven't saved enough to—"

"California can wait." He said it savagely. He looked at her then, flat-lidded, grim. "Redmond's your father's kind of man. I ain't good enough for him."

"Don't go, Dave!" Ginny's eyes were distressed. "Please!"

"There's nothin' else for me to do!" Dave blurted out.

There was a pallor on Ginny's face; her lips were suddenly compressed. "You're a stubborn fool."

He made no effort to touch her, though he wanted to crush her in his arms and wipe that stiffness from her white face, nor did he let her see how her words had shaken him. He waited for her next words. They came quicker than he'd thought, and they were words he didn't expect.

"Well, then," she said, "if you're set on running from Redmond, I'm sure I can't stop you! And I can't stop dad from believing he was right in suspecting you!"

"You think I took that stuff?" he demanded flatly.

"No. But dad will—if you leave the post," Ginny said coolly.

He stared. And then she put her dark head up and walked away from him, presently climbing the stairs to the living quarters on the second floor. Her trim boots rapped out a

stiff tattoo and her door slammed hard.

Dave turned slowly and walked out to the street. Pausing on the gallery, he saw a group of townsmen on the walk, and heard their troubled talk. One man said: "Somebuddy's been sneakin' whiskey to the Shoshones. There'll be the devil to pay if it ain't stopped."

Dave's interest whipped alive. He listened to other voices, absorbing the gist of their worried conversation. The Shoshones, always uneasily at peace, had broken out the day before near Bonnet Creek, some twenty miles from War Pass, and had swept the region with their fire and vengeance. Tonight twenty settlers had come to the Pass from the deeper country to seek refuge until the outbreak died down and the Indians retired into the hills.

Dave let himself down to the walk and made his steady passage up the street through faint light out-thrown from the buildings along the way. The talk he had just heard momentarily pushed his own problem from his mind. Shoshones and whiskey? Powder and fire! Well, there was but one place where that whiskey could have come from. Lost Mile Post! The man or men who had rifled the storehouse were plainly inciting the Indians. But why? If there was an answer to the question, it was too obscure for Dave to figure out.

Dave stopped at Ed Markey's O. K. Corrals, next door to the Elite Hotel. The red-faced hostler told him what a riding outfit would cost. A saddle

forty dollars, a bridle eight. Dave went to the corral and picked a fine-looking red gelding, worth a bit more than the saddle. Markey obligingly threw in a secondhand Walker pistol and a cartridge belt. When he left the stable Dave had spent the best part of his savings for his year's work at Lost Mile Post. Now California would *have* to wait.

Impulse pulled him into the Tincup Saloon. The place was crowded; it was warm and smelled of damp sawdust, beer, tobacco smoke and pop-skull liquor. There was the odor of the trail in here, too, the smell of old sweat and saddle leather, and the almost palpable scent of night excitement in a frontier drinking place. Added to this was an air of tight expectancy brought on by the uprising of the Shoshones.

Over his drink, Dave casually observed the crowded room. Men stood near him at the bar and sat at poker tables lined against the yonder wall. One group attracted his gaze and held it. Lyle Redmond was one of the four card players at this table. He sat slackly in his chair, dark head thrown back as he passed some quip to the red-haired man on his left. This man was Kiowa Clane, the heavy-set driver of the ox-drawn freighter Dave had stopped that afternoon at the immigrant camp. On Clane's left squatted his rain-thin sly-faced partner, Hoot Springer. The fourth player was Sam Carradine, a man who was something of a mystery in the town, a professional gambler who had come out from Laramie the year before with a wagon train. Carradine was a bland-man-

nered, middle-aged man, thick-set. He sported flashy clothes and a thick mustache, black as paint, turned up at the ends. His eyes were arresting—small, pale and cynical.

Dave took a stand at the end of the bar where he could observe Redmond without being seen too readily himself. Though the town was unaware of it, Dave knew Redmond had come to the Pass with nothing but the clothes on his back. And now, staring at the bookkeeper, Dave saw the pile of greenbacks on the table near him, and suspicion turned to positive conviction in his mind. Redmond was patently gambling with someone else's cash!

A sudden impulse over which he had no control began pushing Dave slowly toward the poker players at Redmond's table. At the same moment, Kiowa Clane and Hoot Springer threw in their cards and left the saloon unobtrusively. Two bystanders took the vacant chairs and were dealt in by Carradine.

Dave came to a halt beside the bookkeeper. "Come outside, Redmond," he said brusquely. "I want to talk to you."

The black-haired bookkeeper whipped his head around and up, then slapped his cards down hard and stood up, kicking his chair away. "If you keep botherin' me, Yank," he said in a soft, deadly tone, "I'll put you away to stay."

"You and me," Dave said distinctly, "have got a date with Mariner. And this time it'll be you on the hot end of the argument."

"Maybe you better look for an-

other petticoat to hide behind," said Redmond threateningly.

Muffled laughter ran over the saloon.

Dave's face was imperturbable. He reached out with his left hand toward the stack of chips on the table, raked them deliberately toward Sam Carradine who was staring at him out of his bleak pale eyes.

"Cash 'em, Sam," Dave said.

Redmond's temper flared recklessly in his black eyes. He did not speak, but lunged savagely for Dave's



Ginny gasped as Dave's hard-driven fists sent Redmond careening into a barrel.

arm still angled toward the table. But he was too slow, too confident. Dave whipped his right arm up, planted it against Redmond's chest and shoved him back. The book-keeper's boots tangled with the rungs of his own chair and he went down with a crash that shook the whole saloon.

Instantly excited voices yelled as men scrambled for cover. Sam Caradine rose from his chair, and his warning cry rang out: "Don't do it, Dave!"

IV

Dave had made no move to draw his gun. But Redmond rolled over and jerked a derringer from its holster high against his shoulder. He pointed it straight at Dave's chest. When he spoke, he was very deliberate, very quiet, but Dave caught the deadly intent behind the words: "Get out, Weston." That was all.

Dave hadn't uttered a word, and he didn't now. His big hands pushed up, palms out, shoulder-high, and his look was steady though darkened by a bleak and futile rage. His face—his whole frame—seemed suddenly weary to the bone, and he had the tenseness of a stubborn though beaten man. He moved slowly, taking three or four deliberate backward steps, then lowered his hands and turned and plodded out of the saloon. He didn't hurry, and he didn't look back.

In his room on the second floor of the post, ten minutes later, Dave dropped to his bunk, and sat motionless, staring at nothing. Such was his grim absorption, he didn't hear

Ginny's quick step in the hallway until the door opened softly, and the girl came in and stood beside him.

"Dave," came her low-spoken words, "are you all right?"

He looked up, barely able to discern her slender form in the darkness. "I'm all right, Ginny. What's the matter?"

"Dave, I'm sure I heard sounds down in the storehouse a little while ago." There was tenseness in her manner. "I closed the store an hour ago, and I—"

"Where's your father?"

"In bed. Shall I wake him up?"

He spoke gently, reassuringly. "No. It's all right. I just came in through the side door and didn't hear anything."

"Is Lyle in yet?"

"No."

"Dave"—there was a short run of silence—"I'm sorry I said what I did to you."

He took her hand, aware now of its cold tightness. "Never mind. It's all right. Go back to bed now. I'll watch out for things."

"Good night, Dave." Slowly, reluctantly, she withdrew, and he heard her footsteps fade down the hall to silence.

Dave stood up from the bunk and moved against the door, opening it a crack, listening, straining to hear.

In the big log building every sound carried eerily at night and was amplified tenfold. Now, suddenly, there came the faint scrape of a boot downstairs, the soft, slow squeak of the steps leading to the second floor. Dave didn't breathe. He stood at the door, listening, waiting.

Then he was aware of a solid bulk moving along the hallway opposite his door. He caught the rhythmic breathing of a man, the faint odor of tobacco smoke. A quick tap sounded on a door down the hall where Ginny Marriner's room was located. Dave waited, breath bated. A whispered order reached him:

"Ginny—open up!"

"Who is it?" the girl's muffled question came whipping back.

"Lyle. Open up!"

"Please, Lyle! No . . . please . . . I—"

"Ssh!" A pause. Then: "Did Weston come in yet?"

"I . . . don't know."

"Well, he's up to something. I just found out he bought a saddle horse from Markey a while ago. Open the door, Ginny."

Dave grasped the door with both hands, the panel groaned under the pressure as his fingers bit into the wood. Above the drumbeat of his heart, he heard the girl's tense, "You can't come in, Lyle!" then the sound of a bolt shot home.

Silence came down on the post. Afterward, the stealthy tread of Redmond came again on the stairway, moving down—down—

He's going to pull something off, Dave thought grimly, and blame it on me! I've got to block him now or not at all!

It was hard to gauge the time after the stairway stopped creaking under Redmond's boots. But at last Dave checked it with another sound—the closing of the office door. Then time became vague again. Dave started down the stairs. For the first few

steps he kept against the wall to avoid the creaky boards which had betrayed Redmond; then haste overcame caution and he dove forward, ignoring the noise he made. It seemed at that moment that time rushed by, pelting past him like a wind.

He blundered through the post and reached the office door where a streak of yellow light showed. Gun out and gripped tightly in one hand, he used the other to turn the knob. He kicked the door open with his boot and broke into the office, gun lifted. What he saw stopped him short, staring, shocked. The big cast-iron safe was open, and before it, sprawled out grotesquely on the floor, lay the motionless form of Lyle Redmond!

Dave had no time to think, to comprehend, for there came a quick whispering movement in back of him in the post. He started to turn, started to look around. Then a gun crashed in the dark of the store. Across the space the flame of that shot seemed to spring at him. The solid impact of a bullet spun Dave backward and dropped him to the floor. And as he fell, a white-hot stab of pain went through his right leg just above the knee.

Dazed by the shock of it, he stayed down, supporting his weight on outstretched hands, head bent, chin on his chest. A sensation like that of a cold wind touched his face, and it revived him enough to make him wonder where that draft came from. And then he knew it had blown for an instant through the passageway between the storehouse and the post.

The slam of a distant door put a period to his thoughts.

Upstairs feet were thudding over the floor, creaking on the stairs, stumbling, groping down. Voices, shrill and packed with fear, were calling his name—calling Redmond's name. Dave staggered up. The pain in his leg was growing worse—blood ran in a hot stream down his shin and filled his boot, but he could still stand on the limb. The revolver still swung loosely in his right hand, and he was standing there, weaving a little, when Jackson Marriner broke through the door, a look of frozen horror and accusation in his staring eyes.

"*You've killed him!*" The cry sounded as though it was wrung from Marriner; it echoed hollowly through the aisles and crannies of the post.

It was Ginny's cry that broke the dead silence that followed the trader's damning words. "No! No!"

The girl flung herself past her father, and rushed to Dave who stood dazedly staring at the old man in his flapping night shirt. Ginny, fully dressed now, stood as if to shield Dave.

"Dave didn't do it! He couldn't have!" she insisted.

Out on the street boots kicked over plank walks; voices yelled querulously. Dave's brain cleared. The knowledge that he was caught in a trap came to him. If he stayed here to face it out; if he remained to risk the fury of the town, he might hang for murder. He had to think fast now—had to think faster than he had ever done before. His life was at

stake. And it would do no good to blurt out that Lyle Redman had been the man behind the plot to strip the trading post. Who would believe that?

Dave moved. He pulled the girl aside, lifting his gun on Marriner.

"I'm shaggin' for Squaw Peak! But I'll be back!" he whispered to Ginny. He couldn't be sure the girl caught his rapid words, but he couldn't wait, and he stepped forward, pushing past the stunned old man, and into the darkened post. One blind, staggering rush carried him through the storehouse and into the yard beyond. He paused, uncertain, still a little dazed, seeing a crowd begin to form out on the street before the post.

Then, as the clamor of voices grew louder, angrier, Dave gathered his strength and hitched his way along the rear of the buildings and came out presently in back of Ed Markey's stable. He cut his gelding out of the corral, found his saddle in the tack room and threw it on the horse, cinching up and mounting with some difficulty.

He left town, traveling directly over the grassy plain to the north. And now he had a paralyzing realization of his own predicament. Everything that had occurred tonight pointed irrevocably to his guilt. He had fought twice with Lyle Redmond in full view of the town, and now the storehouse thefts would come out, would be added weight against him. Gripped suddenly by a terrible, unsettling urgency for haste, Dave pushed the gelding faster into the luminous night.

Some time after midnight he reached a region of scrub timber and jagged, deep-slashed draws in the vicinity of Squaw Peak. He plunged into the brush and found a small canyon with overhanging ledges of rock. Ground-hitching the horse, he dug in for the night. His wound, he found, was not as bad as he had thought at first. He bandaged it crudely with a strip torn from his red wool shirt.

The hours of darkness slipped past and the sun at last came up like fire over the eastern rim of the world. Dave had slept but little, and hunger gnawed at him. His leg was stiffening up but he found, after two or three tries, that he could move, could still stand on it.

It was full daylight when he was startled to hear a woman's voice calling his name. It was Ginny Mariner's voice, and he jumped up eagerly, forgetting his game leg and wincing with the aching shock. "Ginny! Over here!"

Hoofs clattered against rimrock; brush crackled. A moment later, she stood before him, eyes wide, cheeks stained with dust. She dropped down beside him, gripping his hands, and saw the torn trousers, the dirty, blood-soaked bandage on his leg.

"Dave," she breathed, "you've been shot! Who—"

He shook his head. "Don't know. Somebody tried to plug me in the back last night—in the office."

"Oh, Dave," she moaned, "what's it all about?"

"Somebody's tryin' to break your

dad!" He gritted the words out, "And fram'in' me!"

"Can you walk?" There was a glint of close-held tears in Ginny's blue eyes. When he nodded, she said: "They're searching the hills, Dave! You can't stay here!"

"I know it. I was just figurin' to move over toward Bonnet Creek and hole up in the timber for a while."

"Sam Carradine's stirred the whole town up," she said breathlessly. "They'll hang you, Dave. What shall we do?"

"Then they think I killed Redmond?"

She gasped. "Why, Dave, I thought you knew! Lyle's not dead! He was struck from behind, and he swears it was you who did it!"

Dave stared, mouth open. Then, very deliberate in his anger: "The safe—did he—did Redmond take the money that was there?"

"Lyle didn't have the money," she said. "He's accused you of stealing it. Ten thousand dollars—every cent dad had!" She choked. "Oh, Dave, it's so mixed up! I wish I knew—"

"Never mind," he said with a quick hard urgency, "I'm going to Bonnet Creek if it's the last damned thing I do!"

V

At noon that day Dave came off the hills around Squaw Peak and pointed the gelding toward Bonnet Creek. The vague trail moved gradually downward in bending, unseen curves through thickets of brush and came finally to a mesquite flat close to the creek. He rode through layers of heat and dust to a spot where the trail

forked. The smell of campfires came to him down the wind, and he thought about the Shoshones who had been reported in this region. Turning southwest, he pushed forward slowly, cautiously.

The farther he rode into this wilderness, the more he became convinced that Redmond and Clane and Springer had a hidden headquarters somewhere ahead—a cache where they stashed the stolen whiskey and stores from Lost Mile Post. If the Indians were on a drunken rampage they couldn't be far from the source of their supply of pop-skull liquor.

Dave circled into the timber, riding a while, then turning back toward the trail, always smelling the taint of wood smoke, never wavering from his patient quest. An hour later, on the trail again, he heard the steady rhythm of horses drawing close from the south. He pulled off the trail instantly, listening, waiting.

Sound grew louder, swelled into the beating tempo of trotting horses—many riders moving northward in the general direction of War Pass. Dave could plainly see the trail from where he sat in the screening brush; he could see the rim of Bonnet Creek, and hear the wash of water over its shallow, gravelly bed. As he bent forward, staring, a large war party of Shoshones advanced on the trail. Reaching the creek, they paused to water their ponies—thirty or forty painted savages, stripped to the waist, their coppery bodies glistening with sweat. They were close enough to Dave for him to see the pole litter drawn by a wiry little Appaluse. The

litter held a whiskey keg, and the stenciled letters on it read:

J. MARRINER—LOST MILE POST

One of the Indians, a big-boned warrior clad in beaded rawhide, was very drunk. He stared above Dave at the cap rock rim and cried a single shrill word, then wheeled and led the band onward to the north and the open plain of Totowa Valley. As this group faded into the brush and timber, another long file came into view from the south—men, women, children, ponies—and moved past the spot where Dave tensely sat. He was sure at that moment that the end of his search was at hand and, spurring his horse out of the brush, he rammed it in the direction from which the Indians had just come.

He broke out of the timber finally in a kind of pocket in the wilderness, reining up, grim-faced, at what he saw. A hundred yards away, dug into the earth on rising ground, sat a good-sized log building with a platform strung across its front. Dave's astonished gaze swept the man-made clearing in which the cabin stood, touched on the piles of boxes, crates and barrels racked on the roofless ramp. Even at this range he could see the stenciled letters on the goods.

J. MARRINER—LOST MILE POST

The smoke he had smelled for the past hour came, not from campfires, but from heaps of cut brush and small trees in the clearing. This layout—this trading post—had

mushroomed in the wilderness almost overnight.

Voices lifted suddenly from the cabin. Boots scraped; a door slammed. Almost at once two men cut around the corner of the cabin and headed for the two ponies standing hip-shot in the sun nearby. Dave drew his gun, and now he was hard-eyed, tight-lipped, for he recognized Kiowa Clane and his rail-thin crony Springer!

The two men mounted their horses, and Dave heard Clane say, "No more drinks, Hoot. Carradine'll raise hell if we don't hit town 'fore the Injuns start the fun."

Carradine! Dave stiffened in the saddle. But he had no time to reason out the meaning of the words. He could only guess at it, for Clane and Springer were moving swiftly toward him along the rim of Bonnet Creek. The two outlaws spotted him at the same moment, pulled their ponies to a sudden halt.

"Stand fast!" Dave ordered.

Instantly Springer drew his gun and fired. The bullet snarled past Dave's head. He punched a single shot at Springer. The wiry little outlaw took the bullet in the groin and spun sideways off his horse, landing on his back while his horse reared off into the brush.

Clane was now out of his saddle, and Dave fired at him this time, spotting his leaning, moving shape, and he dropped at the same instant from his horse and rolled to the shelter of a nearby rock. Jaw set, Dave risked lifting his head to peer above the rock. Clane's gun roared thunderously, and the slug went wild. But

Dave had learned what he wanted to know. Clane's horse, too, had stampeded, frightened by the shooting, and was already clattering along the bank of the creek.

Dave looked again. Clane was getting up from behind a slab of chalk-white stone, gun angled and ready. The red-haired outlaw was erect when Dave's third shot hit him. Clane had one boot in the stream, the other on the bank. He turned half around under the impact of the slug, but steadied himself, took snap aim and fired at Dave, who had now jumped up. The bullet missed. Dave drew a bead, deliberately, slowly, then squeezed the trigger hard. Clane started a scream but only a kind of animallike gurgle issued from his contorted lips. He fell backward, landing in the creek and throwing up a sheet of water that glittered in the sun.

Dave went over and nudged the body of Springer with his boot. The man was dead. He moved on to where Clane lay, head under water. Clane was stone-dead, too. Thereupon Dave reloaded his gun deliberately, holstered it, then returned to his horse. He had to try three times before he could get aboard, but he finally made it and, hauling the gelding around, rammed it northward in the direction of War Pass.

Pushing his horse relentlessly through the timbered hills, Dave anxiously scanned the land ahead, and now, suddenly, he saw the thing he had dreaded since leaving the creek—a cloud of thick black smoke drifting high above the plain that

lay between him and War Pass. Like a storm cloud, the smoke fanned out in the brisk wind that swept Totowa Valley.

Someone was riding in on his left, and Dave checked the gelding's stride. It was, he saw, a man on a winded chestnut pony, riding bareback without even a blanket. Dave stopped. The man came on, arms and legs flopping; his face was pinched and gray with fear, and he shouted, "Don't go in there, man! Injuns started a big grass fire! All hell's a-poppin' at War Pass!"

Dave lifted his horse into a stretching run, leaving the rider to go his way. Circling to the east, he raced into the settlement and dropped from his spent horse in the rear of Markey's corrals. He ran forward at once toward the street, oblivious to the danger he faced if he was seen and recognized. The street was a bedlam of sound and fury. A crowd of grim-faced men and women moved steadily in and out of dwellings and sheds, removing household goods to wagons standing along the walks.

Dave reached Marriner's Post in time to meet Ginny coming out on the gallery burdened down with pails, brooms and blankets. When the girl saw him she cried: "Dave—help us! Hurry!"

If she was shocked at seeing him in town her face didn't show it. Her eyes were fever-bright with excitement and did not seem to focus on anything at all. She appeared to be walking in a dream. Dave rushed into the post, snatched blankets from a nearby rack, grabbed up a shovel

and a pick, then ran outside to join the girl.

Ed Markey, the hostler, stampered up the street, coat tails whipping in the wind. "Behind the hotel!" he hollered. "We'll be wiped out if we don't head 'er off!" He saw Dave then, ejaculated, "Well, I'll be damned!" and ran on.

The pounding of hoofs, the roar of frantic voices, lifted in the smoky air. A dozen townsmen had Marriner's blacks hitched to the big freight wagon which had been filled with water barrels, and were rocking over the ruts heading for the plain to the rear of the log hotel. Dave caught the low growl of the fire that seemed to come from the earth under his feet, from the air, from the sky itself. Beside him Ginny stumbled blindly, desperately. And just ahead, in another group of running townsmen, Jackson Marriner struggled, a fixed look in his deep-set eyes, apparently unaware of anything save the orange glow on the plain ahead.

Now Dave made out the crawling line of the prairie fire, tiny flames at this distance, licking upward slowly, bobbing in and out of the jet-black smoke which spumed high in the air, fountainlike, hiding here and there in the sky, then licking out of the smoke like crimson tongues.

They caught up with the wagon load of water—Ginny was gasping, done in, and Dave took her load away and forced it on an empty-handed man who ran by and stared at him with blank eyes. They pushed on behind the wagon and the men who helped the sweating blacks by

shoving wheel and spoke and hub.

All around them now, and above them in the sky, was the swelling rumble and roar of flames, the vicious sucking wail of wind and heat, the drumming of pounding hoofs, and far out on the plain beyond the blazing grass lifted the sharp crackling of rifle fire, the distant angry shouts of men as they beat the torch-bearing Shoshones off with lead and steel.

Still they struggled on, flailing the red-hot rain of sparks that poured down upon their heads, hurling themselves at the flickering wall of smoke and flame that leaped at them out of the tall dry buffalo grass. The plain swarmed with men, women and children, bent-backed, stubborn, fighting the fire with spade, pick, blanket and sack, and water flung from the bucket lines. Others doggedly dug ditches and back fires, trenches to stop the racing flames. A hundred settlers battled for their town and for the land they loved, retreating only when the lashing flames reached out to claw at them with molten fingers.

How long they labored there, fighting the gnashing flames, Dave never knew. He had met Ginny at the wagon over and over again, wetting sacks and blankets before rushing back to his position in the line. But after what seemed like endless hours the flames died down as though a giant hand had smothered them; the prairie fire faded back smolderingly, blocked at last by the ditches and back fires the townsmen had set in the nick of time.

Dead-beat, almost out on his feet, Dave turned automatically toward

the wagon where a throng had gathered, a tattered, scorched and exhausted crowd, now in an ugly mood and crying for vengeance in their moment of victory. Dave was filled with a kind of exaltation—a savage triumph. For he had fought shoulder to shoulder with men and women who had been his friends. . . .

The thought checked him up short. It suddenly smashed home to him that he would be the man the settlers would be gunning for. As though to underline his desolate reflection, a voice yelled from the crowd: "I saw Weston! Grab Weston afore he gits away!"

VI

Dave pulled back, turned his blistered, smoke-blackened face toward town. He sloped away, limping through the charred, smoldering grass. He had one hope, and one hope only. He had to find Lyle Redmond and Sam Carradine, no matter what the risk. He had to confront them with his knowledge of their guilt, had to wring the truth from them.

When he reached the hotel his red-rimmed eyes fell on a deserted street. Only a few saddle horses stood at the tie rails, reins knotted tight as they peacefully switched flies. Limping on past the hotel, Dave headed for the 'Tincup Saloon. He had seen Carradine's roan standing out in front, and with it, Redmond's star-faced sorrel. A vindictive anger burned through him as he circled the saloon and approached it by the low rear door. And so it happened that he came upon a startling scene, un-

detected and unobserved.

Voices lifted from inside as he crept in and drew near the door which gave into the long barroom. The voices belonged to Redmond and Carradine, and even before he laid eyes on the men he knew they were quarreling bitterly.

"You put the Indians up to this!" he heard Redmond shout.

Carradine's reply came snapping back: "Mister, you ain't no angel! You better shut your mouth!"

Dave came against the inner door, opened it slowly, carefully, and peered into the room beyond. He saw the mustached gambler where he stood against the far wall, facing the bar and Lyle Redmond who was backed up to it, stiff-faced and tense. Carradine's face, which served his profession so efficiently, was more masklike than ever. And his pale hard eyes were pinned on Redmond as if trying to nail him to the bar.

Carradine had his heavy gumbelt pulled slightly to the front, a highly significant position for his shooting iron. And now he said, his lips barely moving with the words: "Feller, you talk too much and raise a heap o' dust."

Redmond's face was as black as a thunder cloud. "You've made a fool out of me, Sam, tying me up in a game of poker the nights Clane and Springer jumped the post! Should've known it wasn't Weston was lugging that stuff away."

The gambler smiled thinly. "What d'you care? Weston got blamed for it, didn't he?"

"I'm going to tell Marriner the truth!" Redmond cried.

Carradine gave a hard laugh. "If you do that, you'll have to tell him about all that money you took out of the safe to pay your I.O.U.'s."

Dave remained a stiff and listening shape at the rear door, watching the two men who sized each other up like dogs going into battle. And now Sam Carradine moved out from his position against the wall and sauntered toward the bar, loosely, negligently, as though he were merely going to buy a drink.

The room was empty except for these two tense men—it was silent save for the soft scrape of the gambler's high star boots on the sawdust-covered floor.

Then Redmond flung out bitter words: "I'll see you in hell before I play your dirty game!"

Carradine's pale eyes were bland as he reached the bar. "You ain't no little white baby angel, kid. I'm sorry I knocked you over last night, but I heard Weston comin' down the stairs. Had to slug you and grab the money or get caught with my braces down."

Redmond stood sideways against the bar; flecks of rage danced in his eyes; his mouth was a flat thin line. "You double-crossing crook!" he snarled.

"Throw in with me, kid," the gambler said in his slow dry voice. "You can work for me at my post up on Bonnet Creek, now Marriner's cleaned out."

Lyle Redmond, the man to whom conscience had come so unexpectedly, stepped back from the bar and his hand flowed up to the holster

under his shoulder. He whipped the little pistol out and threw it down on Carradine. But he was not quick enough.

The gambler grunted, backed up against the bar and drew, firing his gun with his right arm angled across his chest. Redmond staggered sideways, then slowly folded up. Carradine took one step toward the fallen man, leveled his weapon and fired again, point-blank. Redmond's body jerked. It bounded several inches upward in an awful spasm of energy, then settled back, the eyes wide open, terrible, accusing, the two black holes in his buckskin coat small, and flecked with bluish powder burns.

The whole thing had happened so swiftly, so startlingly that Dave Weston had barely time to draw his own gun and step into the room when Carradine swung around and punched a shot at him, blindly, aimlessly. The bullet whanged into the wall, and Dave felt the wind of its passage as he brought up his piece and fired. The slug struck Carradine with a solid, sickening "thunk."

The gambler pivoted slowly on his high heels and the revolver dropped from his hand as if it had suddenly grown too heavy for him to hold. For the space of a long-drawn breath, he hung there, staring stupidly at Dave, then slowly, ponderously, he fell with his head on Redmond's outstretched legs and did not move again.

Lyle Redmond stirred; his eyes were bright and feverish and pinned on Dave's still face as he moved up. "Yank," he gasped, "take off my boots . . . take off my boots—"

Lyle Redmond lay on a blanket in the back room of the Tincup Saloon, his head propped up on Dave's folded coat. He lay quiet and limp, his eyes dull in a bloodless face. Men stood in the doorway, peering in.

"Well," Redmond said in a sighing voice, "guess I'm heading for Kingdom Come, and I hope there'll be no crying over me." He gave a laugh that rattled in his throat.

Jackson Marriner stood nearby, haggard, stricken eyes staring at the dying man. Ginny held his arm, her dead-white face turned to the wall, her shoulders trembling. At her elbow stood Dave Weston.

Redmond rested a moment, and then he said: "I hated you, Yank." He weakly waved a hand in a slow gesture of finality. "No matter now."

Marriner said, "Talk, Lyle," in a hoarse, shaking voice.

"Weston had nothing to do with—missing goods," Redmond whispered. "It was Carradine and Clane and Springer. They—were trying to bust you, J. T. Nearly did it, too." A pause, then: "I—was out with the posse this morning. Stumbled on Carradine's layout—up on Bonnet Creek. Clane—was drunk. He blabbed—told me they'd got the Indians stirred up. They were going to burn the town—everything—"

Marriner eyed the dying man implacably. "You told us it was Weston slugged you from behind last night."

Redmond fought for breath; life was fading from his eyes. "I thought it was. Didn't know it was—Carradine—till he—told me—while ago." A cool dull cloud passed over his

face like a shadow sliding over water. "Tell my folks—" His head rolled back.

Dave Weston faced the crowd in front of Lost Mile Post later that afternoon. Jackson Marriner stood next to him, his high-boned face relaxed in all its deep-grooved lines; and behind them in the shadows of the post Ginny listened while Dave addressed the crowd in his slow, self-conscious way. The throng was quiet as he spoke.

"Redmond's dead and so are Clane, Springer and Carradine. We've closed their post and brought the stolen trade goods back. And now there'll be no more war and no burnin' in this land."

The silence was deep as Dave went on in a louder, clearer tone: "I hold no grudge against anyone. We fought the fire together and we'll go on that way." He paused, said: "We found Mr. Marriner's money in Carradine's saddlebags and what stores Carradine sold out from under us won't hurt us none. We've served the settlers here and the immigrants that traveled through. We aim to keep on servin' 'em."

A murmur of approval ran through the crowd.

"I been asked by Mr. Marriner to stay and run this post for him," Dave continued. "But I can't do it without good will. From everyone. This here's your post and it's your town, too. What've you got to say about it?"

A roar of cheering broke from a hundred throats. Dave saw the smiles on faces that had held hate and distrust for him but a few short hours before. He grinned, threw up his hands.

"All right," he said, and turned and walked back into the trading post.

Laughter spilled out into the quietness of War Pass as the crowd dispersed. Jackson Marriner followed Dave into the store and said in a tone from which reserve had gone:

"Dave, break out that shipment of wine you brought in from Fort Hall last month. We'll throw a shindig for the town tonight!"

Turning, Dave saw Ginny standing near, smiling tremulously at him.

"I'm glad for you . . . for us," she said.

He looked at her and said simply: "I won't forget how you trusted me when things looked black."

She went to him, still smiling. And her eyes held something for him—and for him alone.

"You always said," she murmured, "your home was over there." She nodded her dark head toward the west.

He grinned. "Home's where you make it, Ginny. I've found mine here in the Pass with you, and here I'll stay."

She stood before him, smiling up into his gaunt face. He reached out and pulled her close and he caught the softness, the sweetness of her whisper in his ear: "And California can wait?"



BLOODHOUND BONANZA

by S. OMAR BARKER

When the High Sheriff's bloodhounds picked him for a pard, El Señor Coyote proved that a man's best friend isn't always his dog

TOPPING the rim of Mariposa Mesa, Canuto Luján kicked his scrawny, fagged pony out of sight into the timber, then dismounted and hurried back to the rim to watch the movement of men on horseback approaching across the pine-bordered bunch-grass parks of the Sacatón Valley far below. To his brown ears, bent down under the oversized, flop-brimmed black hat that his smart-dressing cousin Mariano, or as

he was better known, El Señor Coyote, had discarded in his favor three years ago, there came a new, and to him, ominous sound. It was the baying of hounds. Bloodhounds, if his fearful guess was correct—and on his trail.

The last time he was in Tejón City, Canuto had seen the two new dogs that the pudge-middled High Sheriff had recently bought for the boasted purpose of trailing down

criminals. They had looked harmless enough, with their big soft-looking eyes and ears that almost dragged the ground. But the sheriff, who never missed an opportunity to impress his great authority on the simple rural *gente*, had spied the bony figure of Canuto Luján pausing to stare at the dogs and had warned him:

"More better you walk the chalks line now, *piasano*, or I put thees dog blodhounds on your trail!"

"Si, Señor Shereef," Canuto had replied with an humbleness he didn't feel. "But as you see, I am an honest man that pay hees taxes and do not broke the laws."

"Oh, sure!" Sheriff Eufracio Gallegos had laughed mockingly. "Joost esteal a few sheeps, eh, an' escheat on the taxes! If you got seex beeg gwagon horse, to the tax assessor you report joost one leetle small pony!"

Canuto had ventured a weak, sheepish grin. There were not many in Tejón County, he thought, who didn't conveniently forget a horse or two on their tax returns.

Canuto's stringy, work-hardened fingers plucked nervously at the scaly, orange-brown bark of the big pine that hid him. His eyes strained anxiously, hoping to see some indication that it might not be his own trail the bloodhounds were following. But it was no use. From the rocky-rimmed arroyo at the far side of the valley, Canuto had ridden straight for the foot of the mesa trail. Now, behind two moying reddish blobs that he knew were the baying

bloodhounds, three riders were following exactly the same route. And even at that distance Canuto could catch the glint of sun on silver saddle trimmings such as nobody in the county but the High Sheriff owned.

This cousin of Mariano Luján was an oldish man, scrawny and ill-fed, with a thin, foxlike face and patched, ill-fitting clothes that testified to his poverty. It was this poverty, plus a typically native disdain for the game laws, that had brought him out today to see if he could knock over a little wild meat. Well, he had knocked over some meat, all right, but not wild.

"What luck of the demon!" he complained aloud as he hurried back to his horse, "that those damn Shereef got to ride thees country joost on the wrong times!"

Life for Canuto Luján was no bowl of gravy at best, but at least it was free. The vision of himself cooped up behind bars worried him. But what really terrified him was the vision of himself overtaken, caught and torn to pieces by bloodhounds. Ignorant of the fact that such hounds are useful only for trailing and are never vicious with their victim once they overtake him, to Canuto the very word "bloodhound" was soul-chilling.

He considered riding deeper into the woods and climbing a tree to hide. But his pony, old and poor and all frazzled out by his forced climb up the mesa, would stand around and give him away. Then he thought of hurrying home and pretending he was sick and had not been out of bed all day. But again—

this grandfather goat of a horse he was riding would never get him there before they overtook him.

The cabin of his *primo* Mariano, however, was much closer and was it not the sacred duty of all *primos* to help their own *primos*? Furthermore, was it not true that Mariano possessed the cunning of a mountain coyote and was especially fond of outwitting his old enemy, the High Shereef?

Without further hesitation, Canuto quit the trail for a short cut to the little ranch of El Señor Coyote.

The slim vaquero was just dismounting from a tall roan horse when his kinsman, flapping his legs in a futile effort to kick some speed out of his pony, arrived.

"By wheeskers of the burro, *primo!*" exclaimed Mariano. "What's for the big pooshing?"

"Save me, *primo!* That *malvado* shereef, she chasing me with blodhounds! You got to hide me, pronto!"

At mention of the sheriff, a gleam of interest brightened El Coyote's dark eyes. But he shrugged as if unconcerned.

"First we put the horse in the stable and geeve some oats," he said. "Then we talk thees thing."

While they stabled and fed the half-starved horse, Canuto hastily told his story.

"Thees morning I go hunting to kill some meat—maybe deer, maybe rabbit. But nossing. Then in Sacatón Valley by the arroyo of rocks, it was two jearling bool calfs playing some fight. One calf poosh too hard,

the other one fall in the arroyo and broked hees leg! Thees bool calf, he's got the brand of Don Bernabé Gallegos, brother of the High Shereef, so I tell myself thees way, 'Canuto, thees are no beezness from you.' But when I'm start to rode away, she's bawl thees calf, it make me feel too sorry. 'Canuto,' I told me, 'more better you shoot thees *pobrecito* and put heem out from hees misery!' Thass why I eshoot heem, *primo!* Then I thenk thass too bad to wasting all those good meat. More better I eskin heem. Then if I tell Don Bernabé what happen, maybe he will be much oblige for saving heem those meat from the buzzards, an' geeve me a portion for myself! 'Canuto,' I told me, 'you make esmart like Mariano!'

"But when I am eskinning thees calf, I hear those dog blodhounds of the High Shereef! *Por diós, primo,* it scare me—the pants off. 'Canuto,' I told me, 'I thenk you make mees-take on thees! More better you ron away queeck now, before—'

The little man broke off, fear bulging his big brown eyes, as from up toward Mariposa Mesa there came the baying of hounds.

"Leesten, *primo!* They are coming! Queeck to hide me!"

Mariano took a strip of dried venison jerky from his pocket and chewed on it thoughtfully.

"Canuto," he said in Spanish, "you are a fool. But also you are my cousin. Climb up in the hayloft. Until I give the signal, stay hidden in the hay. Then climb out the back way and run for home. If anybody asks you where is your horse, tell

them you sold heem to me yesterday. Also I will now trade hats with you."

"But that way the shereef gonna think you shoot the leetle bool!" protested Canuto feebly. "He take you to the jail!"

"Sure for Mike!" grinned Mariano. "That make joke on heem, *qué no? Pronto, hombre!* Hide in the hay!"

"Ooky dooky!" said Canuto and hastened to obey.

A few minutes later the arrival of a saddleful of bellicose sheriff accompanied by two deputies, all preceded by two sleek, sorrel-red bloodhounds, found Mariano Luján sitting with his back against a sunny side of his stable, Canuto's battered old black hat pulled down over his face, apparently asleep.

Suspecting what he called "some monkeys beezness," the fat sheriff approached cautiously. Only when one of the hounds came close enough to sniff at Canuto's hat did Mariano stir. Then, still without showing his face, he pulled some scraps of jerky from his pocket and held them out in his palm. Eagerly the hound gobbled them in one gulp.

"*Cuidado!*" snorted the sheriff. He kicked the surprised dog in the belly to drive him away, and aimed a second kick at the other hound as he came tail-wagging up to claim his share of the hand-out. "Queeck, Seledón! Make those dog spectum out! Thees *chivo* Luján try to poison heem!"

El Señor Coyote pushed the sombrero back from his eyes, yawned and stretched.

"Hallo, poodin' pants," he said, pulling another strip of jerky from his pocket and chewing on it himself. "What's for you keeck the poor *perros*? Joost because the county furnish you some blodhounds, what right you got to keeck?"

"Pooh pooh for you!" grunted Don Eufracio. "I am the High Shereef! Whass more from that, this dogs don't belong to the county. This dogs are *mine!* If I like to keeck, I keeck!"

"I give them those meat—maybe you like to keeck me, too, eh?" Mariano got up on all fours and obligingly presented the seat of his pants.

For a second Don Eufracio hesitated. But he had Mariano safely covered, and his two deputies, Seledón and Tomás, were grinning at him expectantly. The temptation was too much. His piggy little black eyes a-gleam with anticipation, the sheriff stepped close, drew back a pudgy leg and kicked. At precisely the right instant Mariano lowered the target, and, as is bound to be the case when a fat man kicks too hard at something and misses, Don Eufracio's own plump bottom hit the ground with a thump.

Despite their loyalty to the sheriff's payroll, both deputies laughed, then quickly hid their mirth. Solicitously Seledón helped his chief to his feet, while Tomás poked a gun barrel in Mariano's lean ribs.

"Enough from these monkey beezness!" growled Don Eufracio, re-assuming his dignity. "Mariano Luján, I arrest you for the steal of one bool calf in the brand of Don

Bernabé Gallegos—wheech I ketch you eskinning in the Valle Sacatón an' trail to thees place!"

Suavely, Mariano bowed.

"I am honored, Señor Sheeref!" he said. "But maybe that calf gonna be hard to proof. Maybe more easy if you arrest me for estealing thees one already hanging inside my estable!"

"Aha!" Don Eufracio looked triumphantly at his deputies. "Seledón! Tomás! Take look inside!"

Holstering their guns, the two henchmen obeyed. Unable to restrain his own impatience, Don Eufracio himself waddled to the open door and peered after them.

Quick as the dog-bayed coyote that leaps, slashes and leaps away again before his bewildered attacker can realize what is happening, Mariano shoved the pudgy sheriff inside the building and slammed the door shut, swinging down the lock bar.

In the moments that Tomás and Seledón wasted battering at the door, Mariano got himself safely behind the thick trunk of a pine tree. To the ears of the shouting trio trapped inside the stable there came now the sharp, taunting, *yap-yap-yurr-rr-urr* of a howling coyote.

To the enraged Don Eufracio and his deputies it was a challenge. But to Cousin Canuto in the hayloft it was the signal he had been waiting for. With thankfulness in his heart and caution in his every movement, he slipped out of the hay, dropped silently down to the soft earth north of the barn and safely headed for home.

El Coyote was already on the tall

roan horse he had left saddled beside his cabin when Don Eufracio, boosted up to the stable's one small window by Tomás and Seledón, opened fire. In his wrath the pudgy sheriff emptied his gun, and either the range was too great or his aim too poor, for El Coyote galloped away unhit.

Maybe it was because Mariano had fed them, maybe because the *bank-bang-bang* of the sheriff's six-gun had scared them, or maybe just because they had recognized in Mariano a kindlier heart than that of their present master, but whatever their canine reasons, when Mariano galloped away down the road the two hounds followed him.

If Don Eufracio's bulgy body had not stuck in the stable window, he and his deputies might have gotten out in time to follow El Coyote by sight. At it was, they knew that he had headed down the road Santo Niño village. There, to their pleased surprise, they found his tall roan hitched openly at the gate of the village priest. In the shade of front-yard shrubbery lay the two bloodhounds, panting from their run. On the vine-clad portal sat Mariano Luján, calmly chatting with Padre DuChene.

Flanked by his two deputies, Don Eufracio waddled up the flagstone walk with all the dignity he could muster. Padre DuChene rose, smiling, to greet him.

"*Buenas tardes, Padre!*" The sheriff took off his hat respectfully, keeping a wary eye on Mariano. "I ask your pardon for this intrusion, but it is the duty of the law to take thieves wherever we find them!"

"Thieves?" Padre DuChene looked incredulous, but not alarmed.

"Thees *chiv* . . . I mean thees Mariano Luján! I must arrest heem! Thees morning he eshoot one bool calf of my brother, Bernabé Gallegos on the Valle Sacatón!"

"This morning?" the priest asked in Spanish. "You are sure of the time, sheriff?"

"You betcha my lifes, I'm essure! *Vamos!* Luján, you are under arrest for—"

"But wait, sheriff!" put in the priest. "That is impossible! Mariano spent the night with me here—and this morning he helped me butcher a pig. I will swear it in court, sheriff! This man was here with me until an hour after noon!"

Don Eufracio's fat jowls sagged. He knew Padre DuChene as a man who did not lie. If he came into court with this alibi for Mariano Luján, Judge Hinojos would dismiss the case before it even got to the jury. Once more, somehow, El Coyote had fooled him.

With a scowl Don Eufracio opened his mouth to speak, failed to think of anything worth saying, then without so much as touching his hat, turned and waddled out to his horse.

When he had mounted, he called to his dogs, but the hounds seemed to like it better where they were. Finally, restrained only by the padre's presence from cursing them, he directed Seledón and Tomás to put the two reluctant man trailers on leashes, and started off with them.

"Wait, Señor Shereef!" Though he had no practical use for the dogs, Mariano's sympathy got the best of

him. "Maybe you sell me thees dogs, eh?"

"To you, *chivo!*" Don Eufracio growled back at him. "I sell it nothing! But wait. Sometime I *geeve* you something—a tweest of the tail!"

That night, in his cabin up Coyote Draw, Mariano Luján was awakened by whining and scratching sounds outside. When he went out, there, wagging their tails in the moonlight, were the sheriff's two bloodhounds.

"*Pobrecitos!*" said Mariano. "I bet you got hongry, no?"

The ravenous dogs ate what he fed them, then dutifully bedded down on the saddle blankets he spread for them on the porch.

When the sheriff failed to come or send after the dogs the next day, Mariano was troubled. But the hounds weren't. They made themselves very much at home.

"Look, *perritos!*" Mariano scolded them. "I don't want some dogs—not even to esteal them! Whassamatta you don't went home?"

On the sixth day Mariano saddled up and headed for the county seat.

"*Caramba!*" he complained to the two hounds ranging happily along on each side of him. "If I got to buy you *perritos* from the beeg shereef, don't you know he's gonna steeck me planty? More better I joost took you back to heem! Then if he keeck you some more, maybeso you bite heem, no?"

Mariano was right. Don Eufracio did aim to stick him—plenty. Near Santo Niño, with a six-man posse in support of his authority, the High

Sheriff met and arrested him on the charge of stealing "two dog bloodhounds, worth \$100 per itch." So surprised was Mariano that for once he was caught off base and they had him handcuffed before even his quick wit could figure a way out. Furthermore, this time the sheriff had witnesses. Numerous citizens of Santo Niño—including Padre DuChene—had seen the dogs in Mariano's possession, had they not? They would be called upon so to testify in court!

When the case came to trial in the district court of Judge George Hinojos, even Mariano's old friend and semi-legal advisor, ex-Justice of the Peace Huber, admitted it looked bad.

"I'm afraid they got a tail holt on you this time," he said. "Possession of another man's property is purt near *prima facie* evidence of theft. You kept them damn dogs too long, Mari!"

"They wass nize *popees*." Mariano shrugged. "They like me."

"Not only that, dammit," went on Huber, as spectators crowded the courtroom under the gloating eye of the High Sheriff to watch his long-sought triumph over El Señor Coyote, "but there'll be Gallegos *primos* on that jury as thick as warts on a widow. I wish you'd hired you a sure 'nough lawyer, Mari."

"Don't worry from those," Mariano said carelessly. "Maybe I gonna like in jail!"

But as the trial proceeded Mariano also began to look worried, and the gloating triumph visible on the High Sheriff's ham-fat face was none too easy to take. Neither was

the placid inattention of most of the jurors who, apparently, had already made up their minds to bring in a verdict favoring the sheriff.

"Those dog," Mariano testified, "same like somebody else that come to my house—if he wass hongry, I fed heem. Everybody do thees, *qué no?*"

It was when the prosecuting attorney was arguing before the jury that it was their duty to protect the property of the county's taxpayers by bringing thieves to justice, that Canuto slipped under the rail, and after a nod of permission from Judge Hinojos, whispered to the prisoner.

Mariano, who had been squirming in his seat, stood up.

"Your honor of the court," he addressed the judge anxiously, "can I be excuse to go some place?"

"In one moment this case will go to the jury and I will declare a recess," said the judge. "Can't you wait?"

"Oh, you got some meestake from my meaning, judge!" exclaimed Mariano. "I joost want to go ask some question to the tax assessor!"

"To what purpose?"

"The honorable judge can told me heemself." Mariano shrugged. "Ol' Poodin' Belly—excuse pliss—I mean the Honorable High Shereef claim these dogs are hees property. But if not, he got no right to poosh me to jail for estealing them, *qué no?*"

"Why, I suppose not." Judge Hinojos looked puzzled. "But what evidence have you that they are *not* his property?"

"Maybe sometheeng, maybe noth-

ceeng." Mariano shrugged again. "But on the taxes roll that is spozzin' to list all the properties of ever'body to pay taxes, it don't show no report that Don Eufracio Gallegos got two dogs worth \$200. So if he don't got them, how could I estole them?"

"Monkeys beezness!" bellowed the High Sheriff, his thick neck flushing. "Don't leesten to thees *chivo*, judge. He joost trying to make esmart!"

"And doing pretty well at it, too," said Judge Hinojos dryly. "Sheriff, it is the law that *all* property must be reported to the county tax assessor for the payment of taxes thereon. When you took office, you swore to uphold the law. Are you now willing to swear that you reported to the tax assessor as *your* property two dogs of the bloodhound breed worth \$100 each, upon which to be assessed for taxes?"

"Those question I don't got to answer," Don Eufracio growled.

But when the judge touched him up a little he admitted that the tax rolls in truth did *not* show him to be the owner of "two dog bloodhounds."

"But that don't got notheeng to do with thees case, your honor!" he protested.

"I think it has," ruled Judge Hinojos. "Your failure to list two valuable dogs as taxable property argues that you either don't own them or else consider them worthless. In either case I refuse to waste the taxpayers' money further in court costs in defense of alleged property not to be found on the tax rolls. I will now discharge the jury and order the charge dismissed!"

A scattering of cheers among the friends of El Señor Coyote led by Canuto Luján, intermingled with a few boos from the followers of the High Sheriff, interrupted him.

Rapping for order, Judge Hinojos frowned.

"Furthermore," he continued sternly, "though not written in statute law, this court presumes the existence of the natural rights of dogs, as friends of man, to a voice in the choice of their own masters. Mr. Deputy"—he turned to Tomás—"bring in the hounds! We shall see by verdict of the dogs themselves into whose custody they shall be entrusted for future care—and the payment of taxes!"

"But, *por Diós*, judge," Mariano tried to protest. "Thees are nize popees, an' I like—but it take too much meat to feed allatime!"

He found his protest overruled by the dogs themselves. For when Tomás turned them loose, it was to him, not to the High Shereef that they promptly made their friendly, tail-wagging way.

"Nize popees," said El Señor Coyote, patting their silky heads. With a sigh he snagged out his wallet.

"*Mira*, Poodin' Pants." He reached two bills toward the surprised High Sheriff and winked. "Thees twenty dollar I pay you joost to remember who own thees dogs. *Entendido?*"

Don Eufracio cursed under his breath and started to refuse the money, then changed his mind.

"*Chivo!*" he grunted (which by interpretation means son-of-a-goat) and took it.

RANGE SAVVY,

BY CARL RAHT



When the great westward migration began a century ago, the old immigrant trails crossed into the Southwest at the Pecos River, in Texas, on the way to El Paso. Animals that had suffered from thirst for days before the Pecos was reached, drank greedily of the bitter alkali water and died as a result. The ford was soon lined with the bones and skulls of dead animals and for that reason it became known in time as Horse Head Crossing.



In the early 90's, the Middle West was overrun by lightning-rod salesmen. Almost every ranchhouse was wired and rodded with the contraption to ground lightning and render it harmless when it struck. The popularity of the lightning rod waned around the turn of the present century. But Uncle Sam has revived the use of the lightning rod in a big way. At one of the largest naval ammunition depots, situated in the far West, where hundreds of igloos have been constructed to house sensitive explosives, all reinforcing steel, bolts in the bumper blocks, and even the steel window sashes are grounded, while bristling above the squat buildings, steel lightning rods, eighty feet high, protect the booster plant, the mine-filling plant, and special torpedo storage, from a devastating bolt of lightning that might ignite the vast naval depot.

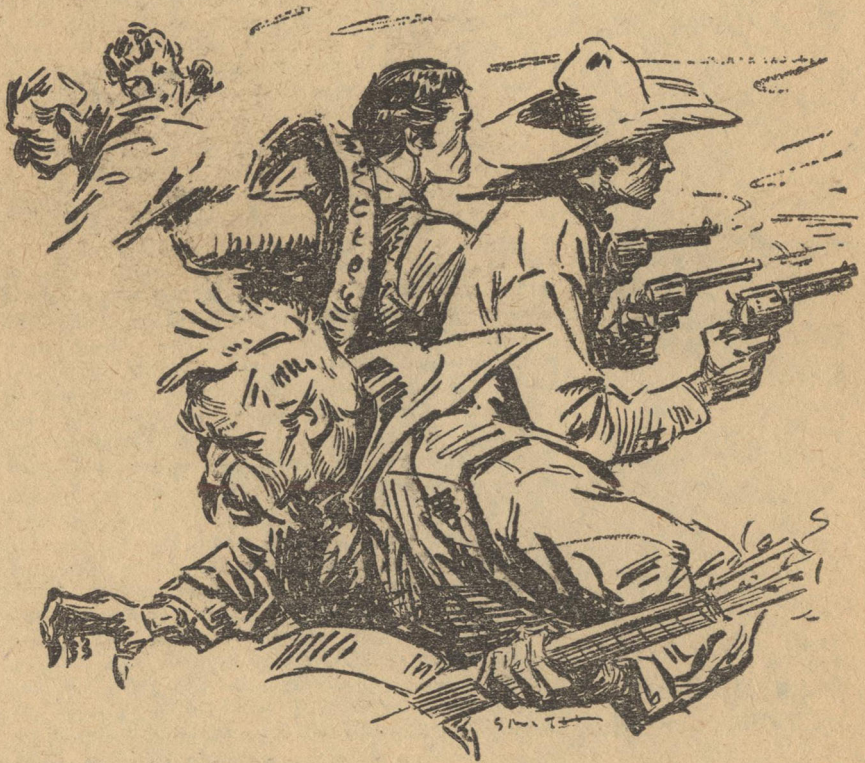


The now obsolete stamp mill used in the early-day gold camps of the West needed a solid foundation. Otherwise the vibration from the incessant pounding of the heavy stamps would jar the mill out of line. To overcome this hazard, a mill in the old camp of Arivaca, near the Mexican border in Arizona, built its walls and foundation of solid ore. Not gold ore, however, but lead-zinc ore. At that time—the early 70's—no milling process was known to separate the lead from the zinc, therefore the ore was worthless to the mill, except for its weight, which withstood the jar of the dropping stamps.

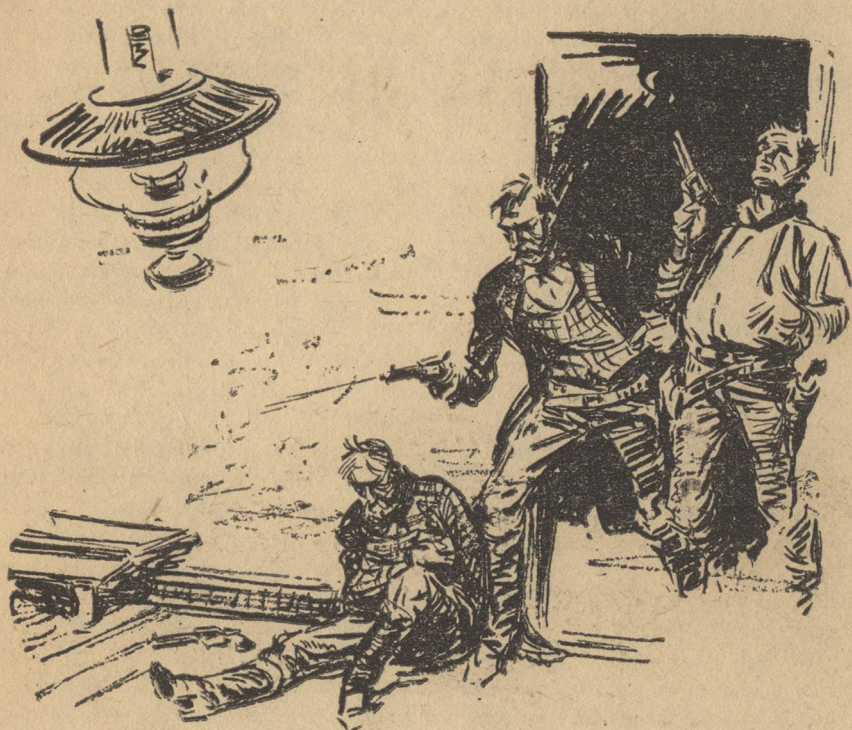
Mr. Raht will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

STEPSONS OF HATE

by WALT COBURN



Exiled to the Yaqui Hills, how could Billy Camp and Pino Robles fight for the range stolen from their fathers by drygulch lead?



I

It was twenty-five miles by horse-back trail to town. Thirty-five or more by the wagon road. And if Doc Eubanks was too drunk to sit on a horse, he'd come by buckboard along the wagon road.

"But drunk or sober," Bill Camp told young Pino Robles, "fetch the Doc. Pronto, boy! *Muy Pronto!*"

Bill Camp's young wife was going to have her baby. Doc Eubanks was a drunken butcher but he was the only doctor in that part of the Arizona cow country and Bill Camp was almighty desperate. So he put young twelve-year-old Pino on the fastest

horse in his little remuda and told the boy to ride him like he owned him. Pino, who was part Indian and part Mexican, was as light of weight as a jockey and savvied better than most men how to get the most miles out of a fast horse without hurting the animal.

Pino's squaw mother was there in the house, padding softly on moccasins between the bedroom where Molly Camp fought her pain spasms, and the kitchen where the teakettle steamed on the back of the stove. Guadalupe Robles had helped bring many children into this world and never once had a baby died. She had

a fine contempt for that whiskey-soaked *borrachon*, Doc Eubanks, who was not even a good horse doctor.

"Let that *hombre sanguinario* into the house if you will, señor," she told Bill Camp, "but let him step one foot into the bedroom and I will take one of his sharp knives and cut the gizzard out of him. He is an evil man. Did he not kill my husband? My own Pablo? Is he not like a blood brother to those hombres back in the hills who are your sworn enemies? That hombre Cahill. That Maybry. That Fanchett. And his own son Rufus Eubanks one of them who would steal away your valley and your rancho, your cattle and your horses and your land. I spit on that Doc Eubanks! Pah!"

"He is the only doctor," was Bill Camp's weak defense.

"He is a rattlesnake. Would you let a rattlesnake crawl into your home to sink its fangs in your wife's flesh?"

"A man must do everything he can at a time like this, Lupe."

Bill Camp paced the floor of the front room. Back and forth in the lamplight, in his sock feet because the clump of his high boot heels made too much noise. Now and then he would go into the bedroom and stand besides the bed with a cowpuncher's helpless awkwardness. Holding the sweat damp hand of his pretty young wife, he winced inside when she forced a smile in spite of the pain that seared her dark-gray eyes.

"I should've moved you to town a month ago, Molly."

"I wouldn't go, Bill. I want my

baby boy to be born here on the ranch. He'll be Little Bill and he'll have eyes like yours. Gray eyes that turn blue in the sunlight. And a short nose and a fighting jaw like his father. Only his hair will be like mine. Black and almost curly. So you'll be my towhead and Billy will be my black-haired little man and he'll learn to ride before he learns to walk. Don't look so worried, Bill. Lupe's never lost a mother or a baby or even a father. Why don't you go outside and smoke a while—?"

She set her white teeth against the pain. And Bill Camp let Guadalupe shove him out of the room.

There was a storm coming up over the mountains. The thunder was rumbling and growling a long ways off and the black sky was streaked above the ragged peaks by sheet lightning. It must be raining hard between the valley and the little cow town of Mesquite. This was the long-awaited rain to break the drought and at another time Bill Camp would have welcomed its downpour. But now it would turn the dry washes and arroyos into raging torrents and no man or horse could cross until the flash floods subsided.

Bill looked again at the battered alarm clock on the shelf, compared its time with the hands of his silver watch. He had done that every few minutes for the past two hours or more. Nearly midnight now and the sun had not yet set behind the mountains when he sent Pino off to town.

A muffled scream from the bedroom tore into Bill Camp's heart like

a twisting knife blade. Lupe wouldn't let him go in there. Better go outside. Wait out there until she called him. He was clammy with the cold sweat that dampened his uncut straw-colored hair.

Worry torn and fighting his inability to help the woman he loved, he did not think to pull on his boots or grab his hat. Nor did he bother to buckle on his cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter or take his saddle carbine from its gun rack on the wall. And it never occurred to him to turn the lamp wick low before he opened the outside door. Molly's shrill screams rose to a higher pitch, filling his eardrums like red-hot needles that stabbed his brain. He had to get outside. Yanking open the door, he almost stumbled in his haste to get out there into the darkness.

Bill Camp never heard the explosion of the four guns out there in the night. Bullets travel faster than their sound when they leave a gun barrel. You never hear the shot that kills you. Bill stumbled and sprawled forward on his face, dead when he fell. He lay there motionless on his own doorsill with the shaft of lamplight from the open doorway making a hole in the night.

The four men outside mounted their horses in the darkness. They were riding away at a lope when the lightning flashed. Guadalupe had heard the shots and she stepped to the window and yanked aside the curtain when she heard the thud of shod hoofs pounding. Molly Camp's pain-seared eyes swiveled in their

sockets and she, too, stared out through the window as the vivid lightning flash turned the black night into glaring brightness. Both the women saw and recognized the four killers who rode off into the night.

Then the pain climaxed and a terrible scream was torn from Molly Camp's tight throat. Guadalupe let the heavy curtain drop again across the window and turned from the stark horror of night murder to her mid-wife chores.

And so young Bill Camp was born within the hour that the night riders had murdered his father.

It was between daybreak and sunrise when young Pino Robles got back to the little ranch in the valley. He was afoot, his clothes sodden and muddy and his brown hide scratched and torn by thorny brush. The horse he had "borrowed" for the return trip had quit on him in the middle of the water-swollen river and Pino had grabbed onto a drifting log and escaped the flood.

Doc Eubanks had refused even to leave town until the boy had pulled a gun on him. The medico had been too drunk to fork a horse and stay in the saddle, so Pino had hooked Doc's team to the buckboard and shoved the drunken doctor and his bag onto the buckboard seat at the point of a cocked gun. He had herded the medico along the wagon road ahead of the storm, only to have the Doc and his rig caught in a flash flood when a wall of black water came down the dry arroyo. Pino and his "borrowed" horse had barely escaped. He did not know if Doc

Eubanks had been drowned, but he hoped the team of horses had swum ashore. Pino loved horses.

Pino told his mother that he had been stopped along the trail to town. Four tough young cowhands had stopped him and asked him where he was headed for in such a hurry and why the big rush to get to Mesquite. And though it had been dark when they stopped him, Pino had recognized them. Joe Cahill, Clum Maybry, Quiro Fanchett and Rufe Eubanks. They had slapped him around before they let him ride on to town. They had had a bottle of booze and they acted drunk.

"Bathe off the mud," Guadalupe told her young son, "and put on clean clothes. Eat some grub, then attend to the stable chores. The señor is dead. Those four *cabrons* murdered him on his own doorsill at midnight. There is no time for whimpering now. Tears are for women. Not for men. And you are the man here now, my Pino. Be strong then, and brave in your heart."

Guadalupe Robles had gone back into the bedroom. She dared not leave Molly Camp alone for longer than a few minutes. A while ago when Lupe was in the kitchen making coffee she had heard a dull thump in the front room and she had found Molly there on the floor beside the roundup bed where Bill Camp's bullet-riddled dead body lay under the tarp and blankets. Picking Molly up in her strong arms, Guadalupe had carried her back to her bed and she had kept the tiny baby

away from his mother for fear Molly would kill the newly born child and herself.

But now Molly lay there quietly enough with her baby in her arms and her dark-gray eyes hot and dry, and bright and almost black in color. No tears would come to wash away that terrible look in their depths and when Molly Camp spoke her voice was too calm and quiet.

"They murdered Bill," she said. "Joe Cahill, Quiro Fanchett, Clum Maybry and Rufus Eubanks. . . . They timed their killing for tonight. Cowards. All of them together hadn't the courage of one man. Or one woman, even. . . . The mother's milk that is strengthening my son shall make him strong and brave and he will grow to his manhood. And when the time comes he will kill those four men who killed his father. I will teach him how to hate those four men. . . . You are a Yaqui, Guadalupe. You understand about such things as hate. Revenge. You'll help me teach my son Bill the way to hate four men. You'll do that. In case I should die, Lupe—"

"Si, señora. But you will not die."

Guadalupe Robles pushed aside the curtains. The storm was over. Sunlight poured through the windows and bathed the woman's head on its pillow. The thick hair that had been jet-black was now as white as driven snow. Gleaming, silvery white. Mission reared and taught by the padres and nuns, Guadalupe Robles looked upon it as some terrible miracle.

II

Guadalupe Robles was a full-blood Yaqui. She had no memory of any father or mother. Only a brown-robed padre and then the black-robed nuns at the convent school in the Mexican village where she grew into early womanhood. The nuns would have had her take the veil but she had fallen in love with young Pablo Robles and threatened to run off with him unless the padre married them there at the mission.

And so they had been married and a son was born. His full name was Lorenzo Jesus Robles but they had discarded the baptismal name for the handier name of Pino. And only two years ago Pablo had been shot and wounded badly. That drunken Doc Eubanks, probing for the bullets, had severed an artery in his drunken clumsiness and Pablo had bled to death. And so Guadalupe, whom they called Lupe, had her own debt of hatred to pay off.

Long ago, without a spoken word to anyone, she had dedicated young Pino to that task of revenging the death of his father. And in a tightly sewn buckskin sack that hung by a buckskin loop from around his neck, Pino carried the two bullets that Doc Eubanks had taken from Pablo Robles' wounded body.

Now the Yaqui woman had four more bullets she had skillfully taken from Bill Camp's murdered body. She would sew them into a buckskin sack and some day young Bill Camp would wear them, as Pino wore his, by a buckskin loop around his neck. As a charm for warding off death by

an enemy bullet and as a constant reminder of the deadly task that lay ahead. Guadalupe Robles, Yaqui, understood about such things as hate and revenge.

But the little ranch in the fertile Mesquite Valley would no longer be safe for the widow of Bill Camp. Night-riding murderers like those four young renegades would not hesitate to kill the two women, the boy Pino, and a small baby. They had their mountain ranches but they wanted the valley. They would stop at nothing now to get it. And behind their ruthless night riding, their cattle rustling, their horse stealing, their range grabbing, was Doc Eubanks. His was the cunning brain, whiskey-fired, that planned and schemed and plotted.

Guadalupe brooded bitterly over the thought of Doc Eubanks being drowned. Drowning was far, far too merciful and easy a death for that *borrachon*, that bloody butcher. Surely the Señor Dios would not cheat her of her great revenge against that *cabron*.

She took time from her nursing and cooking to slip out to her little shrine made of rocks and offer a prayer of hope to the little statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. She was kneeling there when she heard young Pino calling to her from the corrals.

What she saw was like another miracle come to pass. Because stumbling and staggering through the brush and drying mud was the scarecrow figure of Doc Eubanks. Afoot, sodden, mud-plastered, sober enough from his near drowning but unsteady

on his long legs, he came towards the whitewashed adobe house.

Guadalupe beat him there. She met him at the door with a gun in her hand and a murderous glint in her opaque black eyes.

Low-toned, in a mixed jargon of Yaqui and Mexican and mission-taught English, she warned the man away. And with a deadly calmness she described in horrible and vivid detail all the tortures she would take great pleasure in inflicting upon him unless he got away from there as fast as his gangling legs would carry the rest of his long carcass.

Doc Eubanks stood six feet five inches in his boots. Rawboned, lantern-jawed, with dank graying drab-colored hair and mustache. His nose was a huge predatory beak, purplish from booze. And on either side of its jutting ridge peered pale-blue eyes that were deep-set under ragged brows. His skin had a grayish pallor now and was beaded with sweat. Weak from exhaustion, he was torn with the craving for strong whiskey. Hate glittered in his pale bloodshot eyes but that hate gave way to fear when he looked into the glittering black eyes of the Yaqui woman. Her voice was like a rawhide whip that slashed and ripped and cut and he staggered backwards and away from the woman's cold fury, shambling off the way he had come without having opened his trap-lipped mouth.

His son Rufus and Rufe Eubanks' three tough young cowpuncher companions found Doc where he had fallen, exhausted and on the verge of delirium tremens, a mile or so down the valley from the Bill Camp

ranch. They loaded him on Rufe's horse and took him on to town.

Guadalupe Robles told Pino to round up the remuda and hook the mules to the light wagon. They were quitting Mesquite Valley.

"You and Billy Camp will return some day to take it back, my son. This valley will not run away. It will be here waiting. Remember it well. Now corral the remuda while I load the wagon."

Pino sang softly to himself as he rounded up the cavvy of saddle horses and Mexican mules that were used to carry packs or haul the roundup wagons. Death was a sad thing and you felt it like a hard lump choking you and then after a while, when maybe you'd cried some, the lump sort of melted and you let the sunlight into your heart again and you sang a song.

Pino liked to sing or play the harmonica Bill Camp had bought for him, but, best of all, he liked to strum chords on the guitar that had belonged to his father Pablo who had made up little *ranchero* songs.

The guitar was Pino's now. He'd make up a song about leaving the valley. It would be a sad song. A lot of Pablo's songs had been sad like that and then all of a sudden the song would break into swift, gay notes and the guitar would give out the thumping sound under Pablo's knuckles, like horses running. And into the song would come the reckless shout of a vaquero to tingle your blood. In the song a beautiful señorita would laugh like a silver bell. But always underneath the

reckless vaquero shouting and the tinkle of a señorita's laughter there would be the plaintive sadness that pinched your heart.

Guadalupe loaded grub, Dutch ovens, the big feather bed, soogans and blankets and their most valued belongings in the chuck wagon. It had double sideboards and a canvas wagon sheet covering the high wagon bows and Lupe made Molly's bed in the wagon.

When the wagon was loaded and the remuda corraled, she and Pino dug a deep grave alongside the grave of Pablo. There was no time to make a pine-board coffin so Bill Camp was wrapped in his bed tarp and buried in the shade of a giant old cottonwood.

Molly watched, dry-eyed, from her bed with the newly born boy child nursing at her breast. Through the window she watched Guadalupe and Pino kneel there at the grave, but she herself could not remember any prayer nor would the tears come because there was only bitterness and hatred and revenge in her heart.

When the four little mules were hooked to the wagon Guadalupe carried the mother and baby out to the wagon and made them comfortable on the feather bed. Then she climbed up on the high seat and took the four lines in her strong hands. She kicked off the brake and the chain tugs tightened and the wagon wheels turned. Pino followed behind with the little remuda and four packed mules.

Molly Camp had not shed a tear or spoken a word and she had eaten her food without tasting it. There was

a blank sort of look in her dark-gray eyes. She hardly seemed aware of anything. Shock and grief and bitterness numbed her.

It was sundown when they left the valley. Their wagon trail led south towards the Mexican border. The sun went down and the moon rose round and white and very large and the stars came out, one by one. They had reached the San Marcos Pass when four riders barred their way. Silk neck handkerchiefs covered the lower part of the riders' faces but Guadalupe Robles knew them and she gripped the carbine that lay across her lap.

Then a fifth rider came from behind the brush. Doc Eubanks wore no mask. His pale eyes were bleak and his voice was flat and toneless.

"Where's Bill Camp's widow?" he demanded.

"In the wagon. Sick. Her baby boy was born at midnight when those four hombres murdered the Señor Camp. One day that baby boy will grow into a man. Pablo Robles' son Pino will also be a man. They will come back then to take away from you the ranch you are stealing. They will kill all of you. Now tell those four young murderers to let us pass."

Doc Eubanks leaned across his saddlehorn. His yellow teeth were bared in an ugly grin. Then in that flat-toned voice he cursed Guadalupe as she had cursed him. And when he was done he motioned the other four riders aside with a long arm.

"Let 'em pass on through, boys. The hell with 'em!"

III

Young Bill Camp grew to early manhood in the Yaqui Hills, south of the Mexican border. There was a squalid village there. Renegade Americans used the rough hills for a hide-out. Mexicans. Yaquis. They were a law unto themselves and even the Rurales gave the Yaqui Hills a wide range. Now and then when a revolution was brewing in Mexico some rebel leader would come there recruiting men for the rebel army. If the pay was big enough, a lot of them would go and those who came back would have money to squander on gambling and mescal and tequila.

When young Bill Camp was old enough to understand about such things Guadalupe Robles took him to the little cemetery, called the *campo santo*, and she showed him a grave marked by a white cross where his mother was buried.

"She died the night you were born," Guadalupe told the boy. "At midnight. At the same hour four renegades murdered your father. Her hair turned white as the snow on the mountains and her heart shriveled and the light died in her eyes. They murdered her like they murdered your father. But she did not really die until the mother's milk in her breasts was gone and you were old enough to wean to goat's milk. Then she handed you into my arms and died."

Pino Robles added much to his mother's story. With the years that brought Pino to swaggering manhood, his tale became highly colored

and he had made it into a lengthy song, with himself, Pino, quite a bold young hero.

Over and over again, he sang it, countless times; never quite the same in detail, but the main facts remaining the same. For Pino had a vivid imagination and was a born storyteller and a leader among those of his own age. He strummed his guitar and sang his songs and jingled his big-roweled silver-mounted spurs. He grew like a weed and even when he rode, he sat his saddle with a swagger. Tall, long-muscled, lithe and quick-moving, he was by far the best rider in the Yaqui Hills. His white teeth were always showing in a ready grin and when there were any girls to watch him, he was a spur-jingling caballero. He was a crack shot and handy with a knife or the heavier-bladed machete. But he had the knack of vanishing when trouble of any sort started.

"Only a fool," Pino told young Billy Camp, "mixes into quarrels that do not concern him. Remember that, Billito."

An older, bigger boy who had noticed Pino's habit of avoiding such fights mistook it for rank cowardice. He even accused Pino to his face for being a runaway. Pino laughed and walked away, jingling his spurs. And young Billy, watching and listening, felt sick inside because Pino was his great hero.

"There goes the peacock who would like to be called a game rooster." The older boy reached out and grabbed one of Billy's ears and twisted it. "All fancy feathers and

no fight!" He twisted harder and Billy let out a squeak of pain.

Pino whirled. The long-bladed, sharp-pointed knife that had once been Pablo's, was a swift streak hissing through the air. It struck the larger boy in the shoulder and sank deep. Struck with such force that it spun the boy around and his howl of fear and pain filled the air. And Pino charged in the wake of the thrown knife. White-lipped, his black eyes red with fury, he tripped the larger youth and then slid his knife blade free.

"The next time any of you lays a hand on my brother Billito"—Pino's teeth were bared in a snarl—"I'll do worse, I guess you will all think twice now before you call Pino Robles a coward, no?"

But it was not long before young Billy Camp was big enough to take his own part, though he never would be as tall as Pino. His father had stood no taller than five feet seven inches with his boots on and Billy was that tall when he was eighteen. By the time he was twenty, his shoulders and chest had developed and his bowed legs were saddle-muscled.

Billy Camp weighed about a hundred and thirty-five pounds, all of it tough bone and hard muscle from his wide shoulders to his lean flanks, and he was as active as a young mountain lion. His nose was short and stubby, his jaw was blunt and his mouth wide. He had gray-blue eyes and wiry black hair and a slow easy grin. He was quiet of speech and manner and shy when there were girls around. But he was a natural-born cowhand and even the tough white renegades

who drifted into the Yaqui Hills liked him because he was close-mouthed and minded his own business.

Billy taught himself how to read and write. He read everything he got his hands on, Mexican and English. A cartridge was his first pencil. He saved every scrap of blank paper he could find and covered it with writing and figures. When he got hold of a book he read and reread it until he knew it almost word for word.

Billy Camp's studies puzzled Pino and worried Guadalupe.

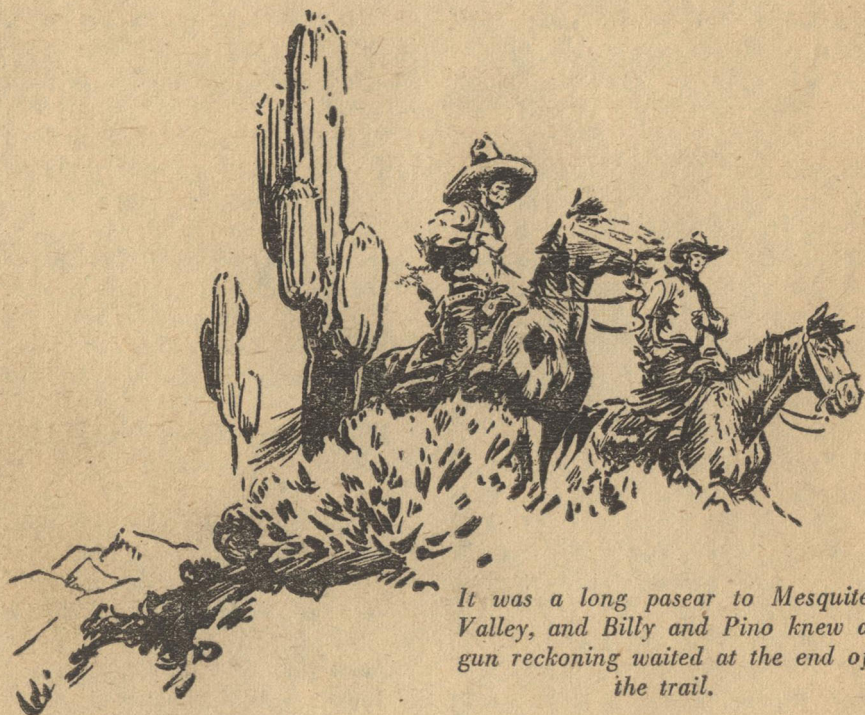
Guadalupe Robles was gray now, and fat. Only her opaque black eyes stayed young and bright and glittered with the hate that was inside her Yaqui heart. She had never allowed Pino and Billy to join any of the rebel armies that rode out of the Yaqui Hills.

"You will get enough fighting when the time comes," she told them.

But it worried and annoyed her when Billy Camp avoided and sidestepped the brawls that were forever cropping up in the village.

"Are you afraid, Billito?" she accused the boy bitterly. "Can it be that you are a coward inside your heart?"

"They get drunk and fight, Mama Lupe." Billy Camp grinned slowly. "They don't know what they are fighting about. A man gets drunk and kills another man and tomorrow when he's sober again he regrets it. It's healthier to read a book. You yourself have told me there will be fighting enough for me when the



It was a long pasear to Mesquite Valley, and Billy and Pino knew a gun reckoning waited at the end of the trail.

time comes to go back to the place where I was born."

"But how can you fight when you don't know how?"

"I think I will know how, Mama Lupe, when the time comes."

Her own son Pino was likewise disappointing Guadalupe Robles.

"You laugh too much, Pino. You spend too much time singing songs to girls. I have wasted all these years trying to teach you how to hate." She sniffed scornfully at the odor of the cheap perfume Pino used so profusely on his clothes and hair. "You stink like a woman!"

"I like to smell good, mamacita. And there is always something to laugh at. I like to make songs. Hate

is for the old. I am young. When it is that time, Billito and I will go back to that valley and kill those five men. But I hear they are tough hombres and maybe I will get killed. So now I will laugh and sing because I am still alive."

"I have failed," Guadalupe Robles told herself bitterly. "I have wasted these years. I should have killed that Doctor Eubanks. I should have picked up a gun and shot those four hombres that night. The son of Bill Camp is nothing but a bookworm. The son of Pablo Robles has turned out to be a clown who spends his time making songs for silly girls. Pah!"

But Billy Camp and Pino Robles understood one another. They were

brothers, closer in most ways than blood brothers.

They rode back to the village one evening and found Guadalupe sitting out in front of their adobe house. She poked at the dying embers of an open fire with a long stick. In the ashes of the fire were the charred covers of Billy Camp's collection of books and magazines and some gaudy clothes that had belonged to Pino.

They stared at her, then at each other. Anger gave way to amusement. But they dared not crack a smile. They swung from their saddles and stood there waiting for her to speak.

"Turn loose your horses," Guadalupe Robles told them. Her voice was toneless. "Tonight at midnight you will ride away from the Yaqui Hills. You will never come back. I am sending you back to Mesquite Valley. Get yourselves and your horses ready."

Tonight at midnight young Bill Camp would be twenty-one years old.

IV

It was about a week's journey on horseback, the way young Bill Camp and Pino Robles traveled it, from the Yaqui Hills north across the Mexican border and through the mountains by way of San Marcos Pass into Mesquite Valley. And while a lot of it was rough country, there was no chance of them getting lost anywhere. Because on the way to the Yaqui Hills Guadalupe had made Pino remember every mile of the long trail, every landmark and the compass lines between those marks. And

hardly a day had passed that the Yaqui woman had not made Pino smooth out a strip of dirt and take little pebbles and a stick. Each pebble would mark a mountain peak or butte and with the pointed stick Pino would mark out the trail between those landmarks.

When Billy got old enough to understand, he sat in on those map lessons and after a while he was able to make his own map, though he'd never seen the country save with unseeing baby eyes. So now, as they rode along, young Bill Camp saw the country of that map spreading out before him and he knew it as if he'd traveled it many times.

Leaving Guadalupe had twisted their young hearts more than Pino and Billy would let on to each other. She had raised them with a hard hand, scolded and quirted them when they needed punishment. Her Yaqui blood would not permit her to show them any outward demonstration of affection and her tongue was tipped with bitter acid as she taught them how to hate and hold revenge deep in their hearts like a priceless treasure. But covertly she did little things for the two boys. And there were times when, watching them, her opaque black eyes would soften. Then when it came time, she sent them away from her with the wooden face of a Spartan mother. But deep inside her Yaqui heart were tears.

Only when they were more than a mile from the Yaqui Hills did Pino swing off the trail and ride in behind some brush and when he rode out again his guitar was slung across his back by a wide buckskin strap. His

white teeth flashed in the moonlight.

"Listen, Billito, to the new song I got. It's got a name. 'Adios.' 'Good-by to the Yaqui Hills.' With a verse for each señorita I leave behind there to cry her eyes red for the Pino who went away."

"You'll be singin' till sunrise, then. . . . I hope you didn't forget enough cartridges for your guns."

"Cartridges enough to kill them *cabrons*, Billito. Music for them girls at Mesquite. An' you brung a book, no?"

Young Bill grinned faintly. In his chaps pocket was a small dictionary with a limp leather binding that he had read like a book from cover to cover. He had carried it with him a lot, otherwise it would have been sacrificed in Guadalupe's fire, along with the guitar if the Yaqui mother had been able to find it.

"I guess we are a hell of a pair of fellers, no? You feel like killin' them five men before breakfast some mornin', Billito?"

"That's our job, *compadre*. Whether or not we got the appetite." Billy Camp's faint grin was mirthless.

They had talked it over many times and they knew just why they had to kill Doc Eubanks and the four younger men they'd find at Mesquite.

They would not fail Guadalupe. But their hearts were not in it. Pino loved his music and laughter. Billy had his books and a quiet zest for wanting to live his own life.

Pino was about thirty-three but much younger in many ways than

the twenty-one-year-old Billy Camp. Neither of them had really begun to live. They had hated the Yaqui Hills for its ugly brutality, its drunken brawling, its squalid stench. Now they were free of it. But their trail led only too short a distance to the grim ordeal of gunfire and the baptism of bloodshed. And unless something in the way of a miracle occurred, it would be the final end of their trail.

They had to kill or be killed. And if they escaped with their hides, the Arizona law would reach out and grab them. You can't ride up and kill off five men and claim their land and cattle and horses and call it a day.

So it was as if Pino Robles and Billy Camp were riding now to their death.

But if it ever occurred to young Bill Camp or Pino Robles to turn aside from that trail to death, neither let the other suspect the thought in his heart and mind. Their lives had been offered up in a grim and terrible sacrifice at the altar of Vengeance. If Guadalupe had thought for one minute those two boys would fail her, she would have killed them, then gone back herself to Mesquite to do the job for which she had so bitterly schooled them.

Dread might have slowed them along the trail. But they wanted to get their task over and done with. So they traveled light, stealing changes of horses along the way. Swapping, rather, a leg-weary horse for a fresh one without the knowledge or consent of the horses' owner.

It was nearing midnight when

they rode into the tough little cow town of Mesquite. And as they neared it they saw lights, and from a barnlike building where the lights showed there came the music of fiddle and accordion, the shouts of men and the shrill squeals and bright laughter of girls being swung through the quadrille.

"*Madre de Dios!*" laughed Pino. "A baile!"

"A dance, sure enough," grinned young Bill Camp. His grin died as he added quietly: "Our killers should be there, Pino."

"*Seguro*. Sure thing. But first we dance, no, Billito?"

"You mean—"

"*Como no?* Why not, compadre Billito? Maybe it will be our last baile. *Quien sabe?*"

"Keep your shirt on, pardner. We'll swamp these leg-weary ponies for fresh uns. And if we're goin' to horn into that dance, we better locate a razor and a change of clothes. It'll be the big showdown before sunrise. I want to be clean when I die."

"Talk like that poisons the luck, Billito. We go to a baile, not to no funeral."

They found the barn man dead drunk, so changing to fresh horses was thus simplified. The barber was just closing. He grinned and nodded at the ten-dollar bill Pino showed him and he had a key to the general store. An hour later they left the barber shop bathed, shaved, their hair trimmed, and wearing clean clothes. A drink from the barber's whiskey bottle was all they needed. And they had learned from

the tipsy and garrulous barber all they wanted to know.

Doc Eubanks was still alive. The barber said the old buzzard would live to be a hundred if somebody didn't kill him. Doc's only son Rufus was very much alive. Rufe, the barber declared, was tough as a boot. So were Joe Cahill and Clum Maybry and Quiro Fanchett. They were a tough outfit. They owned the whole valley and the mountain ranches on both sides of the valley. They worked a crew of tough cowhands and paid them fighting wages, and they ran off strangers. But even the tough cowpunchers who worked for them hated their guts.

The dance, explained the barber, was the annual celebration of their organizing the Mesquite Pool outfit. Twenty-one years ago they had moved into the valley to claim and hold it against all outsiders. And every year they held a big baile to celebrate.

But this year it was a special celebration. There was to be a big wedding at sunrise. Rufe Eubanks was marrying the daughter of Quiro Fanchett. She was only seventeen and Rufe was twice her age. But Doc Eubanks had told Quiro Fanchett that Rufe wanted to marry the pretty, red-headed little Dolores and Doc's word was law here at Mesquite. Dolores was part Mexican and at seventeen was already a woman. But she had no love for Rufe Eubanks.

Any more than little Rose Cahill, Joe's daughter, loved Clum Maybry's big overbearing son Ike. But once more old Doc Eubanks had laid down the law. So it would be a double

wedding. Rose was sixteen and girls married young in the West and were happy about it. But Rose was as pretty and sweet as the flower for which she had been named. And Ike Maybry was a big, swaggering, foul-mouthed bully who had killed three men already though he wasn't twenty-five years old.

But it was old Doc Eubanks behind it. He wanted them all to be married back and forth so they'd all be shirt-tail kin and would stick together better. Clum Maybry was married to old Doc's daughter. Or had been, the barber said, till the poor woman died of hard work and abuse.

Funny thing about those women, said the barber. They died off like they were tired of life. Fanchett's wife and Joe Cahill's missus, both dead. Leaving their daughters motherless, to be raised by that old hag who was Doc Eubanks' wife. But in spite of that snuff-dipping, whiskey-sipping old witch, the two girls had grown up together, clean and sweet and pretty as flowers. But then, declared the barber, he'd seen mighty beautiful flowers bud and blossom in a barnyard.

"Dolores Fanchett and Rose Cahill would've run off long ago if Doc Eubanks' old hag hadn't close-herded 'em. You'll see them there at the dance if that's where you're a-goin'. Dolores is the tall girl with red hair and black eyes. Rose Cahill is a little thing with curly hair the color of old gold and her eyes is what you'd call a dark violet gray. They'll be sittin' on a bench,

one on each side of that ol' she-devil with her black dress and her cane. Wrinkled an' toothless with her under lip bulged with snuff. They say she was a handsome woman in her day. Cruel as a she-cougar. Married to a rich old man somewheres. She hired Doc to murder 'im, then married Doc. They're a pair, them two. . . . There's a story about a rancher named Bill Camp who owned the valley once. Before I come here—"

But Billy Camp and Pino Robles were on their way.

V

Strangers were not welcome here at the annual dance at Mesquite. The whole cow country knew that and stayed away. So there were no guards posted at the door to bar Billy and Pino's way.

They stayed back in the black shadows for quite a while and watched through one of the open windows. Twenty-one years is a long time and men change in appearance so it took Pino a while to pick out the four killers and identify them for Billy Camp.

Doc Eubanks was more easily identified. You couldn't mistake him. Tall, gaunt, stooped a little now, his skin a yellowish-gray, his big nose a dull purple and his pale eyes undimmed by years or booze. He sat beside the black-gowned old hag who was his wife, with Rose Cahill on the bench at his side. While the old crone's bediamonded claw gripped the arm of Dolores Fanchett beside her.

Pino Robles and Billy Camp stared long and hard at the two girls. The barber had not exaggerated. Both girls looked and acted like condemned prisoners but they were as beautiful as two wild flowers coming in bloom. It was Pino Robles' husky whisper that broke the silence.

"I have just said a little prayer, compadre. If the Señor Dios answers it, it will be Pino Robles, not that Rufe Eubanks *cabron* who marries that Dolores. Perhaps not at sunrise. But some day—"

"She's so pale, Pino, I can see the little freckles across her nose."

"My Dolores has no freckles. She has the skin like ivory."

"Who said anything about your Dolores?"

"Oho! Then I better make another prayer. For you, no? For you and Rose. *Bueno!* I tell you, Billito, we got something more to fight for now, eh?"

"Show me which is Clum Maybry's son," said Billy Camp quietly.

"How would I know? That big hombre with the iron-gray hair and the mustache, that will be Clum Maybry. The big tough one with the black hair and kind o' drunk with him will be his son Ike. . . . We got one more now to kill."

Pino pointed out a tall, lean man with pale eyes and a hawk-beaked nose and said that was Rufe Eubanks.

The short, heavy-set man talking to a tall rawboned man with graying reddish hair and drooping mustache was Joe Cahill and his companion must be Quiro Fanchett. Fanchett had red hair but his skin was swarthy and his eyes were coal-black. Joe

Cahill's hard gray eyes were watching Doc Eubanks and the expression on his leathery square-jawed face was ugly. Quiro Fanchett's hand kept brushing the butt of an ivory-handled six-shooter he wore in a tied holster on his thigh.

Clum Maybry and his burly son Ike were joined now by Rufe Eubanks and the three of them walked over to where Doc Eubanks sat with his old hag of a wife.

It was between dances and so close was the open window to where Doc Eubanks and his wife and the two girls sat that Billy and Pino could have tossed their hats into Doc's lap. And his flat-toned voice carried to them.

"Well?"

"Joe Cahill," Rufe Eubanks' voice was like the echo of his father's now, "and Quiro Fanchett are makin' bad medicine, Doc."

"Don't look," growled big Clum Maybry, "like they're goin' to give the brides away, Doc."

"My father"—Dolores Fanchett had a low, musical voice—"would rather see me dead than married to Rufe Eubanks. And that's the way I'd rather have it."

"I told you," said Rose Cahill, "we'd kill ourselves first." Her voice was deadly quiet.

A dull red flush crept into Doc Eubanks' gray face. His pale eyes glittered. But it was the toothless old hag who spoke. Her voice was brittle. But she was looking past them and her green eyes glinted like polished glass as she lifted her heavy

black cane with an imperious gesture.

"Joe! Quiro! Come here!"

Joe Cahill and Quiro Fanchett looked hard at each other. The tall, rawboned Quiro nodded. They both crossed the floor and stood there like a pair of sullen, defiant schoolboys rather than grown men.

"Listen, you pair of numskulls"—her brittle voice was low-pitched now—"you'll go through with this business. These two girls have seen and heard too much. But in court they can't be forced to testify against their husbands or their fathers. Doc told you why they have to marry Rufe and Ike. The law is moving in on us. You have to stick together or that law will hang you. Once the sky pilot marries your pair of brats to Rufe and Ike, they can kill themselves. Doc and I will be glad to give 'em the poison for a quick job of it. Single as they are, they're dangerous. Ready to squeal their silly heads off to the law. Do you understand it now, you two thick-skulled fools?"

"If Rufe ever lays a hand on my Dolores," Quiro Fanchett said, "I'll gut-shoot 'im."

"The same goes," growled Joe Cahill, "for Ike Maybry. I'd ruther see Rose dead in her grave."

"You've both seen your wives buried. So has Clum Maybry." The old hag's green eyes glittered in the lamplight. She leaned forward on her heavy black gold-headed cane. "I hate women. Women who can't keep their mouths shut. I won't have them around me. Do you understand?"

Joe Cahill's tanned face was drained of color. His hard gray eyes stared at the toothless old hag. She laughed. A brittle cackle.

Joe Cahill's voice was a hoarse whisper. "You . . . you damned old murderin'—"

"Take it easy, Cahill." That was Doc Eubanks' flat-toned voice. There was a little double-barreled deringer pistol in his hand.

Rufe Eubanks' gun was covering Quiro Fanchett. His pale bloodshot eyes were murderous.

"Cool off," said Doc Eubanks flatly. "The law's here tonight. Arizona Rangers don't wear badges. Keep your shirts on or you'll all hang. The wife and I are the only ones the law can't lay a hand on."

"Your damned Rufe will hang with us," said Quiro Fanchett.

"Then let 'im hang," Doc Eubanks said tonelessly.

"Doc's right," declared big Clum Maybry. "We gotta stick together. Amongst them tough cowhands we hired is a couple of them Arizona Rangers."

"They got nothin' on us," growled Joe Cahill.

"Who killed a man named Bill Camp?" Doc Eubanks grinned flatly.

"Damn you, Doc!" Quiro Fanchett's voice was tense. "That was twenty . . . twenty-one years ago."

"You'd believe in ghosts," said Doc Eubanks, "if you'd seen what I saw in the barber shop an hour ago. Pablo Robles and Bill Camp were both in there gettin' their hair cut."

They all stared at Doc Eubanks as though he'd gone suddenly crazy. His bleak eyes stared back at them.

"That Yaqui squaw said she was sending back her son Pino and the baby son that Camp's wife gave birth to the night Camp was killed. She's kept her Injun promise. Pino Robles and young Camp are the livin', spittin' images of Pablo Robles and Bill Camp come to life. You'll know 'em when you see 'em. . . . Now has anybody got any further objections to that double wedding at sunrise?"

The fiddler and accordion player came in from outside where they'd been getting air and a smoke and a few drinks. The old hag waved her heavy gold-headed black cane at them.

"Something lively!" she cackled. "On with the dance!"

But nobody in that little group of hard-bitten men had any taste for dancing right now. Though Rufe Eubanks was staring, a leering grin on his face, at Dolores Fanchett. And Ike Maybry, sweat beading his upper lip, towered possessively over Rose Cahill as though he wanted to paw her with his big unwashed hands.

Rufe and Ike were both half drunk and they stank of sweat and booze and the barn and looked uncomfortable in their cheap store clothes and soiled white shirts. They were the pair of prospective bridegrooms and this was their wedding dance and they had been buying drinks at the saloons. Rufe might have yanked Dolores Fanchett to her feet and made her dance with him, and Ike would have pawed and mauled little Rose Cahill around the dance floor. But Doc Eubanks had other plans.

Doc Eubanks got to his feet, the

little .44 caliber derringer palmed in his big hand.

"Let's git outside where a man can take a drink. I'll give you your orders out there." He herded them all ahead of him.

"Look after our little brides," he grinned across his black-coated shoulder at his old hag of a wife. "Mind 'em well, woman."

VI

The fiddler and accordion player glared tipsily at the old hag as they picked up their instruments. At the first squeak of the fiddle dancing couples moved out on the floor. The woman were coarse-looking and hard-eyed and had been brought from the honkatonk dance hall for the occasion. The men were tough hired cowhands who drew fighting wages and were in town to celebrate. But no man among them had the temerity to disobey Doc Eubanks' orders that they were not to dance with Rose Cahill or Dolores Fanchett. The two girls sat there, unsmiling, defiant, contemptuous and not a little afraid, on either side of the toothless old black-satin-dressed hag with her clawlike hands glittering with diamonds.

Pino's white teeth were bared in a reckless grin. "Never before have I seen a señorita with such beautiful hair. Chestnut sorrel. I think it makes me feel a little drunk. Those men are drunken brutes. It is about time Pino Robles showed them a real caballero, no? You feel lucky, Billito?"

Billy Camp nodded. His blood

was pounding. He, too, felt a little drunk. Perhaps it was the barber's potent whiskey on an empty stomach. Or the look he'd seen in the dark-gray eyes of Rose Cahill. Doc Eubanks had spotted them. He'd warned the others. *Bueno*. Fair enough.

"Let's go, pardner." Billy matched Pino's grin.

Pino Robles doubled up and stepped through the low window and Billy Camp was right behind him. Pino unslung his guitar and handed it to the accordion player and shoved a fistful of crumpled money at the man.

"Play a waltz. A Mexican waltz. Keep playing till I tell you to stop. Afterwards there will be more money. Take care of my guitar."

Then Pino was standing in front of Dolores Fanchett, his hat off in a sweeping gesture as he bowed. His white teeth were showing and lights danced in his black eyes and there was a reckless sort of gallantry about him and a gay challenge in his voice.

"Permit me," he said, "to introduce myself. I am Pino Robles from the Yaqui Hills. And with me is my compadre Billy Camp. I call him Billito. He is very shy around beautiful ladies so I must do the talking for us both. We have heard you both mention the fact that this sunrise marriage business is not to your liking. *Bueno!* Billito and Pino will see to it that such a wicked thing shall not take place. Those sweating hombres who are afraid to ask two beautiful señoritas to dance are cowards. They are not even gentlemen who have the courage to

die for a señorita's smile. But Billito and Pino come from the Yaqui Hills and before we attend to that other business that brings us back to Mesquite Valley where we were born, will you be kind enough and brave enough to honor us with this waltz, señoritas?"

Doc Eubanks' wife glared. She lifted her gold-headed black cane to hit Pino across the face. He reached out and twisted it deftly from her withered claw. His other hand held the long-bladed knife that had been his father's.

"It would give me great pleasure," he grinned, "to slit your skinny old neck. Now, Señora Rattlesnake, will you sit back and take it easy or shall I soil the knife of Pablo Robles with your wicked blood?"

The toothless old hag was not afraid. But she knew that this tall, handsome, grinning Pino meant just what he said. She shrank back as the sharp point touched her skinny throat.

Color came into the ivory-white cheeks of Dolores Fanchett. She laughed and got to her feet.

"That earns you at least one dance, Pino Robles. Look at her, Rose. She's frothing at the mouth. She'll throw one of her fits. Let's get away from her."

Billy Camp's ears felt hot and he was tongue tied and awkward. And Rose Cahill's eyes were looking at him. Then she flushed and smiled up at him and held out her hand and Billy took it and lifted her to her feet. He felt her shiver as he put his arm around her waist. Her head

came no higher than his wide shoulder and he was out of step when he led her into the waltz. Then he caught the step and held her close and his awkwardness was gone.

Pino and Dolores, both laughing, danced close to them. Pino's voice was reckless.

"No baile at the Yaqui Hills was ever like this, compadre Billito!"

"The ending," grinned Billy Camp, "will make you feel right at home, Pino. Those Yaqui Hills bailes," he told Rose Cahill, "always end in a fight."

"I hope my guitar don't get busted. I want to sing a song with it."

The two couples kept dancing near each other. Other dancers were losing step as they watched. The tough cowhands were exchanging meaning looks and grins.

Pino was talking rapidly in a low tone to Dolores Fanchett. She frowned at first. Then she nodded and smiled up at him.

"You came back to kill my father, didn't you, Billy Camp?" Rose Cahill asked in a low voice.

"To kill five men," Billy told her.

"I know the story. They murdered your father."

"And my mother. It was cold-blooded murder and I've got to pay off the debt. Pino and I listened outside the window yonder. We heard a lot. We want to help you and Dolores Fanchett. It's an ugly deal."

Somebody must have taken the news outside because Doc Eubanks and the others came back inside and they stood bunched there by the door, staring at the two pairs of

dancers. Pino and Dolores stared back at them. Then Pino said something in a low whisper and the red-haired Dolores nodded and smiled up at him and they waltzed past the hard-eyed group at the door. Dolores Fanchett looked straight into the eyes of her father and smiled defiantly and then turned her eyes contemptuously on Rufe Eubanks.

Rufe would have jerked his gun but old Doc Eubanks grabbed his gun hand at the wrist and said something in his almost inaudible flat-toned voice.

Now Billy Camp caught onto Pino's quick-witted plan and he spoke quietly into Rose Cahill's tawny hair.

"Watch Pino and Dolores. Then pretend you like me a little. Let your father think you trust me so he'll have the nerve to side us against Doc Eubanks and Rufe and the two Maybrys. If Joe Cahill and Quiro Fanchett break now with old Doc Eubanks, we'll all stand a fightin' chance of winnin' out."

Billy Camp guided Rose close to where Joe Cahill stood, scowling and puzzled and hard-eyed, almost within arm's reach.

"I'm going away, dad," Rose Cahill called softly to her father, "with Billy Camp."

Joe Cahill flinched as though he'd been quirted across the face. Then, as Billy watched, he saw Cahill's black-browed scowl turn to a grin.

"Then good luck, young un," Joe Cahill's voice was a low growl.

He turned and Quiro Fanchett moved forward a step. Their eyes met and their hands dropped to

their guns as they turned to face old Doc Eubanks and Rufe and the two Maybrys.

But Doc Eubanks had been watching. His pale eyes were bleak.

"Don't get cheated for a pair of fools," he said flatly. "Get outside where we can talk. We've got young Camp and this Pino Robles caught in the wolf trap. Rufe and Ike will take care of that pair of spur jinglers. We'll lay the ghosts of Pablo Robles and Bill Camp. Outside, Quiro. You and Joe. Before you're tricked into their slick game."

Doc Eubanks herded them all outside and swung the large door shut. The sound of the fiddle and accordion, the scuffling of feet, the tippy voices of the dancers, all those combined sounds almost blotted out the sound of the quick shots outside. No more than half a dozen shots that blended together and then there was only a heavy silence out there in the night.

Billy Camp felt Rose shudder in his arms and he held her closer and kept dancing.

"If they don't kill me, Rose," he said bluntly, "I want to take care of you from now on. And Pino will look after Dolores. We're playin' for keeps. But we play fair and decent. You've got to trust us. We won't hurt you. Not ever. Believe me."

Pino called to the two musicians to keep on playing. Dolores looked white but there was no fear in her dark eyes.

Then the big front door opened slowly and they came back in. Rufe Eubanks and Ike Maybry. Clum

Maybry and the gaunt, bleak-eyed Doc Eubanks behind them. Doc closed the door, There was a twisted grin on his gaunt, lantern-jawed face.

Quiro Fanchett and Joe Cahill had not come back with the others. Those shots out there in the darkness told a grim tale of murder.

This was it. The showdown. Pino and Dolores danced close to Billy and Rose. Pino's black eyes were glittering.

"There's a back door," said Pino. "The girls go out that way. I gave my promise to Dolores that we'd meet them. At the barn. Not a very polite place to meet but we'll find horses there and there'll be time enough later for the politeness. . . . I hope that fiddler don't let my guitar get bust! Now. Pronto. *Adiosito!* And for good luck!" He kissed Dolores swiftly, then shoved her towards the back door.

"Good luck, Billy Camp." Rose lifted her head and Billy bent and kissed her. Then she was gone out the door and it slammed shut.

The old hag leaped from the bench. Then she let out a brittle scream and a tiny derringer slipped from her hand. Her scream halted the dancers and the fiddle squeaked into dismal silence. The accordion wheezed.

The old hag in her black satin tottered and fell and lay there writhing and screaming with foam bubbling from her toothless old mouth and her green eyes glittering like a snake's eyes. And her yellow claws with their glittering diamonds raked at the hilt of the long-bladed knife that was buried to its hilt in her skinny neck.

Not even Billy Camp had seen Pino Robles throw the knife when the woman pulled the derringer on him.

Men and women cleared the dance floor like so many dry leaves blown by a sudden gust of wind. And then six-shooters were spewing streaks of flame and the roaring explosion of the guns filled the place.

Pino Robles and Billy Camp stood side by side in front of the now deserted platform where the two musicians had been. Their guns were spitting fire and their first two bullets struck Rufe Eubanks and the burly Ike Maybry. The two renegades went down with their guns smoking. And then Pino and Billy were shooting at big Clum Maybry and old Doc Eubanks. Clum Maybry let go his gun and grabbed at his belly. Then he toppled over and lay there groaning.

It was Pino's bullet that did the work on old Doc Eubanks and if Guadalupe Robles had held the gun she could not have done a neater job of it. Because the bullet did not kill the murderous old renegade. It struck the base of his spine and paralyzed his long legs so that they jack-knifed at the knee joints and he pitched headlong. And while his legs were paralyzed, the rest of him was alive and some nerve was pinched by the pressure of bullet-smashed bone. The pain must have been terrific because the screams torn from his corded and wrinkled throat were shrill and horrible and inhuman and great beads of sweat broke out on his yellowish-gray

face while the mortal agony of slow, tortuous death glazed his pale eyes.

Women screamed and fainted and the men hauled and dragged them outside and left them there.

Billy Camp's belly tightened in a cold knot and he felt sick and a little faint. He wanted to get outside, but he had to stay there with Pino. Pino Robles was not sick. Pino stood there with his smoking six-shooter in his hand and his eyes were the Yaqui eyes of Guadalupe.

So died Doc Eubanks. And there remained only Pino Robles and Billy Camp standing there in the deserted dance hall.

Pino stepped up on the platform and picked up his guitar and examined it quickly.

"A good thing it ain't bust', Billito. Let's go. You look a little green around the ears."

VII

A tall man came into the place and walked around and over the dead bodies and the length of the dance floor. His eyes were hard and bright and cold and he grinned faintly.

"I'm Tom Jones. Arizona Rangers."

"I am Pino Robles. This is Billy Camp. I guess you know what this is all about. Or will you want me to sing you the song I got made up about 'Adios to Mesquite Valley.' It's a long song. Maybe I got to sing it in jail, no?"

"No. You're both under arrest but that's just a kind of formality. When you get around to it, we'll ride to Tucson and there'll be a trial. But you won't ever get jailed. If

aimed to take chips in the game but it didn't last that long." Jones grinned faintly.

"I knew Bill Camp and Pablo Robles. Punched cows for 'em in Mesquite Valley. I've eaten Guadalupe Robles' tortillas and frijoles. Knew Molly Camp before she married Bill."

The grizzled Ranger shook hands with them. "You boys can go out the window you used when you came in. I saw Dolores Fanchett and Rose Cahill headed for the feed barn. Their fathers were murdered, shot in the back. I've got a home at Tucson and my missus will take care of the two girls. I'll mop up here and meet you at the barn and we'll ride on together."

He looked them over curiously and shook his head. "Nary a scratch on either of yuh. You both must be bullet-proof."

Pino and Billy both felt of the little buckskin sacks hung around their necks, hidden under their shirts.

"Bullet-proof is right, sir," said Billy Camp. "Pino will tell you about it in that song of his."

Pino and Billy met the two girls at the barn. They had their horses saddled.

Pino told them it was all over and there was nothing more to be afraid of. Ranger Tom Jones was taking them to his home at Tucson, he explained. They had better change into riding clothes for the trip.

"Our job here is done," Pino said. And Billy Camp let him do the talking. "I am glad we did not have to shoot Quiro Fanchett and Joe Cahill. They were murdered by the

others. They died like brave men for the love they bore their daughters. Amen."

Neither of the girls was tearful. Grief would come later when the shock of all this had worn off.

"Billito and I will ride back to the Yaqui Hills," continued Pino. "We will tell Guadalupe Robles how our job was done and finished. Then we will come back to Mesquite Valley. It belongs to Billy Camp now. And if you will permit us to do so, we will ride to Tucson to see you."

"But there in the dance hall," said Dolores Fanchett, "you made some promises. Do you forget so soon? Or were you lying?"

"And did my compadre Billito make promises too?"

Rose Cahill blushed. Then her eyes blazed with quick anger.

"Go on back to your darned old Yaqui Hills. We wouldn't hold two such spur jinglers to promises. Your job's done. Go on back to your Yaqui Hills."

"We can't go back there," said Billy Camp. "Not for a few days or longer. We're under arrest. Ranger Tom Jones told us to report at Tucson. And we're takin' you girls to his home there. His wife will look after you. And any promise either of us made, we're makin' good, providin' you'll give us the chance. For gosh sakes, don't let Pino plague you. . . . How soon can you change clothes and be ready to go with us to Tucson, Rose?"

It was a long ride to Tucson. Ranger Tom Jones rode on ahead.

To warn his missus, he said, that they had company coming.

So Pino and Dolores rode a way in the lead and Pino strummed his guitar and sang his lengthy song. It drifted back to Billy Camp and Rose Cahill as they rode along together, holding hands, sharing a silence that held them for the long miles until Billy summoned the courage to break it.

"We've known each other only a few hours, Rose. But to me it's like I've always known you . . . and loved you. Some day, if I get up enough nerve, I'm goin' to ask you to be my wife."

"You don't need to wait, Billy. I think we've both waited long enough for happiness. We need each other now. We'll be married at Tucson. I'll be waiting for you to come back from the Yaqui Hills."

And up ahead of them Pino Robles

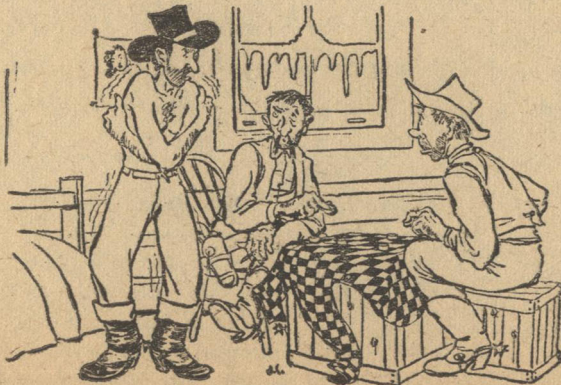
had put his love plea into a song and now Dolores had taken the guitar and her song gave him his answer.

Guadalupe Robles, in the Yaqui Hills, listened, her black eyes glittering, a soft smile on her dark face, while Pino and Billy told her their story.

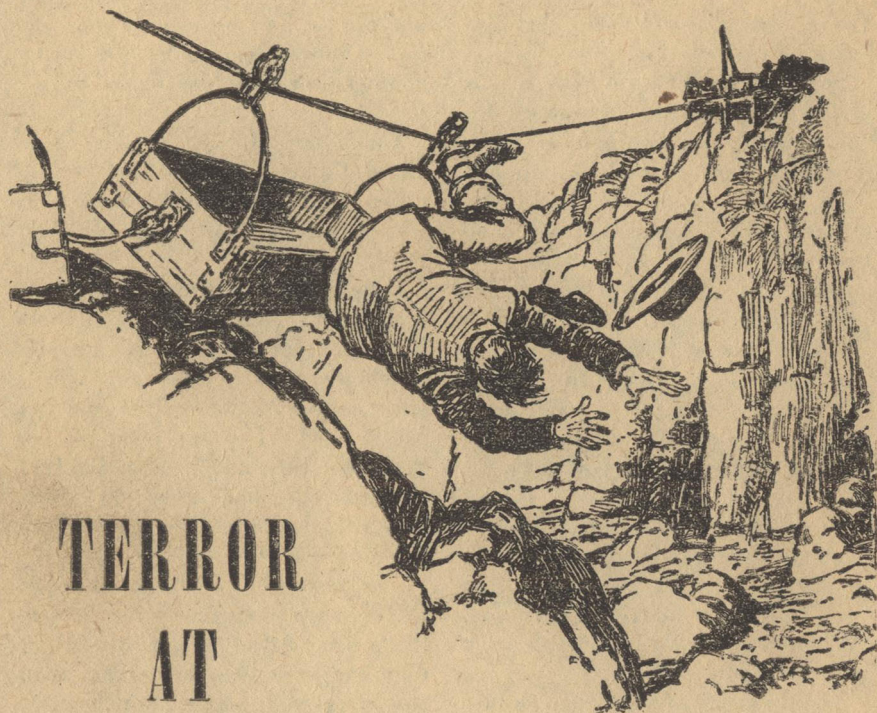
When they had finished, she took their hands and held them in both hers and tears melted the hard glitter in her eyes. Her lips moved in a silent prayer. She smiled and her eyes closed. She lay back on her bed in the little adobe cabin and they thought she had gone to sleep. Death had come that quietly for Guadalupe Robles.

The next night Pino Robles and Billy Camp rode back together to the ranch in Mesquite Valley where they had been born and where their two brides were waiting for them.

THE END



"Finish that game, gents, an' gimme back my shirt—I'm freezin'!"



TERROR AT TOOELE

by GIFF CHESHIRE

Once Lew Barlow's bushwackers had desecrated the Tooele fishing grounds only tribal vengeance could appease the outraged River Goddess!

It was Sammy Horse who first noticed the incident that took place beyond the giant guts of swirling water. Sammy tugged at Jim Calloway's sleeve.

"Hey, Jim! You look! That Pete Berg—he's making kill on old Walking Crow!"

Jim straightened from the dip net he was unsnarling and sighted along Sammy Horse's pointing arm. On the shore, scarcely two hundred yards away, a hulking white man held an ancient Indian erect with one hand while the other leisurely battered him to a pulp. A spring wagon,

to which a span of handsome bays was hitched, stood near. It was Pete Berg, all right—Lew Barlow's bullying fish buyer.

The watchers on the rock out in the raging channel saw old Walking Crow's reedy body sag limply. Pete Berg lifted and hurled him, turning his back disdainfully and moving toward his wagon before the body had dropped from sight into a stand of dried grass.

Jim's helpless rage burned whitely. He would have to negotiate three separate cables to get ashore and he couldn't make himself heard above the roar of Tooeele Falls if he yelled. He saw coals of fire burning in the sockets of the Indian at his side. Scores of other Indians, on the many rocks, had seen this sickening demonstration of the white man's superiority. Jim knew that medicine would be made in the longhouse again, come night.

"Old Walking Crow, he not catch much. Him old. Sell Barlow. Barlow no pay nothing. Walking Crow not like." Sammy Horse's monotone voice was freighted with danger.

"No," Jim answered him. "Walking Crow probably gave Pete Berg some sass. That's probably what touched Pete off." Other Indians, sensing trouble, had come over from the blind side of the rock. They knew what had happened, all right; Jim saw it in their eyes. He said to Sammy Horse, who was their chief: "Probably you ought to send a couple of bucks over, Sammy, to help him down to your camp so the squaws can take care of him."

Sammy nodded. "Yeah. I send Indian help take care of Indian, all right."

There was a grim implication in his voice that brought a troubled look to Jim's eyes.

The fishing season was at its height. Tooeele Falls stretched for nine miles down the mile-wide Tumulum. Hundreds of giant rocks broke up the watercourse in countless falls and raging channels. From spring until fall the Indians of seven gathered tribes, from the distant reservations, would swarm over these rocks like ants, wielding their dip nets. Much of their catch of blueback and steelhead salmon would be sold to furnish the money they needed to winter. The rest would be dried by the squaws and taken back with them.

Jim, Sammy and two bucks made their slow way ashore over the intricate system of cableways, stretching from rock to rock, which took the fishermen back and forth over the surging waters and transported the catch to the fish buyers on the shore. They found Walking Crow in the grass, bleeding and unconscious, and the two bucks started toward the camp at the head of the falls with him.

Sammy Horse looked at Jim. "You been good friend of Indian. You go with me now to see this Pete Berg, this Lew Barlow—to make talk good like they can understand?"

Jim shook his head. "I'm in this, Sammy, up to the hilt. But you let me talk to Barlow alone, first. Have your men in the longhouse tonight."

After I've seen Barlow, I'll come there."

The Indian chief looked adamant for a moment, his semi-savage blood burning for revenge in kind. Yet he knew that Jim Calloway better understood the workings of the white man's mind and laws, the laws that were slowly driving the Indians into a tight corner of desperation. Without a word he turned and made his way back over the cableway to the fishing grounds.

Jim got his saddle horse, which he had tethered in an alder thicket near the main tight line, and struck off in the direction of Barlow's cannery, ten miles down the river. As he rode, his thoughts were troubled. Jim ran a cow spread up in the Hogbacks, close to the reservation of Sammy Horse's tribe. He had long been the young chief's friend and in sympathy with the Indians' slow, losing struggle against white interests. Word had reached him that fresh trouble was building up on the fishing grounds this season, and he had ridden down to see Sammy Horse and to learn what he could do to help.

Jim cursed as he thought of the sly duplicity with which Lew Barlow had got his stranglehold on the fishing ground. He had fooled the Indians, at first, as well as the Indian Service and the federal land commissioner. The government had thrown vast areas of grazing land on either side of the Tualum on the market at two-bits an acre. It had brought on a land rush, and Jim himself had acquired legal owner-

ship of his graze under the development.

No one had noticed at first that Lew Barlow, the cannery operator, was limiting his purchases to either side of the Tualum for the full length of the Tooele fishing ground. Nobody cared until Barlow revealed his real motive. The seven tribes had come to the Tooele grounds for untold generations, and now they suddenly found their way blocked by Barlow men and Barlow fences.

The cannery operator was careful not to interfere with the Indians' treaty-protected, exclusive rights to fish Tooele Falls. He simply denied them the right to cross his land to reach the falls. Unless—Barlow unfolded his deal. The Indians could cross his land freely and openly, provided they sold their catch to him exclusively. That or they could boat their way to the rocks from points beyond his holdings, a totally impractical expedient considering the hundreds of tons of salmon taken daily when the runs were on. The Indians had little choice but to deal with Barlow.

The operator had seemed fair enough, at first. He helped the Indians get in their cableway systems that made access to the scattered rocks easier and less dangerous. He sent buyers to various points on the shore to make it easier and faster for them to dispose of their catches. Lew Barlow's organizing ability had, in fact, turned the rich and ancient Tooele grounds into a highly profitable commercial enterprise. The Indian Service, viewing the situation with the dual perspective of white

and red interests, had seen no objection to the arrangement. Even the Indians became partly reconciled.

Then Lew Barlow had revealed that he did not intend to share the rich profits of the Tooele fishing grounds. Little by little the price he paid the Indians for their catch fell lower. He beat down scattered rebellions by simply denying the rebels the right to cross his land. A few trials at boating the mad rapids were enough to bring most insurgents back into line.

This season Barlow was paying three cents a pound for the catch, when the price prevailing on other grounds was six cents and up. The Indians had been restive ever since the start of the spring run. Jim knew the talk that went on in the longhouses of an evening and around the fires on the rocks when the Indians ate their roasted eel. He didn't know just what he meant to say to Barlow, now, except to warn him of how close he and his quick-fisted help were to setting off an uprising.

But Jim Calloway knew what he would say to Pete Berg if he could find him and how he would say it—with fists.

Jim found Lew Barlow in the cannery office, his feet on the desk, reading a newspaper. Barlow was a lean, middle-aged man, bald and sharp-eyed. He looked at the young cowman, whom he knew for a champion of Indian rights, in mild surprise.

"What're you doing here, Calloway?"

"In case your man Berg ain't told

you," Jim answered hotly, "he beat up old Walking Crow this morning! Walking Crow's got chief's blood in him, and the Indians're mad as hornets! Your price gouging's bad enough, Barlow! There's bad talk in the longhouses. You better throw a dally on that man Berg!"

The cannery man's lips were sneering. "What do them Siwashes think they can do about it, Calloway?"

"They can boil over in the bloodiest uprising this country ever saw!" Jim exploded. "Once they get started, they won't stop with people like you and Berg, who've got it coming. They'll make it a real war between reds and whites!"

"And violate their treaty," Barlow returned with calm assurance. "The treaty that gives 'em perpetual rights to fish Tooele. Tell 'em that. They'll find themselves in such hot water they'll be thrown out of Tooele forever and locked up on their stinkin' reservations! I ain't dependent on 'em. I could get more salmon out of Tooele with fish wheels and cheaper! We ain't scared of 'em, either. We've got arms and we know how to use 'em! Tell 'em that, too!"

Jim Calloway eyed him in slow understanding. "So that's your game, is it? You're trying to rile 'em! If you can bait them into an uprising they'll be penned on their reservations, all right. And Tooele'll be thrown open to the public. Which will mean you, since you own the approaches. And you'll put in your fishwheels and they'll work for you a lot cheaper than even them poor pushed-around Indians, and produce you a heap more fish!"

"You sound like you're drunk," Barlow answered, but a glint of cunning in his beady eyes showed that Jim had called the truth. "And I got this to say to you, Calloway. You keep sticking that nose of yours into my business and you're going to get it hurt!"

"When you set out to do that personally, Barlow," Jim retorted, "you better oil up your joints!"

Jim was riding out of the littered cannery yard when he saw Pete Berg pull in with a wagon load of fish. Jim spurred his mount and rode over. He gave the surprised fish buyer no chance to climb out of the wagon. Leaning in the saddle, Jim seized Berg by the shirt and yanked, tumbling to the ground with him.

Berg was big and tough, and he sensed that he had a fight on his hands. The two men rolled in the dust, while Jim's fist lashed brain-jarring blows against Berg's head. Berg managed to break free and stagger to his feet. He drove out, a big fist rocketing to Jim's jaw.

Jim reeled back, fought off Berg's battering ram of fists. Recovering, he side-stepped a charge, clipped Berg on the temple as he sailed past. Berg whirled, faltering, and Jim bore in to wind it up.

He made it the same kind of methodical punishment Berg had inflicted on old Walking Crow. He cut the man's face into ribbons. Shouts told him that the fracas had not passed unnoticed. Not caring to meet the score or more of tough hands that worked in the scattered cannery, Jim sent in his sleeping powder. He watched Berg go limp.

"That," Jim said, as he swung into the saddle, "was for old Walking Crow!"

He pounded up the lead-in to the country road. But instead of turning east toward Tooele again, he turned west toward the town of Owyhee. In town he left his horse at the hitch rack in front of the office of the Indian Commissioner and went in to see his old friend, Dave Rankin. They talked for nearly an hour, then Jim leaned back in his chair and smoked while Rankin labored with pen and ink over a paper. When he



had finished his work, Rankin folded the paper and handed it to Jim.

"There you are. An agreement between Lew Barlow and the seven tribes wherein Barlow grants their people perpetual rights to cross his land at any point and at any time they choose, and concedes their right to sell their catch to any other buyer who cares to make an offer. That would bring great happiness to a lot of Indians, if only Lew Barlow's signature was on it. I been trying to get it on something of the kind for a long time!"

"I'll get it," Jim said softly.

"You're right about this, Jim," Rankin resumed. "I've already started the legal steps to break Barlow's hold, but such things move slower than molasses. Even so,

there's no real assurance we can ever bust him out of there. It'd be hard to prove in the courts what any fool can plainly see, that he's robbing the Indians blind. The redskins're getting too proddy to wait for that kind of relief, even if they had any respect left for white law. So if you can file that document with me, all signed up proper, danged if I'm going to ask any foolish questions!"

Jim thanked Rankin and rode back to Tooele. That night he sat beside Sammy Horse in the longhouse and through him talked with the redmen. He saw bleakly that they were not comforted by his proposals, were not hopeful of any success. The Indians had lived only a few years under the whites' "civilization"; they had lived for ages under their own simple precepts of strength and force. They knew they were yet strong but soon would be weak. Their cold, simple logic told them what to do.

"Wait one more sun!" Jim begged, through Sammy Horse.

The tribal heads thought about it, passively and at length, then answered that since he was their friend he should have his wish.

That night fire swept over the camp grounds. A fire that started in the dried grass to the windward and raced through the cloistered teepees like mad horses. The redmen were not quite sure how it had started, but they had their suspicions. Jim Calloway did not speak of the white man he had seen slink away when he came out of the guest teepee to investigate the shouts of the bucks and the screams of the squaws and children.

The night dippers came in at dawn and were replaced on the rocks by bitter and sullen men. Grass fires were no new thing, and Jim knew it was only the promise their chiefs had made to him that kept the Indians from starting their revenge immediately. So the braves kept, instead, to their platforms and their dip nets to take their share of the food the River Goddess had provided.

Jim went out on the rocks with them and stood in the spray with a dip net, for he loved this wild contest with the river and was one of the few white men to enjoy the privilege. The sun rose and the air warmed.

Suddenly a buck screamed.

It was a buck on Jim's rock. The white man turned to see him flail his arms and pitch from his platform into the swirling river. In the same instant a gunshot cracked through the roar of the rapids.

A hundred eyes, bloodshot with emotion, turned upon the platform from which the buck had disappeared. Jim and Sammy Horse ran down to it and saw the few telltale drips of blood. In almost a single movement the Indians laid down their dip nets.

"Wait!" Jim shouted.

He was answered with stony silence. He knew that nothing could hold them for long. Blood had been spilled on the fishing grounds. In addition to their personal outrage, that would enrage the River Goddess and next season the bluebacks and steelheads would not run. Only the blood of the man who had let the blood could appease her.

Jim was fighting desperately to gain time. There was little chance of the Indians catching the sniper who had committed the murder. It was now after ten, and Barlow's buyer was due at eleven. Jim had a strong hunch that Barlow himself would be along. The cannery operator would want to see what effect he was producing on the Indians, to build his further tactics and to prepare his defenses in case he had succeeded in bringing them to the breaking point.

"Give me another hour!" Jim begged Sammy Horse. "You know I've been waiting for Barlow to come here, as he must."

The chief's eyes were cold and level. At long last he grunted: "One more hour."

The Indians did not resume fishing. They sat on their dip nets and waited. Jim zigzagged his way back over the cable system to the shore. He wanted to be there, and without any Indians, if Barlow showed up.

At exactly eleven Jim saw the spring wagon with the bays pull over a distant rise. He grew tense. There were two men in the seat, all right, and he saw presently that the passenger was Lew Barlow. Jim waited by the guyed pole that was the shore anchor of the line to the first rock. The wagon pulled up. Pete Berg, his face battered, glared at him. Jim noted that both he and Barlow were armed.

Barlow swung down. "Calloway," he roared, "it looks like you're trespassin' on my land. You light a shuck out o' here!"

"You're going over onto the rocks with me, Barlow," Jim returned. "The redskins over there want to have a little powwow with you."

Barlow's eyes were scornful. "You think I'm fool enough to go over there to that pack of savages?" he demanded.

"I know you'll get gut-shot if you don't go!" Jim answered. His six-gun had appeared in his hand. It leveled on Barlow, and Jim moved so that Berg was also within easy range. "You gents drop your hardware."

After a moment's hesitation the other two obeyed. Jim tossed the weapons on into the tall grass where they could not be readily located.

"I'll have the law on you for this!" Barlow threatened.

"I'll take a chance on that." Jim lashed Berg securely to a wagon wheel. "Be calm and quiet while we're gone," he advised. "If you spook them bays you're sure going to have yourself a ride!"

He prodded his gun into Barlow's ribs and forced the cannery operator to move to the tight line. They climbed to the loading platform. The carriage was a two-by-five wood box suspended from two steel wheels that ran on the cable. A light tow-line stretched from the rock. Jim prodded Barlow into the box. It was big enough for only one of them.

"Wait!" Barlow gasped, noticing that Jim did not follow him. "I'm not going over to them Siwashes by myself! They'd kill me!"

"Wouldn't they, though?" Jim taunted. With a grin he signaled the Indians on the far rock to start pull-

ing. When Barlow had climbed out groggily on the far side, Jim pulled the conveyor back and had himself pulled over. "This is only a way point," he told him. "This trip we're going to cross a real patch of water."

The next cable, a good two hundred feet long, spanned a deeply cut channel of evil reputation. Its waters raced and pitched like a mad thing. An occasional Indian had slipped into it, never to be seen from the instant he struck the water. Jim saw Barlow blanch again. It was on this stretch that Jim had planned to make his big play, and he had deliberately rigged the line with two conveyors. He prodded Barlow toward the rig.

Lew Barlow's face was twitching convulsively. "You can kill me here, damn you!" he roared. "I ain't going out over that water!"

"Don't think I won't kill you!" Jim answered cheerfully. "Or I'll turn you over to the Indians on this rock we're on! Better do what I say, Barlow. We only want to bargain with you. You're a smart man, and maybe you can talk your way out o' this!"

Barlow meditated, striking like a fish at Jim's bait. Lew Barlow had been in tight places before and got out of them. He climbed groggily into the conveyor, with Jim getting into the one coupled behind. The Indians on the far rock began pulling, and they knew how to pull to make the tight line sway and buck. Riding close behind Barlow, Jim could see the cannery operator's hands clutching at the box sides. Halfway across the raging channel the movement ceased.

From his shirt pocket Jim took the paper Dave Rankin, the Indian Commissioner, had prepared for him, and an indelible pencil. He read the document to Lew Barlow.

"Now," he wound up, "I don't figure to influence you about signing this paper. I want you to make up your own mind. It's already signed by the marks of the seven chiefs and witnessed by Dave Rankin and me. I'm going to leave the paper and the pencil with you. Then I'm going to uncouple and have them pull *me* back to the rock we started from. You can be alone out here to think."

He shoved the paper and pencil into Barlow's hand. "Just remember there's some redmen on the end of this towline who'd plumb love to chop loose the whole rigging. Men willing to hang for their tribes, Barlow!" He pointed at the boiling river, seventy feet beneath them.

He had uncoupled his half of the rig, and now he signaled the Indians to pull him back. His eyes never left Barlow. He saw the cannery man move a hand angrily as if to throw the paper into the river, saw signs of a mental struggle as Barlow changed his mind. Barlow sent his gaze to the far rock where a hundred bronzed faces watched him intently. He knew that any one of those primitive men would gladly cut the fastenings, once Calloway was safely off the tight line. Only they could pull him in. Jim chuckled as he saw Barlow cast another look at the river.

"Wait, Calloway!" Barlow shouted. "Have 'em haul me back!"

"I'll sign the blasted paper! Have 'em pull me into the rock, where I can write!"

"You'll sign before they pull you an inch!" Jim told him.

With a curse, Barlow signed the document and shoved it at Jim. Jim examined it to make certain there had been no trick.

"One thing more," he said, before he gave the signal. "Dave Rankin tells me this document might not be considered legal, in case you're thinking about contesting it after you get out of this tight. But I don't think you will. Rankin's against you. He's started legal proceedings to break your grip on Tooele. Besides, an Indian was murdered on these rocks, today. Maybe your man only meant to spook the bucks, but one was hit. Whether or not the lead killed him, it knocked him off his platform into the river. That murder can be pinned on you. And maybe the Indians *won't* take just this paper in payment for the blood you spilled on their fishing grounds!" Slowly

the Indians pulled them in to the rock.

It happened there, all in an instant. By his own hand Lew Barlow removed the last chance of the validity of his agreement with the seven tribes ever being questioned. Though not intentionally. As the conveyors touched the rock, Jim climbed out gingerly. In a panic of desire to feel the solid footing of the rock again, Barlow heaved himself to his knees. The conveyor lurched dangerously.

"Sit down, you fool!" Jim shouted.

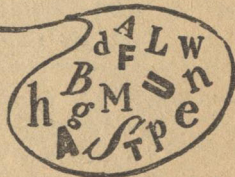
Too late. The pitching only served to rattle Barlow further. He clawed for the line overhead and missed it a foot. The conveyor tilted abruptly and spilled him into the air. Barlow emitted one long, final scream before he disappeared into the swirling gut.

On the far rock Sammy Horse looked at his braves, and for the first time in weeks there were smiles on the bronze faces. The River Goddess had taken matters into her own hands. She herself had sponged the blood from the fishing grounds.

THE END



Below are 15 scrambled words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on 'em? Answers on page 130.



- | | | |
|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| 1. Tafies | 6. Rubor | 11. Knousehub |
| 2. Realygin | 7. Ekatsburg | 12. Hugnawk |
| 3. Nadanban | 8. Falofub | 13. Lopebu |
| 4. Debril | 9. Rede | 14. Reset |
| 5. Woodnottoc | 10. Asme | 15. Ehid |



The hospitality of those Early California Dons would be repaid with merciless betrayal unless Mark Parnell could unmask the traitor among Jeremiah Salter's intrepid

SCOUTS OF EMPIRE

by LEE E. WELLS

I

TRouble had been brewing from the day the trappers had crossed the last great chains of mountains and astounded the Mexicans in California. Mark Parnell had felt it, had seen it. True enough, Jeremiah Salter's little band had been well received by the padres in the missions, but the soldiers were something else.

Mark leaned against the tree just outside the village and watched the coach and its Indian outriders ap-

proach. A lean, bronzed, tall man, dressed in tattered, trail-worn buckskins, it was hard to believe that a scant year before he had been a farmer lad in Ohio. Heavy sheath knife rested in a scabbard at his broad belt. Long rifle and flintlock pistol were back at the San Gabriel Mission.

By turning his head, Mark could see the mission raised against the soft California sky. Peaceful, this country, he thought wryly, good

farming country. But what would it matter if the Mexicans threw the whole group into jail or sent them down to Mexico City where no one could reach them? Already Capitan Juan Duron y Mendez, the arrogant, handsome commander of the local cavalry company, had hinted at imprisonment.

"He waits for a chance," Mark said sourly. "Wagh! 'Twould be a new medal to hang on his chest."

The coach had come closer now and Mark's attention centered on it. He had a glimpse of a lacy black mantilla as the coach wheeled by. The Indians gave Mark a quick, harsh glance in passing and their hands dropped to pistols tucked into wide red sashes.

But Mark was held spellbound by his single swift glimpse of the passenger. Dark limpid eyes in a softly oval, olive face had flashed at him. Red lips had parted in a smile that a mantilla had quickly covered. Mark half turned, looking after the rumbling coach, heart in his mouth. Never had he seen so beautiful a woman.

Hardly of his own volition, he started back into the village after the coach, walking with the long strides of the mountaineer. Wide lips broke the natural solemnity of his face which was broad, heavy-boned at jaw and temples. Wide, brown eyes looked out fairly and squarely on the world, but with a thoughtful reserve.

The coach had halted directly across from the village cantina. The door swung open and a servant

helped the girl to the ground. A dumpy figure in a voluminous black dress followed her and the two women disappeared into the home of the village *alcalde*.

The armed Indian guards squatted on the ground and rolled cigarettes. A few curious villagers clustered in a whispering group. Mark loafed near the coach, beginning to feel like a fool. Yet a girl like that was worth seeing again.

A sudden shout of coarse laughter came from the cantina. Jim Barlow, blacksmith for Jeremiah Salter, appeared in the doorway. Mark tensed. Since Salt Lake, Barlow had been his tormenter. All across the wide Mojave Desert and over the chain of mountains, the blacksmith had tried to make Mark the butt of his cruel, dangerous jokes. Twice knives had flashed, but Salter had stepped between the two men.

Mark moved out of the drunken smith's line of vision. He wanted no showdown yet. Barlow stood in the doorway, bulky body swaying, muddy eyes bloodshot. His bullet head hung low as he looked heavily around. His big hands supported his weight against the thick door frame. At that moment, the *alcalde*'s door opened and the two women appeared.

Mark forgot Barlow. The girl had covered her face with the black net veil but still her beauty was striking. She was small and slender, like an Indian lance. Raven black hair coiled low on a graceful neck.

The girl sensed Mark's stare and halted a brief second. Her eyes swept over him and Mark caught the

gleam of her teeth behind the veil as she smiled. The older woman spoke sharply and shoved the girl ahead, glaring at Mark, her dark, mole-touched face wrathful as a mountain storm. Flushing, Mark started to turn away.

Barlow's heavy voice brought him whirling around. He, too, had seen the girl. Pushing away from the door, he started an erratic march across the street to the coach.

"Hey, señorita!" he shouted. "How about a kiss for a real curly wolf fresh from the mountains!"

Mark glanced toward the coach. The girl was already inside, the duenna following her. Barlow belovied another insulting invitation, big arms reaching out to grasp the door handle. Mark's face flamed red and he jumped forward.

The Indians sprang toward Barlow, lithe as tigers. Their pistols swept from the sashes. Barlow saw the move and instantly whirled, crouching. His skinning knife jumped into his hand and his muddy eyes lighted. Thick lips parted in a crooked grin.

"Wagh! Injuns! Count coup for Jim Barlow!"

Mark reached him as the pistol locks clicked. Mark's fingers grabbed the greasy buckskin shirt and he whirled Barlow around. The blacksmith struck upward with his knife. Mark twisted aside and the blade missed him by a scant inch. His own fist cracked loudly off the rocky chin. Barlow's eyes rolled back in his head and his fingers opened convulsively.

The knife dropped to the dust, and the blacksmith folded in upon himself. His weight wrenched his shirt free of Mark's fingers and he sank in a heap to the ground. Mark looked up.

The Indians held their cocked pistols on him but their beady eyes cut uncertainly to the coach for instructions. The girl had thrust her head and shoulders out of the big window.

"Sancho! Pedro! It is finished!"

The Indians bowed and replaced their weapons. The girl looked straight at Mark, dark eyes soft again. The lace mantilla had dropped from her face. Straight black brows brought out the loveliness of her eyes.

"Señor, it is to thank you."

"I—that is, I reckon there's none due," Mark stammered.

The girl laughed. "I think so. You are very strong, señor. You are one of the Americanos that come to San Gabriel?"

"Yes. I'm with Jeremiah Salter's party."

"Bueno!" she smiled. "Then we shall meet again tomorrow."

"Carlota!" the old woman cut in angrily. "To speak to men is not seemly."

"Si, Nita." The girl nodded and withdrew. The driver whipped up the horses and the big coach wheeled away in a cloud of dust, Sancho and Pedro riding after it.

Mark stood rooted but he jumped when a dry voice spoke behind him. "For a clark, you're a real he-coon. Ye'd best be on your way afore this drunken hulk comes around with murder in his crooked brain."

Mark turned. Moses Larsen, one of the trappers, grinned at him and rubbed bony fingers along a lean jaw. He looked after the coach and then one eyelid closed slowly in a prodigious wink. Mark flushed and walked away, back toward the mission.

As his long strides took him down the dusty road he kept seeing the face of the unknown girl in the coach. He knew her to be from one of the great haciendas in the neighborhood, probably one of the local nobility. His wide lips broke into a twisted grin. Imagine Mark Parnell, farmer's son from Ashtabula, Ohio, falling in love with the daughter of a don!

Still it would be all of a piece with the swift pace of events in Mark's life. First, he had come west and joined the Mountain Men, the fur brigade that roamed the whole length of the great Rockies. His apprenticeship had been over by the time he went to the Rendezvous at the Salt Lake. It was there that Jeremiah Salter had chosen him to act as account keeper for the expedition the young leader had in mind.

Salter had often thought about a quicker way of getting the beaver fur, or plew, to market. Months were lost in the long trek back to St. Louis by river or pack train. But if Salter could blaze a trail over the unknown, unmapped deserts to California, then the shipments could go west to the American sea captains at San Pedro or San Diego. Time would be saved and the profit greater.

The Mexicans themselves were another problem. They were jealous of their California, fearing that an influx of Americans would mean the eventual loss of the rich province. They had considered the waterless deserts and grim mountains to the east as sufficient barriers to keep "*los Americanos*" out. Mark vividly remembered the look of stunned consternation on the faces of the dons when the ragged little band came riding into San Bernardino. Now the trappers waited for word from Governor Perez and their position was delicate. Any little thing might send them to long years of prison in Mexico City. But, with luck, the Mexican ports here in California would be opened to the fur brigades.

II

Mark waited grimly in the big work yard of the mission. He momentarily expected Jim Barlow to come storming in, looking for a settlement to the quarrel started in the village street. But when the western sun sank low beyond the tree tops and Barlow still had not appeared Mark began to feel impatient.

He came to his feet when he heard the fast thrum of hoof beats outside the gate. Unconsciously his hand touched the heavy knife haft in his belt. His face tightened as he looked toward the gate.

He caught a flash of scarlet and then Captain Mendez pulled his mount to a sliding halt just in front of Mark. The captain smiled arrogantly down at the American and his fingers touched his black waxed

mustache. He was hawk-faced and dark-eyed, filled with an overweening pride.

"Señor, I have just come from the Cordoba hacienda. I have heard of the afternoon."

"Yes?" Mark asked.

"You have impress' the Señorita Carlota with the speed of your muscle, señor."

"Oh, the girl." Mark flushed. "I reckon what I did wasn't much. Them Indian guards of hers would have handled Barlow."

"Ah, Señor, you understand that!" Mendez smiled crookedly. "Then we see eye to eye. I tell that to Don Cordoba and I say it again to the señorita."

"You did?" Mark asked dryly. His eyes narrowed. "Why all the fuss and feathers rushing in here, then?"

Mendez lost his smile and again the gantleted hand rested on his hip. He spoke formally and distantly. "It is to thank you, señor, for your service—no matter how slight—to the Señorita Cordoba. It is to suggest, señor, that you take no advantage of the situation at the fiesta tomorrow afternoon."

Mark stared at him, lost for a moment. Then his eyes lighted and he chuckled. "I see how your stick floats. You're warning me to leave the lady very much alone."

"Crudely spoken, si." Mendez nodded.

Mark's grin still split his face. He tapped Mendez's scarlet uniformed knee for emphasis. "Captain, you have a mighty lot to learn about Americans. They don't shine to

warnings. They look where they please and talk to whom they please. Of course, if the lady figures I'm not proper company, then I won't force myself on her."

Mendez jerked his knee away. His face flushed and his fist clenched. "I warn you, señor, because of your service today. *Buenas noches, señor!*"

He jabbed the horse with big, cruel spurs and the animal wheeled. Gravel flicked in Mark's face as Mendez rode pellmell out of the mission yard. Mark was still grinning when he turned to the dining room at the sound of the bell.

Fat Padre Juan sat at the head of the table, face beaming like a secondary sun. At his right Jeremiah Salter toyed with a glass of water. His blue eyes held the chill of mountain snow, and one brow bore the deep scars of a bear's claw. On his other side sat Fra Felipe, eyes staring gloomily into his plate while mild Harlan Roberts spoke of the work of the mission.

Mark seated himself at the end of the table. Silence held the men as they ate. Beyond the open, barred windows the muted life of the mission went its somnolent way. Abruptly Mark heard a coarse shout and a ripping oath. He looked up, startled.

Salter's face had gone white, the lips pinched. He dropped his knife and had come part way to his feet when the door burst open. James Barlow staggered in, roaring drunk. His muddy eyes centered on the stone jar of brandy before Padre Juan. Grinning thickly, he lurched forward.

Amazement seemed to hold Salters rigid. Mark pushed away from the table, expecting trouble. Barlow had eyes only for the brandy. His thick fingers scooped it up. With a crashing blow, he broke the neck on the edge of the table. He tilted the jar to his lips and brandy escaped down over his chin and beard.

Salters found his voice. "You beast of Baal!" he gasped. His blow knocked the jug out of Barlow's hands. It sailed through the air and crashed in a thousand fragments against the far wall.

The giant blinked into the blazing,



wrathful face. The scar in Salter's eyebrow became a livid white and his whole body trembled.

"Get him out and tie him up!" he ordered.

Mark's long arms dropped around Barlow and pinned the man's arms to his side. Barlow ripped out another oath and started flinging his body around. Mark whipped off his feet and it was all he could do to keep his grip. Roberts stepped in, grim-faced. His pistol butt cracked on Barlow's head, and the man sank to the floor.

Salter spoke through tight lips to Padre Juan. "How do you punish rebellious *Indios*?"

The padre shook his head. "We

turn them over to the soldiers. Captain Mendez has them flogged."

"Then I'll use that post," snapped Salter. "This devil's spawn has been long overdue for a flogging."

At the leader's order Mark helped Roberts carry Barlow outside into the mission yard and down the road to the big, heavy stake standing in a circle of hard-packed ground. Barlow recovered consciousness just as the heavy iron manacles were clamped around his wrists. His arms circled the post about his head, his face to the wood. He started cursing in a sick, monotonous voice.

Mark waited for Salter who had gone to the leather shop. The leader reappeared with a short knouted scourge like the cat-o'-nine-tails of the warships. Mark saw that Salter's anger still rode him. Nevertheless Mark halted him.

"There is no need for the cat," he said. "Barlow but hunted for me. If you would let us fight out our ill-will, matters will be at an end."

Salter had thrown off the detaining hand. Now he stopped, turned, and took a few steps back to Mark. "Think you I punish Barlow because you and he glare like two Kilkenny cats?"

"I . . . well, he would not have come into the room had he not sought me," Mark answered lamely.

Salter's eyes flashed.

"Mark Parnell, I punish Barlow for many reasons, none of them having aught to do with you. He is drunk. He swears. This afternoon he insulted a high-born lady of the district. We are in Mexico, sir! Bar-

low endangers all of us with each devil's trick he does. I'll have no more of it."

He whirled sharply on his heel and strode toward the flogging post. Mark shrugged and turned away, walking thoughtfully toward his room.

By morning, the excitement of the flogging had quieted. Mark had a brief glimpse of Barlow and he seemed chastened, though sullen. Mark noticed that Salter had taken the added precaution of disarming the giant smith. Soon after the morning meal, the trappers saddled up and rode out of the mission yard toward the Cordoba hacienda.

Jeremiah Salter, tattered buckskins cleaned, long hair combed over his shoulders, led the way. Mark rode close behind him and worried about the big patches in his own shirt sleeves and back. The rest of the company strung out, bearded faces freshly washed, trail-worn clothing as clean as a day's hard scrubbing could make it.

They cut around the village and headed north and west to the rancho of the Cordobas. Again Mark noticed the great spread of the land, the rich fields and pastures, the grazing cattle.

The great rolling sward below the low tile-roofed hacienda was filled with people. In the back, toward the quarters of the vaqueros, the peasant folk of the district stamped and swung in an intricate dance. A rippling, fast rhythm came down wind to the trappers.

Mark followed Salter and Roberts as they pushed their way through a

crowd of dark, friendly people. Everywhere gleaming smiles met them. Somewhere behind the trio, the rest of the trappers already mingled with the vaqueros and their people. Salter circled the hacienda to the front. An old man, dressed resplendently in fawn-colored bolero jacket with gold thread pipings came forward to meet them.

"Señors, my house is your house. . . . You are Señor Salter?" he addressed the leader.

Cordoba was of medium height, trim and quick for all his age. It was only when Mark's eyes left his wide shoulders and slim, sash-encircled hips and lifted to the wrinkled, hawk face that he realized the man must be well beyond sixty. Soft black eyes snapped and laughed from a tan face topped by a thick mane of white hair.

The don courteously acknowledged Roberts and smiled when he bowed to Mark. "I have heard of these young one. You are twice welcome, Señor Parnell."

He led them into the patio. Here were the aristocracy of the neighborhood, but Mark saw no one but Carlota.

She acknowledged the introduction with a curtsy and a fleeting, cool smile, demurely inquiring his good health. With difficulty Mark freed his eyes from the soft oval face. Just behind her Captain Mendez frowned and restlessly shifted his weight from one uniformed leg to the other.

Mark grinned and turned again to the girl. A string band had struck

up a dance tune and Mark, bowing, extended his arm. Carlota looked startled for a moment, then accepted. Mark moved away with her despite Mendez' sudden step forward. The captain caught himself but still his gaze darkly followed the couple through the crowd.

Mark attempted only a few steps. It was a dance new and strange to him. At last he halted, made a slight gesture of defeat.

"It's beyond me, señorita. Wagh, no mountain man was ever good on the dance floor unless it was hoedown or reel. I would prize it highly did you show me the rancho."

The girl smiled and Mark felt his chest get tight again. She cast a quick glance around and her smile grew wider, roguish.

"It is not done, señor. My duenna will be very angry. But I show you. Come."

They slipped out of the crowd and through the wide gates, working their way beyond the crowd into a flower garden. Mark walked silently beside Carlota, finding himself tongue-tied. She chatted gaily, telling him about the rancho. They came to a bench placed among high rose bushes and Carlota's pace slowed. Mark led her to the bench and sat down.

"You like our country?" Carlota asked.

"Yes, I've seen nothing like it before. I'd be right proud to have a rancho like this—shucks, even handle it for someone. I'm a mountain man, but I reckon real deep down it's the soil and growing things that call me."

"We raise cattle mostly, for hides

and tallow. Your Americano sea captains pick them up at San Diego or San Pedro. . . . Señor, we cannot be here long. I must thank you for what you did for me."

"It was nothing. Your Indians could have taken care of Barlow."

"Si, si—but you did instead. For that I thank you."

"Barlow will be a good coon from now on," Mark smiled. "I reckon he—" He broke off abruptly for Carlota, staring over his shoulder, looked suddenly frightened. Mark turned. He had time only to get a glimpse of a scarlet uniform, and then a glove slapped him stingingly across the eyes.

Mark jerked back. Then he recovered himself. Mendez stood over him, one heavy glove still held in his clenched fist. His mustache quivered with his anger.

Mark acted without thought, coming to his feet in a single flowing motion. His fist lashed out, caught Mendez square on the hooked nose. The captain's head snapped back, his booted feet did a quick jig step and then tangled. He landed sitting in the path, blood streaming out of his nose.

Words caught in Mendez' throat so that only an animallike snarl sounded. He came up on one knee, face distorted. His hand shot inside his uniform blouse and snaked out holding a small, deadly pistol. Mark twisted sideways as the gun spat wickedly.

Carlota screamed and Mark but dimly heard it. Snatching the pistol from Mendez' hand, he jerked the man to his feet. His fist lashed back

to put a definite end to the argument. Suddenly bushes crashed beside him and giant hands circled his throat. Mark lost his grip on Mendez's coat. As he clawed upward to remove the choking fingers that tightened inexorably around his neck he had a contorted glimpse of Jim Barlow's heavy, coarse features.

III

Mark felt himself lifted from the ground. He tried to twist around, but couldn't. He kicked back viciously but Barlow moved slightly, avoiding the blow. The world began to spin as Mark struggled for breath. He still clawed at the fingers that held his throat in a vise.

Abruptly the fingers were gone. Mark fell and lay gasping for air. In a moment, his brain cleared and he raised his head. The guests of the hacienda had crowded in a milling circle around him. Jeremiah Salter stood close by but Barlow had disappeared. Captain Mendez brushed the dust off his uniform and glared at Mark. Carlota was nowhere in sight.

Salter waited until Mark had struggled to his feet. Then he spoke in cold, clipped tones. "I had trusted you above the rest to keep out of trouble. Now I find you brawling like the most ignorant of men. You have insulted Captain Mendez, and you have broken one of the most serious customs of the country in bringing the Señorita Cordoba out here away from her duenna. I demand your apology here and now to Captain Mendez."

Mark flushed. "But he struck me!"

"It was no more than your due," Salter blazed. "Captain Mendez struck because the honor of the Cordobas had been smirched. Your apologies to him, sir!"

Mark wanted to tell Salter to go to blazes. But despite his anger, he realized that he had placed the leader in a difficult position. He shrugged and turned to Mendez.

"My apologies to you, sir, sincere and humble. Any insult to the Cordobas or to you was done in ignorance. It shall not happen again."

Mendez had to speak around a bloodstained handkerchief that he held to his nose. Still, by some strange, manner, his voice remained cold and arrogant. He bowed stiffly.

"I accept the plea of ignorance for the Cordobas. But the blow, señor, is something else. That shall be settled only by duello."

"Not as long as I am here!" Salter snapped.

Mendez smiled and bowed again. "Señor, you are not to be here. You leave immediately for San Diego with Lieutenant Garces. His Excellency, Governor Perez, has asked your instant presence."

Salter's jaw dropped open, then snapped shut. "That is news I've waited, sir. But Parnell and the rest of my men will have orders to fight no duels. Mr. Roberts will be in charge, captain, and any complaints you have must be made to him."

Mendez bowed. "A quick way to save a tattered honor, señor. You will prepare instantly for the journey to San Diego?"

Salter nodded. "Mark, round up

the men. Our party's over."

He pushed through the crowd. Mark gingerly felt his bruised throat and followed Salter through the lane the crowd made. He wondered what had happened to Barlow and tried to puzzle out what chance had brought the blacksmith to the rose-bushes.

The trappers were gathered and the ride back to the mission was made in grim silence. Jeremiah Salter wrapped himself in his own thoughts. The men were surly because they had been pulled so suddenly away from the fiesta. Jim Barlow rode with a slight smirk on his thick lips and Mark caught a few of the man's questioning glances. But Mark let no expression show on his face.

At the mission, Salter hurried to his quarters to pack his few belongings for the trip to San Diego. He took his leave of the padres and made arrangements for his men. Roberts and Mark were given his last-minute instructions.

A loud clattering sounded in the courtyard and Lieutenant Garces' troop of cavalymen wheeled and came to attention. They had provided a stout bay for Salter and he swung into the saddle. The trappers stood in a silent, watchful circle, distrustful because their leader was leaving them. Lieutenant Garces mounted, spoke a curt word, and the troop wheeled and cantered out through the gates.

Instantly the trappers milled forward, circling Roberts, asking questions, making dire predictions of

what the dons would do to Salter. Finally Roberts raised his arms, calling for attention.

"Jeremiah will fare well in San Diego so long as we keep in order here. There has been trouble enough already and we can have no more. None of you will go to the village without permission. The mission wine is good and there will be no need for anyone to leave here."

Barlow, at the back of the crowd, laughed jeeringly. "Listen to the clark! His stick floats to head us. Wagh! This coon goes his own way."

Hitching up his trousers, he deliberately strolled toward the gates. Roberts' face had turned paper white. Mark, with an angry oath, turned to stop the blacksmith, but Roberts held him back.

"Not now, Mark."

"It's now, or you'll never control the rest."

Roberts stubbornly shook his head. "Not now. I'll have no fight less than ten minutes after Jeremiah's gone. I'll go after him later."

Mark pulled angrily away but Roberts again stopped him with a curt order. By now Barlow had reached the mission gates. He stopped there, grinned over his shoulder and then carefully walked through the gates and out of sight. Mark saw the other trappers eye one another, shift restlessly. Roberts went on with assignments and orders as though nothing had happened.

Mark went to his room and threw himself on his cot. In about half an hour, he heard Roberts' step outside his door. A light tap sounded.



Mark caught only a glimpse of a scarlet uniform before a glove struck him stingingly across the eyes.

Roberts stood in the passage, his face troubled.

"I'm going after Barlow," he said.

It was more than an hour before Roberts returned. He was alone and his eyes showed worry.

"I couldn't find him," he answered Mark's unspoken question. "I doubt he's in the village."

Mark rubbed his jaw. "There's no place else where he would go. I reckon he hid until you gave up the search."

"That's not like Barlow." Roberts

shook his head. "I expected a fight before I brought him back."

"Let me search," Mark said suddenly. "Your job is here and I'll not be gone long."

Roberts started to protest and then changed his mind. Mark started off toward the village at a rapid pace.

He reached the village and went first to the cantina. Barlow wasn't there and a careful, painful questioning of the proprietor disclosed that the blacksmith had not visited the place. Mark turned away, puzzled. He thought of the huts along the edge

of the village where the Indians lived.

He had halted just inside the doorway of the cantina, facing Mendez's quarters. His eyes rested absently on the building, not actually seeing it until Captain Mendez appeared. The man seemed immensely pleased with himself. He said something over his shoulder to someone not yet in sight.

Mark watched him, then stiffened as Jim Barlow came out of the house! The blacksmith had a pleased grin crevicing his whiskers. He hitched up his buckskin trousers and turned toward the mission. Mark stood still, held by surprise. He took a half step, then halted, uncertain.

Barlow's back looked confident and full of swagger as he walked toward the mission. Mark frowned, puzzled. What had brought the proud captain of the Mexican cavalry into the company of the drunken, quarrelsome blacksmith of the Americans? It was wrong, all wrong.

Mark shook his head and followed after Barlow. He made no attempt to catch up with the man. The blacksmith went directly to the mission yard and disappeared within the gates. Mark shrugged and quickened his step.

IV

Barlow remained close to the mission, seeming to find his place again among the trappers. Roberts had done nothing to challenge him, evidently glad that the incident had worked itself out in its own way.

But Mark feared the peace as false and treacherous. Barlow would be planning some other loud deviltry and Mark awaited the explosion.

It didn't come. Roberts kept Mark busy on the ledgers for more than a day, and another passed in checking each man's equipment so that it could be replaced when Jeremiah Salter was ready to buy from the dons.

That night Mark went to his little cubicle just after sundown. He was tired and he threw himself on his cot, making no move to light the long candles on the low table against one wall. He lay half asleep for some time, then rolled over and rested his head on one hand, elbow propped against the bed. He could see out through the grilled window into the dark mission yard.

Suddenly he straightened. He had been looking blank-eyed at the dark Indian barracks. A flitting shadow that had not been there a moment before resolved itself into a crouching man. Mark watched him halt and listen at the corner of the building and then dart across the moonlit space to the gate, open it and disappear.

Mark jumped off the cot. He grabbed knife and pistol from the table and shoved them in his belt. Jim Barlow had at last made his move. Mark slipped silently out the door and went down the passage without arousing anyone.

He cut across the yard to the gate. It was still slightly ajar. Outside the mission walls he looked toward the village. He thought he saw Barlow far down the road but couldn't

be certain because of the tricks the moonlight played with shadows.

Mark moved away from the gates, scouting down the road toward the village. He prowled along the street, searching the shadows between buildings, casting quick glances up and down the street. He halted uncertainly before the cantina and then pushed open the door. The place was practically empty and Barlow was not in sight.

Esteban, the proprietor, blinked sleepily at Mark, then suddenly shot erect. He spread his hands in a voluble gesture.

"Señor Americano! The best wine, no?"

Mark shook his head. "No. Have you seen the big Americano with the thick beard?"

"*El Gigante?* No, señor, not for many days."

Esteban watched narrowly as Mark moved to the counter.

"He causes us much trouble, Esteban," Mark explained. "We must watch him. If you know anything about him—" He let the question trail off unfinished.

The little brown face showed suspicion for a moment, then cleared. Esteban leaned closer to Mark, glancing at a vaquero who slept soundly at a far table.

"Señor, there is always talk. These *Señor Gigante*, I have hear he is too much with *los Indios*. He talk much, he drink much weeth them. I have hear he go to the Hacienda Cordoba. That is bad, señor."

Mark drummed his fingers on the counter. He tried a new angle. "Has he been with Capitan Mendez?"

Esteban looked startled. He drew away, surprise and fear showing in his eyes. He shook his head vigorously. "No, señor. No, Capitan Mendez would never speak to such as him. Mendez is the fine caballero—of the blood."

Mark sighed. "Thanks, Esteban. Say nothing of this, eh?"

"That I promise."

Mark left the cantina and stood in the street again, considering. He had lost Barlow and there were probably a hundred places where the man could have gone. Mark realized that it would be useless to search for him tonight. Mendez and Barlow had come to some sort of agreement, for Mark could not forget how pleased both had looked when Barlow had slipped out of the captain's house. Mark struck his thigh with his palm and swore. Something ill was brewing.

Mark returned to the mission and his room. But he kept a watch on the gate and along toward morning Barlow slipped in. The man did not appear to be drunk. He moved as swiftly and as surely as he had when he left. Mark watched him slip into the door of the barracks and then lay back on his cot.

Late that afternoon just before sundown, Roberts eagerly rode in from the village. He sought out Mark right away. "We have an invite, friend Mark, you and I. The Cordobas ask our presence for the evening."

Mark grinned and hastened to his room. There was little to his preparations, too pitifully little. He

wished that he could dress as resplendently as Mendez in scarlet uniform and cockade hat with shining saber. Mark grinned at the thought. He hastily plastered his hair with water and combed it.

Roberts was waiting for him, a horse already saddled. Mark vaulted into the saddle and they rode at a quick canter toward the village. The way to the Cordoba hacienda seemed all too long to Mark but at last they were there.

Señor Cordoba made them expansively welcome. Leading them to his own den, he poured excellent brandy, toasting their good health, and the quick and successful return of Jeremiah Salter.

Then he placed his glass on the desk. Tugging at his white mustaches, he shot a quick glance at the two men from under his eyebrows. His voice was hesitant, embarrassed.

"Señors, I invite you here in friendship. But there is the other matter that must intrude. I apologize for aught that will mar the evening but this thing must be mentioned."

Mark moved uneasily. He wondered if the incident in the garden was to have other implications. Cordoba paced to a high window and back again. He turned, shrugging.

"It is about one of your number. We use many *Indios* here. They do much of the lesser work. Through strict discipline and the gentle teachings of the padres, we keep them at peace. They are happy and the work is done, you understand."

Mark and Roberts nodded, both wondering to what Cordoba was leading. The old man flushed

slightly, hesitated, and then continued.

"This concerns the one the *Indios* call *El Gigante*."

"Barlow!" Mark exclaimed.

"Si, that one. I have heard rumors, señors. This Barlow, he talk dangerous words to the *Indios*. He buys them too much of the wine and the brandy. He makes them dissatisfied with the Rancho Cordoba. That is not good."

Mark and Roberts stared disbelievingly at the old man. Mark spoke carefully. "You're sure of this?"

"But certain." Cordoba flung his hands wide. "Already I have noticed the orders are not received well. There is often delay so that my *segundos* and myself are angered. We have whipped one or two. It does no good."

Mark whistled. He spoke to Roberts. "This is serious."

"But why?" Roberts asked. "Is it just Barlow's deviltry? His want to cause trouble?"

"That, maybe," Mark answered, "and something else. He was flogged. He hates me. That's reason for you, and I have an idea there's something else. I'll tell you when I'm sure."

"I'll have him in chains," declared Roberts.

"Don't try it," Mark put in hastily. "Right now that might mean serious trouble with the other men. Something else: If Barlow is free I can watch him and trail him. I stand to learn why he causes trouble here. That in itself is strange, Roberts."

The door opened and a servant announced the dinner. Instantly Cordoba was all smiles.

"The distasteful words are said, señors. *Por Dios*, it was a task! You have been told about this *El Gigante*. I know you will handle the situation. Now we shall eat, eh? We shall enjoy ourselves, no?"

Still chatting amiably, he led them down a corridor to the spacious dining room. Señorita Cordoba smiled at Mark and again he was struck by her beauty.

The conversation was general for a while and then, during the wine, Mark had a chance to talk to Carlota. Roberts and Cordoba were deep in a discussion of American and Spanish customs.

"I do not see Captain Mendez," Mark said casually.

Carlota made a brief moué and shrugged her bare olive shoulders. "He was not invited."

"I thought maybe you and he—" Mark started, but her silvery laugh stopped him.

"Señor! That is funny, no? Capitan Mendez he has come often. He has looked at me like the very sick calf and once he has played the guitar outside my window. But that is all. Mendez is not one whom I encourage, no. But he is very difficult."

"Yes," Mark said dryly. "I can vouch for that."

Cordoba broke in with a question to Mark and the conversation became general again. Afterwards, they assembled in the big main room of the hacienda before the fireplace sur-

mounted by the Cordoba coat of arms. The mole-faced duenna joined them and Mark had no further opportunity to talk privately to the girl.

Carlota left them early and the men had another glass of wine around. Then Mark and Roberts took their leave, refusing Cordoba's offer of an escort of vaqueros. They rode regretfully away from the hacienda and soon its friendly lights disappeared behind a low rise of ground.

Roberts suddenly swore aloud in the night. "Leave it to Barlow to be mutinous! I swear I'll shoot the dog down the next time he so much as smiles at me."

Mark shook himself free of Carlota's spell. "Let's watch the sign, Roberts. I think I know which way Barlow's stick floats."

Early the next morning, Mendez and three of his men rode into the mission yard. Mendez did not dismount but summoned Roberts and Mark with an arrogant shout. Mark came out of his room and stood close by while Roberts talked to Mendez. The captain was very brief and to the point.

"There is trouble with the *Indios*. I have the belief that you Americanos are behind it."

"Why, in heaven's name?" Roberts demanded.

"Revolt, señor, a blow against the government of Mexico in California. The Indians would help you gain the province."

"Ridiculous!" Roberts snapped.

"We came to open a trade route for our furs. We're not invaders."

"I'll be judge of that, señor," Mendez spoke sharply. "I have orders for you. You Americanos will remain within the mission grounds. Any found outside will be imprisoned—if my men do not shoot first. I intend to crush the *Indios* and I'll not have you interfering."

Mark spoke in a casual drawl, still leaning against the door frame. "Captain Mendez, that sounds very heroic. I'm sure the señoritas will consider you the fine figure of an officer, mayhap one in particular, eh?"

Mendez drew up stiffly. "You speak nonsense, señor."

"Maybe," Mark grinned. "There's a lot of light dawned since you rode in. It explains many things. Does your order also apply to Jim Barlow, or hasn't his work been finished?"

Mendez's hand dropped to his pistol. His eyes flashed. Mark didn't move. "Leave it in the belt, captain. That nice uniform would be spoiled by Americano bullet holes."

For the first time Mendez saw the ring of silent trappers that had gathered. His lips twisted in a grimace but his hand dropped away from the pistol. He spat an order at his men and they wheeled out of the yard. Mark watched him go.

"Under arrest!" Roberts exclaimed. "Leading an Indian revolt! That stiff-backed idiot!"

"You read him wrong, Roberts," corrected Mark. "He's smart and we're the pawns in his game of love and kisses."

Word quickly came to the trappers, before the day was over, that the Indians actually were on the point of open revolt. The Hacienda Cordoba, according to the tales, had prepared for siege. The Indians had suddenly disappeared from the hacienda and the village and no one knew where they had gone. There was talk of a war council in some hidden canyon. Mark listened and waited, watching the gates. Jim Barlow was not in the mission.

Mark became more impatient and worried as the rumors mounted about the Indians. There had been some huts burned west of the village and a vaquero had been found, killed by a dozen knife thrusts. The mission Indians remained close to their quarters. Padre Juan lost his smile.

Suddenly Mark froze as he heard the clang of an anvil! Barlow had not come in the gate. Evidently he had come in over the high wall that enclosed the mission. Mark whirled around and walked with long strides toward the shops. Barlow looked up with a sly grin when Mark halted in the doorway of the smithy. The blacksmith worked a shoe.

"Where have you been?" Mark demanded.

"It ain't no part of your business," Barlow replied insolently.

"Know anything about the Indian trouble?"

"Why should I?" Barlow asked. He dropped the shoe and laid the hammer on the anvil.

"I have an answer for that," Mark replied. "You were paid by Cap-

tain Mendez to stir up trouble among the Cordoba Indians. You were paid well, probably, and it also meant a lot of liquor for you at the captain's expense. That pleased you."

"Go on," Barlow sneered. He edged around the anvil.

"You hate Salter because he had you flogged. You've hated me from the first day we met. All along you've tried to work me into a fight. You'll have your way, Barlow."

The blacksmith, grinned widely and started unlacing his buckskin shirt at the throat. "I've waited for this, you mewling bootlicker!" He jerked his shirt over his head. Muscles rippled along chest and arms as he stood erect again and threw the shirt in a corner. He flexed his arms.

"Ye talk too much, and ye know too much, Parnell. I'll break ye and silence ye."

Mark stepped out into the yard. "I aim for you to tell me when the Indians plan to strike at the Cordobas."

Barlow laughed. "Ye'll have to beat it from me then."

A shout sounded and trappers streamed out of the barracks. Mark had his shirt off. He looked lithe

and small beside the big bulk of the blacksmith. The trappers formed a ring quickly, leaving a wide cleared space around the two men. Harlan Roberts thrust himself through the circle, fright showing on his face.

"Stop it! No fight! Mark, come to your senses."

"Step back, Roberts," Mark said. "This fellow's been stirring up the Indians. He knows their plans and I intend to make him talk. He accepted Mendez's pesos for the job."

"Mendez! In the name of heaven, why?" Roberts gasped.

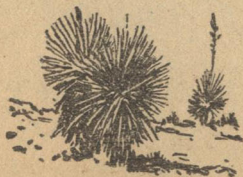
"The captain plans to rescue the hacienda from the Indians. He will be a hero and undoubtedly Carlota will fall into his arms. He'll be able to discredit us to the Mexican governor. Mendez plans well, but he cares little whom Indian knives might endanger. Barlow, you talking?"

"Make me," the smith taunted.

Mark nodded. He swept Roberts aside and the sinewy arms of two of the trappers held the protesting man so that he would not interfere. Mark flexed his arms. He eyed Barlow as the giant started circling.

Suddenly Barlow jumped. His clutching hands reached for Mark, the fingers sank into one shoulder. Mark twisted quickly and the grip was broken. He pivoted, caught Barlow around the waist, used his hip as leverage. His muscles bunched and Barlow upended, hit the ground with a thud.

Barlow scrambled to his feet and bored in. Mark fended off his blows for a moment and then a hammer fist cut low through his guard to



rip into his stomach. Mark doubled up. Instantly Barlow's steel fingers clamped on his arm and Mark felt himself jerked forward. Like lightning, Barlow's grip shifted and the mighty muscles bulged as he lifted Mark from his feet.

Mark gasped for breath, half dazed. He felt himself lifted higher and knew that Barlow planned to slam him to the ground. Mark's fingers locked in Barlow's thick hair and he yanked savagely. Barlow's head jerked back and he lost his balance. Both men fell.

They came to their feet and Barlow rushed at Mark again. Mark met him with a one-two punch to the jaw. Barlow staggered under it, but his fingers sank like hooks around Mark's neck. He held on despite the flurry of punches that Mark threw at him.

Mark tried to jerk away, but couldn't. Suddenly he turned his head and his strong teeth settled into Barlow's arm. Barlow howled and released his grip. There was a flurry of threshing bodies, a cloud of dust. When it settled Mark had a hammerlock on Barlow's thick arms, his legs held the man face down in the dust. Barlow kicked and squirmed, but Mark hung grimly on. His forearm swelled as he slowly brought Barlow's hand up toward the back of his neck.

"Where is the Indian council?" he gritted.

Barlow bit his lip against the pain but he said nothing and Mark exerted more pressure. "The bond will break soon," he warned.

Barlow tried to escape again but

couldn't. He twisted savagely and there was a muffled crack. Barlow screamed and all fight went out of him. "The canyon—west of the village!" he said through clenched teeth. "You've broken my arm, damn you!"

Mark released him and arose. He looked at Roberts. "We ride to the Indian council."

Roberts pulled his eyes from Barlow. "Jeremiah might not—" He caught his breath, saw the harsh look on the sweat-streaked young face. "All right. We'll go."

Mark pulled the blacksmith to his feet. "You're riding with us."

Barlow held his arm. "I can't," he groaned.

"You will—just as you are," Mark told him. "I want your Indian friends to see you."

The trappers broke away, streaking for their long rifles and their horses. Mark helped Barlow into the saddle and the band rode out through the gates toward the village. Before they reached the hamlet, they were met by the Cordoba coach. Captain Mendez and some of his troopers rode around it. Mark had a glimpse of Carlota and her father within the coach, then Mendez had halted the Americans.

Mendez's eyes blazed as he stared at the trappers. "*Caramba!* You leave the mission! I'll have you all in the jail at San Diego."

Mark brushed dust-streaked hair out of his eyes. "You'll have no one in jail but yourself. I believe there

is a Mexican law against inciting Indians to revolt."

"Si," Mendez snapped, "and you have broken it."

Mark waved his hand at Barlow, huddled miserably in the saddle and addressed himself to Cordoba who had descended from the coach.

"I have found the reason for the Indian trouble, señor." He rapidly sketched what he had learned of Barlow's treachery and Mendez's backing of the blacksmith. Cordoba listened, his face growing darker as the tale progressed. Mendez tried arrogantly to interrupt but stopped short when he found himself staring into Moses Larsen's long rifle. The other troopers quietly surrendered to the circling trappers.

Mark finished and a tense silence held the group. Cordoba turned to face Mendez and he carefully held himself in check.

"I shall report this to His Excellency, the governor. It will take a few days, señor. There might be just enough time that you will get a ship at San Francisco. It will save you a rope, capitan."

Mendez drew himself straight. He glared at Mark, then dropped his eyes before Cordoba's blazing look. He swept off his hat and bowed low to Carlota in the coach.

"Adios, señorita." He faced Mark, a slight smile on his thin lips. "You and I still have a score, señor."

His left hand dropped to his pistol. As the weapon swept up, Mark jumped his horse forward. The pistol boomed and the burning powder scorched Mark's cheek. His mount

struck Mendez's horse and the man went down. Moses Larsen calmly pulled the trigger of his rifle and Mendez lay still. Carlota hastily averted her eyes.

Cordoba broke the silence. "I'll send my daughter on to the mission. Then I'll ride with you so the troopers will cause no trouble."

Cordoba instantly recognized the place of the meeting from Barlow's painfully gritted description. It was a grim band that rode on through the village and then into a brush-filled canyon.

They burst into the Indian camp before the natives could gather their wits. More than a dozen long rifles held the Indians sullen, silent. Mark pulled Barlow forward and Cordoba spoke to the natives in cutting Spanish.

"Here is *El Gigante*, the brave one. He is beaten. He is one who spoke to you with a forked tongue. He but followed the words of another man of evil who is now dead. If you follow the bad blood of your deceivers, you will all be killed and your homes burned. If you return to the ways of peace, then no blame will be placed on you. It is your choice—peace or death."

The natives remained silent for a long while and then one of them growled in faulty Spanish, throwing Barlow a flashing, sneering look. "We return, hidalgo, to the ways of peace. We listened to a lying tongue. We leave our weapons here."

The ring of trappers broke and the Indians shuffled away down the

canyon, leaving their lances, bows, knives and pitifully few muskets in the camp. When the last of them had gone, Mark expelled his breath in a deep gusty sigh of relief.

Late that night at the mission, after the Cordobas had returned to the hacienda, Mark and Roberts loafed just outside the gate. The night was soft with starlight and silver from the moon. Roberts sighed deeply.

"Barlow has learned his lesson, I reckon."

Mark nodded absently. He was silent a moment and then asked: "What news did Jeremiah send in the dispatch that came while we were gone?"

"Good," Roberts answered. "There has been delay, but a sea captain named Kerrigan helps Jeremiah with the governor. Jeremiah writes that we will be leaving soon."

Mark laughed softly. "Not I, Roberts. I've found my place."

"You're not returning!" Roberts

exclaimed. He grinned in sudden understanding. "Aye, it's the dark eyes that hold you."

"Mayhap," Mark replied. "Cordoba wants me to manage the rancho. American hustle and bustle will help, he thinks."

Roberts whistled, then his voice grew sly. "Tell me, Mark, are her kisses what you thought?"

"Wagh, I can't tell you! These dons do things differently. Cordoba gave me permission to woo his daughter. I may sing under her window and that sort of foofaraw for a while. But the wooing will be short, Roberts. I read it in her eyes."

Roberts chuckled. "End it before we leave, Mark. 'Twould be nice to see a Spanish wedding."

"Aye, wouldn't it?" Mark asked softly. "I'll try to bring it about."

The stars twinkled down out of the velvet sky and a slight breeze ruffled Mark's hair. But he didn't notice. His eyes were dreamy, his thoughts on a hacienda not far away. As Jeremiah Salter would have said, he had found his Promised Land.

THE END



THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

Our boys can't ride herd on them yella-belly Nazis if we set 'em afoot on Hitler's range, so we gotta keep the tanks an' jeeps rollin' by diggin' deep in our jeans for more

WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!



With a cocked six-gun ready to blast daylight through him, Johnny Wetsel didn't have much time left to discover whether Adam Claypool really was a

HARD-BITTEN HOMBRE

by MELVIN W. HOLT

CRICKETS were heralding the coming of darkness in the marshy river bottomlands known as Mosquito Flats. Inside the squat little cabin which lay secluded in a dense jungle of willows, young Johnny Wetsel was mixing a batch of sourdough biscuits for supper when he heard the screened door being opened stealthily behind him. He swung around swiftly, lambasting his carelessness in leaving his gun and cartridge belt on a wall peg across the room.

In the doorway stood Adam Claypool, a sneer of ugly triumph flattening his mouth. The cocked six-gun in Claypool's steady right hand was trained on Johnny Wetsel's heart. The pistol's round bore, glittering in the lamplight, was like a grimly watchful eye. Johnny backed away, his beardless cheeks draining of color as he anticipated the feel of a heavy slug smashing through his slim body.

"This is the payoff, kid," Claypool said purringly. "When I broke jail

yesterday, you knew I aimed to kill you, didn't you? So you packed up and sneaked out here to hide till I was caught. Reckon you savvy now I ain't fooled very easy. It was simple, slipping back into town and making old Sam Chambers tell me where you'd lit out to."

Sam Chambers owned the Hackamore Livery Barn, where Johnny worked as hostler. Johnny's brow became moist with perspiration, and he felt a strange numbness.

"You killed Sam Chambers," he gritted.

There was mockery in Claypool's quick laughter. Holding the whip as he was now, Claypool was a mighty tough hombre. Hard-bitten and poison-mean.

"You judge me harshly, kid," he chuckled. "I didn't kill him. Just let him sniff the muzzle of this old hogleg, and it sure loosened his tongue in a hurry. Afraid I'll have to kill *you*, though. You're the only living soul who saw me climb out the back window of Ace Lang's saloon the night Ace was murdered and robbed in his back room. Without your say-so, no jury can convict me. Soon as I settle with you, I'm going back to town and give myself up. Then when the trial's finished, I'll be a scot-free man again. Put yourself in my place, kid. What choice have I got but to shut your mouth for keeps?"

Johnny Wetsel's face tightened with contempt. Orphaned at an early age and having worked hard to make a meager living, Johnny wasn't the kind to plead for mercy. Regaining his composure, the kid squared his

shoulders and said defiantly: "Go ahead, Claypool. Pull that trigger, and be damned!"

But Claypool shook his head. "Not just yet. First we'll take a little *pasear* down the river a ways. Not far from here there's a bed of quicksand that'll fit my plans perfect. Once you sink into it, nobody'll ever find you. But damned if I'm gonna lug your carcass down there. I aim to let you walk to your own grave, kid, then gut-shoot you and roll you in."

Johnny's fear of death was momentarily allayed. So long as he remained alive, there was still a slim chance of his eluding the grisly fate which Claypool had scheduled for him. The kid's heart hammered wildly. If only he could reach his gun. Or Claypool's gun—

"Come on in and close that screen door," he said evenly. "Let me finish rustling this grub, and I'll go with you."

Claypool must have read the kid's thoughts. "No use wasting time, Johnny," he said. "One meal won't make any difference. After a while you might start getting funny notions about that gun hanging over there, and I'd have to drill you here in the cabin. Bloodstains don't wash up easy, kid, and I don't aim to leave any clues."

Johnny nodded. "Reckon you're giving the orders. Anyway, I'm gonna wash up a little myself. Got this danged flour on my hands."

While Claypool's leveled gun continued to menace him from the doorway, Johnny lifted a stone jug off

the floor and splashed some of its contents into a wash basin. He lathered his hands with soap, rinsed them. Cupping his hands, he leaned over the basin and began washing his face—then howled a spluttering oath and made a wry grimace.

Again Claypool's deep-throated laughter mocked him. "You give me a laugh, kid," the outlaw said. "You're trying to act brave, but you're scared sick—so nervous you poured out *kerosene* instead of water! Well, enough of this stalling." He gestured with the gun. "Come on, let's take that little walk. Too dark to be riding hosses down through that mess of bog holes."

Hatless, Johnny left the cabin. Night had settled in quickly over the bottomlands. Claypool stayed close behind him, prodding the kid along with his gun muzzle, lest Johnny should suddenly decide to dart into the thick willows and make a run for it.

It was half a mile to the stretch of quicksand which the killer had mentioned. Johnny wondered if there would be enough time. As they walked through the marshes beside the sluggish river, he kept glancing nervously over his shoulder at Claypool.

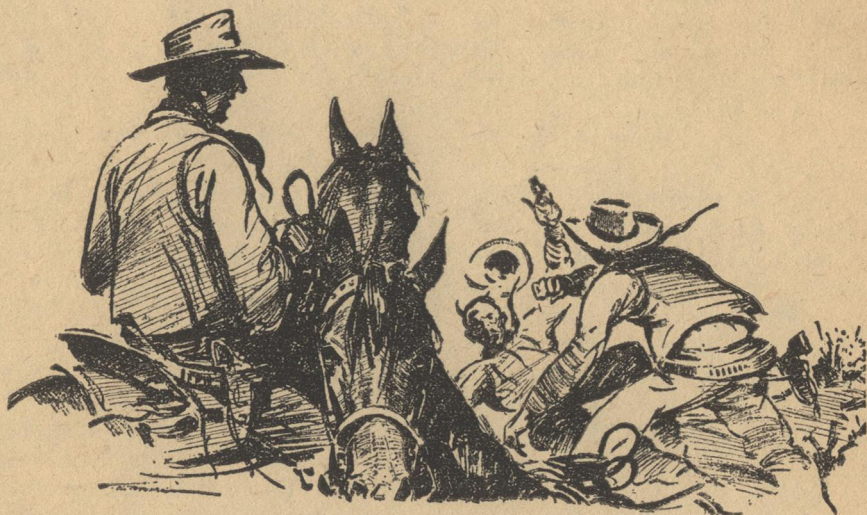
And soon the killer began to curse in a low voice. Several times Johnny heard a *whack-whack* as Claypool slapped himself on the face and hands. Tense, the kid kept walking—and waiting for the right moment.

Suddenly he felt the pressure of the gun leave his back, as Claypool grabbed his hairy right wrist and swore caustically. Now!

Johnny's foot kicked outward and up as he whirled on his would-be assassin. The toe of Johnny's boot thudded into the man's groin. Claypool yelled, tried to swing his gun back into line. Johnny leaped in, grabbed the gun barrel, wrenched savagely—and the weapon came free!

Quickly the kid leaped aside, swapping ends with the gun so that it pointed squarely at Claypool's wide chest. At this point-blank range, he couldn't miss. Claypool backed away coweringly, still cursing, and still slapping at his face and hands.

"Now *I'm* giving the orders," Johnny said flatly. "Start marching back to the cabin, Claypool. Come moonrise we'll head back to town so's you can keep your date with the law. You needn't raise your hands; that'd be too much torture even for a skunk like you. When these river-bottom bloodsuckers get the range on a man," he continued, "sooner or later he's just got to take the time to fight 'em off! They get awful bad at night, 'specially down here along the river. You'd been wise if you'd washed in some of that kerosene, like I done. The pesky little critters don't like the smell of it. They say you're a hard-bitten hombre, Claypool, but no man's what you'd really call bitten *hard* till he's tangled with these danged mosquitoes!"



COVERED TRACKS

by CLIFF WALTERS

Pelt Logan would never have tackled the range-hogging Trasks on his own account but he figured it was the only way he could square the debt he owed young Bill Garland

BECAUSE the boss hadn't showed up with the wagon, Pelt Logan had gone without dinner today on the trail. And without supper, too. Not that the wiry little old shepherd minded it for himself so much. But when he looked at his dog, Scotty, tired and hungry after working all day—

Pelt shifted his gaze and peered through deepening dusk back along

the track-patterned trail. Still no wagon in sight. But there, a mile away, gleamed a few twinkling lights in the town of Lanceville.

"The sheep's bedded down in good shape over on the slope there," Pelt spoke softly to his dog. "You stay here and keep an eye on 'em while I go to town and see if I can't rustle us up a little grub. And it'll be just a little." He smiled apologetically as

he fingered the quarter and dime—all the cash he had—which reposed in the pocket of his overalls.

Scotty seemed to understand. He made no move to follow as the little man trudged away toward town.

It seemed like a long mile across the sage-covered flat to Lanceville. Late as it was, the town's only cafe was still open when Pelt arrived there. Thirty cents of his money bought an order of beef stew. He ate less than half and dumped the rest in a tin can which he had picked up at the edge of town. Then he crossed the street, entered the saloon and spent the rest of his fortune for a sack of tobacco.

He was leaning against the bar, wishing he had a dollar or two in his pocket, when another customer came in—a rawboned, young six-footer, as trail-dusty as Pelt himself—and called to the big bartender:

"All right, Mr. Trask! A drink—several of 'em, maybe—and here's your pay. If gold is good enough!"

Pelt heard a handful of nuggets rattle on the bar. And he heard the big bartender, a deep-voiced, dark man with unfriendly eyes, rumble: "Gold, eh? You've really found something, Garland?"

Garland! The voicing of that name sent old Pelt along the bar with a smile lighting his weathered face.

"Hello, Bill Garland," he said eagerly. "Oh, I ain't seen you since you was about that high, and I don't expect you to remember me, but I'm—"

"You're Pelt Logan." The good

humor had gone from young Garland's voice. Now his voice was flat and hard. And his blue eyes were suddenly frosty.

"Yeah, I . . . I'm Pelt Logan," said the little herder, rebuffed by this reception. "You recall that your dad—"

"I recall too damned well," said Garland. "I recall the day, a long time ago, that he risked his life and lost it by ridin' his horse into a flooded river to rescue a drunken old sheepherder named Pelt Logan."

"Yeah, he done that." Pelt was miserable under the frostiness of those accusing blue eyes. He wanted to crawl away.

"Yeah," young Garland grunted. "Game fool that he was. He's gone. And you're still hangin' around the saloons, eh? Did you hear me say something about gold? And did you smell a few drinks, Mr. Logan?"

"I don't want a drink," Pelt said wretchedly. "I only wanted to say howdy to the son of a game old prospector that lost his life on account of me. Not but what I wouldn't rather drowned myself than have it . . . well, turn out the way it did. "Uh . . . got to be gettin' back to my sheep out west of town and—"

"So you're trailin' them blasted woolies!" boomed the man behind the bar. "Well, savvy this, Mr. Sheepherder! Me and my brother, Stony Trask, owns more than this saloon. We own that Grass Draw range, which your woolies have edged mighty close to today. If you're trailin' toward the mountains, you go around to the south of Grass Draw

even if it's a longer trail. You savvy that?"

"I guess so," Pelt answered.

"You'd better!" said Ira Trask. "If me or my brother ketch you trailin' across that Grass Draw range, we'll beat the daylights outo' you!"

"Stop threatenin' the old drunk, Trask," put in Bill Garland. "Even you—or Stony—wouldn't be yellow enough to hit an old man like Pelt Logan."

"Just let one of us ketch you on that—" Trask's manner changed abruptly. He grinned and said: "Nope. I guess we wouldn't do that."

"Unless nobody was lookin'," said Bill Garland lightly. "Well, are you and Stony goin' to buy my new placer diggin's out, Ira?"

"Where is this diggin's?"

"You'd kind o' like to know, wouldn't you?" taunted the young prospector who, Pelt suspected, had already taken a few drinks aboard. "Well, if I get drunk enough tonight, I might talk too much. But I'll try not to. Haven't the Trask brothers got enough already—with this saloon, a sheep outfit and—"

"Yeah, I guess they have," said the proprietor.

Yet, as Pelt retreated through the door, he carried the strong impression that Ira Trask was the kind who took all he could get, and perhaps any way he could get it. Pelt had been in many saloons in many little towns. He knew a hawk when he saw one. And he knew that hawks sink their talons wherever and whenever the opportunity presents itself.

The old herder also knew that reckless young Bill Garland with a

few drinks under his belt, might become prey for a man whose eyes were fascinated by the sight of raw gold, as Ira Trask's small, shrewd orbs seemed to be.

Wearily Pelt headed back across the flat illumined only by the haze of starlight. It seemed that his old run-over boots were much heavier than when he had walked into Lanceville. Or maybe it was just that another kind of burden was weighing him down—those harsh, jolting words that Bill Garland had spoken.

"He blames me for killin' his dad," Pelt mumbled to himself. "Well, you can't blame him, I guess. Still, I wasn't yellin' for help that day. Shucks, I didn't know there was anybody within ten miles of me till old Jeff Garland rode into the river."

Fatigued, unhappy and wishing that he had never again encountered old Jeff Garland's son, Pelt dragged on until he came to the slope where a band of bedded sheep rested quietly. Nor was there any welcoming bark from Scotty to disturb the sheep.

Silently rejoicing at the return of his gentle-voiced old master, Scotty merely laid a shaggy head against Pelt's leg and sniffed at the can of stew.

"Here you are, feller," said Pelt, setting the can down against a rock. "I wish there'd been more—for both of us. But it'll have to do till our wagon ketches up with us. Wonder what happened to old Mac? Maybe that rickety old hind wheel busted down."

With his dog lying at his feet, and his back resting against a rock, Pelt

didn't sleep much that night. He dozed a little, but every once in a while he would open his eyes and watch the lights—fewer and fewer as the night wore on—twinkling in Lanceville. Sometimes in the breeze that lazed across the hills, the herder imagined he caught the sound of tiny gold nuggets dancing on the bar of the Trask saloon and he wondered how Bill Garland was faring—how much he had drunk and how much he was talking.

A late moon rose, and before daylight the sheep grew restless. Some of them started to leave the bed ground, trailing off in the direction of town. Pelt started after them, but didn't bring them back for they were drifting in the general direction they would be trailing. Too, Pelt kept wondering about Bill Garland.

Pelt might have walked on into town again just before daylight, since he was so close to Lanceville, if he hadn't sighted, very indistinctly at first, a rider leading two pack horses along the low bank of Rawhide Creek, the stream which curved lazily around the little town.

Close to the stream himself, Pelt stood at the edge of a clump of willows watching the rider whom he finally recognized as Bill Garland heading toward the big draw which led to the foothills of the Big Lodge Mountains.

Bells tinkled as sheep got out of the rider's way. Maybe they were frightened by the clank of a new gold pan which, tied on top of one of the packs, thumped against a shovel. Pelt didn't speak to Bill Garland this time. Nor did Garland see the sheep-

herder standing there by the willows. The prospector passed on, heading for the big draw.

Pelt gave orders to his dog. The sheep were quickly bunched and headed toward the big draw. Although they grazed as they went, they moved along pretty well.

By the time dawn broke, Pelt and his flock were quite a little distance from Lanceville. Often the sheep-herder looked back toward town, and at last he saw what he had been half-expecting to see—two riders leaving town. Riders who started to travel in one direction, then turned and came back to Rawhide Creek where they trailed along the bank for some little distance.

They stopped for a short while, then separated, one of them going north and the other south. Making a broad circle around the sleeping town, they met at a point beyond Lanceville—Pelt was still watching them over his shoulder—but soon rode, faster now, back to Rawhide Creek, to the point where Bill Garland had passed Pelt.

It was getting quite light now. Pelt



moved his sheep on faster than he would have ordinarily, along the bottom of the big draw leading toward the mountains. He was passing a little thicket of cedars when he noticed the sheep splitting around some object on the trail ahead. Pretty soon he came to that object, a new gold pan which had fallen from the top of a pack.

Quickly Pelt stooped, picked the gold pan up and tossed it behind the thick, concealing branches of the nearest cedar. Less than two minutes later the two riders, spurring their horses impatiently, came loping along behind him.

Pelt heard them, but he didn't turn and look. He stopped and gazed off to his left, through the broad notch of a tributary draw which permitted him to see country a long distance away.

"Hey, you!" bellowed a deep, harsh voice.

Pelt turned quickly, eyed the advancing riders and recognized the scowling face of Ira Trask, saloon owner and sheepman. A strong resemblance attested to the fact that Trask's companion, also big and dark, was his brother, Stony.

"Mornin'," said Pelt casually. "Up kind o' early, aint' you, gents?"

"Early enough to ketch a whiskey-guzzlin' sheepherder drivin' his woolies up Grass Draw!" growled Ira Trask. "What the devil you gawkin' at over there to the left?"

"Just a rider leadin' a couple of pack horses."

"Where?" demanded Stony Trask, hard eyes glinting.

"Why, there!" Pelt pointed a grimy finger. "Nope. I guess he's too far over the ridge now for you to see him."

"I'm headin' that way, Ira!" said Stony and whirled his horse.

"I'll be right along!" called his brother. "But first"—he swung menacingly down to the ground, his big boot heels jarring the earth—"I'll learn this damned sheepherder that I meant what I said last night." He glared fiercely at Pelt. "I warned you not to come up Grass Draw with your woolies. But you couldn't savvy plain talk. Maybe you can understand this!"

Pelt tried to avoid that big, hard-knuckled fist coming at him. And he did avert its full force. Yet it raked the skin off his cheekbone. Then his own right fist, with surprising quickness and accuracy, lashed out and caught big Ira Trask flush on the nose.

"Why, you old—" Furious, goaded by the audacity and strength of the old herder who was trying to defend himself, Trask, with blood trickling down his chin, launched another assault.

Coolly, courageously, Pelt Logan did his best to stave off the punishment a much bigger, younger man was meting out to him. But he couldn't muster the strength to do it. He couldn't have, even if his stomach hadn't been so empty, or his legs so weary.

Trask hit him time after time until Pelt, the world reeling about him, sprawled to the earth, beaten and bleeding.

"There! Maybe that'll learn you

something!" Trask growled thickly. He wiped his own face with a bandanna, mounted his horse and rode swiftly away to overtake his brother.

Weakly Pelt sat up and got his bearings. He was still sitting there when he heard a concerted tinkling of bells, as if the sheep were being frightened at something. He guessed he'd better get up there. Yet it was all he could do to gain his feet, and maintain a standing position.

He heard hoofs again. Then a rider, coming from up the draw, rounded the little thicket of cedars, stopped his horse and began:

"Did you see a new gold pan? I must've lost it when—" Bill Garland stopped talking, then swung quickly from his horse, caught Pelt's numb arm and said: "What in thunder happened?"

Pelt nodded a painful head toward a rider disappearing through the notch of the tributary draw. "Ira Trask ketched up with me. But it's all right. He warned me not to trail through this draw, remember?"

"Big overgrown coward!" Bill Garland's face darkened. "I ought to—" His hand moved toward the gun at his hip.

But Pelt reached out to stay that hand. "Don't be a fool, Bill," he said. "Maybe the world wouldn't miss Ira Trask—as much as it missed your dad after he was gone. But don't tip your hand an' let the Trask brothers know where you are. It's you they're tryin' to trail."

"Me? Then why are they headin' in *that* direction?"

"I told 'em I'd just seen a rider,

leadin' a couple pack horses, disappear over a ridge into that rough country."

Bill Garland looked baffled. "Why did you tell 'em that? And after the way I talked to you last night?"

"Well, I knew which way you had come. But they never guessed, on account of these woolies coverin' your tracks up so good. And you'll find your gold pan under that tree over there."

The young prospector retrieved the gold pan. Then, slowly, he returned to Pelt Logan.

"I'd ought to have the beatin' that you took from that thievin' buzzard!" he declared. "A beatin' you knew danged well *you'd* take when Trask found you trailin' sheep through the draw!"

"It's all right. There's things that hurt worse than Ira Trask's fists."

"For instance, like the talk I throwed in your face last night in the saloon," Garland said, and his voice was uneven. "Me thinkin' you wasn't worth savin'. But now, after seein' what you've done for me—after you riskin' your life to cover up my tracks just because you thought them damned Trask coyotes might take my life to grab a gold diggin's I've found—"

"It was little enough to do for old Jeff Garland's son," Pelt cut in quietly. "Well, the Trasks ain't likely to find out now which direction you rode from town. You'd better get along to your diggin's, wherever they are, and—"

"I'll get along, all right, Pelt. But,

first, tell me where you're trailin' these sheep to. And whose they are."

"I'm takin' 'em to Trapper Crick. And they belong to old Mac McClure—if he ever ketches up with that wagon."

"Good!" said Bill. "When McClure shows up, tell him there's a couple of herders in Lanceville that're lookin' for a job. Then, when he hires one, you buy a horse and saddle with this"—he pulled out a roll of currency—"and come up to my diggin's. There's plenty of stuff up there for both of us."

"Nope." Pelt shook his head. "The Garlands don't owe me a thing.

It's me that owes them—"

"Then pay me off by bein' my pard," Bill urged. He forced the money into Pelt's hand. And, eventually, he won from the herder the promise that he would buy a horse and ride up to "the diggin's."

That was why, as Pelt Logan trudged along behind a band of sheep that day waiting for his boss to appear with the wagon, there was the hint of a smile on the herder's battered face. And hope in his heart. Not the hope of gaining gold nuggets, necessarily. But the prospect of sharing future campfires with a real pardner.

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



Tom W. Blackburn

"By the time I was well through school," says Tom W. Blackburn, "my chief interests were marked and I had found something more valuable than most sheepskins—a realization that history is no textbookish matter, but the sweat and blood of fighting men and women headed somewhere, back-tracking barred. My family came originally from Colorado and I spent much of my time drifting about in that broad area between the Missouri and the Pacific, and incidentally I've never been

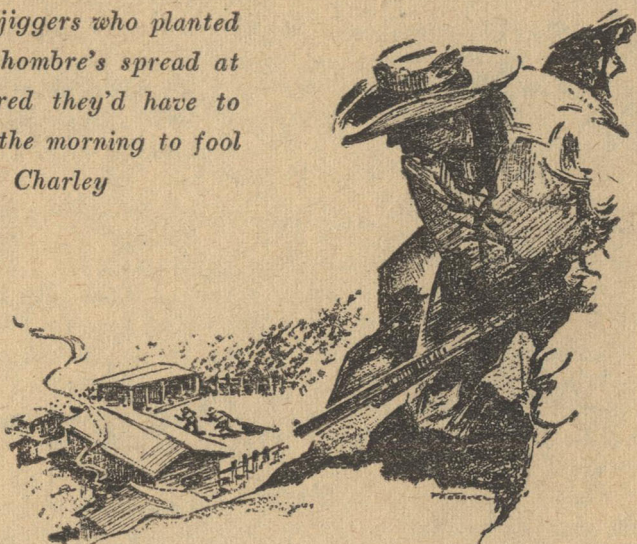
east of the Big Muddy. Been too busy exploring old trails and forgotten towns and listening to the salty tales of old-timers who have given me a faint understanding of the honest-to-goodness, human problems which faced those folks in the wagon-rutted past."

Blackburn always looks forward to those pasears and, though now married and the father of a son and daughter, is prideful that his family's equal enthusiasm bring fresh joy and new viewpoints through which to view familiar ranges. His two hobbies, a fanatic interest in the history of our nation's westward expansion and collecting guns of that period, go hand in hand. "Every time I find one, it presents a challenge," he says. "Can I match the story this gun knows?"

HELL'S HORSE HEAVEN, featured in our next issue, reflects the rugged pioneer spirit and authentic background which has made this young Western author a prime favorite among Western fans. Also included in this big issue are Walt Coburn, Norman A. Fox, M. Howard Lane, Jim West and many others.

*Those two tough jiggers who planted
hides on another hombre's spread at
daybreak discovered they'd have to
get up earlier in the morning to fool*

Tincup Charley



BRANDS DON'T LIE

by MARK LISH

A BLUNT spire of rock stood out of the hilltop, like the core of a boil forced upward through sod skin by a reluctant Nature. Tincup Charley Horn reined his horse close for meager protection against the light chill breeze of first daybreak, sat looking down at the neat stand of ranch buildings sheltered in an angle of the lower slopes.

"Cosy," he muttered aloud. "Vines. Curtains. Kid's wagon in the yard, and a row of stick horses. Just the kind of an outfit Jerry was

aiming at—" He broke off, leaned to rub a hand along the horse's mane. "Haystack by the barn, pardner; and I bet there's a nice motherly woman who can cook and will cook and likes to cook. Including breakfast for strangers. Bet—"

His dark eyes, casually alert, picked up movement a quarter mile away. Two men riding toward the buildings below, concealed from them by a fold of the hills but in full view from this tall vantage. Tincup Charley backed his apathetic, weary

mount a step or two, behind the rock spire where the animal would not see and greet the strangers.

"You be still now," he admonished gravely. "Those gents might turn out to be no friends of ours. We're getting close to where my kid brother must have been living."

He leaned, lazily watchful, behind the spire's forward corner, rolling a cigarette with fingers numbed by the chill air. The two men had halted at a clump of low trees, just out of sight from the ranch buildings. They tethered their horses, untied a clumsy bundle from each saddle and came on afoot, moving stealthily.

Tincup Charley shot a glance at the vine-trimmed house.

"No smoke," he reflected. "Ain't up yet, and that pair slipping up like an Apache on a rabbit. They go to peeking in at windows, fooling with guns—"

He stepped to his horse and drew the rifle from his saddle scabbard, imagining the smell of frying bacon from the breakfast he hoped to have at that farm house below him. The men below were never to know their luck in not threatening Tincup Charley's gustatory prospects.

They halted at the corral, remaining on that side of it opposite the house. One dragged a cowhide from the top corral rail, letting it crumple into folds at his feet. He unrolled his bundle, another cowhide, swung it to cling limply, hair side in, across the rail at the exact spot previously occupied. Tincup Charley's eyes widened.

The other man had crawled between poles and entered the small

barn; he returned with a pitchfork and began digging in the great pile of manure behind the corral. The other man thrust the second awkward bundle into the hole and both raked compost over it, stamping the loose material solidly into place, smoothing bootprints with the fork tines. Together they made a compact roll of the limp hide from the corral fence, one taking it under his arm. They eyed the house for a long wary moment before leaving the corral's partial shelter, walked back over the hill and mounted their horses and rode away.

"Hmm. These folks have butchered a critter, last day or two," Tincup Charley summed up. "Likely their own—no doubt about it. The gents stole that fresh hide and left another. Hid a dry one in the manure pile, to make it seem long habit."

He shook his head chidingly after the horsemen, pursed his lips and let his eyes roll upward. "Why, that's dishonest! Yes sir; downright dishonest! Something out to be done about that—shouldn't ever let a nice piece of country get all contaminated, just because some range-crazy cow king wants rid of the farmers."

He rolled a fresh cigarette and this time smoked it, idly watching the riders grow smaller on each rib of the great washboard they traveled, noting how consistently their course paralleled the well-marked road a quarter mile on their right.

"Coming back with witnesses—sheriff, likely—and don't want their tracks to show in the road," he re-

flected. When the men failed to appear even in distant miniature he sighed from his diaphragm and turned to the horse.

"Looks like a job of work for us, pardner," he observed apologetically. "Got to have a fresh cowhide right away, and that farmer's horse wouldn't be able to help me rope a cow."

The horse pricked an ear, let it lop again disgustedly.

"Yeh, I know how you feel," Tincup Charley admitted. "But this here is a personal responsibility and can't be avoided. We're those folks' guests, whether they know it yet or not, and we sure can't let our hosts be done dirt with us right here looking on. Can we, now?"

The horse lifted both ears, groaned a little and straightened a rear leg from its hip-shot sag.

"Of course we can't," Tincup Charley agreed. "Besides, accusers might ride in before we've had our breakfast."

He rode directly to the corral, letting his horse stand at the gate while he inspected the fresh hide on the fence, then uncovered the dry one in the manure pile. Both bore a hip brand: 77 Bar.

"Nice," mused Tincup Charley. "Only five straight marks to burn. *Cowman's* brand."

In the small granary he found several dry hides, salted and tied in stiff rolls with heavy twine.

"P C Quarter Circle. Same as on the milk cow and on the minnesotas we passed a mile or so back," Tincup Charley reflected, selecting one for burial in the manure pile. "Typical

farmer brand—all curlicues. Bet they're his initials. . . . Let's see—may need some gunnysacks for hoof-pads—"

Tincup Charley was a top cowboy and his horse, weariness notwithstanding, a what-next cowpony. Within an hour a new P C Quarter Circle hide clung to the proper spot on the corral rail, its extreme freshness dimmed a bit by dragging flesh side down over dusty soil. The two 77 Bar hides were hidden expertly in a washout a mile away, and a neatly quartered beef reposed under leafy brush in a spot selected as strategic by Tincup Charley.

Horse and man rested once more by the rock spire. When the stone chimney of the vine-trimmed house breathed first a trickle and then a stream of smoke, Tincup Charley rode down the steep slope for the third time that morning.

He was dismounting at the corral gate when a door opened and a tall man emerged, one arm hooked through the handle of a shiny bucket. He saw Tincup Charley instantly and waved friendly greeting on his way down the path.

"Sixty years a boy," estimated Tincup Charley. "The stick-horse cowboy is a grandchild, likely."

"Put him to hay in the barn, stranger," voice and blue eyes and cheery manner invited and insisted, and Tincup Charley was glad indeed for his morning's labor. "I'll juice the Jersey and pretty soon we'll go in to breakfast. That is, if you like hot cakes and honey and bacon and eggs. Otherwise, breakfast's over

and you might as well ride on."

"You're a man after my own . . . uh . . . stomach, mister," Tincup Charley sighed, and led his horse to a manger filled with blue-stem hay cut short and green. The horse unsaddled and freshened a bit with comb and brush, he came to watch bright streams of milk raise foam above the shiny bucket's top, exploring his host with small talk and liking what he found.

"You look like a man can take a joke," he said presently, as the milker kicked his stool aside. "Guess I ought to tell you the sad sad, story of two gents whose friends are going to be disappointed."

Blue gaze questioned lazily impudent brown, but before Tincup Charley could speak further the soft jingle of riding gear caused the tall man to crane his neck, peering between corral poles. Four riders were almost upon the corral, coming up the road at an easy fot trot.

"Well! Sheriff Keyes and Jing Burton and two of Jing's 77 cowboys. I wonder—"

There was no time now to explain—better just let the farmer act natural, Tincup Charley decided, and spoke in his laziest drawl: "What kind of hairpin is Keyes? And this Jing Burton?"

"Dead square-shooter, Keyes—hard as nails though," the tall man said tersely, still frowning toward the approaching riders now less than fifty yards away. "Jing Burton runs the 77 Bar—owns most of it. Kind of a cousin to the Almighty, in his own opinion. Devil of a temper and all that. Why?"

"Nothing. Just curious," said Tincup Charley, lounging placidly in the middle of the corral, though nothing was there to lean against.

"Lazy jigger," thought the tall man absently, and went to open the gate and call a cordial greeting. "Hi, sheriff—boys. Kind of early, ain't you? Had breakfast?"

The four men nodded—a bit stiffly, Tincup Charley thought. The two 77 cowboys were those he had seen earlier this morning. He noted with some satisfaction that one of them was still riding the big brown horse he had ridden then.

The sheriff stirred uneasily in his saddle, obviously not liking the chore at hand.

"I . . . uh . . . the fact is, Perry, Jing here thinks—"

"Thinks, nothing!" Burton cut in, a figure of arrogance on his handsome bay horse. "The boys here *watched* you, Call—"

The sheriff lost his uncertainty, and voice and gray keen eyes became direct and grim. He raised a curt hand to check the other's speech, turned to Perry Call.

"You butchered yesterday," he accused quietly. "Jing here thinks it was one of his. I want a look at the hide."

Perry Call stood an inch taller, blue eyes dripping frost.

"I butchered, all right," he snapped. "Dry cow eight years old and born my own. There's the hide. Look it over and then get off my ranch."

"Easy, Perry," the sheriff mur-

mured. "These things come up, y'know."

He dismounted, walked to the cowhide and dragged it off the rail, roan hair upward. Perry Call gave a little grunt of surprise, but Tincup Charley squeezed his arm and murmured in his ear: "Easy. After all, it's still *your* hide."

The sheriff turned disgustedly on Jing Burton. "P C Quarter-Circle, big as life and twice as natural. What kind of run-around you givin' me, Jing?"

But Jing Burton had seen and turned savagely upon his companions. The slighter of the pair cringed in his saddle; the man on the brown horse, made of tougher stuff, met Burton's glare coolly enough.

"Call got wise, that's all—changed the hide," he began. "Must have caught on we was watching—"

Perry Call set down his pail and balled his fists, momentarily too angry for coherent speech. Tincup Charley sent his lazy drawl at the man on the big brown horse.

"You're still ridin' the same set of horse tracks you was this mornin'g," he pointed out. "Lot of history in horse tracks, once a man knows where to start."

The man's eyes turned wary, knots bunching at the corners of his jaw. Those tracks led directly to a P C hide, he knew; all too easily found once somebody went to look. Jing Burton rolled hot eyes at Tincup Charley and back to his henchmen, "You fool!" standing plainly in their glare.

"Between two sets of trouble, him," thought Tincup Charley, and turned to the sheriff.

"No wrong hides here, you see. But there's another with Call's curlieue on that you're going to be interested in—"

The man on the brown horse pulled his eyes from Jing Burton's glare. "Well! I ain't going to be made the goat—"

Jing Burton fetched him a hard back-handed slap across the face and jumped his horse nearer Tincup Charley, arrogance turned to fury.

"You talk too much for a pilgrim, mister," he grated. "I'll—"

"No, you won't," said Tincup Charley, and somehow his right forearm was suddenly one six-shooter longer. Where the gun came from the others knew, by the slight agitation of his jacket; how it reached his hand was a matter for conjecture. He held it casually, as a boy might fool aimlessly with a wooden play gun, pointing nowhere in particular. But Jing Burton sat carefully still in his saddle and kept his hands above the level of his waist.

"Calm down, Burton," Tincup Charley drawled advice. "When thieves fall out, hon . . . uh . . . *other* men split the pot. And I guess you two've done fell out enough. Eh, sheriff?"

"I reckon even a lawman can see whose cow's been in the cabbage, now," the sheriff admitted, his own .45 in hand. "You're under arrest, Jing. You two gazabos likewise."

"What for?" demanded Burton. "Is there any law that says a man can't be mistaken?"

"Yeah. Best you can do is pin petty larceny on us for swipin' a cowhide," the man on the brown horse joined in, though his glance at Jing Burton was venomous.

Tincup Charley beat the sheriff to it. "Well, swipin' a cowhide may be petty larceny if the cow ain't *in it*. But I reckon the sheriff here can easy find a carcass to fit that P C hide of yours. You made a bad mistake tying your horse to a tree right alongside the butchering."

He let that sink in a moment and added, to the sheriff: "I expect beef butchering is a cut worse'n petty larceny, ain't it, sheriff?"

"It is," agreed the sheriff grimly. "Fourteen years, in this state—wup, you! That's better; now see how high you can stretch, while Perry Call reaches up and unbuckles them gunbelts. . . . All three of 'em, Perry."

"Damn you!" the man who had cringed from Jing Burton screamed at Tincup Charley, his slower mind grasping the situation at last. "You framed us!"

"Now, now," chided Tincup Charley. "Them is hard words—accusing a man of a dirty lowdown trick like framing another man. Even to get his ranch and stock water."

Jing Burton took that one to heart. "I tried to buy his damn ranch—needed that big spring he's got," he sulked. "The stubborn jassack wouldn't even dicker."

Burton's tone implied that by such unneighborly refusal Perry Call had "asked for it." Tincup Charley glanced at Call, who nodded slowly.

"Offered a good price, too, as

values go," Call admitted. "But to Jing it was just more cow range; to me and Mom, it's home. So we couldn't get together, and it seems Jing wasn't strictly pleased."

"I'll take these three roosters in and leave 'em where the dogs won't bite 'em and get sick," the sheriff decided presently. "Ain't but a dozen miles round trip, and I'll bring back a couple of extry witnesses to go over them said tracks and so forth with us. So long, gents."

"You switched those hides, of course, stranger?" said Perry Call, absently watching the sheriff herd his charges over the first low ridge. "After they'd switched 'em first?"

Tincup Charley nodded.

"I owe you something, tied with a gold string," Call stated simply. "They as good as had me in the pen, if you hadn't happened along. I can see now that young Jerry Horn was framed in almost the same way, a while back—although until now I'd just supposed he'd been butchering 77s like they proved.

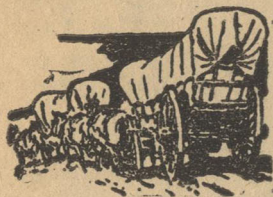
"By golly!" he exclaimed suddenly. "I'll bet the governor will pardon Jerry, 'time those three get done trying to lay it on each other."

"Seems likely," Tincup Charley agreed judicially.

From the house a voice rose in exasperation. "Perry! *Are* you coming to breakfast?"

"Gosh!" cried Perry Call, and jumped for his milk pail. "I'd forgot all about breakfast."

"I hadn't," Tincup Charley Horn assured him placidly.



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

EACH year trapping puts millions of dollars into the pockets of the fur hunter. Last season the fur demand was heavy. Skin prices were up. Red fox for example were quoted at sixteen dollars or more for large No. 1 prime northern pelts. Two years ago such skins were bringing about eight or nine dollars in the raw fur market.

At present it looks as if next season will also be a good year for trappers who do well with their catch. Those able to set out a trapline should do their planning early. New traps are still reported scarce.

Full-time professional trappers are not the only ones who engage in trapping. Thousands of part-time trappers, farmers, amateurs and young fellows with a yen for the outdoors, each season win themselves anywhere from a few to a few hundred dollars and up trapping in their own general neighborhood.

The common fur bearers can be trapped in favorable localities surrounding farmland sections as well as in the wilderness. The list includes fox, 'coon, mink, muskrat, 'possum, and that striped kitty with the odoriferous armament—the skunk. Year after year it is the skins of these more or less familiar

wild animals that net American trappers the bulk of their peltry money.

At the outset we quoted last season's price for top-quality red fox because it is fox trapping—farmland fox trapping—in which reader H. R., of Columbus, Indiana, wrote us he was primarily interested. Foxes, he says, have actually become a pest in his neighborhood.

Most trappers will agree that the fox is one of the hardest of all fur-bearing animals to trap. This is particularly true of the red fox whose fur is more valuable than that of the smaller grey variety. It is the red fox which produces through peculiar color variations the rare "cross" and "silver cross" skins.

Foxes are wary, cunning and sly. These natural characteristics are topped off by an extremely keen sense of scent. Trappers have cursed Reynard's sharp-scentedness as one of the main sources of the trouble they have in luring him to their traps. They overlook the fact that it is this same sense of scent that will draw a fox warily but irresistibly to a baited lure beside the trap.

Careless trapping may now and then catch some fur bearers. It will almost never get a fox. All traces of

human scent must be kept away from a fox set, and every precaution taken to make the ground look as natural as possible after placing the trap.

This means cleaning or smoking your traps. Traps can be boiled with twigs of spruce, fir, hemlock or birch to get rid of human scent. Or they can be buried, or left in running water for a day or two.

Once cleaned, the traps should not be handled with the bare hands. Wear leather gloves.

Gloves should also be worn in making the set. A wise extra precaution is a kneeling cloth when you are making a land set. Every move the trapper makes in the vicinity of his fox trap should be made without leaving human odors on the ground. It is also advantageous to make sets, where possible, at sites from which they can be seen from a distance with field glasses.

No. 2 or No. 3 traps are usually used for red fox. In making a land set for this hard-to-fool animal, the bed for the trap is dug just large enough to contain the trap. Dig the hole deep enough for the stake and chain to be concealed beneath the trap.

The dirt taken from the hole should be placed on a piece of cloth. Then the excess not used in concealing the trap should be carried away and disposed of elsewhere to avoid leaving a telltale pile of earth.

Placing the trap in the hole is a

ticklish job. The trap must be set so that it rests firmly all around and will not spring except from pressure on the pan. To prevent dirt from falling under the pan and clogging the trap's action, a light wad of clean cotton can be thrust into the space beneath the pan. Some trappers, for the same purpose, cover the trap with a thin sheet of paper.

Once the trap is in position, cover it with dry earth free from sticks and pebbles. Spread the top layer of dirt out so the surface looks natural and the actual location of the trap is invisible.

Carrion or flesh bait should be fixed nearby in such a position that the fox reaching for or investigating it will inevitably put his foot on the trap pan. The bait may be buried, or partially buried, in a small, open hole close to the trap.

Good flesh baits for fox are pieces of meat, with the skin on, of ground-hog, muskrat, rabbit, mice, small birds, or chicken entrails. They work best when highly tainted.

Commercial scent lures are on the market. Many of these are made up from prized formulas, the special secrets of successful fox trappers. These often contain rare essences, or loud-smelling drugs like asafoetida.

Grey and kit foxes are not quite as wary as their red brethren. A set good enough to fool a red fox will likewise be good enough to trap the grey variety.

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

A SLUICE box is an amazingly ingenious contrivance. It can be easily constructed of simple materials. And it saves gold. Two men are required to run a sluice-box set-up. One to shovel in. The other to fork out large stones and generally tend the sluice.

The sluice itself is simply an open trough, or long, narrow "box." A handy length is 12 feet with a 12-inch width. The box will be subject to rough usage, so heavy 2-inch planking, is best. Three such 12-foot boards, 12 inches wide and short lengths of 2 x 3's nailed across the top for braces will make a sluice box.

"If you will tell me how to build a sluice box," Seaman W. T. with Uncle Sam's Navy overseas wrote us recently, "I can do my own post-war planning. When the war is over I am going prospecting in the States, in South America, or in Alaska. I have always wanted to."

Okay, Sailor, here you are. Essentially a sluice box is simply a guided channel to carry a flow of water and gold-bearing gravel over devices known as riffles that will block further passage of the gold, or

most of it. The sluice must be long enough to give the water a chance to disintegrate the gravel thoroughly and permit the free gold particles to drop to the bottom and so be saved.

Easiest construction is to build the boxes square, that is the full width of the bottom board throughout their length. In this case the boxes have to be butted tightly together and held in place by cleats. Natural swelling of the wood when the sluice is in use will help tighten the joints.

If you have the necessary tools and are handy with them, the boxes may be made tapering by gradually narrowing the width of the bottom board at one end. Setting up such a sluice merely means telescoping the narrow end of one box into the wide end of the next box lower down.

Telescope boxes have advantages over the square-enders. Tight joints can be assured more easily, and the boxes can be more readily taken apart and set up elsewhere if desired.

Offsetting this, if you use racks of wooden cross riffles as gold catchers, the riffles will have to be specially constructed to fit snugly on the bottom of a tapered sluice box.

More importantly, tapered boxes have a tendency to create surges in the water flow that are apt to wash out smaller gold particles.

Almost any spaced obstruction that will cause small eddies in the water flow and reduce the water speed at that point, thus causing the heavy gold to settle out can be used for riffles. Flat stones, peeled poles laid lengthwise, wood blocks, or wood strips set across the bottom of the box all make effective gold catchers.

If poles are used they should be about three inches in diameter, with the bark removed. They can be fastened about two inches apart down the length of the bottom of the box. Strips of 2 x 2-inch wood, cut the width of the box and spaced about two or three inches apart, make good cross riffles. Such riffles are usually nailed to long side pieces forming a sort of lattice. The riffles can then easily be removed from the boxes in sections at cleanup time.

Shoveling in of the gravel is done near the head of the upper box and an iron screen or grizzly should be provided to keep heavy rocks, coarse stones and so forth from blocking the boxes further down.

Working grade for sluice boxes varies with conditions, but generally runs from a half inch to an inch and a half drop per foot of box. Where natural grade can be utilized (the boxes may be blocked to give an

even fall) they may be set directly on the ground, or on bedrock. Often it is necessary to set the boxes on short trestles with a splashboard affixed to the off side of the upper box to prevent gravel from spilling over the box side.

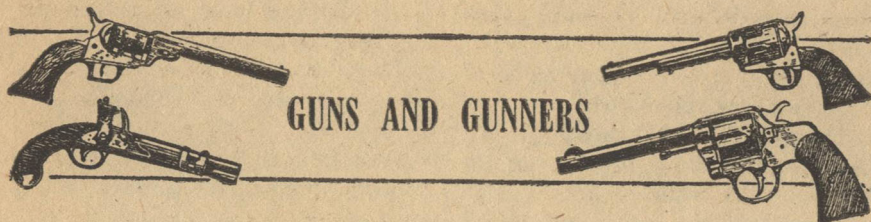
Run water into the boxes for several hours to swell the wood and tighten the joints before starting to shovel in gold gravel. Water requirements vary with the size of the box, grade and nature of the material being washed, and the gold to be recovered. A rough rule to follow is have five times as much water as gravel in the sluice.

The main thing is that there must be enough water to move the sand and gravel and keep it from packing in front of the riffles, but not enough to prevent the gold from settling out of the mass.

A good way to check water and grade, particularly when starting a run, is to take frequent samples of the material washed out of the lower end of the sluice and pan them to make sure no serious amount of gold is being carried through with the tailings.

To G.P., Wheeling, West Virginia: Oil shale contains no oil as such. But on heating and treating the rock a good quality of oil can be recovered by condensation of the vapors. Average yield is said to be about twenty gallons of oil per ton of shale.

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

WAR consumes materiel. We hear about the enormous quantities of this and that manufactured, but you really have to see a dump to understand how it is consumed.

Here in the United States we have established a number of military scrap-salvage dumps. I've had an opportunity to examine a portion of the thousands of tons of junk brought back from the battlefields of foreign theaters. Some of these dumps handle a thousand carloads of junk monthly, and mostly it is just junk. I've seen thousands of foreign military rifles, which probably cost the enemy \$40 each, figured on a comparative basis with our own equipment, piled up on the scrap heap and worth exactly *three cents* as scrap iron.

The Army maintains a salvage system. Battlefields are combed to clear them of debris. Usually there is a vast amount of miscellaneous materiel—guns, ammunition, helmets, food, equipment, arms, artillery, serviceable and wrecked tanks, trucks and miscellaneous motor vehicles—in fact, about everything military. The battle field scavengers gather it all up and bring it to the rear lines where the foreign materiel

is separated, and United States equipment is sorted as to grade—serviceable, repairable, and scrap.

After everything useful is culled from the scrap, it is ready for the junk yard and is shipped back to the United States.

The other day I browsed through one of those huge scrap piles containing more than four million pounds of junk. I watched the salvage crews at work. There they toiled, picking the incoming junk apart; piling it up according to type. There was a literal mountain of German and Italian artillery cases—solid brass units soon to go to our scrap piles to feed American brass mills. There were also tons of steel cartridge cases and these were separated into piles for steel scrap.

Whenever the boys found American artillery cases of brass, mixed into the foreign types, these were laid aside for separate shipment to American arsenals for possible salvage and reuse.

I watched the unloading of a couple of cars of incoming junk. Enormous magnetic cranes pulled the debris from open-top railroad cars and dumped it into piles for sorting. From one car came wrecked foreign

machine guns, artillery wheels, tank bogey wheels, sections of armor plate, heavy artillery, the engine of a German jeep, rifles, artillery cases, wrecked anti-aircraft artillery, and helmets—plus many other items far too numerous to mention.

There was the front end of an American tank, its heavy nose armor telling a graphic story. Several deep craters indicated that it had been hit by .50 caliber machine guns, but one area, about 18 inches in diameter, was literally peppered with smallpox craters—hundreds of .30-caliber armor-piercing machine-gun bullets had been concentrated in this one spot.

American General Sherman tanks like .30-caliber ammunition. The heavy, tough armor sheds this materiel so that only the surface is roughened a little. The story of this tank? Looked as though it had spotted an enemy machine gun nest and charged it. The concentration of bullet marks indicated that the enemy turned his gun on it at very short range, keeping it going until the monster had completed its charge and the stuttering gun silenced.

Foreign rifles, devoid of their wooden stocks, were eloquent testimony to the destructive forces of war. These guns apparently were deemed useless, and had been burned to remove the wood so they would occupy less shipping space. In many cases, the melting and burning of the

steel, fusing a dozen or more rifles into one shapeless mass, indicated the effectiveness of our incendiary bombs dropped on enemy supply dumps.

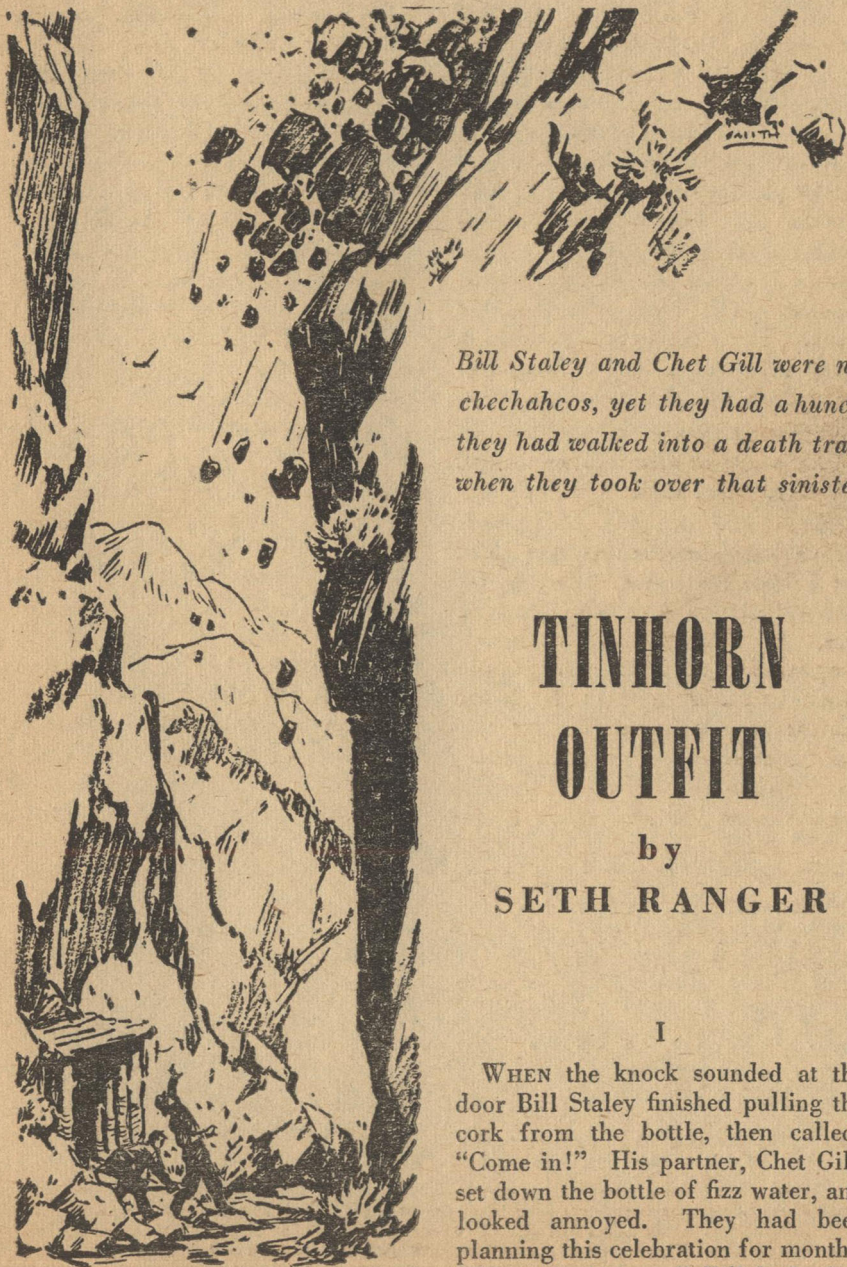
In addition to the above, there were enormous aircraft parts—wings, fuselage, and even engines. Most of these were being disassembled to recover the vast quantities of aluminum and magnesium.

All battlefield equipment is not scrapped. The United States Ordnance Department has the best repair units in the world. It has been recorded that German artillerymen have “destroyed” their heavy equipment when capture was imminent. Ordnance field repair shops have worked on that “destroyed” equipment and put it back in operation in less than twenty-four hours.

Occasionally these scrap piles contain live ammunition. This must be carefully sorted and destroyed, usually by burning. Much of the ammunition mixed into the scrap is severely damaged, and is automatically classified as unsafe to disassemble. A deep burning pit disposes of it effectively.

A study of junk in these scrap piles quickly points out the superiority of United States equipment. It also proves that when the boys overseas call for supplies and more supplies—they mean it. They are using the equipment, and, needless to say, are using it well.

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.



Bill Staley and Chet Gill were no chechahcos, yet they had a hunch they had walked into a death trap when they took over that sinister

TINHORN OUTFIT

by
SETH RANGER

I

WHEN the knock sounded at the door Bill Staley finished pulling the cork from the bottle, then called: "Come in!" His partner, Chet Gill, set down the bottle of fizz water, and looked annoyed. They had been planning this celebration for months. "When we hit pay," Bill had often

said, "we'll buy a bottle of the best whiskey on the market and toast each other for coming through all of our hard luck without throwing fists or lead at each other."

Well, they had struck pay—a nice pocket yielding seven thousand dollars in coarse gold—and the moment was at hand. "Only to have somebody come busting in," Chet thought. The hotel was Seattle's finest. The whiskey commanded a fancy price, even in Scotland, and the ice in tall glasses seemed to freeze all thoughts of desert hardships.

"We might've known it would end this way," Chet said.

The visitor was big and breezy with a hair-trigger smile, but looking behind the smile, Bill detected cold calculation in the man's blue eyes.

"I hope I'm not spoiling a little party," the stranger said, eying the two glasses.

"Not at all," Bill assured him. He got another glass.

"I'm Honest John Quigley," the visitor announced. "I read in the papers that you found that pocket down in Death Valley country. Hunted for it myself for years. I know Stove Pipe Wells, Granite Springs and Furnace Creek like a book. It got too hot for me down there, so I hit for Alaska. Located a likely placer prospect a few years ago. Got caught in a cave-in, though, and was in bed three months. Ever since it seems like rheumatism catches me where the joints and muscles were hurt. Had to quit the country."

"Say when," Bill said, pouring whiskey into a glass.

"*When!*" Quigley exclaimed when the liquor was four fingers high. "Can't drink like I used to. No water, please. I like a drink that can take a hold. . . . Well, here's to more lucky strikes." As they finished the drink, Quigley concluded: "Which is why I'm here. After seeing you boys' picture in the paper, I said to myself: 'Quigley, they're the ones!'"

He fished around in his pocket and brought forth a dull-colored nugget. "Know what it is?" he asked.

The partners examined it. "It isn't platinum, lead nor silver," Chet said. "What is it?"

"Tin. Placer tin," Quigley answered. "We use more tin than any nation in the world, and have to ship it in. Only a few tin mines in the United States and they don't produce much. A nugget of tin don't give you the thrill gold does. There's something about gold. . . ." His eyes burned brightly with a blue flame for a moment. "But a hundred or a thousand dollars' worth of gold won't buy no more'n a hundred or a thousand dollars' worth of tin.

"Now I'm a mining man," he continued, "not a promoter, so I can't use five-dollar words to put over a deal. I'd like you to investigate my tin mine. I think we're close to the mother lode and—"

"Just a minute," Chet interrupted. "Men don't go around peddling a sure thing. If you've a hundred-thousand-dollar prospect there,

you're not cutting us in on it for what we could invest—five thousand dollars."

"You're right. It's a cold-blooded deal," Quigley admitted. "I've no choice in the matter. I'm too old and crippled up to work the mine myself. I can hang on to the property until I die and get little or nothing. Or I can make a deal and get something. As a cold-blooded proposition, which would you do?"

"I'd make the best possible deal," Chet admitted.

"That's what I'm doing. I'll sell you a half interest for five thousand dollars. If you hit the lode . . . well, it won't be any hundred-thousand-dollar deal. A million more than likely. Half is yours. In the meantime five thousand dollars gives me a year of easy living. And I haven't many years left. You fellows, in your early twenties, have the best years of your life ahead. It's whether or not you want to gamble for big stakes!"

Again they could see sold calculation in his eyes. "A young man can gamble," admitted Chet, "but the older you get the closer you play your cards."

"The tin is there," Quigley declared. "I can prove it by banks, assayers and bills of lading. You aren't gambling on there being tin. It's a proven mine. You're gambling on hitting the lode."

"And if we don't?" Bill Staley inquired.

"You've bet on your hoss, the race is over and you lost your bet," Quigley answered. "I'm being honest with you boys. Here's my ad-

dress. Investigate and let me know what you decide."

"I suppose a dozen others are holding their breath while we decide?" Chet suggested.

"No," Quigley answered. "I don't play the field. I look it over and bet on a nose." Either because he was a good actor or because his injuries had left permanent damage, his face winced with pain as he got up to leave. He limped slightly. "Well—s'long."

"A smooth one, Bill," Chet said when the door had closed behind Quigley. "He's up to something, sure as sundown."

"And he spoiled our evening," Bill added. "Instead of celebrating our recent success, we'll be thinking about a mother lode of tin. Blast him! He put it up to us in a way that'll make us bite—even against our better judgment."

"I'm beginning to get it," Chet said. "When he read about us finding the pocket that so many had missed, he knew that we're the special breed that can't resist the lure of a pocket old Dame Nature has tucked away and is defying man to find. The setup played right into his hands." He shrugged. "There's one way to beat the game—say no and stick with it."

"Okay," Bill said. "The answer is no. We're sticking with it."

The next morning at breakfast, Chet said thoughtfully: "Everybody goes after gold, silver or platinum, but tin is something different. Who goes after tin? We're not going to, you understand, but . . . it sort of gets under your skin. Tin . . . something the country needs worse than

gold at times." He sighed. "Tin mining would be a new experience."

They finished breakfast and Bill said: "I think I'll check on Quigley's mine. I'm wondering just how much tin he's shipped out."

II

Jerry Sather, an assayer, had full information. "Every year about this time, Staley, someone comes in for figures on Quigley's tin mine. The Tinhorn Outfit, we called it long ago, and the name's stuck. But it's one of the steadiest paying mines in the North—for Quigley."

"A sucker deal, eh?" Bill suggested.

"Put it this way, suckers pay Quigley's dividends," Sather replied. "I know that there's a placer tin lode somewhere up Tin River. Quigley claims to have staked it. Maybe he has. Who knows? It's a cinch if it's above his claim, whoever finds the lode will have to cross his property. That'll call for a deal with him. Above his claim it's all deep canyons and sheer mountains."

"How'd Quigley find the prospect?"

"Prospecting for gold and found tin nuggets," explained Sather. "Tin River empties into Freshwater Bay, in the Arctic Ocean. You hit bad water a mile above. In late fall when the river's low you can go up in a pole boat, with a little lining here and there. The best time is winter. You go over the ice, get set and wait for the break-up. As soon as the river's down a little, you start work. You work until the freeze-up.

Then you freight out the cleanup to Freshwater Bay. The trader there will buy it and ship it out the following summer."

"There's quite a lag between buying the first pound of grub and shipping out the last pound of tin," observed Bill.

"That's right," Sather agreed. "Another thing: The same bunch never goes back a second time. Once is enough. Some of them don't come out—killed by cave-ins, or go crazy and wander off. Two years were enough for Quigley. The second year started him drinking. That was the year that he was hurt. He's been hitting the bottle ever since. He's in bad shape."

"I don't think we'll take the bait," Bill said, and Chet nodded.

They were sitting in their hotel room that night when the telephone rang. Chet answered it, listened a moment, said, "Thanks," and hung up. "Someone with a thin whining voice warning us to lay off this tin deal unless we want to get hurt. Sounded sort o' hysterical."

"Oh, so someone is trying to scare us off," Bill exploded. He picked up the telephone and called Quigley. "We'll give you five thousand dollars for a half interest in your mine," he said. "Bring in the papers tomorrow and we'll sign." He hung up. "It'll never be said that a threat scared me out," he fumed. "Who do you suppose it was? Someone who wants the claim left undeveloped until Quigley dies?"

"Search me," Chet answered. "All

I know is we're tin miners for the next year or so."

When the papers were signed, Quigley gave full information about supplies needed and transportation. Then he shook hands warmly and departed.

"He acted like a guy holding four aces," Chet observed. "And I notice our dough took some of the limp out of his leg, too."

Quigley's instructions had been brief. Buy supplies in Seattle, ship to Nome, tranship to the *Sybil Craig*, an Arctic trading schooner, which would land everything at the mouth of Tin River.

The day Bill and Chet arrived in Freshwater Bay, the sea was calm, but a gray sky was spitting snow and spray coated the anchor chains with ice.

"Trading post is five miles away," Bentley, the skipper, told them. "You walk along the beach summers. Winters, mush over the ice. But be careful pressure doesn't break up the ice and carry you away on a floe. This bay looks peaceful now, but hellish storms sweep in at times."

Wreckage and weathered bits of driftwood well above high water mark proved just how bad storms might be. Bill and Chet put in several days carrying supplies beyond reach of any possible storm, then made their way to the trading post. Sverdrup, a poker-faced Nordic, took them for granted. As if, each fall, suckers arrived with the ice. Sverdrup let the partners camp in a sod and driftwood igloo and agreed to supply dog teams to freight their supplies to the claim.

"I've a feeling," Bill said after they had been there a couple of weeks, "that the natives are quietly laughing at us."

"And why not?" Chet answered. "Bentley, the skipper, gave me a lot of pointers on thawing frozen ground. He says the ice will be thick enough inside three weeks. Bentley said that we'll probably meet Decker and Moran, this season's suckers, coming out, if they're alive."

Bentley's prediction was true. Halfway through the canyon, they saw a man necking a sled. They waited until the man reached them. He lifted his face, revealing eyes retreating into their sockets. His partner was lashed to the sled.

"I'm Decker," he said. "This is my partner, Moran. Nerves shot. Have to tie him or he'll run off and die."

"Bill," Chet said. "suppose you go on, and I'll help Decker."

Bill nodded and started the team. He wanted to question Decker, but this seemed a poor time. The man watched him a moment, as if not understanding, then suddenly he said hoarsely: "Don't go up there. You can't beat the game. Floods, slides, rocks falling from the canyon rim. You can't beat it. But talking won't do any good. A tin lode. It gets in your blood. You've got to find it..."

For a moment it looked as if he were considering one more attempt in spite of his condition, then he turned downstream, with Chet helping him to haul the sled.

On the desert Bill had usually

found enough sticks and twigs for a campfire, but there was nothing in the canyon. No trees to drift down from above and form jams, or wedge in rock faults—nothing but sheer walls, coated with ice where seepage had frozen.

Noon of the third day, the canyon widened. Marks on the walls and areas of frozen muck indicated that the season's operations had been carried on here. The half light of the Arctic winter revealed a shack, apparently clinging to a sheer wall. A twenty-foot ladder reached it from the ice.

Bill pulled up beneath the shack. It was long, narrow and literally built on a rock shelf, partly supported by irons set in the solid rock. A rusty stove pipe protruded from a sod roof. Climbing the ladder, Bill examined the gloomy interior. Some tinned food remained; a couple of hundred pounds of fine coal; a Yukon stove; bunks; crude furniture and cooking utensils. The double walls had been insulated with dry tundra, tightly packed. Thick paper, torn loose in places, covered the inner wall. Mining tools were piled in one end.

"Pretty tight quarters," Bill mused. "Chet and I'll sure get in each other's way."

He went down, made ice toggles and secured the dogs and began cleaning house while a mournful wind howled down the canyon. "Nature hasn't missed a bet in trying to crack a man's nerves," Bill growled.

Chet showed up the following morning. "I couldn't get much out of Decker," he said. "He'd been

going on his nerve for weeks, and as soon as he realized I'd help him through, he cracked. Let's look around."

"Someone put the shack up here," Bill explained, "to escape high water. There's no other place for man or building that's safe."

They found heaps of tailings, now frozen, proving that Decker and Moran had worked hard. Tunnels crisscrossed in the frozen muck showing that they had tried to follow the best pay. Lacking fire or steam, they had thawed the ground by running cold water through cuts, turning it off, draining the water and working the ground that had thawed. It was the only possible method and, given a long, warm season, a lot of dirt could be moved. Metal sluice boxes had been hung on iron pegs driven in the wall near the shack. And with them were iron pipes used to drain off the water in thawed areas.

A rusty windmill with pump attached completed the heavy machinery on the ground. It wasn't much, but it was a lot to be hauled over the ice by dog teams.

"The first miners began below the shack," Bill said, "and gradually they worked up, year after year, every day expecting to hit the big pay."

"And I wonder how many more will follow us," Chet said. "Each outfit that came in was as hopeful as we are now. And each that went out was as discouraged as Decker and Moran. And all the while Quigley takes his ease on money that

came the hard way. There's this much to be said for him, though, he puts the proposition up to you. There's no high pressure."

"But he knows that a man feels he's yellow and lacks self-confidence if he doesn't give it a try," Bill said. "My idea is to get everything set, then winter at Freshwater Bay. No sense in staying here, burning coal and getting on each other's nerves. We can do a little trapping, too. What do you say?"

"It's a good idea," Chet agreed.

III

Bill and Chet learned a lot about trapping Arctic foxes during the long winter, but little that would help them make a big cleanup in tin. Sverdrup bought their furs and when the sun swung North again, they returned to the mine.

Summer came in the form of a warm rain that melted snow on exposed slopes and sent a raging torrent over the ice. As the water piled up higher and higher against the canyon wall, the partners realized that this was the first test of nerves. There was no escape now.

"We're trapped, Chet," Bill said. "If the water hits the shack we'll go downstream. If the cold doesn't kill us, the boulders will. It's within five feet of us now."

Three hours later, it was within two feet and now ice began showing up in the torrent. Much of it was studded with gravel and above the uproar Chet yelled: "Those side streams froze right down to the bottom."

They roped one cake and held it long enough to chop off the gravel. They panned it for signs of either gold or tin. "That settles one point," Bill said. "The tin's here, not in the side streams. No gold, either, except faint traces of color."

They sat there all night long, watching the ice move. Presently the ice below them broke, and slabs began churning and shattering.

"The river's going down," Bill said at last. "Let's turn in. It sure was a strain on the nerves for awhile. That was the first time in my life that I felt trapped. Before when I've been in a jam, there's always been a way out."

The river was down when they awakened, as there was little back country to maintain a long run-off. Sections of bedrock, scoured clean by the ice, lay exposed. They went down to size up the situation.

"Shucks!" Chet exclaimed. "The tunnels and crosscuts that Decker and Moran left are gone. Now we've got to begin all over again."

"Only higher upstream," Bill answered. "And nearer the lode—we hope." It was clear now what had happened. The cuts and tunnels had given the ice a chance to get a hold on the frozen ground and it had given way under pressure. Upstream, the now-exposed overburden was matted with tundra, ripped and torn by passing ice but the frozen mass beneath was hardly touched.

"There's only one thing to do," Chet declared. "Ditch down to frozen dirt and start water thawing it. It'll be weeks before we can expect to reach bedrock."

"Then there should be a lot of bed-rock gravel to shovel in," Bill said.

The river continued to drop, exposing long stretches of potential pay dirt running from water's edge to the sheer walls. Day after day they dug ditches until they were ready to drop from exhaustion. At first the ditches were little more than scratches in the earth's surface, but as the dirt thawed they widened and deepened them, turning in a greater volume of water.

"You don't get much encouragement," Chet said wryly, "but it keeps you out in the fresh air. Besides, the fishing is good."

They awakened one morning to find the river so narrow and shallow that they could wade across it. Water no longer ran in some of the ditches. In others it was at a standstill.

"A short cut to bedrock!" Chet yelled, pointing at exposed muck. "Our first real break. Here's a thawed area."

They worked an eighteen-hour stretch before the walls began caving in on them.

"And no way of timbering," Bill groaned. "We might have known there was a catch in it. Let's shovel the muck into the sluice box and see what we've got."

They slept four hours, then went to work. The muck ran heavily to tin nuggets from the start. "Maybe this isn't the lode," Bill said, "but it's close to it. If there was only some way of bringing in a monitor and carrying on a large-scale operation."

Chet shook his head. "We aren't

mining gold, Bill," he warned. "Large-scale operations might cost more than the cleanup. If this lay-out was close to cheap transportation it would be a cinch."

They worked twenty-hour shifts the next three days, shoving through the muck easiest to handle. The cleanup pile began growing. Then they switched tactics, contenting themselves with building up a dump that could be run through the sluice box later on. They scraped out muck down to the frost line, and hoped the warm air would continue the thawing.

"Nothing wrong with this!" Chet said. "Where's the hard luck that licked the others?"

"Take it easy," Bill warned, knocking on wood. "Don't start asking for trouble."

Hard driving began telling and they cut their shifts down to ten hours. Water running through ditches had thawed other areas, and even cuts filled with still water had thawed some. Bill was working on a concentration of nuggets in the frozen muck when a faint rumble echoed against the canyon walls.

"What is it?" Bill asked. "Hey! Sounds like water!"

They crawled from the tunnel, and now the roar had grown in volume. "All hell's let loose!" Chet shouted. They caught up the precious tools and ran to the ladder. Chet grabbed a rope and fastened it to the sluice boxes and, with the free end around his waist, followed Bill up the ladder. They braced their feet and began pulling.

The sluice boxes gave way and bounced over the river bed. They had the first section clear when a solid wall of water struck a wall opposite a sharp bend, piled up, then spilled downward. The crest licked at their shack for several minutes, then the flood began subsiding. Two hours later the river was flowing at its normal low water level. The area from which they had been taking nugget-studded muck was covered. The pile that they had accumulated had vanished.

The ditches that they had dug on the higher ground were gone. Most of the ground between, frozen and well-anchored, had been knocked loose.

"If it'll toss boulders around," observed Bill, "frozen ground couldn't put up much of a resistance."

"All our work wiped out," Chet said dejectedly. "I wonder if this happened to the others?"

"Probably," Bill replied. "If we had been working in some desert wash, I'd know the answer—cloudburst in the mountains and most of the water draining down the wash at once. But . . . there was no cloudburst."

"Warm sun on some slope thawed the muck and started a slide which dammed the river," suggested Chet. "Water piled up and the dam went out. Okay, what do we do now?"

"Start over again," Bill answered. "Our money is sunk in this deal. We couldn't quit if we wanted to. No way of getting down river until the freeze-up." He looked at the sheer walls and he recalled the boulders

downstream. "This could easily be called the Canyon Of The Living Dead," he said.

One day about a week later Chet looked at Bill and thought: "He's losing weight. And come to think of it, I took up a notch in my belt this morning." He knew the answer. Until the sudden flood they had been living in the future, buoyed up by the pay they were taking out as the dirt thawed. Just when it looked as if a real clean-up was in their grasp, weeks of work had been wiped out. Now they were thinking too much of other years. Things had happened to men like Decker and Moran that gradually broke them down. Was the flood the first in a series of events, of narrow escapes, that would break him and Bill also?

In early August they were thawing new ground when something struck directly behind Bill's heels.

"What was that?" he demanded.

Chet walked over to a mass of muck and tundra weighing several hundred pounds. "It must have fallen off that cliff," he said. "There must be thawing ground beyond the canyon rim. A slope, probably."

"A bunch of that stuff would ruin a man's health," Bill said, half humorously. "I wonder how much more there is up there."

They shifted operations to a safe point and began tunneling less profitable ground. Several times in the next few days masses of tundra dropped and they awakened one morning to find several boulders on the canyon floor.

"They fell last night," Chet said,

"I heard them. They'd kill a man instantly if they hit him. I don't like it."

"I guess we'll have to work underground," Bill said. "One man can't constantly watch the cliff. Even if he saw something coming, his partner wouldn't have time to get out of the way."

They began tunneling, but it was necessary for someone to be in an exposed position to move the muck from the tunnel mouth. Late one afternoon, as Chet emerged, he dropped a shovel. Bill jumped nervously, then he whirled, his eyes blazing savagely from his muck-covered face.

"Can't you be quiet, you damned fool!"

"Who're you calling a damned fool?" Chet advanced, fists clenched. Then suddenly he relaxed. "Okay, I'm sorry. Your nerves are on edge and a sudden noise naturally made you jump." They returned to the shack, eyes on the canyon rim. "We'd better get a grip on ourselves," he said. "If we start fighting each other, we're licked."

As they were getting the evening meal, a boulder struck the river below the shack, sending a geyser of water from a pool. "That was a big one," Bill said. "Must've weighed a couple of tons."

Things were easier that night, and they began playing cards for the first time in weeks. Suddenly Bill dropped his hand.

"We've assumed thawing ground caused tundra masses and boulders to drop. Where there's thawing ground there's a trickle of water.

But water isn't trickling over the canyon rim. There's only one answer—*someone is trying to bump us off!*"

III

The following morning—at four o'clock—they took advantage of almost continuous light and made their way upstream. Each carried a light pack with grub and ropes. Twice they found signs indicating others had tried to climb the canyon wall and failed. Someone had driven iron pegs into the rock for a distance of one hundred feet at a third point.

"Are you any good with a rope?" Bill asked his partner. "And do you get dizzy in high places? If not, and if those spikes aren't rusted through, you might climb up, rope that outcropping, and pull yourself out. There's some pretty ragged rock above, but you might work your way up."

Chet studied the wall a long time, tested the lower spikes and said: "I'll give it a whirl. But stand back, because if I fall, or start rocks tumbling, the canyon floor isn't going to be safe."

Bill watched him climb slowly. When he reached the top spike Chet clutched a broken spot on the wall with one hand and tossed a loop upward. Again and again the loop narrowly missed the outcropping, then it settled. Chet pulled and some of the rock fell. He flattened himself against the wall and let it pass. Sweat was pouring from his face and the palms of his hands. He kept wiping his palms on his pants; then,

without looking down, he began the final climb.

Twice he roped outcroppings before he gained the broken stuff, then he yelled down. "I can go all the way up, but suppose, instead, I send the line down. You make it to the top of the spikes, fasten your line on mine. It's heavier. I'll pull it up, make it fast, then you can climb. But first send up the packs."

It was ten o'clock before they gained the rimrock. While the canyon wall fell away slightly at this point, it was almost a sheer drop above the mining operation. Looking upstream they saw a great bare area on a steep slope.

"That's where the slide went out that dammed the water," Bill said. "My guess is that some of it has been thawing and going out every year."

Chet estimated the area, and though the distance was great, it was apparent that if the missing dirt had gone out at once, it would have dammed the canyon to the rim.

They started downstream, making long and frequent detours to escape deep splits in the canyon wall. Either during the ice age, or because of earthquakes, the country was badly broken up in spots.

Chet was climbing out of a relatively small lateral canyon when Bill yanked him down.

"There's a man ahead," he said.

The man was a half mile away and he was digging in the tundra. As they watched he ran a dozen yards, turned and looked back. A boulder three feet through rolled toward the canyon rim, bounced several times, then vanished below.

They could hear the deep boom as it hit bedrock.

The man sat down and lit a cigarette. They had a profile view of a rugged individual dressed in rough clothing.

"Surprise is all with us," Chet said.

"But mighty little cover between," Bill reminded him. "We could use a good mesquite thicket to advantage about now."

"A cactus patch would help," Chet said. "Let's see what we can do. He's camped somewhere nearby. No one in his right mind would take long walks through this stuff to his job."

"That guy is very much in his right mind," Bill answered. "He's working methodically. I'll see if I can close in on him—"

"Wait," Chet said, "and give me a chance to circle and close in from the opposite direction in case he spots you."

Bill waited an hour, then he began working his way toward the man who was on his knees digging away dirt on the lower side of a boulder. The dirt would give way under the boulder's weight and in time it would roll. There, then, was what had cracked the nerves of those who had worked the prospect in previous years—the constant threat, day and night, of falling rocks.

"Well, he has plenty of ammunition," Bill mused. "That slope is studded with boulders."

Eventually Bill reached the boulders, and using them as cover got within a hundred yards of the man

before the latter suddenly leaped to his feet, rifle in hand, and snarled: "Come out of there or I'll let you have it."

When Bill hesitated, the rifle cracked, kicking up sod a few feet to his left. He advanced, hands held high, and yelled, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" with the hope Chet would hear.

"Stop," the man ordered querulously when Bill was within thirty feet. "Take off your clothes. Throw them to me. You might have a gun cached. I saw you coming and let you think I hadn't spotted you."

Bill undressed slowly, apparently having trouble with belt and buttons. He saw Chet's head lift above a boulder a couple of hundred yards away. Bill rolled up his pants in a tight bundle and tossed them at the man. While the man was going through Bill's pants Chet managed to race a hundred yards to the next cover.

"Now the shirt," the man ordered.

Bill rolled up his shirt and tossed it. Chet got within fifty feet of the man and Bill yelled: "Don't spill stuff out of the pockets." The man glanced at the ground and Chet hit him from behind. He was a big bruiser and for several moments it was a toss-up. Bill made a dive for the rifle and got it just as Chet caught the fellow flush on the jaw. His legs buckled slowly, and Chet finished him with a right cross.

For several seconds the man lay there, shaking his head to clear the fog, then he began cursing them in thin high-pitched tones. "What

right have you to jump me?" he demanded. "I'm prospecting. Looking for gold in the grass roots around the boulders."

"You threw a gun on me," Bill reminded him.

"Because you was sneaking up," the man replied. "It looks as if we'd made a mistake all around, so let's call it a joke."

Chet laughed mirthlessly. "It isn't as easy as that. You've got a peculiar voice. I've heard it before. Bill, this is the man who warned us over the phone in Seattle not to buy an interest in the tin mine."

"Let's find out who he is," Bill said practically. He searched the man's pockets and found a wallet with identification. "Dan Quigley, eh? Any relation to Honest John?"

"Nephew," Quigley answered sullenly.

"That clears it up," Bill said. "They sell stock in the mine, and Dan puts in the summer making the buyers stop taking out money."

Chet shook his head. "Not enough money involved to make it worthwhile. There's a bigger deal than that going on, and we haven't found the answer, though Dan Quigley may be part of it."

Quigley laughed shortly. He wasn't the sort the average man would take on as a mining partner. His eyes were shifty, but shrewd, and his normal expression was surly. He struck Bill as being the type that spent a lot of time working angles and deals.

"We don't know what your game is, Quigley," Bill said grimly, "but

you knew that we were working in the canyon and that falling rocks might either kill us or force us to hunt cover, so that makes you an enemy. We'll deal accordingly."

"A guy like this," Chet said, "would sneak into the country. It follows no one knows that he's here. So let's buy ourselves a little life insurance by tossing him into the canyon. Who's going to know it?"

"I think," Bill said, "that you've got something there. If anything comes of it, we'll say we found his remains on the river bottom, and that he must've fallen. Take his legs and I'll grab his arms."

Quigley turned ashen and perspiration poured from his face. "I believe you'd do it," he blurted. "I'll make a deal. I'll talk. My uncle and I don't get along. I'm his only

heir and I'm waiting for the old buzzard to die. If I can keep people from hitting the lode, then I'll inherit it." He drew a long breath. "And he is an old buzzard. He's working a deal of his own on this, but I haven't figured it out. . . . Can I pull my freight now?"

"We'll go along to your camp," Bill said. "You can take grub enough, but no weapons."

Quigley's camp was located in the shelter of a big rock. He had grubbed out roots on previous trips and let them dry in the sunshine. A pile of freshly dug roots proved that he planned on returning next year.

"Take what grub you need," Chet told him, "and clear out."

While Quigley was making up a small pack, Chet searched his sleep-

If whisking off tough beard's your worry
And you want slick shaves in a hurry
You'll find the Thin Gillette's a honey—
It saves you lots of time and money!

Top quality
at rock-bottom price



Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

ing bag and found a cached automatic pistol.

"You don't miss a bet, do you?" the man sneered.

"We want to live a long time," Chet said grimly.

They watched Quigley strike across country and Bill said, "He isn't headed for Freshwater Bay. He took only three days' grub with him, and no fuel."

"I had a hunch the amount of grub he took along might give us an idea," Chet agreed. "He wasn't smart enough to take ten days' grub and dump most of it as soon as he was out of sight. I've lost that trapped feeling. Let's check on a way out of here."

They spent the night in Quigley's camp, taking turns at guard duty in case the man returned. The next day they followed his trail through the tundra. It led to his night camp where they found some dried roots.

"He sure was thorough," Bill declared. "Camps nicely spaced, and stocked with fuel."

The third day the pair saw the Arctic washing a quiet beach. Several igloos stood about a hundred yards from the water. Umiaks turned upside down rested on pieces of driftwood. Dogs prowled the beach, and children, with nets, were running through swampy areas catching young geese that weren't old enough to fly.

The trail out had been difficult to follow because of the broken-up country. Neither was surprised that Honest John Quigley and others knew nothing of it. And but for trail

blazes that they had made, Chet and Bill might have had trouble returning.

They decided to salvage what tin they could before the freeze-up came. They checked on the amount of tin they obtained per cubic yard, then estimated the quantity of dirt moved since the first miners began the hunt for the lode. The total was staggering.

"A lode in itself," Bill said.

Chet stared speculatively at the stream. Suddenly he exclaimed: "I've got it! Look! Doesn't this add up?" He talked rapidly, with numerous gestures while Bill listened with growing conviction.

"I believe you're right," agreed Bill. "Honest John Quigley! Honest, hell! Still, no one could make a charge of crookedness stick. You might uncover his game, and know that it was a raw deal, but it's nothing you could prove in court. He can't be punished in any way."

"He can't be punished?" Chet queried. "Suppose you worked out a deal whereby the suckers carried out the dirty work and went their way sadder but wiser. Then just as you were about to cash in and take the pot, someone else grabbed it. Wouldn't that be punishment?"

"Let's stake that lode ground in a hurry," Bill urged. "The nearest commissioner's office is at Freshwater Bay. We can't go downstream until the freeze-up so we'd better take Dan Quigley's trail out."

Chet thought of the long climb by rope, out of the canyon, then the trek to tidewater. "Why didn't I think of this when we were in sight

of that Eskimo village?" he said wryly.

"Because you had to be on the ground to think along those lines," Bill answered. "Now we've got to handle this carefully, otherwise we won't catch the Quigleys off guard. Dan may be waiting for his uncle to die, and old Honest John may not like Dan, but blood is thicker than water, and they'll stand together against the world. With their two sharpshooting minds working together, they could pull some fast deals."

They made it to the village in three days. Dan Quigley had just returned from a whale hunt with the natives and the umiaks were loaded with meat for their caches. He regarded them with open suspicion.

"We want to hire a umiak to take us to Freshwater Bay," Bill said. "We want to pick up our mail."

"No mail's arrived at Freshwater Bay this year," Quigley answered. "The *Sybil Craig* was overhauled in Dutch Harbor last spring and she's late. She'll stop here first."

"You're right," Bill agreed. "There's no sense in going on to Freshwater Bay. We'll camp here!"

"Now we've got to think up another excuse," Chet said when he was alone with Bill. "That guy is suspicious of us, and why not? We've eliminated him as a source of danger, so why aren't we digging tin? It doesn't make sense to him."

IV

The schooner arrived in Freshwater Bay three weeks later.

"We're tired of this Eskimo village," Bill told the skipper when he and Chet collected their mail. "It has too many ornery dogs and loud odors. How about going along with you and getting a change of scenery?"

"If you've got the fare," the skipper answered, "I'll make room for you."

They found themselves in a tiny room, with a porthole the size of snoose tin but comfortable bunks. The schooner passed the mouth of Tin River without stopping, and anchored off Freshwater Bay. Bill went ashore and Sverdrup seemed surprised to find him normal, instead of raving.

"The schooner's going to be here several days, discharging cargo," Bill said, "I'd like to hire an umiak with an outboard motor and take a run up Tin River."

"Ah," Sverdrup said understandingly. "You lost some stuff in that flood and you hope to find it. Say, how'd you get out of that country without coming down the river?"

"It's a long story," Bill answered. "Some other time."

He picked up Chet and they disappeared. They returned three hours before the schooner pulled out.

"We'd like to record some ground," Bill said.

"So?" Sverdrup was amazed. He hardly glanced at the location at first, then he took a second look and clawed at the map. "Do you know where this ground is?" he demanded.

"Sure," Bill answered.

"At first I thought you was different than the rest—not crazy.

Now I know you're even crazier!" Sverdrup said.

The schooner picked up Dan Quigley on the return trip and the three went ashore at Nome to get off messages to the States. Quigley's read:

Staley and Gill up to something. Can't figure it out!

The partners' messages begged:

Send five hundred dollars immediately on a tinhorn proposition. Promise payment in full if we lose. Triple your money if we win.

"I hope," Bill said, "that there are twenty dead-game sports among our friends."

Forty-eight hours later eighteen friends had sent five hundred dollars. Bill and Chet found the *Sybil's Craig's* skipper enjoying a drink.

"Will you gamble on beating the ice to Freshwater Bay?" Bill asked, "if we make it worthwhile?"

"I'll always gamble," Bentley answered. "How much freight have you got?"

"Some machinery, fuel, and grub enough to last until next year's break-up," Bill replied.

"Then we'll have to work fast," declared Bentley. "Ducks and geese have gone South and it won't be long until the ice is coming down from the Arctic."

With a wary eye on the sky—which revealed the presence of ice by reflection against the clouds—the skipper drove his schooner to the limit. Young ice was forming in Freshwater Bay as they drove toward Tin

River. Small, thin slabs, picked up by the bow, went skimming over the ice.

They put two boats over the side, stretched planks across them, and loaded the machinery aboard. Slowly, surely they smashed their way to the beach. Again Chet and Bill watched the winter come to Freshwater Bay and the ice thicken.

They walked over the surface, testing it from time to time, then one day they moved out and spread timbers and planks over a small area. They drove toggles in the ice and made everything secure.

"It looks as if we're going to have visitors," Bill announced suddenly.

Chet put the binoculars to his eyes and saw an Eskimo-driven dog team approaching rapidly. A lone white man followed the Eskimo.

"Nothing wrong with Quigley's leg now," Chet said. "And he doesn't look like a man who's ruined himself with hard liquor. A stall, I'd say, to trick people into believing he can't get around any more."

"Is it Honest John Quigley, sure enough?" Bill asked. "Give me those glasses."

"He looked briefly, then grinned. "Quigley all right."

A short time later Quigley stopped before them and caught his breath. "What do you want for a half interest?" he asked bluntly.

"No dice," Bill answered.

"No? I'll take it into court and prove you're still my partners. I can prove that you didn't finish out the season—"

(Continued on page 130)



The chipped teacup of the PATRIOTIC Mrs. Jones

No matter who the guest—Mrs. Jones brings out her chipped teacup with a thrill of pride.

Not very pretty, that chip. But it bears witness to the fact that Mrs. Jones has her nation's welfare at heart.

Mrs. Jones has given up all unnecessary spending for the duration. By doing *without*—she is helping to fight inflation.

Maybe she doesn't know all the complicated theories about inflation. But she does know that her government has asked her *not to spend*.

So Mrs. Jones is making all the old things do.

And the dollars she's not spending now are safely put away (and earning interest) for the peacetime years ahead.

If we all are like Mrs. Jones, there will be no inflation with skyrocket prices. If we all are like her, dangerous Black Markets cannot exist.

A chipped teacup stands for all that : : : for a sound, secure U. S. A.

7 RULES FOR PATRIOTIC AMERICANS TO REMEMBER EVERY DAY

1. Buy only what you *absolutely need*. Make the article you have last longer by proper care. Avoid waste.
2. Pay no more than ceiling prices. Buy rationed goods only by exchanging stamps. (Rationing and ceiling prices are for your *protection*.)
3. Pay willingly any taxes that your country needs. (They are the cheapest way of paying for the war.)
4. Pay off your old debts—avoid making new ones.
5. Don't ask more money for the goods you sell or for the work you do. Higher prices come out of everybody's pocket—including *yours*.
6. Establish and maintain a savings account; maintain adequate life insurance.
7. Buy all the War Bonds you can—and hold 'em!

Use it up... Wear it out... Make it do... Or do without

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.



(Continued from page 128)

"And what'll we prove?" Bill retorted. "We'll prove that for years you tricked miners into working your ground. You knew a slide blocked the river and turned a flood loose every summer. You knew, too, that the flood was strong enough to move a summer's ditching because the ditches had weakened the ground so that everything went out. I don't know how many tons of tin ore have been carried downstream and left off the mouth of Tin River since you staked your claim, but we're going to find out."

"It won't work," Quigley warned. "You're doing business on a shoestring. You'll make a dump on the ice and it'll freeze, then a wind will break up the ice and you'll lose everything. My tin nuggets will be carried off and dumped in the Arctic Ocean!" It was cold and the air was spitting snow, but Honest John Quigley was sweating and his voice was hoarse.

"You could have done what we're doing years ago," Bill said. "You knew the lode had been washed downstream. But you stretched your luck and—missed the boat!"

Quigley mopped his brow again. "Be sensible. We'll make a contract. I'll put up the money, and we'll come in next year with a dredge and work all summer—"

"Oh, no," said Bill. "I don't know just what you and that no-good nephew of yours had in mind, but we

happen to be sitting pretty just now and you two are out of luck. That's why Chet and I are working this winter to get money enough to buy a dredge. . . . Okay, Chet, let's see what we've got down on the bottom."

A gasoline engine turned over rapidly, a bucket on the end of a long boom, dropped and struck the ice. It cracked. The bucket fell again, smashing a hole. It went to the bottom and ate deep into the muck off the river mouth. By lifting and lowering the bucket they washed out the muck.

"Dan—that fool!" Honest John was beside himself. "I've cut him out of my will so he stands to lose whatever happens. Don't you see," he continued, his wheedling voice suddenly becoming desperate, "you're losing all of the big nuggets! They go out with the muck."

"But they don't go far," Bill answered. "Only to the bottom. Our dredge will pick them up next year." The boom moved around, the bucket jaws opened, spilling water, some muck, and a mass of dark objects onto a sled. "You see," Bill said, "we're making a tin dump on the beach, so that the ice can't carry it off if it breaks up. Chet, I guess we've found the lode!"

"If we haven't," Chet said jubilantly, "we've hit some kind of a jackpot!" The boom swung back, the bucket went deep and took another bite. It was slow work, but all winter was ahead of them.

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 70

1. fiesta 2. yearling 3. bandanna 4. bridle 5. cottonwood 6. burro 7. grubstake
8. buffalo 9. deer 10. mesa 11. bunkhouse 12. goshawk 13. pueblo 14. steer 15. hide

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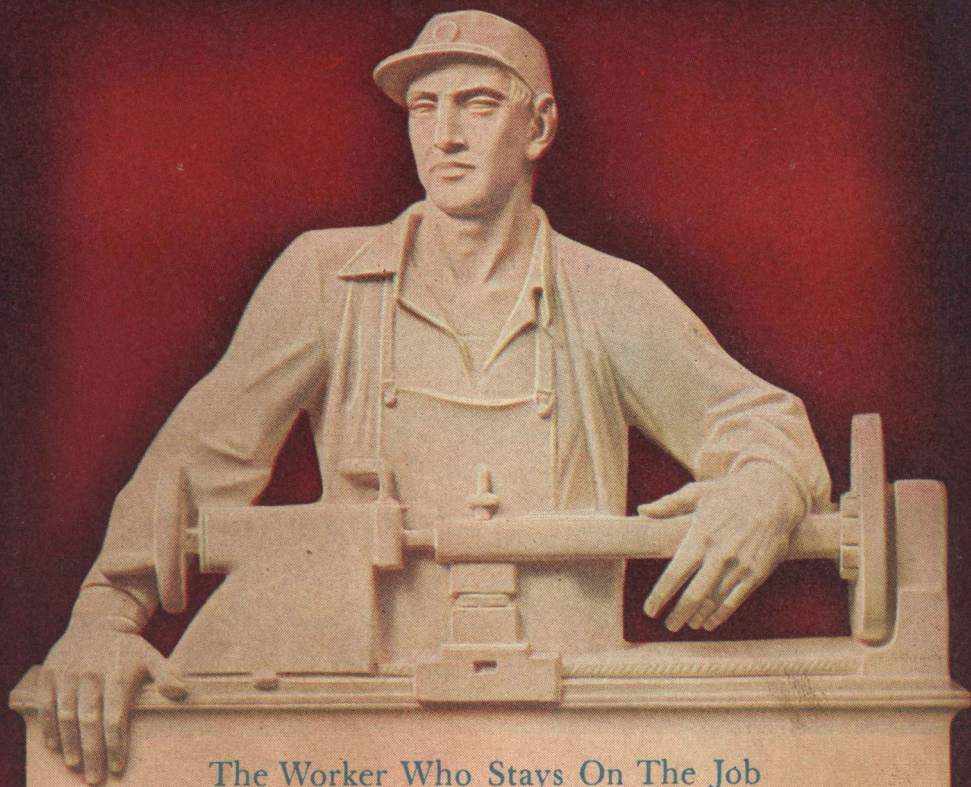


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