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NOVELETTES

NOVEL

SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

Editor
JOHN BURR

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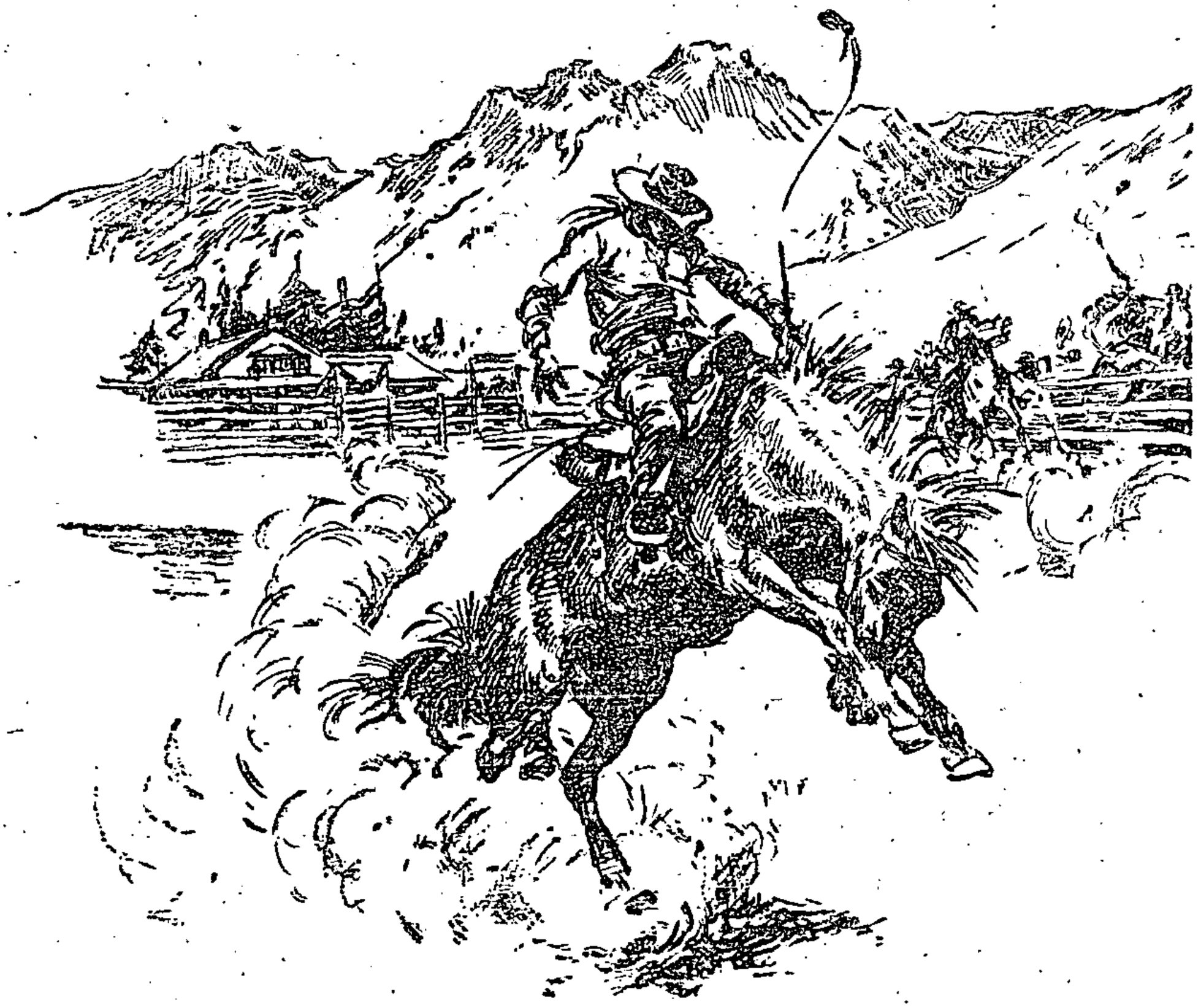


by TOM W. BLACKBURN

I

SERGEANT MACGREGOR, U. S. Army, detached, a dour man smelling strongly of horse sweat and saddle soap, was a veteran cavalryman.

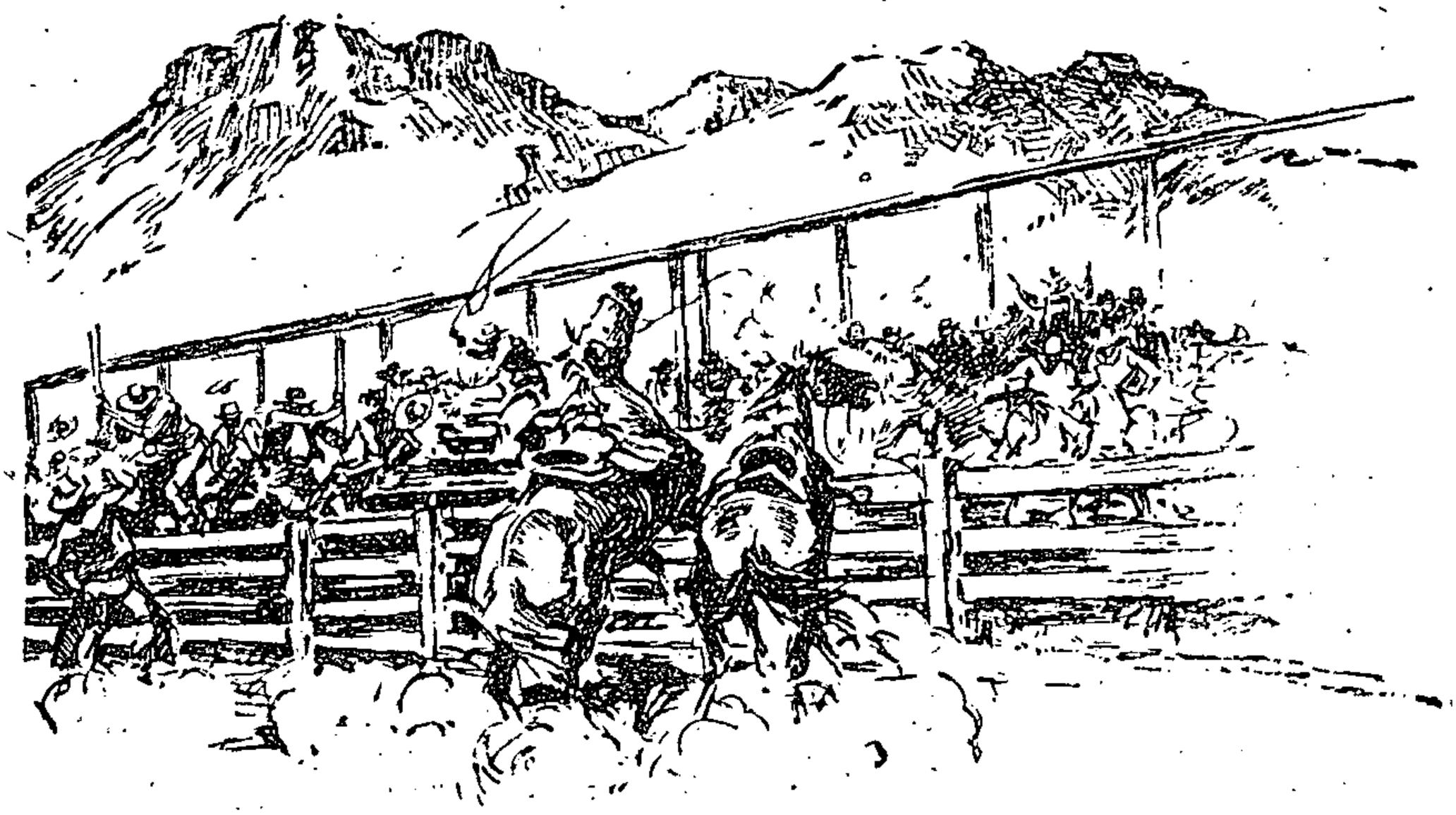
"The cavalry's got to have these horses," he repeated earnestly for the hundredth time in the last thirty-six hours, "and you're the lad as knows critters top from bottom and can't be fooled when you're buyin' them for the quartermasters. But where *is* this Kerrigan place you've been talking about?"

Cal Breckenridge, the stock buyer, grinned faintly and nodded at the steep walls of the pass through which they were riding.

"If a man had something coming from The Maker and could order up a place built specially for raising horses on the quiet and in private, he couldn't wind up with anything better than old Rex Kerrigan's Keyhole. This is the slot I was telling you about. We'll be through it in a couple of hundred yards. Then you'll see it—the sweetest valley man ever looked at, locked right in the middle of the mountains!"

The sergeant nodded without interest.

"Yeah—a horse heaven. You've



How could Cal Breckenridge deal with the owlhooter whose gun-swift raiders had stocked the Keyhole as a

HELL'S HORSE HEAVEN

told me so often I could say it backwards. Kerrigan settin' up here raisin' the best ridin' stock in the country an' treatin' visitors like they was dukes and him a king glad to see 'em. So we'll get a welcome, eh? I could do with one—and plenty wet!"

Cal chuckled. He was thinking of the last time he had ridden into the Keyhole. MacGregor had a treat coming, and a surprise. Until a man had seen Rex Kerrigan's stronghold, until he'd been welcomed to the old man's ranch, he couldn't appreciate what lay ahead.

As he chuckled, a voice sang out, tight, hoarse, unfriendly.

"Hold it—hold it tight!"

MacGregor, jarred, jerked his mount up so savagely the animal reared in protest to the punishment of the bit. Breckenridge stopped short, twisting in his saddle. Three men were riding out from behind a heap of broken rock at the foot of the left wall of the slot. Two were ordinary hands, riding heel to the third man. This one was small, painfully neat of dress, and singularly chill of feature. The trio moved with some caution but plain purpose. This was a trail block.

They held on to within a dozen yards. Then the small man spoke quietly.

"You're off your range, friends. This pass is closed."

"Kerrigan closed it?" Cal's question was edged. The small man nodded agreement.

"He did!"

Cal shifted in his saddle.

"Then that leaves us clear," he said. "I've been Rex Kerrigan's friend for years and I've ridden a long way to see him. Where'll we find him—at the main house?"

The small man's smile continued.

"You won't find him!" he answered smoothly. "You're not going through. Kerrigan's got no friends any more. I said this pass is closed. Start riding—down grade!"

Cal studied the man in front of him for a moment, fighting down a rising anger. A man like Rex Kerrigan didn't change, and the stockman had always had friends. Isolated here in his mountain stronghold, the only way Kerrigan could air his vast pride in the Keyhole and its stock was to those who rode into his ranch to see him. Only for visitors could he stage the epic nights of feasting, carousing and tall talk which were his chief pleasure. There were crossed sticks here.

"I've seen a man or two rawhided off the Keyhole for roughing one of Kerrigan's friends with the wrong side of his tongue," Cal said steadily. "I want your name; then get out of the way!"

The small man nodded obligingly and tilted his head toward the sheer face of one canyon wall.

"The name is Caesar, friend—Danny Caesar. But before you prime trouble, slant a look up there!"

Cal raised his glance. Halfway up the granite escarpment was a ragged ledge. It formed a crude breastwork over which rested half a dozen rifles, angled alertly downward. Danny Caesar chuckled almost soundlessly. Cal scowled.

"If you're bucking Kerrigan, Caesar," he said slowly, "you're bucking a stacked deck. Kerrigan is king in this country. If you're a hand cutting a wide swathe, you won't be for long when Kerrigan hears how you slanted iron at Cal Breckenridge on the Keyhole boundary! Come on, Mac, we're 'bushed!"

MacGregor spat again, turning an insolent stare toward the trio facing them and pointedly ignoring the riflemen above.

"Three buckos, eh?" he queried thoughtfully. "And the lot of ye wouldn't fill one good cavalryman's grave!"

He snorted and reined after Cal.

II

A mile down through the slanting country which headed at the slot, Cal reined up. MacGregor hauled in beside him. The sergeant wore a deeply troubled look.

"I guess this winds us up," he said regretfully. "Kerrigan was about our last hope. Nothing to do now but head back to Fort Laramie."

"We came out with orders to buy three hundred head of remount stock. We don't go back without them!"

Relief flooded MacGregor's face, but he still appeared puzzled.

"What we going to do, catch a pair of wild ones, and sit around till they've foaled us the herd? We ride hard, but we find nary a horse for sale from Laramie to the Bighorn. We've got one ace left, but pretty pants, back there, fizzes it off in our faces. And the cavalry has got to have something better than prairie dogs to ride!"

Cal grinned at the sergeant's rancor. There was reason enough behind it. The Bighorn country was horse country, always had been. The Crow and Shoshone nations had become rich by trading the surplus of their growing herds of riding animals to less well-mounted tribes. The valley had later been settled by cattlemen, but saddle stock had thrived and increased on every ranch. Small, swift, tough animals with savvy whose fame spread slowly. Cal had known this. And he had ridden north from Laramie.

But now, when there was a huge demand, a flat price of a hundred and ten dollars gold for each animal in a lot purchase, and the Army's need was pressing, the ranchers had no stock. The answer was always the same—thieves. The Bighorn was stripped.

All that had been left on any ranch Breckenridge and MacGregor visited were some work animals, some scrubs, and a few personal saddle animals not held for sale. It was a preposterous thing. A gang might clean out a little side valley. Reckless men willing to chance discovery might be able with luck to drive twenty or thirty head north into Canada or deep into the Montana wilds to unsuspecting buyers. But a basin as big as the Bighorn—These reported thefts totaled a huge herd, a herd too big to be driven without discovery and too dangerously large to be held in the brakes for rising prices on a market thus artificially shortened.

Cal had become convinced that the ranchers were lying and lying together, that they were holding their own stock in scattered hiding places and deliberately refusing to meet the Army's need. But he always had Rex Kerrigan on whom he could fall back. If pressed, he was certain the Keyhole could produce the entire three hundred head for which his orders called.

Now, with the Keyhole closed to him, he was against the wall for the necessary stock.

Leaning from his saddle, Cal dropped a hand to the sergeant's knee.

"Cheer up, Mac," he said quietly. "You're not going to have to straddle a prairie dog—yet! Maybe you'll wish you had a curb on a bighorn sheep before we're through. But I want to know why Kerrigan's gates are closed. We're going into the Keyhole—from above!"

MacGregor slanted a long, unhappy look up at the steep granite range which stabbed upward into snow and mists against the western horizon. A visible shudder shook him.

"Dang it!" he complained. "I can't fly. And I get spots—green

ones—when I get more'n sixteen hands off'n the ground. They's got to be an easier way!"

"There isn't!" Cal said drily.

MacGregor spread his hands in earnest entreaty.

"Looky, son," he begged, "mountains is for goats, not for God-fearin' Scots. I've heard how a man's head pipes can bust and him bleed to death, 'way up in the air like that. We're sure to get lost among them unfriendly gravestones and the devil only knows what else!"

"It'll be steep, all right," Cal agreed, "and it may take some careful looking. But if there's a way over those hills into the Keyhole for driven horses, there's a way for us!"

MacGregor blinked his eyes.

"Driven horses! Why, tarnation, you figger them valley lads actually was cleaned of their stock, after all!"

The unhappiness faded from the sergeant's face. He snorted eagerly.

"Troop—forward!" he thundered. "You're right, a cavalryman can go any place a horse does. And I've got a hankerin' to see the back side of that spider-legged Danny Caesar!"

Rex Kerrigan's Keyhole Ranch lay chiefly in a large oval valley sunk between two forking segments of the Divide. The slot barricaded by Danny Caesar was the main gateway, giving directly out onto the wide, lower reaches of the Bighorn Valley. However, Cal recalled from previous visits that Kerrigan had once or twice pointed out steep canyons slicing through slope graze above the enclosed valley, boasting that they were thick with game.

It seemed likely that one or more of these steep water-cuts might climb high enough to breach the main range. If this was so, there would be at least one high pass giving access to the ranch. This was borne out by Cal's hunch that the barricading of the Keyhole had something to do with the stupendous thievery which the lower ranchers claimed had cleaned them of stock. A crew operating on a scale big enough to encompass the whole lower valley would not dare make an open drive through as well-known a pass as the slot leading into the Keyhole. But they might be able to circle even a huge herd through the mountains far enough to bring them in the back way.

And once they were into Kerrigan's domain, behind the closed slot, they were secure.

For two hours, Cal and MacGregor kept apart, sweeping the whole bottom of the ridge fold up which they rode for sign. But toward dusk, Cal rejoined the sergeant, giving up any attempt at locating tracks. The ground was sloping more steeply. Summer rains in this part of the country were brief but they fell heavily. And the bottoms were g o u g e d with run-off so thoroughly that the marks of a passing army would have been obliterated.

Some short of midnight, Cal signaled a halt. MacGregor and himself split the remainder of the night into two watches in the hope that one or the other of them might pick up a fire along the high country

somewhere which would give them a mark at which to shoot when daylight came. However, the black silhouette of the main range was not altered through either of the long vigils and they broke their dry, fireless camp at daybreak.

The sun had not penetrated the deeper gullies when they rode into the head of the slope they had been following, only to find it terminating against a sheer upthrusting around which there was no passage. They back-tracked, crossed a ridge, and started again. In midmorning they were above timberline, breathing heavily and leading their horses. MacGregor's enthusiasm was simmering out.

"Green spots," he muttered, "goin' round and round. And me with no breakfast! Have a heart, Cal. The devil, himself, wouldn't climb this high to thumb his nose at heaven. Let's get down out of here!"

Cal shook his head, saving his wind. But he was beginning to share his companion's ebbing faith in the hunch which had brought them here. It had been a ruthless climb. Even granting that men who knew their objective might also know of an easier way to reach it, any pass at this altitude would be merciless on men and animals.

There appeared to be no end to the rising of the Divide, here. Each ridge summit was surmounted by a higher one, beyond. It seemed almost certain now that any trouble on the Keyhole was strictly Rex Kerrigan's affair, having no possible connection with assertedly stolen stock, spirited out of the great Bighorn Basin, immense in gray distance at their backs.

There was a saddle, cresting just ahead. Cal figured they'd halt there, wind themselves, and start back by an easier trail if they could spot one. He plodded on into the saddle—and drew up short.

There was no higher ridge beyond this summit. There was nothing but a staggering void, dropping swiftly away. Far, far down was a blue-tinged valley, shaped like a meat platter. The irregular pattern of stock grazing on rich grass was scattered across the floor of the valley. And even from this great height, the red sandstone walls of Rex Kerrigan's huge house stood in faint relief against the color of the grass. Here was their upper gateway. Here was the Keyhole. Cal turned.

MacGregor had lumbered up. He stood a yard away, staring with popped eyes and rocking a little on his heels. His face was the liver green of a man fighting a griping nausea.

"Saints and sinners!" he moaned. "I'm a dyin' man!"

A shelving scarp slanted downward from the saddle. Cal nodded toward it.

"There's our track," he said. "Keep your eyes away from the edge and against the wall and you'll make it all right."

"Hell yes, I'll make it!" MacGregor groaned. "It's goin' down and that's enough for me!"

Cal grinned and started forward. At the same instant a hammerlike blow shattered a rock beside him

and a moment later the thin, high crack of a distant, powerful rifle echoed among the pinnacles flanking the pass. Cal leaped across, crashed into the sergeant, and flattened out with him behind a weathered boulder. Other rifles took up the challenge of the first. Lead whined in and dusted the place where MacGregor had been standing with powdered granite. Another slug ricocheted from the boulder behind which they crouched.

The horses, abandoned reins down, drifted to a little patch of snow grass showing hardily up from a crevice. The sergeant belched cautiously, found that he was still in control of his queasy stomach, and swore.

"I've heard of a man having to climb a scaffold to get hisself hanged. But be damned if even a cavalryman ever had to climb a mountain afore to get hisself planted with lead!"

"They're pretty sharp," Cal agreed softly. "Covering all odds—even this pass. We've got to get off of this saddle and down the valley side without getting tagged. But there's one thing—we don't have to worry about where we're going to get horses. There's enough for two armies in that valley right now!"

"Want I should whistle 'em up?" MacGregor inquired scornfully. "That's the only way we'll get 'em."

Cal nodded.

"Maybe," he agreed.

III

Breckenridge listened carefully, estimating angles and figuring distances by the lag between the arrival of singing lead and the sound of the shots which drove it. The rifle barrage set to converge on the pass appeared to be composed of four weapons, scattered on high points on the Keyhole side of the ridge and a considerable distance away. Cal thought it likely that the riflemen were so stationed that they could not only cover the pass but a good portion of the shelving trail slanting downward toward the valley.

Two closely spaced shots smashed uncomfortably close, scarring the boulder behind which Cal and the sergeant were crouched. MacGregor swore with the deep feeling of a man of action, caught in a corner where he can't hit back.

"Sharp shootin'!" he muttered. "Scabby sons o' the devil, but they can shoot!"

Cal nodded. The men with the rifles were expert. Rex Kerrigan hired top hands. But his business was horses. He didn't need this kind of skill. These Winchester men were not Keyhole hands. Here was more confirmation of Cal's hunch. Kerrigan wasn't boss of the Keyhole, now. And the ranch had become a fortress instead of a horse heaven. Cal wondered just where Danny Caesar fitted into this—and he thought he knew.

The rifle fire, having built up to a crescendo, ceased abruptly, as though the riflemen had received new orders. Cal waited a moment to be sure the sudden silence wasn't just an accident caused by reloading and the like. When it dragged on for three or four minutes, he gripped MacGregor's shoulder and stood up.

MacGregor squawked alarm and tried to drag him back down.

"Lad, you're daft!" he growled. "Them small-bore artillerymen'll put a hole in both your eyes, the way they've been fannin' lead in here!"

Cal shook his head.

"Not now," he said with a crooked grin. "Somebody's changed their minds. We've got a special invite onto the Keyhole—and you can thank your cavalry uniform for it!"

"Man, this jacket won't stop the wind, let alone bullets!" snorted Mac. "Your stirrups are draggin'!"

Cal shrugged.

"We'll see," he said.

Where the trail dipping for the valley was sheltered from timberline winds and the wash of spring rains, it was deeply powdered and a wide path down its center was worn clear of grass and growth. It was not positive proof that a huge herd of stolen horses had been driven over this track but it was indication that it had carried more traffic of some sort than could reasonably be expected on so difficult a pass.

Breckenridge rode with a definite assurance that MacGregor and himself were being watched every foot of the way, yet there was no outward sign of this. They might as well have been no more than a pair of pilgrims, straying into a strange valley by an unused track. Once, after they were into the timber belt, they cut across one end of a meadow where several hundred head of ponies were grazing. A rider was on watch at the upper end, hunched with a crossed leg on his saddle. He glanced up, studied them for a moment, and turned his attention back to his charges with no other sign.

MacGregor scowled.

"It's a trap!" he complained. "A yawnin', spike-toothed trap. And you're ridin' smack into it with both eyes open and your ears flappin', Cal Breckenridge!"

Cal grinned.

"Sure, it's a trap," he agreed. "But I've seen a man set a spring for one kind of critter and get something altogether different instead. I promised you a welcome on the Keyhole. Maybe Rex Kerrigan won't be setting it up, this time, but I've got a hunch we're going to get it, anyhow."

"Never seen a lad with so many off-hand hunches!" MacGregor growled. "We should have admitted we was licked, back there at the slot. Wouldn't be the first time the quartermaster wanted more horses than he could get!"

Cal ignored that observation.

"Whatever cards I put down, you string with me, Mac," he said grimly. "When a wild card game gets started, anybody's liable to draw a one-eyed Jack and a deuce or two!"

MacGregor grunted, unconvinced. The trail, now deep into the valley, swung out of a heavy belt of timber and lined across lush, rolling grass toward an immense house. Breckenridge, who had been guest within its walls more than once, was still struck with its magnificence.

Kerrigan had built everything on the Keyhole in keeping with the grand scale of the valley and its surrounding mountains. The house was

no exception. It was two floors in height, rambling, and beautifully kept. Its walls had been quarried from red sandstone bluffs at the upper end of the valley. Its casements and the slate of the roof had been lugged by wagon across the Bighorn and up through the slot. It was landscaped on one side.

On the other side of the house was a wide, fenced corral with chutes, a small grandstand, and an oval, graded track around the outer edge of the corral. Beyond this, under a grove of trees, was a scattering of benches about a huge, spitted fire pit. It was a regal establishment.

MacGregor was still staring at the house and its surrounding grounds when a party of four horsemen who had ridden up from the stock building below the house, cut across the grass and cantered up to the newcomers. Smiling, genial of face, and with a mocking light in his eyes, Danny Caesar was foremost of these.

He pushed back his hat as he drew up.

"Gentlemen, my apologies," he said easily. "I've been expecting you. Sorry you didn't make yourself known at the slot yesterday. I should have paid attention to the sergeant's unform, but we've been troubled by deserters drifting through here. You're the cavalry buying commission?"

Cal Breckenridge matched the man's ease.

"You've put us to a hard ride, Caesar," he said. "But with a red-hot purchase order in our pockets and a lot of miles behind us, we can pass up a mistake for a meal and three hundred head of that stock we passed riding in here."

Caesar laughed.

"The Keyhole'll feed you, all right. And we can make a deal on horses. There's just one thing. These are bad times. A man's got to watch his deals. You cull your herd and draw us a payment voucher on that purchase order. I'll give it to a good man and we won't hold you or the herd any longer than it takes him to get to the nearest bank and trade that voucher for cash."

MacGregor eyed the small man with unmasked dislike. He cocked his head critically to one side.

"This is Rex Kerrigan's layout, ain't it?" he queried. "Is holding army men till a voucher's cashed his way of doing business?"

Danny Caesar's pleasantness faded swiftly. His voice had the ring of a lash.

"It isn't!" he snapped. "But you're not dealing with Kerrigan—direct!"

He wheeled and led the way into the yard of Kerrigan's house. Cal watched hands moving about odd tasks in the compound and looked for a face he could recall from previous visits. There were a few he believed familiar, but he wasn't sure.

MacGregor and Cal were led to a room in the rear wing of the building.

"These are not the guest quarters," Caesar said smoothly. "But we're running a bigger crew than ordinary and we're cramped for room. Rex Kerrigan always entertained a man before he'd talk business—" The little man stopped and smiled

thinly. "That's not changed. Tonight we eat. There'll be whiskey and a little fun if you like. Tomorrow some of the boys are going to settle a few arguments, out in the corral. But I want you to have a little time to think.

"The Keyhole Ranch is prepared to sell you every-head of stock you need, culled out by yourselves and guaranteed up to Army specifications —at our price!"

Caesar grinned and swung the door closed. MacGregor took off his hat and tossed it onto the huge, carved bed.

"Horse heaven," he growled, "ramrodded by the devil!"

IV

Crossing to a window, Breckenridge stared thoughtfully out into the valley of the Keyhole. Danny Caesar's vanity was making him carry out the tradition of hospitality which the owner of the great ranch had long ago established. Cal wondered if Ceasar's pride in his bland pose as master of the Keyhole couldn't be used against the man. This talk of a settling of arguments tomorrow had the sound of an open competition — probably a private rodeo of the sort occasionally cooked up on big spreads for sport. If a man could find allies and get himself set—

Cal turned to MacGregor.

"There's a man outside our door, and another in the main corridor. I want them out of the way for about ten minutes."

The sergeant looked keenly at Cal, said nothing, and stepped out into the hall. There was a mutter of talk which receded. Cal waited a moment, then followed. The hall was empty. So, also, was the main corridor leading to the central stairs. Cal took these two at a time. From a window on the landing, he saw MacGregor and the two guards covering the lower floor engaged in argument on the front steps. The sergeant had apparently suggested something of which Caesar's men disapproved and they were trying to discourage him.

Chuckling, Cal took the last flight at a bound and tried a door. It opened into a darkened room. A man, tightly bound and gagged, sat in a deep wing chair; a man with a shock of steel-gray hair and an erect and powerful body which belied his years. Cal swiftly loosened the gag and Rex Kerrigan ran his tongue over dry, cracked lips.

"Breckenridge!" he said with deep relief. "Man, am I glad to see you! Look, if you can get me out of here and let my boys know I'm gone so they can drift, too—good! If you can't, get out yourself, and fast. You're marked for the ax!"

"Not yet I'm not!" Cal answered.

Kerrigan snorted. "Don't be a fool! Danny Caesar's oiled both ways from the middle and deadly as a sidewinder! Look at his scheme. The cavalry's always been the best horse market in the country. But they've always been choosey about the stuff they bought—registered brands, no clumsy vents, and the like. Now the need is big. So Caesar puts the squeeze on. He strips the whole Bighorn of stock like you'd strip a

rabbit pelt. Driving the stuff with a big crew, he circles the works up through Skyline and drops on me here, pulling my boys' teeth before I knew what was up. The boys were smart. They took it. He's let 'em run loose, since, doing chores and tending stock. Me, I bowed my back and got hogtied in my own guest quarters for it!"

Cal nodded.

"I figured Caesar'd take care of you. Alive and a hostage, he could use you to handle your boys. If you were dead, your hands would figure it was each man for himself and they might give him real trouble. When Caesar told me the guest quarters were full—that he had such a big crew he needed the room—I thought I'd find you here."

"To blazes with me!" Rex Kerrigan growled. "What about you and this horse thief? He's got every head of stock the Army can lay hands on up in this country. He's got 'em holed in here where nobody'll look."

"Maybe—" Cal agreed softly. "What's this competition thing Caesar was telling me about for tomorrow?"

"That weasel-eyed devil's got the gall of a goat!" fumed Kerrigan. "I run a big crew here. You know that. Bottled up like they are, the men get restless. So come every couple of months, I let 'em stage a good jamboree—ridin', ropin', raisin' Ned out in the show corral. Keeps 'em happy. Plans was made for a shebang tomorrow. Caesar's carrying them right on out. Says his boys might as well share the fun too—and my prizes, my whiskey, and my feed after the show!"

Kerrigan's anger reached a peak. He struggled in his bonds.

"The devil with questions!" he rasped. "Get me out of here—standing there jawing me when my wrists are half cut in two!"

"Easy, Kerrigan. Here—"

Cal bent above the struggling rancher, but instead of loosening the ropes which held the man, he slipped the gag deftly back into his mouth. Kerrigan's eyes turned murderous.

"Save it!" Cal counseled bluntly. "We've got nothing to work with but luck and surprise. I'm slipping a knife under this cushion. You can dig it out and cut yourself loose when you're sure nobody else will look in on you tonight. You know the house and where to find your boys. Get word to them that we'll make a try at spiking Danny Caesar's game, tomorrow. Get every one of them to turn out for this show. Caesar's crowd will be dogging it easy, riding on free fun. Have every Keyhole man pick a renegade and spot a singletree or a club or something he can handle his man with. Have them sit tight till hell busts loose, then crowd their luck to the limit!"

Kerrigan looked unconvinced and tried to talk through his gag. Cal left him still working his jaws, and drifted swiftly and silently back to the room which had been assigned to MacGregor and himself. A few minutes later, there was scuffling in the hall and the sergeant was heaved

bodily into the room. A man poked his head in.

"Better keep hobbles on your pal or he'll draw a busted head!" the man snapped. "The boss says to wash up in the kitchen and come out front. Feed's on."

V

Breckenridge sat through the night meal and the carousal which followed with grim satisfaction. Caesar, obviously pleased with his position as uncontested master of the Keyhole, allowed Kerrigan's hands to mingle freely with his own men. And he treated Cal and the sergeant with a mocking courtesy which kept MacGregor in a constant, simmering rage.

Kerrigan's men were an unhappy lot. The generous flow of whiskey and the songs and dancing of a pair of girls who appeared to be a part of Caesar's crew fell far short of making up for their empty holsters and the fact that their boss was being held prisoner on the ranch. Cal watched their temper and felt a vague relief. If bitter men could carry out the reckless pattern of his hasty plan to liberate the Keyhole and secure horses for the cavalry at contract price and in keeping with the law, these hands would do.

Toward midnight Cal signaled the sergeant and rose to leave the furor in the main hall of the Keyhole house. Danny Caesar, his hair damply touseled and his eyes bright with whiskey flame, touched Cal's arm.

"That's right, Breckenridge," he counseled mockingly, "save something for tomorrow. We'll hardly get started, tonight. We do things right on the Keyhole! Or maybe you don't like us, eh? What's the odds? You've got to have horses. I know that. Three hundred head. And I know your orders are to get them, and to blazes with the price. We've got them. You can take them out over Skyline Pass and cross over above the Bighorn. Nobody in the big valley'll be wiser. And they'll only run you two hundred a head. That's only ninety over market—a cheap cut for bunching them here together for you. We'll talk tomorrow after the show—"

Caesar stopped, his eyes turning hard.

"Or *do* you get stubborn? Do I have to . . . ah . . . forget you and wait for the Army to send out another buyer with less conscience and more sense?"

"Tomorrow—after the show," Cal agreed.

Danny Caesar chuckled and turned back to the half-finished bottle of whiskey sitting on the floor beside his chair. MacGregor eyed the man balefully but said nothing until Cal and himself were back in their room. Then the sergeant shook his head darkly.

"A man grows a strong stomach in the cavalry," he said, "but hell itself couldn't turn out a worse devil. There ain't a human bone in that walkin' snake's body! Ye've done a fair job o' matchin' him at the turns this far, lad, but there's a reckonin' comin'. We'd have done better to whistle up the prairie dogs

and drove for the post afore we ever climbed into this stew pot o' blacklegs!"

"Ever dog a steer or hand-tie a high-tailed calf?" Cal asked.

"Tomorrow, eh?" MacGregor grunted. "No, but Army stock ain't always what a man'd call halter-broke. I reckon I could ride a whirlwind, was I given reason enough!"

"There'll be reason enough, Mac," Cal said quietly. "But stick to saddle entries like your heart was in it. It's got to look as though we've made up our minds and we're takin' what's served."

Cal and the sergeant had breakfast in the kitchen alone. There was already considerable hubbub in the compound in front of Rex Kerrigan's house. Cal thought some of trying to slip upstairs to discover how Kerrigan had made out during the night—if his absence had been discovered and whether he'd been able to get himself convincingly bound up again on his return from his prowl.

It was important to know these things, to know whether the Keyhole hands were aware, of the break coming—to know just how many hands could be counted on. But there was a lot of movement through the house. Trying to get upstairs was risky. And to be caught would be to tip off the game. Regretfully Cal decided against it and followed MacGregor outside.

Kerrigan's show corral had been laid out by a man who had a real love for the sport of stockmen. The enclosure was large enough for a man to make a good ride on the toughest bronc without giving the animal the dangerous advantage of too much open. The ground had been carefully screened free of cobblestones and brush snags. The chutes were well placed and finished off smooth against possible injury to men and animals alike. And the stand was set so that spectators could catch every motion of performers and contestants.

A rude outdoor bar was running full tilt on the first bench on the stand. Danny Caesar's men, easily identified by the guns they wore so arrogantly, were thick about it. Caesar himself was not in sight. He appeared in a few moments, walking beside Rex Kerrigan. The old master of the Keyhole looked wan. His wrists were badly chafed and his lips swollen from the stricture of the gag. He looked like a man who had spent a miserable and desperate night as a helpless prisoner. MacGregor shot an accusing glance at Cal. Breckenridge himself felt a sudden heaviness. If Kerrigan hadn't been able to get word to his boys—

Caesar directed Kerrigan onto an upper seat in the stand, apart from the gang about the bar. As the renegade started back down the benches, Kerrigan flashed Cal a look. It was short, marked by a drooping of one eyelid. But it was enough. Cal nudged the sergeant.

"Go pick you a bronc and mark you a man, Mac," he said tensely. "Here we go!"

MacGregor drifted off behind the chutes. Cal saw that the Keyhole

boys, pretty well masking an eagerness apparent to him in each of them, were idly filtering in among Caesar's crew. Many were bellying up to the makeshift bar for a morning shot, but none lingered for more than a few minutes. Caesar flashed a glance at Cal, grinned widely, and started bellowing for attention.

The renegade was braced out in fine gear, every line in place and trim. With a mocking grandiloquence, he announced the first event, a sprint race of three laps on the track. Four of the renegades and two Keyhole men edged into the line-up. Another Keyhole man was starter. It was a rough go, with the Keyhole men crowded into the rail and shoved out of the race. Caesar's crew raised a riot of acclaim when Caesar announced the winner. And the pack poured over to the bar, ignoring the rising heat of the sun.

A bronc shot out of the chutes next, piling its rider, a renegade, in the second jump. A stubble-faced old Keyhole veteran entered the corral with a pliant, use-blackened riata. It came alive under his hand, looping, graceful, accurate as a striking snake. Cal noted that when the old man drifted back into the crowd, he retained the riata.

Another bronc, blaze-faced and as stiff-legged as a corral post, lumped out of the chutes with MacGregor up. The Army doesn't train men to be rodeo stars, but the sergeant at least stuck with the animal long enough to qualify. He was pretty well loosend in his seat by then and looked anxiously across the pick-ups. The pair sat motionless, grinning wickedly while MacGregor clawed for everything on the hurricane deck. The bronc sunfished and the sergeant sailed off, landing heavily in the dust. As the bronc, killer wild, wheeled on him, MacGregor scrambled frantically and barely made the safety of the corral poles.

Caesar laughed uproariously. MacGregor dusted himself off, stamped angrily across, and hauled up truculently facing the renegade chief.

"Ye're a thievin' gold brick, a laughin' hyena, and a black-legged scum o' hell!" he announced firmly. "Ye've got the look o' a human and the tongue o' a human, but I doubt the devil if ye've got the guts of a man. I'd give the hair o' my head to see ye clamp saddle to that brute. Ye've had your laugh. I want mine!"

Breckenridge drew in his breath. Damn a cavalryman's short temper! He glanced quickly over the crowd. The Keyhole boys were shifting, moving up as fast as they could without drawing attention, each toward his picked man. But this had come too fast. A triangle hung on the rail at Cal's back, a rusty clevis pin for a striker beside it—the whole thing apparently used to signal attention to announcements and the like during a show. Cal's hand reached back and closed over the pin.

But Danny Caesar did not explode as Cal expected. He darkened and his hands gripped tight. Then in a moment he spoke, unable to pass up the stinging challenge MacGregor had flung in his face.

"Get that killer into the chute!"

It was reckless. The bronc was a big horse—a tough ride for a small man. And the animal was twitching with nerves, keyed far beyond the usual pitch of its patently savage nature. Fair judges would have ruled it out of any competition until it had been quieted. One or two of Caesar's men, crawling into the corral, paused to protest to their boss. Caesar acridly ordered them on.

The animal was boxed, forced with difficulty back into the chute, and a pair of renegades, gingerly working from above, fastened blinders and checked the cinches. Caesar stood by until they were finished. Then, with cool bravado, he climbed the chute, suspended himself over the shifting saddle below, and dropped.

The gate swung open and the bronc came out like a powder driven bullet.

This was it! Breckenridge knew this was it. The renegades were intent on the ride. Caesar himself, was too busy to sense a strike until too late. But for an instant Cal couldn't give the signal. He was watching something matchless—a savage man hammering with a ruthless will at an equally savage brute.

Caesar, vain even now, rode clear and high and clean. The bronc, as though scorning trickery, leaped across the corral in a series of high bounds, each of them ending with a stiff-legged drop which dealt terrible punishment to the man in the saddle. Caesar tried to hold his neck rigid, tried to keep his body from caving with each of those jolts. But steel would have sprung under those impacts. Caesar's head jerked frightfully. Blood ran from his nose and mouth. The pick-ups started out but he waved them angrily back. Cal turned away.

Leaning forward, he struck the triangle on the rail with the steel pin in his hand. Heads swiveled toward him. A renegade pushed out from the rail as though to protest this diversion. Cal stroked with the pin and the man went down. Cal moved on. The old man with the riata snaked it out and one of the mounted pick-ups was jerked from saddle. A man at the lower end of the makeshift bar jerked a gun and lined at the man with the rope. Roaring eagerly, Rex Kerrigan came sailing down from his seat on the benches above and bore the man to the ground before his piece fired.

Cal caught another with his clevis pin, dropped the steel, and retrieved the falling man's guns. Some of the other Keyhole men had succeeded in arming themselves. Gun sound beat up. Men fell. Men cried out. Men swore. And dust rose like a screen from the ground.

Momentarily clear, Cal shot a glance toward the center of the corral. He was just in time to see a piece of magnificent horsemanship. Badly shaken and racked with pain, Caesar looked about for the pick-ups. He saw the tangle about the bar and behind the chutes. Bending his body like an Indian bow, bracing his toes for an instant against stirrups, Caesar quit the saddle on the bronc at the top of a pitch. It was a tremendous leap which carried him three yards to one side of the suddenly lightened animal.

As it had done with MacGregor, the animal wheeled and charged Caesar, head low. The renegade had dropped into the chute without his guns. One hand now tore frantically into the neck of his shirt and plumbed a shoulder holster. It was a snap shot and the gun small-bore. But the horse's head went down as if pole-axed. Caesar leaped out of the way of the crashing carcass and wheeled toward the mêlée which had flamed up as he rode.

Cal stepped out into the open of the corral, his mouth wide to call out. At the same instant MacGregor came wading out of a press of struggling men, waving a singletree and heading unhesitatingly toward the renegade chief. Caesar dropped into a slight crouch and pivoted his piece toward the sergeant. Cal eared back the hammer of the weapon in his hand. But before he could release it, Rex Kerrigan vaulted down from the rail, lumbered out of the dust and brought up sharply a yard from the renegade.

Caesar fired twice in quick succession. Cal saw both shots strike the big old rancher. Then Kerrigan's gun roared. Caesar turned around as if he had not been touched and walked three steps before he buckled and fell. MacGregor wheeled and climbed between the poles of the rail, hunting for more trouble. But there was a sudden silence and Cal saw Keyhole men prodding two or three knots of Caesar's men into one group. He started toward Kerrigan.

The rancher turned, grinning through an expression of pain.

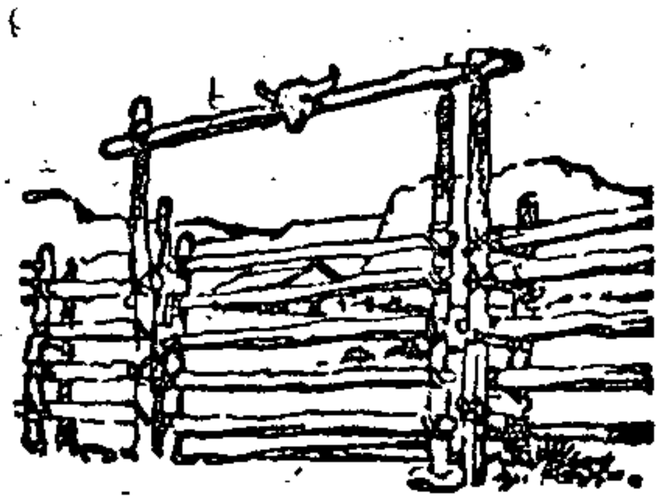
"Thank God for that killer cayuse!" Kerrigan breathed. "I don't think Caesar could more than half see me for the shaking he took. Look—twice in the leg!"

Kerrigan's thigh was soaked with blood. Two small holes were punched in the cloth of his trousers over the fleshy part of his leg. Kerrigan's eyes swept over the shambles about Danny Caesar's improvised bar and the knot of prisoners held by his own men. He grinned again.

"Breckenridge, when the Army does a piece of business, it's done!" he said wryly. "Seeing as all this mixed Bighorn stuff's already here, take what you can use of it. I'll settle with the ranchers down there and make up however many head you fall short, myself. I suppose you'll be back in about six weeks for another bunch?"

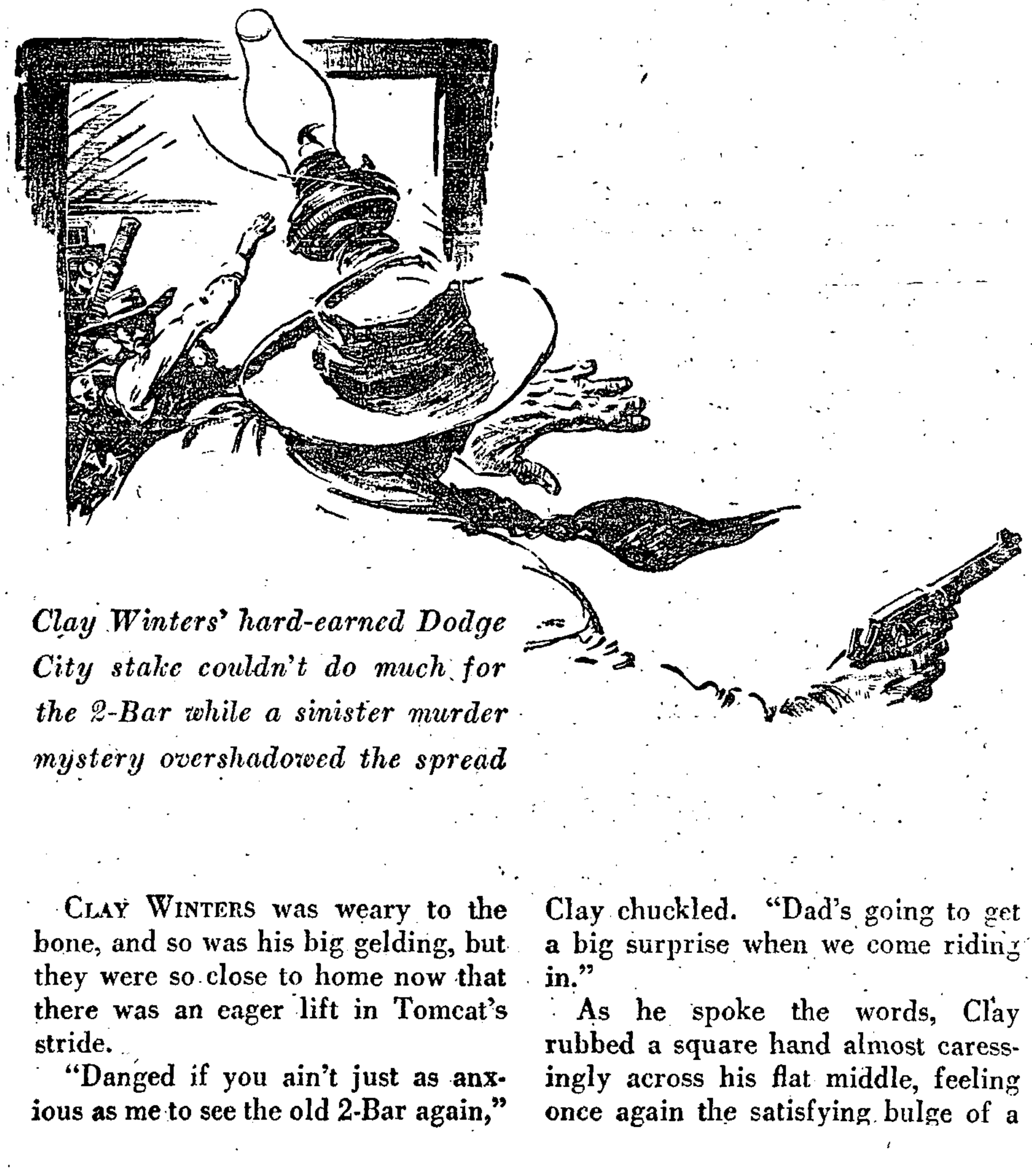
"We still need horses, said Breckenridge with a grin. "You bet we'll be back . . ."

THE END



PAYOFF ON THE PECOS

by M. HOWARD LANE



Clay Winters' hard-earned Dodge City stake couldn't do much for the 2-Bar while a sinister murder mystery overshadowed the spread

CLAY WINTERS was weary to the bone, and so was his big gelding, but they were so close to home now that there was an eager lift in Tomcat's stride.

"Danged if you ain't just as anxious as me to see the old 2-Bar again," Clay chuckled. "Dad's going to get a big surprise when we come riding in."

As he spoke the words, Clay rubbed a square hand almost caressingly across his flat middle, feeling once again the satisfying bulge of a

money belt beneath the dusty blue denim of his shirt. Clay had bought that money belt in Dodge City, at railhead, to hold the fat sum of one thousand dollars. A thousand dollars, he thought happily, that would do plenty for the 2-Bar.

Eagerly now, he let his eyes study the familiar landscape. Off to the right the lazy loops of the Pecos shimmered in the light of the lowering sun. 2-Bar cattle drank there, and a ditch Tom Winters and Clay had dug from the river to the big flat below their modest ranchhouse provided irrigation water for alfalfa and a truck garden. Other ranchers along this strip of the Pecos, and even some of the townfolk in Cherokee, had laughed at them when they put in that garden. But folks had quit their laughing when the crops came in. They'd also been forced to admit that the alfalfa had kept the small Winters herd in mighty fine shape.

"And when all of 'em, includin' that cussed Pete Knighton, hear about the thousand I'm bringin' home from Dodge they'll really figure dad is smart to feed up his critters afore heading them for market," Clay thought proudly.

For his father, with the foresight that had governed most of his actions since settling here along the Pecos five years back, had heard roundabout that a big herd was being collected down river for a drive to market at Dodge. Forthrightly he'd gone down there to see the owners and tell them that he had a little bunch of stock in his 2-Bar iron that was ready for sale. Would they, in return for the lend of his son, let him push his stock along with theirs to Dodge. They would, and so Clay had joined the Staked Plains outfit, and an East hungry for Texas beef had done the rest. The little bunch of 2-Bar cattle had brought the highest individual price of any in the big herd.

Tom was going to be mighty glad to hear the news, Clay figured. Yes sir, the Winters were up-and-a-coming. Why mebbe someday they'd have a spread big as Pete Knighton's.

Pete had been born with a first-class silver spoon in his mouth. His dad had been one of the early pioneers who'd fought Comanches and roving Apaches along the Pecos, slept with the rattlesnakes, and built himself a cattle empire. Old Colonel Joe Knighton had died a couple of years back, and every store in Cherokee had closed on the day of his funeral. Riders and ranchers from fifty miles roundabout had come to pay homage to a man they'd all liked and respected.

But few of those men, Clay reflected a little grimly, would ride a hundred yards to attend Pete's funeral. As soon as Pete had inherited his dad's sprawling Pitchfork Ranch, he'd made it plain that his word was going to be law along this strip of the Pecos. And folks had had to swallow their pride and agree. Because most of them had notes pending at the Cherokee Stockman's Bank, which Pete Knighton owned and ran now that his dad was dead. These last two years Pete had called just enough loans to let

folks know that he meant business.

His tough Pitchfork hands swaggered about the streets of Cherokee as though they owned the town, and there wasn't much anybody could do about it.

"Which ain't going to apply to the Winters much longer," Clay thought. "Tomorrow dad can pay Knighton off the last five hundred we owe his danged bank, and then we can thumb our noses at him and his crew if we feel like it!"

He was topping a last rise now that hid him from view of 2-Bar. Gray-blue eyes bright with anticipation, he swiped at an unruly lock of sandy hair that kept slipping from beneath the sweatband of his dusty Stetson. He had his hat adjusted at a jaunty angle to ride in with a rush as he topped the ridge, and then the surprise that greeted him made him halt instead.

A frown drew his thick, sandy brows together. He'd been gone right close to four months, he counted back, and his father had sure let the 2-Bar go to pieces in that time. The alfalfa patch was brown for lack of water. The vegetables in their neat rows looked wilted even from this distance. The barn doors were open, the corral was empty, and Clay could make out the brown dots of chickens scratching in the yard.

The sight of those chickens was like a hot spur against his ribs. Tom had always been mighty careful to see they were penned at all times, to protect the garden patch. Tom Winters wasn't at the spread or those chickens would never be loose.

"Devil of a home coming!" Clay muttered, and a presentment warned him that perhaps there was more truth in his words than he realized.

The ranch was deserted. The stock had been turned out of corral and barn. Only the chickens squawked and clucked at Clay as he rode into the yard, and he grinned at the feathered brood. They were better than no welcoming committee at all! Then the smile froze on his lips as he sighted a white paper nailed to the closed front door of the house.

Riding closer, he was able to make out the bold print without dismounting.

NOTICE

Trespassers will be prosecuted. Entrance prohibited.

The paper had been signed by Sheriff Dane Camelot.

Clay read it and blinked. Then he noticed the big padlock on the door, and for the first time he saw the stout boards nailed across the two front windows that flanked the door.

Clay drew a deep breath, expelled it with a curse. "By thunder I sure never expected this," he muttered aloud. "What in blazes has been going on here, anyway?"

Like a cat on the prowl, Clay went around the side of the house, and kept walking until he had circled it. The back door was also padlocked, and every window was closed with stout strips of sheeting. The blinds on the inside had been pulled down across the glass so that he could not

peer into any of the three rooms that comprised the house.

"Hanged if I can figure it out," Clay muttered, and he started once more to circle the abandoned ranch-house. On the rear side where the lowering sun struck the wooden slats across one of the kitchen windows a beam of light touched the brightness of a nail head that looked as though it was loose. A little thoughtfully, Clay moved to the window and reached up his hand. He caught a corner of the slat and pulled. It came free in his hand as easily as though the nails had been greased.

The second and third board were as simple to remove. Clay laid them carefully at his feet, and scanned the ground, but Texas sun had baked it to rocklike hardness. There were no prints that he could discern, and yet someone had obviously been using this window as a means of entrance and exit quite frequently, for otherwise those slats wouldn't have pulled free so easily.

Upright again, Clay tried the window. It lifted easily beneath his hand. He tripped the blind, and pulled himself through the opening. At his back, the lowering sun was like a spotlight, sending a shaft of brightness to light the dark kitchen.

For the space of a minute, the homecoming Texan stood rooted, his eyes widening. All about was a scene of disorder such as he'd never expected to see. The usually neat bachelor kitchen looked as though a Kansas twister had struck it. The table leaned drunkenly on sprung legs. The stove in one corner of the room had been turned half over, spilling cold ashes across the floor, and half-filling a coal hod that always stood beside the stove. A box cupboard nailed to the wall beside the stove had spilled its dishes, and broken crockery added to the litter on the linoleum floor.

Linoleum, they had only recently laid, Clay recalled. And been mighty proud of. Now dark stains spattered it. And in the midst of the stains lay a short, curve-bladed butcher knife. That knife had always been kept bright and clear. Now it was covered with the same brown stain that spattered the floor.

Clay stood there and stared. The only conclusions a man could draw from the evidence about him was that there'd been one hell of a fight here, and somebody had been stabbed. Sheriff Dane Camelot had padlocked the house just as it had been found to use as a jury exhibit.

"Dad," Clay gritted. "Dad!"

Was Tom Winters the man who had been attacked here, or had he been the attacker? Clay asked himself that question, and either answer was hard to contemplate.

Sound, faint as the scrape of a rattler's scales across sand, touched his ears. Someone outside was pressed against the house, rising to get a look at him, Clay realized. On silent boots, he spun toward the window, hand lifting Colt from leather as he turned.

A startled gasp surprised him as he got around, and he let the gun in his hand sag slowly back toward holster leather, for a girl's oval face had come into view above the window ledge.

Her red lips parted in amazement at sight of him, and her gray eyes widened. "Clay!" she cried. "Clay. Thank God you're home! I've prayed and prayed you'd get back before—" Her voice broke.

The girl was Celia Jordan, daughter of Hank Jordan, their friend and next neighbor up the Pecos. There wasn't much that had ever been said about it, but Clay knew both his dad and Hank Jordan were hoping that marriage might unite their children. And all the long way back from Dodge, some of the craziest notions had all but kept Clay awake at night. With extra money over and above the mortgage payment owing to Pete Knighton, a man could almost get up the courage to ask for a girl's hand. But now—

Clay wet his lips. "Before what, Celie?" he asked hoarsely.

The words were hard in coming. "Before . . . before they hang your dad for killing my father!"

The double shock struck Clay Winters like two punishing fists. "Celie," he whispered raggedly. "Great Jupiter, my dad and yours were cronies. They . . . they couldn't have got into any kind of argument tough enough to bring them to blows."

Celie was pulling herself through the window, and Clay moved on wooden legs to help her. The touch of her warm hand as he drew her into the room sent its usual electric shock through him. Moonlight nights they'd ridden the banks of the Pecos together, and done their share of dreaming. Now he could feel all of his dreams crashing. If Tom Winters had killed Hank Jordan, son and daughter could never forget that shadow.

Then Clay realized that the girl was still clinging to his fingers, and his spirits lifted sharply. "Celie," he asked her a question that had to be answered right now, "do you believe my dad murdered your father?"

The girl's face tipped up, and she shook her head. "Of course not!" she said slowly, "but I'm afraid we're the only two people along the Pecos who don't!"

Clay leaned against the drainboard, and his hand brushed a pair of empty whiskey glasses as he put it back to steady himself. It meant nothing to him, for they'd always kept liquor in the house, though both of them were frugal drinkers. His eyes touched the girl who stood squarely in front of him now. Her face, in the light coming through the open window, showed the marks of grief and strain

"Let's start at the beginning, Celie," Clay suggested. "Before we can make any kind of move, I've got to know what's been happening here."

"Yes." The girl nodded. She was silent a moment, ordering her thoughts. Then she said quietly: "It's hard to know just where to start, Clay. There's a lot been happening that I don't understand yet. But we'll come to that. This is what Cherokee folks know about the killing.

"Your dad was in town at the bank, talking to Pete Knighton one

afternoon a week ago. When he left the bank, he stepped into the Stockman's Saloon, had one drink, and gave the barkeep a slip of paper from Knighton ordering him to give your father a bottle of his private stock whiskey. Your dad passed the remark that maybe a lot of us had been misjudging Pete. That was all he'd say, and that was all he'd tell my father when he stopped off at our place on his way home. He invited dad to ride on here with him for a drink of Pete's whiskey and some talk. Dad countered by suggesting they drink the firewater at our house, but your father said no. He acted quite mysterious, insisting Hank ride on with him to 2-Bar."

The girl's voice broke a little. "That . . . that was the last time I saw dad alive. The rest of the story I got from Sheriff Camelot when he stopped off at our house later that night with your dad wearing handcuffs."

Clay listened keenly to the girl's story. "Go on," he said.

"Pete Knighton's tough-hand foreman, Sling Keyser, and two more Pitchfork riders were in the party, along . . . along with dad wrapped in canvas across the back of a pack mule. The sheriff tried his best to break the news to me easy, old darling that he is."

"That's the trouble with Dane," Clay cut in grimly. "He's too danged much of an old darlin' to everybody. He's straight as a string and he wouldn't put a horse fly into the calaboose unless somebody prodded him into it. But go on. Why was Camelot riding with Sling Keyser?"

Celie seemed to relive the nighttime horror of that week-old experience. "They'd been heading down river, the sheriff said, trailing a Mex wrangler who had deserted Pitchfork and stolen six broncs, to boot. And seeing lights at 2-Bar they'd decided to stop and ask Tom if he'd heard any horses pass by. When they got no answer to their hail they walked in and found your dad and mine lying on the kitchen floor. My father was dead with that butcher knife beside him. Your dad was unconscious on the floor, and you can see that there'd certainly been a fight—"

"I can see a lot of other things, too," Clay told the girl, and his rough-cut face was grim. "Pete Knighton never passes out those slips for whiskey less'n a man's paid up a note at his bank. And dad didn't have no dinero to pay our mortgage. So Pete had another reason for handin' dad whiskey. Second, why wasn't dad willing to drink at your house? Because Knighton must have insisted that your dad and mine get together here at 2-Bar. Third, unless he's hired him recent, the Pitchfork didn't have no Mex hoss wrangler. Old Colonel Knighton would never hire Mexicans and Pete's been the same way. So I'm willing to bet you the money in my belt that the hoss steal was framed to get Dane Camelot out here to 2-Bar that night!"

Celia Jordan's face was sober as she answered the stocky Texan. "I've used some of that same reasoning myself, Clay. That's why I feel so

sure that your dad didn't murder my father. But I can go even a little farther for you." Her voice dropped unconsciously. "When Sheriff Camelot found what had happened here, he padlocked the house immediately, and boarded the windows, to keep everything just as it was for the jury and county prosecutor to view. He told me that while they were at our house.

"But when I rode down here the next morning to let your stock loose, I found the boards on the window behind us had been pulled off and replaced just as you found them this afternoon. Sling Keyser helped the sheriff seal this place, Clay, and he must be the one who neglected to lock the kitchen window."

"Left it unlocked," said Clay slowly, and his right hand scrubbed the roan stubble along his jaw, "so's he could come back to pick up something that would blow the case against dad sky-high if the wrong hands found it."

"That's what I think," Celia agreed. "But, Clay"—her eyes had taken on a bright sparkle—"*they haven't found what they wanted!*"

Clay quit scrubbing his jaw. "What makes you think that?"

"Because," Celia answered, "I've marked the board with cobwebs they'd never notice, and three times in the past week the webs have been destroyed. Today"—her smile was almost rueful—"I thought I'd get a peek at the man who's been coming here. But—"

"But it was me," Clay finished. "Well, I better ride on in to Cherokee and have a talk with dad and Camelot," he decided. "Dad might be able to give me a little hint as to what happened here."

Not looking at the girl as he spoke, Clay heard something like a sob break from her throat. The sound brought his eyes around sharply.

"Clay, Clay," Celia whispered brokenly, "your father won't be able to answer your questions. He . . . he can't remember anything that happened that night. Not even stopping at our house to pick up dad!"

Tom Winters' memory was gone. His face looked blank as a sheet of paper to Clay as he caught a first glimpse of his parent through the bars of Cherokee's small jail.

At his back, Clay felt Sheriff Dane Camelot's hand fall commiseratingly on his shoulder. "I'm sure sorry, son," the lawman muttered. "It's tough to think of your dad going to the gallows without even knowin' he's on the way."

They had reached the door of Tom Winters' cell. Clay's face was bleak. "Dad ain't going to the gallows!" he growled angrily.

"Now don't git huffy, Clay," Sheriff Dane Camelot's florid face grew redder in the light of the lantern that cast a dim glow over the corridor between the cells. His heavy paunch shook as he drew a ring of keys from his pocket.

"I don't like this any better than you," he continued. "Hank Jordan, yore dad and me have been pinochle-playin' friends for years. But the case is so danged open and shut, Tom ain't got a chance of beatin' the hang noose. Sign in the kitchen

showed they'd had the devil of a fight, and yore dad, he up and rammed that butcher knife clean through Hank's gizzard, just as Jordan bashed him hard enough to knock him cold, and make him forgit everything that's happened. About the only thing yore dad seems able to think about now is whiskey. Keeps wantin' whiskey, and that's funny because he warn't ever much of a drinkin' man."

Clay felt himself grow slowly rigid. No, Tom Winters had never been much of a drinking man. His cronies here in Cherokee had joshed him more than once about not knowing the difference between good whiskey and bad. So why had Pete Knighton troubled to give him a bottle from his private stock? That point had stuck in his craw from the minute Celia had mentioned it, and now, suddenly, like a vision, Clay saw again in his mind's-eye the complete picture of that wrecked kitchen. And one thing was missing. He remembered touching two empty whiskey glasses on the drainboard, but he'd seen no sign of a broken or empty whiskey bottle!

"Son," the voice was a husky croak from within the cell, "son, did you get the water turned on that alfalfy today? Told yuh yesterday to be sure and do it—"

Turning water into the alfalfa had been his last chore before heading down river to join the big trail herd, Clay recalled. His father's mind had skipped back that far. But sometimes a lapse of memory like this didn't mean much, he remembered reading. Like as not, a sudden shock or some incident paralleling the action that had brought on the lapse might bridge the gap.

"That I did, dad," Clay answered heartily, and then he turned toward the sheriff, his face working with realistic grief. One hand raised, he gestured for Camelot to follow him back along the corridor. "I can't stand this!" he muttered for the sheriff's ears.

He could hear the lawman stolidly following him, but he did not stop until he reached the sheriff's office. He'd left his gun hooked over a coat tree beside the door, and he moved to it, and plucked his belt down before Camelot came into the clear behind him. Buckling the weapon about his lean waist, he started to turn, but stopped halfway around as footsteps sounded on the porch.

Silently cursing, Clay waited. The plan he had in mind couldn't be postponed. He had to get his father out of here, and back to the 2-Bar. A sight of that bloodstained kitchen might snap Tom from the fog blanking out his mind.

The door opened and Pete Knighton came into the room with long, crisp strides. He walked like a man with the power of authority to back his every move. A long, lean six-footer, he towered above Clay as his coal-black eyes swept the young Texan.

"Winters," he drawled in the condescending manner he affected with most people, "heard you were in town, and figgered I might find you here. I'm a man of few words, Winters, and I'm in a hurry. Imagine

you'll be needing money to hire a lawyer to fight for your dad, so I'll offer you two thousand cash for your ranch, five hundred and costs being deducted, of course, for the amount still owing on the note you both signed."

Pete Knighton was wearing a tailored iron-gray suit that fit him smoothly. His linen was spotless and his cravat was neatly tied. Clay's knuckles ached to feel the clean-shaven chin of the banker, but now was not the right time, he kept telling himself, to have a knock-down drag out that would attract more attention to Camelot's office.

"Yo're might kind, Pete," Clay said coolly, and he back-stepped a pace, "but I got a pocket full of dinero. See?" He let his right hand slide back toward his pocket, then it was circling the butt of his Colt and two surprised men were staring into its muzzle, as he back-stepped again and kicked the door shut.

"Wh-what—" Sheriff Camelot gasped.

"Shut up, both of you!" Clay warned, and his eyes were gleaming slits in the determined bronze of his face. "What I aim to do may not be according to this here Hoyle, but it might be effective. Pete, you're going to walk on inside with the sheriff. Dane, you're goin' to unlock the door to dad's cell, and let him out. Then, Pete, you're going to step inside and see what it feels like to be locked up. Mebbe, you'll have time to do some thinking while Dane, dad and me take a little ride for ourselves. Now, move!"

Knighton's lean, dark face had turned ugly. "Winters, you're crazy," he rasped. "You can't do this—"

"Now, son," the old sheriff started to sputter, "don't you do somethin' you'll regret—"

"I'll worry about that," Clay cut in. "Git movin'!"

The threat of his gun was an open menace. Pete Knighton took another careful look at it, then shrugged his well-tailored shoulders. "You're makin' a bad mistake, Winters," he said ominously, "and, by thunder, I'll see you pay for it!"

The black shape of 2-Bar buildings lay ahead of them in the light of a late rising moon. Across his shoulder, Clay watched his father keenly to see if the sight stirred any memory in him, but the elder Winters showed no appreciable change.

Clay kept his eyes on his parent, paying the sheriff, who rode on his opposite side, no attention, for once away from Cherokee he had bluntly told Camelot all that he had learned. Summing up, he had finished grimly:

"Dane, if some hombre is interested enough in our kitchen to keep going back there after you sealed the house, it should be proof enough for you that dad ain't guilty of killing Hank Jordan. There's somethin' in there this cuss wants, and I got a hunch it's a whiskey bottle. Dunno whether we can find it or not, but we can sure try!"

"You're taking a big chance, son," Sheriff Camelot had answered him.

"But I like to see justice done, even though I'm an easy-goin' old cuss. I owe Pete Knighton, and that tough foreman of his, Sling Keyser, *nothin'*. Lead the way!"

On horses taken from the sheriff's own stable behind the jail, they rode into the 2-Bar ranch yard. A shadowy figure moved off the porch to greet them. It was Celia.

"Nobody's come near the place," she answered Clay's unspoken question, and then her eyes identified the other riders. "Clay," she began. "How— Where—"

"There's no time for talk now," Clay cut her short as they dismounted. "Get the door unlocked, Dane, while I take these broncs out to the barn. If any visitors come later we don't want 'em to see our horses."

He was back by the time the sheriff had slipped the padlock from the front door. A cobwebbed lamp rested in a bracket just inside the door. Clay touched a match to its wick and felt tension creep through him as he watched his parent's reaction to the sight of their familiar living room.

Tom Winters' leathery face was haggard. He looked like a man who had been sick for a long time, and right now he seemed to be fighting, fighting the fog clouding his mind. Lifting a work-hardened hand, he brushed it across his eyes. He blinked and Clay saw a frown gather between his brows. Without looking at any of them, he started across the room muttering to himself. His gnarled hand reached out, and caught the knob of the closed kitchen door. Pulling the panel open, he stepped through into the other room.

Clay, close behind him, held the lamp high. This was the moment that would prove his experiment. He could feel the sheriff and Celia at his shoulder, and then his whole attention was snapping back to his parent.

"Whiskey," his father's voice was clearer than it had been. "Rotgut, that's all Pete give me. You'd think he'd have done better than that by me an' Hank. Him wantin' us to get together here with a bottle, and talk over his scheme of joinin' our two ranches and puttin' in an irrigation system that'd water both of 'em. Him and his bank'd finance the combine, for a third interest. Make us all rich, he said. Shucks, make Pete Knighton rich, was all me'n Hank decided it'd do. . . . Where's that blasted bottle? Two glasses was all we could stand of the stuff. Made us both feel kind of sleepylike. But it'll be better'n nothin'—"

He moved through the litter, intent seemingly on one objective, and Clay saw him stoop above the coal hod and go to pawing through the ashes. "Tossed the danged thing in here—" he heard his father mutter.

Feathery ashes had covered the bottle, Clay realized, and that was why the killer who had walked in here, murdered one drugged man, and set the stage to lay the blame on another, had been unable to find the evidence and destroy it. That was why he had come back again and again to continue his search.

And he was back again right now, Clay realized too late as he heard the oily click of a Colt coming to cock in the living-room doorway behind them. Sling Keyser's flat, deadly voice drawled: "Hand over that bottle the old coot's just fished out of the ashes, and nobody'll git hurt. Don't worry about hangin' anything on me. I've got a dozen men ready to swear I ain't left the Pitchfork tonight, so folks will just claim you've been dreamin' if you try and hail me into court, sheriff. Hand it over—"

Clay still had the lamp in his hand, but it was his father who made the first move toward the saturnine Pitchfork segundo. A hoarse cry came from Winters as he straightened, and his voice was as natural as it had ever been.

"Keyser!" he snapped. "Keyser, you're the cuss who come in here and started knocking me and Hank around. I remember now trying to get up, trying to fight yuh—"

Clay was around then, and he knew that after his father's denunciation, nothing but death could await them. Drugged whiskey had robbed Tom Winters of his memory, but familiar scenes and similar circumstances had restored it again.

Clay caught sight of Sling Keyser's dark face twisting into a grimace of killing rage, and he flung the lamp in his hand straight at the other as the man's Colt lifted. Following the lamp in a long dive, he clawed his own gun from leather.

Keyser tried to duck the lamp, and his aim as he triggered was faulty. Clay felt the breath of a bullet above his head, and then his Colt hammered twice.

Darkness engulfed the room as the lamp hit the wall, and snuffed out. Clay stumbled over a fallen body, and sprawled down himself. Twisting, he was on his feet like a cat, weapon poised. But he no longer needed a gun. A match flaring in Dane Camelot's hand showed the neat hole that had pierced Keyser's head just above his right eye.

As the match snuffed out, Clay felt Celia press close against him, her hand on his arm, and he heard his father and the sheriff both chuckle in the gloom of the room.

"Thar's a moon outside," Dane Camelot drawled, "and somebody's got to go git the undertaker, and tell Pete Knighton he'd better git used to that cell yuh locked him in. Could be a job for you two—"

Clay caught at his courage. "He done us one good turn with his get-rich-quick scheme for gettin' rid of dad and Hank, and taking over our places. Combinin' and irrigatin' both with the same system is a mighty fine plan if we could work it under just one name."

"Which might be?" Celia asked demurely.

"Winters," Clay said firmly. "Clay and Celia Winters."

"They sound nice together," the girl murmured. "Yes, nice!"

THE END

RAWSON'S WELL

by WALT COBURN

With a merciless killer plotting his death, Bill Rawson might end up in boothill on the desert claim he'd hoped to turn into rich cattle range!

THE cow country figured that Bill Rawson was going locoed.

"It's that well," somebody claimed, "that's turned his mind inside out. Diggin' a well out here in the broad middle of the bald prairie country! Takin' up a desert claim where the only water is straight down and fer all Rawson knows it's miles to water down that direction. Down a hundred feet and nary sign. A man in his right mind would've give up long ago. But no man with a spoonful of brains would've located there."

"It's that woman of his that's drivin' Bill Rawson crazy," maintained somebody else. "That mail-order bride he got stuck with. Dishes piled in the dish pan. Dust an inch thick. Only kitchen tool she savvies is a can opener. And she prances around in high-heeled slip-

pers and a silk dress, and round-sides in the shade with a paper-backed love novel when she ain't fillin' out a list of mail-order truck Rawson shore can't afford to buy. That woman and her lily-white hands would drive a better man than Bill Rawson to likker er murder er both. Only time he gits peace is when he's deep down in that dry well away from her naggin'."

The fifteen-year-old range orphan they called Nubbin had nothing to say. He gave no kind of answer to any of their questions. And Nubbin was closer to Bill Rawson than anybody. The big, slow-motion, soft-spoken cowpuncher Rawson, nearly ten years ago, had found the small boy who had been the only living survivor of a wagon-train Indian massacre along the emigrant trail. Bill Rawson had been riding up on the point of the Rail 7 trail herd and had sighted the smoke and pointed it out to Jim Tombough, the Rail 7 owner, who rode the point on the other side of the strung-out cattle.

Tombough had told Rawson to lope on ahead and see what the smoke was and nearly an hour later the cowpuncher had returned with a small boy riding behind his saddle and hanging onto his galluses. The boy had hair the color of new rope. His eyes were gray-blue and his tanned, freckled, dirty face was tear-stained.

"He's no bigger'n a li'l ol' nubbin of squaw corn, Jim," declared Rawson. "But he's all that's left of some emigrant wagon train an' he's a shore game li'l feller. He'll do to take along."

So they had called him "Nubbin" and taken him along with the trail herd outfit to Montana. And while Jim Tombough had sort of adopted the range waif, it was the big, slow-spoken, easy-going Bill Rawson who had first claim always of the boy's loyal affections. From that moment when Bill Rawson had found Nubbin hidden in the buckbrush along the creek and lifted him up into his saddle, that big homely sorrel-headed cowhand had been the boy's greatest man of all time, bar none.

When Bill Rawson had filed on that desert claim and moved there, just about two years ago, Nubbin had gone with him. He'd helped the big cowpuncher build his log cabin and barn and the pole corral. Peeling logs, chinking and daubing the log cabin and barn, and setting corral posts, had put callouses on his small hands. While the big cowpuncher did the heavier work, the boy Nubbin cooked the meals, washed the dishes and scoured the skillet and Dutch oven with coarse sand, and hauled the water five miles in the two big barrels roped on the wagon. And evenings before they bedded down for the night, Nubbin listened to and shared the great dreams of Bill Rawson.

"We'll have a gold mine, Nubbin, when we hit water. Put us up a windmill that'll pump enough water to take care of all the cattle in Jim Tombough's Rail 7 iron. We'll throw water acrost that flat and grow hay enough to feed all them cattle. And that ain't the half of it. We'll have us a stage station here. A tradin' post and a saloon. Somethin' fer a

man to fall back on in his old age.

"This is fine land, pardner. This soil kin grow anything once you splash enough water on it. Water's the secret. You mind that party of queer-lookin' dudes was out here all one summer? They was called geologists. They savvy what's under the grassy side. I seen maps that show what they call rock stratas. And the feller ramroddin' the outfit says there's a big underground river here. A man tap that there underground river and he's got a world of water. That's what I aim to do, Nubbin. Tap that big river. Sink a well. It'll be like tappin' a mine of flowin' gold. We'll call our place Rawson's Well."

That was Bill Rawson's dream. And he'd declared Nubbin in as a pardner, right from the start. And *until The Woman came it had been* like that. Just Bill Rawson and Nubbin—pardners.

Spring and fall they worked with the Rail 7 roundup. Bill was a top cowhand. Nubbin wrangled horses. They saved their wages and pooled the money they put into the desert claim. Winter time, when the ground froze and it was too cold to dig in the well, they hired out once more to Jim Tombough and worked at the Rail 7 home ranch.

And it was there in the Rail 7 bunkhouse during the long winter nights that Bill got tangled up in this Heart-and-Hand outfit. When Curly, who rode the Rail 7 rough string and considered himself something of a spur-jingler ladies' man, sent off for the Heart-and-Hand catalogue with the names and addresses and photographs of lovelorn and matrimonially minded ladies, he got most of the other cowpunchers interested and Bill Rawson was the only one who held out on the game. Bill had been something of the same kind of a range orphan as Nubbin and he'd been too hard-pressed scratching for existence to learn much about reading and writing.

Finally when Bill admitted that he wasn't much of a hand at reading handwriting or writing with pencil or pen and ink, the handsome Curly said, shucks, that didn't need to stop a man from hitting up a letter-writing acquaintance with some pretty girl. That he, Curly, would do Bill's letter writing for him. And that was how Bill Rawson got dragged into it. For Curly signed all those winter letters with an impressive, "Bill Rawson. Rawson's Well, Montana."

The Chinook wind came early that spring and cut the winter's deep drifts so Bill and Nubbin moved back to Rawson's Well. Bill went back to his well digging with Nubbin helping work the windlass up on top, hauling up buckets of dirt.

Nubbin had never liked Curly. He couldn't name any real reason for disliking the tall, handsome bronc rider with his curly black hair and neatly trimmed mustache and his dark yellow eyes. But the day Curly rode up with a big sign that wore the bright-red lettering, Rawson's Well, painted on a snow-white background, Nubbin almost liked the swaggering spur jingler. And nobody but a real and wild bronc peeler could have packed that sign clear

from the Rail 7 ranch on a spooky bronc.

When the three of them had the sign nailed up over the cabin door, Curly pulled a bottle from his chaps pocket and he and Bill drank to the sign. Bill gave Nubbin a mild cold toddy he called a smell of the cork. It was then that Curly sprang the big surprise, dropped it like a bomb. A bomb in the shape of a letter with a Chicago postmark.

"It's from your Heart-and-Hand sweetheart, Bill. From Maizie. It was marked 'Important' so I figgered I better open it. She's on her way here. She says for you to meet her at the train at Big Coulee. I had the sign made so's your blushing bride'd know her Home Sweet Home when you fetched her here to Rawson's Well."

Bill Rawson had looked like a man who had been gut-shot. He didn't savvy any of it. He didn't want any bride. He'd only been joshing, like all the other Rail 7 cowhands had been joshing, with those Heart-and-Hand letters. It had just been something to pass away the long winter bunkhouse evenings.

"What'd I want with a wife, Curly?"

"You got me there, Bill. But you got one a-comin'."

"You got me into this, Curly. You git me out."

"No kin do, Bill. Shucks, who'd've thought Miss Maizie Smith was serious-minded about it? You gotta go through with it now. She kin have you sent to the pen if you don't. So wash off that well dirt and shave. Crawl into your town pants and taller your boots. We'll just about make Big Coulee before the Westbound gits there. I'll go along to see that you git a square deal."

Bill Rawson looked like a man on his way to his own hanging, and Nubbin had been so sick inside that he felt like dying.

"Look after the place, pardner," Bill Rawson had told him, "till I git back."

"Better build a weddin' cake when you git the cabin slicked up, Nubbin," Curly had grinned back across his shoulder as he and Bill Rawson rode away.

Nubbin had felt like shooting Curly then. Later on he wished a thousand and one times that he had. For the way things happened, it looked as though Bill Rawson was going to have to kill Curly.

It wasn't the dry well that was slowly turning the big, homely, red-haired Bill Rawson into a bleak-eyed, grim-lipped stranger Nubbin could not fathom. Nor was it The Woman, for all her made-up face and yellow hair and shrewish tongue, who was poisoning the big cowpuncher with a slow poison. The dry well and The Woman had something to do with it but it was the bronc-riding Curly, with his saddle swagger and his too-frequent visits to Rawson's Well, that was the real danger.

"I got to kill that Curly," Nubbin decided a million times. "I got to kill 'im. If Bill shoots Curly, they'll send Bill to the pen."

Nubbin had hoped, with a terrible and desperate kind of prayer in his torture-twisted boy's heart, that Bill

Rawson would ride back from town alone. Maybe with a big paper sack filled with horehound and peppermint and wintergreen candy.

But Bill came back in a hired top buggy, his saddled horse led alongside the livery team. And sitting on the buggy seat beside him, holding a flat square package wrapped in brown paper, was Bill Rawson's mail-order bride.

II

She was a little thing, sitting there alongside Bill Rawson's big husky bulk. She had golden curls and there was pink stuff rubbed on her cheeks to give some color to her city-pale skin. And her mouth was a crimson slash. Her eyes were large and bright blue under arched eyebrows that had been blackened like her eyelashes. It was a hot day and her clothes—a cheap tailored suit, silk stockings and high-heeled slippers, pale pink like the suit—were all dust powdered. Rivulets of perspiration marred the make-up on her thin face.

"So this is Rawson's Well!" she said when Bill reined the sweat-streaked team to a halt in front of the cabin. And she stared at the sign nailed over the door.

Her voice was shrill and knife-edged. Then she let out a high-pitched laugh and kept it up until it cracked into a choking sob. She was still screaming with that hysterical laughter when Bill Rawson, sweating and red-faced, with a stricken look in his puckered bloodshot green eyes, lifted her from the buggy and carried her inside the cabin, kicking and clawing with one hand but the flat square parcel in brown paper clutched in the other hand.

"The big rube!" she shrilled. "The big, sweat-stinking hick! Carryin' his bride over the threshold like the handsome hero in the novels. Put me down, you big hayseed, or I'll claw your eyes out!"

Then Bill Rawson came out of the cabin and she slammed the door and there was the sound of smashing things inside.

"Put up the team, Nubbin." There was no tone left to Bill Rawson's voice. It matched the bleak look in his green-gray eyes. He lifted his bride's two big, bulky telescope valises from the back of the top buggy.

"You kin take the rig back to town in a few hours. Water 'em when they've cooled off. Grain 'em."

Bill Rawson took a bottle from under the seat and pulled the cork with his big white teeth. The whiskey was warm, hot almost. But he drank it down as though it were cold water and he were thirsty. And big Bill Rawson had never been a drinking man.

It was typical of the big cowpuncher that he thought first about caring for the livery team. He came on to the barn a little later, leading his saddled horse, the bottle in his hand. The two big bulky telescope valises were still outside the cabin door. She had barred it from the inside. But she'd quit trying to wreck the cabin. There wasn't much in there to smash—a homemade table and a few homemade chairs with rawhide seats and backs. The dishes

were all made of tin.

Bill let Nubbin take his horse. He squatted on his hunkers there inside the barn, staring at nothing. Now and then he would shake his head as though he were bewildered and take a drink of the hot whiskey. Sweat beaded his big homely face and his healthy tanned skin had a grayish sort of pallor to it. Suddenly he picked up the half-empty bottle and threw it out on the manure pile.

"A hell of a thing, pardner," he said in that toneless voice. "A hell of a thing to happen to a man."

That was all he had to say by way of complaint. Then or later. But he was like a man sick from a very slow poison.

Bill Rawson was still squatted on his boot heels inside the barn when Nubbin started for town a few hours later, his saddled horse tied behind the top buggy. And he was still there when Nubbin rode back to Rawson's Well at sunrise.

But the big telescope valises were inside. And later on when she opened the door and walked out, fresh as a flower in a clean pink linen dress and high-heeled white slippers, and minced off to go on the first of those walks that were to mark Nubbin's memory, she never gave so much as a glance towards the barn where Bill Rawson, still wearing his town pants and best shirt and new boots, was helping Nubbin with the stable chores.

She had left the kitchen door open. After they'd finished the chores Bill said they might as well go into the house and rustle some breakfast.

The kitchen was littered with the dishes she had thrown around. She had made no breakfast fire and if she'd eaten anything it was from the boxes of chocolates and candied fruit she'd brought with her from Chicago.

There was no more than enough water in the kitchen pail to make a pot of coffee. She'd used all the water in the barrel in the little lean-to shed off the kitchen, to take a bath. The lukewarm soapy-crusted water was still in the big round tub. She'd poured some kind of cologne in the water and it gave off an odor.

"Looks like you'll have to haul water, Nubbin," was all Bill Rawson said.

That marked the beginning of the water business. She took a bath every day, sometimes twice a day, filling the big tub which held about one barrel of precious water. And it was a five-mile haul from the nearest waterhole.

In the big room off the kitchen, hanging on the wall, was the flat square thing wrapped in brown paper that she'd clung to. It was their marriage license and wedding certificate. Framed and hanging like some sort of challenge or gesture of defiance or bitter self-mockery.

III

Jim Tombough told his wife about it. He'd ridden over to Rawson's place with the excuse that he wanted to see how the well was coming along, and fetched a couple of windmill catalogues for Bill to look over.

"Though I should've come out,

flat-footed, and told Bill that I was just a hen-pecked ol' ranny sent over by his missus to fetch back the gossip," Jim told his wife. "Anyhow, the only thing in the way of pictures a-hangin' on the wall is that blasted marriage license in a gold frame."

"And where was this mail-order female?"

Jim Tombough took his wife by the shoulders and grinned faintly as he looked down into her eyes.

"Don't git high-toned on me, Martha. I'm just a cowhand. The Rail 7 is a big outfit but my hired hands call me Jim. You're a cowman's daughter. You know better."

"What are you trying to tell me in that roundabout cowpuncher way of yours, Jim? This ain't a horse swap. Bring it out in the open and we'll both look at it. You were there when she got off the train. You told me how she mistook Curly for Bill Rawson and threw her arms around him and kissed him. How she looked when Curly turned her over to her real heart-and-hand bridgroom—after he'd finished hugging and kissing her. You said yourself that she was a cheap little thing—"

"I was sore as a boil on a man's neck. Bill Rawson's the best cowhand that ever pointed a trail herd out o' Texas. He's more'n that. He grew up on the old Rail 7 Ranch down on the Pecos. We was raised together. He's sided me through some dangerous tights. And when I sighted him there at the depot where I'd gone to see the station agent about that carload of grub, I figured he was just in town and had walked over with Curly to watch the train come in. When *she* stepped off I stood there slack-jawed and bug-eyed. Then that smart-aleck Curly told me the girl was Bill Rawson's mail-order bride.

"Bill looked like he was at his own funeral instead of his weddin'. Gosh knows he's homely and gawky enough on the ranch in his Levi overalls. But in that boiled shirt he looked like a sorrel mule poking his head over a whitewashed fence. And the girl looked at him like that was her opinion of her bridegroom. Curly was best man, more ways than one. He didn't travel with the Buffalo Bill Show two years without learnin' how to dress fancy and jingle his silver-mounted spurs on parade. Curly was the Chicago gal's idea of a handsome, dashin' cowboy. And the only time she smiled was when she looked at him. There was only one thing I could do to keep from gettin' awful sick. Git drunk. Which I proceeded to do. And I had a bad hangover when I got home and told you the news.

"But now I ain't so doggoned certain I was plumb correct. What I should've done right there and then was had Curly throwed in jail or horsewhipped, then fetched Bill Rawson and his bride here to the home ranch. Because somethin' almighty terrible is happenin' at Rawson's Well. It'll end in a killin'."

Jim Tombough lit his pipe. He was badly upset. And the grizzled little bowlegged cowman didn't upset easy.

"I don't know what the girl did for a livin' back in Chicago," he said. "But I don't reckon she ever was

much of a hand at housekeepin'. And I got a notion she figgered she was marryin' a wealthy cattleman who looked like one of them fancy-dressed Buffalo Bill Show cowboys. Like that damn Curly. But she drawed the homeliest cowhand in the country and he's taken her out to that desert claim with not another woman within fifteen miles. You're a woman, Martha. Mebbyso you kin savvy better'n me, just how that pore li'l lost thing feels."

Martha Tombough smiled. "You seem to have gotten a fairly good slant on it, Jim, for a man. I'll drive over in the buckboard tomorrow and fetch her here. If I can leave Nancy that long. She's running a fever. Doc says he can't figure out what ails the child."

"Nancy," said Jim Tombough, "is in love."

"Nonsense! the child's only twelve years old. Let me smell your breath. In love, my eye!"

"When I was about twelve I aimed to marry my schoolmarm down on the Pecos. And I recollect a kid in pigtails by the name of Martha Wier who sent me a valentine she made. Cut heart-shaped from a chunk out o' the tail of her dady's new red flannel shirt. Stitched on the red flannel heart was 'To My Valentine Jim. From Martha.' The kids joshed me about it. I was busy for a month tryin' to lick 'em. I recollect throwin' that red flannel valentine in the river and tellin' the pigtailed Martha Wier I was marryin' the schoolmarm. You didn't come to school for a week. Your mother told mine that little Martha was runnin' a fever . . . Nancy thinks that the Nubbin is somethin' out of a story book. Take her along to Rawson's Well. She kin watch Nubbin at his well-diggin' chores. That'll cure what ails her."

Martha Tombough nodded but there was a worried look in her dark brown eyes. She wished little Nancy would be like other girls her age, play with dolls instead of hanging around the barn and corrals and underfoot where she might get crippled or killed. She wished her daughter would play with other children instead of trailing after Nubbin like a sheep dog.

"And the language the child uses, Jim, when she gets mad and flies off the handle."

"Now! Now!" chuckled Jim Tombough. "Nancy's a born rider. Handy with a rope. Ropes at everything from the roosters on up to them milk cows that just stand there till she gits mad because they won't move to give her a runnin' target . . . Why don't you bake a cake an' take it over to Rawson's Well tomorrow? You an' Nancy."

Martha Tombough smiled as she'd smile at a small boy. She was a mighty pretty woman. A ranch wife and proud of it most of the time though it got more lonesome than she ever admitted, even to herself. She'd drive over to Rawson's Well. She'd already formed her own opinion concerning this heart-and-hand mail-order bride from Chicago. Poor gullible, simple-hearted Bill Rawson. Saddled with some painted little high-heeled hussy from Chicago's tough

dance halls. Fooling even Jim who should know better. Martha Tombough wasn't high-toned. But she had her own ideas. Jim Tombough was a good judge of horses and cattle and men. That let him out.

"It might simplify matters, Jim," she tried a new lead, "if you'd fire Curly. You never liked him and you've said you wouldn't trust him out of sight."

"Curly is the best bronc handler I ever saw work a green horse. He's about half started now with a big string of broncs, at the horse camp on Sagebrush Crick. I let him go now, them broncs will be spoilt. I wish that curly-headed spur jingler had been born dead."

Jim Tombough walked the floor, puffing his short-stemmed brier pipe, a short, stock, bowlegged man with gray-black hair, drooping mustache and a pair of keen steel-gray eyes. Though he was no more than ten years old than Bill Rawson, he had always treated the big easy-going cowhand as though he was his only son and none too bright in the brain.

Jim Tombough had hired Curly because the tall, curly-headed spur jingler was the best bronc handler he'd ever watched work. Curly had shown up about six months after Tombough had thrown his Rail 7 trail herd in on good feed and water in the big valley here in Montana. That was before Jim had gone back to Texas and fetched his bride to the Montana ranch.

Curly had ridden up out of nowhere on a green bronc. He'd been wearing a beaded and fringed buckskin shirt and with his black hair and yellow eyes he'd looked like a half-breed. When young Nubbin, his boy's heart and brain still blood-stained by nightmares of the wagon-train massacre, had sighted the tall man in the beaded buckskin shirt, he had let out a terrified scream. And Bill Rawson had had a time getting the small boy's fears calmed down.

Nubbin had never outgrown his fear of Curly. And when the bronc rider quit to join the Buffalo Bill Show, young Nubbin had been almighty glad. Then, a few years later when Curly had shown up again, that same fear had returned to chill the young range orphan's heart.

"I'm scared of that Curly, Bill," Nubbin had confessed.

"Why?"

"He was with them Injuns that charged down that mornin' and massacred the wagon train, Bill."

Bill Rawson grinned and shook his head and told Nubbin he'd been too young to recollect it. It was just the buckskin shirt that gave him the notion Curly was one of that war party.

Just the same, Bill Rawson took Nubbin's story to Jim Tombough.

"Curly's a white man, Bill," had been the cowman's attitude. "He ain't a man you'd trust nowhere but he ain't no painted Injun liftin' white men's scalps. That was a renegade war party off the reservation. Curly's had a white man's raisin'."

But Bill Rawson and Jim Tombough could not shake off the sneaking notion that the boy could be right. A thousand-to-one chance.

Deep in his young heart Nubbin knew he had seen that same Curly

that horrible daybreak. Curly, stripped to a breech clout and wearing a beaded buckskin shirt with fringe; streaked with war paint and with a scalping knife gripped in his hand. Only his hair was not so long as the other painted warriors' and he had mixed white men's words with the Indian language.

"Kill 'em all! Men! Women! Kids!"

You don't dream up a thing like that. Even when you had crouched in the brush and mud along the creek where your father had hidden you, and watched your father and mother, your older brothers, your sisters, shot down and lanced and stabbed and scalped.

"It ain't a kid nightmare," Nubbin told himself there at Rawson's Well as he sweated and worked the heavy windlass that took all his wiry strength. "It was Curly. I got more reason now to kill that Curly."

Down a hundred feet in the dry well Bill Rawson jerked at the rope. That was the signal for Nubbin to turn the big handle on the windlass and haul up another bucketful of the bone-dry dirt.

Just then Curly rode up on one of his string of broncs. He wore a bright red flannel shirt and the fringe of his chaps lifted and fell with the motion of his horse. Curly on horseback was a handsome picture.

"Down went McGinty to the bottom of the well!" His white teeth flashed a flat-lipped grin. "Only this McGinty don't even git his boots damp . . . Where's the prairie bride, Nubbin?"

"You know dang well where to find her!" Nubbin panted. "Out yonder where the greasewood's grown high."

But this time Nubbin was wrong. The mail-order bride had gone for one of her walks but now she was coming back, limping because those high-heeled slippers were not meant for prairie walking. She was stumbling. Out of breath. Her face was chalky-white and fear widened her blue eyes. She'd torn her dress coming through the greasewood.

"A rattlesnake!" Her voice was thin and shrill.

She would have fallen if Curly hadn't swung from his saddle and, without letting go of the horsehair hackamore rope, caught her, reeling and sobbing with fear, in his arms. She clung to Curly and he grinned at Nubbin as he held her in his arms.

IV

Nubbin let go the windlass handle; he'd just commenced hauling up the dirt-filled bucket. He turned and walked towards the cabin. Bill Rawson's holstered six-shooter and filled cartridge belt were there inside the cabin, hanging from a wooden peg in the log wall. Nubbin's dust-powdered sweat-streaked face was drained of color so that the sprinkling of freckles looked like black lumps across his short nose. His gray-blue eyes were glinting like polished steel. Opening the kitchen door, he went in and was reaching for Bill's wooden-handled six-shooter when he heard Bill's voice out by the well.

"Go on to the cabin, woman!" Bill's voice was toneless and deadly.

"You, Curly, shed that gun unless you're plumb yellow. I'm goin' to give you the worst whippin' a man ever got and lived to remember it!"

Bill Rawson had come up the well rope, hand over hand. He stood there now beside his dry well, legs spread, his big fists knotted. Naked to the waist of his sweat and dirt-caked overalls. Sweat glistened on his dirt-grimed arms and powerful shoulders and hairy chest. His hair, sweat-matted and untrimmed, was the color of wet rust. From a mask of dust his bloodshot eyes were green as bottle glass. Bill Rawson towered like some terrible giant there in the sunlight.

Curly was tall, wide of shoulder and long-legged, and as fast-moving as a mountain lion. He was no man's coward. But there was something about Bill Rawson standing there, big, cold-nerved, that must have put a sudden fear in Curly's treacherous heart. He threw the girl aside so roughly that she fell, and reached for his gun as his bronc jerked loose. It was the yank of the hackamore rope that pulled Curly off balance.

Then Nubbin's voice shrilled from the cabin door.

"Drop that gun or I'll kill you, Curly!"

Nubbin had Bill Rawson's wooden-handled six-shooter cocked and it was steady as it pointed at the bronc rider. And when Curly whirled around to face this new menace, Bill Rawson went into action. His heavy open-handed slap knocked the pearl-handled six-shooter from Curly's hand and sent it spinning through the air.

"I'm obliged, Nubbin," said Bill Rawson's toneless voice. Then he hit Curly.

That sledge-hammer blow thudded as it landed. Curly staggered backwards and the blood spurted from his smashed nose. Bill Rawson could have followed it up with more pile-driver blows but he didn't. He just stood there, his big, dirt-grimed fists clenched, teeth bared in a flat grin.

"Stand on your laigs and fight like a man, Curly."

Pain blinded the bronc rider for a few seconds. He spat blood and his yellow eyes blinked hard.

"Lemme take off my chaps, Rawson."

"Take 'em off, then."

The bronc had spooked and tangled in the dragging horsehair rope and finally stopped near the corral.

"Ketch his bronc, Nubbin," called Bill. "Don't want one of Jim Tombough's horses runnin' loose with a saddle."

Nubbin caught and tied the bronc. Bill Rawson's mail-order bride had regained her feet. But she wasn't going to the house. She stood there, hands clenched, her eyes dark with fear and excitement.

Bending over, Curly unbuckled his spurs and kicked off the gun-barrel chaps with the long leather fringes. Suddenly he straightened up with a jerk and jumped at Bill Rawson, like a mountain lion springing. He'd slid a hunting knife from a sheath built into the chaps pocket and its six-inch blade glinted in the sunlight. Nubbin saw it too late to shout a warning. The woman let out a thin

scream. Blood spurted as the blade ripped Bill's big shoulder.

Then Bill had Curly's wrist gripped in his huge hand and, doubling his other fist, he sent short, vicious, thudding, trip-hammer blows into the dodging head and face of the bronc rider. When Curly tried to wrench free, the heavy grip on his wrist jerked him off balance. It wasn't until the knife slid from his half paralyzed fingers that Bill let go the man's wrist. And then he knocked Curly down. Bending over, he hauled the bronc peeler onto his feet again, let go and, before Curly could get balanced, knocked him down again. Picked him up, knocked him down until Curly's face was a bloody pulp and the swaggering bronc rider lay there on the ground, arms covering his battered face and sobbing that he'd had enough.

"Git up, Curly." Bill Rawson was breathing hard. Blood from his knife-stabbed shoulder was covering

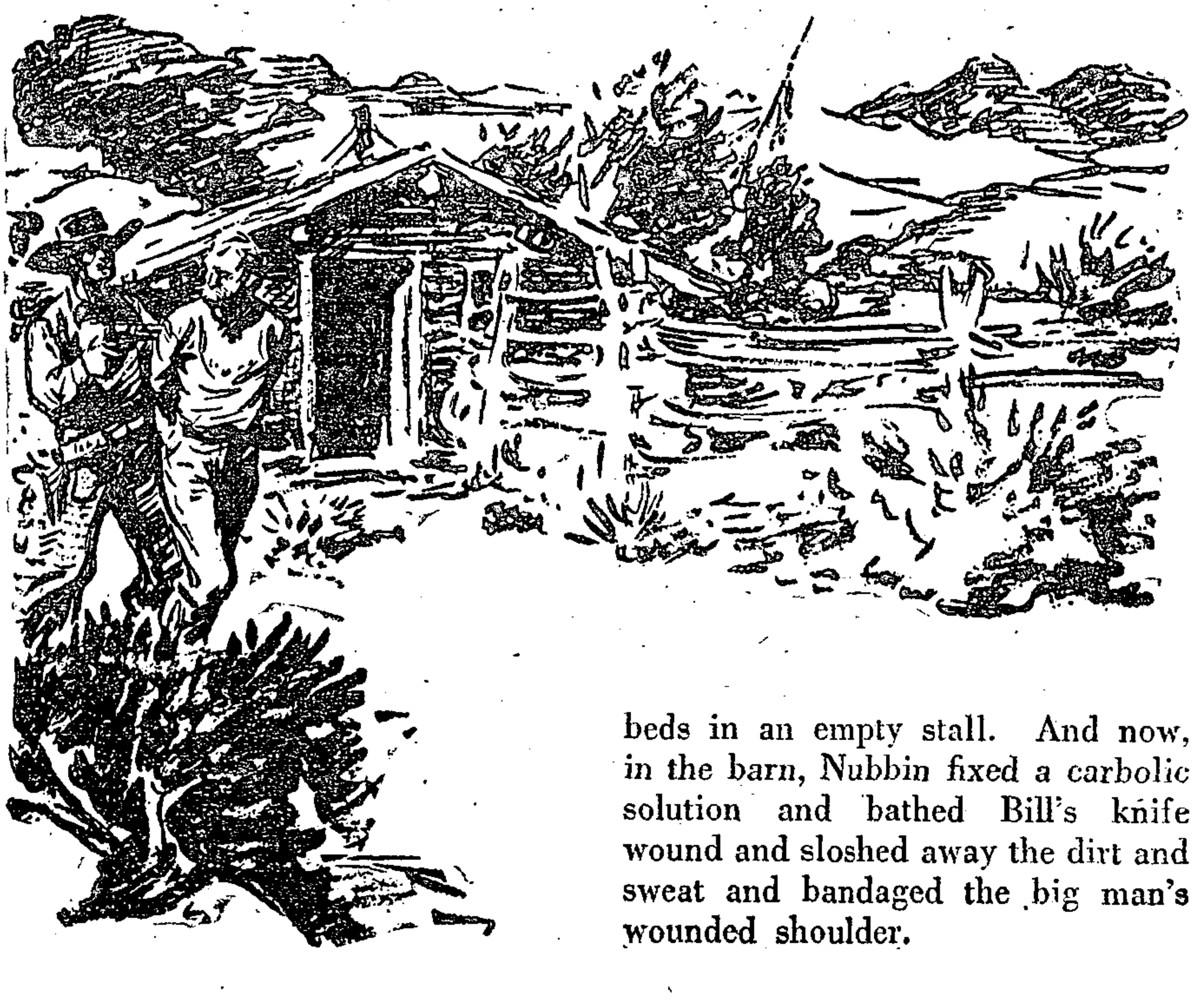
him with its crimson flow. "Git on your horse. If ever you set foot on my place again, I'll kill you. Savvy?"

Curly managed to get back on his spooked bronc. Nubbin handed him up his chaps and silver-mounted, pearl-handled six-shooter. The knife was no longer any good. Bill Rawson's heavy boot heel had broken the long, sharp-pointed blade.

Bill Rawson watched Curly ride out of sight across the greasewood flat. Then he turned and headed for the barn. Nubbin fetched a pail of water and basin and clean dish towels to rip into bandages.

Neither of them had slept in the cabin since the evening Bill Rawson had fetched home his mail-order bride. A wagon from town had brought out a new brass bedstead, a mattress, and bedding and they'd set it up in the cabin for the girl. Nubbin and Bill had moved their bedrolls to the barn. They'd spread their

Nubbin tightened his grasp on the big six-shooter as he watched Curly force Jim Tombaugh toward the river.



beds in an empty stall. And now, in the barn, Nubbin fixed a carbolic solution and bathed Bill's knife wound and sloshed away the dirt and sweat and bandaged the big man's wounded shoulder.

The pain from the carbolic must have stung but Bill Rawson gave no sign. He just sat there on his tarp-covered roundup bedroll and his bloodshot green eyes stared. And when he did break the silence it was as if he'd forgotten all about the fight with Curly.

"The air's gittin' bad down there in the well. I think I got it figgered out. Better take the buckboard Nubbin, fetch back all the stovepipe they got at the mercantile. It comes in three-foot lengths. We'll need a hunderd and ten feet of it to start. Git anyhow fifty feet more so's you won't have to make another trip to town. Have the blacksmith make you a big three-sided hoodus ten-twelve foot wide acrost the top and about ten foot high. Tapered down like a funnel to fit the stovepipe. It's to ketch the wind and funnel it down the pipe into the well. Should give a man enough air down there to work by. . . . You got 'er straight in your mind, Nubbin?"

Nubbin nodded. He wanted to ask Bill how he felt. But there was a look in the cowpuncher's bloodshot green eyes that forebade the asking of any kind of questions.

"Tell Her," added Bill Rawson, "to make out a grub list. You kin fetch back what she needs."

She was in her room when Nubbin went in by the kitchen door.

"I'm goin' to town," Nubbin spoke through the closed door. "Bill wants you to make out a grub list."

"Let him make out his own lists," came her muffled voice from the other side of the door.

"He would, I reckon. Only he don't know how to write."

There was a long moment of silence. Then Nubbin heard her moving around, yanking open a dresser drawer. At last the door between her room and the kitchen opened and she stood there holding a little stack of letters in her hand.

"What do you mean he can't write?" Her voice was tense and her upper lip curled back from her small white teeth. "He was handy enough with his pen and pencil when he wrote me these things!"

Nubbin stood his ground. His heart thumped hard against his ribs.

"Curly wrote them letters to you, ma'am. Bill Rawson can't write. Ner read letter writin'. Only newspapers. Saddle catalogues. Then he has to spell out each big word slowlike. Them letters he got from the heart-and-hand outfit—Curly used to read 'em all out loud to Bill. And I reckon Curly read off a lot of stuff that you never wrote in your letters to Bill Rawson at Rawson's Well."

Bill Rawson's mail-order bride stood there, staring at the boy. She looked white and sick and small and lost. It was the first time it ever occurred to Nubbin to feel anything like sorry for her.

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you, kid?"

"No, ma'am. I got no reason to lie." Then an idea struck him and he put it into words.

"If you want to go back to Chicago, I'll wait till you're packed. I'll take you to town in the buckboard. I got about a hundred dollars saved

that you kin have to buy a train ticket—"

"You hate me, don't you, kid? About the way I hate you and Bill Rawson. Well, you almost got your wish. I was packin' when you called me. Getting ready to quit this forsaken place. But I've changed my mind. I'm sticking here—till hell freezes. . . . Longer than that, kid. Till Bill Rawson strikes water. Sit down. I'll make out a grub list."

She tossed the packet of letters aside and got a pencil and pad of writing paper. Her eyes were bright as though they'd been polished and she was smiling to herself. It was a tight-lipped sort of smile that made her little chin look firm and hard. She handed Nubbin the list and told him to look it over and see if she'd overlooked anything.

Nubbin's eyes widened as he read the list. Flour, soda, baking powder. No fancy stuff. It was the sort of grub list a cowpuncher in a line camp would make out.

"No canned stuff?" he asked her.

"Not unless you want it. And if they've got cake flour, get some. It's finer. Makes a better job of it. And if you like chocolate or cocoanut cake, get a bar of chocolate and a package of cocoanut. If they have it in a town the size of Big Coulee."

"You mean . . . you kin cook?"

"I mean I've had to cook most of my life, kid. After my mother died I kept house for my old man and a bunch of hungry kid brothers and sisters. Then the old man was killed. He was a cop. After that we scattered. Looked after ourselves. I got a room with another girl—a little hole in the wall. We ate our meals at the restaurant owned by the big department store where we were sales girls. Got our clothes wholesale price. My mail-order bride's wardrobe, when I come West to marry my cattle king, Bill Rawson. Rawson's Well. It looked swell on paper. Why don't you get a laugh out of it, kid?" Her voice was brittle.

Nubbin shook his head. "I'd like," he said slowly, "to have a look at them letters that Curly wrote you and signed 'Bill Rawson, Rawson's Well.'"

"When you get back, kid. Maybe I'll read 'em aloud to you and Bill Rawson. With gestures. Somebody led little Kathleen Mavourneen Riley on a snipe hunt. Dumped me in the middle of nowhere to hold an empty sack. Somebody's going to pay for that trick . . . Wait a minute!"

She darted into the bedroom and came out with a silver medal.

"There was another one like it. It was pinned to my old man's blue coat with the brass buttons when they gave him a cop's funeral. It's for bravery."

When Nubbin handed it back to her he noticed for the first time that the bleached color of her hair was streaked with a reddish hue and near the roots her hair was redder than Bill Rawson's.

She saw him staring at her hair and smiled. "I'm a redhead. Bleached blonde because my heart-and-hand cattle king wrote that he preferred blondes. And when I freckle, kid, I freckle. Say, how old are you?" Her eyes were deep greenish-blue

now, like the ocean.

"About fifteen, mebby. I don't know. Mebby fourteen."

"When I was thirteen I was wrappin' bundles at that big store. From six in the mornin' till six at night and a half hour for lunch. I'd get breakfast for the old man and the kids before I left home, fix their lunches. Nights when I got home I cooked supper. After I got the kids to bed my time belonged to me. I used to fall asleep over my books at the night school where I went. . . . Now trot along, kid, before I git goin' on the story of my life."

Nubbin nodded. "They don't have choc'lates at the store. But they got them round peppermints and wintergreens. The wintergreen is pink. And horehound sticks—"

"Why, you darned towheaded Nubbin! You'd better go before I bust out bawling."

Tears welled to her eyes. She grabbed the boy and hugged him and rumpled his straw-colored hair. And then they were both grinning.

"Don't you say a word to Bill Rawson, kid, about any of this. Can you keep a secret with me, Nubbin?"

"You bet. If it ain't goin' to hurt Bill. Yes, ma'am."

"The guy that's going' to get hurt," said Bill Rawson's mail-order bride, "is that knife slinger. And don't call me, ma'am. Or Maizie. That Maizie was the heart-and-hand name. My old man called me Kit."

Nubbin said he liked the name Kit. He was whistling by the time he reached the barn. It had been a long time since Nubbin had whistled.

V

Young Nubbin was happier than he ever dared hoped he'd be again. He whistled and sang all the way to town. And at the Mercantile Store he bought candy and a whole spool of wide satin ribbon. It was a new color called peacock blue. The color, Nubbin told himself, of Kit's eyes. It would make a sure handsome-looking sash with a big bow at the back, to go with a white dress of hers that he'd noticed.

While the blacksmith was making the huge air trap and funnel and fitting it to one length of the stovepipe, Nubbin examined the upper half of the knife Curly had used on Bill Rawson. He'd picked it up off the ground and shoved it inside his shirt. It was a hunting knife with about three inches left of the whetted blade. The hilt was silver-mounted ivory and there was a name so deeply engraved into the ivory that Curly's filing had been unable to erase it entirely. Nubbin's sharp young eyes could just about make it out: *Captain John Stuart.*

"That cinches it!" Nubbin spoke aloud.

The blacksmith paused in his hammering. "What's that, Nubbin?"

"Nothin'."

But Nubbin's tanned cheeks were flushed and his eyes were bright with excitement. Jim Tombough and Bill Rawson had found out that the ill-fated little wagon train of which the boy was the only survivor had been piloted by a Kentuckian, Captain John Stuart of the defeated Confederate Army. And when Bill Raw-

son had asked the small boy his name that day he'd found him, the boy had told the big cowpuncher that his name was Johnnie Stuart and his daddy was Captain John Stuart.

It was dusk when Nubbin started back for Rawson's Well, his buckboard loaded with the grub and the hundred and fifty feet of stovepipe that came in flat three-foot lengths that could be rolled into pipe cylinders and fastened by crimps along the edges. And the big wind trap was tied on top of the load.

The moon, big, white and round, came up right after sundown and as he drove along the rutted wagon road Nubbin made out the girl's head in the moon like little Nancy had showed him. The profile of a woman with her hair done in a bunch at the nape of her neck. Nubbin thought it looked like Kit, though he felt a little pang of guilt because Nancy Tombough claimed it was her picture in the moon—her grown-up picture.

The moon was high up among the stars by the time Nubbin drove up to the barn at Rawson's Well. No light was lit in the cabin and he reckoned Kit was sound asleep and hadn't heard him drive up. But it struck him as mighty queer that Bill Rawson did not come out of the barn to help him unhook the team. Bill was never a heavy sleeper and the big cowpuncher was always on hand to help with such chores as helping unhook and unharness the team.

The boy turned the leg-weary team into the horse pasture. If Bill was tuckered out and asleep, Nubbin wouldn't be noisy. Their bedrolls were in the small stall. It was pitch-dark inside the barn until Nubbin's eyes got focused. He unrolled his tarp-covered bed and spread it out. And then he sat down to pull off his boots. But he never took them off. He froze, there in the darkness. There was no sound of Bill Rawson's heavy breathing. And in the darkness Nubbin's eyes made out Bill's bedroll still rolled up and roped as both beds were rolled and roped every morning to keep the stable dust out of their soogans. Bill Rawson wasn't here!

Nubbin struck a match. The barn was empty. Bill's horse, Nubbin's horse, the black-and-white pinto Curly had given the mail-order bride for a "wedding present"—all were gone. And Bill Rawson always kept at least one horse in the barn to use for wrangling the other horses from the pasture of a morning. All the stalls were empty. If Nubbin hadn't been so excited about everything, he'd have noticed the empty stalls even in the dark, because of the barn's empty silence.

Nubbin raced for the cabin—and got his second shock. Both cabin doors were ajar. And that meant something was wrong. Almighty wrong. Doors were kept shut at night on account of prowling animals like skunks.

"Bill! Kit!" Nubbin's voice was rasping, scared-sounding. But it got no reply from the dark cabin.

He struck a slow-burning sulphur match and lit the kitchen lamp. The door to Kit's room stood open and he carried the light with him when he went in.

Nubbin did not know just what he expected to find. But there was nothing to cause alarm. Kit's clothes were hung up. The room was in order. Her woman's toilet stuff on the dresser. But there was an overturned chair near the door.

Back in the kitchen Nubbin found the stove cold. But there was a burnt odor and he found two badly burned dried apple pies in the oven. There was a brand-new oilcloth table cover and the table was set for two with new napkins he'd never before seen. The new heavy white crockery dishes had been scoured and polished. And in the center of the table was a mason jar with a bouquet of wild flowers. And the only thing wrong was another chair lying overturned.

Nubbin's eyes went to the wall. Bill Rawson's six-shooter in its holster, hung by its filled cartridge belt from its peg. Bill's saddle carbine hung on its wooden pegs. Nubbin shoved the six-shooter into the waistband of his faded Levi overalls and carried the belt which was too big to stay buckled around his slim middle. He took the .30-30 carbine and a box of cartridges and, blowing out the lamp, headed for the barn. His heart was pounding against his ribs and a cold sweat bathed him. Something was wrong here. He sensed it in every nerve of his boy's body. His belly felt cold and fear crawled inside it when he found Bill Rawson's saddle there in the barn—and his own saddle. But Kit's new full-stamped saddle was gone.

Nubbin took his hackamore and a nosebag filled with grain. He had to walk to the far end of the pasture before he located his own private horse, a tough line-backed buckskin gelding Jim Tombough had given him last Christmas. The buckskin was a pet, the only horse in the pasture you could walk up to. Nubbin rode back bareback, saddled and shoved the carbine into Bill's saddle scabbard which he tied to his own saddle.

He left the saddled horse eating grain and began his frantic, desperate search for Bill Rawson. And while he hunted for Bill he was sick inside and clammy with cold sweat and shaking because he was filled with a horrible dread. Bill hadn't ridden away from Rawson's Well. There was too much of the cowpuncher in him to start anywhere on foot. And if Bill were alive he'd answer when Nubbin shouted.

The dry well with its windlass was where Nubbin headed for. And it was the place he dreaded most to search. When he got there his fear heightened and it gripped him in a clammy hand. It took all the courage in his young heart. He stood there, hands clenched, fighting down the fear that crawled inside him like a slimy snake, trying to steady his nerves and figure out what there was to learn here.

The thick, heavy well rope hung down its full length into the black well from the windlass. And that was wrong. Because always when the day's well digging was finished, Bill would leave the half dozen empty buckets up on top of the wide plank platform and the rope wound up on the windlass with its big four-

pronged steel hook tied to the rope's end.

There were only four empty buckets there on the platform. The other two must be down in the well. And Bill?

Nubbin tried half a dozen times before he got any volume into his voice as he called down into that hundred-foot black hole.

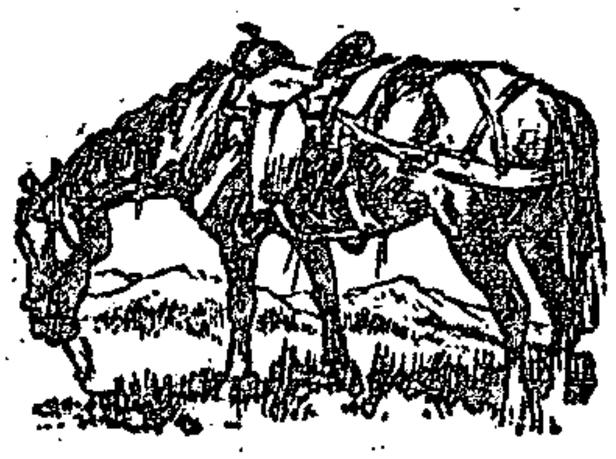
"Bill! Bill! It's me! Nubbin! Bill! You down there, Bill?" A sob kept choking his voice.

Then the heavy well rope moved, jerked feebly. And Bill thought he heard the sound of a groan down there.

Countless times in the past, since Rawson's Well was no more than twenty feet deep, young Nubbin had gone up and down the well rope. It was like a game with him. A game that was a sort of contest between him and the big cowpuncher to see who could go up and down the rope the faster. And while Bill Rawson had a giant strength in his hands and arms and powerful shoulders, it was the nimble Nubbin who had the speed and skill of a young monkey and always won by a wide margin.

But the fastest time he'd ever made was cut in half now as Nubbin grabbed the heavy rope and went down its hundred-foot length. Tough and calloused as they were, the palms of his hands were peeled raw as he slid most of the way in that rapid descent. And then it was pitch dark and the air fouled because the oxygen was badly used up. His matches wouldn't burn.

"Take 'er easy, Nubbin—" Bill Rawson's voice whispered.



Bill was badly smashed up. And getting his two-hundred-pound bulk up out of the hundred-foot well was going to be a terrific job. But Bill was alive and that was all that mattered now to the boy who worshipped that big cowhand. That quick-triggered young brain of his with its boy's ingenuity was working fast.

The wooden buckets were big, almost three feet in diameter.

"You sit in the bucket, Bill. I'll tie you so's you can't fall out. Me'n Buck will haul you up by the saddle-horn, slow and easy. It'll be like shootin' fish in a rain barrel, Bill."

It was hard working in the dark. The fouled air made Nubbin dizzy. Bill's smashed body was pain torn. Perhaps that moving, the twisting and jolting, would kill the big man. Nubbin knew the risk. Bill Rawson gritted his teeth and asked Nubbin how much he charged for the free ride. Nubbin's head felt like a gas-filled balloon. Sweat poured off him as he labored. Breathing was a torture. It seemed an endless eternity before the boy got the big man tied to the bucket and the heavy well rope. And climbing the rope was a feat that Nubbin did not know how he accomplished. But after he'd climbed up a ways to where the air was pure and he pulled it into his lungs with heaving gasps, his head cleared and he scrambled up the rest

of the way with the agility of a scared monkey.

Often before Nubbin had used a saddle horse to haul up the heavy buckets of dirt. But never before had the tough line-backed buckskin hauled up such a slow and valuable a load by the saddlehorn. Nubbin had the catch rope looped into the big hook he and Bill had made to fasten to the upper end of the thick well rope. And the well rope was threaded through a big block-and-tackle pulley arrangement.

Bill Rawson was unconscious when he was hauled to the top. It was just as well because the pain of having his big broken body shifted from the bucket to the tarp-covered bed that Nubbin had fetched from the barn would have been terrible for him. The fresh air and water and then whiskey brought Bill Rawson back to life. But he was in critical shape. He was only partly conscious and his talk was rambling when he did come awake.

"Heard her holler. . . . Come up the rope . . . should've knowed that damn Curly'd come back . . . should've had my gun . . . Curly laughed. . . . Then hit me acrost the head with his gun barrel—"

VI

It was about the middle of the morning when Martha Tombough and little Nancy drove up in the Tombough buckboard. The cowman's wife did not ask a single question. Handing the lines to little Nancy, she stepped down and took charge.

"We'll have to move Bill into the cabin before the sun gets too hot, Nubbin. Then you can ride to town for Doc."

They got him into the house and into Kit's bed. Martha Tombough found Kit's scissors and cut off what clothes Bill had on. Meanwhile Nubbin put up her team and Nancy built a fire in the kitchen stove and put on water to heat. And the sun melted the chocolate coating on the three-layer cake Nancy had fetched from the Rail 7 Ranch and forgotten to take out from under the buckboard seat.

They got the muck and blood bathed from Bill's bruised and badly broken body, and while he was still unconscious Martha Tombough, with Nubbin to help her, set the big cowpuncher's broken leg and and a broken arm. He was covered with ugly bruises and he'd lost a lot of blood from that re-opened stab wound in his shoulder. There might be some fractured ribs or other broken bones that would show up under the doctor's examination and there was the possibility of internal injuries.

Bill had climbed the rope in answer to his mail-order bride's outcry. As his head and shoulders lifted above the level of the plank platform Curly, a snarling grin on his battered face, had been there waiting for him. And while Bill Rawson clung with a desperate helplessness to the well rope Curly had clubbed him over the head with a gun barrel. Bill's big hands, thickly calloused, had clung to the rope and he'd slid most of the way down its

hundred-foot length before the black oblivion of unconsciousness finally claimed him and he let go and dropped the rest of the way to the dry floor of the well. His heavy mop of sweat and dirt-matted rusty hair had cushioned the blows of the gun barrel that chopped down on his head and his skull must have been thick or it would have cracked like an egg shell. There was the possibility of a fractured skull and concussion.

Bill Rawson groaned and opened his eyes. He recognized Nubbin.

"Where is she, pardner?" And Nubbin knew he meant his bride. "I was down in the well. . . . There was six full buckets of dirt to haul up. She wasn't stout enough to work the windlass and didn't savvy workin' a saddle horse to haul it up. . . . It was her that hit on the idee of flaggin' the bucket handles with white rags. She stood alongside me on the platform with her lookin' glass and she'd ketch the sun with her lookin' glass and throw it like a bull's eye lantern down into the well. When the light hit one of them white flags on the bucket handle, she'd hold it steady while I stood there with the rope and fished with the four-pronged grapplin' hook till it hung in the bucket handle. Then I'd haul it up. . . .

"I was down there fixin' the white rags on the last three buckets of dirt when I heard her holler like she was hurt or scairt. She'd bin helpin' me. Shed them danged high-heeled slippers for boots and taken off her fancy dress and was wearin' a pair of your old Levis. I don't know what'd come over her, Nubbin. . . . Anyhow when she let out a holler, I come up fast. And that damn Curly was there. He whopped me acrost the head with his purty gun. . . . Where is she, pardner? She gone off with that yaller-eyed breed?"

"If she went with Curly, Bill," said Nubbin, "it was because he made 'er go along. Kit's all right. She talked to me before I pulled out for town. Curly jobbed you both. Lied to Kit in the letters he wrote. Made her think she was comin' to Montana to marry a cattle king. She worked since she was a little kid in a big store in Chicago. Her father was a cop and he got killed. She showed me a medal like the one they pinned on him when they gave him a cop's funeral. Kit's all right, Bill. She'll kill Curly if she gits the chance. . . . I gotta hit the trail now, Bill."

Bill Rawson grinned feebly. His bloodshot green eyes closed. He had slipped into unconsciousness again.

Martha Tombough had been standing there. There was a worried look in her warm brown eyes.

"Jim left last evening for the horse camp on the Missouri River, Nubbin. He rode there to fire Curly. Jim should have been back before I left the ranch. But he hadn't shown up. You'd better swing past the ranch on your way to town. If Jim isn't there, send some of the boys to the horse camp."

VII

Young Nubbin was headed for the horse camp. Jim Tombough hadn't returned to the Rail 7 home ranch.

Nubbin had sent a man to town for the doctor. The Rail 7 cowpunchers were all away at that time of day, and wouldn't be back until supper time. So Nubbin was tackling the danger-out job lone-handed. That was the way he wanted it. With a killer's job on his hands, he'd aged, grown overnight into grim manhood.

He'd found that packet of heart-and-hand letters and given them to Jim Tombough's wife to read for what they were worth. And he'd given the candy and the big spool of peacock-blue ribbon to little curly black-haired, brown-eyed Nancy. Martha Tombough had given him a tight hug and a kiss and told him he was a real man and she'd see to it that Bill Rawson did not die.

The horse camp was down on the Missouri River. The roundup wagon road followed the ridges. But Nubbin took the shortest cut through the broken badlands, pushing the tough line-backed buckskin hard and getting every fast mile out of that game-hearted cow pony without hurting him. Young Nubbin had a real way with a horse. Better than Curly. And when he neared the horse camp he slowed down to a cautious running walk and reined up behind the thick brush when he was about a hundred yards from the log cabin and barn and thatched-roof cattle shed and pole corrals.

The place looked deserted. The mare bunch and sorrel stud were down in the big lower pasture. But the string of broncs Curly had contracted to break were not in the upper pasture. And there should have been about fifty head of yearling colts in a third pasture but it was empty now. The corrals were empty. No smoke came from the cabin chimney. Something was wrong here. Wrong, like he'd found it when he'd gotten back to Rawson's Well. Nubbin could smell danger.

He slid the saddle carbine from its scabbard and dismounted. It was sundown, the red sun just sinking behind the ragged badlands skyline. A meadowlark warbled. Giant cottonwoods towered high. Over all was a peaceful silence. Only there was something wrong here. A deadliness and danger hidden in the silence that seemed so peaceful.

Nubbin unbuckled his spurs and took off his chaps. He wore the filled cartridge belt over one shoulder and across his chest and under his left arm. The wooden-handled six-shooter was shoved in the waistband of his dirty and blood-spattered overalls. He gripped the .30-30 carbine in his hands which were steady enough and stepped cautiously from the heavy buckbrush and willow thicket. It was at least a hundred yards to the cabin and barn and it was a bald clearing. But he had to cross it, regardless.

He had taken no more than half a dozen cautious steps when a blinding light struck him square in the eyes. He ducked as though he'd been hit in the face. Crouching, he gripped the saddle gun. The blinding light flickered in his eyes and drove him back into the brush with its glare. And as he crouched low in the heavy buckbrush he suddenly knew what it was and what it meant. Somebody

had a mirror, perhaps a small mirror like the one Bill Rawson's mail-order bride was always taking out and looking into to primp, a round, gold-backed thing, small enough to palm in her hand. She'd used it to throw light down into Rawson's Well. She'd used it the same way now to throw the reflected sunlight into Nubbin's eyes, to warn him of the danger there. Nubbin's heart pounded against his ribs and the blood pulsed in his throat. He grinned and wiped his sweaty palms on his overalls and gripped the .30-30 and crouched lower.

He didn't have long to wait. Curly came out of the big log barn, leading two saddled horses and a pack horse that carried a tarp-covered bed, some grub, a skillet and coffeepot. Curly's white teeth bared in a grin that twisted his battered-looking handsome face. He had recovered his swagger. Only it was more than a swagger now. There was a six-shooter in his hand and he was a killer with murder glittering in his yellow eyes.

"I'll finish tamin' you, you clawin' little she-wildcat," Curly's voice was a rasping snarl, "when we make camp at daybreak."

Then Nubbin saw Kit. She was lying on the ground outside the barn door. She was gagged and she lay there as though she were tied hand and foot. She moved a little and Curly stood there, his silver-mounted six-shooter in his hand.

Leaving the horses standing there, Curly swaggered to the small one-roomed log cabin and when he came out about a minute later he was shoving Jim Tombough ahead of him, prodding the grizzled little cowman with his fancy gun barrel. Tombough's hands were tied behind his back and his face was crusted with dried blood.

"You should've stayed at the home ranch, Tombough," said Curly, "where yuh belonged. Minded your own damn business."

"You dirty horse thief! They'll hang you when they overtake you. You can't git away with them horses."

"I'll have them yearlin's and broncs peddled before ever they fish your dead carcass out o' the river, Tombough. There won't be no bullet holes in yuh. You'll just be drowned. Like Bill Rawson got killed by fallin' down his dry well. Just a couple of accidents. No proof in the world agin' me. And Rawson's widder won't talk. I'll tame her. If she don't tame good, I'll kill her. And she knows it. But she's stuck on me and once she gits over her wildcat clawin', she'll purr when I pet er.... Git along, Tombough. Right on down to the river bank. I'll tap you acrost the skull and you'll be asleep by the time you hit the water. I'll cut the hoggin' string loose from your arms. The current's swift. You'll be carried downstream a mile or two. They say a drowned man comes to the top in three days."

"So you aim to murder me." There was no fear in Jim Tombough's voice. Only cold contempt for the killer.

"I'm goin' to drown you, Tombough. And six months from now,

when she finds out the rustlers are robbin' her, your widder will unload the Rail 7 awful cheap. I'll pick it up then. I've had my eye on it a long time. Rawson's dead. You'll be dead. And if Rawson's widder is half as smart as I figger she is, she'll be damn glad to keep her trap shut and wear di'monds and silk and live in a town house with champagne fer breakfast. If she lets out so much as a whisper I'll claim she killed Bill Rawson and run off with me. I kin even work that Nubbin button into testifyin' how her and Rawson hated each other's guts. And when I'm done with that Nubbin, I'm killin' him."

"What you got against the Nubbin kid?"

"I kin tell you now, Tombough, because you ain't goin' to live long enough to spread the news. That Nubbin is li'ble to turn over my hole card. He knowed me the day I rode up to your camp. I was wearin' an Injun buckskin shirt. He's the only one that got away when me'n them renegade Injuns wiped out Captain John Stuart's wagon train. I hired the Injuns cheap. A barrel of rotgut booze and what plunder they'd git. Stuart was a rich man. Had it in cash in a strongbox. I got it now. Saved it all. It's in a steel box in my war sack on that pack horse. It'll be laid on the barrelhead, Tombough, to buy your Rail 7 outfit from your widder. You should've listened to that Nubbin when he sighted me that day and told you and that big thick-skulled Bill Rawson that I was one of them painted Injuns. . . .Now git along, Tombough. You're walkin' your last trail."

The trail to the river passed close to where Nubbin crouched behind the buckbrush. Curly and his prisoner were close enough now so that Nubbin could have hit Curly with a rock.

Nubbin had laid the carbine on the ground. Bill Rawson's wooden handled six-shooter was gripped in his hand now. He thumbed back the hammer.

"I got you, Curly!" Nubbin's voice was changing. It cracked in a shrill yell.

Curly whirled and his silver-mounted gun spewed flame. Nubbin's finger pulled the trigger and he felt the heavy kick of the .45's recoil and the hissing whine of the lead slug from Curly's gun as it missed his head by an inch or two. He saw Curly stagger and double up and he fired again and kept on shooting as the killer's legs buckled at the knees and the six-shooter slid from his hand. And Nubbin kept on thumbing back the gun hammer and pulling the trigger and shooting into the sprawled body of the man called Curly until the hammer snapped down on an exploded shell. Then he dropped the gun and came out of the brush. He felt dizzy and nauseated and when he tried to talk no sound came from his throat.

Jim Tombough stood there on his short bowed legs. There was a grim smile on his blood-crusted face with its graying black mustache and his eyes were shining.

"You shore got 'im, Nubbin. If

you got a jackknife handy, I'd be obliged if you'd cut my arms loose from this hoggin' string. Then we better git over to the little lady."

Nubbin fought off the dizziness and cut the cowman's wrists free. And then they cut Bill Rawson's mail-order bride loose.

"He had me hogtied inside the cabin," said Jim Tombough. "I was watchin' out a window. Saw you flash that lookin' glass in the Nubbin's eyes." He released the gag from Kit's mouth.

She wiped her sleeve across her bruised mouth and opened one hand with the little round mirror in it. And Jim Tombough chuckled as she looked at herself in the mirror.

Then her arms went around Nubbin and her eyes were wet as she hugged him hard and kissed him. But abruptly her shaky laugh died.

"Bill?" Her voice was a croaking whisper.

"Bill's goin' to be awful happy to see you, Kit. He ain't in any too good a shape but he's too big and tough to die from a busted laig and arm. I hauled 'im out o' the well. Aunt Martha's lookin' after him till the Doc gits there. She's got Nancy with her. . . . We better git to Rawson's Well. Aunt Martha's worried about you, Jim."

"She's got a right to be!" snorted Jim Tombough. "Any man fool enough to walk into a trap and git a gun barrel bent over his head as he walks into a dark barn, needs a nurse."

On the way back Nubbin showed the cowman the hunting knife with the broken blade. And when they stopped to water their horses at a creek Jim Tombough opened the steel box they'd found on Curly's pack horse. It was filled with gold coins and sheaves of currency that represented a sizeable fortune.

"It's all yours, Nubbin," grinned the cowman.

"Mine and Bill's. Bill Rawson's my pardner. So's Kit. You won't have to live there in the greasewood no longer, Kit. The heck with that darned dry well—"

"Not if I know Bill Rawson," smiled Kit, "as well as I think I do. We're after water, Nubbin. We're going on down till we find it."

Jim Tombough looked at her for a long moment. Then nodded.

"I reckon you're right," agreed Nubbin.

Bill Rawson tapped the underground river at two hundred and seventeen feet. He was sodden with its water and mud as he climbed up hand over hand and the water level rose slowly behind him. Nubbin and Kit were waiting for him up on the platform. They laughed and shouted and they danced a war dance around the well. Later Kit cooked a supper that they called a banquet and they sat up nearly all night talking.

In the morning they dressed up in their town clothes and rode over to the Rail 7 Ranch with the news, and that called for another celebration. Before it was over Nubbin and Nancy fell asleep on the big horsehair sofa. Nancy was wearing the peacock-blue sash and her hand clung to Nubbin's as they dreamed.

Tall cottonwoods shade the big log house at Rawson's Well. White-faced cattle and sleek brood mares and their colts graze on the many hundreds of fenced-in irrigated pasture and hay meadows that once were covered with greasewood. Bill Rawson and his wife, Kit, live in the big log house. They're building another log house and when it is finished, Johnny Stuart, still better known as Nubbin, will move in there with his bride, Nancy. But the big wedding is going to be at the Rail 7 home ranch. Rawson's Well is a part of the Rail 7 now and they raise their prize cattle and quarter horses there. It's Tombough, Rawson and Stuart now who own the big Rail 7.

But the name of the post office where the stage brings the mail is Rawson's Well, Montana.

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY

S. Omar Barker

Born in the New Mexican mountains, of Virginia mountaineer stock, and raised on a mixture of saddle, gun, fishpole, pitchfork, ax and hoe," seems like a sure-fire recipe for the colorful Western humor and homely philosophy one finds in the stories and verse of S. Omar Barker.

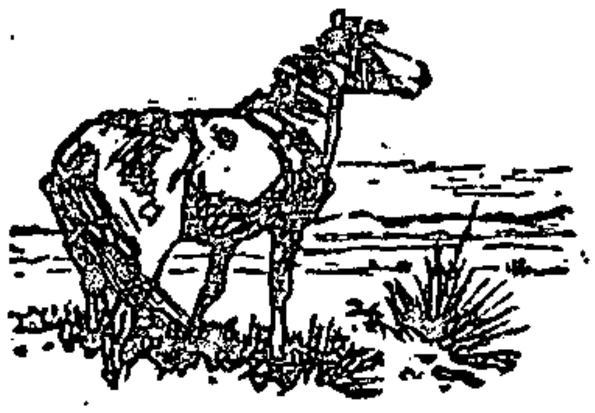
"Although I was never much of a cowhand myownself," he admits, "I know which end of a horse the tail is on and claim to know the cowboy breed from stirrup to Stetson, and he'll sure do to write about—which I've been doing for twenty-odd years. I've taken my turn at newspaper reporting, forest ranging, rodeo publicizing, soldiering (AEF in France in World War I), teaching school, and I once played slide trombone in Doc Patterson's Cowboy Band. Also served one term in the New Mexico Legislature but never been in jail—yet!

"My wife, Elsa, and I like to ride, fish, hunt mountain lions and bobcats, camp, and garden and I'm mighty fond of genuine old cowboy songs, the Spanish dialect, quiz programs and beefsteak—without onions. I've had a peek or two at the elephant but a true mountaineer always comes back to taw—so here I live in high New Mexico where the wildcats scat and the hoot owls hoot and a man gits clean dirt on his boots."

Our next issue takes you on a little pasear into that mountain country for a side-splitting adventure with Barker's zany scourge to rangeland romance, Romeo Jones, who makes his reappearance in CHICKEN HOUSE CHAMP. Also included are Western favorites such as Walt Coburn, C. K. Shaw, Jim Kjelgaard, Charles N. Heckelmann and many others.

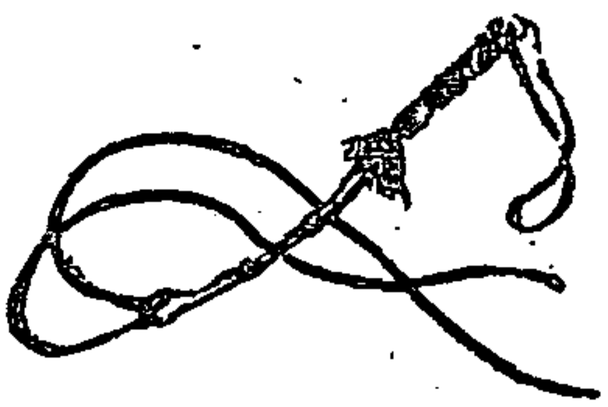
RANGE SAVVY

BY CARL RAHT



Dry lakes in the West are almost as illusive as mirages. During the winter months, when the desert sun shines less fiercely and evaporation is practically nil, these lakes take on the appearance of extensive bodies of water, but only for a short time. Such a lake in the upper Paranagat Valley, in Southern Nevada, deceives even the wild mustangs, so swiftly does the water evaporate. When the thirsty animals find nothing but a dry lake, they hit for the nearest water—a seep at Coyote Wells, twenty-five miles farther north.

In the early 80's, when the railroads opened the lower plains country in Texas to settlement, the first thought of every ranchman was to dig a storm cellar to protect himself against the sudden and violent cyclones so frequent in that region. Often the storm cellar was furnished with beds for an all-night stay, in case the storm was of long duration. Many a rancher and his family have pushed open the door overhead at dawn, to find their home a mass of crumpled walls, and the barn and haystacks scattered to the winds.



There was a time in the cow country when a rawhide quirt hung on every saddlehorn. But it was never used on a roping horse by a wise rider. For a horse soon learned to dodge a blow from the quirt, and when the time came to swing a loop in roping a critter, the horse would likewise dodge, spoiling the roper's aim. But a quirt was invaluable when it came to cutting animals from a herd. The slap of the rawhide against leggings would startle the animal into motion and enable the rider to work it from the herd without starting a stampede.

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.

WESTERN SADDLES

by JIM WEST

Conquistadores

WHETHER it is a roping kack he is after or an ornate, hand-carved leather outfit that may run him into several hundred dollars, the Western cowboy is as fussy about choosing his saddle as a debutante buying a party dress.

He has to be. A saddle is part of his working equipment. He orders it to fit his measurements and to suit his personal saddle preferences. And he buys a saddle specifically designed for the job he has to do.

The modern Western stock saddle is definitely an American product. Years of invention, innovation, skill and improvement have gone into its development. It grew up with the cattle country. But its main features were derived from the first Spanish saddles brought into Mexico and the Southwest by the Conquistadores.

The Spanish, and later the Mexican saddles with their broad seats and wide, sloping cantles, were in turn an adaptation of even earlier Moorish models. Since the Moors practically lived on horseback they had learned how to design a rig that was comfortable for the rider as well as easy on the horse.

Perhaps the first Americans to adopt the Spanish saddle in the West were the traders and fur trappers. They were the first in the wilderness, and the first to reach Santa Fe. Among them was the famous Kit Carson, Kentucky-born and apprenticed to a Missouri saddle maker before he ran away in 1821 to join a caravan on his first trip to Taos and the Spanish capitol in New Mexico.

Such men undoubtedly found the saddlehorn useful in handling pack animals. It also made a handy peg on which to hang a coil of rope, sling a rifle, or carry other pieces of their trapping gear.

The essentials of the Spanish saddle were all the mountain men cared about. These consisted of the tree, or framework, the squat, leather-covered, flat-topped horn, stirrup leathers, roomy oxbow stirrups, and the rigging. The last was center-fire or single cinch. The rings, however, were well forward and the cinch was made of a broad belt of braided

horsehair. It held the saddle in position fairly well.

The hardy trappers scorned as "foofooraw" the spangles, silver buttons and other purely decorative trimmings that fancied up the saddles of the Santa Feans. They did make one concession to comfort by adopting the Indian habit of throwing a folded buffalo robe across the saddle seat.

It is likely that from Santa Fe also came the first woven Indian saddle blankets that grew into such a popular adjunct to the Western stock saddle. Genuine Navaho saddle blankets are still used and prized by many Western horsemen. They represent a definite class of Indian blanket weaving art. Woven of coarse yarn in red, blacks, murky whites and grays, they average in size about 36x48 inches. Individual blankets may be a trifle larger or smaller than this.

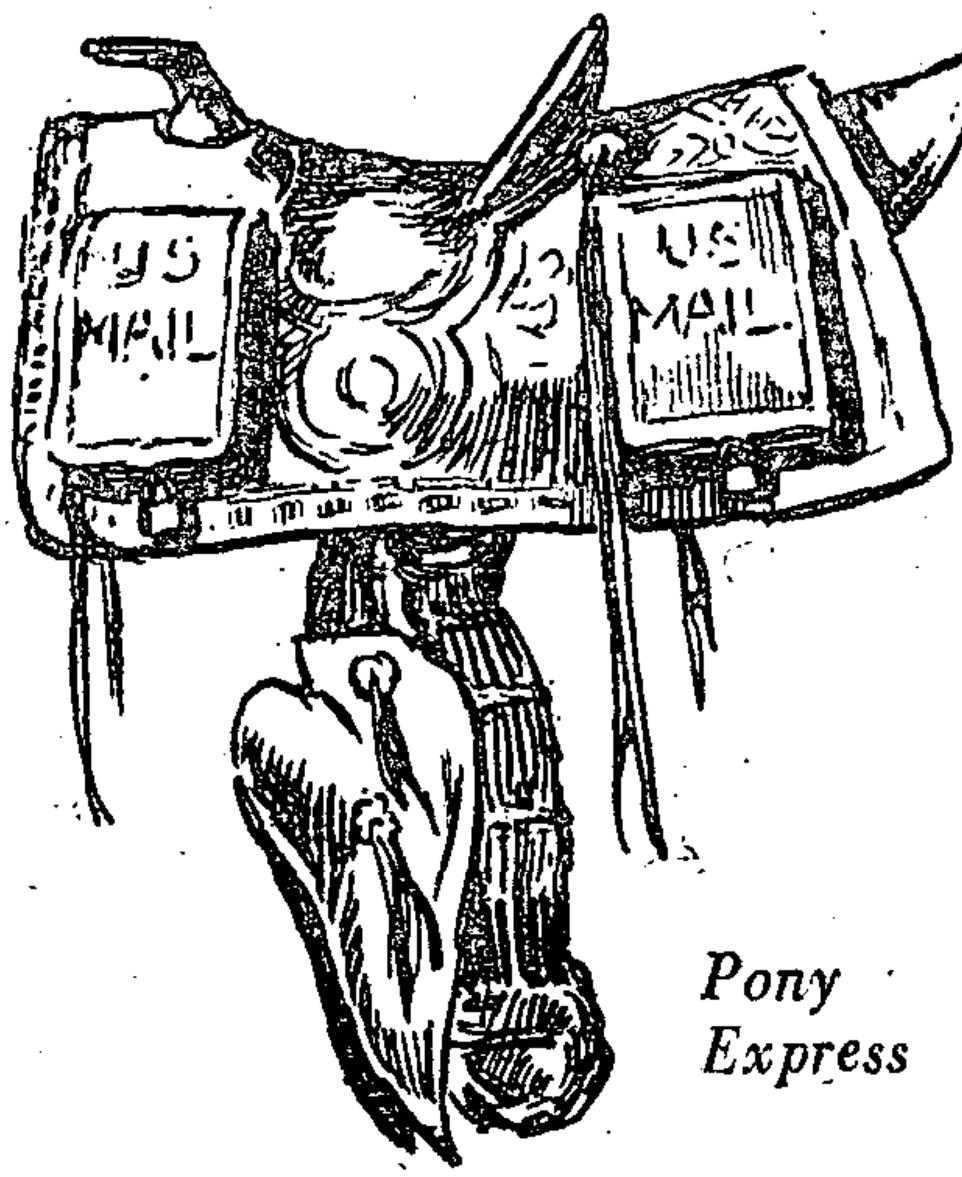
Early in the settlement of the West returning trappers began to order "Mexican" saddles from the St. Louis saddle makers. The first innovation to make its appearance was a wide leather covering that fitted over the saddle seat and extended fore and aft of the tree. Made to supplant the trappers' buffalo robe the leather "blanket"-was removable. It fastened to the saddle by lacings around the horn.

Interesting use was made of this detachable feature as late as 1860 when the thrilling and colorful Pony Express was inaugurated to carry fast mail across the plains, to California. Speed was the heart and essence of the Pony Mail. Light equipment, light, daredevil riders and tough, fast horses were used in relays throughout the long run.

The precious mail was carried in locked, built-in pouches attached to a specially designed saddle fitted with one of the old-style leather skirts. The moment a pony rider whirled up to a relay station the next horse, or horse and rider as the case happened to be, was waiting to speed the mail on its journey.

It required only a matter of seconds to flip loose the lacing, strip off the leather skirt with pouches intact and throw it on the already saddled fresh horse. The system was quicker than changing saddles.

Pouches attached as part of the saddle were safer than separate bags. The rider couldn't lose them and anyone attempting to steal them had to catch the horse first—not an easy trick when you remember that Pony Express horses were hand-picked for speed and endurance and specially trained for the job of galloping over



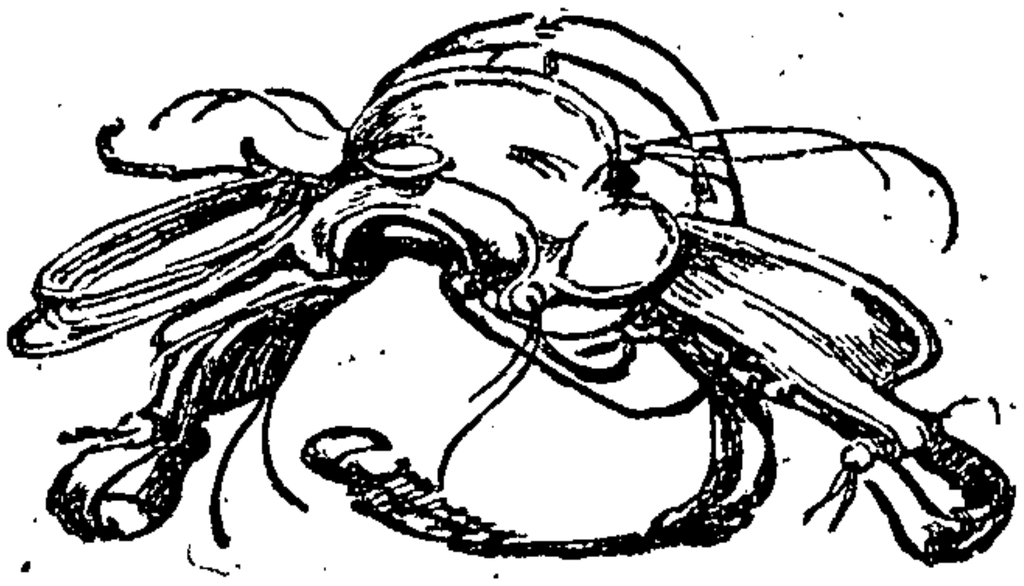
Pony Express

their relay, with or without a rider.

The stripped-down trappers' version of the Spanish saddle with its removable leather skirt was in general use when the railroads pushed into Kansas and the great Texas trail drives opened up the cattle industry of the Southwest. Prior to that time the half-wild longhorns roaming the brasada of south Texas had been useful mainly for their hides.

It was not long before cowboys and trail drivers discovered that riding the long, hard trails to the railhead boom towns and chousing cattle out of brushy thickets required something more to hold a saddle on a horse than a single cinch. They adopted the double rig. With only a split second after spotting his longhorn in the mesquite in which to run out a loop and make his rope cast, the brush popper had no time to light and recinch a slipping saddle a dozen times a day. The double rig held better in steep, arroyo-cut country and when a roped mossyhorn was throwing his weight around in the brush.

In due time these rimfire saddles found their way up the tortuous cattle trails into New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana.



Working Saddle

As the cattle industry developed and prospered, so did the cattlemen and, in a measure, the adventurous, hard-living hombres who rode the range for the vast, kingdom-sized spreads. The horses the cowboys forked were generally the boss's, and belonged to the ranch remuda. But their saddles were their own.

There is the old story of the cowboy who loaned a stranded stranger his riding horse to get to the next town.

"When you git there," he admonished the recipient of his cow country generosity, "see that you return *the saddle.* The saddle's mine."

Not only were saddles an emblem of the cowboy's calling. The men had to work in them all day long and often part of the night as well. They were therefore understandably fastidious about the fit of their rigs. Pride and rivalry caused them to vie with each other in the leather carving and fancy scrollwork they ordered on the saddle skirts and other trimmings.

A half, or even a whole, year's salary was not too much for a cowboy to lay out on a saddle of his own particular choice.

As a result, the saddle maker became an important personage. Some of them were famous throughout the West for the quality of their saddles and the improvements they developed in saddle structure and design.

Frank and Tom Meanea learned the trade in Missouri, and went West. In the early 1870's Frank opened the first saddle shop in Cheyenne, Wyoming. His brother, Tom, made

the trees for Frank's saddles in Denver, Colorado. The team made Western saddle history.

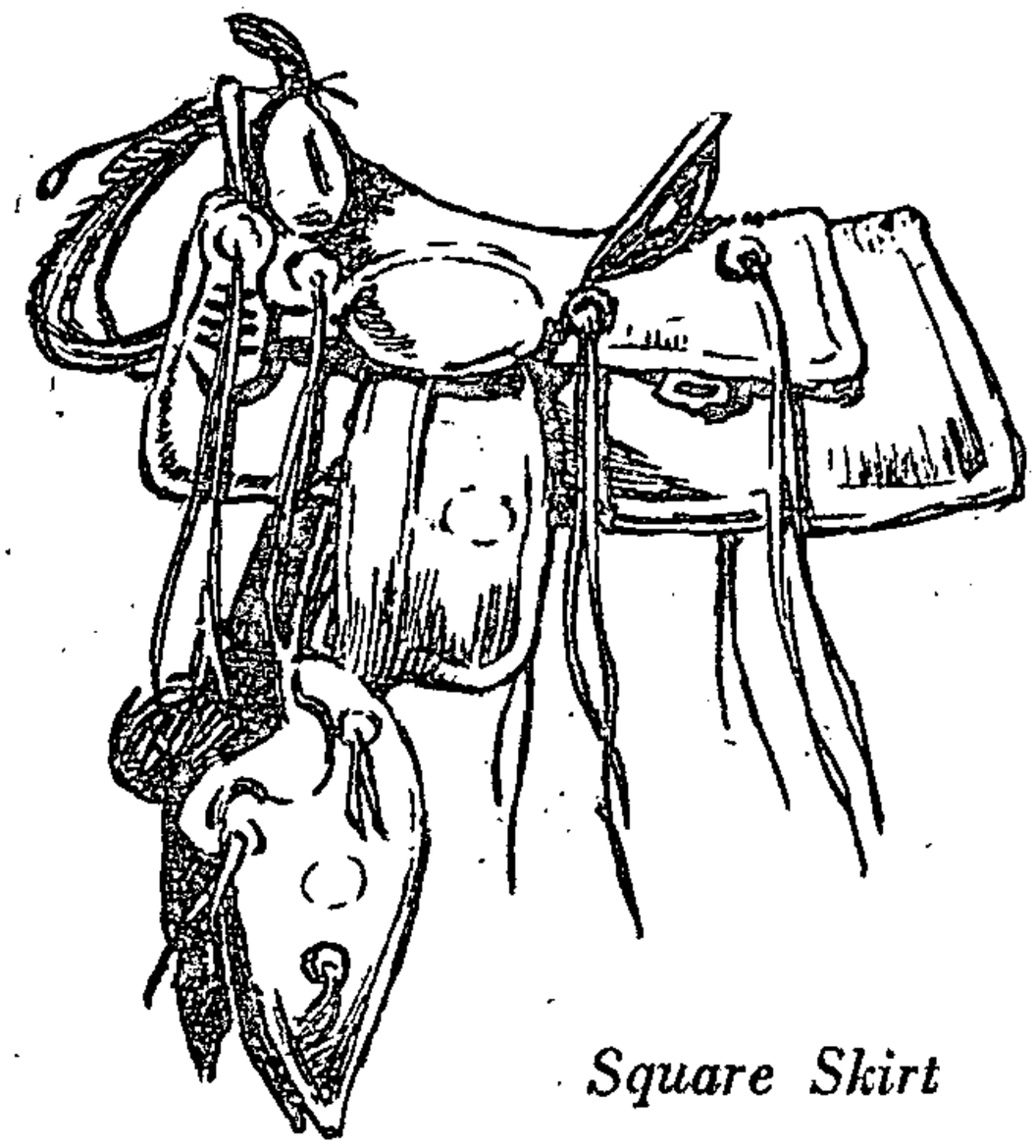
Frank is credited with originating what came to be known as the Cheyenne-type saddle. It was double-rigged like the later Texas jobs, and had the square skirts characteristic of the Texas saddle. In the Cheyenne version the skirts were cut down in size, and something entirely new was added—the roll cantle.

This gave the saddle a changed appearance and enhanced its eye appeal. Other than that it seemed to have no definite purpose. Yet almost instantly the Cheyenne roll cantle won tremendous popularity. The style was widely copied by other saddle makers. Lately its popularity, which waned greatly about 1900, has been returning.

Another well-known name in Western saddlery is Collins. Collins' special roping saddles, first made in Omaha, Nebraska, shortly after the Civil War were designed to anchor firmly on the roping horse. They became favorites throughout the West. And they are still being made —in Omaha.

The list could be expanded. Newton Porter ran a famous saddle shop in Abilene, Texas, in the 1880's. Later he moved to Phoenix, Arizona. His descendants are still carrying on the business.

The old saying that his saddle would identify the section of cow country a cowboy came from is pretty much blasted today. Modern stock saddles have become fairly standardized as to types, most of them being a cross between the round-skirted California style and the Texas double rig.



Square Skirt

Standardization doesn't apply to *tree types—the basic framework.* These are made in a multiplicity of variations. Differences in heights, shapes, forks, swells, horns and cantles in almost endless combinations give the present-day buyer of a 'Western' saddle more leeway in the matter of fit and style preference than he ever had before.

As for such adornments as hand tooling on the leather, silver mountings and such, they too (though out for the duration of the war) have returned in all their former splendor. In the matter of foofooraw the Spanish saddle is back where it started. But as a definite stock saddle, it is now a thing of vastly improved utility and workmanship.

Three generations of Western cowmen and saddle makers have seen to that.

THE END

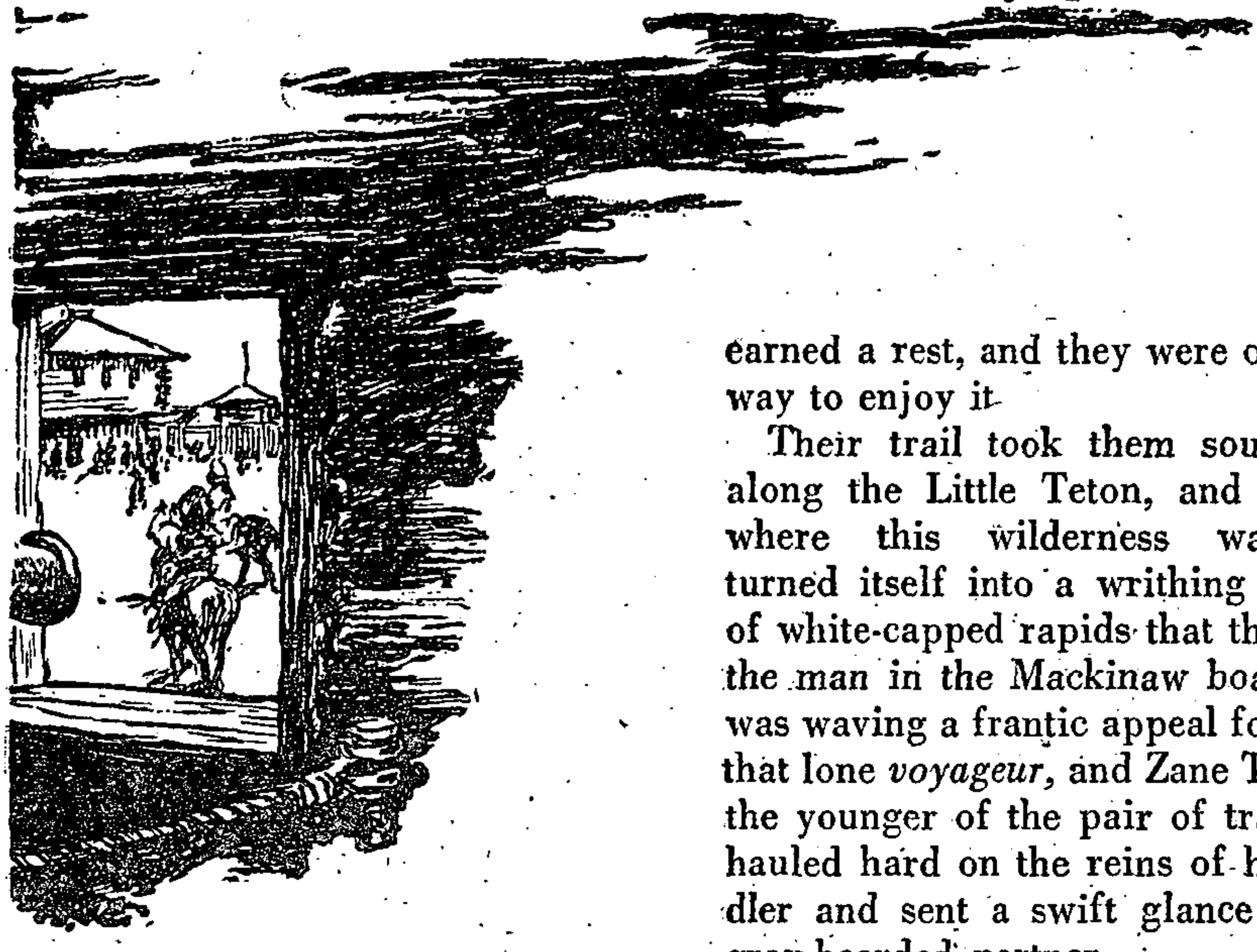
TRIGGER CALL FOR

by

NORMAN A. FOX

The summer rendezvous had to wait for Zane Tolbert until he probed the weird plot that threatened to plunge Fort Bighorn into a flaming war with the Assiniboines

A FREE TRAPPER



I

THEY were headed for the summer rendezvous in Wyoming where friends would meet and whiskey would flow, and they were a light-hearted pair, these two free trappers, as they rode along this sunny morning. A hard season was behind them; they had trapped and traded among the Mountain Crows and the River Crows, the Gros Ventres and the Assiniboines, and they had even penetrated the land of the dread Blackfeet and returned with their hair intact. They had earned a rest, and they were on their way to enjoy it.

Their trail took them southward along the Little Teton, and it was where this wilderness waterway turned itself into a writhing stretch of white-capped rapids that they saw the man in the Mackinaw boat. He was waving a frantic appeal for help, that lone *voyageur*, and Zane Tolbert, the younger of the pair of trappers, hauled hard on the reins of his saddler and sent a swift glance at his gray-bearded partner.

"Trouble," Zane said tersely. "He's let himself get sucked into the rapids, and yon boat's too big for him to manage."

"Wagh!" Pelly River Pete Stone agreed in the nasal jargon of the mountain men. "And that thar's a Bighorn Co. boat, or this old hoss don't know fat cow from pore bull."

Mention of the Bighorn Fur Co. brought a frown to Zane's brown, high-boned face. Then: "It's Baptiste LeNoir!" the young trapper cried in sudden recognition, and he came down from his saddle to make a high, handsome figure in his fringed buckskin. He shed his powderhorn, bullet

mold and hunting knife as he ran to the river bank, and he took to the water in a clean dive. Some vagary of the current had swept the Mackinaw shoreward, and Baptiste LeNoir, the only *engagé* of the powerful Bighorn Co. whom Zane called friend, had seized this hope of salvation to go over the side and was feebly threshing in the water.

Resisting the hard pull of the current, Lane struck out with all the strength that paddle and portage trail had put into his muscles, and he saw the *engagé* carried toward him. Reaching, he got a hold on LeNoir's long, black hair and the two of them were bowled over and over and swept toward upthrusting rocks. Then Zane caught a glimpse of Pelly River Pete running along the bank, a rawhide rope in his hands, and abandoned his efforts to try for the shore. Getting an arm around a rock, he held fast to LeNoir.

"Pete!" he shouted frantically. "Hurry!"

Torn from this boulder, the two would be carried out into midstream, and now Zane could only pit his strength against the river and hope that Pelly River Pete's rope would reach them in time. And in the midst of this endurance contest against death, he reflected that most men would brand him a fool for risking his skin to save a Bighorn hireling.

Free trappers were anathema to the Bighorn Co. and especially so was the little band led by Zane Tolbert. That same band was now far down the trail, gone on with the pack animals carrying the season's catch of furs. Zane and Pete had let them go ahead while they themselves had followed buffalo sign beyond a timbered ridge.

Every one of those hairy mountain men who trapped where fancy took them and traded wherever they pleased had had occasion to curse the name of Fort Bighorn, and Drake Anselmo, its factor. Sharp competition had made sworn enemies of Anselmo and Zane Tolbert, but Baptiste LeNoir, when in the employ of a British company far to the north, had once saved Zane's life a few years before. And, in turn, Baptiste would be saved today if Zane's strength held out.

Then the rope came whistling. Zane managed to get it around LeNoir and to wrap his own arm around the rawhide, and in this manner Pelly River Pete hauled them toward the shore. A few minutes later the two lay on the grassy bank, Zane gasping for breath.

Pete bent to examine Baptiste. The French Canadian *engagé* was unconscious, and Pete, his fingers exploring rapidly, sucked in his breath.

"Tain't no wonder he couldn't handle his boat!" the mountain man ejaculated. "He's got a bullet hole in him you could drive a buffler through!"

Zane crept over to the swarthy Baptiste and, seeing the wound, he wondered what inner strength had sustained the *engagé* so far. Then LeNoir opened his eyes, staring blankly for a moment.

"Who shot you, friend?" Zane demanded.

"I am come in toward the shore at Plew Rock," LeNoir gasped. "The gun, she sing from the bushes, and Baptiste is gone to de deep sleep. *Sacré bleu!* When I am open my eyes, the boat she is in de rapids!"

"So someone shot you before you could come ashore and make portage around the rapids! Who, Baptiste? And what fetched you down the Teton alone, anyway?"

"I am look for you, *mon enfant.* The big trouble, she is come to Fort Bighorn. The Assiniboines, dey send the war smoke curling to the sky. Soon they make the strong fight, I t'ink. It is bad . . . bad . . ."

"Trouble for Fort Bighorn!" Pelly River Pete growled. "That suits this old hoss. Let the Injuns burn 'em out, I say!"

LeNoir's dark eyes were on Zane. "Your father, the chief *bourgeois* of de Bighorn, has come up the rivair from St. Louis," the *voyageur* said pointedly.

"I know," Zane said and tried to keep his voice even. "The furland has been full of rumors that Henley Tolbert is at Fort Bighorn." Eagerness edged into his tone in spite of himself. "He sent you to find me, Baptiste? He wants my help against the Assiniboines?"

But Baptiste, with a soft sigh, had closed his eyes, and it was a long moment before either of the trappers realized that the *voyageur* was dead. They sat staring at each other wordlessly until Pelly River Pete, still holding silent, began scooping a grave in the river bank's soft and

Zane Tolbert

yielding earth. Zane fetched one of his *epishemores,* and this saddle blanket was used to wrap Baptiste's remains before he was rolled into the shallow hole.

When the rocks were heaped, Zane said, "He did me a mighty favor, once," and this was the epitaph for Baptiste LeNoir, French-Canadian peasant who had traded the security of paternal acres for a *voyageur's* perilous life and meager pay.

"He was coming down river to fetch a message to you, Zane," Pelly River Pete said thoughtfully, "and somebody used a rifle to try and stop him. Why, son? And what's putting the Injuns on the warpath against Fort Bighorn? That's queer doings in these woods!"

"Hard riding might fetch us to Fort Bighorn by sundown tomorrow," Zane said absently.

Pelly River Pete regarded him with hoisted brows. "Zane, we've been pards since that day in Inde-

pendence when we put our backs together and stood off a bunch of river riffraff that craved the sight of mountain blood. But we ain't never asked questions of each other. Yet they tell it fom the Clark's Fork to Fort Galpin on the Missouri that Henley Tolbert, the head booshway of the Bighorn Co., hates his son and aims to run him out of the wilderness. Considering that, thar's no call to risk our ha'r for him!"

"You've listened to a lot of woodland rumor, old-timer," Zane declared. "It's high time you had the truth. There's been no hatred between my father and me, Pete. We were just too much alike—a pair of proud, stubborn mules. He had a fine desk job for me in the Bighorn's offices in St. Louis but I preferred the wilderness end of the business. He told me I was too soft for the mountains; I told him I'd turn free trapper and show him. That was ten years ago, when I was eighteen. I haven't set eyes on Henley Tolbert since. But meanwhile I've piled up a stake in down-river banks. When it's big enough, I figger to dump it in his lap."

"And he's given all his factors orders to ruin your trading, whenever they get a chance," growled Pete. "Look how Drake Anselmo's worked against us in this stretch o' furland."

"It's a game between dad and me," Zane said softly. "But that doesn't matter now. Danger threatens Fort Bighorn; my father needs me, and I want to think that he sent Baptiste after me. I'll overtake you at the rendezvous, old hoss."

"We better cache our fixin's," Pete said gruffly. "We'll need to travel light to reach Fort Bighorn tomorrow."

Thus did the old mountain man announce his decision, and Zane smiled as they fell to work digging a cache. Into it went their sacks of beaver traps, extra moccasins and buckskins. Zane changed from his own wet garb before they were ready for the back trail. He kept rifle, powder horn, bullet pouch and implements for making fire, and he left his hatchet fastened to the pommel of his saddle. High noon found them retracing their steps along the Little Teton, riding single file and in silence.

Zane's thoughts centered on the brief message Baptiste LeNoir had fetched. It made little sense, that talk of war in the woodlands; there had been peace for many seasons, and certainly the Assiniboines, few in number this far south of the Milk River, had been tractable enough. But now the signal smoke was going up, and the tribe was gathering for an onslaught on Fort Bighorn. Zane Tolbert had seen the red fury unleashed before. Shuddering, he urged his wiry mountain saddler to greater speed.

They threaded a wild, timbered land all that day and made camp not far from the upthrust of Plew Rock. Zane had taken flint, steel and pieces of punk from his bullet pouch, ignited a fistful of dry grass, heaped tiny sticks upon the blaze, and he had his hatchet in his hand when the gun spoke from the bushes. But there'd been a slight footfall—warning enough for both Zane and Pelly

River Pete. The oldster dropped the wood he'd been gathering, and Zane swerved sidewards as a rifle ball whipped within an inch of the gay bandanna he wore tied around his head.

Zane's rifle was close by, but he didn't take time to reach for it. Instead he sent his hatchet sailing; the firelight glinted on the blade as it arced through the air in the direction of the gun flame, and a fierce howl of anguish testified to some kind of a hit. A stocky, swarthy man reared into view, but only for an instant, and then his moccasins beat wildly through the underbrush. Zane and Pete, who had dived for cover, came to a quick stand, but the would-be bushwhacker was already far gone.

"Wagh!" Pelly River Pete ejaculated. "The same sneakin' devil that done for pore Baptiste at Plew Rock, I'll wager. Let's see what kind of sign he's left."

"No need," said Zane. "I got a glimpse of his face after I'd nicked him with my hatchet. It was Jules Menard."

"Menard! Drake Anselmo's breed brother-in-law. So the chief *comis* of Fort Bighorn wants us dead!"

Zane shook his head. "Menard's chief clerk no more," he said. "The River Crows told me not long ago that Anselmo had dismissed Menard from the company's service. But even if the man's turned renegade, why should he be hankering for our scalps? Pete, let's say nothing about this at Fort Bighorn, but we'll keep our eyes and ears open. Jules Menard tried to keep Baptiste from reaching us, it seems, and then he tried to stop us from getting to the fort. Why?"

The shattered silence of the night had restored itself; there was only the rippling wind in the pine tops and the distant rumble of the river to give him answer. Zane Tolbert shook his head in bewilderment.

II

They came to Fort Bighorn in the last light of the next day, and Zane, gazing upon the log stockade with its towering bastions, saw at once that the few Assiniboines who usually camped before the fort had struck their lodges and left. That in itself was an ominous sign.

A scowling clerk answered Zane's loud thump on the huge gate and admitted the two mountain men into the small areaway between the palisade and the rear walls of the sod-roofed log structures of the post. Indians were allowed to enter this section to trade, and Zane knew that the bastion cannon, loaded with grape shot, frowned down upon him.

"What brings you here, trappers?" the clerk demanded.

"Business with the big *bourgeois* from St. Louis," Zane said curtly. "Take us to him."

Shrugging, the clerk led them toward the council room, and other clerks and *engagés*, their Indian wives and half-breed children staring curiously at the trappers with a certain unnatural restraint, came crowding around. Before they'd reached the flagstaff in the middle of

the square, Drake Anselmo appeared.

In a land where men ran to leanness, this olive-skinned factor of Fort Bighorn, who was a mixture of French, Spanish and English blood, made a huge, thick-waisted figure. For over a decade he'd served Henley Tolbert and served him well, and he and Zane Tolbert had clashed often in the past.

"Ho!" Anselmo exclaimed as he recognized the pair. "You are not welcome at Fort Bighorn, mountain men."

"I've come to see my father," Zane said and put his hand to his rifle. "Are you going to take me to him, Anselmo?"

Pelly River Pete had crowded close behind Zane, and together they must have made a formidable-looking pair, for Anselmo, after studying them speculatively, said, "Come along." He ushered them into the council room and through it to a large, adjacent room where a fire smouldered smokily in a huge, rock fireplace, and a tallow taper, placed upon a long table, cast a feeble glow.

In the thickness of the shadows, it took Zane a moment to recognize the gaunt, gray-haired man seated at the end of the table, for this man looked much older than Zane had supposed he would.

"Dad!" he choked. "Don't you know me? It's Zane."

He'd taken an eager step nearer, and he saw now that the older Tolbert was garbed in black broadcloth, as always. Stirring, the gray-haired man said, "State your business with the Bighorn Fur Co."

There was nothing but coldness in that voice, no note of welcome, and Zane said desperately: "Baptiste LeNoir overtook me down river, but he got caught in the rapids and died after I hauled him to the shore with my partner's help. Before he died he told me that you were here and that war with the Assiniboines threatened this post."

A bony hand lifted in a gesture of annoyance. "A race of sentimentalists, the French. Yes, it is true that a crisis threatens us. LeNoir came to me and said you'd be on your way to the Wyoming rendezvous where men of your independent ilk gather at this season, and he claimed he could overtake you. He thought a father and son should be standing shoulder to shoulder at a time like this. I told him to mind his own affairs, but it was reported to me later that he left the post in spite of my wishes."

Zane stiffened, remembering the bullet hole in Baptiste LeNoir, but he banished his sudden suspicion as too wild for credulity. Henley Tolbert, proud and stubborn as ever, might not have wished an appeal for help carried to his son. But he would never have ordered LeNoir's death. A hard man, Tolbert demanded absolute obedience from his hirelings, yet he treated his *engagés* with greater consideration than did many a rival company.

"I'm sorry to hear of LeNoir's death," the elder Tolbert added with his first show of emotion. "He was a good man."

"This trouble?" Zane asked. "I've come many miles to learn about it."

The gray-haired man shrugged. "I've been here only a few weeks, and when I first came up from St. Louis, the Indians who were camped nearby possessed an albino buffalo robe. They are a rarity, and I directed Anselmo himself to barter for it. But the Indians would have none of his offer."

Anselmo had eased his big body into a rawhide-slung chair. "As you know, trapper, the white buffalo is sacred to the Assiniboines. I offered them eight horses for it, or any kind of trade goods with a bartering value equivalent to the price of forty ordinary robes. But they wouldn't sell."

"Wagh!" Pelly River Pete snorted from where he stood with his chin resting on the end of his rifle barrel. "As well try to trade the Jesuits out of the candles they use on their altars!"

"I know that," Anselmo said. "But M'sieu Tolbert ordered me to make the try, and I obeyed. And now that the robe has mysteriously turned up here—inside the post—there's no explaining it. But it makes the devil's own situation."

"The Indians came to us and reported that the sacred robe had disappeared from the lodge of their medicine man," the elder Tolbert explained. "Since we had tried to buy it, they naturally suspected us of the theft. We could only try to assure them that we knew nothing of the robe. Then, that very night, one of the clerks found the robe here. But the Assiniboines had already returned to their village, and our *engagés* tell us that their war smoke is calling all their kind for battle. Returning the robe now would be like admitting we'd stolen it and regretted our action. We'd lose face with all the tribes. Yet to keep it means that war is inevitable."

"Then," said Zane, for his mind had been busily at work, "there is only one simple solution. I've traded with the Assiniboines; I call Standing Elk, their chief, my friend. Let me take the robe to them and give them some wild story about finding it in the forest. They know that the Bighorn Co. hates me; they'll never suspect that I'm doing this for you. And your fears will be over."

"No!" The gaunt man behind the table came to an abrupt stand. "I want no help from you, Zane. There was a day when I needed your help and made a special place for you in my St. Louis office. You chose then to go your own wild, independent way. More than that, you accepted financial help from Branson Tolbert, who happens to be a distant cousin of ours, but who also happens to be the bitterest enemy I've got. Go to him if you have any favors to extend, Zane. You seem to owe him a greater obligation than you owe your own father."

"So that's it!" Zane declared hotly. "Yes, I needed traps and trade goods to get my start ten years ago, and I advertised for a backer. Branson Tolbert wrote me from Independence that he'd stake me. At that time he was only a distant kinsman with an offer of help; it wasn't until later that I learned of the hatred between you and him. Once I realized he'd only staked me to spite you, I paid him back with interest and severed all relationship with him long ago. But it's eaten at your pride that Branson Tolbert gave me my start, eh? Well, to blazes with your pride at a time like this!"

"Get out!" the elder Tolbert thundered. "Get out before I call my clerks and have you thrown out!"

"I'm not going!" Zane insisted just as angrily. "Safe and snug in your St. Louis office, what have you learned about the wilderness? You've no ideá what this war will mean. Other tribes may ally themselves with the Assiniboines; all white men may be prey to the gun and the tomahawk, and there'll be no trapping for any of us in this area for years to come. If that sacred robe isn't returned, my business is endangered as well as yours. I've got a stake here, and I intend to protect it!"

"Perhaps his solution is the only one," Anselmo put in. "I beg you to consider his offer, M'sieu Tolbert. He has respect among the Assiniboines, I know. And he can be the salvation of all of us."

The gaunt, gray-haired man sank back into his chair, and his voice was weary when he spoke. "I still want nothing from him," he said. "But perhaps he was right about my ignorance of the frontier. Since there is no other way, give him the robe and let him return it to the Assiniboines."

Turning on his heel, Zane marched stiffly from the room, Pelly River Pete stalking after him. Into the adjacent council room, Pete drew in a long breath. "Wagh!" he ejaculated. "So that's the great Henley Tolbert of St. Louis. Ye come by your stubbornness honestly, boy!"

Drake Anselmo came into the council room and, unlocking a great chest, he drew forth the white robe and laid it before Zane. Examining this rarity, Zane said: "Have you got a blanket I can wrap it in, and some rawhide thongs to tie it and make carrying loops? I'll leave at dawn, and I don't want prying eyes to see me with the robe on the trail."

Anselmo nodded and fetched the required articles, and when Zane had fashioned a bundle to his own

satisfaction, the factor said: "Come, I'll show you to sleeping quarters."

Casting a last glance at the doorway to the room beyond, the room where the elder Tolbert still sat, Zane hoisted his bundle and followed Anselmo out of the building. On the way, Zane, stirred by a sudden remembrance, said pointedly: "I haven't seen Jules Menard around the fort."

"He is no longer with the Bighorn," Anselmo said with no change of tone. "He was insubordinate, and I tolerated him because his Indian wife and mine are sisters, as you doubtless know. But I finally had to dismiss him."

Later, when the two mountain men were stretched upon straw-filled ticks in the quarters assigned to them, Pelly River Pete said: "Best leave our hosses here, Zane. No guessing the mood of the Injuns, and we'll want to walk light till yonder robe's returned to 'em."

"True," Zane agreed. "But I'll be going alone, old hoss. No, don't argue. I can't put my finger on anything, but somehow I'll feel safer if you're here, keeping an eye on things. Somebody's working against this post, and likely from inside. Keep your powder dry and your eye sharp, Pete. All the danger may not be out on the trail."

III

Tired from the long trail to Fort Bighorn and his tussle with the Little Teton, Zane slept soundly that night, but he was awake before the first flush of dawn. Groping in the gloom for the bundle he had prepared, he got the sacred robe in place on his back, and slipped from the room without awakening Pelly River Pete, who still snored lustily.

Out into the square, Zane was surprised to find Drake Anselmo apparently awaiting him.

"I thought you'd be making an early start, so I fetched food for you," explained Anselmo and proffered a package. "But where's your partner?"

"Pelly River Pete will wait here," Zane said. "This is a one-man job."

The factor shrugged and let Zane out through the small gate that was set in one of the leaves of the main gate. *"Au revoir,"* Anselmo said. "May good luck attend your mission."

Munching the food Anselmo had given him, Zane faced toward the Assiniboine camp. A well-worn game trail skirted the Little Teton, but he took to the underbrush instead, mindful that any prowling Indian might be anxious to count coup, mindful too that Jules Menard might be somewhere about, his rifle thirsting for a target. Setting a steady, mile-eating pace, Zane kept his own rifle in his hand, and by high noon he was nearing his destination.

He saw the smoke of a council fire curling upward long before he reached the ring of lodges, and he heard the steady throbbing of ceremonial drums above the murmur of the nearby river. When the time came, he stalked boldly into the camp.

Dogs came running to yip at his heels, squaws regarded him stonily,

the drums ceased beating, and the ring of warriors squatted around the council fire remained unbroken until Standing Elk, the chief, rose to a high erectness. A commanding figure with his quill-decorated robe held tightly about him, he stood staring at Zane in silence, no welcome in his glance. Zane spoke then in the common tongue of all the thirty-three bands of the Assiniboine Nation.

"Many times have I come to your camp," he announced. "But now you wonder why I come in *Waheqosmewi*, the month of the Full Leaf Moon, when the furs are no longer prime and there is no trading between red brothers and white." He swung the bundle from his back. "I bring great tidings to my friends, the *Wadopabina*. I bring that which belongs to them and was stolen."

Jarred from their impassivity, the squatting warriors began to murmur excitedly. But: "How do you come by this thing you bear?" Standing Elk demanded.

"Several suns ago my trapping party found a strange man—half-Sious and half-white from the look of him—making a cache in the woodland," Zane lied glibly. "From the shelter of bushes we watched him, seeing that he had the stealthy way of a thief, and when he had gone, we opened his cache. This is not done by the mountain men, as you know, and we would have reburied what we found had we not discovered that it belonged to the *Wadopabina*. For it was the robe of the sacred white buffalo, and already the leaves whispered that our Assiniboine friends made strong medicine for the warpath. Many marches have I come to return this robe to you, so that your medicine may be made good for hunting and trapping and planting—the ways of peace."

The Assiniboines were as excited now as they ever allowed themselves to become, but they let Standing Elk do their speaking for them. Raising his hand in a stately gesture, the chief said: "It is good. Three days have I fasted alone and away from camp, looking for a sign to guide me on the warpath. And always my vision showed me the sacred robe in the big log lodge of Drake Anselmo to the south. Now I know that the Being who brought this false vision was an evil Being, for the robe was not at Fort Bighorn, after all."

Zane breathed easier now, assured by Standing Elk's manner that the Assiniboines were eager enough to forget the warpath now that the sacred robe was being restored to them.

The medicine man rose from the circle, flinging his arms wide and beginning a tale of how his tribe had stalked the buffalo herd with the albino bull that had given them their prized robe. He related how that herd had seemed always to gather in such a manner as to shelter the white one until his, the medicine man's, medicine had proved the stronger, and the prize buffalo had fallen to their guns. It was a long story, and it was accompanied by the proper re-enactment of the chase and the kill, and Zane, knowing the ways of these people, waited pa-

tiently until its finish. Then he knelt and cut the bindings of the blanket, unrolling its contents with a grand flourish.

"Here is your sacred robe!" he cried. "Here is peace between red men and white! Take it, my friends!"

Then he was staring with unbelieving eyes at the article that had spilled upon the ground. For it was an ordinary black buffalo robe, and not the sacred white robe he had been given by Drake Anselmo.

The gathered Assiniboines were surprised too, but their surprise turned swiftly to anger. Instantly a horde of warriors closed in upon Zane, seizing him violently. He tried vainly to explain, but where were the words to make sense at such a time? Wresting his weapons away, the Indians bore him downward, lashed his hands and ankles with rawhide thongs and dumped him unceremoniously into a small, smoky lodge.

At the entrance, Standing Elk regarded him angrily. "You heard of our loss and came to our camp to make a great speech and then to laugh at us after you had made us believe our sacred robe was being returned," the Assiniboine accused him. "But we *Wadopabina* do not laugh at the white man's poor joke. Nor will you laugh when the night comes!"

The Indian was gone then, and the flap closed after him, and Zane was left alone to fight against the rawhide thongs until the perspiration burst forth from him and his skin was rubbed raw by his effort. And all the while he cursed the luck that had trapped him. An ordinary robe in place of the sacred robe! He'd prepared the bundle himself, and therefore the switch must have been made while he slept so soundly. And he hadn't noticed any slight disarrangement of the rawhide thongs that bound the bundle, for he'd slung it on his back in the darkness before dawn at the fort this morning.

There'd been treachery at Fort Bighorn, of course, treachery that had sent him to his doom. And all the good that had been accomplished by this mission to the Assiniboines had been undone in an instant. A devilish brain had plotted his downfall, and doubtless the downfall of the Bighorn Fur Co. at the same time. Drake Anselmo? The factor had known about the bundle, yet Anselmo's loyalty to Henley Tolbert had always been above question.

Through the sweltering summer afternoon, Zane lay there, listening to the sounds of the camp beyond the hide wall of the lodge, and he tried to interpret those sounds, for they took on a strange significance.

In mid-afternoon a messenger came to the camp; Zane was sure of that, for he could hear the warriors assembling to listen to some sort of speech, and though only fragments of words came to his ears, they carried a white man's accent. Later there was a wild flurry of hoofs, much shouting and talking, and many warriors departed. After that there was comparative quietness.

Had the Assiniboines ridden away;

Pelly River Pete

in strength to carry a war to Fort Bighorn? Did they still suspect that their sacred robe was within its log walls? Or had they forgotten their animosity toward the Bighorn Co. now that they had Zane Tolbert to fasten their hate upon? There was no telling.

Dusk came; Zane could see that the day was waning by watching the change in the sky through the smoke hole overhead. He craved water and food, but nothing was brought to him. This was part of his punishment, he supposed, and he did not blame the Assiniboines for their attitude. They had grasped at the only possible explanation for his behavior. He had appeared to make fun of their holy of holies, and he could understand their just wrath.

Yet the night was to bring his doom, unless the departure of the warriors meant a change of plans. Again Zane tried his strength against the rawhide, and again he failed to loosen it. Then, soon after the bit of sky overhead turned black, he heard a faint footfall to the rear of the lodge, and he stiffened, listening intently. Suddenly a knife blade was thrust into the lodge wall. The knife was pulled swiftly downward, and the first starlight glinted through the slit thus made. A man bulked big in the opening, and Zane wondered then if he were to die now, alone and unable to lift a finger in his own defense. Then groping hands were seeking his bonds, the knife that he had feared was freeing him, and a familiar voice was whispering in his ear.

"Thar's no one out behind, boy. Crawl on yore hands and knees, once you've rubbed some circulation back into ye. Easy, now."

"Pete!" Zane whispered and fell to chafing wrists and ankles. In a few minutes he came out of the lodge and followed his gray-bearded partner as they crept toward the nearest bushes. But all the while questions were thronging through Zane's mind —questions and a vague and growing fear. He was saved, snatched from the Assiniboine camp by Pelly River Pete Stone. But this same Pete Stone was supposed to be at Fort Bighorn, watching for trouble there. What new development had sent the old mountain man away from his appointed post?

IV

When they had crawled far enough away from the Assiniboine camp to make it safe to come to a stand, Pelly River Pete extended Zane's rifle, knife, bullet pouch and powder horn to him.

"Mighty keerless, those Injuns," Pete explained. "They left yore possibles laying beside one of the lodges. I stumbled on 'em while I was creepin' to whar they was keeping you."

"You saw them take me prisoner?"

"Reached camp just as they was totin' you into that lodge, all trussed up. 'If I'm to hang onto my topknot,' says I, 'this old hoss had better keep to the brush till the sign's right.' It's been a long wait for deep dark."

"I'm mighty obliged," Zane said. "But I didn't think you'd be away from Fort Bighorn."

"Kept my eyes peeled like you told me to," explained Pete. "Warn't long after sunup when I saw an *engagé* scale the palisade and hit out for the woods. Mighty queer doings, I think, so I cut after him. When he saw me coming, he took to shooting, and I had to bring him down with a rifle ball from Old Betsy. Packin' a bundle, he was, and a letter. Inside that bundle was the white robe. Soon as I saw it, I knew you'd been tricked; thar wouldn't be *two* of them sacred robes. So I headed here mighty fast—but not fast enough."

"The letter—" Zane began.

"Hyar," Pete said and produced it. "I cain't read, Zane. I was keeping it for you."

Zane turned the envelope over in his haud. "Fetch the robe along, Pete. I'll have a look at this letter when we can risk a light."

Pelly River Pete got the bundle from the crotch of a tree where he'd left it and the two went stealthily through the underbrush, their ears cocked for any sound of alarm from the Assiniboine village. But Pete had managed the rescue carefully and there was no hue and cry. As he catfooted along, Zane said: "What was all the stir in camp after I was tied and put away?"

"Couldn't rightly tell," Pete said. "A messenger came to camp—another of them Fort Bighorn *voyageurs*—and after he'd palavered with Standing Elk, there was a heap o' talk, and mighty soon those Injuns was ridin' south. I itched to foller 'em, but I figgered I had to get you free first."

Zane nodded. "We can build a small fire at the side of yonder bluff," he suggested. "Looks like the redskins aren't going to find me missing until morning."

When the flint had been put to use, and a tiny blaze was crackling, Zane bent for a look at the letter. It was written in a precise, scholarly hand that won his eager attention, and it was addressed to a certain Jules.

"Jules Menard!" Zane cried in sudden understanding. The message read:

My Dear Jules:

Raoul will bring this to the usual place, and I hope it comes into your hands soon. Zane Tolbert and his partner arrived at the fort last night. He mentioned that Baptiste LeNoir met with an accident in the Little Teton, and I presume you had a hand in that. You are to be commended for trying to keep LeNoir from reaching young Tolbert, as per my last instructions. But I

must reprimand you for allowing Tolbert to reach the fort.

Tolbert left this morning to return the sacred robe to the Assiniboines, thus making peace with them, but he will learn too late that he is carrying only an ordinary robe. I am sending the white robe with Raoul so that you may hide it in the woodland. If it were to be discovered here now, the finder would realize that Zane Tolbert had been tricked.

My dream, nourished these many years, will soon see its fruition; Fort Bighorn will be wiped from the wilderness, and the path will be cleared for a new and greater company—my own. Today I am sending a messenger to the Assiniboines, promising them the return of the sacred robe and many gifts if they will come peacefully to the fort. Zane Tolbert commands great respect among the tribes, I'm told, and there is the chance that he might sway the Assiniboines from the warpath in spite of having the wrong robe. This must not happen, so I'm taking this last step to insure the doom of the Bighorn Co.

When the Indians are crowded into the trading areaway, expecting the gifts our dupe of a messenger will promise them, I will fire the bastion cannon into their midst. What power on earth will stop a war, then? And in the confusion, Raoul and I will escape the fort to join you, my precious Jules, and we shall watch the destruction of Fort Bighorn in safety. And when my own company is established, you shall be the *bourgeois* of my biggest post, and Raoul, too, shall have a fitting reward. *Au revoir*, and good luck!

All this Zane read aloud to Pelly River Pete, and when he'd finished, the young trapper said, "There's no signature, of course. He was remembering that this might fall into the wrong hands. Even through his scheme were exposed, there'd still be no proof against him."

"Drake Anselmo!" Pete exploded. "It's plain as the hump on a buffler's back! All these years he's drawed Henley Tolbert's pay—and planned to ruin him. A company of his own, after the Bighorn has been burned out of the wilderness! And that sneaking brother-in-law of his has been working with him. That explains how the sacred robe disappeared from Standing Elk's camp, then turned up in Fort Bighorn!"

But Zane's whirling thoughts were elsewhere. "No time now for talking!" he barked and scattered the tiny fire with a quick kick. "So that's why that messenger came to the Assiniboines this afternoon! And they're already long gone on their way to the fort! Pete, we've got to pray that the cannon hasn't yet been fired! Come on!"

Then the two of them were hurrying along the Little Teton, clinging to the cleared game trail this time. And as Zane stumbled through the dark hours, his mind was miles ahead, seeing Fort Bighorn as it might look upon his arrival—a smoking ruin. But he still clung to one feeble hope.

The Assiniboines might not have reached the fort until dusk. That would mean that they would put up lodges and wait for the gates to open in the morning. Then, as was the custom, a few of them would be allowed through the small gate and into the trading areaway; and here gifts would be presented to them while the loaded cannon frowned overhead. The Assiniboines, come to make peace, would fear nothing and have no suspicions. Not until that cannon was discharged into their midst. There'd be dead and dying

strewed within the fort—and survivors beyond the gate to make war.

"Hurry, Pete!" Zane urged. "Hurry, man!"

Their moccasins beat a steady tattoo against the trail, and Zane begrudged the moments when they paused, panting, to recover their breath. The miles seemed elastic, stretched twice their actual length, and the dawn came all too early at this season. Very soon the eastern hills were etched in scarlet, and they were still in the timbered land. But when the sun first showed itself, they burst into the clearing and Fort Bighorn sprawled ahead of them. Before its gates stood a half-dozen lodges, proof that the Assiniboines had camped for the night. But now the small gate was open, and the Indians were streaming inside.

"There's still time!" Zane gasped. "But mighty little of it!"

Pelly River Pete was unwinding that same rawhide rope that had snaked Zane and Baptiste LeNoir from the Little Teton. As they neared this far end of the palisade, he sent a loop arcing over a pointed post.

"Up hyar, boy," Pete suggested. "Anselmo will be in the cannon room and able to see anybody who comes in through the gate. Sight of us would make him set off the cannon that much sooner."

Zane had had this same strategy in mind, so he quickly went up the rope. Pete, after hiding the bundled robe, passed up their rifles, climbed the rope, and the two came along a catwalk that was built high up on the fort's inner wall to allow defenders a firing place. Below them they could see the sod-roofed structures of the fort, but they had eyes for nothing but the bastion ahead, for within it was the cannon.

They reached the bastion quickly. The door to the cannon room was slightly ajar, but though they'd expected only one man to be within, there were obviously two. One was speaking, and he said: "When I found Raoul with a rifle ball through him, I knew something was wrong. I came here to find out why. Now don't worry. Nobody saw me come over the palisade."

"Perhaps it is best," the other replied. "In a moment my work here will be through. Then we can leave together. Watch below, Jules."

Zane and Pelly River Pete were shoulder to shoulder, and Zane felt his partner stiffen at the sound of that second voice. But Zane was already lunging into the cannon room, and the two within whirled in astonishment to face him—Jules Menard, swarthy, stocky brother-in-law of Drake Anselmo, and the other man, the one who held a pitch flare dangerously near the fuse of the cannon.

"Wagh!" Pete ejaculated in vast astonishment. "It's ain't Anselmo, after all! Are you seeing what I see, boy? Henley Tolbert, your own father, all fixed to fire the cannon that will bring ruin to his own company!"

V

There was no denying it. That tall, gaunt man in black broadcloth was certainly not Drake Anselmo.

But that changed nothing, for he was sweeping that pitch flare toward the cannon's fuse, and that gave Zane no choice. Leaping upon the elder Tolbert, he wrested the flare from him, flung it to a far corner, and at the same time Pelly River Pete closed with Jules Menard.

Thus the four of them were locked in combat, two and two, and Zane found that the man in his grasp possessed a wiry strength that belied his gray hair. Also the elder Tolbert was fighting with the strength born of desperation, and was wielding a long, wicked knife that he had whipped from beneath his coat.

There was no room here to bring a rifle into play. Letting his long gun fall, Zane used his left hand to get a hold on the man's wrist before that knife could descend, and then the young trapper wrenched out his own knife. For seconds the two stood straining against each other, but the older Tolbert managed to thrust Zane backward and make a wild lunge for the burning flare.

In that instant Zane had a quick glimpse of Pelly River Pete and Jules Menard, and these two were also pitting knife against knife. But even as Zane glanced, Pete lunged under Menard's down-descending arm, and the old mountain man's own knife sank deep. With a low moan, Menard sprawled forward and died.

"Wagh!" Pete shouted exultantly. "Your hatchet must have nicked Menard's knife arm the other night, boy. He was a mite too stiff. This hyar old Green River has counted coup."

Then Pete, too, was lunging for the elder Tolbert, for the gaunt, gray-haired man had swerved sideways and was snatching Zane's fallen rifle from the floor. He swung the long gun in a devastating arc, catching Pete with a glancing blow along the top of the head, and the old mountain man sank to the floor, unconscious.

Zane was upon Tolbert again, wrenching away the rifle, and then it was knife against knife once more. They came together with a hard, solid crash, strained tightly for a moment, and Zane was pressed back against the cannon. Through the aperture, he could see the Indians milling below, receiving the looking glasses and bits of colored cloth that were being presented to them, all unmindful of the doom hovering above. Then Zane felt his adversary's knife point at his throat, and he drew away with a desperate effort, lunging blindly with his own knife at the same time. And the blade, piercing the breast of the elder Tolbert, sent the man staggering against the wall where he slumped downward, dead.

Feet were pounding along the catwalk; the sounds of struggle had been heard and men were coming on the run. But Zane only stood staring, looking down upon his dead kinsman and finding some scant consolation in the thought that there could have been no other finish but this. Then Drake Anselmo bulked in the doorway, a half-dozen clerks and *engagés* at his back.

"So!" Anselmo ejaculated, his eyes sweeping from the two dead men to

Pelly River Pete, who was groaning his way back to consciousness, and then on to Zane. "You killed him, *m'sieu!*"

"To save Fort Bighorn from ruin," Zane said wearily. "He was about to fire the cannon into the Assiniboines below."

"A brazen lie!" Anselmo snorted. "Why would Henry Tolbert make trouble for his own company? Your father and you have hated each other for years. That hatred finally culminated in bloodshed. The facts are all too obvious, my young rooster. And you'll hang from the fort's gallows for this!"

"Better read this letter first," Zane said and, producing the message that had been meant for Jules Menard, he told how Pelly River Pete had come by it.

Anselmo read with widening eyes, and when the factor had finished, Zane said: "I found an ordinary robe in my bundle when I arrived at the Assiniboine camp. Somebody made a switch while I slept here at the fort."

"Henley Tolbert went to your quarters that night!" Anselmo said in bewilderment. "I thought it was the act of a father too stubborn to accept his wayward son, yet anxious to look upon him while he slept. And your father knew about the bundle, since it was prepared within earshot of him."

"He changed the bundle, Anselmo; his letter the same as admits it. Pete thought *you* wrote that letter. I never had time to tell him different; we were saving our wind on the trail. But I recognized the

handwriting as soon as I saw the letter."

"But I still don't understand," Anselmo declared. "Why would your father drive his own Bighorn from the wilderness in order to start another company?"

Pelly River Pete's eyes had fluttered open; the old mountain man looked around, but he was still too weak to rise.

"Now, perhaps, you are prepared for the truth, Anselmo," Zane said. "That dead man by the wall *isn't* my father. It's Branson Tolbert, our distant cousin, a renegade of the worst sort, and my father's most relentless enemy."

"Branson Tolbert!"

"Of course," Zane said. "There is a family resemblance between him and my father that is quite remarkable, considering the distant relationship and the differences in their natures. Branson Tolbert even fooled me the other night, but the light was very dim in that room where we talked, and it's been ten years since I saw my father. Probably it's been longer since you actually faced Henley Tolbert, Anselmo. He's stayed in St. Louis, dealing with his far-flung posts by messenger."

"I'm beginning to see. . . ." Anselmo said slowly.

"Branson Tolbert obviously prepared himself for the impersonation, and he played the part devilishly well," Zane said. "He even reminded me of the hatred between Henley Tolbert and himself, just as my father might have done. I never saw Branson Tolbert, which made fooling me that much easier, but I was in correspondence with the man years ago when he staked me. His handwriting hasn't changed. That's why I recognized the truth when I saw that letter to Jules."

"And Jules was working with him, hoping to be a *bourgeois* in Branson Tolbert's company," Anselmo mused. "Him and Raoul."

"We'll never know how long those two worked for my father's enemy," Zane said. "Probably only since Branson Tolbert arrived here. It would have been like him to spot any treacherous element within the post and to make such men his pawns. Menard doubtless stole the sacred robe and fetched it to the fort. When LeNoir went after me, in spite of Branson Tolbert's wishes, Tolbert sent word to Menard to stop LeNoir or to stop me from coming here. Likely Branson was afraid I'd recognize that he wasn't my father. He gave in to my proposition to take the robe to the Assiniboines because he didn't want our talk prolonged. Even then he'd probably fashioned his scheme to betray me by switching robes. But all his scheming has come to an end now."

"Thanks to you," said Anselmo with respect.

"And to Pelly River Pete for spotting Raoul," Zane added, kneeling beside his partner. "The sacred robe will be restored to the Assiniboines, and we'll tell them the whole truth. They're anxious for peace; they proved that by coming here so readily to accept gifts."

Anselmo signaled a couple of *engagés*, and they hoisted Pelly River

Pete and carried him triumphantly from the room, Zane following after them. The sacred robe was fetched from where the two mountain men had left it, and presented to Standing Elk within the hour. There was much talk, and many questions to be answered, but in the end there was a solemn council within the fort, and the pipe of peace was passed around for red men and white to draw upon.

It was in the midst of this ceremony that there came a heavy thundering at the gate, and when it was opened, a crew of buckskin-clad trappers poured into Fort Bighorn. At their head was a gaunt, gray-haired man, and Zane, staring in astonishment, made no mistake this time. Running forward, he joyously cried, "Dad!" And Henley Tolbert came to meet him with outstretched hand.

"I can't understand it!" Zane exclaimed. "You here, and with my own outfit of free trappers!"

"Met them while I was making portage miles below on the Little Teton," Henley Tolbert explained. "When we got to powwowing, they said their booshway was called Zane Tolbert. I showed some interest, and they swore they could lead me to you. And they did, by a marvelous feat of tracking, starting from a spot on the Little Teton where we found a fresh grave."

"So the rumors that you were coming up from St. Louis were true," said Zane. "Branson Tolbert was here impersonating you, dad; but he'll never trouble you again. That's a long story, and the telling can wait."

"I'm not surprised," his father said grimly. "Word that my precious kinsman had left for the mountain country is what took me out of St. Louis. Branson had always borne watching, and there have been times in the past when he's traded on the resemblance between us. This might be another of those times, I reasoned, so I cleared my desk and came for a tour of inspection."

"And you came with your hand extended," Zane said quickly. "Does that mean our old quarrel is forgotten?"

Henley Tolbert closed one eye in a solemn wink. "I've studied Drake Anselmo's reports carefully for many years," he told his son. "At my insistence, Drake gave you sharp competition, but, in spite of that, he admits that you can outtrade him with any of the tribes. When a smart business man like your father runs up against that kind of competition, he proposes a partnership, Zane. How about your free trappers joining up with the Bighorn? I'll handle the St. Louis end of the business; you and Anselmo and my other factors will take care of the mountain country. Are you interested, you sunburned, dog-eating young heathen?"

"Wagh!" Zane exclaimed in the best manner of Pelly River Pete Stone who stood grinning at his shoulder. "And we'll make a mighty fine pair of partners, dad, or this old hoss don't know pore bull from fat cow!"

THE END

When Long Jerry Lucas roared into town, Hutch Snavely knew it was up to him to take on the battles of those two troubled-trailed

ORPHANS OF CHAPARRAL

by L. P. HOLMES

It wasn't that Hutch Snavely really needed any steady help around the livery barn and corrals, for he was not a lazy man and there was always a broken-down drifter coming along who, for the price of a meal, a bed in the harness room and a pint of liquor, would help out with the most onerous chores. It was something about the kid himself which decided Hutch.

The kid had come into Chaparral on foot, plodding down the long, dusty road from LaPlante. Hutch, seated on the bench at the shady corner of the livery barn, busy cleaning up a set of harness, had spied the advancing figure while it was still a long way out there and had watched with idle curiosity. And now the kid was standing before him, dusty from the long hike and asking gravely for a job.

Especially did Hutch like the kid's eyes. They were clear gray and honest, and set wide apart, a good sign, according to the old saying, in man or horse. Yet there was a pinched look about them, as there was to the kid's cheeks and the whole, splinter-thin figure. Hutch Snavely had an idea.

"When did you eat last, son?"

The kid's eyes dropped and he gnawed at his under lip as though to keep it from trembling. "Night before last," he admitted huskily.

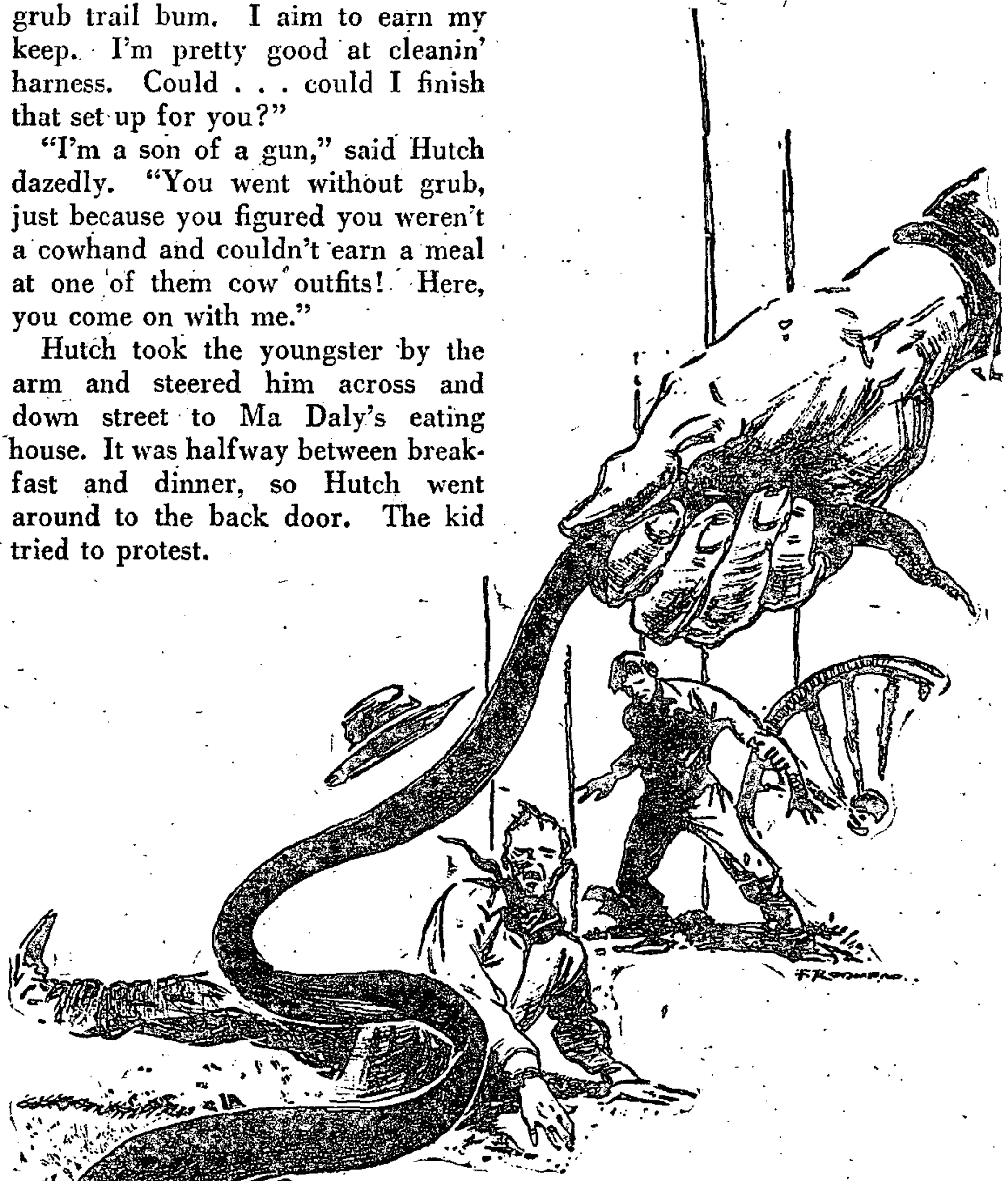
"What?" yelped Hutch, coming up off the bench as though he'd been stung. "Great glory! You mean to say you ain't had anything to eat since Monday night? What's the matter with those outfits between here and LaPlante, they all turned miser?"

"I didn't stop in at any of them," admitted the kid. "They're cow outfits, and I ain't a cowhand. I'm a

skinner, a wagon man. I ain't no grub trail bum. I aim to earn my keep. I'm pretty good at cleanin' harness. Could . . . could I finish that set up for you?"

"I'm a son of a gun," said Hutch dazedly. "You went without grub, just because you figured you weren't a cowhand and couldn't earn a meal at one of them cow outfits! Here, you come on with me."

Hutch took the youngster by the arm and steered him across and down street to Ma Daly's eating house. It was halfway between breakfast and dinner, so Hutch went around to the back door. The kid tried to protest.



"I ain't asking for free grub, mister. I aim to earn my keep."

"Sure, sure, son," soothed Hutch. "I know that. The work can come later, but first you eat."

Ma Daly, a tall, gaunt, almost

masculine figure, stared with disapproving eyes at this intrusion into the sacred limits of her kitchen. Hutch beat her to it.

"This kid, Ma, ain't had a bite to eat since night before last. You feed him, feed him until he can't squeak. I'll settle up when I come over at noon for my own grub."

Ma Daly was looking the boy over and a softer light came into her eyes. "Sure," she said. "You can wash-up over at the sink, laddie."

"When you get plumb filled up, son," Hutch said, "come on back to the stable. I think we can talk business."

In half an hour the kid was back at the stable. Hutch said: "What's your name, son?"

"Jimmy Leeds," the kid told him.

Hutch held out his hand. "Shake, Jimmy," he said gravely, "I'm Hutch Snavely. I been looking for somebody like you to help out around here. There's a spare bunk in my living quarters for you. I think we'll get along fine."

The kid drew a deep breath of relief. "Thanks, Mr. Snavely. I'll do my best."

After watching casually for a couple of hours Hutch became convinced of two things. One was that the kid was a natural around horses. Another was that he was the workingest button Hutch had ever seen.

When Hutch went over to eat his dinner and asked Ma Daly what he owed her for the kid's grub, Ma smiled grimly.

"Jimmy's taken care of that already," she said. "He made me promise I'd let him come in and wash dishes for me after supper. He's a good laddie, Hutch."

There was a battered old freight wagon standing out at the rear of the corrals and when Hutch got back from dinner he saw the kid looking it over. At the moment the kid was down underneath the wagon, examining a broken reach pole.

"Pretty much of a wreck, eh, son," Hutch remarked.

"Not so bad," said Jimmy, a thread of excitement in his voice. "That's a genuine Harvey wagon, Mr. Snavely. A man was to fit himself a new reach, set the tires and straighten the front axle he'd have himself a mighty good hauling rig."

The kid crawled out from under, stood with his hands on his hips, looking at the wagon. "I'll make you a deal, Mr. Snavely. Don't you pay me no wages until you figure I've earned enough to own that wagon. I aim to set myself up a hauling business, one of these days."

Hutch grinned. Nothing like the enthusiasm of youth, he thought.

Toward the fag end of the afternoon Hutch sauntered up town and stopped in at Joe Little's general store.

"I see you got a helper," grinned the merchant. "You aiming to raise a family at your age, Hutch?"

"I aim to give a good kid a chance," said Hutch. "Right now he's kind o' raggedy and full of fringes. So I want a fresh outfit for him, jeans, shirt, underwear, socks and boots. You've seen him, Joe, so you got a better idea of the size than me."

Back at the stable Hutch built up a fire in the stove in his living quarters and put on several pots of water to heat. He set his old galvanized wash tub out in the middle of the floor, then called the kid, who was out back currying down the horses.

"Ain't nothing sets a man up as much as knowing he looks well, Jimmy," explained Hutch kindly. "There's the tub, there's the hot water and there's a new outfit of clothes. Fly to it."

Jimmy stared at the new clothes and blinked suspiciously. "You're sure meeting me mighty fair, Mr. Snavely," he said huskily. "I won't forget all this."

Stripped down, Jimmy was a typical stringy, wiry fifteen-year-old. But as he squatted in the steaming tub and began to soap himself busily, Hutch saw something which brought him up with a start. Across the kid's back and shoulders were several long, dark bruises. And as the kid dribbled hot water down across them, Hutch saw him flinch slightly.

"What happened to your back, son?" Hutch asked.

Jimmy hesitated, his head bent. Then he said: "That's where Long Jerry hit me with the end of a tug."

"Long Jerry! You mean Long Jerry Lucas, that skinner who runs an outfit from Placer to Stent?"

The boy nodded. "He . . . he was full of liquor, and when he's that way, he's mean, Long Jerry is."

"There must have been an argument," probed Hutch.

The boy hesitated a long time. Then he said, his head still bent: "I'd been working for him. He owed me back wages and wouldn't pay them. I kept nagging him for them too much, I guess. Anyhow, he got mad and went after me with a tug. I . . . I hit him with a set of hames and knocked him down. Then I pulled out. I . . . I ain't mean or bad, Mr. Snavely. It was just that—"

"Sure, son, I know that," said Hutch. "Forget it. Get yourself cleaned up and we'll go get supper."

But Hutch was thinking: "*I* won't forget it, though. Next time I bump into Long Jerry I'll invite him to hit me with a tug end, the dirty, drunken lout!"

When they finished supper Jimmy said: "Hope you don't mind me sticking around here for a while, Mr. Snavely. I aim to help Ma Daly wash dishes."

"Sure, son," Hutch said cheerfully, "go ahead if you want to. Then you can go over and turn in. Me, I spend my evenings playing seven-up with Joe Little. Should you want me for anything, I'll be over at Joe's store."

It was around eight o'clock and Hutch and Joe Little were just starting the third of their usual five games when Ma Daly came striding in, looking a little more grim than usual.

"Hutch," she said, "come outside. I want to see you about something."

Hutch, wondering, followed her out on to the store porch. Ma Daly didn't beat around the bush.

"It's that boy, Jimmy," she explained. "I'm wondering if we haven't been a pair of suckers,

Hutch. That offer of his to wash dishes for me was just a blind. Know what he did? While I was cleaning up in the dining room he helped himself to a big chunk of roast beef, a good pound of cheese and a couple of loaves of bread. I just hapened to notice what was gone. Not that I care about the food, of course. I'd have given it to the boy if he'd asked for it. It's the idea of him stealing it. I . . . I liked that boy. I thought you'd like to know, Hutch."

Hutch said, a trifle heavily: "Thanks, Ma—thanks for telling me. But let's give the kid the benefit of the doubt for the moment. I'll go look him up."

Hutch hurried back to the livery barn. He got there just in time to hear the fading tattoo of hoofs up the LaPlante road. He went through the stable calling: "Jimmy—oh, Jimmy! Where are you, kid?"

There was no answer. Hutch checked up on the horses. One of them, a staid old saddle pony, was gone.

Hutch felt as though he'd been hit with a club, or rather, horsewhipped. He hadn't realized until now how, in a few short hours, he'd come to think a lot of that kid.

Cold anger gripped Hutch. He threw a saddle onto another pony and lit out ramming up the LaPlante road. Then as reason returned, he reined in, realizing he'd made a fool play of it, barging along this way. The kid was sure to have heard him coming up and had probably slipped off to one side.

Hutch swung down, scratched a match and looked over the dusty road. No fresh hoof marks here. Yeah, the kid was foxy. He'd just pulled off a bit and let Hutch go by.

Hutch turned back, riding at a walk, and letting his pony get its breath again. He felt a little old and weary. What was the sense of trying to run that kid down on a dark night? The thing to do was report the affair to Sheriff Luke Dean.

Abruptly Hutch reined in again, threw his head back and sniffed the air. Yeah, there it was, the smell of wood smoke. Pungent, aromatic, the smoke of cedar burning. Hutch stared around into the darkness, realized he was just opposite the mouth of Buffalo Head Wash, a narrow, crooked, steep-walled gulch which wound off to the west of the road. Somebody down there had a campfire going.

His curiosity aroused, Hutch dismounted and ground-reined his bronc. Moving as quietly as he could, he covered close to two hundred yards. Here the gulch took a sharp jog to the right and down there, just past the turn, the campfire glowed. Not a very big fire. but disclosing two figures crouched beside it. Hutch went down on his hands and knees and crawled to the rim right over the fire.

It had been a night of shocks. Now Hutch got another one. The figure standing by the fire was Jimmy Leeds. The one crouched down beside it was a little ragamuffin of a girl in shapeless jeans and an old coat several sizes too large for her.

Her head was bare, her tawny hair tousled. She was eating ravenously, listening to what Jimmy had to say.

"I hate to think of you stayin' out here alone all night, Mary But I got to go back right away before Mr. Snavely gets home and finds me gone, because we don't dare let anybody know about you until Long Jerry has come to Chaparral lookin' for you. I kind o' figure he'll show up tomorrow. If he does, I won't let him know where you are, not even if he takes another tug to me. After he's gone, then I'll tell Mr. Snavely about you. He'll help us out. You . . . you won't be afraid to stay here alone tonight?"

The little girl quit eating long enough to say sturdily: "Not now I won't, Jimmy. Now that I'm not so . . . so hungry. I'll be all right—"

Hutch didn't wait to hear any more. He called down: "Hold everything, Jimmy. I want to get in on this."

Braking himself with his heels, Hutch slithered and slid down into the gulch. Both youngsters were on their feet now, Jimmy with his arm about the little girl, as though to shield her. The two of them were big-eyed and speechless.

"Why didn't you tell me about this, Jimmy?" asked Hutch.

The kid shifted from one foot to the other, then his head and shoulders went back. "It was because of Mary, Mr. Snavely. I didn't want Long Jerry to get her back."

"What claim has Long Jerry to her?" Hutch asked. "Is he her father?"

The girl flared like a cornered wildcat. "Not that nasty old—old whiskey jug. I'd rather be dead than have him for a father."

"Maybe he's your uncle, then?" Hutch prompted gently.

"Let me tell him, Mary," said Jimmy Leeds. "No, Mr. Snavely, he ain't her uncle, either. He's just Long Jerry, who used to be in partners, freightin', with Mary's father. And after Mary's father was k—— I mean, died, Long Jerry told a judge, or somebody, that the freightin' layout was really his and that he'd be glad to look after Mary in memory of his old partner. But he was mean and drunk all the time and he whipped Mary. I worked for him, but it got so I couldn't stand the way he treated Mary and the last

time he started after her with a freightin' tug, I went after him with a set of hames. He larruped me plenty with that tug, but I finally got him down. Then Mary and me, we ran away. I lied to you when I said it was over wages."

Hutch said quietly: "Now what say we go back to Chaparral, you and Mary and me?"

"I don't dare!" exclaimed the little girl. "Long Jerry would sure find me there, and take me away again."

"Long Jerry won't take you away," promised Hutch. "Where's your pony, Jimmy?"

"Along the gulch a ways, Mr. Snavely. You . . . you ain't mad because I borrowed it? And about that food I took from Ma Daly's kitchen, I aim to pay her back for that, washing dishes. But I knew how hungry Mary would be. I just had to get something for her to eat."

"Sure you did, son," agreed Hutch. "Sure you did. Now get your pony. You and Mary can ride double. We'll get along home."

"So that's the way things shape up right now, Luke," concluded Hutch Snavely. "I figure those kids are telling the gospel truth. And I figure there might be a few things you could look into, particularly about the death of Mary's father."

Sheriff Luke Dean, a spare, erect man with white hair and an iron jaw, nodded thoughtfully. "What you're driving at, Hutch, is this," he drawled. "Long Jerry profited by his partner's death. The whole freight layout became his. But why should he have bothered to take on the care of the little girl?"

"Maybe for this reason, Luke: Somebody had to, and if other folks did, maybe they'd get to wondering if Mary's father didn't leave some property, or something. Maybe that freight outfit was really all his, instead of belonging to Long Jerry, and Jerry didn't want to risk getting turned up as a thief."

Luke Dean nodded again. "You may have something there, Hutch. I'll look into things."

"One thing more, Luke," said Hutch grimly. "If Long Jerry shows up, and both kids feel sure he will, I want to have first bite at him. Oh, I won't kill him, but I'll show him a harness tug can swing two ways. Ma Daly, she'll kill him sure if she can get her hands on him. Before she put that little girl to bed last night she gave her a good brushing and scrubbing. And she was telling me this morning that Mary has those same kind of bruises on her that Jimmy has on him. I got a tug over at the stable, all picked out. It's old and tough and hard as a rock. And I sure aim to use it on that no-good, drunken lout of a Long Jerry. Any objections?"

Sheriff Luke Dean smiled grimly. "I won't show up until after Long Jerry has been hollering for quite a spell, Hutch. But watch yourself. He may have a gun."

"I'll take it off him if he has," growled Hutch. "Don't worry. I'll handle him."

From the sheriff's office Hutch stopped in at Joe Little's store. Joe was hustling about with an order book in his hands and an excited glint in his eyes.

"Why all the hurry-up so early in the morning?" queried Hutch.

Joe grunted. "You ain't heard the news? They've made a new strike down in Placer—a big one. Richest gravel they've ever hit down there, so I hear. That means Placer will come to life with a bang. It also means I'm going to do a heap of business, so I'm getting ready."

Hutch digested this news for a moment, then said: "Take time out to get me another outfit of clothes, Joe. For a little girl this time."

Joe grinned widely. "You're late, Hutch. Ma Daly was over already, getting that latest young un all fixed up with duds. You better watch yourself there. Ma's got a jealous look in her eye. She's going to take care of that little girl, and nobody else."

Back at the livery barn Hutch found Jimmy Leeds hooking a team up to the buckboard for Doc Syncott.

"Tell me, son," Hutch said curiously, "you got any kin at all that you know of?"

Jimmy shook his head solemnly. "Nary one, Mr. Snavely. Mary ain't either. We're both orphans. That's why I aim to look after Mary. With a good steady job like I got now, I can earn enough for both of us. I aim to see that Mary goes to school."

Hutch dropped a hand on the kid's shoulder. "You bet. We'll see that Mary gets her schooling. I—"

He broke off, staring. Out there a rider was coming down the street. He was up on a shambling, flea-bitten old mule, in a saddle frayed and ragged and ancient. The rider, frowsy and unshaven, was long and gangling with a bullet head hunched down between a pair of high, narrow shoulders. Jimmy Leeds, following Hutch's glance, caught his breath audibly.

"Long Jerry!" he burst out. "Long Jerry Lucas! I just knew he'd come prowling down here, lookin' for Mary and me. Remember what you promised, Mr. Snavely—that he can't take Mary away."

Jimmy's voice was rising in shrill feeling as he finished and his words had carried across the quiet street. Long Jerry Lucas heard, and swung his bullet head that way. He saw Hutch and Jimmy, standing there in the doorway of the stable and with a curse of triumph, reined his mule around and came over.

"Had a hunch I'd find you down this way somewhere," growled Long Jerry, sliding to the ground. He had an old quirt in his hand. "Where'd you take that girl to, you little sneak thief? Won't tell, huh? We'll see. Time I get through tannin' you with this quirt, you'll be tellin' me plenty."

Jimmy had gone a dead white, but he held his ground valiantly. "You could kill me," he cried shrilly. "And still I wouldn't tell."

Long Jerry cursed again, took another step forward, swinging the quirt up. "You'll tell all right, 'fore I'm done with you."

That was when Hutch hit him. Time was, back in the days of his youth, when Hutch Snavely could handle himself in any company; having learned all the tricks of a rough-and-tumble frontier. Now, while the years had slowed him down considerably, they had also added extra weight to his sturdy square-shouldered figure. And Hutch got most of that weight behind the fist he sent crashing into the side of Long Jerry's jaw. It was a little too high for a clean knock-out, but it was plenty to upset Long Jerry and hold him on the ground for a moment or two, dazed and shaken up.

While he was in this condition, Hutch jerked the quirt away from him and tossed it aside. Then he ran swift hands over Long Jerry's gangling figure and found a snub-nosed gun shoved down under Jerry's dirty shirt, inside the waistband of his jeans. This Hutch also tossed aside and Jimmy Leeds, watching with big-eyed excitement, cried shrilly.

"Why don't you gun him, Mr. Snavely? Why don't you kill him? He ain't fit to live."

Hutch stepped back. "I got other treatment figured out, son," he said evenly. "Hanging on that harness hook at the end of the oat bin, there's a length of freight harness tug. Bring it here."

Jimmy brought it on the dead run. There was four feet of it, heavy, age-hardened leather. Hutch wrapped both hands around one end of it. "All right, Mr. Long Jerry Lucas, get up and take it. I understand you're right fond of whippin' kids with a tug end. Let's see how you stand up to your own medicine."

Long Jerry came up all right, fast and slithery as a snake, so fast he nearly caught Hutch off guard. Long Jerry's eyes were like red, murderous coals. Hutch caught him across the side of the head with a half swing of the tug. It staggered the mule skinner, sent him reeling, to bring up with a crash against the front of the stable. Hutch followed and belted him again, this time full across the flat of the shoulders, the leather landing with the spat of a pistol shot.

Long Jerry yelled, yelled with pain and rage, and came at Hutch with desperate, flailing arms and fists. Hutch beat him back, whaling him over arms and shoulders and back, mauling him into cursing retreat. Suddenly Jerry jumped way back, out of reach of the tug and his right hand looped up behind his head and neck.

"Look out, Mr. Snavely," Jimmy yelled. "He's got a throwing knife!"

Hutch dodged desperately as he saw sunlight glint on flashing, naked steel. The knife whipped across at him, caught him way out on the point of his left shoulder. It burned like a red-hot iron as it slashed, glancing. For a moment it hung there, caught

in flesh and the fabric of Hutch's shirt. Then it fell away and there was a warm, wet cascade down Hutch's left arm.

Hutch really went after his man, then. He lunged in and hit Long Jerry twice as hard as any time before. The lashing leather had the weight of a club this trip. That weight carried through, hurting savagely, numbing and sickening the mule skinner. He staggered drunkenly.

Hutch hit him again and Long Jerry began to crumple. The fury in his little red eyes now faded to a glint of pure, animal fear. He tried desperately to get away, reeling back through the wide stable door. But Hutch followed him relentlessly, nailing him again and again. Long Jerry let out a whimpering gasp and went down, rolling from side to side, shielding his head with his arms.

"Don't!" he begged thickly. "Don't hit me again! Don't—"

Hutch, that lethal tug held high and ready, hesitated. Sudden inspiration had reached him. "Only one thing can keep me from beatin' you to rags," he panted. "That's by you talkin'—plenty. Who did that freightin' outfit really belong to, you or Mary's dad? Who did it? Quick?"

Long Jerry rolled and kicked, trying desperately to knock Hutch's feet from under him. He missed, but Hutch didn't. Twice more that tug lashed out and down. Long Jerry quieted, began to moan.

"It was his," he gasped. "His—not mine! Take the outfit—take the girl. Only—don't hit me again!"

Hutch was still adamant. "How Mary's dad was killed is somethin' else I want to know more about. The story you put out, Jimmy Leeds tells me, is that a sudden chuck hole in the road threw Mary's dad off the wagon box and the fall killed him. Or did you push him off, so you could claim all the outfit? Better talk, Lucas. Because I still ain't started to wear this tug out, yet. But I will. You hear me—I will!"

"I didn't mean to knock him off," moaned Long Jerry. "That's the truth, so help me. There was a bad

chuck in the road an' I was pretty well likkered up. My balance wasn't none too good. The chuck hole threw me into him and knocked him off. He—he broke his neck when he fell. That's the truth. I swear it's the truth! Don't hit me again—with that—damned—tug!"

Long Jerry was maudlin now, half hysterical. Hutch threw the tug away and said: "Now you and me are going to see Luke Dean, and you're going to tell him all you've told me."

"No need, Hutch," said a voice from the stable door. "I've heard it all. You've done a pretty good job.

Now I'll take over. All right, Lucas —on your feet. You're going to board on the county for a while, likely, a good long while."

It was Sheriff Luke Dean. He caught Long Jerry by the shoulder, jerked him to his feet and sent him stumbling and lurching out into the street.

Back in their living quarters, Jimmy Leeds fixed up Hutch's shoulder. He washed the cut clean with hot water, doused it liberally with balsam oil, then fashioned a bandage with strips torn from a clean shirt.

"That—that ain't much," said Jimmy a trifle shakily. "But it'll do until Doc Syncott gets here. You were just great, Mr. Snavely, the way you handled Long Jerry. What you made him tell means that Mary ain't no pauper. It means she owns a whole freight outfit. We can sell that, and she'll have money enough—".

"We won't sell it, son," cut in Hutch. "We'll make it earn money. We'll fix up that old Harvey wagon out back an' that'll give us two full outfits. You and Mary and me, we're going in partners. We're going to run a freight line to Placer. They just made a whaling big, new strike and there'll be all kinds of freightin' and haulin' business between here and Placer. We're gettin' in on the ground floor, you and Mary and me. What do you think of that?"

Jimmy was almost too overcome for words. "It . . . it's swell, Mr. Snavely. Mary can go to school, and you and me, we can run the outfits. I . . . why are you so good to me and Mary, Mr. Snavely? Nothin' we can ever do will make up for what you've done for us. Nothin'."

Hutch slid his sound arm across the kid's shoulders. "Make it Uncle Hutch from here on out, Jimmy. And that'll square everything. Now, don't you think we ought to go and let Mary in on the good news?"

"You bet!" cried the kid. "You bet, Uncle Hutch!"

THE END

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

1. Searpa
2. Egghol
3. Reodin
4. Tacsuc
5. Otnip
6. Ruckbodab
7. Last
8. Herfie
9. Latly
10. Komes
11. Revamick
12. Bremoh
13. Gelea
14. Leum
15. Warnlerg

There was magic in Fat Phil Fagan's piano-playing fingers but bushwhack death awaited him unless he could make a six-gun play a

SMOKY SERENADE

by RALPH YERGEN

TROUBLE in the rugged form of Joe Cord intercepted Fat Phil Fagan as he cut across the weed-grown lot behind El Rey Saloon. It was the first time the bull-shouldered contractor and gun boss had deigned to notice Phil Fagan, who played the piano at El Rey each evening for the entertainment of a rowdy gang of dam workers.

Red light from the setting sun crimsoned the back walls like flame. It was an hour of lull in normally boisterous Hotgate when most townsmen were occupied with supper.

Towering a head above the chubby piano player, Cord's haughty demeanor made him seem even more formidable. Chill, unreadable black eyes flanked a predatory nose which hooked over a wire-stiff mustache. His thin lips were twisting into a frozen smile which somehow matched the coldness of his eyes.

Never had Phil Fagan felt so insignificant by comparison. His short, fleshy stature made him feel like a small boy beside a giant. The current of apprehension running through him increased.

Cord's deep voice grated in Phil's ears. "On your way to wear the slivers off that piano stool, Fatty?"

Fagan hated that name. He could tolerate "Fat" with a smile. But "Fatty" with its juvenile, sissy implications aroused his temper faster than a kick in the shins.

His cool gaze did not waver as he replied shortly: "That's what."

A former gambler, Cord had entered the construction business here in Hotgate two years before and had rapidly assumed control of the town's destinies, chiefly by authority of his four hired gunmen and a town marshal who knew which side of the political fence was most healthy for him.

By means never brought before the public eye, Cord had secured a contract with the government for the main construction work at the new dam across Frognose River, the site lying just beyond the outskirts of Hotgate. No one was fond of Cord personally, but all tried to gain his favor for reasons of expediency.

"Scrape the frost off, Fatty," Cord went on, the attempt to make his voice congenial losing ground before the arrogant manner with which he customarily treated small fry. "No reason why we can't be friends. So have a smoke."

Cord extended a fat brown cigar to the piano player.

"Thanks, but I don't use 'em," Phil said shortly.

"Pure of habit, eh?" Cord rumbled. He jammed the stogie between his teeth and lighted it with a flair which was meant to be impressive. "Every man to his own choice about that. I reckon, though, you wouldn't be averse to earning yourself a nice chunk of cash money tonight. Say a century note?"

A vague suspicion began to jell within Phil Fagan. His face creased into thoughtful lines. "I'm making a pretty fair living here at El Rey," he said guardedly. "Why?"

"Chicken feed, this saloon money," Cord scoffed. "Work with me, Fagan. It's easier and healthier. Short hours. Big pay. A hundred bucks for a few minutes' walk down the street tonight."

Phil's interest suddenly intensified to a high pitch. Not in the money offered, but in the task Cord had indicated. Yet he allowed only a slight curiosity to creep into his voice.

"Yeah?"

"No exaggeration, Fagan. You always walk home from the saloon late at night with that Hammond pilgrim. All you have to do is steer him around past the dam. Easy enough, ain't it?"

A bleak, uncontrollable chill overwhelmed Fat Phil Fagan's thoughts. In those few words, Joe Cord had revealed his murderous scheme as thoroughly as if he had mapped out his plans on a blackboard.

"What if Hammond don't want to walk that way?" Phil muttered, parrying for time to weigh the full import of Cord's implication.

"Tell him you want to see how the concrete pouring is progressing. Or to gawk at the moonlight on the river. Or any damn thing. Just so you get him over there near the

dam construction. We'll handle all details from there on. What do you say, is it a deal?"

Cold, bitter anger budded within Fat Phil Fagan. For a handful of measly gold, Cord was asking him to help murder his best friend. Phil knew what those "details" would be, once Henry Hammond was lured to the dark, lonesome heights above Frognose River. Hammond would be shot in the back and his body thrown into the walled pit which enclosed the dam's foundation. At daybreak when the construction crews began to toil, a giant crane would swing out above that pit and spill a sticky mass of cement over Hammond's body, sealing it forever from human eyes.

Moreover, Phil was under no illusions. Cord would doubtless include Phil himself in the bushwhack job. He would take no chances on anyone talking later to law officers of a different stripe than the Hotgate town marshal.

Henry Hammond was not only Phil Fagan's best friend. He was Joe Cord's worst enemy in Hotgate, a fact known only to the three of them. For Hammond was a man of mystery in the town.

For an instant Phil Fagan forgot that Cord was the most powerful man in Hotgate, physically as well as financially. Before he could check it, his swift blaze of anger exploded into words.

"Take your money and shove it down your windpipe! Hire some of your pet gun wolves to help with your black-hearted murder schemes."

The quick glint of crimson in Cord's eyes warned Phil Fagan. He clenched his fists, a stubborn streak of pride resisting a sharp impulse toward panic.

A blue cloud of cigar smoke boiled out of Cord's mouth squarely into Phil's eyes. Phil blinked, coughed. And in that instant a heavy fist smashed into his mouth, bowling him over to land flat on the seat of his pants.

Cord's enraged voice roared in his ears. "Maybe that will hold your lip, you impudent tub of lard!"

All of Phil's fear and reasoning melted in the white heat of anger. He felt a sharp stab of pain from a broken tooth. Blood was streaming down his chin. But he shook the daze from his brain and climbed clumsily to his feet. He plunged blindly at the big contractor, swinging a fist recklessly at the superior grin behind the cocked cigar.

But the blow never landed. A sharp, crushing hook against the musician's ribs spun him half about. As if through a wavering smoke screen, Fagan saw grinning faces at the back window of Cord's office where Kid Clifford and Greasefoot Tilk, hired gunmen, were watching the unequal battle with huge enjoyment.

Before Phil could regain his balance, a terrific weight seemed to wedge abruptly into his brain. Stars bounced high, exploded in blinding blue flame. Then the dark strata of unconsciousness settled down upon him like a thick, feathery cloud. . . .

Fat Phil Fagan came to his senses in a red pool of pain. With an

elbow he propped up his aching body. Subdued shades of dusk were drawing over Hotgate, as he looked about for his tormentor, but the man was gone. So were the grinning faces at the window.

Phil drew a bandanna from his pocket and swabbed the blood from his bruised face. Somehow, he was glad that he had stayed to take the beating.

He trudged to a pitcher pump beside the saloon wall and dipped his head into a bucket of cold water. When he had cleaned the blood from his skin and clothing and combed his straight brown hair, he entered El Rey by the stockroom door.

Cranky Joe Garcia, a paunchy Latin with a perpetual grouch, eyed his hired musician with no favor.

"A fine sight you are coming to work a half hour late," the proprietor grumbled. "What you got in your way which makes your face look like one busted tomato?"

"I got in a fight," Phil admitted gloomily. "An' got licked."

"I am not hiring you for a prize-fighter," Cranky Joe grumbled. "Get over to that piano. Your wages I should cut in two pieces for such going-ons."

From the stockroom, Phil walked past the end of the bar into the broad, smoky cardroom. The place was already half full and a dozen games were in progress. In frock coats and fancy vests, marble-faced gamblers with a cold eye for profits were selecting victims.

It was a familiar sight to Phil Fagan. As he walked to the scarred mahogany piano and sat down on the worn stool, he attracted slight attention from anyone. He was regarded as impersonally as part of the furniture. Settling his stubby weight on the stool, he let his fingers travel lightly over the yellowed ivory keys.

Phil's fingers were the only agile part of him. They were short, and speared from soft, pink hands. Yet they could flash with eye-deceiving speed, and when they trickled over the keyboard a liquid river of melody flowed from the instrument.

Tonight he swung into the mournful strains of "Clementine," playing mechanically, his thoughts far from the music.

He saw two of Cord's gun wolves slink into the barroom, the same two who had watched the fight from the office window. Kid Clifford, who wore a perpetual sneer on his brick-red face; and Greasefoot Tilk, whose finely chiseled features reminded Phil of an artist's etching depicting subtle cruelty. They slouched down at a table near the piano, and Phil felt the weight of their stares converging heavily upon him.

Phil was hoping that Henry Hammond would not appear tonight. He was certain that Cord would not drop his plans to dispose of Hammond simply because Phil had refused to co-operate. Cord would merely revise his scheme and bushwhack his victim at some other spot. Phil was still thinking about it when he saw Hammond stride into the barroom.

He was a big man in his own right, this Henry Hammond. Tall, powerful, rawboned, lean- almost to

the point of gauntness. No gun belt adorned his flat middle, but suspicious bulges beneath his long brown coat pointed to shoulder holsters. Phil had often wished that he was as tall and lean-muscled and strong as Henry Hammond. Particularly tonight when he locked horns with Joe Cord!

Hammond's cool eyes drifted to Phil Fagan, and a brief spark of surprise flashed in them. His angular, tolerant face failed to reveal any expression other than its usual touch of sadness. He nodded and stalked silently through the crowd to a vacant chair in the far corner where each evening he listened to Phil's playing until midnight, never gambling, and drinking only an occasional mug of beer.

Phil enjoyed playing for a man who appreciated the true expression of music. To most of the saloon's clientele, bad playing and good were all the same.

Every night at closing time, Hammond joined Phil in the homeward trek. Hammond lived at a boarding house on the outskirts of town. The shack in the desert that Phil called home lay a half mile beyond. During these walks, a deep friendship had built up between them. Phil had come to know Henry Hammond as few men anywhere, and certainly as no other in Hotgate, were privileged to know him, and the musician cherished that friendship as one of his most prized possessions.

As Phil played, hearing the music with only half an ear, Hammond's words echoed in his memory. "When I was a kid, I was a sailor for a couple of years, and went all over the world. And I can tell you this land of ours is tops. But it can be wonderful or as drab or as sordid as we make it, Phil. Within a year Frognose Valley's dry wasteland will be a green garden of growing crops. Fifty men will find a living where only one can now survive. When the dam is finished, I intend to build a creamery in Hotgate. To furnish a market for the dairymen who will settle in the valley. In that way I can do my part in development as well as make a living for myself. But right now my job is helping clear away some of the human rats and the pitfalls the rats have put in our way."

Later, in the natural manner with which most humans will confide in an intimate friend, he had told Phil: "An old friend of mine in the Department of Interior in Washington asked me to make a special investigation of the Frognose Dam construction. Joe Cord has a contract which calls for the government to pay all costs plus a fixed profit. That fixed sum isn't large, but the costs are running sky-high. The answer is simple.

"Since the government pays for it, Cord agrees to buy materials from certain companies at double the market price. Then the companies split their big profits with Cord. This man is getting hog-rich by cheating the government, which, of course, is you and I and all the citizens in this democracy of ours. That's what I mean by human rats and pitfalls.

Fat Phil Fagan

"That's why I'm playing this round close to my vest," Hammond had admitted. "I've been lucky so far. I've gathered a fairly complete record of the swindling. Officials from the Interior Department are coming to Hotgate the afternoon of the twenty-second to inspect the dam construction and get my report. They'll make it plenty warm for Cord."

Those words rang over and over in Phil's ears. For tomorrow was the twenty-second and, with a multi-million-dollar contract at stake, Cord could afford to take no chances. Phil knew he would strike tonight. Unwarned, Henry Hammond would fall an easy prey to hidden guns. A desperate urgency seized Phil. The investigator trusted him, had confided in him alone of all the men in Hotgate. Somehow he must find a way to tell Hammond that he was in dire peril.

He flung a glance cornerward. Hammond sat utterly relaxed in a chair, tilted back, his eyes half-closed as usual when he was losing himself in the moods of the melody. As Phil turned back to the keyboard, he caught the threatening glances of Kid Clifford and Greasefoot Tilk directed his way. He knew it would be useless to try reaching Hammond with a direct word.

Fat Phil Fagan played on, combing his thoughts for means of arousing apprehension in Hammond. "Oh, Susannah," "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," and "Molly Darling," and other popular tunes of the times rippled from the yellowed keys.

El Rey had reached the peak of the night's activity when Joe Cord strutted into the barroom like a general on dress parade. He marched to his gun-wolf hirelings and sat down between them. As he swilled down a double Scotch, he let his black eyes wander over the room, passing Phil Fagan and settling briefly on the silent Hammond in the corner.

Phil saw Cord whisper to his men as they glanced significantly at the piano player. A fresh chill zigzagged down Phil's spine. Cord didn't mean to take any chances on either Henry Hammond or Fat Phil Fagan talking to those government inspectors.

A minute later Cord's second pair of gun wolves skulked into the room and stationed themselves at strategic posts. Phil recognized the half-breed Jatek, a skinny, catlike man, and Rumley, a bullet-headed ex-pugilist who wore the indelible dye of prison shadows on his stony face.

Hope glimmered to a low ebb within Phil Fagan. His fingers,

trained to the keyboard, were supple enough to handle a six-gun with more than average skill. With only the buzzards watching, he had practiced many hours on the desert with an old, single-action .38. He could knock the spots out of a playing card at ten paces. But right this minute his old .38 was hanging on the inside wall of his shack out there in the desert.

Unable to sit quietly any longer, Phil got up abruptly and turned toward the corner where Henry Hammond sat, appearing half-asleep. He found Kid Clifford's beefy torso blocking his path. The gunman's face was dark as a thundercloud, and his finger tips were brushing the .45 in its grimy holster.

"We want another tune, Fatty. Sit down," he growled.

Phil turned around and sat down, hot with futile anger. A minute later he launched into the stirring strains, with variations of his own choosing, of "Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight."

Cord soon left El Rey's smoky barroom and Jatek and Rumley followed him. Phil arose again, meandering idly toward the bar. If he could get his fingers on a gun, he resolved to shoot it out with the two remaining killers. Once more he found a gunman confronting him before he had taken six strides. It was Greasefoot Tilk.

"Where you think you're going, Fatty?" Tilk asked insultingly.

"After a drink. I'm thirsty."

"You'll sit down and stay thirsty," Tilk gritted. "Or I'll gun-whip you over the coco."

Phil shrugged, returned to the stool. He was boxed as helplessly at the piano as if he were hogtied and locked in a vault.

Eleven-thirty wheeled past. Phil's thoughts returned to Henry Hammond. He was a man this new Western country needed. The loss of Fat Phil Fagan, saloon piano player, would be of small consequence. But Hammond was a builder, the type of man who more than anything else had made this country supreme.

Phil recalled Hammond's favorite melody, "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair." He played it very deliberately as if he wanted Hammond to hear each note.

At midnight, Phil folded the cover down over the keyboard. Most of the customers had departed. Only the high-stake poker games were still in full swing. Henry Hammond came lazily to his feet, strode past the piano and halted.

"Going my way, Phil?" he asked casually.

Phil Fagan looked at Hammond, and then he looked at the gunmen who were edging toward the piano.

"I reckon—" he began, and stopped when Kid Clifford's surly voice interrupted.

"Joe wants you to stick around and help him in the stockroom, Fatty."

Phil hesitated. He wanted to tell Kid Clifford to lock up his yap and mind his own business. But he didn't. Instead he said to Hammond: "I reckon not right now, Henry."

"O. K. See you tomorrow."

Henry Hammond stalked through the doorway and disappeared into the darkened street.

Kid Clifford gruffed in Phil's ear, "Just keep away from your pal, Fatty, and you'll live longer."

Phil was silent. He would not live much longer anyway. Not unless he managed to secure a six-gun and fast.

With that warning, Kid Clifford turned and marched out of the saloon beside Greasefoot Tilk. They would be following Hammond, Phil guessed. He sauntered around the end of the bar, reached to draw himself a glass of water.

While Mugs, the porcine barkeep on duty, busied himself mixing a highball at the far end, Phil's hand stole to the secret shelf where Cranky Joe kept a six-gun concealed in case some greedy-fingered gent tried to hatch out ideas about relieving the gorged till of its contents.

Phil slyly withdrew the gun and thrust it under his shirt unobserved. Gulping down the glass of water hurriedly, he left the bar and strode through the dark stockroom to the building's rear exit. If he could force his stubby legs to carry him fast enough through the town's back alleys, a slim chance remained of his intercepting Henry Hammond short of the bushwhack web which he was convinced Cord had spun somewhere on the route to the boarding house.

An inner wariness bent Phil Fagan's body low as he plunged from the saloon doorway into the moon-silvered night. As his left boot struck the ground, a red sliver of flame split from a rubbish heap across the weed-grown lot.

The bullet struck him a slogging blow high in the left shoulder. It reversed his motion abruptly, hurling him back against the saloon wall. As six-gun slugs peppered the boards above him, he slid to the ground and lay flat.

A second gun roared out its throaty blast. From a sharp angle, the slug plowed up dirt in front of Phil's face. He judged the shot had come from the corner of Cord's office building. The tall weeds concealed him from the bushwhacker behind the rubbish pile. But this new attacker had an open shot.

Phil didn't take time to draw the six-gun pressed against his belly. The pain of his shoulder a raw, flaming torch, he began to roll toward the saloon woodpile, a stack of pine blocks a few feet away. His roly-poly stature simplified the task, and he whirled like a barrel over the ground until the woodpile blocked the hail of screaming lead.

Pressed close to the tiers of wood, Phil lay quiet for an instant, clutching his shattered shoulder while waves of nausea shuddered through his stomach. Making him feel even worse was the knowledge that Cord had outfoxed him.

Shots filtered through El Rey's walls, but apparently no one in the saloon cared to risk his neck by sticking it outside. Somewhere down the street a door slammed and then the town was quiet. Hotgate citizens always stayed within the safety of their own walls when Cord's hood-

lums were on the gun prowl.

Likewise, Phil could expect no help from the town marshal, whose habit was to sleep particularly sound during such occurrences and to wake up only after all shooting had subsided.

The chill blast of anger which flooded through Phil helped to overcome the hacking pain of his shoulder. He fished the six-gun from beneath his shirt and, with jaws clamped like a steel trap, began to climb a tier of wood. The footing was tricky, but Phil reached the top without mishap.

The six-gun he had obtained in the saloon was a Colt .45, and too heavy for him. But he rested it on a pine block and peered cautiously over the top. The contour of the stacked wood concealed him from the office building, but the rubbish heap across the lot was plainly visible. He spotted a human figure rising up behind it.

Moonlight bleached the gun steel in the man's hand and Phil recognized the blocky body as belonging to Kid Clifford. Doubtless the hoodlum believed Phil to be unarmed and was planning to flank the woodpile for a final shot.

Gloom blurred the sights, but Phil had practiced enough to be able to shoot by trained instinct alone. As Clifford moved into full view, Phil pressed the trigger firmly, deliberately. Kid Clifford's head lolled back and, by the full white glow of the moon, Phil saw a look of blank amazement displace the familiar sneer. The gunman's knees jackknifed, and he toppled into the junk heap with an unholy clatter of tin.

A grim satisfaction running through him, Phil moved to gain a view of the bushwhacker beside the building. A stick of wood rolled beneath his foot. He jabbed his toes frantically for new foot holds, but they crumbled beneath him as the shaken woodpile slid apart under his weight. He went down in a slithering avalanche of pine blocks.

As he rolled into full view, a gun snarled from the building corner. The slug raked a hot, raw brand across his thigh. He struggled among the wood to bring his own pistol into line. He glimpsed the second bushwhacker crouched in the shadows, aiming.

A gun bellowed somewhere in the night. The aiming gunman tottered against the wall. The gun in his hand flamed toward the sky, then slipped from his fingers as he clawed the smooth lumber for support. His feet tangled up, and he piled limply on the ground and lay quiet.

A fresh medley of shouts sounded within the saloon and adjoining buildings, but no one yet dared to come into the open to investigate the shooting. Phil watched a tall, angular figure emerge from the murk of an alleyway beyond Cord's office. He recognized it and a glad cry sprang to his lips, as he scrambled free of the pine blocks.

"Are you all right, Phil?" Henry Hammond's anxious voice came out of the shadows.

Phil rushed toward the investigator. "Henry! You didn't walk into their trap? You didn't go

straight home?"

Henry Hammond's smile gleamed whitely in the moonlight. "No, Phil. I—"

"Look out!" Phil barked abruptly. "Behind you! Coming up the alley."

Henry Hammond whirled, ducked behind a water barrel resting beneath a drain pipe. From the phantomlike figures faintly visible as they moved along the alleyway came jagged streaks of powder flame. The blast of lead rocked the barrel in front of Hammond.

Caught in the open, Phil hurled himself behind the corner of Cord's office building, opposite from where Greasefoot Tilk had stopped Hammond's bullet. Here the black shadows of El Rey enveloped him like a cowl.

Phil's mind pictured Cord's recent movements. The absence of Henry Hammond and the prolonged shooting by the saloon had drawn Cord and the rest of his gun hawks from the bushwhack trap uptown to investigate. It was a battle to the finish now, and the odds lay three to two in the gun boss' favor. Really three to one and a half, for Phil considered himself but half a gunman.

He peeked around the corner, flicked a quick shot at a moving object and a howl of pain tailed the loud blare of his shot. Red jets winked through the night's gloom. A bullet splintered the corner casing a scant inch above Phil's head. He ducked lower, blazed another shot at the powder flashes.

Farther along the alley, and nearer the Cord crowd, Henry Hammond was still crouched behind the protecting barrel, shooting over the top, a spasmodic red fountain of powder blaze gushing from his guns.

A human body rolled into a patch of moonlight on the alley floor, and Phil recognized the skeleton frame of Jatek, the half-breed gun tough.

Joe Cord's frenzied bellow sounded through the booming Colt thunder.

"Tear the guts out of that long-legged son-of-a-buck behind the barrel. We'll salt down Fatty later."

A fierce hurricane of lead rocked the water barrel in front of Hammond. His guns were silent, and fear seized Phil Fagan.

Grasping advantage of the lull in his own area, Phil risked a clear view of the shadowed space lighted intermittently by the fiery red needles. He spotted a dark blob, a patch of murk darker than the alley shadows. Burning powder bloomed brightly from it, and Phil knew one of the bushwhackers was revealing himself in his desperate eagerness to drive a bullet through Henry Hammond's heart.

Phil aimed, triggered. The blob disappeared in the swirl of smoke. So did the powder blossoms.

"That's from Fatty," muttered the piano player.

A curse of rage echoed his shot. Cord's voice was screaming, "Damn it, they got me, Rumley! They got me. Damn 'em. Kill the—" The voice trailed into a quavering wail of blasphemy that ended in a single, convulsive cough.

Phil saw a dark shape fleeing down the alleyway like a giant bat in the night. He heard Hammond's

warming to halt, then the shot. The gun wolf Rumley abruptly joined his cronies in the dust.

Out of the shadows, Henry Hammond came limping into the silver-blue light of the moon. He was hit in several places, but the slow, sad smile which Phil had come to know so well lighted his face when he saw the rotund piano player still on his feet.

"We're a bit shopworn, Phil, but the next batch of gun wolves will think twice before they tackle a couple of old smokeballs like us."

Townsmen were suddenly swarming out of doors, crowding about them, asking excited questions. But the piano player and the government investigator had a few things to say to each other before they satisfied the curiosity of the horde.

A new admiration brightened Phil's voice. "That was real shooting, Henry. You handle a six like a town tamer."

Hammond began to reload his Colts. "There's a reason, Phil. I used to be marshal of a tough town. My real monicker is Forty-five Sawyer. But it was your own presence of mind that saved our gizzards, Phil. I wasn't aware of any particular danger until you gave me the high sign in the saloon tonight."

A warm glow was spreading through Phil Fagan, dwarfing the pain of his smashed shoulder. "I was afraid you wouldn't savvy."

Hammond's smile broadened. "I savvied there was something wrong when you started mixing wild snatches of 'The Devil's Dream' with 'Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight.' You never committed such musical mayhem before. And later, when you made sour hash out of 'Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair,' I knew something was plumb wrong; you always played that especially well for me. But I was completely certain when you let loose with 'Sailor Beware!'

"So when I left El Rey, I hid outside and watched the front door. It took me a little time to work around the building when the shooting started behind. But I got there just the same. Speaking for the United States government and myself, my friend, this town of Hotgate can be mighty proud it has a piano player named Fat Phil Fagan."

THE END

While others won glory fighting his country's battles, Reyes Gonzales was tied to a flock of sheep —then suddenly the enemy was in his own camp!

THE SHEEPHERDER

by BARRON B. BESHOAR

REYES GONZALES had a pain in his heart, a sharp, depressing pain. It was true that his heart was as strong and his lithe body as full of life as those of any twenty-year-old, but he had troubles. He flicked a pebble at a morose lizard and spat contemptuously in the general direction of the sheep that grazed placidly on the sunlit mesa. Off in the distance, the twin Spanish Peaks reared their snow-white crowns far up into the blue Southern Colorado sky.

Carneros! Sheep! Here he was tending sheep while important things were going on in the world. He thought of his brother, Juan, a prisoner of the *Japoneses* since the fall of Bataan, and of his other brother, Arturo Gonzales, hero of Attu.

Sheep! Bah! Deferred to be the herdsman of a bunch of his father's sheep, all because his father was too old to work and the draft board thought sheep important. Sheep! Bah! That was his life: a lonely mesa, a tent, some flour and beans, and lots of baa, baa, baa . . .

Reyes flung himself down beside a stump and rolled over on his back. Far overhead a hawk circled lazily, an almost motionless figure in the blue Taos sky. Reyes chewed a stem of wild vega and watched it. Perhaps it wasn't a hawk. Perhaps it was a fighter plane looking for a Messerschmitt. Perhaps it was an enemy aircraft.

He reached for his .22 and pointed it skyward, but pulled it down when he heard voices off in the piñon trees. Putting the gun across his knees, he waited. There was no tinkling bell, so it could not be a pack train. Besides, the train had brought his provisions three days ago.

Reyes listened carefully for the sound of horses; then looked toward his own pony, Chapo, grazing peacefully a few yards from the sheep. If horses were coming, Chapo would know. Chapo would have raised his head and nickered.

Reyes remained by the stump until he saw three blond men, husky, suntanned hombres, come out of the trees and stride toward his tent, a hundred yards away. From under half-closed lids, Reyes saw that these were no ordinary men. Very blond they were, and they didn't look like the men who ranched near Poso even though they wore Levis and blue denim shirts. They didn't walk as cattlemen walk. They walked as do national guardsmen, only much stiffer. They didn't wear hats and no self-respecting cattleman ever went without a hat.

There was something about these men that made Reyes thankful for the sheepman's old habit of sitting at a distance from his tent. It was good to see visitors first when one was alone. With a quick motion, Reyes placed his gun on the ground beside the stump and walked leisurely toward his camp site. As he approached, the three men spotted him simultaneously.

"Hello," the oldest of the three, a man of twenty-five or so, called out. "Have you got anything to eat here?"

Reyes decided it would be best not to speak English.

"Si, señor," he replied. "*Buenos dias.*"

The man who had addressed Reyes did not offer to shake hands, nor did the other two so much as greet him. That was very strange.

Reyes picked up a stick and stirred the beans that never stopped cooking in the can over his fire. He mixed flour and water for tortillas. His three visitors sat silently, watching his every move with frosty blue eyes. Reyes was reminded of the quick-minded wildcats that inhabited these lonely Ratons. When the tortillas were turned a nice brown, he dished up the beans in his plate, a cup and the wash basin and passed them to the men. He poured coffee into bottles for his visitors.

"*Muy hambre, no?*" Reyes asked.

They looked at him blankly and went on eating, wolfing the beans and tortillas as though they had not eaten for a long time.

The sun was dropping toward the Sangre de Cristos in the west. The men had no outfits, no guns, no food, nothing. Reyes was disturbed, but gave no sign. When the men had finished the meal, the silent two stretched out on the ground and closed their eyes. The leader stared at Reyes.

"You are alone here?" he asked.

Reyes shrugged his shoulders.

"*No hablo,*" he replied. The leader cursed in some strange tongue.

When darkness fell, Reyes built up the fire and fed the men again. Afterward they smoked silently by the fire. Reyes politely offered his tobacco sack and then accepted a tailor-made with alacrity. What a treat in this isolated spot! The visitors, strangely enough, talked not at all. Finally a golden moon peeped over the edge of Chacon Mesa.

Extending his pack of cigarettes again, the leader asked slowly: "You know way to Mexico?"

Reyes grinned and nodded. He pointed south and then to a dark blob that marked the opening of a canyon leading up into the Ratons. Even a stranger could tell it was a canyon as the moon lighted up the rim rocks on either side. Reyes traced the route to and through the canyon in the dirt by the fire. The leader patted his shoulder gingerly.

Reyes motioned toward his little tent and, when the leader shook his head in the negative, the sheepherder went to it and wrapped himself in his blanket.

"*Alemanes,*" he suddenly thought, and was panic-stricken. German *soldados* on his own mesa! They had to be Germans. Juan and Arturo Jesus had fought the *Japoneses.* Now he, Reyes Gonzales, was host to Nazis on his own mesa, far from the plaza. What would Juan and Arturo Jesus do with these three men?

Reyes wiggled silently out of his blankets, rearranged them carefully, and crept softly away into the night from under the far side of the tent. Softly he made his way to the old stump where he took up his .22. With the gun tightly gripped, he crouched behind the stump and watched the three figures by the fire. One of them was gesticulating. Finally all three rose and walked to the tent.

Reyes crouched lower and waited. He heard a yell of rage and a moment later saw his little tent smashed to the ground. Grinning, he went to find Chapo.

These, then, were the enemies from far away Germany. And on his own mesa . . .

In the dim light of early morning, the Germans seemed uncertain. They shivered as they ate and Reyes watched them hungrily. He was angry when they cut his tent up, made it into three bags, and packed his beans and flour and coffee. When they finally moved off toward Echo Canyon, he mounted Chapo and circled ahead of them.

It was noon when the Germans stopped at the mouth of the canyon and ate. Reyes watched them from behind a protecting boulder. When he saw their heads bobbing again on the trail below, he retreated up the canyon toward Broken-off Rock where Chapo was tied to a gnarled cedar.

The Germans marched single file up the trail. They were strong men and they tackled the grade impatiently. Just as they reached the deepest point in the canyon, a half dozen voices called out:

"Halt!—Halt!—Halt! . . ."

The Germans pulled up and stood stiffly until a number of voices called to them again:

"Lie face downward and put your hands behind your backs!"

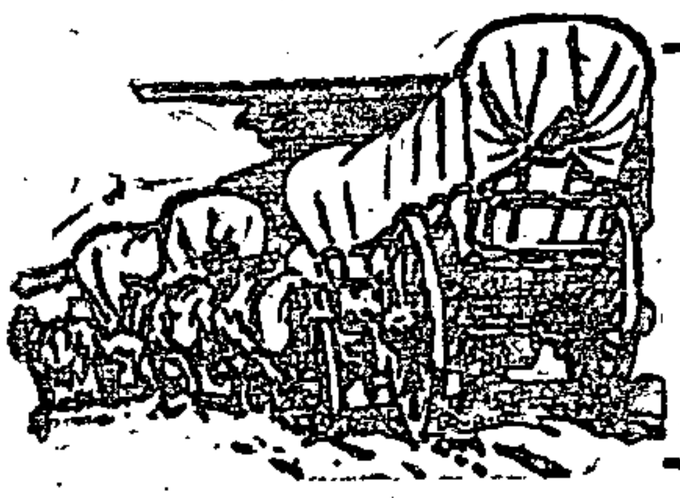
As the message was shouted at them from all sides, the Germans appeared bewildered but, at a reluctant command from their leader, complied.

Late in the day, three bedraggled figures, securely tied together with a stout lariat, stood in the center of the little plaza in the midst of a crowd of men, women and children who eyed them curiously. Reyes Gonzales listened gravely and proudly as his white-haired father spoke:

"You have done well, my son. You have done as well as your brothers, Juan and Arturo Jesus. You were very wise, *hijo mio*, when you used the many voices of Echo Canyon, for you were one and they three. These *Alemanes*, we have learned, have escaped from the war-prisoner camp near Trinidad. We shall see that they are delivered into the hands of the sheriff. Go now, *hijo*, and tend to the sheep on the mesa."

THE END

"Yeah—Blackie always enjoys a friendly little game."



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

WASTE not, want not is good outdoors philosophy. When the old-time wilderness hunter packed home a deer, like as not he utilized almost every part of it.

Primarily he took game for food, as should the modern sportsman. And deer meat, properly dressed and cured, makes excellent eating. It need not be the strong, gamey-tasting stuff some of today's hunters bring home to their friends and families.

An oven roast of venison, venison steaks, chops and stews are all sound, sustaining meat dishes delicious enough to grace any table. The liver, heart, brains and kidney are good eating, too, and the marrow bones can be used for soup stock.

Aside from the meat, real backwoodsmen often save the ligaments on either side of the backbone for making durable sinew thread. They may even boil down the hoofs for glue. Tanned buckskin, made from the deer's hide, has always been an important and useful material to the man who lives outdoors. Sewn into a jacket, or soft hunting shirt, buckskin provides as serviceable and durable a garment as a woodsman could want. Moccasins made of deerhide are soft enough for comfortable lounging in around the cabin, and at the same time tough enough to use outside. But for the day-long wear a woodsman is apt to find they don't afford sufficient support for the arches of his "civilized" feet.

In the recent past too much that is usable of this favorite and relatively abundant game animal has gone to waste. In the hunting days to come, when the world is once more back on an even keel, let's hope others will learn to feel as B. L., of Bremerton, Washington, does on this important subject.

"I'm fond of hunting when I get the chance," he wrote. "And one of the things the war has taught me is the importance of salvage. In other words, throw nothing away that can be used, or made into something useful. Believe me I am going to practice it next time I am lucky enough to bag a deer. Can you help me out with some practical tips on what to do once the deer is an accomplished fact?"

Gladly, B. L., gladly. Item One: to get the best out of every pound of venison in your deer, dress it as soon as possible after it has been killed. It is when the glands and "innards" are left in the animal for any length of time that the meat gets

a strong, "gamey" flavor. The quicker you get them out, the better your table meat will be. This applies in general to *all game*.

Item Two: The cleanest way to dress a deer is to hang it up—head first. Don't suspend it by the hind legs. Often a handy sapling can be used to hang the deer. Bend the sapling over, trim the end and tie the deer to it by the horns.

The natural spring-back of the tree will support part of the animal's weight. A cut pole with a crotch or fork at the end can then be used to prop up the sapling so that the deer hangs clear. If one pole is insufficient or unsteady, cut three and set them with the butts radiating outward on the ground to form a tripod.

The next best way to dress a deer is to place it on sloping ground sufficiently steep to provide good drainage. Set it with the head uphill. No slope? All right, get the deer to a down tree, or fallen log and hang the head over it.

Item Three: With the "innards" out, swab the cavity clean with a clean cloth. Better yet if water is available, rinse the inside out with clear cold water.

Now you are ready to haul your buck to camp. If two men are going to make the carry, use two poles fastened together shoulder width apart a short distance from each end, stretcher fashion. Then tie your deer *on top of the poles* so that the bulk of its weight rests on, not under, the improvised stretcher.

If you are alone, or have to drag the animal and the ground is rough, take the trouble to make a light bough "sled," preferably of spruce or balsam, to put under the carcass. This makes the dragging easier. It also helps prevent damage to the skin.

Drag the deer by a rope through the lower jaw. Another method is to tie the rope around the animal's neck, then make a loop that brings the nose and outstretched forelegs together. A short length of stout stick knotted to the free end of the rope makes a handy pulling handle.

A husky hunter can carry a small deer bunched over his shoulders. This is okay in the wilderness. But if you are in country populated with hunters, it may be risky. Make sure you have plenty of red showing even if you have to hang your hat on the deer. Otherwise some over-anxious nimrod may take a shot at it with you under it.

As for the venison itself, remember that deer meat keeps a long time —several weeks—in a cold, dry climate without curing. Aging venison makes it more tender and gives it a better flavor. Hung deer ages best at just above freezing temperatures, say from 36 to 40 degrees. Two or three weeks is a good average aging time for venison.

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

PERU, where the ancient Incas dined from golden plates, has been a rich source of gold since long before the white man first landed in the New World. Millions of dollars' worth of the precious yellow metal have been mined from its mountain streams high in the towering Andes.

Top Kick L. G., of Uncle Sam's fighting Marines, has seen a lot of places and done a lot of things in his many years of service with the Devil Dogs.

"That goes double," he writes, "since we took chips in the present war. But so far I've never gone gold prospecting, and I've never hit Peru. I'd like to satisfy both these ambitions when the war is over. Can you tip me off to the placer gold sections there? What about the country's mining laws?"

First let's get a few facts straight. Placer gold is still mined in Peru. Plenty of it. But it is not so easy to find the bonanza deposits that made the country gold-famous in the past. The old ones have been pretty well worked out, what with three or four hundred years of gold mining by prospectors and larger mining companies.

Lately a considerable part of Peru's annual gold output has come as a byproduct of its extensive copper and silver mines. Originally, virtually all the gold came from placers (stream gravels) and hard-rock mining of gold-bearing quartz veins.

Even so, those adventurous enough to tackle the Peruvian Andes in quest of yellow metal ought to get themselves some colors in the pan.

Up in northwestern Peru there's a little city called Tumbes. Try the river of the same name near the town. Placer gold's been mined there fairly recently. In the same general region over on the east side of the Central Cordillera range, hunt up the Maranon River close to the border of Ecuador. Prospecting along some of the south-flowing tributaries of the upper Maranon has turned up placer gold in the past.

'Way further south below Trujillo on the Pacific coast some of the mountain streams around Caraz have given up colors of yellow metal. There are gold-silver lode mines in the area.

To get over where the Incas are supposed to have mined a large part of their early golden wealth, strike out for Cuzco, then make your way north and east to the headwaters of the Madre de Dios River. Quite a few placer deposits are still regularly

mined in that sector, many of them fairly extensive. The Inambari River, a tributary of the Madre de Dios, might likewise be worth a try.

Those are perhaps the most likely known gold-placer sections in Peru. But the prospector should remember that placer gold, particularly in the present day, represents only a part of the country's enormous mineral wealth, both proved and potential. The gold lodes found in Peru have produced tremendously rich mines.

Silver, copper, vanadium and other metals are found and mined in this rich, South American country. The Cerro de Pasco mining district, a little over a hundred miles northeast of the capital at Lima, was one of the world's most famous silver-mining areas for almost three hundred years—from the early 1600's until the turn of the present century. Since then and up to the present it has been an important producer of copper, one of the most essential of all our modern industrial metals.

Gold lode mines are also situated near Paucarbamba, and at Julcani, southeast of Hauncavelica, and to the south at Posco, fifteen miles west of Andaray. The list could be extended. The point, however, is not to rattle off a string of Peruvian place names where gold mining is, or has been, carried on, so much as it is to put over the important fact that Peru is a highly mineralized country. Gold has been found there in a lot of scattered places. Future prospecting may add to the already intensive catalogue.

A few years ago there was a flurry of intensive prospecting for further gold in the general southern half of the country. This may be taken up again after the war. South America is one of the world's greatest remaining storehouses of potential, unmined mineral treasure.

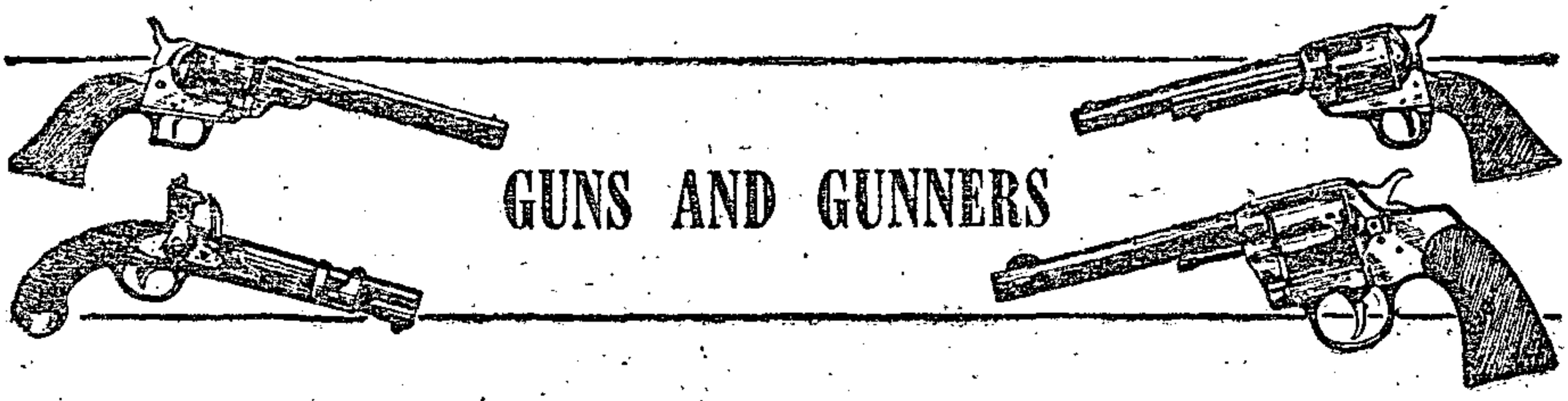
Prospecting is freely permitted in Peru. The unit for placer claims is a square measuring two hundred meters on all sides. This works out to about eight and a half acres. Lode units are smaller—two hundred by fifty meters. In either case the unit is known as a pertenencia.

A claim, or more correctly a denouncement, refers to the total amount of ground the prospector wishes to locate. This may, and generally does, consist of more than one pertenencia. Seventy units is the top allowance.

An annual tax is imposed on the amount of land denounced. If it is more than a year in default, the land automatically becomes "open" again.

Other required regulations are advertising of the land, surveys and registration. Fees for these things are nominal. At any rate the first step is to set up posts marking the corner boundaries of the land denounced. Following this, application for the land must be made to local government authorities on special forms.

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

FROM the weapons of today's war we turn to those of yesteryear. The days of the muzzle-loader were long ago "numbered," but someone, a short two decades back, began a new series of numbers.

The boys like to shoot these old black-powder muzzle-loaders. The sport started when a single group of collectors in Ohio took an interest in their collection pieces and began to experiment with them. In a short time the practice spread from coast to coast and from border to border.

Favorite of most of the muzzle-loading fans is the American-built-and-designed "Kentucky" rifle. Strange as it may seem, this rifle was born in Pennsylvania, and is believed to have been the product of the famous German gunsmiths, today known as the "Pennsylvania Dutch."

In the early 1700's, many of these gunsmiths came to Pennsylvania from Germany and Switzerland. They brought with them skill and ideas from the old country—ideas which they later developed into the rifle which made them famous.

With these early gunsmiths came the ideas of the so-called Scheutzen rifles—heavy, large-caliber precision weapons designed for target shooting. Because of their size, their bulk, and their weight, they were unsuited for use as hunting weapons. Furthermore they were extravagant in the consumption of powder and lead —most of them were about .75 caliber or as big as a 12-gauge shotgun. Some were rifled; some were smoothbore. The original models were listed as to gauge rather than caliber. The American system of caliber, meaning hundredths of an inch, was later applied to rifled barrels—smoothbored were designated by gauge. This same system of gauge designation still applies today.

A study of the design of the Kentucky shows features of both the German and Swiss rifles. The German Schuetzen rifle was a large-bore (about .75 caliber), heavy and beautifully ornamented weapon. The barrel was large, thick and short as the rifle was used not only for target shooting, but also for hunting the wild boar and antlered stag in dense forests. The Swiss rifle was used at long range for hunting the wary mountain sheep and goats. Thus it had better sights, longer barrels, and slightly smaller bores.

The Kentucky rifle was designed to meet American hunting conditions. There was an abundance of small game, but hunting required much

walking through all kinds of terrain, and three major requirements were indicated: The rifle had to be accurate. It should be light and easy to carry, steady to aim. It should be conservative in the consumption of powder and lead, so that the hunter could make his hard-to-get ammunition last longer.

The short-stock, long-barrel rifle was thus born. The small bore came into existence. Most of the early Kaintucks were of .45 caliber; a few were larger, and some were only .36 caliber. The latter became known as squirrel rifles.

The job of identifying these old guns—both flintlock and percussion—is extremely difficult. Some makers made the gun in its entirety. Others put their names thereon—some did not. Still others made guns but purchased their barrels and locks. Thus the names or marks of several men may be found on a single gun.

When the fine accuracy of these early muzzle-loaders became known, they sprang into prominence among target shooters. The old system of target scoring was much different from that used today. One system was to establish a center mark for aiming purposes. If a five-shot string was fired, the distance from the center of the aiming point to the center of each bullet hole was measured, they were added, and the average of these was taken.

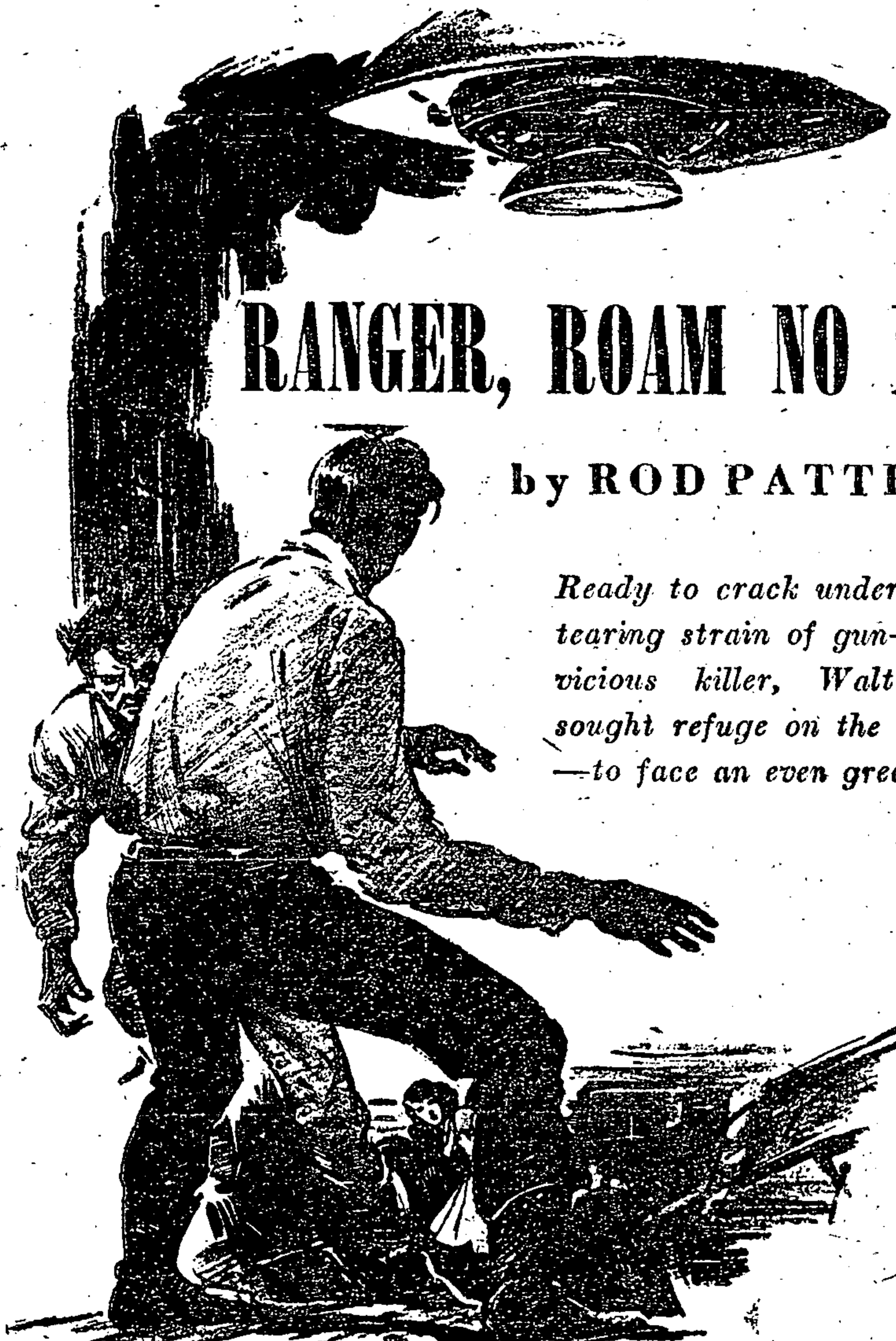
Another method of measurement was the old "string method." In one end of a cord a knot was tied. The left-hand thumbnail was placed on this knot to hold it on the center of the target. The cord was stretched to the center of the first bullet hole, gripped with the right thumbnail, and the knot abandoned. The left thumbnail was then brought into contact with the right nail to hold the cord, whereupon the cord was stretched to the second bullet hole with the left thumbnail holding it at the center of that shot. The process was repeated until all holes had been covered.

The cord was then measured against a yardstick. As scored, a 10-inch string did not mean that the group diameter of the five shots was 10 inches—it gave the most accurate method of measuring the distance connecting all shots.

There were many variations of the target-measurement process—so many that old records are useless. Unless the size of the target is available, the size of the scoring rings, or the method of measurement is indicated, one really cannot visualize performance. However, the string idea gives a better picture than the "bulls-eye score"; bulls-eyes are round and all edges equal in value.

Finally, the matter of comparing old records is extremely difficult because of the many types of targets in use. Targets, like firearms, have gone through a process of evolution.

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.



RANGER, ROAM NO MORE

by ROD PATTERSON

Ready to crack under the nerve-tearing strain of gun-guarding a vicious killer, Walt Buckman sought refuge on the Kirk ranch —to face an even greater danger

I

THE stagecoach rolled up out of the cold night rain, and stopped with a flare of brass side lamps before a sign that read: *Trampas—5 miles.* When it lurched onward into the dark of the lonely road, two men stood close together in the mud.

One, tall and lean, with deep-set blue eyes above cheeks drawn flat by exhaustion, wore a yellow slicker over stained range clothes. Water

dripped in tiny rivulets from the brim of his old black hat.

His companion was a short, hard-bodied man, with eyes like hard shiny buttons sewed into the saddle leather of his flattish, sullen face. His nondescript clothing clung soggily to his frame, revealing the bulge of solid biceps.

The tall man shook the weary stoop out of his body, and started abruptly across the trail. The sudden motion staggered the short man, almost upsetting him, because he was linked to the other by a set of steel manacles.

"Take it slow, Ranger!" the short man brayed. "You nearly busted my arm!"

"Quit draggin' back then," Walt Buckman said shortly. *This must be it,* he thought. It was hard for him to remember this spot, after four years, especially with the rain and darkness. But straight ahead was the white-painted gate, and beyond it the wagon road leading down through a park of Chino trees toward the Kirk ranchhouse.

They were tramping down the road a moment later—the road which somehow seemed redder than any other in these red Texas hills. It was slippery under foot. Walt trod the ruts, asleep on his feet, pulling his prisoner behind him like a horse on a hackamore. His own wrist had long since ceased to hurt.

Suddenly Walt slipped and collapsed on one knee. Hade Muller jumped him like a flash. They rolled over in the mud, arms and legs thrashing. Muller kept stabbing the manacle on his left wrist for Walt's head, but missing it. Walt's breath forced its way through his teeth.

"You dirty killer!" he panted and cuffed the man with his right fist, once—twice—three times.

Muller whimpered and tried to cover his face. "Don't—don't—"

Then Walt was on his feet. He dragged his prisoner upright by the collar, slapping him across the jaw with the outlaw's own hand. The handcuffs cut like a jag-tooth knife.

"All right—all right!" Muller howled. "Leave me be!"

Walt thought, *I'd better stay awake or he'll get me yet. He's had all the sleep in this here party.* Hade Muller had killed a man before. It was a sure bet he'd try it again, with his neck at stake.

Walt hadn't closed his eyes in thirty hours. He was dead beat, though every nerve was drawn as tight as a fiddle string. It wasn't the responsibility of delivering his prisoner to headquarters that was causing that tension, either. A hundred yards ahead, in a rambling house, he would be seeing Connie Kirk again. He wondered how she would greet him and he was filled with grave doubts.

At Blackhorn Station, four miles back, people had acted mighty queer when he'd inquired about her.

"Shore," the stage agent had drawled, with a quick lifting of eyebrows, "Mrs. Kirk's still out at the ranch. Don't hardly ever come to town these days, though—don't have nuthin' to do with nobuddy. Jest stays with that loco old housekeeper out there night 'n day. Her husband

was killed two years ago and since then she—"

"I know all about it," Walt said curtly.

"Frank Kirk was a Ranger, too," the man persisted. "He was killed down at—"

"Two tickets to the Trampas cut-off." There was no intonation in Walt's voice, which was as good as an order for the agent to mind his own business.

Now, as Walt marched with his prisoner along the rain-spattered road, he considered the happenings of the night. There was something ironic, even eerie, about the whole business. Here he was, coming back to Connie Kirk down the well-remembered lane, and shackled to a murderer.

It had taken Walt a year and a half to get his man, but he had been given the mission by his chief, Hap Havey, at his own request, and he'd stuck it out to the finish. He should be feeling pretty good about it, but he wasn't. He was filled with a queer foreboding, and he was dog-weary. He knew it was against sound Ranger practice to travel away from the beaten path with a man as dangerous as Hade Muller, but it was unavoidable under the circumstances.

Who could have foreseen the chain of events that had led up to this? How could anyone have predicted the hurricane that had swept this whole region the day before? The storm had flooded rivers to ten times their original size, washing out trails, inundating ranchlands, bringing the railroad bridge south of Blackhorn Station down in a tangle of splintered wood and twisted rails.

The train Walt Buckman had boarded two hundred miles north with his prisoner had been stalled at that bridge and all the passengers had been forced to walk back to the town for rooms and food. He and Hade Muller had been in that throng of disgruntled people. Well, he'd done the best he could, and his conscience was clear. He had to keep moving with Muller at all costs. And he hadn't headed for Connie at first, either.

He had tried to find a place to leave Muller in town, but the jail was being used for a relief depot, and every house and shack in the little community was filled with refugees of the flood. It was only then that he had thought of Connie, Frank Kirk's widow. He had to get some sleep—had to find a safe place to anchor the killer for a few hours.

Of course, seeing the girl he had once loved might start the ghosts walking again, but Walt had no alternative. He had to take the risk. The Kirk ranch, four miles from town, was the only practical sanctuary he could think of in all these rolling Texas hills. Connie might permit him to lock Muller up in the stable while he grabbed a few winks of shut-eye.

Then, too, Walt was a little curious to see how Connie was making out since the death of her husband two years ago. He would always feel a little to blame for the girl's unhappiness.

Thinking of Connie made him think of Frank Kirk—the man who had once been his best friend. They

had both courted Connie in the old days, and it had been a serious though good-natured rivalry. Frank was tall and blond while Walt was tall and dark. Frank was a peaceable sort—Walt nervous, fiddle-footed. And yet Walt would have settled down if Connie had taken him.

Four years ago, when Walt had told Connie he was going to swear into the Texas Rangers, she had begged and pleaded with him not to choose so dangerous a life. She had told him he'd be dead in a year if he joined up. He had lost his temper then, and, well, that was when he'd lost her to Frank.

Connie had been driven by fear. Of what, Walt didn't know for sure, even today. But he guessed that she recoiled from any form of brutality. She was afraid of tumult, of fear itself. How it must have shaken her when her husband, two years afterward, had come down to Laredo to become a Ranger—had come at Walt's invitation.

The service had needed men badly at that time, and Walt was proud of the Lone Star troop to which he belonged. He hadn't considered the impact on Connie. He had been, still was, he guessed, blind to a woman's point of view.

He felt regret, but no remorse, that Frank had been killed in the performance of his duty. It had been in the cards for Frank, and what better way could a man pray for than to go out with his boots on and his pistols blazing? And Connie had money enough in her own right to take care of herself for life.

Hade Muller's whining voice broke into Walt's train of thought, and he came back to the present with a start. Muller was saying: "Why don't you leave me go, Ranger? Then you can sleep. I never done nuthin' to you, only back there when you tripped. I'm skeered, that's all. And that man I killed, I done it in self-defense. I—"

"Shut your damned mouth," Walt said curtly.

This peremptory manner, this tough way of speech, came naturally to Walt Buckman. Not because he was actually tough, but because four years in the Rangers had hardened his body and his mind, had made him intolerant of evil in any form, especially of the murder and lust in some men's souls.

Now, as they mounted the steps of the long, low ranchhouse in the grove of cottonwoods, and crossed the broad veranda, Walt was sure someone was waiting silently, listening, just behind the heavy, paneled door. He stopped Muller with a jerk on the handcuff, and knocked.

The door opened a few inches on a chain. A pair of cold, stern eyes peered out through the aperture—eyes set in a pinched, bitter face, topped by a wrinkled forehead and scraggly iron-gray hair. It was the face of Sarah Twogood, Connie Kirk's housekeeper, a dour-mannered servant who had been in the Kirk family for thirty years or more.

"I want to speak to Mrs. Kirk," Walt said quietly.

"Go 'way," the woman commanded in a creaking soprano. "I got a

shootin' iron right here and I'll use it on you quick!"

"You're Sarah," Walt said in the same low tone. "You must remember me—Walt Buckman?"

Breath whistled in through the woman's tight-trapped lips. "Connie don't want to see the likes o' you. Go 'way!"

"I don't mean to spook you, Sarah," persisted Walt. "But it's pretty important. Tell Connie I'm here."

The door banged in his face, dragging a hoarse guffaw out of Hade Muller which Walt ignored. Voices murmured inside, then slowly, very slowly, the door opened a crack. Sarah Twogood poked her nose through it.

"Connie says for you to go on to Blackhorn Station. You can get a room there, and—"

"I've just come from there," Walt said patiently. "There's not a room or a bit of food in the town."

"Who you got with you?"

"A prisoner. I'm takin' him in," Walt said. "The storm washed the railroad bridge out. I'm dead beat, and I got to find some place to sleep for a while."

"We don't want no Rangers here," the woman told him.

"Tell Connie it ain't for myself I'm askin'. It's for the good of the service." Truculence edged into Walt's tone. "Tell her that."

II

Suddenly the door was flung wide open. In the opening, limned startlingly against inner lamplight, stood a young woman with a fine-featured face and a boyish, slender figure. She wore a white shirtwaist and russet-colored riding skirt, and she was very small, very straight, very indignant. Light, framing her head, formed a nimbus that was like misty flame.

"Please go away, Walt!" the pathos in her husky voice did something to Walt, away down deep inside of him, just as it always had. "I don't want to hear about the service!" She stopped, breathing rapidly, then rushed on impetuously: "Why did you come back? You, the man I ought to hate but somehow can't! The man that made Frank leave me for—for death!" Her voice caught. She swallowed and gave her red-gold head a determined shake. "Walt, please don't ask me to take you in!"

She was just the same, Walt thought grimly: the same taut, slim body; the same stormy eyes—eyes that yearned for peace, for something always just beyond her reach. Suddenly a kind of warm current flowed over him, and he wanted to comfort her, wanted to tell her that a man had to do the things he'd taken an oath to do, whether it cost him his life or not.

He wanted to tell her that Frank Kirk had lived and died by a code of honor that exalted him above ordinary men. He had laid his life down for a principle, an ideal: that men have an inalienable right to live their lives out free of the menace of lawlessness. But Walt didn't yield to the impulse to say what was in his mind. Instead, he murmured:

"I know how you feel, Connie. But I won't bother you longer'n I have to. All I want is a cup of coffee and a bite, and a corner to bed-down in for a few hours."

She held herself rigid against his soft words, doggedly resisting his compelling personality. "Don't you think I've given enough to the service already?" But suddenly she went limp and turned irresolutely back into the room. "Oh, come on in. We'll do what you ask."

Walt hauled Muller into the living room. The outlaw came in crabwise, a hang-dog expression on his flat face and in his jet-black eyes.

"Ma'am, make him quit hittin' me," Muller moaned. "I ain't done nuthin'. They're accusin' me of somethin' I never—"

Walt yanked hard on the handcuff, an abrupt movement that sent a stab of agony from wrist to shoulder. "Shut your mouth!"

Hade Muller fell to his knees, whimpering like a hurt dog. Walt dragged him back on his feet with a jerk. "You blamed faker! Stand up and shut up or I'll give you something to crawl about!"

Connie Kirk pulled back, eyes widened with horror, hands caught at her throat. "Walt," she said hoarsely, "can't you be human? Do you have to torture that poor creature. What . . . what's he done to—"

"He's a killer," Walt answered in an utterly unmoved tone, and let it go at that.

"I ain't neither," whined Muller, massaging his wrist. "I never—"

Walt silenced him with a look that burned. He was fighting the drag of exhaustion now, brought on and accentuated by the warmth of the room. But he took Connie's appalled stare, and shrugged. He had to stay hard and casual. He couldn't let her even guess what seeing her again was doing to him.

"No use tryin' to explain, Connie," he said. "You wouldn't savvy."

Connie's shoulders relaxed a little of their tenseness. She met Walt's level gaze, and her own wavered away suddenly, and he saw the sudden flush that stained her throat and cheeks. His heart beat wildly for a moment, but he fought it down to its normal pulse with the icy thought, *It's too late now. Don't be a fool.*

"You don't have to explain," the girl said wearily. Then she looked at the stiff-faced Sarah Twogood who stood in the kitchen doorway, watching the scene out of bitter, indomitable eyes. "Sarah," Connie said, "get them something to eat." She seemed to contract suddenly, to retreat into herself. "And fix them a place wherever Walt wants to go. Good night."

Then she was gone, silently moving toward the door to her own bedroom on the right. The housekeeper stood a moment, hesitating, her pointed, resentful face tightened in all its angled lines. Then she shrugged her bony shoulders spitefully, and went rustling off into her kitchen without a word. Walt followed her wearily, hauling Hade Muller after him.

It was all familiar: the big oak-beamed kitchen, with copper pots hanging from wall pegs, the coal-oil

lamp suspended from a hook in the smoke-stained ceiling. Everything was the same as when he'd seen it last, except that Frank Kirk was not here; his lusty voice would never ring again beneath this ancient roof.

Walt did not pause, but kept on toward the rear door that gave into the ranch yard. But Hade Muller pulled back suddenly.

"I gotta eat, Ranger," he protested. "You want me to starve to death?"

"Where you're headin'," Walt mocked, "it won't be an empty belly that'll kill you. It'll be a hemp rope."

In back of them, Sarah's breath came in a harsh gasp. But she did not speak. As Walt pulled the outlaw into the darkened, rainy yard, he sensed the imminence of danger. Straight ahead, looming grayly in the murk, stood a hip-roofed barn with its low-squatting outbuildings gathered about it like chicks around a mother hen.

Walt had the advantage of memory to serve him now. He knew Frank Kirk's old ranch, knew the landmarks, remembered every foot inside the barn. He recalled the three box stalls with the heavy cast-iron rings bolted to metal feed troughs—the heavily bolted doors once used to guard prize stock against horse thieves.

The rain let up as they drew near the barn, and then they were inside the stable, and a high moon, sliding out from behind an umber screen of clouds, filtered a luminosity over the interior. Walt held the outlaw at arm's length, swung the door of the first stall outward on shrieking hinges. Muller was wholly silent now—the cringing look had left his dishlike face, and his mouth was set in a surly line.

Walt's hand brushed the butt of his holstered gun as he fished the handcuff key from his pocket. "All right," Walt said. "In you go."

He pushed Muller ahead of him, kept shoving him toward the feed trough and the iron ring. He moved the key swiftly toward the handcuff that clamped him to the killer, watching Muller steadily, warily. There was a faint click. The bracelet slid off Walt's wrist, and he seized the outlaw's arm quickly and pulled it forward toward the ring.

Then it happened. Muller jumped with an agility astonishing in a man of his bulk. He jerked back, yanked his manacled wrist up, swung viciously at Walt's head. Walt ducked, felt the wind of the empty cuff whisk past his ear. From a crouching position he straightened and struck, all in one motion, as though his body was poised on springs. His fist exploded against Muller's jaw. The sound—like the flat of a cleaver slapping raw meat—echoed in the stall. The outlaw fell without any outcry and lay unmoving.

Standing over the knocked-out man, Walt snaked the loose manacle up with a numbed hand and deftly clipped it to the iron stall ring. Then he drew back, breathing gently, though sweating a bit, and pocketed the key, thereafter leaving the stall unhurriedly. He threw the bolt on

the outside of the door, rubbed his tingling knuckles briefly in a cupped palm, then moved on into the yard, heading for the kitchen door.

The house smelled of coffee and frying food. Sarah had set two places at the table, and when he came in alone, she stared at him balefully.

"Ain't you goin' to feed that pore man?" she demanded in her shrill voice.

"No," said Walt, and, sitting down, attacked the plate of bacon and fried potatoes. After his fourth mouthful, he said, not looking up: "An empty belly'll take some of the murder out of him maybe."

He gulped hot coffee while the housekeeper continued to stare. Finally she said: "Miss Connie says for you to take him a pillow and a blanket. They're in the parlor."

Walt yawned. He looked up out of haggard eyes and said: "He ain't a man, Sarah. He's a back-shootin' animal. Leave him lay."

The woman spoke tonelessly. "*You're* an animal. All you Rangers're the same—except Frank. He was a good, kind man."

Walt wiped his plate with a scrap of bread, then pushed his cup and saucer back. "That's right, Sarah," he said absently.

"The rest of you policemen don't care who you ketch," the woman went on persistently, "jest so long's you pin a crime on somebuddy. Connie says—"

Walt's face was inscrutable. He came to his feet, stretching and grunting. "Where'm I goin' to bed-down, Sarah? I'm dead on my feet."

"In the parlor," she said disapprovingly. "I'll show you."

She threaded her way back through the living room with Walt at her heels, stumbling a little in his weariness. There was a low-burning lamp on a marble-topped table in the old-fashioned sitting room, three easy chairs, a horsehair sofa, a hand-carved melodeon. Walt peeled off his slicker and sat down heavily upon the couch, hauling off his boots with some difficulty.

Sarah paused in the door, looking back. He had unhooked his gun belt and draped it over the back of a chair. The key to the handcuffs he took out of his pants pocket and dropped unseeingly into one of his boots. This was habit, and he never gave thought to it, and didn't now.

III

"Walt!" He turned with a start, staring toward the door. Connie had been standing there in the opening, watching *him*. He hadn't even noticed that the housekeeper had gone.

"Yes?" he asked.

She stood very straight and firm, hands clasped in front of her, eyes pinned intensely upon his face. She was wearing a pale-blue dressing gown. "Walt, Sarah says you're not going to feed him or take a blanket out."

"No," he said roughly. "I'm not."

Her eyes burned with a quick, consuming flame. "You haven't changed, have you, Walt?" She asked the question without malice, but in a low, suffering tone of voice. "You'd treat a horse with more kindness than you would a man!"

"No, I wouldn't," he retorted impatiently. "This hombre's an out-and-out killer."

"You don't know for sure."

He threw up his hands, then stood up in his stocking feet and moved deliberately toward her, stopping squarely in front of her. "Look, Connie, why don't you get some sleep and let me do the same?"

The tension grew greater. She drew a deep, shaken breath. "Walt, don't you ever yearn for peace? Don't you ever want to go to sleep at night without thinking about the men you've killed—or dragged to jail?"

He had to grin at that. But he wiped the smile off his face quickly. "Connie, honey," he said in a calm, slow tone, "I take orders and carry 'em out. I'm not the judge and jury of my fellow man. It's my duty to bring in the man I'm sent out to get, not to ask questions."

"Don't you ever think of the duty you owe the one . . . the ones you love?" Connie's cheeks showed a spreading stain; her eyes grew round and wide and questioning. "Don't you, Walt?"

"I've got nobody," he said gently. "Nobody."

Suddenly she put out her hands and gripped him by the arms, just above the elbow. "Walt—Walt, don't you know how Frank died?"

He frowned. "Of course I do."

"He was sent into a place without even a chance of coming out alive." Her grip tightened; there was the glint of close-held tears in her eyes. "He went in. Blindly. Knowing he was going to be killed."

He made his quick protest. "No, that's not the truth. He had a chance—he wasn't alone."

"They wouldn't let him die with dignity," she choked. "They let him bleed to death on a barroom floor!"

Walt moved against her, pulling her hard up to his chest. He was filled with an illogical compassion that was like a dull ache all through him. "You're sick, child. Sick. You've got it all tangled up. I—"

She closed her eyes, and the tears fell down her cheeks and struck warmly on his hand. "I hate the service," she sobbed. "Hate it, hate it, hate it! I should hate you too, because you got Frank to join, but—"

He shook her as he would a hysterical child, then dropped him arms and stepped back away from her. His eyes were tight and hard, and suddenly almost cruel.

"Got to get some sleep," he said thickly. "You better go."

Blood stormed into her face at his words, and she whirled and stumbled from the room.

Walt stared vacantly at the empty doorway, then sighed and went back to the sofa and dropped down with a groan. He was asleep at once.

He didn't want to wake up. He fought against waking up, tried to strike the hand away that was shaking him.

"Walt—Walt!" Sarah Twogood's voice kept up its anxious calling. "Wake up! That man's gone! He got away!"

He swung around and up, his socks hitting the floor with a quick

thud. "What?" He said it stupidly, blinking his eyes. "What—"

"Connie's skeered to death!" The housekeeper chattered at him, her eyes rolling wildly in her head. "We . . . she brung him his supper, and he got away. We—"

His eyes were focusing. He reached out for his boots, felt in each one, searching for the handcuff key. It was gone! Yanking the boots on his feet, he stood up, lancing the housekeeper with his hard eyes.

"Who took the key?" When she didn't answer, he repeated, "Who took that handcuff key?" and seized her arm and shook her once as he would a cat.

White-lipped, shaking, Sarah screeched: "I dunno who took it! Don't stand there like a fool!"

He flung her away from him and grabbed for his gun belt. One glance told him the worst. His gun was missing, too! The holster was gaping, empty! Walt's face froze up. He did not speak, but strode out of the room, stumbling through the darkened living room and into the kitchen.

Connie was sitting at the table under the lamp, facing the outside door. She had a rifle in her hands, and had it pointed toward the yard, seen as a blob of blackness, faintly tinged by moonlight. When Walt burst into the room, she lowered the rifle, and came to her feet unsteadily. He kept on past her toward the door, then stopped and turned and came back, his eyes two slits in an iron-hard mask.

"How long has he been gone?" His lips hardly moved as he clipped the word. "Answer me!"

White and trembling, she confronted him, and the rifle clattered to the floor. "Walt, I . . . I'm sorry. I . . . didn't think—" She buried her face in her hands, shaking like a sapling in a gale of wind. "I only tried to give him his supper. He . . . grabbed me, made Sarah go back for your key and your gun. He said . . . he'd kill me if Sarah woke you up. Oh, I didn't think—"

"Which way did he go?" Walt's voice was like ice breaking.

"Down through the *vega*." She moaned it out, head still buried in her open palms. "He'll cross the creek and the south pasture and head for the stage road—"

He bent to pick up the rifle. It was clamped in his hands and he was starting toward the door when her voice, shrill and terrified, stopped him short. "Walt! The rifle's not loaded! And I haven't any shells!"

He stopped breathing and stared at her. Then he hit her with his voice, clubbed her with his brutal words: "Hade Muller's the skunk that killed your husband! He shot Frank in the back two years ago! And now you've turned him loose to kill again!"

IV

He didn't hear her anguished cry. He was outside the house and running empty-handed through the moonlit yard, down past the barn, through a willow motte on out into the open fields. The creek was quite narrow, hardly over ten yards wide where he crossed it, and he only

had to swim a few strokes in the center of it.

Sloshing heavily up the opposite bank, Walt could see flat open country ahead in the bluish incandescent light. Presently, running swiftly but without effort, he came in sight of a *loma,* or low bluff, on the topmost part of which bulked a small wooden building that looked from a distance like a line shack. It proved to be just that as he drew closer.

The bluff was bare on all sides, except for sparse clumps of mesquite, and while he ran on toward it, he caught sight of the figure of his man climbing rapidly toward the shack. Hade Muller was going to halt at that cabin and make one last desperate stand against his enemy.

Walt lost sight of Muller then, and, a moment later, came to the foot of the bluff, about three hundred feet from the shack on its crest. Only this thin intervening brush would screen his approach to it. He stopped in the moonlight, breathing gustily now, realizing belatedly that he had no plan of attack at all, no weapon save his fists in the final clash. The killer had his, Walt's, revolver, and would use it to knock over his pursuer, shoot him like a sitting duck!

Walt started forward up the slope of the knoll, walking without haste, pacing with a slow, firm tread. He walked with his shoulders hunched, with his arms flat down beside him. And he could think of no other plan than to get as close as he could to the cabin, then to charge into it and take his chances with the cornered Muller.

Now he was a third of the way up the grade. Then halfway. He was beginning to think Muller had left the shack by a rear door, and was pushing on frantically toward the stage road, a mile away, when something sent him diving to the earth. He had seen the pale flash from the shack's front window—a solid object whanged into the ground on his left and too close for comfort, and a slamming report slapped against his ears. Another shot came instantly afterward, the bullet boiling up chunks of earth still closer to where he lay, flattened out on the ground.

Bitterness choked him. What a bootless way to die! It was poor shooting on Hade Muller's part, to miss him twice at such close range—a hundred and fifty feet—and with no obstruction between him and his target but a few thin wisps of brush. Connie had said Frank had died without d i g n i t y. Walt wondered grimly what she would think of this brand of death.

The pistol cracked again, and Walt ducked. Damp earth showered over him, stung his cheeks, blinded him briefly. That was close! Well, he couldn't lie here helplessly and wait for the next one which might have his initials on it. And the next one could be it. He dashed mud from his eyes and squinted upgrade, seeing a small outcropping rock about a hundred feet farther on—not much of a bulwark, but it would be better than the meager protection he had here.

He got his knees under him, then sprang up suddenly and ran forward,

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digging his boot-toes into the crumbling slope, hurling his body onward, upward, waiting breathlessly for the inevitable smash of lead. He reached the rock, fell flat on his face, just as Muller's fourth shot rang out from the shack's front window, and the bullet ticked into the rock in front of him. Two more shots left—Walt counted them. Four gone, two to go. Maybe—

The rock was small and half-buried in the slope. He had to twist his body sidewise to get his head and chest behind it. He didn't dare think of the rest of his fully exposed body. Seconds passed. Muller was no fool. He was probably waiting for his victim to get up and run again—waiting for the shot he couldn't miss.

Dammit, Walt thought, *I can't stay here all night!* Death would be better. Quick death. Maybe it wouldn't be quick, though, if the killer managed to get in a groin shot. Then it would be a slow and agonizing one. Walt pulled in a long, slow breath, tensed his body, flattened out his hands in front of him. Then he flung himself up and out, arms spread wide, racing for the shack. He ran erratically, weaving back and forth, twisting, turning, expecting any moment to feel the white-hot shock of lead—the fiery, jarring smash of it. . . .

No shot came—no flash of muzzle flame. His wits swam in wild incredulity as he ran. This was not possible.

He struck the cabin head on and jerked aside. Then catapulting himself toward the wide-open door, he flung himself inside. He brought up short, hearing harsh, labored breathing. And he caught a low-snarled oath, heard it even before he saw the moving figures before him in the moonlit room. There was a rear door, and the pale light sifting through it showed the violently struggling shapes in the center of the cubicle.

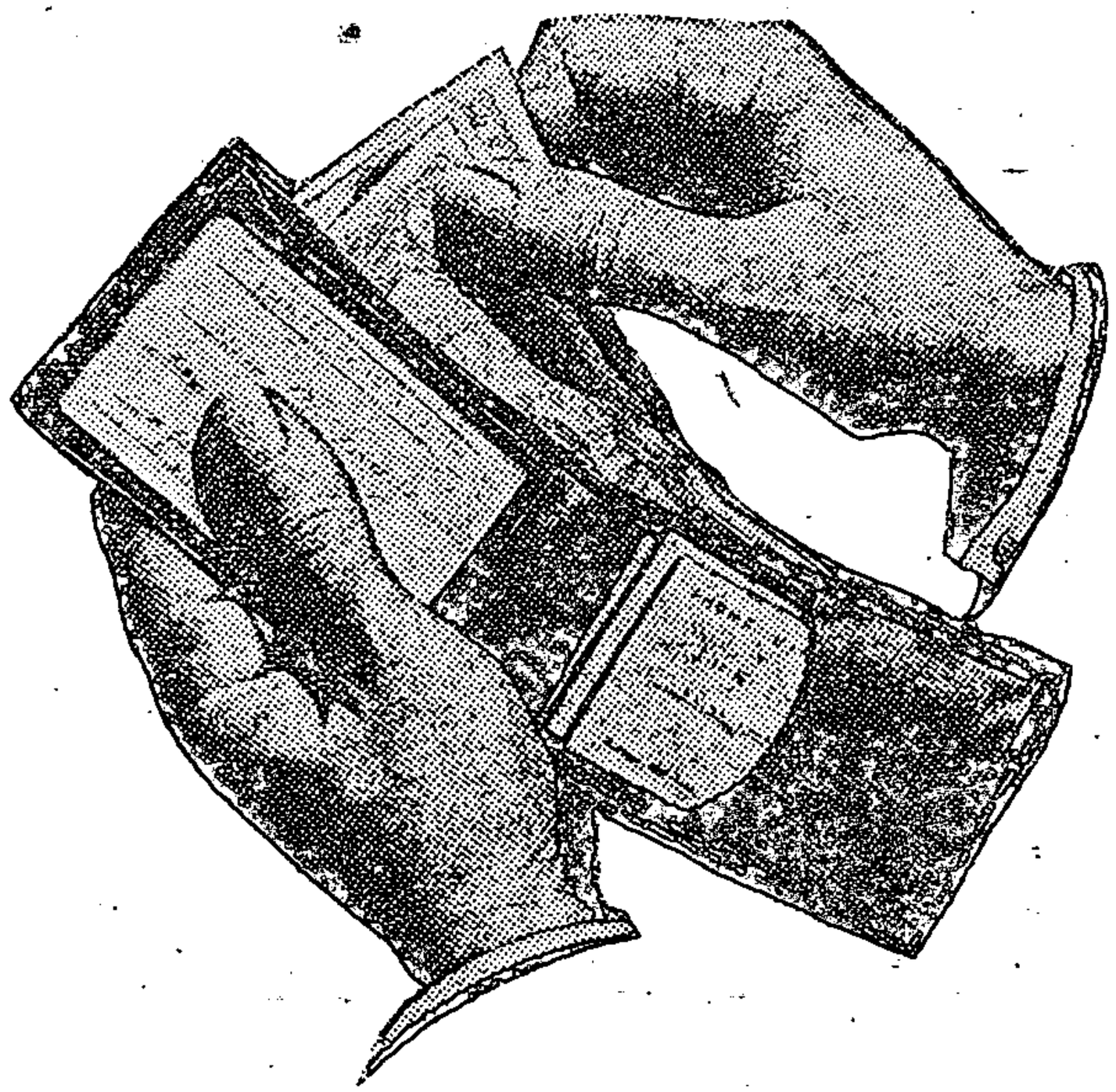
One of those shapes was that of Hade Muller; he had a revolver raised, but twisted queerly in his hand. And then Walt saw Connie. The girl had a desperate grip on the outlaw's gun arm, was fighting the weapon upward with all her strength. And her teeth were fastened in Muller's wrist.

Walt lunged. The girl, flung clear by Muller's convulsive heave, fell to the hard-packed earthen floor, the pistol thudding at her side. She seized it, threw it hard into the shadows, crying: "Walt! Walt!"

The two men met with bone-jarring impact. Then, silent and terrible, they battled back and forth across the room. Connie stumbled to her feet, gasping, sobbing, staring, as she watched the awful tension of straining muscles. Back and forth they fought, breath whistling, snarling like dogs in a death match, staggering under the blows of flailing fists. Hade Muller was short, but he outweighed the Ranger by twenty pounds. He struck Walt repeatedly and carried him backward under the relentless pressure of that weight.

They hit the front wall, caromed off it back to the center of the room. Walt saw Muller's head roll sidewise, and he jumped. He smashed

How to prevent inflation in one easy lesson



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4 THINGS TO DO to keep prices down and help avoid another depression

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2. *Never* pay more than the ceiling price. Always give stamps for rationed goods.

3. *Don't* take advantage of war conditions to fight for more money for yourself or goods you sell.

4. *Save.* Buy and hold all the War Bonds you can afford—to help pay for the war and insure your future. Keep up your insurance.

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.

the killer below the ear, spun him backward, then rushed in swiftly, head down, crowding him, punishing him, slugging with both fists. The killer tried to duck, to fend off the hammer blows. He was too slow. Walt's final roundhouse swing exploded like a bomb in his face—one clean, hard-driven smash.

Muller let out a gurgling scream of pain and fell against the wall. Then his knees buckled under him and he settled slowly, very slowly, his huge shoulders scraping roughly down the wall. He struck the floor in a sitting position, then toppled sideways, and his head bumped the earth like a melon dropped. Afterward, he did not move.

Connie was on her feet, swaying, shoulders drawn up taut, her face dead white. "I—hope you didn't kill him, Walt," she gasped. "I—want him—hanged. Oh, Walt—"

Between long-pulled breaths, Walt said: "He's not dead. And, I'm sorry for what I said back there at the house. I should've told you he'd killed Frank, then you'd've stayed away from him. It was just that I didn't want to make you suffer any more."

Connie was quiet suddenly. "When I found out he'd . . . killed Frank, I had to stop him, had to keep him from killing you. I came up behind the bluff while you were drawing his fire. All the time he was shooting, I was crawling toward the back door. I . . . oh, Walt, it was awful!" Her voice caught.

"No, it wasn't, Connie," he said gently. And he felt his pulse pick up and race happily. He felt a quick, swelling pride in her courage, and he knew that fear would never scar her life again. "You were wonderful," he added in the same soft tone.

"*You* were wonderful—you *are*." She stood before him, a sweetness, a revelation of understanding on her face. "I've been a fool for so very long."

Walt did not touch her, did not even come closer. But his eyes encompassed her and held her tight. "Look, honey, the job I started out to do two years ago is finished with. And my four-year trick with the service is up next week." A pause. "Hap Havey's gettin' pretty old to rod a bunch of fightin' Texicans—he's steppin' out for a younger man. And . . . well . . . they've asked me to take his job. You think I ought to turn it down? It's tricky and it's dangerous."

Connie looked at him long and levelly, and then she shook her red-gold head. "No," she said. "I think you ought to take it, Walt." There was tenderness and a promise in her voice. "And . . . I'd be so very proud of you."

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 94.

1. pasear 2. hogleg 3. dinero 4. cactus 5. pinto 6. buckboard 7. salt 8. heifer 9. tally 10. smoke 11. maverick 12. hombre 13. eagle 14. mule 15. wrangler

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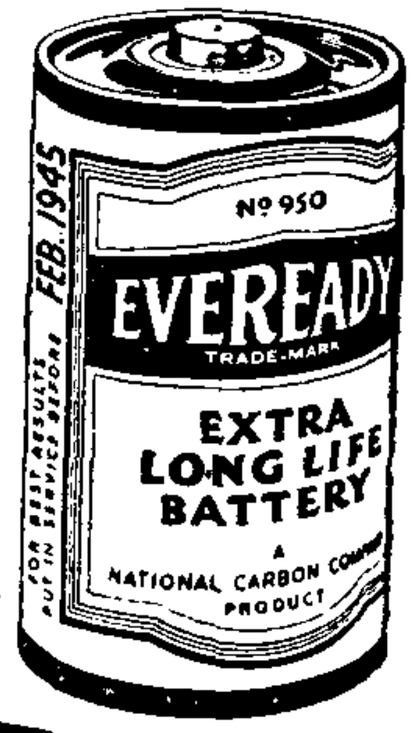

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