

WESTERN^W

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STORY

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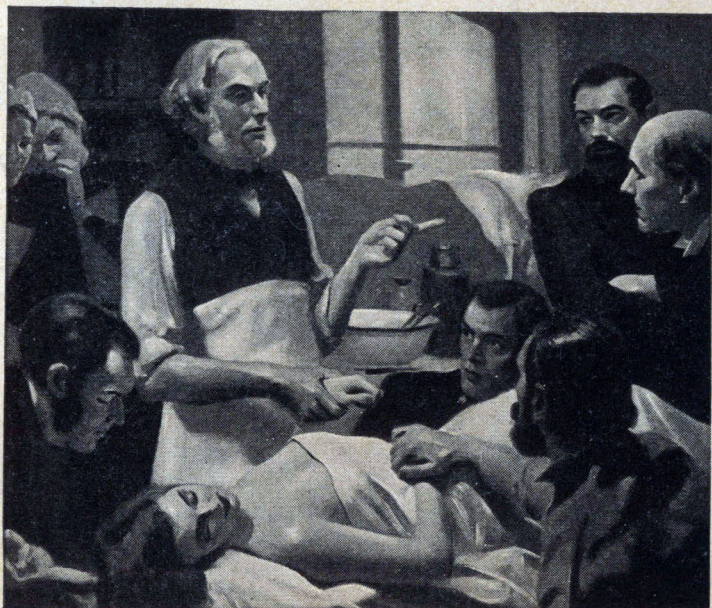
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ALL STORIES COMPLETE



“Scoff, if you will, Gentlemen, but this woman will live!”

SLOWLY, and with the fierce conviction and undying faith that had marked him from the beginning, Lister, his scalpel laid aside, the last dressing completed, addressed his critical audience.

In the eyes of one or two he saw hope and faith to buttress his own, but on the faces of others—some of them the leaders of the profession—he read only doubt and disbelief.

He could almost hear the sneers of the attending nurses whispering in the background while they viewed the pale and lovely woman on the table. Lister knew that they regarded his fanatical insistence on cleanliness, the repeated dressings, his evil antiseptics, as the vagaries of a madman . . . that they were awaiting the “dead-cart” to carry the woman away, just as it had carried away countless others, when blood poisoning followed compound fracture.

But Lister knew, also, that his radical methods, his antiseptics aimed to keep germs out of wounds, before, during and

after every operation, must, with God’s will, triumph.

And triumph they did . . . the woman lived!

So, patient by patient, case by case, day by day, Lister piled up evidence in support of his antiseptic theory which was to rid the world of untold suffering, and reduce the hideous fatalities that time and time again followed even the simplest surgical operations.

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WESTERN STORY

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Editor
JOHN BURR

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BUNKHOUSE CHRISTMAS

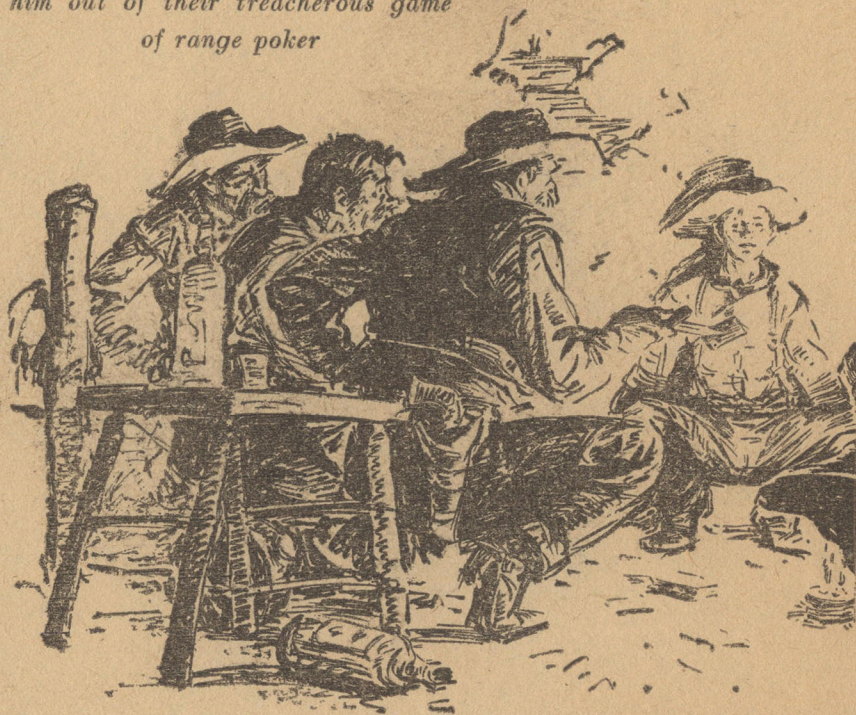
by S. OMAR BARKER



The junipers whiten with snow softly fallin';
Somewhere down the draw there's an ol' cow a-bawlin'.
There ain't nothin' ails her—we're plumb sure of that,
For grass has been good an' the stock is all fat.
An' yet, driftin' in on the snow-feathered breeze,
The sound brings a feelin' of wishful unease
To us old uns settin' here cozy an' warm,
Snug-sheltered an' safe from this Christmas Eve storm.
A strange, lonesome feelin' we can't push away—
Rememb'rin' tomorrow will be Christmas day,
Rememb'rin' it's Christmas, an' wonderin' when
Them three empty saddles will be rode again,
There's three pairs of spurs an' three hats on their pegs,
An' three pairs of chaps meant for young cowboys' legs
A-hangin' unused on the ol' bunkhouse wall—
But the boys they belong to ain't hearin' cows bawl.
They're hearin' machine guns, the whine of a shell,
An' all them strange sounds of a battlefield's hell;
The sea slappin' soft 'gainst the side of a boat,
The four-motored roar from a big bomber's throat—
While deep in their hearts what they're longin' to hear
Is wind in the cedars, the bawl of a steer.

Us old uns, we set here this Christmas Eve night,
A-thinkin' of cowboys that's gone off to fight.
If our thoughts could reach them, here's what we would say:
"We're doin' our best, boys, since you went away.
The ranch is still here an' the cattle well tended;
Your horses are fed, an' the fences all mended.
Looks like a white Christmas will show up at dawn—
We hope it's the last one you boys will be gone.
Some ol' cow's a-bawlin'—she claims her calf's missin'—
Sure wish that you boys was here with us to listen!"

Young Andy Jackson Jones faced a cross fire of renegade guns when he told those five tough hands to deal him out of their treacherous game of range poker



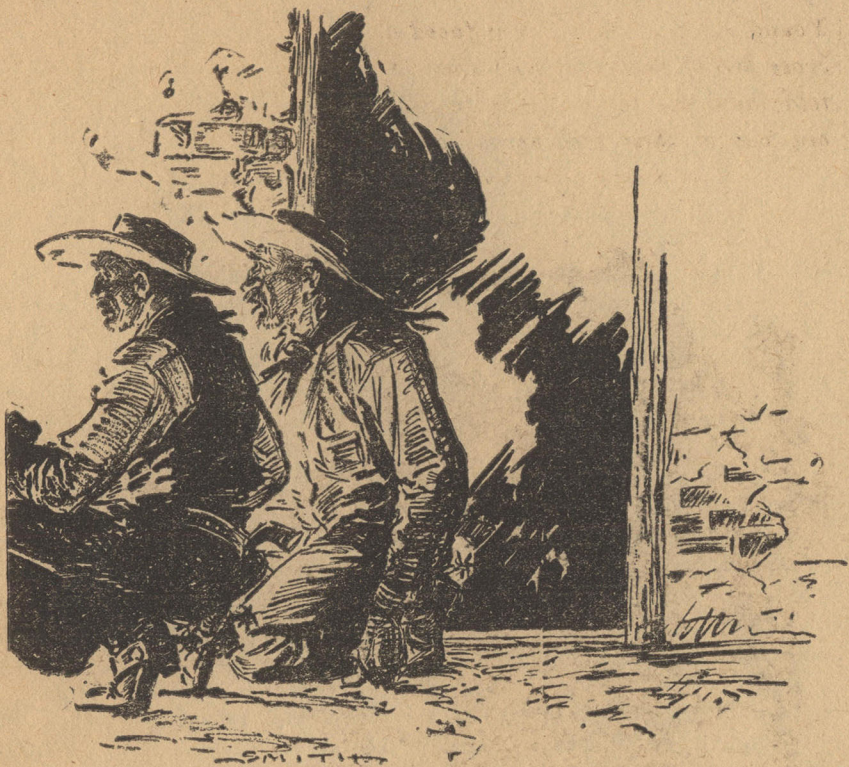
LAW RIDES TO

I

Six men had gathered after night-fall at the deserted cabin at the edge of the Lobo Valley. Five men, to be exact, and the seventeen-year-old boy, Andy Jackson Jones. There was a candle burning and as they squatted around in a circle on the

dirt floor, the flickering light threw shadows across their faces. And young Andy's heart pounded against his ribs and the blood pulsed in his throat as he cut furtive glances at the five men.

Even the range dude, Curly, needed a shave. A stubble of wiry black whiskers marred his too-hand-



LOBO VALLEY

by WALT COBURN

some face and his black eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed. The cat's-claw and mesquite had scratched his tailored suede leather jumper, and his cream-colored flannel shirt and his 5X beaver Stetson were sweat-marked. His shined kid boots with their carved leather tops were powdered with the yellow dust of a

long ride and brush-scratched like the fancy soft leather chaps that were too light for the Arizona brush. Curly was a pretty bronc rider and fast roper, but take him away from a Wild West show ring or the rodeo grounds and put him out on rough open range and he was lost. He was uneasy now, uncertain, unsure

of himself and he was using liquor to cover it. He was ramrodding this outfit. It was his tinhorn brain that had furnished the scheme, and his wolfish cunning had worked it up into a high-stake gamble. He had to swagger it and back his bluff with that pearl-handled, silver-mounted six-shooter he packed in a fancy carved holster. Curly had to out-tough the four tough hands he had picked to do the dirty work. He didn't figure he had to bother about the kid. He knew he was young Andy's tin god on red wheels.

The four others were of rougher, coarser cut. Big Un, big as an ox, with a two week's dirty sandy beard and hard green eyes, spitting tobacco juice, his voice a snarling growl or bull bellow.

Little Un, slim, almost skinny, with a long-jawed bony face, long-fingered hands and pale-green eyes set under crooked bleached brows. Dirt and sweat was crusted on his skin and his tow-colored hair and whiskers were matted. Treacherous and dangerous as a coiled snake, he talked in a thin nasal whine.

The renegade they called Happy Sam had a meaningless laugh that broke out when there was no call for laughter. There was an almost blank look in his round blue eyes and he had an upturned pug nose and a big loose-lipped mouth. His mentality was that of a twelve-year-old but he was powerfully built and a crack shot, and fear had been left out of his make-up. He would obey any order Curly gave him. And the taste of blood or the twinge of pain from a fight turned the laughing

Happy into a witless killer.

Happy carried a battered harmonica Curly had given him and played meaningless off-key snatches of tunes whenever he got off by himself and there was nobody to stop him. His thatch of hair was the color of new straw, and though he was perhaps in his thirties he was almost beardless. Curly said he'd won Happy in a poker game from the manager of a freak show who had had the half-wit eating broken glass on a platform in the side-show tent. Horses were not afraid of Happy and even a green bronc never humped when the big half-wit mounted. But when they bucked, Happy rode 'em. He was a natural rider. Curly always had to rope Happy's horses out of the corral for him, though. A gun was the only thing Happy could handle.

The fourth man was the mongrel mixed breed called Speck. Yellow-eyed, his yellow skin sprinkled with black freckles, he had short kinky hair, big yellow teeth and a splayed nose. He was ugly to handle in a fight when he had the bulge but there was a cowardly streak in him as yellow as his eyes when he did not have all the breaks on his side. Speck was by far the best cowhand of the outfit.

Slim, red-headed, freckle-faced Andy Jackson Jones watched those men with narrowed gray eyes. It was fear that tightened his lean belly. And yet he was no coward. In a fight he had more real courage than any man here. But they had him outnumbered and if Curly gave them

those kind of orders, they would kill him. And the showdown was coming.

They were cutting ace-deuce from the deck of cards Curly took from his pocket. First ace and first deuce would pair off two of them and to that pair would fall the job of killing Zee Roswell. Old Zee owned the big Z Lightning outfit. He was tough as an old boot and the only way they'd ever kill that grizzled hard-bitten cowman was to drygulch him. Out in the open old Zee could gun-whip a corral full of such renegades as Curly and his hand-picked bunch, so they'd have to do a first-class bushwhack job. Curly had his eye on the big Z Lightning outfit.

Curly's nimble fingers shuffled and riffled the deck of cards. Then with the heel of his hand he smoothed the dirt floor and set the deck down. His white teeth flashed in a mirthless grin.

"Cut your card, Big Un," he ordered.

Big Un cut the ten of spades. Then Little Un cut the jack of diamonds. Happy cut the four of clubs and they all grinned when Speck cut the deuce of spades.

"Cut 'em, Andy!" Curly's voice had a whetted edge.

This was it. He might cut anything but an ace, Andy told himself. There were only four aces in the deck. How many cards in the deck? Fifty-two? Four to fifty-two for odds that he'd not draw an ace. But that wasn't the idea. He had to declare himself before the draw.

"Deal me out, Curly." He tried to make it sound manly. But his

youth's voice was changing and it cracked. He flushed red and cold sweat bathed him when Happy laughed.

"What do you mean, button?" Curly was still grinning, showing his scrubbed white teeth. But his eyes, under their heavy black brows, were as red-black as glowing coals.

"I ain't bushwhackin' Zee Roswell, that's all."

"You'll split the job with Speck, button, if you draw an ace."

"I ain't drawin'."

"Zee Roswell killed your old man." Curly's voice sounded gritty. "Zee killed Jackson Jones because he had to have the Jones ranch. He needs all that water you got on your place. So he killed your daddy to get the outfit."

"I only got your word for it, Curly. When I tackled Zee about it he denied it. Cussed me out. Laughed at me. Said somebody had bin throwin' a big load into me—"

"You tackled Zee about your daddy's killin'?"

Andy Jackson Jones nodded. "Zee said that even if he'd hated my daddy's guts he wouldn't have shot him from the brush. That he'd aimed to whip the hell out o' Jackson Jones, and if he couldn't fist-whup him, he aimed to shoot the belly off him. But he said that never for a second did he ever bother with the notion of drygulchin' Jackson Jones or any other man on earth—"

Andy's voice gathered strength as he talked but it sounded mighty thin and puny in his own dusty ears and

he saw the quick look Curly cut the others. They were all staring at Andy cold-eyed—all but the grinning Happy who was picking the dirt from his harmonica with a match.

"Jackson Jones," said Curly, "was one of us. Regardless of what that whiskey-soaked old rannahan Zee Roswell claims, he killed Jackson Jones. I kin put eyewitnesses to the killin' on the stand in a law court and prove it."

"Then why don't we have Zee Roswell arrested?" asked Andy.

"No court in Arizona would ever convict a big cattleman like Zee Roswell for killin' a two-bit rustler like Jackson Jones. The jury would free him without leavin' their seats in the jury box. Only way you kin ever square your daddy's debt is to throw in with me, button."

Andy Jackson Jones' heart thumped his ribs. He shook his wiry red head, licked dry lips and spoke.

"No."

"Jackson Jones was into me for five thousand dollars. Gamblin' debt. You want me to take your outfit for that debt, button?"

"I'd ruther lose the outfit than murder a man."

There it was. His cards spread face up for Curly and his renegades. It had taken just about all the guts Andy Jackson Jones had.

"That tough-hand daddy of yours"—Curly squatted on his boot heels, a little drunk, his eyes watching the boy narrowly, and his voice was toneless and deadly—"was out under

a two-thousand-dollar bond on a cattle-rustlin' charge, when Zee Roswell killed him. I put up that cash bond and the law won't hand it back to me. Jackson Jones would be proud as hell of his only son if he seen him now tryin' to back out of a debt of honor."

Andy's face whitened until the mass of freckles stood out like warts. There was a desperate stricken look in his eyes.

"The Swingin' J outfit is worth more'n that, Curly. You take it for the debt."

Curly's lips twisted in a faint sneer. "I already got it, button. Lock, stock and barrel. Ranch, cattle, horses. Signed over to me on an old gamblin' debt. Jackson Jones had a bad losin' streak to'rds the last."

Happy laughed his meaningless laugh. Andy was sweating but the sound of that half-wit's laugh sent a shiver along his spine.

"Cut yourself a card, button," said Curly quietly.

Andy cut a quick look at the faces of those four tough renegades. They were watching him as though he were some kind of an animal they'd caught in a trap. An animal that was trying to get away and couldn't.

Speck was holding his deuce of spades and his yellow eyes glinted in the flickering candlelight.

"Ace my deuce, kid," he purred, "and I'll learn you how it's done."

Big Un's huge bulk barred the open doorway as he squatted on his hunkers, clenching and unclenching his big hairy hands slowly as though

he were choking somebody to death.

Little Un had been whittling a stick. Tossing it aside, he stropped the sharp three-inch knife blade along his chaps and a one-sided grin slid across his lean face as his pale eyes looked at Andy. Then he reached out, speared the top card with the point of his knife blade and flipped it, face up, on the hard-packed dirt floor at Andy's feet. The card was the ace of spades.

"There's his card, Curly," said Little Un.

Curly smiled thinly and reached for his half-empty bottle. Happy's moronic laugh filled the cabin.

"You aced my deuce, kid." Speck's yellow eyes shone like a cougar's.

Andy was squatted on his spurred boot heels, his back against the old adobe wall of the cabin, every nerve pulled taut and his muscles tensed. Sweat beaded his freckled face and he was too scared to move or even say anything. They had him trapped. He'd seen a half-grown rabbit once, frozen in its tracks by fear. And within striking distance of the rabbit was a coiled rattlesnake, its flat head swinging slowly sideways, its green eyes holding the rabbit's eyes with a hypnotic stare. Andy likened himself now to that rabbit. He had shot the rattler's head off, but there was nobody to shoo the heads off these—

Andy jumped at the sound of a shot outside in the night. Happy's crazy laugh broke off sharply. Big Un pulled his bulk inside and out of the doorless opening. Curly slapped out the candle light.

II

Without taking so much as a split second to think it out, Andy moved now. It was still part of a horrible nightmare. He dove through the open doorway no longer guarded by the Big Un's bulky frame. Dove headlong and rolled when he hit the ground outside. Then he scrambled to his feet and was running, crouched, as he rounded the corner of the old adobe cabin. Cat's-claw limbs tore at his old denim jumper and chaps and one limber branch whipped his face, the curved needle-pointed claws raking his face. But the stinging pain only spurred him on and he clawed and tore his way through the brush to where he'd left his saddled horse.

He'd wrapped his bridle reins around a mesquite limb. Now he yanked them free, grabbed the saddlehorn and swung a-straddle of his saddle without touching a stirrup. Digging in his spurs, he leaned across the horse's neck and the startled cow pony snorted, jumped and hit a run like a quarter horse leaving the starting line. Dodging boulders and brush. Running like hell-on-wheels. Twisting, dodging, jumping the low rocks, swerving past the big boulders in a reckless race with death.

But not a shot sounded. No bullets whined past Andy and his running horse. And when he'd left the cabin a mile or two behind him, he reined to a halt and sat his saddle, his six-shooter gripped in his sweaty hand, panting like a spent runner, shivering a little with the thrill of excitement that had replaced that

paralyzing fear inside the cabin. His heart was pounding so hard its pulse drummed in his ears.

Then, so close that he hardly had time to jump his horse in behind the brush, came a horse and rider with the same headlong, reckless speed with which Andy had made his getaway. Andy thumbed back the hammer of his gun. Ready to kill now. Kill or be killed.

Horse and rider loomed up, flashed past, crashed on through the night. But in that brief swift passing the boy had recognized both horse and rider. He lowered the gun hammer and spurred in pursuit.

"Hey!" Andy lifted his voice in a cautious shout. "Hey! Honey! Gosh sakes! Slow down!"

The rider ahead either did not or would not hear him. It was miles further on and the rocky brushy trail had lost its steep dangerous slant and flattened out onto the mesquite and cactus-spotted floor of Lobo Valley before Andy rode down the fleeing rider.

Honey Roswell, niece of the grizzled Zee Roswell and second heir to the big Z Lightning outfit, was fifteen, with dark honey-colored hair and honey-brown eyes so fringed by thick black lashes that they looked black in the moonlight. Her sun-tanned skin looked even darker because of the honey-colored curls. Small, reed-slim, she was developing into the first bloom of young womanhood, but in her shabby old denim jacket, and brush-scarred chaps with a battered old Stetson that had belonged to her uncle yanked down

hard on her head, she looked more like a boy than a girl. A scared, angry, taunting boy.

"So I guess Zee Roswell still killed Jackson Jones!" she panted. "I guess my Uncle Zee is still a darned bushwhacker, ain't he! I guess your fancy Curly is the best friend you got! I guess you wasn't scared, there in that cabin. I guess— Oh, you darned red Andrew—"

Honey's voice choked and the fear she'd kept fought back flooded now in tears that she tried to knuckle out of her eyes with small tanned hands that were brush-scratched and grimed by dust.

"Gosh sakes, Honey. Don't bawl. Was that you fired that shot?"

"Who . . . who'd you think it was? The Arizona Rangers? That darned gun k-k-kicked out of my hand."

They sat their sweaty, blowing horses and Andy patted her clumsily on the back. Even around Honey he was girl-shy.

She shrugged away from his awkward back-patting and sniffed. Under level black brows almost too heavy for a girl, her dark honey-colored eyes blazed.

"Don't go pawing me like your fancy Curly does Nita. Don't touch me, Andy Jackson. Not till you take it back. Every darned word."

"All right, I take it back, then. After all, you kind o' helped me out o' a sort o' tigt. But you'd've bin shore underfoot around there when I got ready to shoot it out with 'em."

"Whew! You wasn't shooting anybody from where I was watchin'. All right, if you're takin' it back, take it back, Mister Andrew."

"How many times I said don't go callin' me Andrew. You went and named one of them hound pups Andrew—"

"The runt of the litter," smiled Honey. "You takin' it back or are you just keepin' on changin' the subject? Whyn't you say it?"

"How'd you get there to that cabin, anyhow? Your Uncle Zee'd warm your britches if he found out. You must've cold-trailed me."

"Say it!"

"If Curly or one of them tough renegades had ketched yuh—"

"Your fancy Curly couldn't ketch cold. I could lose that fancy pants inside the horse pasture. Say it!"

"Gosh sakes, quit harpin'. If you could see your face. Dirty. I don't know if it's tears from bawlin' or just sweat—"

"So you're a liar. You said you took it back. And look at your own face. Brush-popper Andy! Can't dodge a cat's-claw branch. Well, you takin' it back? Or are you a dirty liar?"

"You needn't cuss about it. And takin' it back don't prove he didn't do it. Curly says he's got eyewit-nesses—"

"Uncle Zee says he didn't kill Jackson Jones. You takin' that fancy-pants Curly's word against Zee Roswell's?"

"I'm not takin' anybody's word. I'm goin' to find out who killed my dad. And I'm killin' him. If I said it—come right out now and said Zee didn't kill my dad—I'd just be talkin' through my hat. I'm gittin' proof. Why can't you let it go at that?"

"Because Uncle Zee is the finest man on earth. That's why."

"He's tryin' to jail me."

"Reform school ain't jail. He caught you brandin' a mav'rick. And he caught your daddy stealin' Z Lightnin' cattle. And somebody bushwhacked his only son Bob, and now Nita is Bob's widow and she's stuck on that Curly. I guess if you was Uncle Zee you'd get ornery about it—"

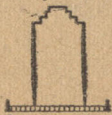
Honey's voice choked up again and angry tears welled to her eyes and clung to her thick black lashes when she tried to blink the tears away. She mauled the tears away with her fists and her voice went on.

"You rode to the ranch, Andy,

TEST SIGHT

TASTE RIGHT

If the ladder is placed against building,
how far up will it reach?



ANSWER.

It will reach exactly to the top of the building.



and tackled Uncle Zee. You had a gun in your hand. He talked you out of it. I guess if Zee Roswell is as ornery as you claim, he'd have taken a quirt to you. But he let you go. Then he sent for the sheriff. That's why I rode over to your ranch. To tell you the sheriff was comin' to take you to reform school. But you wasn't there. That fancy Curly was ridin' away from your place. So I trailed him to that old cabin on the rim, 'bushed up and watched and listened. I could see you all in the cabin in the candle-light. And when it looked like they was goin' to kill you or somethin', I cocked the six-shooter I'd swiped from Uncle Zee and aimed at the moon and pulled the trigger. Why didn't you tell me a six-shooter kicked back in your face?"

"Curly was at our ranch?"

"Nita met him there. If she knew I saw 'em together, she'd . . . well, she don't like me, Andy. She'd hurt me if she wasn't scared of Uncle Zee. Nita is awful beautiful, Andy, but she's got mean eyes. Only I guess Wild Bob Roswell never noticed she had mean eyes or he wouldn't have married her. Now Wild Bob's dead and Nita's his widow and she inherits Bob's share of the Z Lightning outfit. And Uncle Zee can't buy her off. I listened to Uncle Zee and the lawyer talkin'."

They rode on to where the trail forked. One trail led to the Z Lightning home ranch, the other trail went to the Jones place in Brushy Basin. And Andy Jackson Jones remembered what Curly had said about claiming the Swinging J out-

fit, lock, stock and barrel.

"You better not go home, Andy," said Honey Roswell. "The sheriff will be there."

"I got no home to go to, Honey. The Swingin' J belongs to Curly now. And no sheriff is goin' to take me alive—"

"Pssst! Andy! Somebody's comin'!"

They had no time to hide. And the lone rider had a gun in his hand. His voice, a lazy drawl, challenged them.

"Claw for the moon, you two!" His saddle carbine covered them.

Then when his horse carried him up at a running walk, he lowered the gun and wiped a grin from his lean tanned face.

"Excuse me," he said, laughter brimming his drawl. "Looks like I horned in where I got no business. But if the young lady is called Honey, her Uncle Zee Roswell is havin' big fits and little uns. And if the young feller is Andy Jackson Jones, I got orders to take him to town."

"You ain't the sheriff." Andy's voice sounded stubborn.

"Nope. I'm captain of the Arizona Rangers."

He looked at their sweat-marked horses, at their dusty, stained faces. And again his hand wiped away the start of a grin.

"Nothin' to git excited about, Andy," he said. "I'm in no lather about takin' you to town. I knowed your daddy. Worked with him on lots of roundups before he got married and before you was born. That was back in Texas when he was

called Sorrel Jackson. Before he tacked on that Jones to his name. Fact is, me'n Sorrel Top was raised together on the Pecos. And you kin gamble on it, as I told Zee Roswell, if Sorrel Jackson turned bad, it was booze and somebody mean a-crowdin' him into it. You ever hear your daddy mention Brett McGrath?"

Andy's eyes widened. "Gosh! Brett McGrath. Texas Ranger. He always said that if anything happened to him I was to try to locate Brett McGrath—in Texas."

"I just come from Texas. Taken over this Arizona Ranger outfit. It was disbanded. I'm patchin' it up and puttin' it together. You couldn't locate me so I come to hunt you up. And I reckon we're in no big rush to go to town, are we, Andy?"

"I won't go to no reform school!"

"Not while I'm alive, you won't, and we'll shake on that, Andy." Brett McGrath held out his hand. Man to man.

III

The Ranger was big. Wide-shouldered and lean-flanked, he rode a long stirrup. He had wiry black hair and blue-gray eyes that puckered at the corners when he grinned. His nose was blunt and he had a wide mouth and a fighting jaw. And for a big man, he handled himself well. Brett McGrath had made a gun-fighting rep for himself as a member of the Texas Rangers. That was why he'd been sent for to organize the Arizona Rangers. Brett McGrath was tough on cattle rustlers.

He let go Andy's hand and shook hands solemnly with Honey.

"You're Pete Roswell's Honey," he said. "Pete was Zee's younger brother. He stayed in Texas when Zee trailed his Z Lightnin' herd to Arizona. I knowed Pete lots better'n I ever knowed Zee. You see, Zee was a lot older'n me and Pete and Sorrel Jackson. He had a habit of treatin' us like we was too young and weak-brained to amount to much. Saved his money while we blowed ours. When we wanted to git Zee on the prod we'd call him Gran'maw. If ever that ol' rannahan gits to ridin' you too hard, Honey, you call him Gran'maw. That actually curls his hair . . . Now let's git on to the Z Lightnin' Ranch before Zee scatters that posse he's gatherin' to hunt you."

Brett McGrath was somewhere in his forties. He had a way with horses and kids. Before they reached the Z Lightning Ranch, he had listened to all Andy and Honey could tell him. And they all agreed that it was strictly between the three of them and not even Zee Roswell was going to know all of it. They were three pardners from here on.

Honey and Andy were too excited to notice how Brett McGrath's leathery face had whitened a little when Honey spoke of Wild Bob Roswell's beautiful widow being "stuck on" Curly. Like a knife had been twisted in his back. How the humorous glint in his eyes had died and left them bleak.

Lights showed in the big ranch-house and moving lanterns bobbed like fireflies around the big barn and

the horse corrals where Z Lightning cowhands, mostly Mexicans, were roping and saddling their top horses.

Zee Roswell was there at the barn. A short, heavy-shouldered, hard-paunched, bowlegged man with ragged gray mustache and bushy white hair, his seamed face gray and his steel-gray eyes bloodshot.

"Honey!" There was a dry sob choking the tough old cowman's voice as he lifted his niece from her saddle and hugged her hard. "Honey!"

Nita Roswell came out of the barn. Tall, with mahogany-red hair and green eyes, she was a lithe, graceful figure in whipcord riding pants and a jacket patterned after a cowpuncher brush jumper's. Her skin was like old ivory but the smile wiped from her beautifully chiseled face when she saw and recognized Brett McGrath. Something like terror darkened her green eyes. And then the Ranger swung from his saddle and there was a hard grin on his wide mouth as he pulled the hat from his graying wiry black head.

"Long time no see you, Nita." His voice was a lazy drawl.

Color flooded Nita Roswell's cheeks and she pulled off a buckskin gantlet and held out her right hand almost like a challenge.

"It's good to see you again, Brett." Nita Roswell had a husky voice. "And I really mean it."

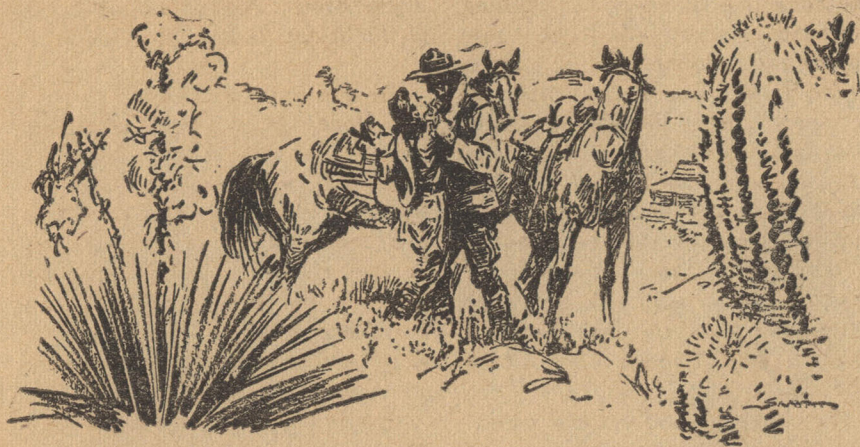
"Same words." The Ranger's voice was low-pitched. "Same tune. There was a time when I believed it. Water under the bridge over the Rio Grande. Remember the old bridge? El Paso, Texas, on one side

of the River. And at the south end of the bridge, Juarez, Mexico."

Zee Roswell was too busy reclaiming Honey to notice. But young Andy Jackson Jones, still sitting his saddle, had seen and heard and was troubled because it was something that reminded him of the evening he had ridden up and found Nita there at the Jones ranch. Jackson Jones had been holding her in his arms and sort of smoothing that heavy dark-red hair. And then they had heard Andy's horse and had broken apart as Jackson Jones had jerked his gun. Nita had wiped tears from her face. Then when Jackson Jones had seen it was Andy, he had shoved the gun back in its holster. And a day or two later somebody had told Andy that Wild Bob Roswell had been bushwhacked on his way from town to the Z Lightning Ranch.

Andy's father had never offered a word of explanation why Nita Roswell had been sobbing in his arms. He'd told young Andy to keep his mouth shut, and promised that some day he'd tell Andy about it. Meanwhile the boy was just to forget it. But after Wild Bob's murder Jackson Jones had been careful to pull the blinds before he lit a lamp in the house and he'd warned Andy over and over about never opening the locked door at night no matter who knocked on it and wanted in. And if anything happened to him, Jackson Jones, Andy was to get in touch with the Texas Rangers and Ranger Brett McGrath.

Now Andy watched Nita Roswell



"You'll take care of me?" Nita begged, clinging to Brett.

and Brett McGrath and there was that same look in her green eyes that darkened and softened them, as though there were tears hidden in their depths.

"I've got to see you alone, Brett." Her face flushed and her voice was husky. "It's life and death. Your life, your death, if you're buying chips in this game. They murdered Bob. They killed Sorrel. They'll get you next. I didn't dare hope you'd come. Now you're here and I'm afraid for you. I heard Zee say he'd send for you. He doesn't know about . . . about us. I've never had the nerve to tell him. And anything I'd say now would only damn me more in his eyes. Zee Roswell is a hard man, Brett."

"Hard. Yeah. And dead on the level. I've bought chips in the game. Pete and Sorrel and me—amigos. Not even you could smash up that pardnership, Nita. Then you married Wild Bob and got what you

wanted—the biggest outfit in Arizona . . . You say they got Wild Bob. And they killed Sorrel. You forgot Pete Roswell. They got Pete first and they're after Zee now. That's fair enough, if bushwhackin' is fair. But when they go after youngsters, by Satan, lady, I'm declarin' open season on 'em. Pete Roswell's little Honey, Sorrel Jackson's young Andy. Those tough hands are hydrophobia wolves. And the devil in hades will show 'em more mercy than they'll git from Brett McGrath. Pass that down the line to Curly for what it's worth. And I'll keep my mouth shut. Zee won't learn it from me. That's your dirty chore."

Brett McGrath turned away. He almost bumped into Andy's horse. And for the first time he seemed to remember the boy had been there all the time. A grin twisted his mouth and he told Andy to light and put up his horse.

Nita Roswell stood in her boot

tracks a long moment. She looked as though she had been slapped hard across the face. There was humiliation and shame, and then pride and a woman's fury in her green eyes. She turned quickly and walked towards the house, tall, lithe, very beautiful, her coppery hair like a crown on her proudly tilted head.

The big Ranger's eyes followed her. Then he took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped away the sweat that beaded his forehead.

"A hell of a thing, Andy. Hittin' a woman. Even when you know that she deserves it. But mebbys you don't know. Mebby it's the wrong guess. And in a case like that you'd git down on your knees and crawl. And you would thank the Señor Dios because you'd guessed wrong. You *could* be wrong, too, because she's a high-stake gambler and nobody gits a look at the hole card she's got buried. But you know it's the card that'll fill the royal flush she's bin drawin', card by card while the jackpot keeps gettin' bigger. And, one by one, they drop out o' the game and she rakes in the chips without anybody knowin' if that hole card fills out her hand. Only this time we hang and rattle—to the last chip. Till we git a look at that hole card. Or a bushwhacker bullet pushes your chair back and like Pete and Wild Bob and Sorrel, you're out of the game. . . . I'm thinkin' out loud, Andy. Keep it under your hat. Let's put up our horses."

Then Zee Roswell came up with Honey. There was a grin on his seamed old-leather face and a twin-

kle in his eyes as he beetled shaggy brows at young Andy.

"Keep your gun in its holster, young feller. And we'll all sit down to a bait of grub. Chip off the red-headed Jackson block, ain't he, Brett? He's got more guts than most men. Shoved a gun in ol' Zee's belly and told him he was goin' to gut-shoot him because Zee Roswell had killed his daddy. Meant it, by grab. And had me sweatin' before I talked him out o' the notion. Honey thinks he's quite a feller. And speaking of guns, somebody swiped a six-shooter I laid on the kitchen shelf. Danged gun's loaded. Li'ble to explode if you fired it. I taken it off a drunk Mexican. The thing looked like he'd tried to shoot a .38 ca'trige in its .45 barrel. Bullet stuck, and clogged the barrel near the muzzle. If I was the feller that swiped it, I'd throw it in the crick. And if I wanted a gun that bad, I'd ask my ornery ol' Uncle Zee for mebby a .32 pistol that'd fit me. Now I wouldn't mention no names but if you was to see—"

"No wonder it kicked me, Andy!"

"For gosh sakes!"

"It'll mebbys save everybody concerned a lot of fuss and bother," said Zee Roswell, "if you was to cut me in on the deal. That goes for you, too, Brett. . . . And Nita."

The big Ranger's face flushed. Zee Roswell chewed the ragged end of his drooping gray mustache and told Honey to take Andy on to the house and show him where to wash up. And not to spare the soap, either of 'em. They when they had

gone on, the grizzled cowman turned to the Ranger.

"Nita never loved my boy Bob. She told him that before they was married. They both told me. Bob was younger than her. He worshipped her and she straightened him out. Then Bob was killed. Murdered. And she told me she was going to kill the man who had killed my son. She said she was to blame for Bob's bein' killed. That she'd be her own law.

"I told her I'd sent to Texas for the only man who could handle the deal. Meanin' you. And I was watchin' her when I spoke your name. First time I ever saw her flinch. If I hadn't bin lookin' for it, though, I'd have missed it. Nita's got a good poker face. Well, she should have. Owned the biggest gamblin' joint in Juarez, didn't she?"

Brett nodded. "It wasn't much of a secret, Zee. Nita's father was one of the biggest gamblers both sides of the Mexican border. When he was killed on the bridge one night by some bad loser, Nita was left the gamblin' house—and not much else. She had to run it or give it away. She'd played with cards and dice and roulette wheels like other little girls play with dolls, so she ran the place. She was runnin' it the night I met Sorrel Jackson and Pete Roswell a few years after our trails had forked. We drifted in there to gamble and we met Keno Kinnear's daughter Nita who had taken over the gamblin' house.

"There was a rebel raid that night at Juarez. At least they were shouf-

ing 'Viva, something or other.' It was quite a ruckus. The three of us got Nita Kinnear and most of her bankroll across the bridge to El Paso. We had to use our guns. We banked Nita's money in the safe at the Paso Del Norte Hotel and then we celebrated with champagne. Nita swore we'd saved her life. That it had bin a fake rebel raid. A tinhorn trick to rob her. We knew there'd bin nearly two hundred thousand dollars in the bankroll and she wasn't a lady who imagines things. So she was plenty grateful. The three of us wasn't used to the gratitude of a beautiful lady. Shucks, we all wanted to marry Nita Kinnear. And not for her money.

"None of us married Nita. Pete and Sorrel married Texas girls they'd known all their lives. I rocked along batchin' it. Nita Kinnear dropped out o' sight. She'd told the three of us she was marryin' for a million dollars some day and wouldn't settle for a cent less. To git rid of three likkered-up, lovesick cowhands, she told us that. And then I heard she'd married Zee Roswell's son and heir to the two-three-million-dollar Z Lightnin' outfit. And I told myself Nita hadn't bin foolin'."

Zee Roswell nodded. "It was a million-dollar deal, Brett. But not so cold-blooded as it sounds. Bob Roswell left Nita that much and more when he was killed. But the day of the funeral, after Bob's will was read, Nita had the same attorney draw up a statement deedin' her share of the Z Lightnin' outfit to my niece, Honey Roswell. She wouldn't have it any other way. And she

tried to argue me down when I made her a big cash settlement. She claimed her hands were bloodstained enough. . . . What ails you, Brett? You look kind o' green around the gills."

"Could be," the big Ranger grinned crookedly, "like I told Andy. Git down on your knees and crawl. . . . Excuse me, Zee. I hit a lady. Hell, not with my fist. There's other ways of hittin'. Words that you can't take back if you live to be as old as the hills—"

"Hold on, hold on. Before you pull up lame. This Curly. Who is Curly? What is he? What does he mean to my son Bob's widdier?"

That halted Brett in his boot tracks. "That's right, Zee. For a second or two I forgot. Curly? You're askin' me the same question I haven't got the nerve to ask Nita. I'll just hold back a while on that kneelin' and crawlin'. All I know is that Curly is bad medicine and I'm goin' to kill him. I don't think Nita wants him killed. But Curly was the name Nita Kinnear mentioned that night of the Juarez ruckus when bullets were thicker'n hail. Curly was the gent behind that fake rebel raid. So far and up to date, Curly is just a name. But it's one mighty bad name, mister!"

IV

Brett McGrath, Acting Captain of the Arizona Rangers, rode away alone from the Z Lightning headquarters ranch. Dawn was just breaking and he bared his head to the cool breeze that drifted down

from the mountains. It felt good. He'd had a few drinks with Zee Roswell and he had smoked too much as the two of them talked in the lamplit office behind tightly pulled blinds. Brett was trying to convince himself now that it had been those few drinks of whiskey and the smoke-fouled air and all that augering that had left him with a headache and his blood hot as though he had a fever. But Brett McGrath was not a liar. He could not lie, even to himself. Least of all, to himself. It was Nita Kinnear that bothered him.

Brett McGrath thought he had been cured of Nita. But the mere sight of her, after all these years, the sound of her voice, the grip of her hand, the way she had looked straight into his eyes without flinching, brought it all back. And he was ready to risk his life for her, listen to her, believe in her. That was why he was slipping away before daybreak, running away like a coward. Because his was a grim and ugly job and it had to be done with a gun and done in cold blood.

Brett was a law officer. He'd taken this job of reorganizing the disbanded Arizona Rangers, getting that law outfit in shape to turn over to the Ranger captain the governor would appoint. Zee Roswell had sent to Texas for him and told the governor of Arizona that Brett McGrath was the one man for the job, because Brett McGrath was a man who could never be bought or scared off. Zee had lost his only son. His Z Lightning cattle had been whittled on by rustlers. Zee Roswell was a

power in Arizona—owner of one of the biggest cow outfits in the Southwest. And old Zee was on the prod.

"I'll put a bounty on their rustler bushwhacker hides, Brett," Zee offered. "Name you own figger. I'll lay the cash on the barrelhead. I got some Mexican cowhands workin' fer me that kin shoot and they'll foller you through hell and high water. Take 'em along."

"I'll do this job alone, Zee. I don't want help. Not even yours. And you know damned well I'm no bounty hunter. So keep your dollars in your pocket."

"Write your own ticket."

Brett said he aimed to. "Look here, Zee, nobody outside of the Arizona governor and you know I'm here and what I'm here for. Keep it dark. Andy and Honey are kids but they'll keep a secret better than most men. Nita knows who I am and what I am and why I'm here. I want her to have plenty free rein. Let her come and go, day or night. Don't trail her. Don't send anybody to foller her. If Nita gits in touch with this Curly, I'll know it. Might be she'll lead me to him and his renegades. But it's strictly a one-man job. That's the only way I'll play it."

"You're the boss, Brett. But remember, I'm here if you need me."

"I know."

Brett McGrath had looked through the haze of tobacco smoke at the grizzled cowman. Zee had aged fast. Building up this big layout had been a tremendous job but it had been the kind of work that was meat and drink and pleasure for Zee Roswell.

He had never taken time off to play, even when he was young. His sole ambition was to own the biggest cattle outfit in the country and he had not spared himself night or day, to bring about the realization of his boyhood dreams. Well, he'd done it. His Z Lightning was one of the largest spreads in the West. His Z Lightning brand was well known from the Mexican border to the Canadian line.

Zee had done the job alone. He had married a girl who would make him a good ranch wife. And she had died in the harness, wearing a ranch woman's kitchen apron instead of the silks and satins of a millionaire's wife. Like her husband, she had never cared for town and society. They had a big house at Tucson and she had lived there winters while young Bob was going to school. But she had been happier at the ranch.

Their only son, Bob, had inherited none of his parents' thrift or bent for hard work. From the time he was old enough to get into trouble he had been in one scrape after another.

Zee's money and influence had kept Wild Bob out of jail. Out of prison, even. Booze and guns make a bad combination. Whiskey softens you up for the tinhorn gamblers. And it leaves the son of a rich father wide open for the snares of the honkatonk girls. From what Brett McGrath could learn, Wild Bob had gone the route. He had killed a man or two in drunken gun fights. The gamblers had taken him down the

line. Zee had paid off half a dozen ladies who proved Bob Roswell had asked them to marry him.

Bob's mother had died when he was about fifteen and Zee had done the best he knew how. He had hidden his disappointment behind a grin, making the excuse for his son that Bob was entitled to sow his crop of wild oats. But it had been Wild Bob, not the hard winters, the drought and the gruelling work that had etched the deep lines in Zee's leathery face and whitened his hair and bent his stout back under a load too big and heavy for one man to tote alone.

Then Wild Bob had brought Nita Kinnear to the ranch. Only she was now Mrs. Bob Roswell. Zee had shaken hands with her and looked straight into her eyes that were as cold-green as winter ice.

"How much?" Zee had put the question when he was alone with his son's bride. "How much do you want to turn my boy loose?"

"There never was, never will be," Nita had told the grizzled cowman, "any price tag on me. I've got what I wanted. The Z Lightning outfit and all that it means. Security. Position. A place in the sun. I made a deal with Bob Roswell and I'll stick to it. I'm Bob Roswell's wife, Zee Roswell's daughter-in-law. I'll respect every word of those marriage vows. Neither of you will ever have cause to be ashamed of me. I never welshed on a bet in my life. Neither did my father. He was a gambler. I'm a gambler's daughter. Keno Kinnear was on the square. He taught his daughter from his book."

Nita had opened her bag. From it she had taken a thick package of I.O.U's. She had won them, she told Zee, from various gamblers who had taken Wild Bob at dice and poker. The total sum of those gambling debts, Zee told Brett McGrath, had been something to stagger a man. Nita had made him tally their total before she burned them.

Nita had weaned Wild Bob away from the whiskey bottle. She had sobered Bob up on his wedding day and kept him cold sober until he was killed.

Nita had put Bob Roswell to work. Made him like it, to boot. Wild Bob Roswell had been ramrodding the Z Lightning outfit when they killed him.

And Nita had accomplished all that, made a man of Bob Roswell, without henpecking him or riding him in any way. She had told Bob that she'd like to be proud of him. That had done the trick.

And the odd part of it was, Zee told Brett, Nita had stayed here at the ranch. She'd never taken her fancy clothes out of her trunks except to hang them in the closet. She wore calico and gingham, or shabby riding duds. She and Bob had their own house. Nita did her own housework with a Mexican woman for the scrubbing and heavier work. She made and hung the new curtains, put Navajo rugs on the floors and hung her oil paintings, some of them valuable, on the walls. She cooked Bob's meals and had Zee and Honey there for supper now and then, serving meals as fine as ever Zee's good wife had cooked. And she sang at

her kitchen chores. Sang in that husky voice that sent shivers all over a man. And so Nita had won over tough, hard-bitten Zee Roswell.

But Honey was the rebel. The girl would never let Nita mother her or big-sister her. And the more Zee let down his guard, the higher young Honey built up the barricade that shut out Nita. Honey distrusted Bob's wife from the start. Nothing Nita could do, and she tried everything, could get her a place in the youngster's heart. Jealousy? Perhaps.

"Nita's got mean eyes," was little Honey's only answer to Zee's questioning.

Brett McGrath turned that over in his mind now, along with all Zee had told him. Mean wasn't the right name for them. Cold, perhaps, till some inner flame warmed them and they deepened and softened and darkened. A gambler had to be poker-faced. A gambler's eye had to remain fathomless. And Nita was the greatest gambler Brett McGrath had ever known—

V

The big Ranger was jolted out of his thoughts. Somebody on horseback was behind him. He'd left the Z Lightning Ranch ten or fifteen miles behind. He rode off the trail and in behind the brush and slid his six-shooter from its holster.

Then the rider came up out of the gray dawn. Cussing softly, Brett shoved the gun back in its holster and rode out from behind the brush patch to block the trail.

"Whichaway, young feller?"

Young Andy reined up. Color flushed his freckled face. "Gosh! Gee whiz! I just—I kind o' figured—"

"I told you to stay at the Z Lightnin' Ranch, feller. You got to learn to take orders."

"They don't want me there, Brett! I don't want to stay there!"

It was like sending back a faithful dog. Big Brett McGrath turned away from the pleading look in the boy's eyes.

"It's like this, Andy. And I had to tell Zee the same thing. It's a one-man job. Even the toughest gun-sluggler I could hire would only be underfoot. Manhuntin' takes years of experience. You got to outwolf the wolf to ketch him."

"But there's four besides Curly."

"And that only makes my job easier, pardner."

"Zee Roswell don't want me there. He tried to send me to reform school."

"Zee's got a new slant on things since I talked it over with him. He's kind o' adopted you. Along with Honey. The Z Lightnin' is your new home, boy. It's a good un."

"I like Brushy Basin."

Brett McGrath grinned. "Turn a horse loose and he'll head back for where he was born. He'll quit green feed and runnin' water to drift back to mesquite beans and the dried-up waterhole where he was born. But you got more sense than a horse. Anyhow, you got to ride herd on Honey. You pull out and she'll cold-trail you. . . . Listen! Looky you-

der a-comin' at a high trot. What'd I tell yuh?"

Honey tried to dodge back. But it was too late. The big Ranger hailed her and she rode up, tight-lipped and defiant.

"You ran off, you darned Andrew!"

"Gosh sakes, Honey. You trail a man like a coon houn'!"

"Whoa!" Brett McGrath halted the fight before it got under way. "Hold your fire! Now turn back from here. Rattle your hocks. Mebbyso you kin git back before Zee or Nita find out you've drug it."

"Zee was up all night augerin' with you," said Honey. "He's bedded down now. That Nita sneaked out three hours ago. Saddled a horse and drifted.

"For gosh sakes!" burst out Andy. "What was you doin' up all night?"

"Standin' guard. What was you doin'? Sleepin' like a jughead!"

"Hold it!" Brett McGrath's voice had a growl in it. "Give me your promise to go straight back to the Z Lightnin' Ranch. Both of you. Then hightail it. You're wastin' my time. See what I meant, Andy? I've got a job to do."

When they had started back, arguing hotly, Ranger Brett McGrath lifted his horse to a long trot. His grin was gone and his eyes were bleak. He knew where he was headed for and he dreaded what he'd find out when he got there.

He cursed himself for the way he'd treated Nita. She'd wanted to see him alone. Talk to him. Perhaps tell him something he needed to

know. But he'd slapped her in the face with some brutal words. And you couldn't treat a woman like Nita Kinnear that way.

Nita Kinnear had a man's code, straight from the book of her gambler father. She played the game square, according to her own lights. When the breaks had been against her and the going was tough, Nita hadn't whined or quit. And when she got what she wanted from life she showed her true colors. She could have walked away from Wild Bob Roswell with her freedom and a million-dollar settlement. But that wasn't Nita Kinnear's way. She didn't welsh on a bet. Didn't go back on a bargain. And Brett McGrath had accused her of things he had invented in his mind and heart because he was eaten inside by a jealousy that warped his own man's code of honor. Nita Kinnear had hurt him so he'd tried to hurt her back. He'd made a thorough black-guard job of it.

It seemed like a million years ago, and still only yesterday, but time was



something you can't measure when you hold it as a scale against memory. There had been that night there on that bridge across the Rio Grande when Nita had let Brett walk back with her to the middle of the bridge and the moonlight on the water below and the stars reflected there. And Brett McGrath had held Nita Kinnear in his arms and her arms had clung around his neck. Her lips had bruised under his and her eyes were deep and dark and welled with tears.

"I've never kissed a man before, Brett. No man ever meant that much. No man can ever mean this much again. I'll go back with you now. To El Paso. Marry you. Share whatever there is to share in life with the man you love."

"The pay of a Texas Ranger." Brett's voice had been bitter. "Beans and jerky. A room in a second-rate boardin' house. A tent. And you wait alone there and every hour you're alone you're wonderin' if they'll fetch me home dead. A hell of a life for any woman. Worse than hell for you. I've squandered everything I ever had. Tossed it away because it didn't seem worth savin'. I was happy to rock along. Nobody told me I'd meet you."

"Money, Brett?" Nita Kinnear had picked up the two bulky satchels he'd been carrying for her. "There's enough here to buy whatever you want. A big cow outfit. Land. Cattle. Horses—"

"That's not my money, Nita," he had told her flatly. "I got to earn my own. Mebby in a few years."

"No, Brett. It would take too long.

What's mine is yours. You're right about the boarding-house room or a tent pitched in the shade of a mesquite alongside a waterhole. I've earned the right to something better. It's here in these two bags. It's mine; I won it without cheating. I'll share it with you, but I'm not brave enough to throw it away. I'm not brave enough, Brett, to go back to beans and jerky and sometimes not even that. I've shared those lean days with my father, along with the flush days. That poverty will always haunt me. You'll have to take my gambler winnings along with Nita Kinnear. If you want her."

"All I got left is a man's pride, Nita. I won't let even you take that away from me. I'll git backin'. Start on shares. I'll own my own brand in a year. There's quick money in wet cattle—"

"Brett!" Nita's husky voice had been a gut shot. "I'd rather see you dead. I'd rather kill myself than see Brett McGrath turn cow thief!"

So he had kissed her good-by there on the bridge across the Rio Grande. Nita Kinnear had carried her two-bags of money back to Juarez, in Mexico, and Brett McGrath, Texas Ranger, had walked back to El Paso. To his Texas Ranger job.

That had been a million years ago, and only yesterday. And Brett McGrath still did not own a brand. And he was on his way now to kill some men. There was one of them named Curly. And it looked as though Nita had ridden on ahead to warn this Curly.

Curly, and his four hand-picked renegades. They had killed Pete Roswell. They had killed Sorrel Jackson who had changed his name to Jackson Jones when he began rustling Mexican cattle. They had sworn to kill Brett McGrath because those three wild cowhands, one of them a Texas Ranger, had helped out Nita Kinnear that night in Juarez. They had killed Wild Bob Roswell. Why? Nita had the answer to that. They planned to kill Zee Roswell. Nita knew why. Curly and his four renegades. Those four were border scum. But Curly had been with the Buffalo Bill Show. Curly had won bronc riding and roping prizes at all the big rodeos. On the other hand, Curly had been behind these bushwhacking killings. He had hired these four tough renegades to do the murdering. Perhaps he figured that did not make him guilty. But in the book of Ranger Brett McGrath, this mysterious Curly was guilty as hell. Guilty of murder.

Nita Kinnear, for she would always be Nita Kinnear to Brett McGrath, had gone to warn Curly that the Ranger was on his trail.

Unless . . . Unless she had meant what she had told Zee Roswell when she said she would kill the man who had murdered Wild Bob Roswell.

"She meant Sorrel Jackson Jones," Zee told Brett McGrath last night. "It was Bob that ketched Jackson Jones stealin' Z Lightning' cattle, Brett. I had nothin' to do with it. Bob was ramroddin' the outfit. Curly posted cash bond for Jackson. And Jackson was out on that bond bail when Bob got bushwhacked. Nita went around

like she was movin' in her sleep, walkin' through a nightmare.

"Then Jackson's murdered body was found just inside the big gate yonder. Nita was gone all that night. She won't say where she was and I've never asked her. But you kin see how it tallies up, Brett. Nita knowed Jackson killed Bob Roswell. She tricked Jackson into meetin' her at the big gate out yonder. That's where she killed him. You better drop it right there. I might gun down the man that tried to prove that killin' on Bob Roswell's widder. . . . Now I'm goin' to bed. You better do the same, Brett."

Ranger Brett McGrath hadn't argued the point. He had, so far as Zee was concerned, dropped it and let it lay. And there it would lay until he talked to Nita. But he wanted to kill Curly before he saw Nita again.

VI

Andy Jackson Jones leaned from his saddle and swung open the big pole gate, motioning Honey through. The silence that had held them on their return ride to the Z Lightning Ranch had been strained to the breaking point. Now Honey rode through the gate, high-chinned and queenly haughty, and on towards the ranch buildings a mile distant. It was not until she heard the clink of the gate chain and metallic snap of the seldom-used padlock that she discovered she'd been tricked. Because Andy was on the outer side of the pole gate and Z Lightning fence.

"Your Uncle Zee," grinned Andy,

"will be lookin' for you again by this time."

"Where you goin', you darned Andy?"

"Home."

"You're cold-trailin' that Ranger! And after you promised him—"

"He said he'd make me promise," Andy slid out with a boy's reasoning. "Then he must've forgot. Now don't tag along, savvy? Or I'll set you afoot. Brett McGrath don't know this range. Curly and them others do. Brett's takin' the long roundabout trail to Brushy Basin. I'll beat him there an' if they got a bushwhacker trap set for him, I'll spring it and warn 'im. . . . There's your Uncle Zee a-comin' after yuh. So long!"

Andy whirled his horse and rode away at a long lope, cutting through the brush. Deaf to Zee Roswell's profane shouting, he was taking the shortest route to Brushy Basin. Tight-lipped, his freckled face set in grim lines, he whistled tunelessly through his teeth to keep up his nerve. That was a shabby trick to play on Honey. And he was sort of sliding out, belly-crawling out of an unspoken promise to the big Ranger. But he had it figured out that Brett McGrath was too badly outnumbered and the Ranger was too handicapped by not knowing this country that was plenty familiar ground to Curly and his renegades. And so he figured that his trick was justified. And when he neared the Jones place in Brushy Basin a couple of hours later, he felt certain he'd done right.

Two shots, not a hundred yards

away, broke the morning silence. Then a woman's sharp cry rang out. Nita's voice, anger, not fear, shrilling it.

"Let me go! Take your dirty hands off!"

"Take it easy, lady!" That was the Big Un's heavy rasping voice.

"Curly will kill you for this!"

"Guess again, Miss Nita!" sounded the Little Un's nasal whine. "We're follerin' Curly's orders. You double-crossed Curly too many times. Seems like he don't trust you no more. So he's keepin' you on ice till Zee Roswell kicks through with big ransom money for Wild Bob's purty widder. You play it Curly's way this time, or you git what we give Sorrel Jackson Jones. You signed back your part of the Z Lightnin' to Zee Roswell. After all the trouble we went to, drygulchin' Wild Bob. Sorrel Jackson parted Curly's hair with a bullet and left him for dead and rode to the Z Lightnin' Ranch to tell you the news and give Zee a big earful. So we cut Sorrel Jackson Jones down."

"Sorrel didn't have anything to do with Bob Roswell's killing?" Nita's voice sounded brittle.

"Hell, no. Curly doped Sorrel's likker. Sorrel was dead to the world when we drygulched Wild Bob. And when he come out of the likker sleep, he went gunnin' for Curly. Damn near got 'im—"

"Shut up, Little Un," growled the Big Un. "I got her gun. You wanta come along peaceful, lady? Or do we tie you to your saddlehorn?"

"Keep your distance, you two!" sounded Nita's brittle voice. "I'll

rip you wide open!"

"Look out!" roared the Big Un.
"She's got a knife!"

The Little Un let out a whining scream. Brush crashed. Hoofs pounded. Then Nita spurred into sight, her horse lifted to a run. And not a hundred feet behind her, Big Un and Little Un gave close chase. The look on the Big Un's face was like that of a savage animal. Blood spilled from the knife rip in the Little Un's shoulder.

They were coming fast along the twisting trail and towards the brush that hid Andy Jackson Jones and his horse. Andy gritted his teeth and sat tight in his saddle, gripping his six-shooter until Nita raced past on her running horse. She was out of the line of fire now. Andy thumbed back the gun hammer and pulled the trigger. The heavy .45 slug hit the Big Un in the belly. He lurched in his saddle and a hoarse bellow of pain and fear tore from his bearded lips. The six-shooter slid from his big hairy hand and he was clawing at his belly when his horse threw him. And before he hit the ground Andy was shooting at the Little Un as fast as he could thumb back the hammer of his six-shooter and pull the trigger. Little Un was screaming and cursing and hanging onto the saddle-horn. Then his voice choked off in a rattle and he let go and slid sideways off his horse, dead when he hit the ground. And when Nita brought her running horse to a halt and reined around and rode back at a trot, the Big Un was dead, too,

his ugly face in the dirt.

"It's Andy!" Nita's voice was hardly more than a whisper.

Andy Jackson Jones sat his horse, smoke drifting from the muzzle of his empty six-shooter. The freckles stood out on his white face.

Nita rode alongside him, white-lipped. Leaning from her saddle, she kissed him hard.

"You're a brave man, Andy."
There was a dry sob in her voice.

Then she swung from her saddle and picked up the gun the Big Un had dropped. Nita's own gun, an ivory-handled .38 on a .45 frame.

"Better load your gun, Andy."
Nita's voice was quiet. "Then let's get away before the others get here."

There were only two trails into Brushy Basin. This was one. The other followed the ridge on the other side of a brush-choked barranca. Andy and Nita could hear Speck's voice lift in a shout.

"You, Big Un! Little Un! What you got over yonder?"

Happy's crazy laugh sounded. Then the echoes of their voices tossed back and into a hushed uneasy silence.

"You all right over yonder?"
Speck shouted again and his voice sounded tense and uneasy. "Let out a holler, Big Un. She come on your trail. Did you git 'er?"

And again Happy's meaningless crazy laughter echoed Speck's voice.

Nita and Andy could see Speck and Happy ride out from the brush on either side of the trail, their gun barrels glinting in the sunlight. Then at almost the same moment, Andy sighted Brett McGrath riding

along the trail. The big Ranger shouted a challenge at Speck and Happy and the next split second they were shooting at him. Like a flash, Brett was off his horse and standing crouched, his saddle carbine cracking. Speck went backwards out of his saddle but Happy kept riding at the Ranger and the six-shooter in the half-wit's hand kept spewing streaks of fire while the bullets kicked the dirt around Brett McGrath. Happy's crazy laugh mingled with the sounds of the two guns and then his horse swerved and the witless killer crashed heavily to the ground almost at the Ranger's feet.

Brett McGrath was back on his horse now. Speck and Happy lay dead there on the trail and Brett's horse shied around the motionless bodies. Then Nita called out to the Ranger.

"Be careful, Brett! Curly's there at the ranch. Andy got the Big Un and Little Un. Andy and I are going in on this trail. You go in on that one."

"Andy?" The big Ranger's voice was harsh.

"Sorrel Jackson's Andy. And he's got all it takes. Get down there fast, Brett. Shoot first and don't miss! Curly won't show you any mercy! Good luck, man!"

Brett McGrath headed on down the slanting trail, his horse at a run.

Then Nita jumped her horse around and past Andy's and she had a fifty-yard start as she matched Brett McGrath's speed in what seemed like a race with death to the

cabin and corrals Andy Jackson Jones called his home. The boy was still far behind and he could not see her when he heard her voice, clear and sharp.

"Get back there, Curly! Don't coyote! Die like a man! Give me that little to remember about you!"

"Don't shoot, Nita! Let me past! I'll keep going! I'll never come back. Never bother you. You'll never see me again—"

"You yellow, whining, mongrel whelp! Brett McGrath will give you a fighting break. Take it. You try to pass and I'll shoot! If you get past me, Sorrel Jackson's Andy will kill you like you killed his father. Ride back and play your hand out, Curly. Let me remember you like that!"

"Looks like your jackpot, Nita. So be it. Adios!" The craven whine was gone from Curly's voice. Andy caught a last brief look at the fancy range dude who had once been his idol. Handsome, white teeth bared, Curly sat his horse with a showman's saddle swagger. He gave a sort of mocking salute, then rode back the way he had come, his silver-mounted six-shooter in his hand.

"Adios, Curly!" Nita called after him, tears in her dark green eyes and a farewell prayer in her choked voice.

Andy reined up alongside her. Together they sat their horses and in almost breathless silence they watched the clearing at the foot of the brushy trail. Curly and Ranger Brett McGrath rode towards each other until they were within short six-shooter range. Then both guns

spewed fire. But Curly's gun barrel was tilted too high as though he was shooting at the sky, firing some last bitter, mocking salute. The farewell to defeat. Brett McGrath's first bullet struck Curly in the center of his chest and the heavy .45 slug tore through his heart. Curly was dead when he hit the ground.

Nita rode down the rest of the way alone. Andy stayed there. He did not quite know why. He saw the big Ranger dismount and lift her out of her saddle and hold her in his arms. And then her arms were around Brett McGrath's neck and she tilted her face up. Brett's face bent down and their lips met.

"Who was Curly?" Brett's voice was smothered in Nita's hair.

"Curly Kinnear was my brother," Nita told him. "A cheat and a blackguard. A tinhorn. Keno Kinnear disowned him finally, kicked him out. Curly's renegades killed my father. Since I can remember, Curly has cheated his way through life. Begged from me. Blackmailed me. Threatened me. I told Sorrel about it the day Andy caught me at Jackson's ranch. Sorrel said he'd protect me and Bob. That's why they killed Sorrel. You'll marry me now, Brett? Take care of me?"

"For keeps, Nita."

Andy turned in his saddle. Zee Roswell rode up, his horse dripping sweat and blowing hard. Honey was right behind him, and then a bunch of Z Lightning Mexican cowhands.

Zee reined up. He saw Brett McGrath kiss Nita, then put her back

on her horse. The old cattleman's leathery face lightened up with a grin. He nodded his grizzled head.

Honey rode up alongside Andy.

"You hurt, Andy?" she whispered. "We heard a lot of shootin'."

"I got the Big Un," Andy's voice was at the changing stage and it broke into a weird falsetto. "And the Little Un."

"Honest?"

"Gosh sakes, you tryin' to call me a liar?"

"That was a dirty lowdown trick lockin' the gate. Wasn't it? Now, wasn't it?"

"I got the Big Un. I got—"

"Prove it. I bet next thing you'll be tryin' to shave."

Zee Roswell shifted his weight to one stirrup and turned in his saddle. His eyes were twinkling.

"I got a razor that's all yourn now, Andy. And I reckon you earned the right to use it."

Then Nita and Brett rode up. And Andy almost fell out of his saddle when he saw Honey throw her arms around Nita's neck and Nita's eyes soft with tears as she smoothed Honey's tangled curls.

Zee gave his Mexican cowpunchers orders to bury the dead and to mark Curly's grave apart from the others.

Then they rode back to the Z Lightning Ranch. Zee Roswell was turning the Z Lightning outfit over to Brett McGrath to manage. Brett and Nita would stay on there, always. It was their outfit. And Honey's and Andy's. Zee wouldn't have it otherwise. Arizona would have to get another Ranger captain.

Brett McGrath would be too busy ramrodding the Z Lightning from now on to attend to anything on the outside.

So Brett and Nita rode on ahead while Zee rode along between Honey and Andy. It was quite a while before young Andy got rid of that hard, cold, tight knot inside him and the color came back into his freckled face. He caught the cowman looking at him and grinned sheepishly.

"I want to take back all I said and thought about you, sir."

"You just call me Uncle Zee. Zee, fer short. And I'm takin' back what I had in mind about you, Andy. You'll shore do to take along."

"I was scared," Andy told him. "Scareder than I ever was except when they had me in that cabin—when Honey saved my life."

"That don't make you a coward," said Zee. "I reckon even Brett Mc-

Grath gits that scared feelin' in a tight. Only it ain't fear, because Brett McGrath is the most fearless man I ever knew."

Andy felt better. Honey was smiling at him, her young heart in her eyes. Andy's freckled face reddened. Old Zee used much the same gesture Brett McGrath had used to wipe off a grin.

"So you took it back, Mister Andrew!" Honey beamed.

"Gosh sakes, Honey, can't you let up!"

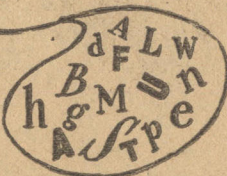
Zee chuckled and dropped behind. He was happier than he'd ever hoped to be. Some day Honey and Andy would no longer be kids. They would be like Nita and Brett, up yonder, riding hand in hand.

Grizzled Zee Roswell, tough as an old boot, pulled a big white silk handkerchief from his pocket and blew into it and wiped the mist from his eyes.

THE END



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



1. Nutback
2. Pelotean
3. Hornnit
4. Osocie
5. Pramews

6. Klerjine
7. Hissaw
8. Rutiga
9. Techu
10. Hugdeaj

11. Dahon
12. Dawyd
13. Hightkawn
14. Sterwinech
15. Knuks

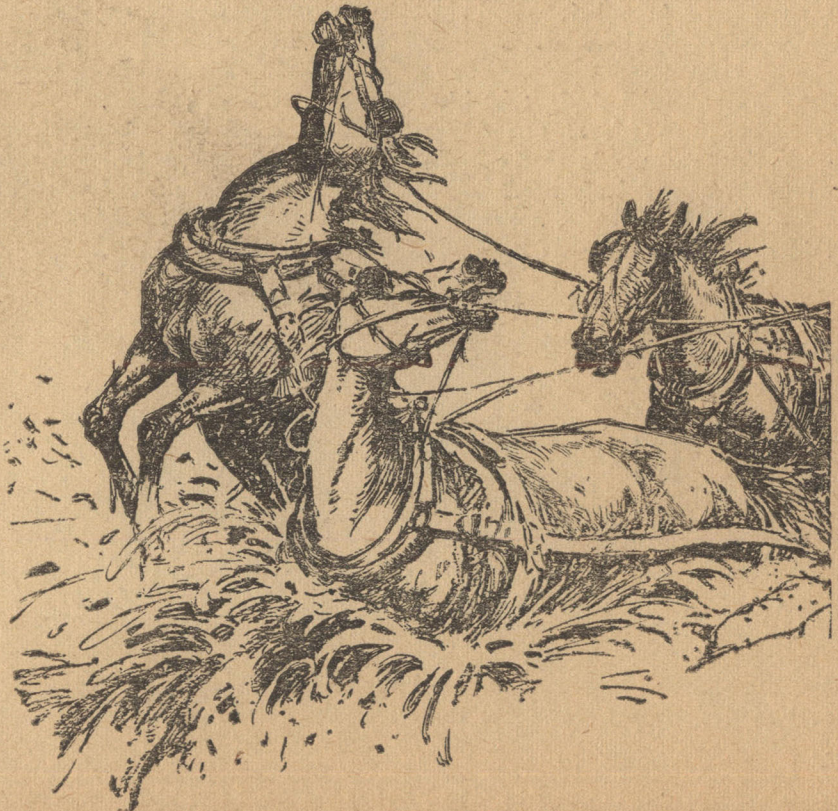
SIX-GUN SCHEDULE

I

As black a night as Lee Foster ever had known mantled the twisting stage road through central western Oregon. The nine passengers within the Silver Wheels coach tried their

best to sleep it out, but the four outsiders bouncing behind the whip stirred uneasily and penetrated the road rumble with nervous talk.

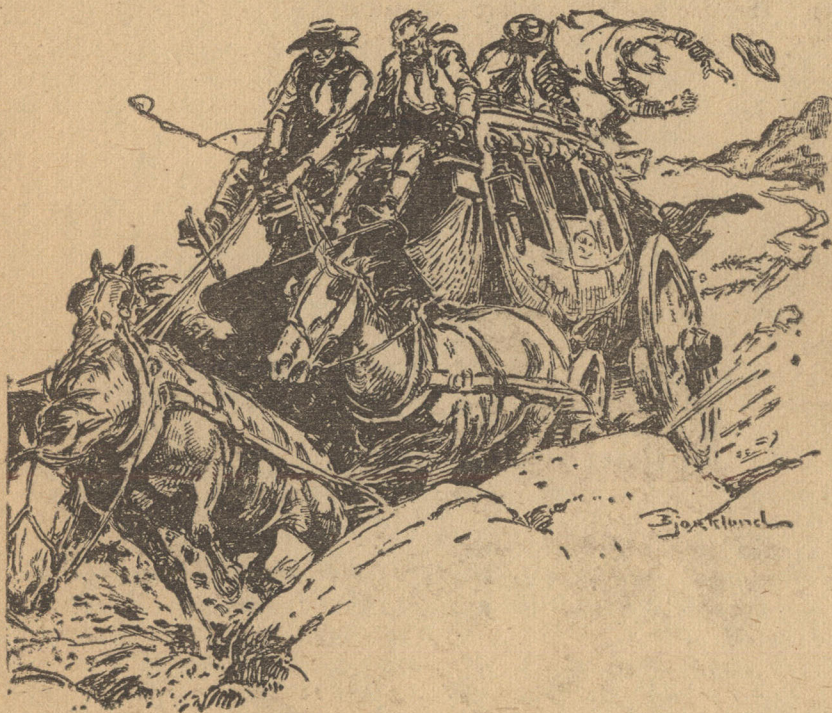
Their open unease had long since spread to Lee, who was making his first trip at the lines of a Silver



FOR FRISCO

by GIFF CHESHIRE

Lee Foster was just the kind of reckless trouble shooter the Silver Wheels needed to bring its enemies into the open—but the coach he tooled out of Portland was boothill-bound!



Wheels stage. Ace of many years on the Overland, he felt callow as an apprentice as he took direction from the girl beside him. Yet he did so willingly, not only because she was Hank Silver's daughter but because Helen Silver knew the way

ahead in that black mystery. "Take it easy here, Lee . . . look out for big rocks . . . you can gig 'em, now! . . ." Her presence was also a comfort, for Helen knew as well as Lee that trouble was going to explode somewhere along the line.

A week earlier Lee had traveled the line northward as a passenger, far too short an acquaintance with the route to give him the road lore a driver needed. He had quit his Overland job and headed for Portland the very day he heard old Hank was in difficulty. Hank Silver had been like a father to Lee in the days when he, too, cracked a skilful whip on the Overland. He had helped Lee to work his way from stable hand to a driver's seat. Then a rheumatic back had taken Hank off the lines for good.

Later Lee had heard that Hank Silver had started his own line, north from Frisco to Portland. Up to that time the Willamette Valley in Oregon had been served only by the coastal steamers that plied north from California. Silver sent his coaches along the meandering ruts worn deep by settlers coming into Oregon country by the south route and later by gold miners. It had looked like a good setup, and Lee had been puzzled when the talk drifting along the staging lines told that Silver was in distress.

Silver had moved his headquarters to Portland, and when Lee walked in on him there the old man's joy had been boundless.

"Am I glad to see *you*!" His face had grown shockingly thin, and worry had dulled the humour of his clear, steady eyes. "They're ruining me, Lee, and the almighty misery is I don't know who!"

Yet the effects were evident enough, Lee soon saw. Outfits broke down, linemen quit with no notice, ugly whispers told of the discomfort

of the six-day trip and distorted the danger of Indians and road agents. It was simply an ugly whispering campaign, an old practice in the business and strange here only because the Silver Wheels as yet had no competitor.

At first Lee had assumed that the dirty work came from competition planning to enter the field. Abruptly he changed his mind. Scanning through the Portland *Oregonian*, his eye fell upon two advertisements in chance but eloquent nearness. The first was Hank Silver's, which read:

Stage to San Francisco! Only *six* days! Overnight stops at Jacksonville and Eureka. Passage may be resumed any time within thirty days. Fare fifty dollars. Ride the stage, save time, and enjoy the wonderful scenery!

Scarcely a hand span away appeared the ad of the North Coastal Steamer Co., which inquired:

Why be uncomfortable? Take a North Coastal ship to California in leisure and safety! Sleep nights in a comfortable cabin!

The North Coastal was only one of several lines advertising their service, but they alone had taken up Hank Silver's challenge in their advertising. Lee's suspicions grew when he learned they were a new outfit with headquarters in San Francisco and going in for cutthroat competition with other steamboat lines as well.

Lee asked Hank Silver about it. "Yeah, their ads sure play up the whispers!" Silver admitted. "Steam-

boat outfits sure wouldn't want to see quick staging to California become too popular."

"They're trying to hog the whole business," Lee pointed out.

"It looks like you're right, son. But how're we going to stop 'em? I started the advertising war, to get folks to see they could save a lot of time taking the stage. That was fair competition. And it took hold. We had all the business we could handle for a while."

"Looks like you still have," Lee remarked. "The stage I come up on was loaded down. So was the one that pulled south this morning."

The old man's grin was bleak. "There was only *four* paying passengers on this morning's stage, Lee. The rest was fakes. Some we just gave free fare for their promise to keep shut about it. Others we've actually been hiring to make the trip back and forth. We don't dare let the public learn how bad people are getting scared out!"

Lee could well concede that. Silver had sunk plenty of money into equipment and the long string of way stations he had set up. A fall-off in revenue such as he described could work quick ruin.

Excitement was stirring in Lee. "If I knew the road, I'd take the next outfit down myself! The only way to stop the whispers is to expose whoever's causing the actual trouble along the line." He knew that Silver's lame back had prevented his traveling the line himself as a trouble-shooter.

"Helen knows the road," Silver told him. "She's ridden it dozens of

times just to make a passenger. She's been pestering me for a driver's job. She can go with you!"

Lee did not realize how pleasant such an arrangement would be until later. The last time he saw Helen Silver she was a spindle-shanked girl. When she came to her father's office, shortly after that conversation, Lee was surprised to find her a full-blown, beautiful woman. Later, with three paid fares and a handful of deadheads, they had taken out the 'Frisco stage. . . .

They now were passing through the low rolling hills and narrow valleys along the upper reaches of the Willamette, and it was only a couple of hours before dawn. Daylight would put them through the Unapquas and Rogues and to Jacksonville, where they would make an overnight stop before entering the foothills of the Siskiyou.

Lee had gone out of his way to ask for trouble this particular trip. He found that his reputation had preceded him, and his presence was probably well known by now all along the line. He had spoken freely of his intention of taking a stage through himself. He spread a brand of boastful talk that was calculated to challenge rather than frighten his enemies.

Hank Silver had pointed out one thing. His stages had been molested almost entirely in the vicinity of Jacksonville, and it looked as though that overnight stop was headquarters for the trouble makers. It was a boom mining camp, jam-packed with hellions.

Abruptly Helen broke silence. "Rough stretch just ahead, Lee. We ford a creek, then climb a high bank."

As she had indicated, the road fell away quickly. The coach body shot forward on its through braces. Wheels crunched into gravel and the coach leveled again. Lee heard the splash of water as the leaders sliced into it. The ford was rocky, all right. The big hickory tongue slapped against the wheel horses. Then suddenly the front end of the coach seemed to drop, lurching widely as a wheel ground against a big boulder.

Lee was almost thrown from his seat, and Helen slid down against him, jerking awake. A topper swore, and there was a scramble for hand holds. Lee let the spans pull the coach up on the far gravel bar, then pulled them down. Securing the lines, he swung to the ground.

Match light confirmed his suspicions. A thorough brace had given away. Helen had climbed down and stood beside him.

"A thing like that," Lee declared grimly, "couldn't have happened by itself!"

He got a lantern from the gear box and lighted it, then crawled under. It was as he had suspected. The thorough brace was fashioned of many plies of riveted leather strung lengthwise on the chassis, suspending the body. The right of the two braces had given way, near the front. A metal body brace had become loosened and dangled near.

Some of the passengers had alighted in boredom. Helen crawled

under the coach beside Lee. He pointed to the dangling metal. "That was pulled loose in a silly attempt to make it look like it had worried the thorough brace in two! That'd take a month of Sundays, and besides I checked this rig personally before we pulled out of Portland. Look!" He picked up an end of the immense leather strapping. "It was sawed almost through in a way to make it look frayed. Then it was rubbed with grease and dirt to kill the new look!"

Helen frowned. "Anyhow, it's a new wrinkle! We've had broken axles and harness and even tongues! We've cleared enough downfall off the trail to start a sawmill! We've hit way stations to find the relief animals either foundered or lamed! I sure thought they'd reached the point where they'd have to start repeating!"

"They're bringing out their special stuff!" Lee grinned. "I sort o' asked for it!"

He decided they would have to wait on the spot until daylight. Even so he hadn't the equipment for repairing the broken brace so it would hold. There was a repair shop at the stables in Jacksonville. The body would have to be rigid-braced with a pole, which would mean a slow, rough ride on in. There might be only three paid fares along, but it would mean three more people to spread complaining talk against the Silver Wheels.

In the light of early dawn Lee cut a small sapling. He had to press some of the deadheads into service

to get the body jacked up and the pole in place. As day brightened, he made a fresh examination of the passengers. They were the typical assortment he had known on the Overland, and Helen was the only woman along. The three paid fares looked like business men. Of the others he did not know which were free riders and which had actually received pay for the trip. He found it impossible to judge whether one of them might be an agent of North Coastal.

It seemed more likely that the thorough brace had been cut at the way station behind, where they had stopped during the night. It was easily within the Jacksonville orbit.

Riding the crudely repaired rig proved to be all Lee had expected. From there on they would be in mountainous country, and the road was rutted, rocky and studded with creek crossings. Lee had to hold the animals to a mere crawl, which lost precious time. A heavy fatigue settled on him and he turned the lines over to Helen for a time but found it too rough to catnap. Ordinarily a whip would go no farther than one division, but Lee wanted to travel the length of the line. This would center interest on his particular coach and perhaps bring out the best his enemies could offer. He gave up trying to rest, and his pulses began to stir with excitement as they inched ever closer to Jacksonville.

II

It was far into the night when the crippled Silver Wheels coach

finally limped its way into the mining town. The passengers climbed out in relief and made for the few hotels and eating houses. A stable crew was on duty at the company barn, but the blacksmith had gone home. A northbound stage had come in and the empty vehicle stood in the equipment yard.

It took an hour for Lee to locate the smithy and get him started on the repair job. Tomorrow he would need a dependable rig under him, for ahead lay the perilous passes of the Siskiyou. The two overnight stops had been spaced so as to afford daylight for crossing the mountains.

Helen had gone to a hotel, and Lee yearned for a bed himself. But the town's honkatonks stayed open most of the night, and he wanted to do a little nosing around before he turned in. When the repair work was under way, Lee strode down the main street. He had spent an evening there on his trip up and was somewhat familiar with the layout.

The liveliest saloon was the Big Strike, and Lee headed for that. If Jacksonville harbored enemies of the Silver Wheel, as Hank Silver suspected, they would be likely to show interest in Lee Foster.

The saloon was crowded and noisy, interest centering around the gaming tables in the rear. Mining men and townsters stood two deep at the long bar. Lee found an opening at the bar and ordered a drink.

His presence lured attention quicker than he had expected. A man made his way through the crowd toward him. A rangy individual, his cheeks were lean and

shadowed with beard. He showed the effects of heavy drinking.

"You Lee Foster? I'm Gow—Emmett Gow. I run Hank Silver's stables in this sink hole. The smithy told me you got in finally."

Lee took the extended hand, noting the man's limp grip. He instantly disliked Emmett Gow, and it came from natural aversion rather than his suspicions about Jacksonville.

"Yeah—finally," he admitted.

"Hear you drove through from Portland. That's a long sweat. You turning back from here or going on south?"

"South. Through to the end of the line." Maybe Gow was just curious about why a man should elect such punishment, but Lee had the feeling he was disturbed. "I'm throwing the whips out of stride, I admit. The man that brought in that northbound coach tonight'll have to go on north in the morning instead of turning back. It'll straighten 'em all out again when I come back."

Gow shrugged. "That's what I was wondering about. Well—I'll see you at the stables in the morning." He turned and made off through the crowd.

Lee finished his drink reflectively. He was ravenously hungry, but there was no chance of finding an eating house open at this hour. He helped himself to a sandwich from the free lunch, then strolled out onto the sidewalk.

Street movement had thinned away, and the only life now was in

the honkatonks. Lee started down the walk. He had gone only a short distance when he grew aware that he was being followed. There was a half vacant block ahead, high with brush, weeds and dried grass. Lee stopped on a corner to fashion and light a cigarette, giving them plenty of time to outflank him or pass their signals. He paused a moment more, dragging on his smoke reflectively. Then he moved down the block.

He had passed half its length when the play came. There was a swishing sound, and he ducked, expecting a knife. This movement probably saved his life. He realized immediately that no knife but a weighted wire had cut the night, whirled once over his head, then dropped to wrap around him. If successful, it could easily have broken his neck. Somebody was playing for keeps!

Lee plunged toward the brush. Two figures stirred there, one coming at him. Lee could tell by their statures that neither was Emmett Gow. The second man blurred out of cover, bent forward. A thrill of animal pugnacity shot through Lee. He had wanted this fight, and now he had it!

Reason cautioned flight, for the odds were greatly against him. Lee ignored it. Probably they had hoped to snap his neck. Since the attempt had failed, they would have to show bigger cards, and he wanted to see them.

He met the charge from his right, and chopped hard fists to the man's jaw. Wheeling, he lunged toward the second assailant only to encounter a flurry of hard-driven

knuckles. He broke through, crashing a shoulder into this man's face. The man took a couple of quick back steps, then sat down hard. The first assailant cut air in a panther-like spring as Lee spun around.

The collision sent them both sprawling. Lee landed flat on his back, his breath ripping from him. The second jasper was on his feet. Springing, he landed boots first on Lee's head and began to stomp out his killer fury.

Lee rolled, trying to suck back his escaped residual air. The effort made a rasping sound. Now that he was down, the two hard-cases seemed bent on finishing the fight with their feet, as they would grind out the life of a reptile. Recovering a little, Lee shot forth a hand and grasped a man's foot. He jerked, twisting the leg with all his might.

His victim described a quick half turn in midair and landed face down on the hard earth. The other man backed off momentarily. Lee churned to his feet and sailed into him with skull-popping blows.

His hope was to survive the scrap with at least one of these jaspers a prisoner. The town marshal could probably identify him, and the man could be made to talk. What he could tell, Lee knew now, would be of great benefit to the Silver Wheels.

Lee battered the form in front of him to the ground and stood over it, panting. Then something hit the side of his head with terrific impact. He was dimly aware that a rock had been hurled. Lights burst inside his skull, and he wobbled on his feet. Mechanically he saw a figure

struggle up and come at him. He tried to put up a defense, but he seemed to have lost the power to drive his fists ahead of him. He tottered, and as the other came in with a series of ripping uppercuts, he fell forward. . . .

When he came to, Lee spent a long, dazed interval trying to get his bearings. There was a terrific reek of whiskey in his nostrils, which coupled with the roaring ache of his brain to nauseate him. He knew that he had been unconscious, but to his dazed memory it seemed as though it had been only for a few minutes. Suddenly he saw with a start that it was daylight.

Lee sat up painfully, discovering he had been stretched out on the hard earthen floor of a log cabin. The windows had been boarded up. The place was empty except for the dust, webs and the spiders that had spun them. Lee staggered to his feet, reeling. Exploring fingers located the blood-caked lump on the side of his head, where the rock had impacted. He discovered that the smell of whiskey came from his own clothing.

He could hear no sound of movement beyond the clay-chinked walls, so he decided the structure was somewhere outside of town. It was clear that his attackers had cooped him up here to get him off that stage run. He wondered whether Helen had taken the lines herself, when he failed to show up, or had waited. He could not understand the meaning of the whiskey with which he had been liberally soaked.

Presently Lee's head cleared enough to permit him to take interest in his immediate problem, which was to get out of there. A quick investigation showed him that the heavy door was locked on the outside. The boards sealing up the windows were thick and apparently had been put on with big spikes. The chinking was brick-hard clay, and even if he managed to pick some of it out he would open a crack only an inch or so wide. The sheeting and tin roofing above the pole rafters seemed to have been put on to stay.

He found that he had been frisked and relieved of his jackknife, the only thing resembling a weapon he had been carrying. He discovered that his unwound watch had run down, and he whistled in alarm. That meant it was well along in the day. That rock must have handed him a stiff brain concussion!

Lee prowled restlessly around the small, one-room shack, everywhere meeting with frustration. He was relieving himself in a series of ripping curses when suddenly he grew still and tense.

There was sound of horseback travel beyond the log walls. Lee sucked in wind for a mighty yelp, then held it. The riders coming up to the cabin halted. He waited rigidly, pondering the situation. He had no way of knowing if they were coming to turn him loose or to finish him off permanently.

Voices sounded outside, and shortly somebody was slipping a key into the padlock. Lee heard the hasp drop, saw the door swing inward.

Two men came into the shack, each with a six-gun bunched in his fist. Both looked battered, and Lee realized they were the pair that had attacked him the night before. The gangling one had a mouse under his eye. The other, wedge-shaped and powerful-looking, peeled back puffed lips.

"Well, Foster, did you have a restful night?"

Lee studied them as they circled into the room carefully. If they started to cut him down, he would have little hope of stopping them. But at least they had learned respect for him.

"Watch the jeebow, Smitty!" the wedge-shaped man muttered. He gave Lee a long, insolent look. "No use your cutting capers, Foster. We're here to turn you loose. Step out that door and into the nice sunshine. But no tricks, because we'll be right behind you!"

Lee stepped over the high jamb, the bright daylight blinding him for an instant. The pair followed him out.

"Watch he don't try to hook one of our cayuses, Penton!" the man called Smitty warned.

"He'll get plugged where his suspenders cross if he does!" Penton replied cheerfully. "Lee, if you follow that trail for a quarter of a mile, it'll put you on the road to Jacksonville. Smitty and me'll wait here a while, and we'll be on guard for a trick, so don't try anything."

Lee plunged ahead on the trail Penton had indicated. Apparently they had meant only to hold him up until the Frisco stage had pulled

out, which it would have done long since if he knew Helen Silver.

From the position of the sun, Lee judged that it was nearly noon. He bent forward in the long hike to Jacksonville. . . .

When Lee reached the edge of town and struck off down the side street toward the Silver Wheels stable, his brow wrinkled puzzledly. A crowd hung around the big doors, and he recognized some of them as passengers he had brought in the day before. For some reason, Helen had not taken the stage on by herself, as he had expected.

As he pounded up the hard path, Lee noticed that his appearance was causing a stir of excitement.

Somebody yelled, "There he comes, the carousing son!"

Emmett Gow leaned against a wall, watching Lee's approach through steady, inscrutable eyes. The whipman saw the big Concord coach standing unhitched in the equipment yard beyond the stable. The northbound stage had pulled out. A man Lee had earlier decided was one of the paying fares glared at him.

"A lousy trick you played on us, leaving us stranded like this!"

Lee was commencing to see the pattern. The real story, if he told it, would be called an attempt to wiggle out of a tight into which a night of "carousing" had gotten him. His eyes bored into Emmett Gow's.

"Where's Helen Silver?"

Gow's gaunt shoulders lifted in a shrug.

"Why!" he returned, in mock surprise, "we thought it was on account of her that you didn't show up!"

III

The discretion that would have been natural to Lee otherwise evaporated as he heard those words. He went forward on churning legs, his shoulders bunched for attack. He knew Gow expected this, but had risked it to get the audience to believe the way he wanted. All that seemed immaterial in his furious craving to drive the man's words back down his throat.

Gow wasn't afraid of him. His long body alerted, big hands scooping forward as he fell into a rough-and-tumble stance. Smitty and Penton must have described the kind of scrap Lee had put up the night before, but Gow seemed to feel himself equal to it.

Lee never gave the man a chance to practice his special brand of mayhem. He avoided the swooping paws and drove a smoking fist to Gow's jaw. Outrage lent surprising power to the punch. Gow's head snapped back, and his eyes glazed. Head bent and shoulders swelling to his fury, Lee exploded a series of chopping drives to the muscles of the man's belly. Gow's body slammed back against the wall, then he slid into a heap in the straw-littered dust.

The blacksmith Lee had roused out the night before stood in the crowd, as well as a couple of stablehands. Lee turned to them.

"How come that stage isn't hitched?" he demanded.

"Kept her hitched from daylight to ten!" a stablehand whined. "No sense letting them hosses fry out their brains in the sun!"

"Well, get 'em hitched again!" Lee rasped.

He was worried about Helen Silver, but a whip had but one main instinct, to keep the wheels rolling as close to schedule as human wit and endurance would allow him. The 'Frisco stage would have to roll out, Helen or no, for it had already lost six hours. And the story that could now be told about a drunken driver having caused the delay would do the Silver Wheels no good.

While the hostlers were spanning up the animals, Lee made a minute inspection of the vehicle and could find no evidence of tampering. The broken thorough brace seemed to have been properly repaired. Gow and his hard-cases, he reflected, had switched to blue chips and now disdained trifling efforts.

Before he rolled the stage off the yard, Lee checked hurriedly at the hotel where Helen had put up. He learned little. She had left before the clerk at the desk came on duty that morning, and that was all the man knew. With a sigh, Lee turned and made his way back to the stable. It would have been easy for Gow to trap the girl. Helen had probably put in an early, unsuspecting appearance at the barns and walked right into Gow's hands.

Gow had revived by the time Lee got back to the yard. But he had had all he wanted of Lee Foster's medicine, at the moment, and had retired to the dinky office at one end of the barn. Lee went there. He knew there was no use either questioning or threatening the man, but

he felt impelled to deliver a warning.

"I'm taking the stage out, Gow! Maybe you figured that by taking Helen Silver you could hold me here. I know you're behind all this. I know you're drawing pay from the North Coastal outfit. If you was loyal to Silver and a real stage man, you'd've seen that stage went out on schedule this morning—even if you had to take the lines yourself!"

"Hank Silver never authorized me to run his outfit!" Gow returned savagely. Yet from his expression Lee knew his charges had jabbed into a sensitive nerve. "I run his barn and take care of his hosses, and if a whip goes on a tear it's no skin off my nose!"

Lee gave him a long, departing look. "I've got to go through, but I'll be back. Helen Silver had better turn up before then, and she'd better be unharmed! If anything's happened to her, Gow, I'll take you apart in a way that'll make hell seem a relief!"

South of Jacksonville more than one worry pressed heavily on Lee's shoulders. The delay would put him into the worst stretches of the Siskiyou during the coming night, a section Silver had carefully planned to give his whips good daylight for negotiating. And Lee knew the brief but thorough whipping he had given Emmett Gow would call for swift reprisal. The reptile couldn't ask for a more suitable site than the endless, precipiced switchbacks that lay ahead.

Lee's weathered features were cold as he sat at his lines and crowded

his horses. His concern for Helen never left him. The sleep of unconsciousness is not restful sleep, and weariness burned in his eyes. Hunger and thirst were forgotten, and desperation opened reserves of energy.

Before entering the foothills of the challenging mountains, Lee hung a string of bells across the hames of a leader. The high trails were not wide enough to permit passing, which was accomplished through a system of turnouts. It was the unwritten obligation of any outfit, stage, freighter or packstring, to keen the air for the sound of warning bells before it left such a turnout. The traffic from California to Jacksonville was much heavier than it was to northward, and long waits were often necessary in crossing the range.

Lee halted at a way station just short of the summit for a change of horses and to let the passengers stretch their legs. The sun was moving far down the sky when he topped the hump and started down the south slant. The occasional waits on the turnouts grew longer as oncoming outfits toiled their slow way upgrade. It grew obvious that night would catch them in a bad spot.

In the high switchbacks the trail was little more than a narrow ledge spanning the face of sheer precipices. Even so, there were occasional stretches where Lee could let the spans out, and he took every advantage of them. A topper crawled uninvited into the seat beside Lee.

"Jumpin' catfish!" he whistled.

"If we had a tail we'd be a kite!"

Before Lee could answer he grew aware of a disturbance inside the coach. He flung a quick glance over his shoulder in time to see two men swing out and land rolling in the road. For an instant he thought they had spooked out. Then a couple of seconds later an explosion rent the air.

"Dynamite!" somebody inside the coach shouted. "They held a gun on us while one of 'em lighted the short fuse and tossed it out! Then they piled out!"

Lee's hands were too full to listen further. The explosion had reacted instantly in the nervous horseflesh coupled to his lines. He rose to his feet, cutting loose with his black-snake in an effort to divert the spans. The animals shook their heads and lengthened out in panicked strides.

The coach rocked to break-neck speed in a matter of seconds, and it was already too late for the rattled passengers to jump for it. Lee applied all the brake he dared, and concentrated on his lines.

They were careening down a long and fairly straight slant, but there were hairpin turns ahead. And the worst hazard was that they might meet an oncoming outfit. Lee shuddered as he imagined the consequences of that. He alternately punished and soothed the racing teams, striving to recapture his control. There were seconds when spinning wheels hung on the very brink of the great drop, and again the coach bounced along inner walls. They careened past a turnout where an ox-drawn wagon waited, luckily

halted there by the stage's madly jingling bells. The flashing side sight made Lee's flesh crawl.

Instinct told him the animals were beginning to tire. He dared not brake too heavily for fear locked wheels might skid them off. Then, a quarter mile ahead, he saw where the trail reached canyon's end and swung back sharply. He knew they could never make that turn.

Horror swept over him. Even if they did navigate the turn, a string of Mariettas was tooling up the grade, just around the bend below. The freight outfit had expected the coach to stop at the turnout just passed.

Lee's glance knifed ahead to the end of slant. Beyond the apex of the curve the canyon dwindled in a thin wedge, and he observed suddenly that the road crossed a small bridge. A mountain stream flowed from the wedge and on down the widening canyon. In brief, frantic flashes Lee's mind formulated a desperate plan.

The distance separating the stage from the bend disappeared in a matter of seconds. As the leaders reached it, the whip put the last measure of his control into jerking them abruptly from the road and into the creek. Instinctive brute obedience brought response. Lee locked the brakes tight.

The leaders slacked speed when they hit the water in a huge splash and observed the canyon wall dead ahead. The spans behind were forced to follow suit. As the traction eased, the locked wheels skidded

along the ruts, and the vehicle slowed noticeably.

Drenching, icy water and the barrier ahead stopped the horses, but not before the leaders had tripped on the rocks of the creek bed and gone down with the others piling up behind them. The coach careened from the road and bounced a few feet on the rough creek bed, then came to a stop.

The passengers had been badly mauled and frightened, and they piled out of the coach like angry hornets. A couple of toppers had been spilled when the coach left the road, but they were not hurt. Lee leaped to the ground, his face a mask, to inspect the damage.

IV

A leader was dead and another badly injured. The other animals showed only minor injuries, though their harness was badly tangled and broken. The coach, aside from burned-out brake blocks, was not damaged enough to prevent its going on.

Seeing that the menace had been removed from the road, the freight outfit resumed and pulled on up. Lee borrowed a pistol from a skinner and shot the injured leader. The remaining four animals would have to power the coach on to the next way station. Lee cut a small fir tree to drag behind as a brake.

It required nearly an hour for him to get the tangled spans straightened out and the stage back on the road and rolling again. Not until then did he have opportunity to

digest all that had happened. But it was apparent from the open way they had set off that explosion that the Silver Wheels' enemies had expected the outfit to wind up in total wreckage on the canyon floor, with nobody left to tell how it had come about. Tangible evidence would point simply to a runaway. A catastrophe like that to one of its stages would have been a killing blow for the line.

And the whip realized that his skilful maneuvering in preventing the disaster would invite another and probably more vicious attack. While the passengers could testify that it had not been a natural runaway, Lee was probably the only one who could trace that dynamite explosion to the North Coastal outfit. Since the assault had come close to costing the lives of a coach full of men, their agents would be frantic to silence him.

Horsebackers could easily overtake him on the road, or they could follow one of the summit trail short cuts and come out somewhere ahead of him. To achieve surprise, they would likely pursue the latter course. Lee realized he would have to keep on the alert.

Yet he felt anything but alert, now. Reaction had set in and it combined with his weariness to depress him. He felt no further uneasiness about his motley passengers, for any secret agents would have jumped from the stage with the other two. Struggling against fatigue, he crowded the spans forward into the ever receding hills.

Traffic thinned as evening approached, for few cared to dare the

high passes after nightfall. Then, at a turnout where the road crested one of the lowering hills, the warning sound of bells caused Lee to wait. He did so worriedly, debating if he should halt for the night at the way station ahead, which offered no accommodations for the passengers, or push on. The thought of losing the hours of darkness was bitter to him.

He swung to the ground to exercise the stiffness from his aching bones. The inside bank had fallen away at this point, and a large table rock towered above the road. A few of the passengers swung down, also, uneasy because of the night that promised to catch them still on the switchbacks.

"Seems to me we'd ought to stop wherever it gets too dark to see good, driver," a man muttered nervously.

One of the men Lee had taken for a paid fare scowled quickly. "Man, I've got an appointment in 'Frisco, and we're late already! If it's going to take ten days to get there a fellow'd better ride a steamer and save himself all this!"

That settled it for Lee. "We'll go through!" he rasped.

Yet his temper had been aroused more by the warning bells, which seemed to come no closer. The outfit was certainly taking its own sweet time about clearing the neck!

There was sudden sound from the left, and all turned toward it.

Mounted men came suddenly from behind the big rock. They were all masked, and Lee tallied six of them

in his first startled glance. The reckless anger of frustration flared in him again as he recognized the gaunt frame of Emmett Gow. This was the showdown! The hard-cases, Smitty and Penton, were along, bruises showing on the parts of their faces that were not covered by their masks, and two others were probably the pair who had started the run-away and then managed somehow to join Gow.

They had used bells to stop him there, and it had been a sure-fire trick, for Lee would not have dared to ignore the sound and enter the neck. But Lee would not have side-stepped the showdown even if he had been warned, for he wanted to get it over with.

Gow ripped out an order. "All right, you people! Line up in a row there along the bank!" He masked his voice with deep, gravelly tones.

Six-guns bunched in ready fists prompted the passengers to hasty obedience. Lee elevated his hands, but did not move. His eyes had fixed on the sixth masked figure. It was boyish, much slighter than the rest, though likewise masked and with gun in hand. Lee knew abruptly that it was Helen Silver.

It took an instant for Lee to figure it out. A mounted man sat astride a skewbald cayuse beside and a little behind Helen. He was watching her rather than the stagers, and Lee realized he was holding a gun on her. Probably the weapon in her own hand was without ammunition.

Lee saw Gow's eyes narrow in satisfaction above the black handker-

chief. Gow had intended for him to recognize Helen Silver! They must have forced the girl to don boy's clothing and accompany them in this fake stick-up. Whatever their game, she was a trump card. Gow realized Lee would be far more tractable knowing who she was and that she was in mortal peril.

"Get over by the wheel there, driver!" Gow snapped.

Lee obeyed. He had to let the game proceed long enough to get his bearings. He stood with hoisted hands while the man called Smitty dismounted and began to rifle the boot. He returned from it with an impatient shrug, then went to examine the boot in the rear. After that Smitty made a hasty examination of the gear chest and the inside of the stage.

Emmett Gow spurred closer to Lee. "Where'd you hide the dust, driver? Speak out if you don't want a gun whipping!" He kept his voice so well disguised that for a second Lee was uncertain if he had guessed the man's identity correctly.

"What dust're you talking about?"

"Don't try to sligger me, hombre! We got the tip you took on a dust pouch in Jacksonville for the 'Frisco mint! You got it hidden somewhere, and you'd better decide to fork it over!"

Lee stared at him through narrowed lids. This was beginning to make sense. That mythical dust pouch was the front for this fake stick-up. The real play was yet to come.

"Reckon you got wise when our dynamite play backfired!" Gow resumed. "We figured you'd turn the cayuses into the bank instead of letting 'em run, and we'd have you!"

Lee couldn't help grinning. That was designed to delude the passengers as to the reason for the dynamiting. The whole play was a desperate attempt to drag a red herring across North Coastal's trail by a confusion of motives. If it succeeded in no more than dividing opinion, it would be greatly to that outfit's advantage.

Lee could explode the whole fiction by speaking out the truth for the passengers to hear. Gow certainly would not dare an open mass murder to silence them. Yet Lee realized that he dared not do that, just as Gow realized it. It would be easy for Gow to whip up an emergency fracas in which Helen could be shot. Lee dared not bank that some small decency might keep the hard-case bunch from shooting a woman. He had to play along for a time and hope for a break.

"Well, driver, are you going to speak out? Where's the dust?"

"There's no dust, blast you!"

The leader nodded to his men. "All right, boys! One of you stay and watch these people. The rest of you come with me. It looks like we got to take this jasper aside and teach him sense!"

Anxiety spewed in Lee's veins in spite of himself. Yet he had known Emmett Gow was building up to something like this. He marched down the trail ahead of the horsemen as Gow ordered, knowing they would probably ride back presently with

word that the driver had been right and there was no dust shipment. Then the fake bandits would melt into the manzanita, and maybe one of the passengers would drive the stage on to the next way station. And if they left Lee Foster there in the undergrowth, they would be obliged to leave Helen Silver with him!

Beyond a bend, Gow gestured to Lee to turn off into the brush above the trail. The horsemen followed. They prodded Lee on until they came to a small clearing. There the riders dismounted. Helen held back for a moment, clinging to her saddle seat. Her guard gestured to her roughly to climb down.

Instead Helen Silver drove spurs deep into her horse's flanks. The animal reared and lunged. The maneuver drove her through the group of masked men, and her life hung on a thread. Three men stumbled and scattered, and the other was momentarily dazed.

Emmett Gow seemed more alert than the others, and he wheeled and lunged from danger. As his henchmen scrambled out of range, Gow's gun came down on Helen.

Lee had gone into action the instant he realized Helen was attempting to create a diversion for him. An earlier appraisal had set up Gow as the most dangerous of the quartet. Lee had thrown himself into the confusion as men scurried clear of the girl's horse, pivoted abruptly, then launched himself in Gow's direction.

Aware that she was dangerously targeted against the sky, Helen flung herself from the saddle on the far

side of the horse. Intent on her, Gow did not notice Lee's charge until the whip was upon him. Lee's shoulder hit him in a flying tackle. Twisting and whipping, Gow went down.

Lee hammered savage blows to the man's head, changed tactics abruptly and wrenched Gow's six-gun from his hand. Helen had watched this development, and as Lee raced toward her she whirled and sped with him for the nearby cover. Bullets snarled around them as they disappeared.

Gow had churned to his feet, and his voice came in a roar. "Circle 'em! Don't let them get away!"

Lee Foster entertained no idea of flight, though he wanted them to believe he did. A hounds-and-hare chase through the undergrowth was likely to end in disaster for the pursued. He broke open the gun he had wrested from Gow and found it filled. This gave him some assurance, but it was scarcely sufficient for taking on four armed and desperate men in pitched battle.

Sound in the brush told him that at least three men had deployed on either side and were racing to get ahead of him.

"You all right?" he asked Helen hurriedly.

The girl nodded, and his eyes raked over her with involuntary admiration. In boy's clothes she looked absurdly young, but steady courage shone in her eyes. Hank Silver would have been proud of this girl, could he have seen her now.

After a moment Lee and the girl moved back along their tracks. Gow

was smart enough to be on the lookout for a sudden doubling back, and Lee was only trying to play a poor hand for its utmost value. Telling Helen to wait in the shelter of a downfall, presently he crept to the edge of the clearing.

The horses had calmed and were feeding on the scattered grass. As his eyes swept the scene, Lee saw the brush across the open move suddenly. Gazing in a tangent direction, a man raised his head sufficiently for Lee to recognize him.

"Smitty!"

Smitty spun, jerking a nervous shot as Lee's figure bulged out of cover and plunged toward him. He fired once more before Lee's exploding six-gun sped lead that pierced his heart. Smitty was dead, an instant later, when Lee loomed over him and took the pistol and ammunition belt from him.

Heartened, Lee straightened and made his way quietly around the clearing. Moving brush and frequent sound warned him they were crawling up on the clearing. Lee's position gave him a good field of fire. He kept a six-gun bunched in each fist, with Smitty's belt laid out nearby.

A sudden crash in the brush to his right froze him. In quick response Gow's men rose from cover and began firing madly. Terrified for an instant that Helen had deliberately drawn their fire, Lee realized abruptly that she had managed to roll a boulder down the slant. Gow's outfit was jumpy enough to be fooled by it momentarily.

Six-guns bucking in his fists, Lee came into the open. A man pitched forward, his weapon flying ahead of him. The other two whirled, stunned as they realized the trick. Then slugs were whistling all around Lee. Crouched, his guns leveled in quick rhythm, he took their hastily shifted attack head on.

The gun in his right fist clicked empty, and he passed the other over swiftly. His body jerked as a bullet grooved red hot along his ribs. For a split second the two figures beyond his sights bobbed together dizzily.

He was aware presently that only Gow was left on his feet. Lee did not want to kill Emmett Gow, who was the only remaining link between the Silver Wheels' trouble and the outfit behind it. The look of trapped frenzy was clear in Gow's eyes as he stalked forward. Lee let him get in the first shot while he took deliberate aim at the man's right shoulder.

When the Silver Wheels stage rolled into Eureka, where it would stop for the night, it was far behind schedule. But with an early start the next morning it would get its passengers to destination on time. The passengers rose to the spirit of the occasion, now that they realized

the true cause of their troubles, and agreed to sacrifice badly needed rest to get back on schedule.

As Gow's most open and vicious work had been done in California, Lee turned him over to the town marshal for safe-keeping until he could be brought to proper trial. Already Gow was eager to talk to gain leniency, and there was no doubt that certain officials of the North Coastal would soon be brought to justice.

Before Lee left Helen Silver at a hotel, he took a moment for private business. This consisted of nothing more than a kiss, which he planted on willing lips.

"Oh, Lee!" the girl breathed. "I suppose now that the trouble's over, you'll want to go back to the Overland!"

Lee chuckled. "Helen, I learned the Portland-Frisco trail the hard way! You don't think I'd want to quit, now that the going's bound to be easier?"

"Oh. . . . Is that all?"

"Not entirely. I've also got some savings I'd like to invest in the Silver Wheels if Hank'll take me into the business. I might even get married, if a certain somebody was willing!"

The eagerness with which Helen moved into his arms again told him he need have no worry on that score.

THE END



RANGE SAVVY

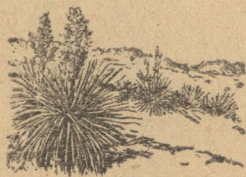
BY GENE KING



Since the earliest days of the West caves have served as natural food caches for the pioneers. Now it seems that a hole in the ground is about to become the largest food warehouse in the United States. At one-tenth the cost of what it would take to build similar storage space the government has taken over an old limestone mine, or underground quarry near Atchison, Kansas, and is converting it into a modern, refrigerated food cache. Huge quantities of lard, cured meats, dried fruit and eggs are to be stored in the gigantic cavern for safekeeping.



Horsehair riatas are part of Western tradition. For years they have been made by Mexicans and Indians. They were used extensively by the early cowboys. The West, however, did not originate them. Horsehair ropes were common in Europe and other parts of the Old World. In spite of their long history hair ropes have practical drawbacks in working cattle. They are often too light for a catch rope, especially when it is necessary to throw them far enough to make long catches. They have a tendency to kink and become rough with use. Though they undoubtedly served their purpose in the old days, horsehair riatas have just about been pushed out of the Western cow-country picture by modern, specially treated hemp ropes.



Yuccas blooming on the brown desert against a background of distant purple mountains are a picturesque sight. Yet yuccas don't bloom by themselves. If it were not for a tiny desert moth, the *pronuba*, which fertilizes the yucca and lays her eggs in the yucca flower there would be no succeeding generations of the plant. Scientists say this complex tie-up of plant and insect nature has been going on for about three million years—to the benefit of both the yucca and the moth.

Mr. King 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.



BUTTON BUCKAROO

by GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

Even Santa couldn't have got a warmer welcome than Smoky when he packed that trouble-trailed young un through a raging blizzard to the W Oxyoke

SMOKY was unable to figure out what was going on at the W Oxyoke. The exciting days of the fall roundup had been followed by the calf branding; then the steers had been loaded into cars and shipped away. As usual, the weaners had been put in a corral, protected on all four sides by comfortable sheds made of logs, and their mothers had been turned into the big hay meadows to clean up the scattered bunches of timothy left by the mowing machines. In all these activities, the little mule

had played a part. He had carried Shorty Welton's bedroll and camp outfit during the roundup, and he had watched from the top of a nearby hill when Shorty, on Tantrum, had done a wonderful job of cutting out the wild steers from the herd.

Once in a fit of mischief, Smoky had pulled the wooden peg that fastened the gate to the corral where the weaners lived and had been mildly cursed by kindly old Dad Wasson, for the trouble he caused.

All these things Smoky could understand, but now that the fall work was done, there should be months when the only excitement was an occasional trip to Creede, to carry something that Jolly, the cook, had forgotten to order when he put in the winter's grub. This had been the pattern every winter that Smoky had lived at the big ranch on the Upper Rio Grande, but this year, instead of the cowboys going to town to celebrate Christmas and coming home cross and smelling like the stuff Shorty put on Smoky's leg the time he got it cut in the barbed wire, they had figured out something different. So Smoky was hearing a lot of new words that he did not know at all.

There was something, however, that he did know, and it had made him so uneasy that when Shorty came to pet him, as he always did after he had fed the horses in the stable, Smoky tried his best to get Shorty to a place from where he might see what was going on under the cutbank below the willows.

For several nights now Smoky had seen Snag Turpie, the new man Dad Wasson had hired to cut fence poles, digging a hole in the cutbank and carefully carrying the dirt that he took out, over to the river and throwing it in the water. Any smart mule would have wondered what Snag was doing, but Smoky could not seem to make Shorty understand.

Ordinarily Shorty's curiosity would have been aroused by the nervous actions of his pet, but since this idea of having a Christmas celebration at the ranch had originated

with Shorty, he felt responsible for its success and was giving more thought to it than he was to any information that Smoky had to offer.

"We're sure going to have one nice Christmas," Shorty told his pet. "Dad got two big turkeys for Jolly to roast, there's going to be potatoes mashed in cream, and a plum puddin' with brandy sauce; and there'll be an extra feed of oats for all the horses and one little no-account mule."

Smoky showed his interest by taking a nip at Shorty's shirt sleeve, and then trotting to the fence to point with his long ears at the place where he knew Snag had been digging. Shorty didn't catch on, not even when Smoky stamped his small black hoofs and snorted.

Snappy, clear, forty-below-zero weather moderated into a mid-winter thaw the day before Christmas. Dad Wasson called Fred Groom, his foreman, into the dooryard and pointed at the fog banks drifting south from old Bristol Head.

"Boy, we're going to have an old-fashioned Christmas in more ways than one," Dad declared. "Tomorrow morning you'll wake up with a foot of snow covering the range. Better take the crew and bring in that bunch of yearlings we've been holding on Bellows Creek."

Fred studied the sky a moment. "Aw, Dad, they'll be safe till after Christmas. Even if it does snow we can bring 'em in plumb easy."

"Sure you could, but why knock the fat off 'em makin' 'em buck through big drifts when you can

do it so much easier now. Today is fine for riding. I think I'll go along with you."

Fred told the men to saddle their horses, and when Shorty came leading Tantrum past Smoky's shed, he pulled the gate pin. "Come on, nuisance," he joked. "This'll be the last chance you'll have for exercise for many a day."

Smoky was like a hunting dog on the first day of the open season. He ran and bucked and played, making the cowboys laugh at his antics. His excess energy still wasn't worked off when they came to a little cabin on Farmers Creek where Jim Baker lived. Baker was a poor nester who was trying to get a start with a little bunch of cows. His wife came to the door of the cabin to greet the W Oxyoke men.

"I'm so glad you came by," she told Dad. "I'm worried about Jim. He got a job carrying the payroll to the Last Chance Mine once a month. There's an extra payday on account of Christmas, and he had to go there this morning. He wasn't feeling very well so I wish you'd keep an eye out for him, and if he comes by your place, make him stay all night. Tell him little North and I will get along all right."

Dad looked over the makeshift sheds where a few scrawny yearlings were gnawing the bark off the fence poles. Smoky came up beside him and rubbed his head against Dad's chaps. Dad stroked the mule's neck and pulled the long ears playfully.

"You're one lucky mule," he remarked. "You get all you can eat every day, and have a nice warm

place to loaf when it storms."

Smoky made the queer sucking noise that he had inherited from his burro sire and Shorty looked up quickly.

"What's Smoky begging for?" he asked.

"I know," came the childish voice of little North Baker as he brought a piece of bacon rind out and held it up in front of Smoky's nose.

"Mules are crazy for bacon," North said. Smoky took the morsel and ate it greedily, then sniffed at the boy's body so that he would be sure to know it next time he saw him.

The cowboys laughed and North clapped his hands gleefully. "See, I know mules, don't I?"

"You sure do, son," Dad agreed. "Some day you'll be a great stockman."

The men were quieter after they left the Baker place. Smoky didn't know why everyone acted so differently; there was a sense of depression that checked any tendency to play and made him almost wish he hadn't come.

The party found the yearlings yarded up under the spreading branches of the spruce trees. Dad called Fred's attention to the way the yearlings acted. "What did I tell you? There's goin' to be a big storm."

Fred glanced over the foothills to the back range. "Huh," he ejaculated, "it's snowing right now on the Cochetope side. Come on, fellers, get going! We'll have a man-sized blizzard on our hands before long."

Some of the cowboys started a

small herd along the trail while the others quickly rode from the surrounding cover and forced the fat rollicky calves into line.

Snow began falling before the herd had passed the Baker place and by midday the hills on both sides of the W Oxyoke were white. Smoky went into his own shed and stood there, protected from the storm, while he watched the cowboys drive the yearlings into the big corral and throw timothy into the mangers for them. A great sense of comfort and well-being came over the mule. His little world was all right. He laid down on a bed of clean straw and went to sleep. That was why he failed to see the men saddle fresh horses and ride away to Creede, to do some shopping.

The snow piled up during the afternoon and when Smoky woke up and went to the trough for a drink he saw no one about the place. It seemed terribly lonesome.

Shorty had failed to put the safety catch over the wooden peg that fastened the gate to Smoky's pen. It was easy for the mule to pull the peg and trot out into the dooryard. He went to the door of the bunkhouse and struck it a sharp blow with one front foot. There was no response. Perhaps Dad was in the house. Smoky trotted around to the low window and looked in. The room was empty. No fire in the place where Dad usually sat smoking his pipe. Next Smoky tried the kitchen door; but Jolly was gone too.

As Smoky turned to go back to

his shed, he saw Snag Turpie ride up behind the barn, leave his horse standing and go down to the cut bank carrying a shovel over his shoulder. Turpie was in a hurry and kept looking back up the valley.

The snow was falling now in a thick mass. Smoky could see only a short distance, but he knew perfectly well that something was very wrong. Where could everyone be? The last trip they had made had been the one over past the Baker place. Perhaps they had gone there again.

The tracks made by the herd were not yet entirely obliterated, and Smoky could smell them through the snow that had fallen. The light was fading rapidly. Smoky trotted along back-trailing the herd; then, as a fit of nervousness seized him, he began to run like a scared rabbit, covering the distance to Farmers Creek in half an hour.

The storm was heavier near the Baker place. The wind swept down a cross canyon and piled the snow into huge drifts that Smoky had to buck through. He saw the light in Mrs. Baker's kitchen window and went to the door. Someone heard him and crossed the room. The door opened slightly and Smoky stuck his nose in the crack.

"Oh, ma, it's the little mule from the W Oxyoke," North Baker's shrill voice cried out. "If I can catch him, I can go for help for Pa."

Smoky heard the sob in Mrs. Baker's voice. "If you only could."

"Course I can," North said bravely. "Cut off a piece of bacon for me." He stood there rubbing Smoky's nose until Mrs. Baker

brought the bacon. While Smoky was munching it, North slipped a rope on him and opened the door wide. Now Smoky could see into the room. Jim Baker lay on a cot near the kitchen fire. One leg was bandaged with white cloth and there was a smell of blood. Mrs. Baker was crying as she helped North into a ragged coat and wrapped pieces of gunny sack about his boots.

"You tell Mr. Wasson that someone held your pa up and took the payroll away from him," she said. "Tell him pa's leg is broke and we'll have to get a doctor from Creede."

"Yes, ma. Now don't your worry, mules are great snow fighters. I'll be over there in just a little while."

Smoky stood with his head and shoulders inside the doorway. He saw Mrs. Baker rub her nose against North's, and Jim Baker put out a hand to grip the boy's.

"You're a real man, North," he said in a weak voice.

Smoky stood very still while Mrs. Baker lifted North onto his back. North had no saddle and the crude hackamore made by half-hitching two loops around Smoky's nose was all the bridle he had, but that was plenty for the mule. He knew now that the W Oxyoke crew was not here so they must be back at the ranch. Anyway that was where he was going. He looked back from the place where the trail dipped down into an arroyo and saw Mrs. Baker standing in the doorway, sheltering a lamp with one hand.

North, too, saw his mother. He waved his hand and yelled, "Don't

worry, I'm O.K." but the wind whipped the sound away so quick that Smoky knew she couldn't have heard.

Smoky felt his way carefully down the steep place into the arroyo, then stopped to get his wind before plunging through the deep snow in the bottom.

The wind drove icy particles of snow into Smoky's eyes, blinding him so that he had to rely entirely on his homing instinct. North leaned over to rub the mule's neck and praise him. "You're sure some snow fighter. I'll bet there ain't a horse on the W Oxyoke that can beat you buckin' drifts."

Smoky loved that. He made good time across the mesa and dove into the opaque darkness of the forest beyond.

North's voice quavered a little as he asked: "Are you sure you know where you're going, mule?"

Smoky grunted and dodged below a stiff branch that touched the tips of his ears. He knew that it would brush North off his back if he kept on, and stopped so suddenly that the boy slipped onto Smoky's withers, resting his body against the branch. Smoky stood motionless. This was bad. He didn't know what to do about it. Fortunately North did not get excited. He felt along the branch until he found that the trunk of the tree was about two feet to his right, the branch about four inches through, and six above Smoky's back. Sliding back to Smoky's rump, he kicked gently with his heels. Smoky moved forward a step.

"Whoa, mule! Now hold real still." North talked as though the mule understood every word, and while that was beyond Smoky, yet he was smart enough to understand what the boy was going to attempt, and he helped. North eased his body over the branch and rested his hand on Smoky's closely roached mane. There was nothing for a hand hold, and if Smoky failed to stand perfectly still, the jig was up.

With a hand that trembled more than he would have liked to admit, North passed the hackamore rope beneath the branch and held it tight on the other side until he dragged, first one leg and then the other over the branch and sat down again, astride Smoky's shoulders.

"I always did think I liked a mule better than I do a horse," North praised and kicked Smoky's ribs gently with his heels.

On through the black Smoky trudged bravely, guided by the assurance that off there somewhere was home and Shorty. Once more he came near to tossing the boy off into the snow when he had to buck his way through a drift. North, however clung to his seat and a moment later Smoky smelled the smoke from the fireplace and trotted around to stop in the light that blazed through the kitchen window. Jolly, washing dishes at the table by the window, saw him.

"Shorty, your mule is here," he yelled.

Shorty came on a run.

"You danged little tramp, where you been?" he demanded. Then as he saw North, he yelled back over

his shoulder: "Dad, Fred, José, something has happened over at Baker's." He lifted North in his arms and carried him into the kitchen, then led Smoky into a warm dry stall and wiped the ice and snow from his legs.

Fred came out in a little while. "Shorty, it looks like Smoky has done played Santa Claus." He told North's story and finished: "Dad says for us to hitch four horses to the bobs. We're going to put hay and blankets in and bring the Bakers over here."

For once Smoky was content to stay behind. While the men harnessed the horses and hitched them to the bobs he munched his oats contentedly. They started off and he listened to the sleigh bells, as long as he could hear a tinkle. After a while he heard them again, so faint that at first he wasn't sure, then a little louder until they seemed to be dancing with snowflakes. At last the big draft horses trotted into the light from the windows and Mrs. Baker sprang down to hug and kiss North. The men lifted the cot out and carried Baker into the house.

All was quiet around the ranch Christmas morning. There was no wind and snow fell steadily. Smoky stuck his head through the little window and looked off down toward the cutbank. He saw Snag Turpie skulking along over the now familiar trail. If he had been walking upright, Smoky might not have been excited, but furtive movements always arouse suspicion in a mule. He brayed so loudly that Shorty came

running to the door of the bunkhouse in his underclothes. He saw Snag and turned to say something to Fred. A moment later the whole W Oxyoke crew were slipping down past the corrals, holding guns in their hands, as though they were sneaking up on a duck pond. Smoky was so excited he leaned out as far as he could and brayed again.

"It's all right, Smoky," Shorty told him, "we've been suspicious that Snag had a cache around here somewhere. Last night's job wasn't the first one he's pulled, but it was sure the last one he'll get away with for a long, long time."

The men came back with Snag. He had his hands tied and was put in a sleigh and taken away; then there was a lot of laughing and happy talk and everybody wanted to hear North tell his story over again. Smoky could smell the turkeys roasting and hear the boys singing, while José accompanied them on the guitar. It was all very nice and comfortable, especially when Mrs. Baker came and put her arms around Smoky's neck and told him that he was the best little mule on the Rio Grande. She gave him a piece of candy—which was sure all right by Smoky!

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



Dunc Coburn

Dunc Coburn, whose humorous illustrations and cartoons appear regularly in *Western Story*, and are always good for anything from a quiet chuckle to a belly laugh, was born in St. Louis, Missouri, where, he says, he started to draw at the age of five. Being from Missouri we can savvy that reverse English on the old "you

got to show me" gag. He was taken at an early age to Arizona where he grew up and got his "book larnin'." Dunc allows his family was as surprised as himself when he survived his first years of schooling which included drawing and painting, mixed with a generous helping of football and high hurdles.

Commercial art, cartooning and illustrating for books and magazines have occupied his years since leaving the University of Arizona, varied by many pasears into the colorful distant corners of the Old West. At present he lives in New York but claims it gets him down to be so far from Arizona. His hobby these days is tennis and he tells us that his friend and severest critic of his work is one Cynthia Anna Schmaltz—a little dachshund. We gather the admiration is mutual. . . .

Heading the tally for our next issue will be a feature novel by that top-hand of 'em all, Walt Coburn, as well as exciting stories of the range country by Lee E. Wells, Tom W. Blackburn, Wayne D. Overholser, Clint MacLeod and many others.

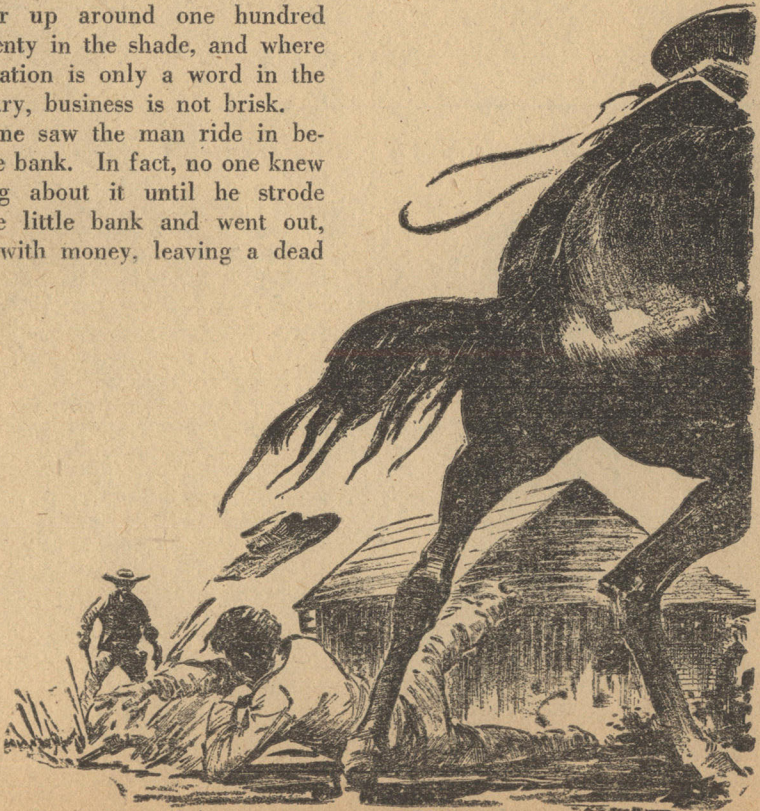
DINERO DILEMMA

by W. C. TUTTLE

THE holdup of the Apache Wells bank was well-timed. The middle of the week and middle of the day. That means something in Apache Wells. In the middle of the week business is at its lowest ebb, and in the middle of the day Apache Wells takes a siesta. With the thermometer up around one hundred and twenty in the shade, and where refrigeration is only a word in the dictionary, business is not brisk.

No one saw the man ride in behind the bank. In fact, no one knew anything about it until he strode into the little bank and went out, loaded with money, leaving a dead

When the Piegan Kid discovered he was being measured for another hombre's hemp necktie he decided he'd stayed in Apache Wells' jail long enough



man on the floor. The dead man was Pop Rogers, owner of the general store, and the best-liked man in the country.

Howard Myers, the middle-aged banker, a hard-eyed man with a jutting jaw lost composure and became almost hysterical. The robber had taken the payrolls of the Antelope and Shoshone Mines. The money had been brought in that morning by the stage from Dry Forks, and was all made up for the two mines. In fact, Myers had just finished checking the figures when the bandit walked in, masked.

It was several minutes before Ed Brady, the sheriff, and Cactus Green, his deputy, were able to start a pursuit, with three cowboys, who happened to be in town at that time. The robber had gone north and that was about all they knew.

The Piegan Kid was hungry, tired, and in a strange land. His last meal had been rattlesnake, broiled over sagebrush coals. The meat was all right, but the Kid didn't like rattlers.

The Kid had a thin face, wistful-looking gray eyes. He was only about five foot seven in height, and had a slender, almost scrawny build. He didn't look like the descriptions on the reward notices offering much money for him, dead or alive. In fact, he didn't look like a bad man, at all. His faded old shirt hiked up around his skinny neck, his overalls had long since lost their original color, and his boots were scuffed and worn. The old sombrero on his head was shapeless and colorless. Around his thin waist was a handmade car-

tridge belt, and he wore a black-handled Colt .45 in a short holster. His roan horse, branded on the right shoulder with a 44, was listed as a stolen animal.

The Kid himself wasn't sure it was a stolen animal, because he had taken it from an outlaw, after his own horse, honestly owned, had been downed by a deputy sheriff. The Kid didn't care for stolen horses because they were too easy to identify.

The Piegan Kid was ignorant, as far as book knowledge was concerned. All he knew about his ancestry was that his grandmother had been a Piegan Blackfoot squaw. After all, ancestry didn't interest him. He didn't drink, smoked only occasionally, and never gambled. But he did like to eat.

He rode out on a low mesa and saw a small ranchhouse below him. It had a deserted look, and there was no one in sight. Here the Kid's Indian blood cropped out. He dismounted and crouched in the shade of a manzanita while he looked the place over.

A lone rider came out of the brush, mounted on a gray horse, and rode up to the place. He evidently dismounted in front of the house, because when the Kid saw him again he was down by the corral. First he went down on his knees, then he stretched out flat. The distance and the heat haze were too great for the Kid to see just what he was doing.

"Maybe get some food," the Kid told the roan, and they went off the mesa.

The man was not in sight when the Kid rode up to the rickety porch. As he started to dismount, a bullet came so close to them that the roan whirled, knocking the Kid almost to his knees, and the Kid's gun flew from his short holster. He regained his balance, almost standing on his gun.

The man had popped out from the corner of the house, and was standing there, a mask covering the upper part of his face. For several moments the two men eyed each other, not over fifteen feet apart. Then the masked man said:

"I think I'll jist shoot you right between the eyes, feller."

It was about as tough a spot as the Piegan Kid had ever been in. But he was not the kind to stay there and take that bullet between his eyes. He dropped like a flash, his right hand sweeping up his gun, but before he could pull the trigger, the man fired a shot which struck the ground about a foot in front of the Kid's face, filling his eyes with sand.

The Kid was blinded, helpless for the moment. He dropped his gun and threw both hands up to his eyes. He expected to feel the shock of another bullet, but instead he heard the man laugh harshly, and then he heard him ride swiftly away. The Kid managed to get to his feet, and through a tearful haze he found the steps. Sitting down, he tried to wipe the sand from his tortured eyes.

Fifteen minutes later he was able to see well enough to find his gun and clean out the sand. He was also

able to see well enough to discover that the man had taken the Kid's roan horse and left his own gray. Not a bad-looking gray either, although it was kind of sweat-caked.

"First time I almost lost m' eyesight lookin' for grub," said the Kid with wry humor. "I suppose that sudden *pelicano* stole that gray, too. I'll shore have to go awful easy, seems like."

As the Kid went over to tighten the cinch on the gray, five men slipped past a corner of the shack and covered him with their guns. It was the sheriff and his little posse. The Kid didn't turn. When the sheriff said, "Hold it, feller," he merely dropped his hand away from the latigo strap.

His gun was deftly plucked from his holster, and handcuffs snapped on his thin wrists. Then he turned and looked at his captors. One was a sheriff who said harshly:

"Well, you didn't git far, feller."

"I wasn't goin' far," said the Kid quietly.

"I'd like to shoot his blasted head off right here," rasped one of the punchers. "Old Pop was my best friend."

"Old Pop?" queried the Kid.

"The man you murdered in the bank."

"And that's my horse and saddle, you mink-faced bum," said another. "You stole it last night from a hitch-rack in Apache Wells."

"Did, huh?" muttered the Kid.

"What's yore name?" asked the sheriff.

"Pete Smith."

"Prob'ly lyin'."

"Prob'ly," admitted the Kid.

They took him to Apache Wells and the sheriff literally threw him into the little jail, which was part of the sheriff's office. Then came Albert Wells, the prosecutor, Howard Myers, the banker, and Jim Carson, operator of the stage line. Carson was a cousin of Myers, who owned the stage line as well as the bank. They wanted to know where the prisoner hid the money. They talked singly and collectively, but all they got was a frozen stare from the Kid. He didn't bother to tell them that he was innocent; they wouldn't have believed him, anyway.

"Turn him over to me for thirty minutes and he'll tell," rasped Carson. "He'll tell plenty, too."

"The law will handle this," replied the sheriff. "Mr. Myers, are yuh sure this is the man?"

"Absolutely," declared the banker. "He wore a mask, but he couldn't disguise the rest of him. I'd recognize him anywhere."

The sheriff and deputy searched the old ranch, but found nothing. The whole country was aroused over the murder of Pop Rogers. Cactus Green, the deputy, was the only one who treated the Kid like a human being. Cactus was tall, lanky, awkward, very deliberate in speech and action but warm-hearted and kindly.

They found the 44 roan next day, the saddle still on its back. Of course, the sheriff didn't know he had the Piegan Kid in jail. There wasn't a picture of the Kid in existence, and the descriptions on the reward notices were vague and misleading. Cactus Green was the only one who

seemed puzzled over that 44 roan. It was a good-looking animal, and the saddle was in good condition. He wondered why the outfit had been abandoned. Cactus wasn't exactly satisfied.

Cactus brought the prisoner plenty of food, and watched the thin-faced Kid wolf the meal.

"Better'n rattlesnake, cooked over sagebrush," the Kid remarked.

"When was that?" asked Cactus.

"Yesterday. Long time between meals. Much obliged."

Cactus leaned against the bars and handed the Kid some tobacco and cigarette papers.

"Why did yuh kill old Pop Rogers, Pete?" Cactus asked quietly.

"I never done it," replied the Kid.

"No-o-o?" drawled Cactus. "Mebbe you never robbed the bank."

"Mebbe not," the Kid agreed.

"I'll be darned," muttered Cactus, and took away the empty dishes.

But when Cactus suggested that maybe the prisoner hadn't pulled the job, no one would listen to him.

"You've got crazy ideas, Cactus," the sheriff said. "Why, we catch this Hombre almost red-handed. He don't deny anythin'. Howard Myers absolutely identifies him. What more do yuh want?"

"I dunno," replied the deputy. "I've jist got a feelin', that's all. And there's that Forty-four roan, packin' a good hull—and no owner."

"Forget that Forty-four roan, Cactus."

"Yeah, I reckon so, Ed. Still—"

Cactus took a chair back to the cell and sat down, his boots against

a cross bar. He wanted to get the Kid to talk. He tried to find out exactly who the Kid was, but he got nowhere. The Kid just sprawled on his hard bunk and listened dreamily to Cactus, who asked him if he ever owned a horse from the 44 spread. The Kid didn't seem interested in a 44 horse.

"Where is this Forty-four spread?" Cactus asked.

"I don't know," replied the Kid. "What are yuh tryin' to do, accuse me of ridin' a stolen horse?"

"Yuh see," Cactus explained patiently, "yo're in a tough spot, Pete. They'll hang you sure as fate."

"Mebbe," said the Kid.

"Mebbe! Don't yuh realize you murdered one of the best-liked men in this here town? The banker says yo're the man. He was the only one what seen yuh in there, except old Pop Rogers, and Pop's dead."

"Who," asked the Kid, "was the feller with the big mouth and big nose?"

"Him? That's Jim Carson. He runs the stage line for Howard Myers."

"Kind o' mean sort of feller, huh?"

Cactus laughed. "He was the one that wanted to *make* yuh talk."

"Uh huh. How much money did they lose, Cactus?"

"I dunno yet. I heard it was about thirty-two thousand dollars—you'll never enjoy that money, Pete."

"I reckon not," admitted the Kid.

Everybody in the country came to Apache Wells on Saturday. There would be a lot of liquor consumed,

and a lot of talk made. The Piegan Kid, alias Pete Smith, would be the point of those talks. Ed Brady, the sheriff, knew the temper of those people, and he knew just how much chance his little jail would have, in case they wanted to lynch Pete Smith.

Ed Brady was no coward, neither was he a fool. If he wasn't in Apache Wells that day . . . So he took it upon himself to deliver some legal papers far out in the desert.

Many people came along the wooden sidewalk, peering into the office, possibly expecting to see an ogre. Cactus looked them over thoughtfully. Jim Carson came down to the jail and talked with the deputy.

"They're drinkin' a lot today," said Carson, "and talkin' big."

"About him?" asked Cactus, jerking a thumb toward the Kid's cell.

"Sure. They don't want to wait for the law. If I was you, Cactus—"

"You ain't," interrupted Cactus. "I'm keepin' my prisoner."

"I thought you liked old Pop."

"He was the finest man I ever knowed," said Cactus quietly. "I'd like to he'p hang the man that killed him—but hang him legally."

Jim Carson went back and told the men that Cactus Green wasn't listening to reason at all. They laughed among themselves and went back for more liquor. Someone had already completed a hangman's noose.

But Cactus Green knew that they would never make the attempt in daylight; so he wasn't worrying too much—yet. He was sure the sheriff would be back before morning. Cactus didn't want to tell his prisoner of

what was on foot, but he finally did. The Kid squinted thoughtfully.

"I'm workin' up to a idea," he said.

"Yo're workin' up to a broken neck," growled Cactus. "This jail won't stand much."

"I ain't been able to git out, Cactus."

"You ain't very big, Pete. Why, darn yore little hatchet-faced soul, I kind o' like yuh. I'd hate to see 'em lynch yuh—darned if I wouldn't. You don't look like a killer and yuh don't talk like a killer."

"I ain't no murderer, Cactus," said the Kid wistfully.

"Well, you'll have the devil of a time p'ovin' that, Pete."

Dave Allen and Terry Adams, owners of the Antelope and Shoshone Mines, respectively, came over to the jail and talked with Cactus. They knew what was brewing, and it worried them.

"If they lynch that feller, Cactus," Adams said, "maybe we'll never find our money. How about us havin' a talk with him?"

"I don't think he'll talk," said Cactus, "but yuh can try, Terry."

They tried, but their words were wasted. The Kid merely looked at them as though he didn't know what they were talking about. They went away discouraged.

"They own the two mines that lost their payrolls," Cactus told the Kid.

"Uh-huh," nodded the Kid. "And if I'm lynched, I can't tell 'em where to find that money."

"That's the idea. Yore secret dies with yuh, Pete."

"What's a secret, Cactus?"

"It's somethin' that you know—and nobody else knows it."

"Yeah. That's me, Cactus."

"That's shore intelligent," said Cactus, but the Kid merely grinned.

Cactus locked the jail and circulated around the town. In spite of the heat, men stood at the bars, drinking raw liquor. The conversation lagged, when Cactus appeared, but he heard enough to know that the crowd had sinister designs on his prisoner.

Cactus went back to the office. Sitting down in a chair, he tried to figure what to do. It would soon be dark. Apache Wells was an all-night town on Saturday night, and those men probably wouldn't make a break until around midnight. Still, you can't take chances.

He went to the little restaurant and had them cook a big meal for the Kid who did justice to it by the light of the lamp in the corridor. Cactus watched grimly. It was like he had read about a prison execution; they gave a condemned prisoner anything he wanted for that last meal. And it seemed as though that beef stew was just about what this prisoner desired.

Perfectly satisfied, the Kid sprawled back on his cot, with a sigh of relief.

"Much obliged, Cactus," he said. "That's the best meal I ever et."

"Yeah, and probably the last," sighed Cactus. "They're goin' to lynch yuh tonight, Pete—and, blast it, I can't stop 'em!"

"Can't, huh?" The Kid considered his demise quietly.

"You ain't figured out that there idea yet, have yuh, Pete?" asked the deputy.

"Pretty near. I figure out things sometimes," the Kid said wistfully. "I'm not very smart, but I git ideas, Cactus. Lately I've been doin' a awful lot of thinkin'. I kind o' git somethin' on my mind, and I stick with it, like a bur on a pup."

"And worth about that much," sighed Cactus.

He went to the front of the office and looked across the street. The lights were all on now, and there was activity over there. Trouble might bust loose any time now. Cactus locked and barred the front door, pulled down the shades over the unbarred windows and went back to the cell, dangling a pair of handcuffs.

"Hold out yore hands, Pete," he said. "I'm puttin' the irons on yuh."

"Yuh don't need 'em on me in here, Cactus."

"We ain't stayin' in here, Pete. Me and you are goin' for a walk."

"Walk?"

"Yeah," said Cactus, as he snapped the cuffs on the Kid's thin wrists. "I'm givin' yuh a chance for yore last white chip. C'mon out—and don't try anythin' funny."

Cactus took the Kid through the back doorway, and straight away from the town. About a quarter of a mile away, out there under the stars, the deputy unlocked the Kid's left wrist and locked the loose cuff around a mesquite trunk.

"That mob is goin' to be awful mad," said Cactus soberly. "They'll bust down the jail after awhile. Then

they'll go hellin' down to my shack, thinkin' I took yuh there."

"I like it better out here, Cactus."

"Uh huh. Well, it's safer." Then Cactus said quietly: "Pete, how about that there idea you was a-thinkin' up?"

"I dunno," sighed the Kid. "Mebbe you wouldn't do it."

"If yuh mean turn you loose—I wouldn't, Pete."

"I ain't askin' yuh to, Cactus. Listen."

The Kid talked and the deputy listened. Cactus was a cautious man but at last he said:

"Uh huh, uh huh. Well, you can't git away. I can't lose. Yo're a funny little devil, Pete."

"Mebbe it won't work," said the Kid. "I dunno. I jist worked it out in m' own head. Might try it, Cactus."

"Yeah, that's right. Plenty time. They won't move this early."

It was after midnight before the mob started. It wasn't exactly like a mob, either. About twenty men gathered quietly around the jail. There was no noise, no confusion. Jim Carson was their accepted leader. They called on Cactus to open the doors, but there was no reply.

They took a heavy plank and smashed in the back door, only to find that the place was empty. Then they headed for Cactus Green's shack on the outskirts of Apache Wells.

That, too, was empty, so they went back to town, swearing vengeance on Cactus Green, who had been too smart for them. Jim Car-

son blamed himself for not posting guards around the jail early in the evening. Men were sent out to scout the town and keep watch for Cactus and his prisoner, while the rest drank quietly and waited for word.

Sheriff Brady came back to Apache Wells, found his jail broken into, the prisoner gone. He went out seeking information and ran into Carson and Howard Myers. He listened grimly to their story of what had happened.

They were standing in a group in front of the Apache Saloon when Cactus Green staggered into the group. Cactus was without a hat or a gun, and he was barely able to explain that he had taken Pete Smith out for safekeeping, and that the prisoner had escaped.

"Dang him, he tied me up with m' own rope!" panted Cactus. "Took my gun, too! Said he was goin' to dig up the money, and to the devil with all of yuh!"

The sheriff grasped Cactus by the arm and shook him.

"How long has he been gone, Cactus?"

"Thirty minutes, I'd say. Don't shake me, Ed. Dang it, I done my best."

While the crowd of men milled around, wondering what to do, the sheriff and Cactus headed for the office. Inside Cactus whispered:

"Saddle yore horse, Ed; mine's all ready. We're ridin'—and we're ridin' mighty fast."

"What do yuh mean?" gasped the sheriff.

"Don't talk—git goin'."

They trotted back to their little

stable, and in a few minutes they were circling the town. Cactus led the way, explaining nothing, and they finally reached the old abandoned shack where the Kid had met the masked man and got his eyes filled with sand. Cactus led the way down past the old tumbledown corral. They hid their horses there and came back, sprawling behind a pile of old corral poles.

"Now, blast it," panted the sheriff, "maybe you'll tell me what this is all about, Cactus. It don't make sense."

"Wait!" Cactus whispered. "Listen! Horse comin', Ed."

A lone rider swept into the place, swung around behind the house and dismounted. They saw him in the starlight as he came around the corner of the house and crouched in the heavy shadow.

"What in thunderation's comin' off around here?" whispered the sheriff.

"I ain't jist sure—yet," Cactus answered. "It ain't jist like— Oh-oh!"

Another rider was coming. This one didn't hesitate but came right past the house, pulled up sharply near the corral fence and dismounted. It was too dark for them to see just what the man was doing, but they heard some planks being flung aside and the man grunting as he worked.

"He's at the old well," whispered Cactus. "I plumb forgot—"

The other man was coming down from the house, coming toward the man beside the corral fence. Flame licked out in the darkness, and the

spang of the shot seemed very loud in the quiet air. A man cried out sharply, and there was the sound of scuffling feet.

"C'mon!" whispered Cactus, and they crawled swiftly past the corner of the fence.

There were two black figures on the ground only a few feet away, and one of them seemed to be disappearing—climbing down into the old well. The two officers came with a rush. The man at their feet was groaning hollowly.

"Git out of that well, feller!" Cactus ordered. "We've got yuh."

"What the devil!" whispered the man, his voice sounding hollow.

But he came out, panting, groaning. It was Howard Myers, the banker, almost on the point of collapse. The man Myers had shot was Jim Carson. Myers was unarmed now, having left his rifle on the ground. He was trying to babble his innocence, prove an alibi and beg for mercy all in the same breath.

Jim Carson was unconscious. Cactus raced for town to get a doctor, while the sheriff handcuffed Howard Myers, who suddenly refused to talk. It was an hour before Cactus returned, and the whole mob came with him. They brought the doctor and some lanterns to light up the place, and they all crowded around, most of them sobered by this time, while the sheriff went into the well and found the payrolls.

Jim Carson was conscious, but badly hurt. He didn't seem to understand that Howard Myers had shot him. It didn't make sense. Terry Adams, owner of the Shoshone

Mine, was in the crowd. Myers broke his silence, when he saw the loot.

"Don't open it!" he said. "It's all right. I'll fix it up at the bank."

"You won't fix up nothin' at no bank," said Cactus. "Why not open it, Terry?"

Terry Adams broke the seal on one of the sacks. It was a conglomeration of lead slugs, iron washers, bolts and nuts. There was not a cent of money in the sack. Cactus showed it to Jim Carson.

"That's what you stole, Jim," he said. "You can't spend that stuff."

"He tricked me," gasped Carson painfully. "Oh, I might as well tell it all. Myers was goin' broke, playin' the stock market. He . . . he needed money, and I promised to help him. He framed the robbery. It . . . it was a cinch, except old Pop, happenin' to be in there. Myers shot him. I thought Myers was on the square when we agreed to hide the money for a long time. I didn't tell him exactly where it was."

Carson stopped to catch his failing breath, and the sheriff said:

"Why did yuh come out here to get it tonight, Carson?"

"That Pete Smith," whispered Carson. "I . . . I was afraid he saw me hide the money in that well. I thought I killed him that day. When Cactus said that Smith got away and was goin' after the money, I . . . I had to get it. I told Myers I was goin' after it . . . and the dirty crook tried to kill me and keep anybody from findin' that he still had the money in the bank."

"Was Smith lyn', Cactus?" asked the sheriff.

"Mebbe," Cactus answered with a grin. "He jist had an idea. He figured the money was out here some'ers. He told me about seein' the man on his belly beside this corral, and I remembered the old well. Pete Smith is smart."

"Where," asked the sheriff, "is Pete Smith right now, Cactus?"

"Staked out to a mesquite, south of town," Cactus answered. "Yuh see, he saw the lower half of that masked man's face here that day, and he saw the man's lips twitch. Well, sir, when he saw Jim Carson, talkin' with you at the jail, he saw that same twitch."

"Let's go find him," said Terry Adams. "I owe him somethin'."

"How'd it work, Cactus?" asked a voice behind him.

It was the Piegan Kid, free of handcuffs. The men stared at him.

"How'd you git loose, Pete?" gasped Cactus. "Why, I—"

"Slipped loose," said the Kid soberly. "Mebbe yuh didn't click it in the last notch. I borrowed my gun from the office and I got my horse at the stable. Yuh see, I didn't want anythin' to go wrong out here."

"I'm a son-of-a-gun!" gasped the sheriff.

"Pete Smith," said Terry Adams, "you've saved me a lot of money, and I owe you somethin'. In fact, Apache Wells owes you a lot. What can I give yuh?"

"Well," replied the Kid, "I dunno. I need a pair of overalls pretty bad

—and I'd shore like to have a good horse, if that wouldn't be askin' too much."

"Much? I'll buy you the best horse and saddle in this country. You pick it out—horse and saddle—and I'll pay the bill."

"That'd shore be great. Better than"—the Kid hesitated—"gettin' lynched."

No one said anything. Only a short time before they had thirsted for the blood of this thin, grave-faced man. It was different now. They went back to Apache Wells, taking a babbling Howard Myers and a badly wounded Jim Carson to face their fate.

They tried to fete the Kid, but he found the horse and saddle he wanted, and in the morning he was gone.

The sheriff and deputy were in the office after breakfast. On the desk was a telegram, unopened.

"It came yesterday afternoon, when you was away," Cactus said. "I didn't open it."

The sheriff opened the telegram and read it carefully. Then he tore it into small pieces and dumped them into the wastebasket.

"Must have been important, Ed," said Cactus.

"No-o-o," drawled the sheriff quietly. "Somebody reportin' a stolen horse. Been gone couple, three weeks, northern part of the State. Roan geldin', marked with a Forty-four. The wire said: 'Lost, strayed or stolen.'"

"Prob'ly strayed," said Cactus.

"More'n likely."

CHRISTMAS CAN'T WAIT

by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

I

JIM BALLARD was talking to himself, and the things he was saying—coming from another man's lips—would have been enough to start a fight. "Always talking big, then trying to make good. You're just a danged fool dreamer. Then, to save your face, you try to make dreams come true."

With hand spikes, levers and ropes, Jim was trying to move a fir log into the water. In an optimistic moment he had promised Janice Lane that he would build a sawmill, cut lumber and build a community hall where the settlers could hold a Christmas celebration. The log was part of the mill foundation. The boiler,

engine, saws and other machinery were coming around Cape Horn in a sailing ship to San Francisco, from which point they would be re-shipped on the brig *Jonathan Brent*, to Puget Sound.

Jim realized why he had made so

Only Jim Ballard understood what a real Christmas celebration could mean to people weary with the battle of wresting homes from a raw, new land



rash a promise. It was his sentimental streak. Some of the settlers had come over the Oregon Trail to Portland, then by schooner to Puget Sound. Others had made the long voyage around the Horn. Men, women and even children had worked like dogs to build homes and raise vegetables among the stumps. In their tired, discouraged moments their thoughts had turned to the comfortable homes they had left back East. They never lost courage, but sometimes doubt crept in. Several new graves reminded them that some, among them, had gone down under



the stress of frontier existence.

Every group has its Skookum Tye, which is Chinook jargon for strong leader, and, at twenty-three, Jim Ballard was the strong man of this community.

"First," he had said when they landed, "we'll build cabins, clear land and start things growing. Then we'll get out piling for the wharves they're building in San Francisco. We'll build a sawmill, cut lumber and put up real homes and stores. We'll get a heavy hammer and build a pile driver. In time, we'll ship our lumber to Asia and California. If we prosper, we may even build our own sailing ships to carry our products. It wouldn't surprise me if big cities with as many as fifty thousand people will be found on the Sound seventy-five years from now."

It was evident that people wanted to believe what he said, but they lacked his vision, and when someone said, "Fifty thousand people!" and laughed others joined in.

Janice Lane, seventeen, had smiled, and that had hurt. Jim wanted Janice to believe in him. He had shrugged. "But I'm running before I've learned to walk," he had said. "First the sawmill, and a community hall; a Christmas celebration with a real Santa Claus." All this he believed that he could bring about through his own efforts, plus a little help and a reasonable amount of luck.

Now Jim gave a final heave on his block and tackle rig, then leaped clear. The log plunged over the

bluff into deep salt water. Climbing down to a heavy skiff, Jim fastened a tow line to the log and began rowing toward the mill site.

He rowed without resting and stranded the log on the beach. Then he went to work with an adz, surfacing the log on two sides, and taking off a little on the heavy end to even the weight. At dusk he sat on the log and lighted his pipe.

The timber came from the distant snowline down to the water's edge. The settlers had cut hundreds of trees for piling, but had left little impression, so vast was the forest. Jim was dog-tired from driving himself, but in his mind's eye he saw the forest retreat, buildings leap into being and he heard the whine of saws eating into solid wood. There were a dozen windjammers at the long wharves, and a score anchored in the bay awaiting cargo. He himself was wealthy, wearing good clothes, a heavy gold watch chain with a charm, and a silk hat.

There was a girl at his side and when he heard her step, Jim opened his eyes with a start. "Oh, hello, Janice," he said.

"Dreaming, Jim?" the girl asked, then added: "As usual?" Her face was sympathetic as she told him: "You're working yourself to death. You're thin as a rail, though you eat plenty."

Jim shrugged. "I'm working harder than usual," he admitted. "I've got to be ready when the machinery comes. I have to hew out the foundation timbers, but once they're in, the mill can cut the flooring, siding

and roof. This sure is a beautiful, peaceful place."

Janice sat down beside him and ran her hand over the timber. "A saw couldn't have cut it much smoother, Jim," she declared. "You do everything well."

"No," he said, "not everything. I love you, but I don't know how to win you." He sighed heavily, his eyes on the dugouts hauled up on the beach near the Indian settlement. A squaw was bent over a campfire and the smell of salt-water-soaked driftwood burning heavily came to his nostrils. "Maybe I'm a fool to dream and work. Maybe the Indians have the right answer to life—clams, crabs, salmon for the taking. Once in awhile deer or bear. Ducks. Wild berries on the burns. Plenty of time to do nothing. If—"

"No, Jim," Janice interrupted. "That isn't the answer. But your dreams are impossible—a big city, mills, trade with Asia, our own ships—"

"To me, Janice," said Jim, "one thought follows the other. You plant corn and you expect golden ears in late summer, don't you?" She nodded. "I put my money and effort into a sawmill, and I can't help but see the rest. . . . Would you marry me, Janice, if I had more horse sense?"

"I might," she confessed.

Jeff Lane came to the door of the Lane cabin and bellowed, "Supper's ready . . . you two!"

They walked slowly over the hard sand. Janice was slim, blond and full of life and vigor. She had to take three steps to Jim's two, almost

running along at his side and often glancing into his face. She learned more from his expression than she did from his spoken words. His eyes were as blue as her own, but his hair was black and curly, and his beard was like night itself. He stood well over six feet, with broad shoulders, strong arms and powerful hands. He weighed around a hundred and sixty pounds which meant that his strong-muscled body was almost gaunt.

They ate supper with little conversation, and afterwards, while the women were doing the dishes, Jim and Jeff Lane sat on the steps and smoked.

"Jim," Lane said, "you've got yourself into a fix, promising a community hall for Christmas. The womenfolks set great store by you. You're a natural leader and your strength pulled us over the rough spots crossing the plains. Now they're taking it for granted you'll make good. They've told the kids, too. Those young uns are expecting Santa Claus."

"About time," Jim observed. "The women had some tall explaining to do because Santa hasn't shown up. They said that he hadn't found Puget Sound, or that he got lost on the Oregon Trail."

"The point is," Lane said, "if you don't make good, all of us are in for a bad letdown. If the Promised Land is on the other side of the mountains, you'll get there on your nerve. But if you get over the mountains, and the Promised Land isn't in sight, then you've got to pay be-

cause you've abused your body and nerves. Our bodies and nerves have taken a lot of abuse the last three years."

"I know. I've allowed time enough, unless the ship is wrecked," Jim said. "Fact is, I'm going to San Francisco next week on the *Molly McDowell* to make sure the machinery is aboard the *Jonathan Brent* when it sails."

"There's one point you've overlooked," Lane said reflectively. "As long as man hasn't anything, he can't lose anything. When you've developed something of value in the Puget Sound region, the rough element will come in, hoping to skim the cream. You've got to be on guard."

Jim Ballard had been so interested in developing the country that he had overlooked that angle. He had expected trouble from the Indians, only to learn that the Sound natives were glad to have the whites around to protect them from raids by the fierce Alaskan Indians who came down in the long canoes on slave hunts.

The *Molly McDowell* was ten days late and by the time she arrived Jim had almost completed the mill foundation. The captain and a passenger came ashore—the former to arrange for a deck load of piling, the latter to see what he could see.

The passenger's name was Peter Cramm, he said, and the first thing he saw was the mill foundation, the deep harbor, and the limitless timber. What caught his eye then was Janice Lane smiling at the captain,

who was an old friend of the Lane family.

Peter Cramm was about thirty years old and built along rugged lines. He was the finest rooster the settlement had seen since it was established. His sideburns extended slightly below the cheek bone, and he had a beautifully waxed mustache and well-groomed brown hair. A strong jaw was his most noticeable feature. His tie, with its massive knot, lay lightly on a snow-white boiled shirt. A diamond gleamed from the scarf, matching the beautiful stone on his right hand. He wore a pair of gold-mounted pistols, which were unnecessary in this region.

In various places in the West this same pair of pistols had saved Peter Cramm's life on several occasions. In San Francisco he had used them when a miner caught him with five aces. The Vigilantes had gone for a stout rope, and Cramm had lost no time in jumping into the nearest boat. He had given the boatman a hundred-dollar gold nugget and said: "Row me to the first ship due to sail."

It had been the *Molly McDowell*. Cramm hoped that the Vigilantes would forgive, if not forget, by the time she returned to San Francisco.

Again and again a girl had changed Cramm's immediate plans. He was not interested in marrying and settling down. Rather it was the personal satisfaction that he found in winning a girl from some other man. The mill foundation interested him, too. While he couldn't see cities, huge mills and lumber

trade with Asia, he realized Jim Ballard's sawmill would make him a comfortable fortune.

"A pretty girl, a sawmill," he mused. "Something to keep me occupied, and in funds—if I'm no longer welcome in Frisco."

He studied the situation, and some of his contempt for the hard-working Jim Ballard disappeared when he realized Jim had selected the most logical site for his mill and wharf. The settlement might spread, but Jim's property was the neck of the bottle through which everything must pass.

"I'd better look around for a town of my own," Cramm reflected. "This Sound country must be full of townsites. If I make a play for Ballard's ground, I'll be in trouble with everyone." He thought a long time. "No, the ace card in this deal," he concluded, "is the mill machinery. Whoever owns that, takes the pot."

He learned that it would take the *Molly McDowell* nearly two weeks to discharge cargo and take aboard piling. Jim Ballard had suggested that a port be cut in the bow and that additional piling be stowed below decks. Long piling, impossible to take through a deck hatch, could be shoved through a bow port. The master had immediately put the ship's carpenter to work on the port.

Unconsciously Jim Ballard was playing into Cramm's hand. The additional time would give Cramm a chance to look over townsites. He chartered a canoe and told the owner that he wanted to contact the various native villages with a view to establishing a fur trade business.

Jim had nicknamed Cramm's native guide the Duke of York because he was the younger son of a local chief. He was a stolid Siwash, but nobody's fool. He noticed that Cramm spent many hours studying bays deep enough for anchorage, but not too deep. Cramm was particularly interested in a place the natives called Tenas or Little Bay. The surrounding area was level, and heavily timbered. It was ideal for a townsite. A fine stream of clear, cold water, tumbled into the bay—enough water to supply a big city. It could be easily dammed three miles from the bay to insure a steady flow.

Then Cramm spent many hours studying the nearby reefs, the tide rips and the set of the tide. The driftwood carried to the reef near Tenas and stranded, fascinated him. The Duke pointed to the reef and said: "Cultus. Boston canim hit 'em in fog. Sink fast like hell!" Cramm understood. He had learned that "Cultus" meant bad, "Boston" indicated all whites, and "canim" was canoe in Chinook.

"So a white man's ship hit this bad reef," he mused. "I had an idea something like that would happen if the night were dark, or a ship got caught in a fog."

To cover up his real purpose, he talked with many natives, urging them to investigate the fur possibilities in the back country, and promising good prices.

Cramm returned to the settlement two days before the *Molly McDowell* sailed. "Janice," he said as soon as he met the girl. "I'm excited over this region's possibilities."

"Sawmills, harbors full of ships, big cities?" she asked. Jim Ballard heard the query, and he flushed.

Cramm never missed an opening. Without looking at Ballard, he answered: "I'm afraid I'm unromantic, but practical, Janice. A small mill would prosper, but I see a chance to develop a tremendous fur trade. In a few years there will be several fine towns."

Jim Ballard's ears were red, and he clenched his fists, but said nothing.

Janice's fingers fell lightly on Cramm's arm. "You don't believe in Santa Claus?"

"Only for children," Cramm answered. "To them, he'll come in a year or so."

Jim started toward Cramm who was looking at Janice, but the Duke of York caught his wrist and muttered: "No. You skookum Boston man. Him, hiyu cultus Boston man."

Jim was amazed, because the Si-washes rarely offered advice. He hesitated, and Janice turned to Cramm.

"The tide is out and the beach sand is hard," she said demurely. "Shall we stroll down to the point? I'd like to hear more of your plans."

Cramm bowed triumphantly. "I'd like nothing better, Janice. But Asiatic trade and Santa Claus won't figure in them."

A sense of having lost a battle filled Jim Ballard. He knew that several natives and a dozen whites had witnessed what had happened. It meant that every adult white and native would hear the story before

sundown. Jim's eyes lifted to the strolling couple, the man's head bent attentively, the girl's upturned face revealing eager interest. The gentle wash of water on the damp sand drowned their words, but suddenly Janice threw back her head and laughed.

Her father stepped to Jim's elbow, frowning. "The cuss has a way with wimmin folks, blast it!"

"I'm wondering what to do about it, Jeff," Jim said. "I'd like to tear Cramm apart, but I'm afraid that's the wrong thing to do."

"At a time like this, Jim," Lane said, "it's easier to do the wrong thing than the right."

II

When Jim saw Janice that evening she was bright with excitement. "Peter . . . that is, Mr. Cramm," she said, "has a lot of admiration for you, Jim. He says it's your sort that builds empires. But he disagrees on big towns. He thinks there will be several small places, each with its mill. He's afraid of one thing, though."

"What's that?" Jim asked, almost too sharply.

"He's afraid that something might happen to your mill machinery in San Francisco," she replied. "There's a lawless element there. And quite a brisk demand for sawmill machinery, too."

"And he thinks I should go down?" Jim asked. Janice nodded. "I've already made up my mind to work my passage. I can't afford to

pay my way. Everything has gone into the mill."

"Well, be careful." Suddenly Janice regarded him with grave anxiety. "So much can happen. You handled the Indians on the plains, but I'm worried over renegade white men—how can you tell a cultus white man . . . until it's too late?"

"By using common sense," he answered, "and not being blinded by appearances."

"I only hope you're equal to it," Janice said worriedly.

As Jim made his way to his cabin that evening, one of the children called to him from her doorstep. "Is Santa Claus *really* coming this year?" she gravely inquired. "Mama said you said he was coming this time, sure."

"He'll be here," Jim promised the youngster.

The following day he realized Peter Cramm was making the future difficult. The man had gone among the real young children and told them that Jim Ballard was going to bring Santa Claus in a big Indian canoe because there wouldn't be snow enough for a sleigh. Cramm had turned on his charm and the children were convinced. Christmas was several months away, but already there was a marked improvement in deportment.

Sailing day, Jim shook hands with everyone, and waded out to the waiting lifeboat. A sailor carried Cramm to the bobbing craft, and placed him in the stern beside the first mate. He waved his beaver hat as long as Janice stood on the beach. Aboard the ship, he went

aft to his quarters, while Jim went forward to the ship's foc'sl.

The *Molly McDowell* fought tides all the way to Cape Flattery, then sailed into foul weather. Barefooted, Jim spent time aloft taking in sail, or shaking it out while the master bellowed orders from the deck. Jim was awkward, but he was tough and strong, and used his head. He followed the old rule of one hand for himself and one for the ship while aloft, and thus managed to do some work without falling overboard.

Days later they dropped anchor in San Francisco Bay beside the *Jonathan Brent*. A small boat came alongside a half hour later and a thin-faced expensively dressed man with weasel eyes came aboard. His was the pasty coloring of the gambler.

"Hello, Pete," he called to Cramm. "Have a nice voyage?"

"Yes, and glad to be back, Harry," Cramm answered.

"You're still a sick man," said Harry. "I'd advise a round trip on the *Jonathan Brent*. It's very unhealthy ashore." They exchanged significant glances. "I was threatened with throat trouble myself, but with a little care on my part, I've thrown off the disease. My advice, my friend, is to await better weather."

Jim was standing near Cramm and overheard the conversation. "Throat trouble," he mused. "It sounds like hanging. I'm not surprised."

"Captain," Cramm called to the *Molly McDowell's* master, "may my friend come aboard and help me

shift my gear to the *Brent*?"

The master nodded.

Harry came briskly up a ladder and followed Cramm to his cabin. "They're waiting to hang you, Pete," he said. "Nothing is forgotten nor forgiven. If they knew you were aboard, they'd be out here. They don't think you're fool enough to return. This time, things aren't dying down."

"Bad, huh? Well, Puget Sound is quite a spot. I may turn straight for awhile. My . . . er . . . reputation isn't known. I have in mind starting a new town with a saw-mill—"

"Where in thunder will you get the mill?"

"It will be aboard the *Brent*," Cramm answered. "I've arranged a series of incidents that will give me possession, without exciting suspicion. You might say it comes under the head of perils of the sea."

"Where's the girl?" Harry demanded. "There's always a girl in your life, Pete."

"And yours, Harry," said Cramm. "I'm glad you aren't in the Puget Sound country. Her name is Janice—a lovely, wholesome girl, inexperienced and unawakened. Sentimental about Christmas and that sort of thing."

"And very gullible, no doubt," Harry said dryly.

"Rather, eager for knowledge of the world," answered Cramm. "Now here's a little job for you. Men disappear every night ashore. Jim Ballard, would-be mill owner, is aboard this boat. You saw him as you came over the side. He'll go

ashore to check on a few details and do a little buying and ordering. He has a Christmas list, I believe."

"He'll be taken care of when the tide is right," Harry promised. "Now, we'd better hustle you aboard the *Brent*."

Jim Ballard went ashore early the next morning. He saw fine ships rotting on the mud flats because their crews had stampeded to the gold mines. He saw every nationality crowding the saloons. It was a seething, roaring crowd even at an early hour. A man could get into a fight without half trying. Jim let a few insults go by without doing anything about them. He couldn't afford to get into a brawl at this stage of the game.

He located the mill machinery, checked it carefully, and found everything in order. "Send it aboard the *Brent*," he directed. "Within a few months we'll be shipping lumber out, Mr. Nash. You might as well act as our agent. It'll save me trips to San Francisco."

"I'll consider it," Nash answered. "Will you have supper with me?"

"I'm sorry, but time is short and I'm shopping for Christmas."

"Christmas!" Nash exclaimed. "So soon?"

"It takes a long time to get things for children these days," Jim answered. "And my time is short."

He went from place to place selecting items that might well go into Santa's pack. He had heard various people in the settlement mention badly needed articles, and he had jotted them down. It was dark when

he started back to the waterfront. He walked in the middle of the street to avoid being sandbagged by someone lurking in an alley or between buildings.

From time to time men came out of the blackness and disappeared as they went about their business. Safety lay in being suspicious of everyone, and glancing frequently over your shoulder. Two blocks from the waterfront, Harry and two of his men picked up Jim's trail. One or the other had kept Ballard in sight most of the day.

Jim stepped onto a hastily constructed wharf. He could hear the lapping of waves, and smell the stench of exposed tide flats. Small boats made good money running people from a float to the ships. Jim stopped suddenly and listened.

"I've heard that boat squeak enough times today to be familiar with the sound," he muttered.

He stepped behind a pile of freight and crouched. A man, nervously alert, walked by. Suddenly two men rushed him. Before the man could turn, they had attacked. From the thudding sounds, Jim knew they were beating their victim over the head. He made out the figures in the gloom and suddenly rushed to the rescue.

The "beating" ended suddenly as all three turned on Jim. "Figgered you'd be fool enough to try and help somebody out," a voice sneered. Jim backed up against the freight, realizing the attack had been staged to lure him into the open.

"I'm learning," he thought, "the slow, hard way."

He grasped two cases, partly sup-

porting his body, lifted his feet and drove his boot heels into the nearest man. He could hear ribs snap as the man went down. Somebody drew a gun, and a voice warned: "Don't shoot, you fool! Want the Vigilantes on your back?"

Jim recognized the voice. The man had boarded the *McDowell* and visited Peter Cramm. He recalled the fellow's name—Harry. Harry had a knife and was moving in, warily avoiding Jim's boots.

"So you don't want noise!" Jim said. He bellowed: "Whee! Got one of 'em down! Come in and make a fight of it. *Whee!*"

"Shut him up quick!" Harry ordered. He rushed in with the knife and slashed. But the blade went deep into the wood of one of the cases. Jim's fist shattered Harry's jaw and, as the gambler went down, Jim went after the third man, a big bruiser.

It was a slugging match, with Jim taking a beating, but managing to stay with his man. He was doing a little more than that when men suddenly rushed in from all sides.

"You Jim Ballard?" a voice asked.

"That's me!" Jim answered.

"You're the man we're looking for. We're Vigilantes," the man said. Someone turned on a light. "Here's Bull. Breathes like his ribs are busted. And here's the gambler." Another said: "I've got Dutch. Ballard, we've been trying to catch this bunch in the act of murder for a long time. We've kept an eye on you all day, figgerin' you was a marked man. You made a good live decoy."

"Thanks," Jim said. "I might've been a gone goose if you hadn't showed up. Dutch was about all in, but so was I."

The Vigilantes hurried away with the trio. The wharf was alive with tough-looking customers, but all seemed meek now. The Vigilantes left a sobering effect on everyone. Jim stepped into the nearest boat. Ordinarily he would have regarded the crew of three with doubt. Each man looked as if he had accepted blood money in his time. But now when Jim said: "The brig, *Jonathan Brent*," they answered meekly, "Yes, sir."

He watched a certain star and knew that they were rowing in the right direction. In time the brig's vague outline emerged from the blackness. A watchman hailed him.

"Jim Ballard, able seaman, coming aboard," Jim answered.

"Your gear was brought over from the *McDowell* this afternoon," the watchman told him. "Come aboard and go below. The skipper wants to see you."

Captain Carey greeted Jim in the cabin. "I heard you wanted to work your passage home," he said. "You're a shipper. You may become an important one some of these days. I don't like the idea of a shipper before the mast."

"That's the way I want it," Jim told him. "Some of these days I'll be a passenger. It won't hurt me any to work my way, and I'm learning something of the sailor's viewpoint. Have you a full crew?"

"No, I paid off my men. Some

have returned, but I'll have to pay blood money to the crimp for the rest. I don't like that kind of business, either," Captain Carey said. "But what can I do?"

"Which means you can use me," Jim said.

The skipper grinned. "Sign the ship's articles, and go forward. We have a passenger. A man named Peter Cramm, traveling for his health."

"Yes," Jim answered with a touch of grimness. "He has throat trouble in these parts." He hesitated a moment, then said: "Ask him to come in here. I don't want to talk about a man behind his back."

Captain Carey looked at Jim curiously, then went down the passage, knocked on a door and said: "Mr. Cramm, come here, sir."

Peter Cramm was a badly worried man when he appeared. He had visions of being turned over to the Vigilantes.

"Captain," Jim said grimly, "for reasons that I think good, this man will bear watching. If Cramm wants details, I'll give them."

Cramm's eyes blazed and for a moment he licked his lips, started to speak, then changed his mind. Finally he said: "I admit, captain, that several of my friends have had reputations, but they've always dealt fairly with me."

"We'll leave it that way," Jim said. He started forward, but Cramm caught him near the main mast. "What do you want?" demanded Jim.

"Keep out of my affairs," Cramm warned.

"Tonight," Jim said evenly, "Harry, Butch and Dutch jumped me, with every intention of dumping my remains into the bay. I'll probably never learn how the Vigilantes happened to be keeping an eye on me. Some unknown friend must have told them I was a babe in the woods. Anyway they came and seemed very pleased to bag Harry, Butch and Dutch. As Harry and you were pretty thick, from what I can learn, you're tarred with the same brush. I told Captain Carey about you for his own protection. I think you're up to something, Cramm, so pull in your horns."

"Your damned jealousy—" Cramm began furiously.

"If my damned jealousy, as you call it, weren't under control, I'd report you to the Vigilantes," re-

torted Jim. "But I can't bring myself to turn a man in unless I have proof of his guilt. You're getting a better deal than you'd ever give me, Cramm. And you know it." Interruption came as a boat bumped the gangway.

Someone shouted hoarsely: "Got men for you, cap'n!"

Captain and mate hurried on deck. Several burly sailors began carrying unconscious men aboard. The mate searched each man and whenever he found a knife, he broke off the point of the blade. One of the men, opening his eyes briefly, saw Peter Cramm and gave him a furtive wink.

The men were carried to the foc's'l and dumped into bunks where they pretended to sleep off their drunkenness in the time-honored manner.

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The sawmill machinery came aboard early the following morning. The engine, saws, steam, water pipes and tools were stowed below. The steam boiler was secured on deck.

III

Fair winds seem to be favoring Jim Ballard's plans as the brig moved northward. He saw the California coastline in a haze, then the snow-capped peaks of the Oregon country clear and sharp above the haze. He breathed a deep sigh when they passed Cape Flattery and sailed up the straits of Juan de Fuca.

Jim, standing a wheel watch, remarked as the captain paused near him: "Some, day, sir, there'll be light houses along the shore, and you can cut the corners instead of staying in the middle of the channel."

"Aye," the skipper answered, "but not in my time, I'm afraid."

They continued easterly until the Sound proper appeared on their starboard beam, then the skipper changed the course to a southerly direction. A stiff breeze carried them along as darkness settled. Someone relieved Jim at the wheel and the skipper watched the man steer for several minutes, then went below for his evening meal.

Peter Cramm, lounging on deck, came over to the wheelman. "Well, Kelso," he said, "this is the big night." He drew a piece of metal from his pocket and placed it near the compass, but out of sight. The needle swung several degrees. Cramm shifted the metal slightly and

the nervous needle responded to the change. "That should turn the trick," he said. "The tide will help."

Captain Carey came on deck twice during his meal to check the compass course. "Steady as she goes," he said to the wheelman the second time.

"Steady as she goes," the wheelman repeated. He put a respect that he did not feel into his voice.

Later the mate came to take his watch, but Carey lingered on. There were short stretches where the mists were rising. Overhead it was inky black with not a star showing. The captain was tempted to anchor until daylight, but soundings indicated the water was too deep.

He sent a watchman forward and an hour later the man bellowed: "Land off'n the sta'board bow."

The skipper roared an order, and the wheelman turned the wheel smartly. The brig began responding, then suddenly she struck. A topmast snapped off and crashed to the deck, bringing sails and gear with it. There was a tense moment when the masts swayed dangerously, and lines snapped, then as all hands came on deck, the captain sent them aloft to take in sail and relieve the strain.

"Sound the bilges," he ordered. "She's taking water, I think." A few minutes later men were manning the pumps. Well below the water line they could hear the snap and groan of timbers giving way as the fangs of the reef gnawed into the hull. The pumps sobbed and gasped, spilling dirty bilge water on deck where it washed into the lee scuppers.

Cramm saw Jim hurrying forward and stopped him. "I'm a gambler," he said. "What do you want for your sawmill now—spot cash?"

"I'm a gambler, too," Jim answered, "and it isn't for sale at any price."

They couldn't gain on the water and when it reached a certain level and the hull was no lower, Captain Carey concluded that the *Brent* wouldn't sink. For the present at least it was hung up on the reef. Later when the tide changed and strains shifted and increased, the brig might slide off.

"I can't understand it," Carey said. "I made allowance for drift. We should have been five miles off shore."

While the crew was getting the boats over the side, Cramm removed the piece of metal from the compass and tossed it overboard.

Jim approached the skipper when things had quieted down. "The sawmill engine and saws are the most valuable pieces of cargo, sir," he said. "I'd be happy if you could land them on the beach. If the brig sinks it may be weeks before—"

"I understand, Ballard," the skipper said. "And salt water would ruin everything. I guess the machinery is more important to the region than anything."

They rigged tackle, placed planks across two lifeboats and lowered the engine to the planks and lashed it. The boats rode low in the water, but the waves were little more than

ripples, and the boats were rowed to the beach. All hands skidded the engine over planks to a high point on the beach. Metal sheets from which the smoke stack would be constructed followed, with the saws. The boiler had to take its chances with the brig. It was secured by a long chain to which a float was attached. The deck lashings were cut. If the brig went down, presumably the boiler could be brought to the surface by hauling away on the chain.

The groaning of timbers continued until daybreak. In the gray of dawn they saw the ragged hole and the rocks holding the brig on the reef. She would be there many a day unless a Northeaster kicked up a heavy sea and she broke up.

"You'll have no community house by Christmas," Captain Carey observed gloomily. "The *Molly McDowell* won't arrive until early December. Then we'll have to lighter the boiler out to her. Well, settlers are used to disappointments. I guess they can stand another, but it's hard on the children."

"What are your plans?" Jim asked him.

"Remove the light cargo to the beach," replied Carey. "Patch the hole, shift the heavy cargo aft at extreme high tide, which should lift the bow clear. Beach her and make permanent repairs. After that, float her, take cargo aboard and complete the voyage. Your only hope is that the *Molly McDowell* makes an extra voyage."

Jim shook his head. The *McDowell*

wasn't due until the middle of December, and an extra voyage wouldn't be profitable because there was no piling ready to ship out.

The Indians came out of Tenas Bay to view the wreck, and make comments in their native tongue. Jim leaned on the rail and watched them. Cramm came up and said: "We don't like each other because we don't see eye to eye, but we've common sense, Ballard. You haven't a chance to get your mill to the settlement and you know it. You might take the engine apart and ship it by canoe in pieces, but the steam boiler has you whipped. That can't be taken apart. I'll give you a good price for everything—spot cash."

"How much?"

"Three times what you paid for the machinery," Cramm answered. "That's a big profit. If you let Christmas sentiment influence you you'll lose everything. As you've said yourself, the Sound is bound to grow, with many small mill towns along the shore. There's room enough for all of us. I plan to set up the mill in Tenas Bay."

"I'll work out something," Jim answered. "I'm not selling."

"You can't hold on. If you lose everything in some fool hope, then it'll be years before the settlement has a mill," Cramm argued. "And someone else will build it. You've invested your last dollar, and I know it."

"I'm not selling," Jim repeated.

Cramm realized there was no use arguing. He decided to let Jim think it over. Without the mill, Cramm's

whole plan must be discarded. With the mill, he would be in a position to buy most of the *Jonathan Brent's* cargo at a low figure.

Jim smoked a pipe at the rail and continued to stare at the canoes. They were forty feet long and as many as thirty natives were jammed into some of them. "Almost two tons of weight," Jim mused. "The trouble is, they're open. If they were loaded and unable to head into the wind, they'd ship water—and sink."

He went to the captain and said: "Why not lash three of those canoes together, put planks across them and cover them with canvas to keep out the water. Then we could put the boiler aboard, lash it and head for the settlement?"

"You've got some open water and if you were caught in a storm you wouldn't last long," the captain replied. "Besides, how would you paddle a load like that? A hatful of wind would stop you in your tracks!"

"I'd go with the tide," Jim answered. "When the tide turned we'd anchor and wait for it to turn again. We'd get there in time. It would be a snail's pace, but we'd get there. What I need is trade goods to make a deal with the Tenas Bay natives."

"I'll give you whatever you need," Carey offered, "and since you're financially cramped at present, I'll take lumber from your mill in payment."

IV

The ship's carpenter left space between the canoes so that they

wouldn't rub and possibly splinter under pressure. He constructed frames and installed them to strengthen the canoes, and to these frames he bolted lateral timbers. He planked the three canoes, making one continuous deck. He arranged for oarlocks so that the canoes could be rowed in smooth water. All openings were covered with canvas, which was painted to make the fabric waterproof.

At high tide they lowered the boiler into a sort of cradle and watched the canoes go deep under the weight.

"The fool!" Peter Cramm muttered to himself. "He hasn't a chance in a million of making it through. And he's cheating me out of starting a sawmill town—cheating himself, too. The damned fool!"

"Pete," one of his men said, "I guess it's about the first time you was ever licked in a crooked deal."

"Shut up!" Cramm retorted savagely. "I'm not licked yet. That mill will never cut a stick of timber."

As the tide set toward the settlement Jim Ballard cast off the mooring lines and his sluggish craft drifted slowly away. They had their first fight that night when the changing tide threatened to carry them to mid-channel, and far past the stranded brig.

They rowed to the point of exhaustion, but got the anchor down. "Just a taste of what's to come," Jim told his Indian crew. He lost track of time. His days were meas-

ured in terms of tides. He knew that the *Brent* had stranded in late November, a period when southwesterly winds lash the Sound to fury. Again and again they were forced to stay anchored in some sheltered spot awaiting favorable weather.

One deceptively calm day they saw the smoke of the settlement far ahead. A strong tide was running, but there was a hint of storm in the air. "We'll chance it," Jim said. "That tide is all in our favor."

They drifted rapidly, while the lazy ripples grew lively and became white caps. The canoes began lifting and falling sluggishly and spray began coming aboard as waves broke against the weather sides of the canoes.

Now the wind came and caught the boiler, checking the drift with the tide. "Get out the oars," Jim shouted. "When the tide turns we'll have both wind and tide against us."

They were making perhaps a half mile an hour when the tide turned. Now they began moving away from the settlement toward the exposed shore. Jim took soundings, but could find no bottom. It was deep here. Standing on the boiler, he could see a brisk sea breaking all along the shore.

"Row!" he ordered. "We can't hold our own, but we can slow down the drift."

He set the pace, pulling until his face was lined with exhaustion. Suddenly there was a shout and looking up, he saw Jeff Lane in a canoe, with

a row of paddlers on each side.

"Toss me a line," Lane shouted. "We saw you coming." As Jim tossed him the anchor rope, a second canoe came up, then a third and fourth. Finally three white men appeared in a heavy skiff. Now the waves began breaking over the forward end as the canoes were hauled into the teeth of the storm.

Hour after hour the paddlers slugged it out with the wind and tide; then the tide turned and the settlement seemed to move toward them. The women and children were running along the beach waving and shouting. As the canoes grounded on the mill site, a youngster yelled: "Did you see Santa Claus, Jim?"

Santa Claus!

Jim hadn't quite forgotten the cheery old fellow in the life and death struggle, but he was vague on details. "Huh?" he answered. "Oh, yes. I saw him! And he's coming, sure!"

Janice, smiling radiantly, was waiting as Jim stumbled ashore. "You'd better have something to eat first," she advised. "You're thinner than ever."

"As the cowboys say, a change of feed is good for thin cattle," Jim answered, "and I've been living on my own cooking for a long time." He turned to Lane. "Jeff, will you haul up the canoes at full tide?"

After supper they went over to the mill. "Your engine came down in a couple of canoes along with the sheet metal for the smoke stack,"

Jeff Lane said. "We've set her up, and riveted the metal into a stack. About all that's left is to set the boiler and connect up." He looked at the boiler. "Jim, I don't see how you got her here. For a dreamer, you can be mighty practical in a pinch."

"Just a case of patience, luck, and plenty of help at the finish." He glanced at a familiar figure. "How long has Cramm been here?"

"Two weeks," Lane answered. "And I'm worried. He's sparking Janice every night. And he's trying to get on the good side of everyone by pretending to help out."

The sawmill had been set up and was ready for operation. Smoke came from the smokestack, and steam pressure mounted as a settler fed pitch wood to the firebox.

"Before you start the engine," Janice advised, "I think you had better look inside the cylinder. It shouldn't take very long, because it only took Peter Cramm a few minutes to do whatever he did last night."

Cramm, caught completely off-guard, stared at her in amazement. "What're you talking about?" he blurted. He couldn't believe his ears.

"We'll find out," Jim said. He had the cylinder head off in a few minutes. He wiped the inside with a rag and brought it out. The rag was covered with iron filings. He half started for Cramm, but others were already surrounding the man.

"He tried to ruin the engine!" someone exclaimed. "Let's string

him up! The sooner renegades know we won't stand for their nonsense, the better. Get a rope! Get a rope!"

"Hold on a minute!" Jim shouted. "We don't want a Christmas hanging. Others have a better claim to Cramm, anyway. The *Jonathan Brent's* master, for instance. I'm sure that Cramm wrecked her. A little pressure will bring out the truth. Besides, he's wanted in San Francisco—by the Vigilantes. Tie him up."

Jim replaced the cylinder head and tightened the bolts. "Ready!" he said. The fireman blew the whistle. The echo came back from the timbered shores across the bay. Jim opened the valve and the engine began turning over. "Powf! Powf! Powf!" Each time the exhaust sent a white plume of vapor into the cold air.

A log came from the pond and stopped, swaying ponderously on the carriage. Jim pulled a lever and the log moved into the saw. The note changed from a high-pitched singing sound to a businesslike drone. A slab of bark fell off.

The carriage went back again, the log shifted slightly, and now the first board fell off. A cheer awakened the echoes. The first boards supplied a temporary shelter for the engine and saws, then came timbers for the community hall foundation.

The mill was kept going day and night, men carrying boards to the hall site as fast as they came from the saw. Down went the flooring and as the boards were nailed, carpenters

on hands and knees smoothed them up with their planes.

"Here's the *Molly McDowell*, Jim," Janice shouted one afternoon. "Better late than never."

She came smartly into the harbor and dropped anchor. As Jim came alongside in a canoe, the captain shouted down: "I'm a fool, Jim. To get this stuff here in time for Christmas, I took chances. I might have piled up as the *Brent* did."

"You're New England born," Jim answered, "and you can't help going soft Christmas time."

Then boxes came over the side until the canoe rode low. "And here's an order from the *Brent's* master," the skipper said. "He wants you to cut timbers according to specifications. He seemed to know you'd get that boiler through in spite of hell and high water. The timber is to patch up her hull."

"We'll get right at it," Jim promised, "and you can take it when you go, along with a prisoner named Peter Cramm."

The community hall was finished. Sticky drops of pitch formed on walls and ceiling, and the interior smelled of sap and dampness, but the hall kept out the rain, and kept in the heat. A Christmas tree stood at one end, The hastily built benches were filled, and a hush fell over the gathering.

"Will Santa Claus really come?" a little girl asked.

"Sure," her mother answered. "He sent word that this year he'd find us."

"Hey!" a boy shouted. "Where's Jim Ballard? We don't want Jim

to miss Santa Claus! Somebody find Jim!"

Then Santa Claus came through the door, red coat, whiskers, merry eyes, boots. And he carried a mighty pack. It seemed that he hadn't missed a bet. Things that the settlers hardly dared dream of receiving came from his bag—that special pipe for Jeff Lane; that satin gown for Janice; new glasses for Old Man Spencer; a rifle for Tim Betten; dolls for the girls and knives for the boys; store candy; and clothing.

"Hadn't you better stay for the dance, Santa?" someone said when the gifts had been given out.

"Just one, the first," Santa answered. "I've got a lot of ground to cover, you know."

Old Man Spencer put on his glasses, picked up his fiddle and read the music on the rack in front of him—a waltz. Santa asked Janice Lane to dance and when his lips were close to her ear, he said: "You caught onto Peter Cramm's tricks, and most of us thought he was fooling you."

"He was vain and boastful. Vain

and boastful men talk too much, and if you listen you can learn a lot from them. I could only guess what he was up to. I was afraid he might try to get rid of you in San Francisco, so I wrote the Vigilantes a letter, and sent it on the *Brent*."

"That probably saved my neck," Jim told her.

"When Cramm came here again, I watched him, and saw him tamper with the engine. I said nothing because when I accused him I wanted a lot of people around so that he couldn't sneak out of it."

"And right along you believed in Santa Claus?" Jim asked.

"Yes," Janice answered in a low voice. "Even the big towns, the many mills, the long wharves and trade with Asia."

Little Annie Craig suddenly whispered in a shocked voice: "Oh! Oh! Tommy, Santa Claus just kissed Janice. I'll bet that would make Jim Ballard terribly mad if he knew about it."

Tommy stared, pop-eyed. "He kissed her again. But maybe Jim wouldn't mind—so long as it's Santa Claus."

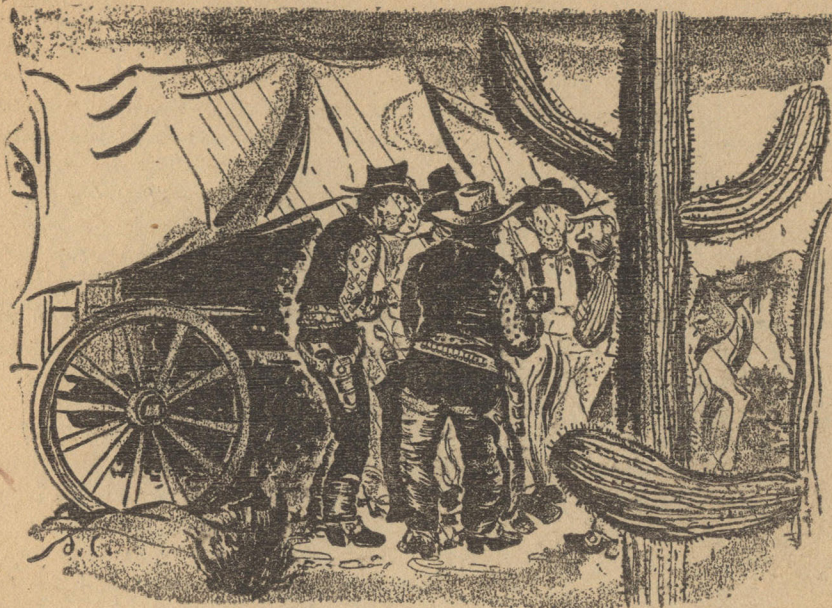
THE END



THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

I reckon our boys would a heap ruther be back home buckin' broncs than over there buckin' swastikas. We can help 'em whittle the Nazis down faster if we put our extra dinero in

WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!



CHUCKWAGON CHEF

by MARVIN DeVRIES

Having the Comanches cut their herd was bad enough but losing their new chef really hit the Running H boys where it hurt

THE chuckwagon looked like it was bogged down for good. "Like a bull-headed mustang settin' down," Jim Bead remarked. "What's the matter, Seedy—you goin' to let her stay there for keeps?"

"Nothin' but a couple chuckholes we run into," Seedy explained.

"We'll pull her out in the mornin'."

"If she don't float off meantime," said Jim.

"Them chuckholes'll anchor her down," Seedy joked in his shrill voice. "What could be more fittin' than chuckholes f'r the chuckwagon? Heh, heh, heh."

It was still raining lizards and long-eared angle worms. The fire roared ten feet high, and we all stood close by, giving off steam like a boil-in' pot hole, and drinking down Seedy's coffee, but even under them conditions, it didn't taste good.

"Seedy ain't a cook," Sid Storm, the wrangler, remarked. "He's a poisoner at heart. We'll all be dead, sure enough, before we ever git to Dodge."

"Shucks, I think I done real well with that coffee," Seedy stuck up for himself. "I like it."

"Anybody who likes that stuff 'ud like year-old barrel water," retorted Sid.

"Yeah," young Les Cranch joined in, throwing what he had left in his cup at the fire, "if it don't git any better, I'm goin' home. The devil with this."

For a minute, nobody knew what to say to that remark. The thrown coffee dripped along the piled wood with a hot sizzle. Les watched it glumly, and hunched his shoulders to the raw wind. He was only a young sprout, and no way used to this kind of head-on work. It wasn't right to bear down on him about it, but his remark didn't stack up right either.

"You could go home," Nick Roman answered him finally, "but in the end you'd wish you hadn't."

"Why?" Cranch wasn't goin' to take in a sensible remark like that right then. And he wasn't the only one. We had a lot of shorthorns on that drive.

Nick told him why. He just talked at the fire. He didn't look

at anybody in particular, and he didn't talk loud. You had to bend an ear to hear. But when he got through he had the idea pinned down. It was just that when a man hired out for a job like this he stuck with it, and did what he could to see it through, whether he got good coffee, or bad. He kept that herd headed where it was bound for until every last critter was counted in, and if it didn't work out that way, he knew it wasn't because he had quit on the job.

Cranch listened, and he didn't throw any of it back at Nick. But the next morning he was gone, anyhow. Jim told Nick and me when we come back from the bed ground.

"And there's more of 'em ready to go first chance they git," Jim predicted.

"We're too short-handed to let that happen," Nick said.

"How you goin' to stop 'em? You give 'em a talkin' to last night."

"It's Seedy and his danged grub," I added. "The only thing that could hold this crew together now is a good cook."

"And they don't grow on bushes," Jim said. "Besides, Seedy wouldn't ever give up the chuckwagon without you killed him off."

To make matters worse, Seedy had gotten bogged down with breakfast, too. The flapjacks was scorched on one side, and dripped dough on the other. Seedy said it was because the fire was lopsided.

"What about the coffee, then?" Jim demanded. "That boils all over when it boils, don't it?"

"That's good coffee." Seedy took a swig out of the cup he always had standing on the shelf behind him, and smacked his lips, but it didn't make the stuff taste any better to the rest of us.

Nick didn't join in the argument. He just walked off by himself and looked at the scenery. I don't know why I watched him; mebbe it was the cagey way he acted. He didn't walk fast, but gradually he circled around behind the wagon and came back. All I could see was his legs. He stopped behind the canvas drop Seedy had rigged up to keep out the drizzle. Then his arm came out around the edge, and he poured something into Seedy's coffee out of a bottle.

When he got back to the fire I thought he'd let us in on his joke, but he didn't. As it turned out, it wasn't a joke at all. I found that out as soon as Seedy took another swig. It didn't gag him or anything. But a second later he started to breathe hard and then, all of a sudden, he sagged in a heap in the mud, and stayed there.

"Holy smokes!" Nick exclaimed. "What's the matter with Seedy?" He ran to him, rinsed out Seedy's coffee cup, good and proper, and tried to give him some water, but Seedy couldn't take it down. "He's got an attack!" Nick cried. "We better git him in the wagon."

The attack lasted about an hour, and then Seedy came to, but he couldn't stand on his feet, and the way it looked, it would be a long time before he ever stood on his feet again. The boss asked him how he

felt, and Seedy said he felt like somebody had poured him full of lead.

"Dang it!" the boss flared. "If it ain't one thing, it's another. What're we goin' to do now?"

I guess that was what Nick had been waiting for. He straightened up, and said mebbe he could take over the job. He said he used to do some cooking.

"All right, Nick," the boss said. "You take over. Just do the best you can, and I'll see to it the boys don't do no hollering."

"I'll do the best I can," Nick promised.

"We'll git Seedy back on his feet as soon as we can. There's a doc up at Marco Creek. We'll see what he says."

We all lent a hand gettin' the chuckwagon started, and then went out to the herd. The boss was plenty worried, though.

"It was bad enough with Seedy, but I don't know what's goin' to happen now," he muttered, rubbing his hand along the back of his neck the way he did.

"It'll be a change anyway," Jim argued. "He's bound to do it different than Seedy."

"If anybody starts to hooraw him, you boys pin their ears back," the boss begged. "If he quits, we're sunk."

"I don't think he'll quit, boss," I said. "But if his grub ain't no better'n Seedy's, you'll have trouble, after what Cranch did."

The boss shook his head. "If any more pull out, I don't know what

we're goin' to do. A lot of them don't hardly pull their weight, but, all the same, we couldn't do without 'em. Most of them can use a gun."

"Listen," Jim said, "don't you go worryin' about Comanches."

"I ain't worryin'. I'm just lookin' ahead. When we git up through the Nations, we—"

"We'll just keep foggin' along like we're doin' now," Jim told him.

"Unless old Hook Nose—" the boss started again.

"Shucks, that ornery coyote may be dead by the time we git there," broke in Jim. "Don't worry about him."

"I ain't," the boss stated. "It's just—"

"I got to go up there on point," Jim said, and rode away.

The boss kept on airing his views to me, and I let him unwind. I didn't know whether or not to tell him what I had seen, but finally decided I'd wait until I could have a talk with Nick in private. Mebbe it just happened that Seedy took sick when Nick was going to play a joke on him, and that the two things didn't have anything to do with each other. On the way back to the chuckwagon, though, the whole thing slipped my mind for a while. I rode in with young Ken Blake, and he started to talk about Cranch of his own accord. He said, after all, it was his own business what he did. A man was his own boss, to come and go as he pleased.

"Hm!" I said. "When you pullin' out?"

"Me?" he let go. "I wasn't

thinkin' of pullin' stakes. But . . . it's an idea."

"Remember this," I told him. "It's rough country on a man who don't stick to the job he's laid out for himself."

Nick was under the canvas drop, handing out the grub when we rode up. I lit on the ground, and walked over to him.

"How'd it go, Nick?" I asked. "Pretty tough proposition, ain't it?"

"Oh," he said, "I made out."

I hardly dared to look at what he handed me. I just shoved some of it in my mouth, and chewed it a minute, and then looked down at my plate. It looked about the same as always, but it was sure something I had never et before. Nick had done something to that food to make it taste good. He had done a miracle. I wouldn't have dreamed of anything better, if I'd been starved for a month. It was food a king would have et.

"Well, I'm hornswaggled!" I said.

I looked at Nick, and he was grinning from ear to ear.

"You got somethin' here, Nick," I said. "Can you do it again? You ain't just a flash in the pan, so to speak, are yuh?"

"Holy smokes!" Ken Blake exclaimed. "I never seed such grub."

Just to test him, I said: "Yeah, that's good grub, but I can't enjoy my food when it's rainin' cats and dogs. Do you s'pose it's ever goin' to let up?"

Ken looked up at the sky, as if he didn't remember it was rainin'. "Oh, yeah," he says. "The weather. I

guess it'll let up some time. I don't mind the weather."

"Well, I'm damned," I said again.

Seedy, meanwhile, stayed in the wagon. The doc at Marco Creek told him he had yellow jaundice, but he wouldn't believe it, and put up quite an argument. He said it was just an attack, nothing more, and after that first bad spell, he did improve some. In fact, he started gettin' nasty with Nick, and one day he got hold of a gun and tried to drive Nick off the chuckwagon. It was a little too much for him, though, and he wilted before he could shoot.

Nick quick fed Seedy some good hot coffee, but, mebbe because he had overdid, he got a relapse, and was down on his back again. Another doc further up the trail said he had complications, but didn't tell us what ought to be done to get him uncomplicated. The one at Red Rock shook his head pretty glumly, and said he would say Seedy had leaping consumption, and there wasn't much to do for that.

"Don't worry, Seedy," the wrangler told him. "When we git up in the Nations we'll git a medicine man to work on you. They know a lot of stuff sometimes."

"I won't eat no cooked buzzard claws!" Seedy yelled. "You can make up yore mind to that. I'd ruther die."

The only complaint Nick had was that he was on his feet so much it made them ache. "I got bad feet," he told me. "I always had bad feet. I got to be doctoring all the time with 'em."

"What do you use?" I asked him.

"Oh, some stuff I got from a store in Palo Pinto. It's called Fletcher's Foot Balm."

"By the way," I asked, "what's the stuff you're feedin' Seedy?"

He scabbled at the dirt a long time with his boot. "So you know about it, eh?" he remarked finally.

"I knowed about it right from the start," I told him. "I saw you sneak behind the wagon and slip it in his coffee."

"I'm givin' him that Foot Balm," he said. "The same stuff I use, only Seedy gits it internal."

"Jumpin' sidewinders!" I said.

"It ain't fatal," he said. "I took some once by mistake, and it sure does things to you, but it ain't fatal. Besides, I ain't givin' him any more than just enough to keep him on his back. Somethin' had to be done, you know that, and it was the only way to git Seedy out of that chuckwagon, short of shootin'."

"When you goin' to let up on him?"

"When we git in the clear."

"Ain't that now?" I said. "I ain't complainin', Nick, but mebbe Seedy's constitution won't stand so much of that stuff. And nobody's worryin' about a thing right now, except the boss with his Comanches."

"I know about that," Nick said. "I thought mebbe I'd hang on till we got through the Nations."

"Yeah," I agreed, "mebbe that's a good idea. The boss talks about Comanches so much he might throw a scare into some of the new hands, and they'd pull out in spite of all you done."

That's the way we let it stand. And it was a good thing we did, because the closer we got, the more the boss talked. He said we'd fight 'em off, come hell or high water.

"We still got every steer we started with," he crowed. "And we'll keep 'em. We can do it, can't we, boys?"

"We'll fight 'em off, boss," I told him. "We'll fight off the rats, no matter how many there are."

A worried look came into his eyes. "If there ain't too many," he remarked. "But mebbe they won't bother us. Lots of drives git through without payin' toll."

That was what the boss was hoping for, but it didn't work out that way. One day the Comanches came down on us across the Staked Plains. Somebody riding point saw them first, and motioned that the live oak shinnery roundabout was crawling with 'em. Three of them kept in the open, though, and the boss went out to parley. He took me along because I could talk what you might call Spanish.

One of them was Hook Nose. He wore only one feather in his hair, and a breech clout around his middle. But he was loaded for bear, sure enough, with a scalping knife, a bow and arrows, and a repeating rifle slung alongside his leg. Without batting an eye, he said he wanted one hundred head of beef, wo-haws, for letting us cross the reservation.

"He must be sick," the boss said. "That's a lot of beef."

He said a lot more, but he didn't make much impression on Hook Nose. Right away, the Chief got tough, and scowled and ranted, and

rode around in a tight circle, slashing the air with his hand, and grabbing for his rifle, and then his knife, as if he didn't know exactly which way he wanted to kill the boss. It was play acting, of course, but our main trouble was he could back it up plenty.

As much as he hated Comanches, the boss kept cool. "We'll jaw 'em down to ten head if we can," he told me. "Mebbe a little more. It's goin' to cost us somethin', I can see that, and I'd ruther it was beef than scalps. They got the whole herd pinched in."

"I know it," I said. "We gotta git organized. If this old buzzard gives 'em the sign to bust loose, you pick him off, an' I'll take the other two. Then we'll dig back, and make out the best we can."

"Don't do nothin' 'til I tell you," the boss ordered. "I've been thinkin'—"

"You better think fast, boss," I said. "Hook Nose is gettin' mighty mean."

"You know," the boss said, "if Nick could stomach it to cook him a meal, we might git some of that mean streak out of him, and then we could talk business."

"I'll talk to him, boss," I said. "If he knowed what Nick's cookin' is like, he'd fall all over himself gettin' there." Then I turned on my Spanish, and flowered up what the boss had told me to say. It worked, too, because when I got through it didn't take Hook Nose long to decide he'd come. Mebbe he just figured that if there was any funny business goin' on, he wouldn't be the

one to git the worst of it. Which was probably true.

Nick had the meal ready. It was a mixture of meat, rice, and tomatoes, with some cheese throwed in, I think, and biscuits that would have floated off in the air if you didn't hold 'em down.

"One thing's sure," the boss said, after watching the three Comanches awhile, "if that'd been Seedy's grub, they'd 've killed us in cold blood by now. You better taper it off, Nick, or he'll git a stomach attack. Jim, you cut out a couple culls, and we'll see if Hook Nose'll talk business on that basis."

Two culls didn't suit Hook Nose, though. He still wanted a hundred head—and something else. He said he wanted Nick, too, to cook up the wo-haws the way he had done it just now.

"It's gettin' worse, boss," I said. "He still wants a hundred head—and Nick besides. It looks like we put our foot in it."

"Balls of fire!" the boss roared. "Who does he think he is?"

"Don't go flyin' off the handle," I said. "Remember he cin run off the whole herd if he gits a notion."

"The ornery varmit! Do you hear that, Nick?"

"Yeah, I heard it," Nick said.

"Listen, now, everybody, you better git set. We made our play, and lost. I'll take care of Hook Nose. The rest of you—"

"You'll lose every man," Nick said.

"And every steer, too."

"What else can we do?"

"I could go with him," Nick answered.

"What?"

"I could go with him," Nick repeated.

"Hang it, man, you couldn't do no such thing," the boss flamed. "What'd happen to you?"

"He don't want my scalp. He wants my cookin'."

"Sure, but—"

"Let me chance it, boss. I got an idea."

"What kind of an idea?"

"Oh, just somethin'."

"What'll we do in the meantime? We need a cook, too."

"I got a notion Seedy'll git back on the job when I'm gone."

"Well-l-l." The boss scratched his head, and Nick took it for granted he meant to let him go. The boys cut out the hundred head, and drove them off. Then a hundred or more Comanches crawled out of the brush, and fell in behind them, yelping, and hurrawing us till our ears burned. I never felt so mortified in my life.

But two days later Jim Read and I went back. By that time, we had the herd in the clear, with two river crossings between. We said we were just goin' to have a look-see, but the boss knew we meant to git Nick back if there was any way to manage it. We back-trailed all day, and long into the night, figuring on resting our horses through the next day, and then making our play.

Jim figured we had a fair chance of pulling it off with whole skins, if we could only locate Nick.

"I'll go in first on foot," he said, "an' git him located, and then we'll

make a run in, and shoot hell out of the place like we was an army. Then, when the panic's on, we'll run off with him."

"S'pose he won't come?"

"Why wouldn't he come?" Jim demanded. "You don't suppose he likes what he's doin', do you?"

"I got a notion he went with 'em so he could keep an eye on that stock, and he'll try to figure out some way of gettin' 'em back."

"He better not. They're gone."

"I ain't so sure. I got a notion we'll see 'em back."

Jim wouldn't believe me, but I was right. We were comin' to the creek where we meant to hide out for the day, when we run into them, trailing out of the tules in a long thin line. It was beginning to get light, and we stood to one side, and counted 'em. They was all Running H stock, and when the last one had come through I said: "Holy smokes! I count ninety-nine."

"Me, too," Jim said.

"Can you beat that? I told you we'd—" I didn't finish what I was goin' to say because, right then, we heard a yell up ahead, and rode on in. "That's Nick," I said. "I can tell his voice."

It was him, all right. The one steer that was missing from our count was bogged down on the far side of the creek, and Nick was trying to git him out, edging toward where he had gotten off the solid footing.

"Balls of fire!" I grumbled. "Can't he even let one go!"

"He better," Jim said suddenly.

"I seen the bushes move just beyond

him." He pointed to a spot a little upstream from Nick. I didn't see the bushes move, but all of a sudden a rifle barrel was poking out, and it was aimed straight at Nick.

I let out a yell, and Nick dived off his horse into the water, but I couldn't tell whether he was shot off or came off of his own accord, because right then the rifle started blasting at him. The last I saw of Nick he was floating downstream, and it looked like he was dead.

The man in the bushes stepped out to git a better shot, and we recognized him. It was Hook Nose, the same varmit we had stuffed full of food a few days before. We started throwing lead at him, but three hundred feet, or more, is a long way with a revolver, and it ain't half so far with a rifle, which we found out pronto.

"Jim," I said, "I don't know what we can do for Nick, but we sure enough are goin' to git that bellerin' steer out of there if it's the last thing we do."

Then we saw the bushes move behind Hook Nose, and we thought it must be another Comanche comin' out, but it wasn't. It was Nick. He must've played dead until he was out of sight, then come ashore, and circled around.

"Keep on shootin' til Nick gets set," Jim said. "We—"

Right then, Hook Nose spun around and saw him. Point-blank like that bis rifle wasn't so handy, but it was handy enough. We didn't know if Nick had a gun. Or, if he did, whether it had got waterlogged. Whoever got in the first shot was the

only one who was goin' to come out alive.

We slid down the clay bank, and tried to git across, but it was slow going. We hit deep water, right off. My horse got panicked, and I went off. By the time I got ashore, I still hadn't heard any shooting. It must've happened when I was under water. But the only thing that mattered was that Nick was the one who was standing there waiting for us, and the Comanche chief wouldn't ever move again—not of his own accord, at any rate.

The first thing Nick said was for us to give him a hand with that bogged-down steer.

"Nick," I answered, "I'd do it, if that whole pack of Comanches was on our tail."

"They ain't," he told us. "They all got took sick."

"Hm!" I said. "Somethin' like what took Seedy?" Jim bein' there, I couldn't say it any more outright.

Nick nodded. "They ain't used to civilized food, I guess," he explained. "They all got it right after I cooked 'em their first meal. It was goin' to be a big celebration. I didn't want to spoil any Running H stock on 'em, so I got 'em to use some other they had, but I guess—"

"How come Hook Nose tailed you then?"

"He couldn't eat. He was still loaded down with what he had et at the chuckwagon. I knew he'd tail

me, but I figured I could handle him."

"You almost didn't," said Jim. "What you should have done was to light out of there as fast as you could, and leave the stock go."

"Shucks," Nick said, "that's why I went along in the first place. I had an idea I could git 'em back."

"You know," Jim said, "when we git to Dodge we're goin' to take that bellerin' steer there in the water and make some kind of a statue of him. I couldn't think of nothin' more fittin'."

"A statue for who?" Nick demanded.

"For you, you stubborn ole coot."

Nick didn't think much of the idea. He said he got his wages, an' that was all he wanted. "How's everybody?" he asked.

I told him everybody was fine. "Even Seedy's back on his feet, cookin' again. By the way, you don't happen to have any o' that Foot Balm left, do you, Nick? My feet have been killin' me, lately."

Nick shook his head. "No, it's all gone," he said. "I had some foot trouble myself the last couple days, and I used it all up."

It was kind of funny the way Jim listened to this double talk, without gettin' the real drift.

"That's a fine note," I grumbled. "I s'pose I just got to suffer in silence."

"Forgit it," said Jim. "Seedy's grub ain't as bad as that."



THE BLOOMING DESERT

by JIM WEST

*You'll never go hungry or thirsty in
the desert—if you learn your way around*

THE blooming desert is no catch phrase, no wisecracking punster's paradox. It is gospel truth. From mountain top to valley floor the arid sections of the Southwest support a surprising variety of plant life.

Even eliminating the widespread cactus, strange, exotic trees and shrubs dot the desert flats and dry range gulches. Many of these plants are capable of giving aid and succor to the wayfarer who knows his elemental desert botany. They grow like beckoning beacons out where the brown sand stretches into endless infinity under the blistering rays of the blazing sun.

These weird plants of an unreal Never-never Land, strange to most of us, are as familiar to many arid-country prospectors and old-time desert rats as the vegetables you nur-

tured with tender care in this year's Victory Garden. And a lot of them are just as useful.

There's "squaw cabbage," a desert member of the mustard family. People who gush over the desert instead of living there like to call it "desert candle." The latter sounds more romantic. But to a hungry man, anxious for a fresh batch of boiled greens, the original name has more purpose.

Squaw cabbage starts as a low bush with a thick bunch of bluish-green leaves—the greens that are both tender and tasty when cooked with a dash of salt and pepper. Later the hollow central stem lengthens, pushing up well above the leaves. This white stem forms the "candle" and bears a purple flower at the tip. After the plant has flowered and died

the waxlike candles still stand, interesting in themselves and a giveaway of the location of a growth of cabbage in the neighborhood.

There are places in the Mojave Desert north and west of Barstow where the desert is virtually covered with acres of delicious squaw cabbage.

Many a desert rat chousing a pack burro down a lonely mountain trail in the depths of the Southwest's most arid regions has at some time or another come on what he first took to be the gray haze of a campfire in a distant dry wash. It has taken a second and sometimes a third glance to convince him that it wasn't smoke, that no other travelers were camped down there in the desert.

The gray haze isn't smoke, though it may seem to be moving in the shimmering heat. It's *trees*. Smoke trees, their appearance as deceptive as any desert mirage.

The smoke tree or smoke bush, technically *Parosela spinosa*, is one of the strangest plants of the desert. It grows along the sandy beds of dry watercourses much as the more familiar green willows line streams in country that is not so arid. The trees reach twelve to fifteen feet in height. Rooted in the sand and gravel they may stretch in irregular clusters for miles along a dry wash.

They have no regular leaves. The ghostly gray haze is obtained from the myriad of laced and interlaced branches and twigs, all of which are covered with sharp spikes. It is only from a distance that the illu-

sion of smoke is present.

When the seasonal spring rains visit the desert, sending torrents of water cascading down the parched dry washes, the smoke tree blooms in a bright blue glory. Then the wraithlike gray of the twining branches is lost under the multitude of tiny flowers that bathe each bush in cool sea blue.

But where there's smoke there's fire, and where there are smoke trees there's apt to be water, even if it is only a trickle of lukewarm moisture below the surface of the oven-hot dry wash. A little digging will usually bring you to damp ground. A scooped-out hole may provide you and your pack animals with a needed drink, and perchance enough to cook your evening meal and fill your canteens before starting out again in the morning.

Another tree of the desert washes and the arid mountain gulches is the palo verde. Leafless most of the year, it blossoms yellow and gold and ruby-red in its short springtime flowering season. It may attain considerable size with a trunk several feet in diameter and branches that are thick and twisty.

Always a welcome bit of green in barren country, the palo verde will provide firewood for a prolonged desert camp. And palo verde beans can be ground into flour that will make a rather flat-tasting but sustaining hoecake. Desert Indians used palo verde bean flour.

The mesquite grows extensively in semi-arid country and may be found in mountain canyons, draws and

gulches far out across long miles of blazing sand. Thorny-spiked and with broad, brown bean pods that rattle when they are dry, the mesquite is very likely the most useful of all desert trees.

The wood is excellent for fuel. In the main, in the arid regions it is the desert mesquite that provides shelter for men and livestock. The bean pods are a staple food among Mexicans and Indians. They are tidbits for stock and pack animals.

In case you have a sweet tooth yourself there is a second cousin of the familiar Spanish bayonet, the *agave deserti*, from which, if you take the trouble, you can make yourself some really good desert molasses as fine a sweetening spread for a stack of flapjacks as any desert camper could want.

The *agave deserti*, like the bayonet, sprouts from a central close-laid group of sharply pointed spiked leaves. But the leaves are bluish-gray while those of the bayonet are a deeper green. The plant sends up a single, tall flowering stalk that reaches a height of eight or ten feet and blossoms with a honey-yellow flower.

To obtain desert molasses from the plant the first step is to gather a half dozen or so of the spiked-leaved clusters that have young, tender shoots. Cut the shoot or stem off at the base—the short shoot merely indicates a young and more tender plant. From the center of the leaves cut out the core or heart of the plant. These are generally pulpy lumps about a foot high and a little less than that in diameter.

Next dig a fire pit in the sand and line it with stones. Get a good fire going of dried roots, greasewood or other available fuel.

Lay the plant hearts around the edge of the fire for a preliminary scorching while you are heating the stones for the actual baking. When you have a plentiful supply of live coals and the cooking hole heated, put the *agave* hearts into the hole on top of a deep bed of coal. Bank hot ashes and coals around and on top of the hearts.

It is like baking bean-hole beans, only you use desert *agave* hearts instead. After about twenty-four to thirty hours of cooking dig the hearts out of the pit. The outer skin will be black and charred. Cut this skin away with a sharp knife. Inside will be a golden-brown, fibrous gooey mass.

Let it cool, and then don't be afraid to taste it. Think of the hero who first tackled an oyster on the half shell.

Desert molasses is surprisingly sweet, so sweet a little goes a long way. And it has a strange, indescribable flavor that tastes like nothing in the world but—desert molasses.

Now with desert molasses to spread on your palo verde bean-flour hoecake you can top off the meal with an after-eating smoke of home-cured "coyote" tobacco rolled in your favorite curly paper. *Nicotiana bigelovii*, a true tobacco, is not very common but it can be found here and there growing wild in the desert country. It is a many-

stemmed plant about one or two feet high with very dark, long, green leaves. It looks exactly like what it is, a stunted tobacco plant.

Coyote tobacco, dried and cured, may not taste like your favorite brand but many a desert rat and sand-country prospector knows how smokable it is in a pinch. Especially if you are figuratively a million miles from nowhere and your supply of "makin's" has given out.

Of all the non-cactus desert growth, none is quite as startling as the Joshua tree, *yucca brevifolia* to the scientists. In broad daylight a forest of Joshua trees will make an honest man shudder. Under the eerie rays of a desert moon they will give him the creeps.

Localized in groups or forests throughout the Southwest's desert areas, the huge, tree-size plants have thick, stubby, abruptly amputated branches that resemble thorny arms. A yellowish covering of long points takes the place of leaves. When in bloom the flowers are a greenish-

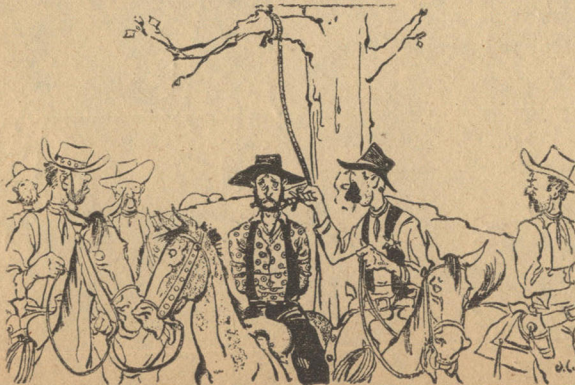
white, like curdled milk and their scent is acrid and sour. The fruit is bitter with a lip-puckering, soapy taste.

Not the least uncanny feature of the tree is the persistence with which the grotesque, handleless arms twist until they all point roughly in one direction. It has been said that when the early Morman immigrants first encountered these weird trees they noted the arms pointed west. Considering the trees a sign marking the way to their Promised Land, they gave them their present-day Biblical name.

Unfortunately while the arms of the individual trees do tend to point almost accusingly in a single, steadfast direction, they don't always point west. Even as a desert compass they are not reliable. Dog-gone the fascinatin' things anyhow!

But that's the way of the desert. Lots of help from its weird plant life where perhaps you would least expect it. And here and there a Joshua tree to fool you.

THE END



"Thar now, Lige! Thet boil o' yourn feel more comfy?"

With a tiny pearl button as his only clue, Doc Comanche worked against time to trap a killer in that

MANHUNT IN OVANDO

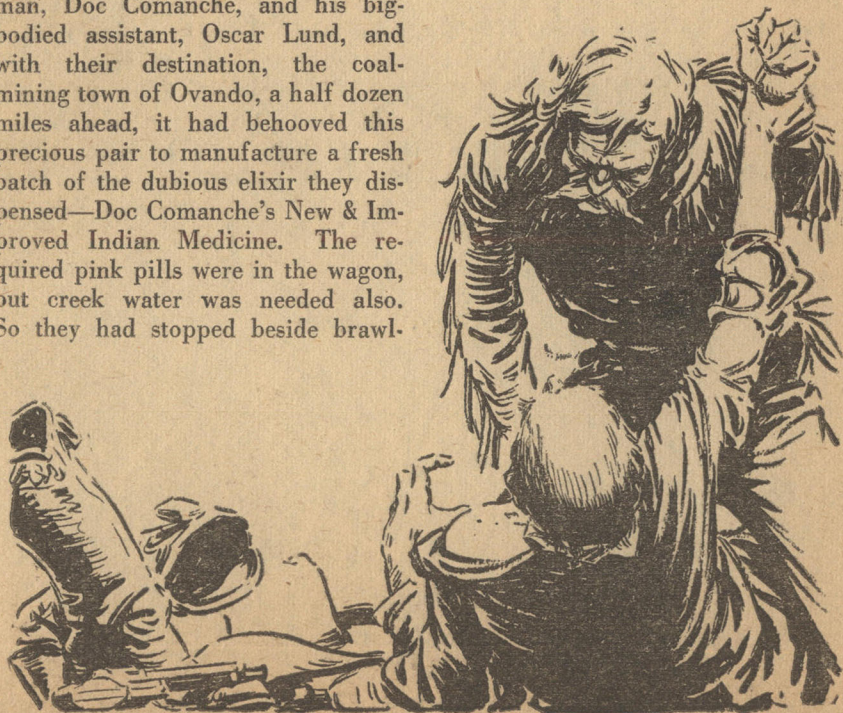
by NORMAN A. FOX

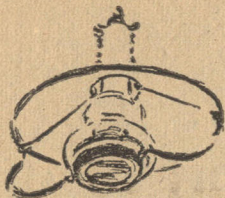
I

THEY found the dead man face down beside a mountain stream. They'd come rolling along in their old Conestoga, that veteran pitchman, Doc Comanche, and his big-bodied assistant, Oscar Lund, and with their destination, the coal-mining town of Ovando, a half dozen miles ahead, it had behooved this precious pair to manufacture a fresh batch of the dubious elixir they dispensed—Doc Comanche's New & Improved Indian Medicine. The required pink pills were in the wagon, but creek water was needed also. So they had stopped beside brawl-

ing Sombra River and stumbled upon the body.

Big Oscar made the find. A man of brawn, Oscar was somewhat wanting in brains, but preparing Doc's





medicine required no great skill. Oscar had set himself to filling bottles; Comanche, pleading pain from an ancient and entirely imaginary bullet wound, stretched out beneath a tree and was deep in a dream of easy dollars when Oscar's wild bellow jerked him to wakefulness.

"Doc! Come here, Doc! Hurry!"

That brought Comanche to his feet, and he made a fine, high figure in his fringed buckskin, his long, silvery hair flowing to his shoulders, and his creamy Stetson slanted over one eye. He plunged through the fringing willows to where Oscar had ambled as he worked and found the big man pointing downward.

"Dead!" Oscar said needlessly.

Doc knelt for a closer look.

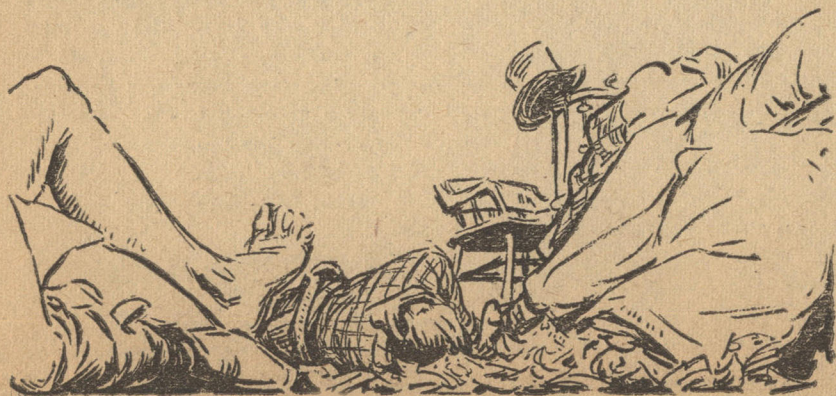
Turned over, the corpse proved to

have a vicious, beard-stubbed face. A bullet had split his heart, and it had been fired at such close range that the fellow's shirt had been scorched. His pockets were empty, Doc quickly discovered, but the man clutched a gun in his right hand, a .45 with an intricately carved cedar butt, it developed, a gun almost as fancy as the pearl-handled sixes Doc sometimes wore.

"He's got something in his other hand, too, Doc," Oscar observed.

"So I perceive," said Doc and went to work on the clenched fist. This fellow had been dead nearly a day, and it took considerable prying before Comanche got a diamond-shaped pearl button from the stiffened fingers. A wisp of gray thread clung to the button, and Doc stroked his skimpy goatee in puzzlement as he pocketed this peculiar find. Then he had a look around.

There were many footprints in the soft earth of the river bank, and the sign spoke of a struggle. The ground might have been trampled by two men—or twenty; there was no telling. Threshing among the bushes, Doc



came upon a crutch which he held aloft.

"Must've belonged to the dead jigger," Oscar slowly opined. "He's got a twisted leg. We'll report this to the Ovando sheriff, huh, Doc?"

But Comanche shook his silvery head. He numbered badge toters among his friends, did Doc, but twenty years of rolling through the West with his medicine wagon had taught him to walk wide of the law.

"We're going to Ovando, Oscar, to sell medicine," he reminded. "Not to answer questions for baffled badge toters who might lock us up for investigation. We shall give this unfortunate soul decent Christian burial and forget him. I perceive, Oscar, that you've finished filling bottles. When you load them in the wagon, get out the shovel. This old battle wound of mine—"

"I know, Doc," Oscar said resignedly. He'd stripped off the dead man's gun belt and thrust the fancy .45 into one of the holsters, his bovine face lighting as he fondled the weapon. "No sense in burying this gun, huh, Doc?"

"The gun," Doc said firmly, "goes into its owner's grave. It's bad luck to rob the dead. But, on second thought, we won't bury that crutch. I, Oscar, see the faint outline of an inspiration!"

"I reckon you know best, Doc," Oscar conceded grudgingly and headed for the wagon.

While Big Oscar toiled with the shovel, Doc Comanche squatted beneath the tree again, just out of sight, but he didn't doze this time. He'd

found a riddle made up of a dead man, a diamond-shaped button, a fancy gun and a crutch. Born with a tendency for getting into trouble, Doc liked no part of this. But his business was the peddling of medicine, not the solving of a range's riddles, so he deliberately turned his mind to his own affairs. By the time Oscar pronounced the burial completed and the two climbed aboard the sway-backed Conestoga, Doc had built an inspiration into a rounded scheme.

He said: "You stowed the crutch in the wagon, Oscar?"

Big Oscar nodded.

"When we are closer to Ovando, you will head on afoot," Doc told his assistant. "You will come hobbling into Ovando on that crutch, and you will make yourself conspicuous. Do you understand me, Oscar?"

"I'm to play like I'm crippled, huh, Doc?"

"Exactly, suh. I will delay my arrival until nightfall. When I make my pitch, you, Oscar, will be in the crowd. And you will buy a bottle of Indian Medicine, family size preferably, and take a stiff dose at once. Then, suh, you shall proceed to break the crutch over your knee and execute a lively dance."

"Just like the times I had heart attacks in the crowd and you brought me out of 'em with medicine, huh, Doc?"

"Precisely, Oscar. You are learning rapidly. Another twenty years and you will undoubtedly be a perfect assistant. Now for the next few miles just keep thinking about your

act. Crutch—medicine—a happy jig. Can you remember that, Oscar?"

"I reckon," Oscar said. "I'll sure make me a fine figger in that town, huh, Doc?"

II

Thus it was that Doc Comanche came tooling his crowbait team into Ovando alone at sundown, driving the main street's length to the wagon yard and eying the town with a thought to the dollars that might be harvested here.

Huddled up under the Sombra Hills, Ovando drew its living from the mines pocking the nearby slopes, and the grime of coal was upon it. There was a Black Diamond Mercantile, a Black Diamond Saloon, and, across from the jail building, a massive two-storied building bore the legend:

BLACK DIAMOND MINING SYNDICATE
OVANDO BRANCH
AMBROSE CUFF, MANAGER

People thronged along the boardwalks, rough-clad miners who kept the saloons' batwings creaking busily. Of big Oscar Lund there was nothing to be seen, but Doc, unperturbed, put up the team, had himself some supper, and, when deep darkness came, set up his stand and got the oil torches burning to make his pitch.

First there was the lure to draw the populace, and a few tunes wrung from his banjo usually did the trick. Stationed at the far end of the street, Doc plucked out his music in stunned amazement, for people heard but

didn't come. Huddled in tight knots along the street, they seemed deeply concerned with business of their own, though at long last one came ambling toward Doc's stand, a tall, stringy fellow with a vacuous face.

"Evenin', sir," Doc said hopefully. "Would you be interested in a bottle of Doc Comanche's New & Improved Indian Medicine? Nature's own cure for asthma, eczema, warts, wens, premature wrinkles and seventy-seven other afflictions which beset man and beast."

"Reckon not," answered the stringy fellow, turning his pocket inside out. "Unless you're taking buttons for money."

Doc frowned. "Then tell me, suh, what ails this town?"

The stringy one shrugged. "Nothin'," he said. "Folks just ain't interested in buying medicine when they've got a lynching on their minds. Reckon those Black Diamond muckers will be likkered up enough by midnight to take Twisty Turnbull out o' Sheriff Hartridge's jail and string him up."

"Twisty Turnbull?"

"Sure. The lame safe cracker. Ain't yuh never heard of him? Hit this town last night and cracked the Black Diamond Syndicate's office safe and walked off with a pay roll. That made the miners fit for tying. Callaghan, the Diamond foreman, saw Turnbull hobbling off last night, but Callaghan didn't know, then, that the safe had been robbed, so he didn't have sense enough to stop Turnbull. But Twisty come back to town today, he did."

"Come back? Why, sir?"

"Probably figgered nobody'd seen him last night and it was safe enough. Turnbull built his rep down south, and folks up here don't know him by sight. Reckon he wanted to find out how hot the law was hunting. So here he comes this afternoon, big as life, hobbling along on his crutch and—"

"*Crutch!*" Doc ejaculated and saw the shape of a hideous truth. "You mean the sheriff jailed a man who was using a crutch? Why, anybody might—"

"Sure, anybody might use a crutch. But it seems that Turnbull packed a brace of fancy .45s, and he laid one on the floor beside the Black Diamond safe, when he was busting it last night. Must've got scared and left in a hurry, because he plumb forgot his gun. But he was toting its twin when he came into town today. And that cinches it. All the lying he can do now won't save him from an air dance!"

Fear washed through Doc Comanche, a strength-sapping wave. Big Oscar had kept that fancy gun, after all, and had worn it into town. What was it he'd said? "I'll sure make me a fine figger, huh, Doc." And Oscar, mistaken for Twisty Turnbull, had blundered into trouble.

There were still pieces to this puzzle that didn't fit, but Doc Comanche wasn't concerned about them. Coming off his stand, he shouldered past the stringy fellow who'd been his entire audience, and headed down the street at a fast stride toward the sheriff's office. He'd made no spiel in this town as yet, Doc hadn't, but

he was going to make one now. To the law.

Walking as quickly as his long legs would carry him, he reached the lamp-lighted jail in record time. But at its office door he paused, for the sheriff had company. Doc recognized the lawman, a big-bellied man, by the badge he wore, and he saw the other two who were here, one an overly dressed thin whiplash of a man, the other burly and blue-jowled, with the red-veined nose of a heavy drinker. The thin man was saying petulantly:

"If you had to see me, Hartridge, you could have come to my quarters over the office. I've been a sick man, sheriff. Now what's so pressing that you sent for me and Callaghan, here?"

"Your miners," Sheriff Hartridge said wearily. "They're swilling whiskey and making lynch talk, and I don't dare leave the building for fear they'll come after my prisoner. That's why I sent a boy to fetch you two. You're the Black Diamond's local manager, Mr. Cuff, and Callaghan's the mine foreman. If anybody can talk the lynch notion out of those muckers, it's you two."

Doc drew in his breath hopefully. This fancy-dressed man, then, was Ambrose Cuff, whose name decorated that sign across the street. But Cuff said: "I can't see why I should bother myself. After all, a considerable sum was stolen last night—which means my men will have to wait for pay already overdue. Can you blame them for being on the prod? And I, as manager, will have

to report a loss to my employers, the Black Diamond owners. You captured Turnbull, but, by your own admission this afternoon, you didn't get the money back. I'd say a lynching is what the fellow deserves!"

"But I tell you the prisoner swears he isn't Turnbull!" the sheriff said impatiently. "Claims he's some medicine show man. And he certainly hasn't a game leg—"

"The problem of identification is yours, sheriff," Cuff interjected. "Also the problem of protecting your prisoner. I couldn't stop those miners, if I wished. What they do off shift is their own business. Come along, Callaghan. And I'll thank you, Hartridge, not to drag me over here again!"

The two came out of the office, brushing so close to Doc that the reek of Callaghan's whiskey-laden breath reached him, and the pitchman, an itch in his knuckles, fought down the impulse to plant his fist in Cuff's narrow face. Stepping into the office, Doc made a sweeping bow to the startled sheriff.

"I, sir, am Dr. Comanche, adopted kinsman of that brave tribe whose name I bear," Doc said. "I have

come to inform you of a grave miscarriage of justice. Your prisoner—"

"I know," Hartridge said wearily. "Your man told me his story. I've hoped you were in town and would show up, but I haven't dared leave to go looking for you. Not with that mob working itself up. Now tell me the straight facts. Your partner talks in circles."

Doc Comanche gave the lawman a long, speculative glance, and because it was the pitchman's judgment that Ben Hartridge was an honest man possessed of a dilemma, he told the sheriff the whole truth.

"So you see," he said in conclusion. "Oscar took the gun because of a childish fancy, in spite of my orders to bury it with the gentleman who seems to have been a certain Twisty Turnbull. We meant no harm by borrowing the crutch, suh. Merely part of a plan to provide a bit of dramatic entertainment for your townspeople. Now if—"

The sheriff's interest had quickened. "It begins to make a little more sense!" he ejaculated. "You found Turnbull dead—shot—and

SEEING-BELIEVING

THIRST-RELIEVING

What happens when you look at the circles
and move your head from side to side?



ANSWER.

The circles spin like a wheel.



you buried him. What about the payroll money?"

Doc sighed with genuine regret. "Who knows, suh?"

"Somebody caught up with Turnbull," the sheriff soliloquized. "That somebody could have fetched in the body and been the town hero, but he didn't. You found the body—but not the money. That means Turnbull's killer was as big a crook as Twisty. Whoever he was, he's got the money now!"

Doc nodded. "Now, suh, if you'll just release Mr. Lund—"

The sheriff shook his head. "It wouldn't do. You can bet those miners are keeping an eye on the jail. If your friend appeared, they'd be after him in a minute, figgering I'd released him so's he'd have a chance for his life. He's safer behind bars, I reckon."

"But if you tell them—"

"Tell 'em I've got the wrong man? I tried that before they got too figured, so your positive identification of your assistant would sound to them like a windy I'd thought up. You see, Comanche, in a way it was their money that was stolen. And they'll be on the prod till they get their hands on that pay roll."

"Then, sir," said Doc, "we'll have to find Turnbull's killer and force him to surrender the money."

It was as simple as that when it was put into words, yet time was running on, and mob violence was growing with the marching minutes, the strident sounds boiling from saloons and boardwalks testifying to the crowd's growing anger. There was Ambrose Cuff, who might have

stopped the miners, but he'd refused. There was this sheriff who intended protecting his prisoner, but was one against a town. That put it squarely up to Doc Comanche.

Digging into a pocket of his buckskin shirt, Doc extended a diamond-shaped button. "Have you ever seen one like this, sir?" he asked eagerly.

Hartridge shook his head. "Not that I recollect. Mighty fancy."

"When I find the man who wore it, sir, I'll have the scoundrel who killed Twisty Turnbull and took over the pay roll." Doc turned toward the door. "I'll be beholden if you'll tell Oscar I'm siding him to the finish."

He wanted to go into the cell corridor and see the big man. He wanted to assure Oscar personally that he, Doc Comanche, would be doing his nimble best to extricate his big assistant from trouble. But time was precious and Oscar would understand anyway, in his own dim fashion. Oscar Lund's faith had always been pinned on Doc Comanche.

III

Striding up the street, Doc elbowed among the sullen miners, measuring their drunkenness and their wrath and trying to estimate when the one would bring the other to a boiling point. Studying buttons as he made his way, he came to his stand and found the stringy man still loitering there.

"Sort o' been keeping an eye on your stuff while you was gone, mister," the fellow said. "Should

oughta be worth two bits for the bother, huh?"

"Fair enough," Doc murmured absently and was suddenly electrified by the great idea. He said: "You remarked, sir, that your fortune was limited to buttons. This, sir, is one occasion when buttons will serve as money. Here, my good fellow, is a bottle of my Indian Medicine. It's yours—for one button!"

"One what!"

"One button!" Doc cried and, wrenching a button from the man's shirt, he pressed the bottle into his hand. "And here, sir, is a dollar. Hoof down the street and pass the word. Tell folks that nature's own balm to afflicted mankind is now available for one button per bottle. Do you understand me, suh?"

"I can understand the dollar!" said the stringy fellow and was off.

Instantly Doc climbed upon his stand. Reaching among the medicine bottles, he felt for one shaped differently than the others, a pint bottle of whiskey, the seal broken and one small nip gone from its contents. This was Doc's protection against hoarseness when making a spiel, but he wasn't interested in a swig at the moment. Fumbling for a box of pink medicine pills, he worked feverishly, and by the time men came lurching up the street, he was holding the whiskey bottle aloft.

"Here, gentlemen, is a precaution against snake bite and sunstroke," he cried. "It is whiskey, sirs, and not available at any price. Indian Medicine you may buy, at the special introductory offer of one button per

bottle. And for the fanciest button fetched me during my stay in your fair city, I shall present, as a special award, this whiskey. Step up, gentlemen. One at a time, please. You, sir? A coat button? And here is your medicine."

There were only a half dozen before the stand, drunken, jostling miners who'd come to see if the tale that was told along the street was true. But more were coming, and Doc's hopes lifted. Faced with the impossible task of examining all the buttons in Ovando, he'd found a way to have buttons fetched to him.

Doc hadn't been sure the scheme would work, yet, wise in the ways of a purchasing public, he'd known that an offer of something for nothing—or almost nothing—would bring them. More than that, he'd made them forget their lynch plans for the moment.

Not that this interlude could last. But meanwhile he was peddling medicine and taking buttons in return, scrutinizing each one quickly. He got plain buttons and fancy ones, round buttons and oval ones. But the supply of medicine Oscar had prepared today was dwindling rapidly, and there'd been no diamond-shaped button such as the one he sought. His quest for Twisty Turnbull's killer had struck a snag, and the moment arrived when the last medicine bottle was gone.

"That's all, folks," Doc said wearily. "The special award will be made tomorrow."

Fingering the buttons he'd collected, he watched the crowd drift away, seeing them gather along the



street again and revert to the business that had occupied them before he'd worked his ruse. And as he watched, his shoulders slumped in defeat, he thought of the .45's he sometimes wore. He'd need those sixes if Oscar was to be saved tonight, it seemed, and, in the midst of that speculation, he felt a gun barrel against his back.

"Hoist 'em, Doc!" a voice ordered.

He raised his hands, not making the mistake of trying to turn around. The man with the gun said: "So it's buttons you're collecting, eh? Come along and I'll maybe show you the one you want!"

Thus had Doc Comanche's quest for a killer come to its end, but not in the manner he'd planned. He had hoped that the man would unwittingly come with a button in exchange for a bottle, giving Doc his chance to make a capture. Instead the killer had understood his intent and come with a gun. It left the bitter taste of defeat on Doc Comanche's tongue.

He moved along, that gun barrel prodding him. There was no choice. Goaded into an alleyway, he stumbled and lurched in the darkness. A door creaked open and he was shoved into even deeper darkness.

"Mind the steps!" he was ordered, and in the close confines of a hallway, he caught the reek of his captor's whiskey-laden breath. He climbed, until at last another door was opened, and he stepped into a lamp-lighted second-story room, furnished for comfortable living.

IV

A nightgown-clad man sat propped up against pillows in bed, and that man was Ambrose Cuff. The fellow who'd fetched Doc kicked the door shut and stepped forward. Doc got a look at him, then, and recognized Callaghan, the Black Diamond mine foreman.

"I bagged him, boss," Callaghan said.

"I, sirs," Doc said with dignity, "demand an explanation!"

"And you'll get it," Callaghan assured him. "I got mighty interested in you, Doc, when I saw you standing just beyond the door when we come out of Sheriff Hartridge's office. Hartridge had said his prisoner was a medicine-show man and you looked like the grandfather of all quacks. So I just hung behind and had a listen to your palaver with the sheriff. Then, when I heard street talk that you were collecting buttons, I figured it was more than just a crazy sales stunt you was working. Reported to the boss, here, and he told me to fetch you along. Take a look, Doc. Is *that* the button you want?"

With his free hand Callaghan pointed at Cuff's nightgown. The gray flannel garment was open at Cuff's scrawny throat, but once

there'd been two buttons to fasten it tight. Only one remained—a diamond-shaped pearl button—the exact duplicate of the button Doc had found in Twisty Turnbull's dead hand.

"You!" Doc gasped. "So you, sir, overtook Turnbull and killed him! But—"

Callaghan laughed. "You're wondering about the nightgown, eh? Well, when I discovered our safe robbed last night, I reported to the boss, and we started out after Turnbull. Cuff, here, was ailing last week, but he was well enough to ride, so he just pulled his pants on over his nightgown, and we caught Turnbull hid out along the river. In the tussle Twisty snatched a button off the boss' nightgown, but Cuff didn't miss it till later."

"So you recovered the pay roll," Doc said. "But you didn't tell the sheriff."

"Of course not, you blithering old goat!" snapped Cuff. "We were going to at first, till we got to thinking. Since Callaghan and I only *work* for the Black Diamond Syndicate, we had a nice stake in our hands and nobody the wiser. The loss may be a mark against my record, but I can bear up under it."

"You, sirs," declared Comanche, "are a pair of unmitigated scoundrels!"

"Spout off, Doc," Callaghan said with thick laughter. "We'll humor you, just like they humor a man in the death house. Because that's where you are. You see, with Turnbull blamed for the robbery and Turnbull not able to talk, the game

was all sewed up till you and your pard butted in. But everything's gonna work out fine anyway.

"When the miners got the lynch notion, I set up free drinks and egged 'em on. Supposing they do lynch the prisoner? Tomorrow them miners will be sober and ashamed of themselves. And tomorrow it will percolate into their thick skulls that they've lynched the robber and that there ain't nobody alive who can tell 'em where the pay-roll money went. After that, the whole business will be dropped and forgotten."

"And you'll be dead, too, meddler," Cuff told Doc Comanche. "No, we can't shoot you now. A bullet would bring somebody on the run. But that lynch mob sounds like it's about worked up to the proper pitch for action. When it comes a-howling, there'll be plenty of guns barking. One more won't be noticed. Afterwards we'll toss you into an alley. The sheriff may ask a lot of questions, but there won't be anybody to answer him."

Doc, unchallenged, took a step toward the window and peered down into the street. Light from a score of windows splashed saffron stripes across the darkness; the jail building loomed gaunt and ugly, and the dark masses that were men were slowly converging before the largest saloon.

"I'm watching you, Doc," Callaghan warned him. "Try anything and I'll trigger and worry about the consequences afterwards."

That converging mob was on the move now, a score of throaty voices blending into a single, angry roar.

It was Doc's thought that when they reached the jailhouse, they would doom him as surely as they doomed Oscar Lund. His lips felt dry; he ran his tongue along them and said:

"A request, gentlemen. I have a pint of whiskey in my pocket, the one I promised the crowd. Do you mind if I have a small nip?"

"Whiskey!" Callaghan laughed. "Shucks, Doc, we promised to humor you, but there's limits. No sense wasting whiskey on you. Pass it over, Doc. Ain't I the gent that found the fancy button and won the prize?"

Crossing the room in long strides, he lifted the whiskey bottle from Doc's pocket. Holding it in his free hand, Callaghan jerked the cork with his teeth and took a hard pull. Down below, the mob was almost abreast of this building. One among the many hoisted a gun and sent red flame lashing at the sky. Another and another fired, and a voice cried:

"Hang the thievin' son! Break in the door and haul him out!"

"Where did you get this booze, Doc?" Callaghan demanded. "Make it yourself? What a wallop?"

Cuff stirred in his bed. "Lots of guns going off now, Callaghan. This is your chance. Get it over with!"

"Sure," Callaghan agreed. Turning the gun toward Comanche, he seemed to have a hard time managing the weapon, and suddenly his knees began buckling beneath him, his eyes rolling glassily.

"Doped—doped me—" he said thickly and fired. But the shot tore harmlessly into the ceiling as Cal-

laghan went down in a heap. And that was when Doc jumped.

Not toward Callaghan. There was no fight in the big mine foreman, but Ambrose Cuff was still to be reckoned with, for Cuff was kicking aside blankets, drawing up his knees for a leap toward Callaghan's fallen gun. But Doc, diving wildly, was upon him, and as the two gripped, Doc found his adversary possessed of desperation's strength. Together the two rolled and tussled, crashing to the floor entwined, Cuff's pillow falling beside them and greenbacks bursting from it to spill across the floor.

Here, doubtless, was the missing pay-roll money, but Doc wasn't concerned with it. Neither did this fight matter so much. He was trying to keep Cuff pinned to the floor, trying to get a good grip on the man's windpipe, but the heart of Doc Comanche was not here. It was out on the street where a mob's sullen roar rose to a new and savage frenzy. From the sound, they'd gotten a battering ram and were hammering at the jail's door. And Doc was sick with the realization that no matter what this fight's outcome, it was likely too late to save big Oscar.

The room's door had opened, he suddenly realized, and a big man stood framed in the doorway, his voice reaching the pitchman as from afar.

"What's going on here?" the voice demanded, and Doc recognized Sheriff Ben Hartridge then. Getting to his feet, Doc fastened a grip on Cuff and jerked the man to a stand.

"No time for talk!" Doc said hurriedly. "This here's the killer of Turnbull who kept the pay roll for himself. The money's scattered here on the floor. See Cuff's nightgown button! It matches the one I showed you!"

That was all the convincing Ben Hartridge needed, but the lawman groaned. "They're battering in my jail!" he cried. "I came a-runnin' to make one last appeal to Cuff to stop those miners. But nothing can stop them now!"

Doc ran to the window to look at the howling pack below. His eyes roving desperately, he seized a chair, hurled it through the window, carrying the pane and part of the sash away. Then he scooped up an armful of greenbacks from the floor. Rushing to the broken window, he cried:

"Here's your pay roll, men! Help yourselves!" And he flung the money down upon the mob.

At his side, Sheriff Hartridge said: "Look at 'em scramble for that money! Just look at 'em! Mister, you sure figgered out the one thing that would take their minds off what they were doing!"

"I think, sheriff," Doc said between breaths, "that you'd better get downstairs with your new prisoners. You'll have your chance to make a spiel to yonder misguided miners. They'll be mighty busy picking up the manna that's fallen in their midst!"

They sat in Sheriff Hartridge's office, the three of them, Hartridge

himself, Doc Comanche and big Oscar Lund, with the sunlight of a bright, new day streaming in through the barred windows. They'd done their talking—or, rather, Hartridge and Doc had, with big Oscar listening in silent awe—and now that it was about over, the lawman massaged his chin speculatively.

"Cuff and Callaghan are locked up," he said. "Cuff's made full confession, and that about winds it up. But there's still one point that's not clear to me, Doc. I can understand your outfighting Cuff last night, but how did you manage to knock out a big galoot like Callaghan?"

Doc sighed. "That whiskey," he explained. "It was to be the prize for the man who brought me the right button, and it was also to be my way of subduing the scoundrel so I could fetch him to you. I dosed it with the pink pills which are the basic ingredient of my New & Improved Indian Medicine. One pill, sheriff, is a sedative; a handful of them works like a knockout drop."

Big Oscar's bovine face glowed with pride. "I guess you fixed him, Doc. You're the town hero now, huh, Doc?"

Doc Comanche smiled and rubbed his palms together. "A good ending, sir," he remarked. "We have won the miners' friendship, Oscar, but, what is equally important, we have filled their pockets with money. I suggest that you hurry down to Sombra River and make up a fresh batch of medicine before the sun sets. I, sir, am anticipating a rushing business!"



MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

EVEN for an Arizona desert town, Yucca isn't much of a place. Mostly it is a Mexican settlement, brown dobe houses frying in the sun. But the road that winds east across the sand from this little hamlet leads to the Borianna Mine, Arizona's largest tungsten producer.

That makes Yucca important. It's the shipping point for tungsten from the Borianna district. The mine that gives the district its name is 18 miles away near the crest of the Hualpai Mountains. The road to the mine and to the district is rough and rutted. It is not on most maps. Desert-wise prospectors and miners call it passable the year around. It is, if you can follow wheels that dip sand and climb a deep-cut mountain gorge.

Yucca, 25 miles south of Kingman and on the main line of the Santa Fe, is likewise the jumping-off place for prospectors interested in tungsten mining in the Hualpai Mountains. From Yucca out you are strictly on your own.

There is another isolated mining region in this general section of Mohave County that produces strategic, war-needed tungsten. It is on the other side of the Hualpais and further south in the Aquarius range. To reach it take the graveled road

from Kingman 25 miles to the Big Sandy River. There the road turns south following the Big Sandy wash perhaps 15 miles to Cane Springs, and a similar distance further on to Wikieup. There is a store at Cane Springs. From there or from Wikieup you can make your way into the Aquarius range.

Tungsten, important in steel-hardening and in making tool steel is a metal of paramount necessity in wartime. It is one of the metals that is also needed for peacetime conversion and in the manufacture of normal peace-economy materials, particularly tool steel.

G.F. has learned from his present work in a West Coast war plant how necessary tungsten is. A former gold prospector, he is interested enough, he says, to be planning a future post-war trip in search of tungsten deposits within the borders of the Western mining States.

"What about Arizona, especially Mohave County?" his letter asks. "Are the tungsten deposits there lode or placers? What is the country like in which they are found?"

They are lode deposits, G.F., tungsten minerals found in veins.

In the Borianna district both wolframite and sheelite occur in irregular, coarse-grained, glassy gray

quartz. The ore shoots, or portions rich enough in metal to be minable, are apt to be restricted and spotty. Yet over the long period in which they have been worked these veins have produced millions of dollars' worth of vital American tungsten.

Rugged and arid best describe the tungsten districts in Mohave County south of Kingman. The Hualpai Mountains are a north-trending range about 35 miles long. They run from 7,000 feet high to a maximum altitude of over 8,000 feet at Hualpai peak. Narrow canyons cut deep into the range. One of these canyons draining southwestward opens on the desert east of Yucca and forms the route into the mountains leading to the Borianna Mine. The mine itself is within a quarter mile of the divide at the top of the range.

In the Borianna district most of the tungsten deposits are held by the Borianna Mine. There are a few exceptions and some small-scale leasing has been done from time to time on portions of the veins. But in the main it is a Borianna project. It has been for a long time, the Borianna having been worked extensively during World War I. The mine has been actively producing tungsten during the present war emergency.

In the tungsten section of the Aquarius range the Williams Mine, located in 1909 by Ed Williams, seems to contain the principal de-

posits so far discovered. This mine lies in a shallow saddle near the crest of the mountains.

Aside from the Williams Mine several other tungsten properties have been staked and located in the Aquarius Mountains. Some of them have been fairly well prospected, and have produced varying amounts of tungsten.

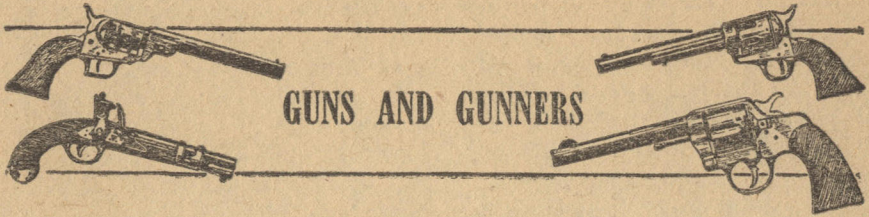
In this district, as in the Borianna, the tungsten is found in veins, chiefly quartz. The tungsten minerals are wolframite, an iron-manganese-tungsten combination and huebnerite, a manganese-tungsten ore. Sheelite apparently is not present.

Also as in the Borianna district, the tungsten minerals in the Aquarius range tend to be localized in zones and pockets in the veins, a feature that makes the vein values spotty except in the definitely richer portions. The veins themselves appear to be extensive and long-lasting.

The trick is to locate a minable ore shoot—which is more or less the nub of successful lode prospecting in the case of many, if not most, vein deposits of metallic ores, from gold on down.

You not only have to find the presence of the actual weight-bearing mineral, but you have to find it in a concentration rich enough to make mining it a paying proposition—under existing mining and market conditions. When you can do that you have the real makings of a mine.

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.



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

A LOT of servicemen are bringing home souvenir foreign military rifles. And the first question overseas boys ask in their letters is the old: "Can I get ammunition for this gun?"

That's a tough nut to crack. Although there will probably be a lot of stray military ammunition of the captured variety, no military ammunition is suitable for hunting purposes.

Let's look over a few of the available weapons.

Japan uses two calibers of rifles—a 6.5 mm. and a 7.7 mm. Both are special cartridges for which there is no American substitute. These cartridges will fit no other rifle, and no other rifle cartridge will fit the Jap weapons. Thus you are out of luck there.

Germany uses chiefly the familiar 7.92 mm., a standby for some forty years. Remington has made a sporting cartridge in this size for twenty-five years. Another American ammunition plant has loaded millions of rounds of military ammunition in this caliber for China which uses the German rifles and machine guns extensively. England also uses this cartridge in one of their machine

guns. So 7.92 mm. Mauser sporting ammunition will probably be readily available here after the war.

British rifles and machine guns use the .303 British cartridge, long available on the American market in sporting loads. Italy has a motley collection of rifles and cartridges—the most common of which is the 6.5 mm. This is a special, however, and does not fit any other weapon. It has never been made in the United States and probably never will be. Owners of that weapon will be out of luck when it comes to getting ammunition for it.

Italy also uses the 8 mm. Austrian Mannlicher rifle, mostly from the First World War. Such guns use a special cartridge never manufactured here.

France still uses the 8 mm. Lebel. Prior to this war this cartridge was also available with sporting bullets in the Remington line, as Remington made French ammunition in the last war. There should be no trouble in keeping such a gun fed with sporting ammunition.

Russia, too, still uses the 7.62 mm. cartridge they had in the last war. Hundreds of thousands of Russian rifles and millions of rounds of the

ammunition were made here during the last war, and it remained as a sporting load on the American market. You will probably be able to feed this rifle.

You will find a number of rifles of many nations using the 7 mm. Mauser cartridge, long a favorite among riflemen in this country. Excellent sporting ammunition is available.

A few Swiss rifles may turn up. The cartridge is a 7.5 mm., unlike any other. Not available.

Generally speaking, you can see that sporting ammunition will be a problem for these oddities. But as one chap writes, "most of these 6.5 mm. models are .256 caliber. A number of American cartridges use sporting bullets of reasonable diameter, and we load the 6.5 mm. Mannlicher-Schoenauer. Various 8 mm. rifles could use some of the 8 mm. sporting bullets on the market. Couldn't we locate enough fired cases to permit us to reload them?"

That chap had an excellent idea—only it won't work. Most foreign ammunition uses the Berdan type of primer. The American type, or Boxer, is a self-contained primer—the cup, the priming mixture, and the little anvil, all assembled as a single unit. A central flash hole in the bottom of the primer pocket conducts the flash of the primer into the powder chamber of the case. Thus the fired primers can be read-

ily pushed out with a special punch and live primers used to replace them.

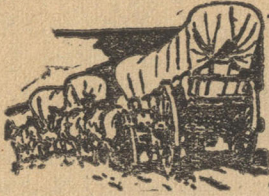
The Berdan primer is somewhat different. The anvil is formed as a tit in the bottom of the primer pocket—an integral part of the case. Very tiny twin or triple flash holes surround this anvil. Some are even at an angle, and all are too small to admit a decapping punch. The Berdan primer itself is nothing but a special percussion cap.

To remove such a fired primer, a special hard steel pick must be made to force through the cup. You'd need a special fixture to hold the fired case during this operation. Then you twist and pry, and eventually, if you don't break the pick and lose your patience, out comes the primer. Often, however, you spoil the case in getting it out, particularly if it is crimped in, as are most military primers.

Assuming you get it out clean—what have you? A case with an odd size and depth of pocket, and no Berdan primers on the market to fit it. Too many sizes, too. Reloading such ammunition is almost impossible.

It all sums up to this: Enemy weapons are trophies and should be treated as such. Don't try to make them work for you. Better stay with the quality and types available on the American sporting market.

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. We will continue to answer all letters from readers. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip E. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Store, 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.



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

CPL. B. H. has just written us from overseas where he has been playing a fighting hero's part in the Italian campaign. Outside of winning the war the corporal is interested in that great American bird, the turkey.

"I have saved a little money and bought War Bonds as a backlog for the enterprise," his letter said. "Is there money in turkeys if I start in modestly and pick my way along? I want to raise them on my own place, the land I intend to settle on in the West someday in the future. How about Oregon?"

Under good management, proper care and normal market conditions, turkey growing can be made a profitable farm enterprise. It is a specialty. Like other such types of farm effort it requires a certain amount of know-how. But many have learned the business from a standing start and made a success of it.

In Oregon commercial turkey raising is a comparatively new business. The climate is favorable, growing population will increase local markets, and already the State is becoming one of the important Western turkey-producing areas.

Where conditions are otherwise suitable, turkeys can be raised with

very simple equipment. Initial cash outlay can therefore be kept to a minimum. Turkeys are good grazers over a limited stretch of range. Besides foraging for feed, they are pest eradicators, consuming a lot of injurious bugs and insects in the field.

It is important, however, in raising turkeys that the flock be maintained relatively free of disease. In the past disease losses were perhaps one of the biggest drawbacks to profitable raising of the birds. Modern feeding methods, cleanliness and proper sanitation have done a great deal to eliminate this bugbear.

Today six* standard varieties of domestic turkeys are recognized: Bronze—the traditional and popular holiday table bird since the days of the Pilgrims; White Holland; Bourbon Red; Narragansett; Black, and the Slate. Of these the Bronze attains the largest weight—a two-year-old or over adult male should weigh 36 pounds to be up to standard. Cockerels less than a year old should weigh 25 pounds.

The Bronze is the most commonly raised commercial or farm flock turkey. But whatever type you choose, remember that your breeding stock is the foundation on which your

turkey business will be built. Get the best you can.

Remember, too, that turkeys are raised primarily for meat, rather than for egg production. So strive for birds with compact, meaty bodies. In good birds the breastbone should be straight, the back broad, and the breadth carried well back towards the tail. The body should be deep, the breast full and well-rounded. Other important features are full, bright eyes, a broad head, solid, rather short legs set well apart, and a definitely vigorous character.

Formerly breeding flocks were customarily allowed free range throughout both the breeding and laying season. It wasn't always a happy practice. Nests were sometimes hard to find, eggs couldn't always be gathered daily and other more or less serious disadvantages resulted.

Nowadays many breeding flocks are kept in breeding pens or enclosures with nests conveniently set inside or outside the roosting shed. It is a good practice, worth the extra trouble involved.

An enclosure of 10 to 15 square rods makes a large enough pen to hold 12 or 18 birds. A fenced-in orchard often makes a good pen. Hog-proof fence, 6 feet high, will usually hold the birds. They are not likely to fly over it because they can't rest on the top strand of wire.

Have the fence dog-proof and, in sections where they are prevalent, coyote-proof. Dogs and coyotes are among the most destructive animals to turkey flocks. Another fence tip: Buildings, solid gates (less than 9 feet high) should be topped with a 3 foot wide strip of poultry netting to keep the birds from perching on them.

Finally if, fence or no, your turkey hens insist on flying out of the enclosure, clip the flight feathers of one wing. That will keep the ladies home. Dont, however, clip the wing of a breeding male. It ruffles his dignity or something and may interfere with mating.

Keep the breeding enclosure clean and sanitary. It is a good idea to have the buildings portable, then each year they can be moved to new ground.

Protection against rough weather conditions is usually required to raise turkeys successfully. For full-grown birds an open-front shed with a reasonably tight roof and a dry floor is often sufficient. Good-sized poles or lengths of 2 x 4's nailed flat to supports make acceptable roosts. Though grown turkeys can stand a considerable amount of dry cold, they are not so resistant to dampness. The shed therefore should be so situated that it will afford a maximum protection against prevailing rain storms.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountaintops 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 Store, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.



**JOKER
IN THE
DEVIL'S
DECK**

by CLINT MacLEOD

Not until Grayling's aroused townsmen made their deadly gunsmoke cut of King Kimball's owlhoot crew did the Joker discover that his back trail held both mystery and danger

FIRST there'd been King Kimball, that old he-wolf of the high country, and his sons, Ace and Deuce and Trey, a wildling tribe that had raided from the frowning rimrock looking upon Lehigh Valley. The harassed law of Lehigh called them the Devil's Deck, and the name clung, even after the Kimballs gathered other men who were not their kin, men like surly Garth Fabin.

Just yesterday the ten of them had gone to gut the bank in Grayling, at the valley's end, and that left Joker Kimball, youngest of the crew, to keep another lonely vigil. But only six men came riding back at moonrise, Garth Fabin leading them, and by that token Joker knew disaster had struck.

Man-size, this Joker had the big bones of the other Kimballs, but he was fairer of hair, bluer of eye. In all his memory, he'd never been beyond their Hole-in-the-Hills hide-out; he'd learned his reading, writing and figuring from old King, himself, and he would ride with the rest on his eighteenth birthday.

That had been the King's promise. There were six months to go, the way the King calculated it, but Joker matured as he watched those riders return and saw which saddles had been emptied, though there were tears in his voice as he went running to Garth Fabin.

"King?" Joker choked. "And the boys?"

Fabin was a blocky man, coarse of body, coarse of speech.

"King's dead. So're Ace and Deuce," he said. "Grayling was a hornet's nest, button. The last we

saw of Trey, he was down on his knees, wounded."

"And you left him?"

"Better one in jail than six more dead."

That was solid owlhoot logic, and Joker gave no argument. But, stunned and grief-stricken, he looked at these six and knew that the best of the Devil's Deck was gone. Fabin had long aspired to leadership of the Devil's Deck, and the guns of Grayling had put it into his hands.

His voice cold and brittle, Joker said: "I'll be riding into the valley, Garth. I'm going to get Trey out of jail, and I'm going to nail the men who killed King and Ace and Deuce!"

Fabin shrugged. "A lot of triggers were jerked," he said. "But your man is Big Ben Renner. His Rocking-R crew helped spring the trap on us. Sheriff Chad Morony never owned a rabbit's guts, and it's been Renner that's fought us for years. You know that."

"Then I'm heading for the Rocking-R," Joker said.

Thus, an hour later, Joker Kimball rode down into the Lehigh for the first time, a grim, tight-lipped youngster with an old Colt strapped to his hip. Sunup found him sleeping on Rocking-R land; high noon brought him toward the ranchhouse of Ben Renner. He came to the place unerringly; he'd heard too many raids planned in the Hole not to know the Lehigh like the palm of his hand.

At first, while his grief and rage were the strongest, he'd planned to ride to the Rocking-R and put a

bullet into Ben Renner—and to blazes with the consequences! More sober thinking had shown him the futility of that.

There was Trey Kimball to think about—Trey who was lying in Grayling's jail awaiting a rescue that might not come. You couldn't count on Garth Fabin; he was a man given to cautious scheming, and he might count the risk too great. That put it up to Joker, but a stranger might arouse suspicion in Grayling. He had to establish some sort of status in this valley, and he'd figured the way. Big Ben Renner would help him, and that made irony to Joker's liking.

Thus he came riding boldly to the ranchhouse gallery. Two men sat here, and Joker instinctively knew which was Ben Renner, for the man was big in more than body, a silvery-haired, hawk-nosed oldster. Howdy Wayne, Renner's lanky, balding foreman sat slouched beside him. On the gallery a phonograph ground out music; from its wide-mouthed horn poured a hilarious song.

It was the first phonograph Joker had ever seen, and he stared, fascinated. Music had always held a strange lure for him, but he'd known only harmonicas and fiddles.

Renner snapped off the machine and said: "Howdy, son."

"You Ben Renner?" Joker asked. "I could use a job."

Renner stared hard, and beneath that fixed and steady gaze, Joker suddenly felt stripped. He wondered if he'd somehow been recognized, and if his ruse was to come to a quick end.

"Your name, son?"

"Jones," Joker stammered.

"How old are you, Jones?"

"Uh? Nearly eighteen."

Renner smiled. "That makes it about right," he said. "No, I haven't a job; I've got all the crew I can handle. But you're welcome to stay here, if you want. Come inside, son."

Dazedly Joker piled off his horse and climbed the steps. He knew little of the ways of the world beyond the rimrocks, but he'd expected nothing like this. Ben Renner had been the constant nemesis of the Devil's Deck; his name stood for ruthlessness and hatred. Joker skirted Howdy Wayne, and the foreman gave him a curt and unfriendly nod.

"Come upstairs and I'll find you a room," Renner said. "You'll want to wash up and rest a while, likely."

They climbed a broad stairs to another hallway, and Joker was shown a room, clean and tidy and inviting. Out into the hall again, Renner indicated another room. A key hung from a nail beside its closed door, and the cattleman said: "The house is all yours, except this room. It was my wife's. It's been left locked since she died, years ago."

Joker nodded. "I savvy."

"I wonder," Renner countered and smiled. "This is mighty surprising to you, eh, son? You didn't expect such treatment from a stranger. But it happens I once had a boy. He wandered off on this very ranch years ago; he was only five then, and probably the wolves got him. He'd be eighteen now, about your age."

"You figger—" Joker began.

"I figger you *might* be my boy. That's why I treat every boy like he was my own. I'll be seeing you later, son. Just make yourself at home."

Renner left, heading down the stairs, and Joker stood staring after him, trying hard to understand. King Kimball had schooled Joker in his own rough way, fetched him books and spun him yarns, but there'd been nothing in those tales like this.

But because he'd been wildling-reared, Joker was wary of a trap. That was why he slipped off his boots and went padding after Renner. He came down to the lower hallway, and saw that Renner was out on the gallery with Howdy Wayne again. Joker crept as close as he dared.

". . . I tell you you're taking a chance, boss," Wayne was saying. "Sure, I know how you've always felt about strange kids. I've sat down to table with every fuzz-faced saddle tramp in Montana. And I've seen you search their faces, wondering, hoping. But have you forgotten how touchy things are? With the whole crew guarding your horse herd, and them A-rabs a prize to make the Devil's Deck sit up nights—"

"I know," Renner interjected. "Those horses represent the saving of the Rocking-R, considering the bad year we've had. Another week and I'll be collecting a check for 'em. But the Devil's Deck will likely lay low for a while, considering the crimp we put into 'em in Grayling the other day."

"That kid came riding from the direction of the rimrock!" snapped Wayne. "Sure, we've never seen him before, but I'm betting he was sent by the Devil's Deck. Remember the talk, boss? Some say King Kimball had another kid—one called Joker."

Beyond the door, Joker flattened himself more tightly against the wall, but Renner only laughed softly. "You've seen King Kimball lots of times, Howdy," Renner said. "Now think hard, old-timer. When you looked at that boy today, could you see his father in him?"

Wayne's voice rose shrilly. "Look yonder, boss! Ain't that Shorty Morse killin' a hoss this way?"

"It's Shorty!" Renner ejaculated. "Thought he went to town today. Now what the devil!"

Joker heard the rising thunder of hoofs, the beat of boots as a man came out of a saddle and ran up the steps. "Boss, there's big trouble shaping in town!" a new and excited voice announced. "Hotheads are liquoring and making talk of lynching Trey Kimball."

There was a moment of silence, and Joker was sure his heart stopped beating. Then: "Cut yourself out another saddler, Shorty!" Renner snapped. "Come on, Howdy. We're riding over to the herd and getting part of the crew. I've waited twenty years to bust the Devil's Deck, but I don't stand for lynchings. Trey Kimball's got a trial coming to him, and he's going to get it!"

Boots thundered again, three pairs this time, and Joker, risking a better look, saw Renner and Wayne and a

short, bowlegged puncher running for the corral. A few minutes later the three were riding hard toward the west, and Joker knew then that Renner's precious herd of blooded horses was in that direction. He'd heard about those Arab mounts, up at the hide-out, but he wasn't interested in them. Not now.

Trey Kimball was in danger of being lynched. Joker had thought he'd have plenty of time to help Trey. The next older than Joker of King's sons, Trey, at thirty, only had rustling and robbery against him. Joker had supposed Trey would have a lengthy stay in Grayling's jail, and then a trial, and then a stretch in Deer Lodge pen. And Joker had hoped to establish himself in the valley and find a chance in due time to snatch Trey from Grayling's jail. But now he had to go into Grayling, a stranger. And he had to go pronto.

Running upstairs, he stomped into his boots, and then he was hurrying out of the house and piling onto his own horse which had been left standing.

Hard riding ate the miles away, but it was sundown before he reached Grayling. He wondered if he were too late, but the blatant sounds that poured from the many saloons indicated that Grayling was still liquoring for the kill, and doing so in high style.

Raucous music burst from one saloon, and Joker sensed that he was hearing a piano. He might have wondered how he knew, but there were other things to think about.

The jail stood dark and silent at the street's far end, and Joker knew

the building by its barred windows. With no more than half a plan, he came off his horse, hauled his bandanna up over his nose, tugged his floppy sombrero low, and stalked inside, gun in hand.

In an office fronting the building, a ponderous man—Sheriff Chad Morony—looked up from his desk in astonishment, then clawed for a gun. Joker calmly laid his gun barrel across the lawman's head.

As the sheriff slumped into unconsciousness, Joker snatched a key ring from the desk and slipped into the cell corridor, whispering: "Trey? Trey?"

A big man, his head bandage-swathed, stirred in one of the cells, sucked in his breath and said: "Kid! It's Joker, ain't it? What the devil?"

Joker fumbled with the keys. Finding the right one, he swung back the door, motioned to Trey and slipped into the office again.

Outside, Joker stepped up into his own saddle. One horse stood at the jail's hitch rack, the sheriff's likely, and Trey Kimball eased into the kak. This had been simple, so utterly simple that Joker almost felt cheated, and then, as they wheeled their horses, lifting them to a gallop, a gun spoke and Trey reeled in his saddle.

A group of drunks, lurching along the street, had spied them, and the shout—"Jailbreak!—Jailbreak" went up, as bullets sang. Trey aimed his horse at the slot between two buildings, Joker following him, but the sheriff's horse went down, bullet-stricken. Trey kicked free of the stir-



Perhaps I'm one war older than you are!

Believe me, after the last war I saw what happened. Will you let me give you some advice?

If you've got a job today—for your own sake, fellow, be smart! Think twice before you fight for a wage increase that might force prices up and land you behind the eight-ball in the end.

Salt away as much as you can out of your present wages. Put money in the bank, pay up your debts, buy more life insurance. Above all, put every extra penny you can lay your hands on into Uncle Sam's War Bonds and *hold 'em!*

Nobody knows what's coming when the Germans and the Japs are licked. Perhaps we'll have good times. Okay. You'll be sitting pretty. Perhaps we'll have bad times. Then they're sure to hit hardest on the guy with nothing saved.

The best thing you can do for your country right now is not to buy a thing you can get along without. That helps keep prices down, heads off

inflation, helps to insure good times after the war.

And the best thing you can do for your own sake, brother, if there *should* be a depression ahead, is to get your finances organized on a sound basis of paid-up debts—and have a little money laid by to see you through!

4 THINGS TO DO to keep prices down and help avoid another depression

1. Buy only what you really need.
2. When you buy, pay no more than ceiling price. Pay your ration points in full.
3. Keep your *own* prices down. Don't take advantage of war conditions to ask for more—for your labor, your services, or the 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.

**HELP
US
KEEP**

PRICE DOWN

rupts, and Joker shouted, "Up here!" He got Trey behind his saddle, used his spurs, and the night swallowed them.

"Hard hit?" Joker asked.

"Arm's scratched, kid."

"Then grit your teeth and hang on!"

Pursuit might come, and this horse was double-burdened, but now Joker had Trey's owlhoot skill to lean upon, and that helped. "Cut into yonder draw," Trey suggested once. And later: "Head for that rocky stretch; we'll leave no tracks there."

Joker did as he was directed, doubling and circling and leaving little sign, and when the moon soared up, there was no one on the horizon behind them. But Trey's face was ghastly in that first light, and Joker knew then that Trey was bleeding badly.

"Got to fix that arm," Joker muttered, and he headed toward the Rocking-R.

The great ranch lay silent when they reached it. Trey stared in surprise, and Joker said, "Never mind the questions, Trey. This is the place for us, and we'll be safe here. I'll tell you all about it later."

Turning the horse into the corral, he helped Trey into the big living room, lighted a lamp and found water to wash Trey's arm and a clean shirt of Ben Renner's to bandage it.

"Looks like we shook off anybody that chased us from town," Joker said. "But they'll comb the Lehigh for you. I don't reckon anybody got a square look at me, so I'm safe enough. But I've got to hide you.

And there's one place that nobody will look—not even Big Ben Renner."

Steering Trey upstairs to that room that had stayed locked across the years, Joker lifted the key and opened the door to Mrs. Renner's room and thrust Trey into the darkness beyond.

"Lay low and keep quiet," Joker urged. "I'll get grub to you later. Right now, I've got to rub out sign.

"I guess my questions can wait, kid, but there's something I've got to tell you," Trey said, "King and Ace and Deuce are dead, Joker, and—"

"I know about that," Joker broke in. "I've got to hurry, Trey!"

Locking the door and putting the key in place, he sped downstairs and made quick motions, hiding the tattered remnants of the shirt he'd borrowed, putting the wash basin back where he'd found it, looking the room over quickly to make sure he'd left no betraying sign. Then he hurried to the corral, got the gear off his horse and started toting the saddle to the barn. And from the shadow of the great doorway, someone whispered: "Hsst! Joker!"

Joker spilled the saddle to the ground and jerked out his gun, and then he recognized the blocky bigness of Garth Fabin. Casing his gun, Joker said: "You here, Garth?"

"Came to do a little spying, kid," Fabin said. "Likewise I've been plumb worried over you. From the set of your jaw, I knew it was no good trying to talk you out of riding. But I had to know how you was getting along."

That didn't sound like Fabin; he'd

shown no love for the original Devil's Deck, and he'd bucked King Kimball more than once.

"Grayling got set to lynch Trey tonight, Garth," Joker said coldly. "I had to snatch him out of jail and hide him in yonder house. Renner's letting me stay here; he don't know I'm the King's kid."

Fabin drew in a sharp breath. "I figgered on raiding Grayling one of these nights and springing Trey. I never counted on no lynching. How is Trey? Sore because I had to leave him behind?"

Joker had the feeling that Fabin was hanging on his answer, and he took his own good time. "Reckon Trey savvies how it was," he said finally. "We ain't had much time for talking. What *else* fetched you to the Rocking-R, Garth?"

"Renner's prize horses," answered Fabin. "He's only had half his crew watching 'em tonight, but that was still a few too many for me. But at least I've got those A-rabs spotted. Can Trey ride?"

"I reckon."

"Good!" Fabin said exultantly. "Here's the scheme, Kid: Tomorrow one of the boys is riding into Grayling, pretending to get liquored, and he's gonna let it slip that the whole Devil's Deck is hitting town tomorrow night to try finishing that bank job. The gent that does the talking is taking a long chance, but I'm gambling that Grayling will let him ride out, figgering they'll get a chance to bag the bunch of us. And they'll send for Renner; they always count on the Rocking-R when the Devil's Deck is riding."



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"And you think Renner will take all his crew into town?"

"Sure he will, kid. He danged near busted the Devil's Deck the other day. He'll jump at the chance to get the rest of us in one swoop!"

"And you'll run off his horse herd meantime?"

"That's the idea, kid. The Deck will head straight for Grayling, but they'll only make a pass at the town; they won't really ride into it. I'll sidetrack to the horse herd on my lonesome, but I'll need help moving it. Those A-rabs are at Standing Rock; Trey'll know the place. You and him meet me there at moonrise. We'll head those fancy jugheads up into the rimrock, and the boys will join us after they've led Grayling men on a long chase in the wrong direction. It's a pat hand, kid. Can I count on you?"

Joker hesitated. "Renner's a white man," he said at last. "I've found that out. And when Trey was likely to do an air dance, Renner headed for Grayling to save him. That kind o' sticks in my craw."

Fabin snorted: "Of course Renner didn't want Trey hung. He aimed to salt Trey down in a courtroom, and he didn't want Grayling stealing that show. Blazes, kid, are you so green that Ben Renner can soft-soap you? King Kimball would be alive tonight, if it wasn't for that owlhoot-hating son!"

Joker gave that his slow consideration. "I'll see you tomorrow night, Garth," he said. "At Standing Rock."

"Good!" Fabin said and slipped off into the darkness.

The saddle put away, Joker went back into the house, stretched himself out in a chair and tried to tie his thoughts together, but things had been coming too thick and fast. He was here when Big Ben Renner came jingling into the room later, but Joker pretended to be asleep, watching Renner covertly the while. Renner's face was drawn; he studied Joker speculatively, then fetched a blanket and put it over the boy, and blew out the lamp.

The next day was the longest in Joker Kimball's life. He had to pretend a nonchalance he was far from feeling, and he found himself deliberately avoiding Renner. A man rode a lathered horse up from Grayling that afternoon; Joker saw Renner talking excitedly to this man, and Joker knew then that word had been fetched of a Devil's Deck raid on Grayling. Shortly thereafter Howdy Wayne went riding to the west, and Ben Renner took to restless pacing about the ranch yard.

That gave Joker his chance to smuggle food to Trey. Wandering to the cook shack, he stowed grub inside his shirt, and when the sign was right, he eased up the stairs, unlocked the door, whispered to Trey and quickly shoved the food inside. Trey was bursting with questions, but Renner's boots were beating along the downstairs hall.

"Getting you out tonight," Joker promised and locked the door.

Howdy Wayne returned at sundown with the full force of the Rocking-R; Ben Renner talked to his crew from the gallery, but Joker kept far away, deciding that a show of

curiosity might not be wise. Shortly thereafter hoofs thundered off to the south, the sound fading into silence, and Joker Kimball went into action then.

First he darted to the barn, got gear onto his own saddler and slapped a kak onto a spare Rocking-R horse. Ready to ride, he had a look at the loads in his old Colt, then headed back to the house for Trey. As he came into the lower hallway and passed the living room, someone coughed slightly, and the blood of Joker Kimball turned to ice, for Big Ben Renner sat slouched in a chair, watching him.

"I . . . I thought you'd gone!" Joker gasped.

Renner stretched his long legs. "I took half my crew into Grayling last night," he said conversationally. "Thought I'd need a show of guns to stop a lynching. But I had to sidetrack to Standing Rock to get my boys, and I hit town a little late. Folks were babbling about a masked man who'd ridden off with Trey Kimball."

"Yes?" Joker said shakily.

"I told my boys to split up and cut for sign. That put each of us on his lonesome, and I run across something interesting. No, it wasn't Trey. It was Garth Fabin, snooping around Rocking-R land. I followed him—plumb to the barn door. I heard everything, Joker."

That dropped the bottom out of Joker Kimball's stomach, but Renner's voice droned on.

"My boys are riding toward Grayling, but they won't go into town.

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They'll hide in the coulees above town, and they'll be ready when the Devil's Deck comes riding. You can bet money on this, Joker: that whole crew will be in Grayling's jail, come moonrise."

"And you're sending men to Standing Rock to corral Fabin?" Joker blurted.

Renner shook his head. "Figger every man had better be helping trap the Devil's Deck. I'll take my chances that Fabin won't try running off the horses till you show up. And I'm likewise taking my chance that you won't show up. You see, Joker, you're my son—the kid who wandered off when he was five years old."

"That ain't so—" Joker began.

"But it is. I knew you the minute I set eyes on you. I asked Howdy Wayne, yesterday, if he couldn't see the father when he looked at the son—and I didn't mean King Kimball. But the King had the raising of you, and maybe that makes you a Kimball, after all. That's the thing I've got to find out, son. Are you taking Trey Kimball and riding out to meet Garth Fabin?"

Joker's mind was reeling; he tried hard to find something to hold to in a world gone topsy-turvy. He thought of many things—the Devil's Deck riding into a trap—Trey Kimball alone and wounded upstairs—but mostly he clung to the shining memory of King Kimball, and that made his choice for him.

He said: "King's the only dad I ever knew, mister! He was mighty good to me, and he'd have died ten times over before he'd let his men—even the scum that's left—ride into

a trap. Maybe if you was really my dad, it would be different, but I can't grab onto that. You've gone so loco on being kind to kids the right age, that you're trying to make a break for me. I reckon I don't want it, mister. I came here to kill you, but you're too white for that. But I'm locking you upstairs, and I'm taking Trey and riding to head off the Devil's Deck!"

Joker's gun was in his hand, and Renner, shrugging heavily, came out of his chair and let himself be herded upstairs. When Joker ordered him to unlock that certain door, Renner said: "You're what King Kimball made you, all right."

"Get that door open!" Joker said curtly.

The door was thrust inward. Trey Kimball stood blinking in the gathering dusk, and then, recognizing the two, shot up the drawn blind and let the last of the light into the room. That gave Joker a look around. He saw the things that had belonged to Mrs. Renner, the chairs and the table and the sewing basket—and the piano that stood against the wall. And staring at that piano, Joker gasped.

"Where did that come from?" he demanded.

"It was my wife's," Renner said. "For many years it was the only piano in the Lehigh. Folks came from miles around to hear her play it."

"I remember!" Joker said hoarsely. "I remember her playing it, and folks crowding close, and me a little feller. It's come back to me

now! All my life the memory of that music's kept crowding me. Other things have changed hereabouts, but this room's the same!" He turned stricken eyes on Trey. "Renner's my dad, Trey," he said.

Trey Kimball nodded. "That's one of the things I wanted to tell you last night. I figured you had the truth coming to you, now that you'd ridden out of the Hole. King found you lost and crying, years ago when he was riding home from a raid. He brought you to the Hole, and later he learned you were Ben Renner's kid. But he kept you, partly because he hated Renner, mostly because he'd taken a liking to you. That's the straight of it, Joker."

"But the Deck's riding into a trap!" Joker ejaculated.

"Let 'em!" Trey snapped. "There was something else I wanted to tell you, too. King and the boys were cut down because somebody tipped off Grayling that we were coming. And I know who that somebody was—a gent who craved to lead the Devil's Deck, but who couldn't do it while the Kimballs were alive—Garth Fabin. It was him shot me off my horse. Maybe he don't know I know that, but I saw him!"

"Last night he was afraid you knew!" Joker said in sudden understanding. "He asked if you were sore!"

Ben Renner nodded. "I could have told you about Fabin," he said. "He sent us a note, said he was willing to lead the Kimballs into a trap, if we'd see he wasn't hurt. We were to know him by the bandanna he'd

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wear. The rest of the Deck waited outside town; Fabin and the Kimballs came in. I was for taking the Kimballs alive, but they put up too much fight for that. Fabian was playing both ends against the middle."

"I reckon the rest was backing him," Trey said. "Some jobs were too strong for King's stomach. Fabin was going to rod a new outfit that didn't draw the line."

"Then," said Joker, and there was iron in his voice, "I'm heading for Standing Rock. There's something I owe King Kimball that needs squaring up!"

He went down the stairs at a hard run; he heard Renner and Trey calling after him, but he paid no heed. . . .

He'd had his saddler ready, had Joker, and hard riding brought him across the miles toward Standing Rock in record time. He knew that ancient landmark; it had figured in many a Hole-in-the-Hills plan. He saw the upthrust of it in the first moonlight, and he saw the scattered prize horses of Ben Renner and Garth Fabin sitting a saddle and waiting. He came wheeling to a stop close to Fabin, and the blocky man said: "That you, Joker? Where's Trey?"

"Fixing the head wound you gave him in Grayling, Fabin!"

Fabin's breath caught. "Trey

told you?" he asked.

"Enough," Joker said. "What did you figger on doing, Fabin? Have us help you with these horses, then kill off the rest of the Kimballs when that chore was done? Start your smoke, you double-crossing son!"

But Garth Fabian was already bringing up his gun; it spoke once, fitfully, the bullet tearing Joker's sleeve. Then Joker was triggering in turn, putting all the skill King Kimball had taught him into the task, and Garth Fabin wilted, then spilled out of his saddle, dead.

Joker was looking down upon him when Ben Renner came roaring up.

"Trey's coming," Renner said. "His wounds wouldn't let him keep to a steady clip. But me and him has had time for talking, son. I gave Trey a choice—to cut and run for the rimrock, or to stand trial and take the law's medicine. I think I can get him off with an easy term. Trey's made his choice. There'll be a job waiting for him on our Rocking-R when he comes home from the pen."

Joker let the gun slip from his fingers; there'd be no need for guns in Lehigh Valley from here on out. He sat tall and straight in the moonlight, feeling the friendly weight of Ben Renner's hand on his shoulder, and he drew satisfaction from the odd thought that all of this would have been to King Kimball's liking. . . .

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 31.

1. cutbank
2. antelope
3. tinhorn
4. coosie
5. swamper
6. jerkline
7. Siwash
8. guitar
9. chute
10. jughead
11. honda
12. waddy
13. nighthawk
14. Winchester
15. skunk

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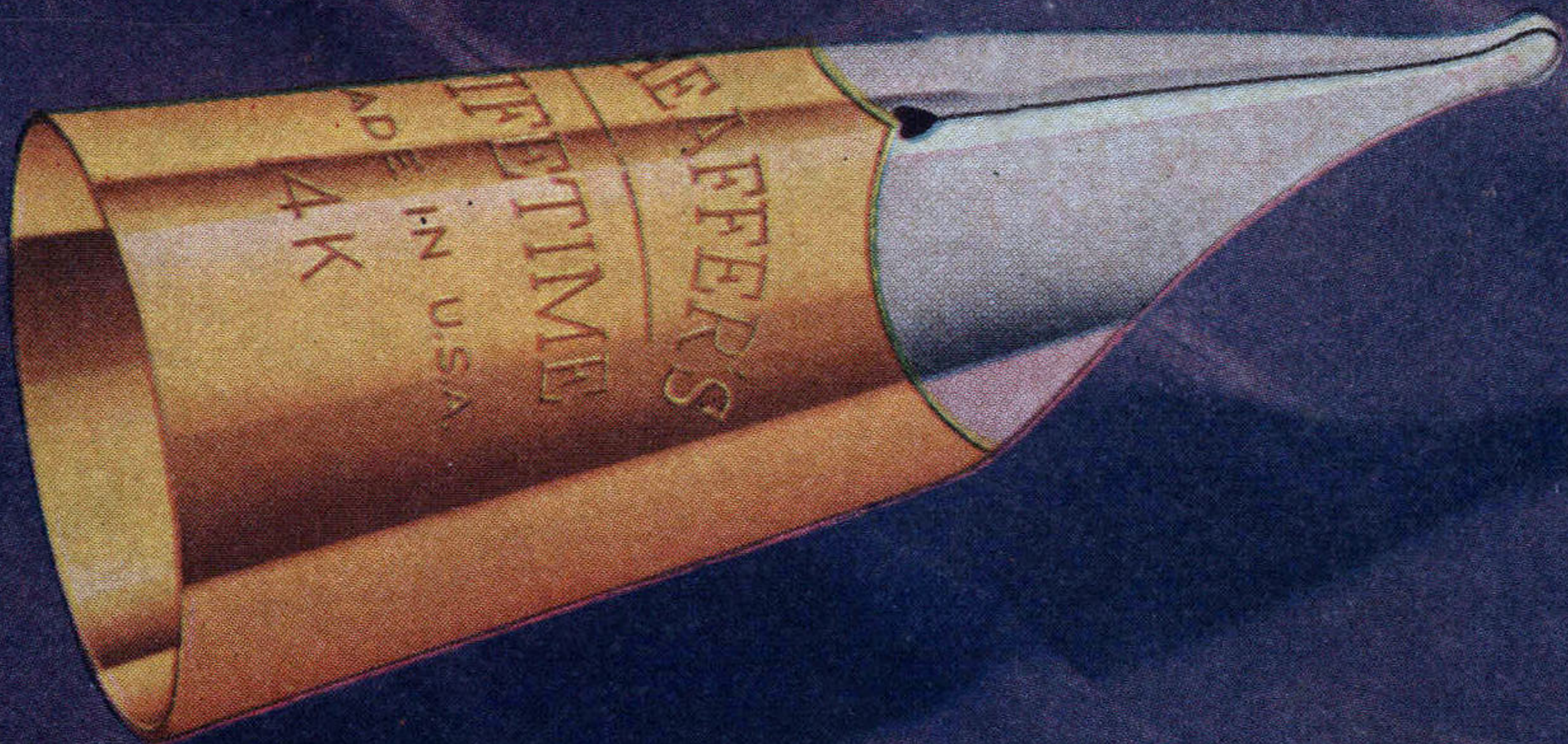
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