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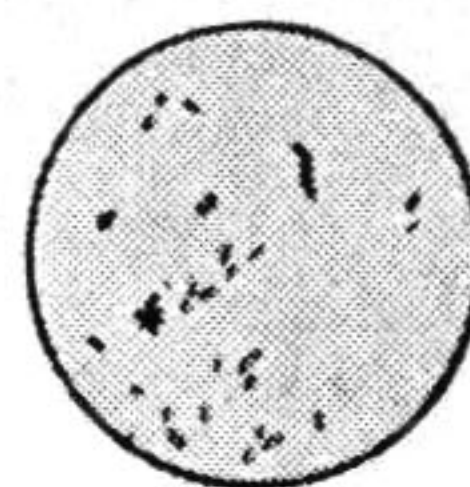
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STREET & SMITH'S
WESTERN STORY

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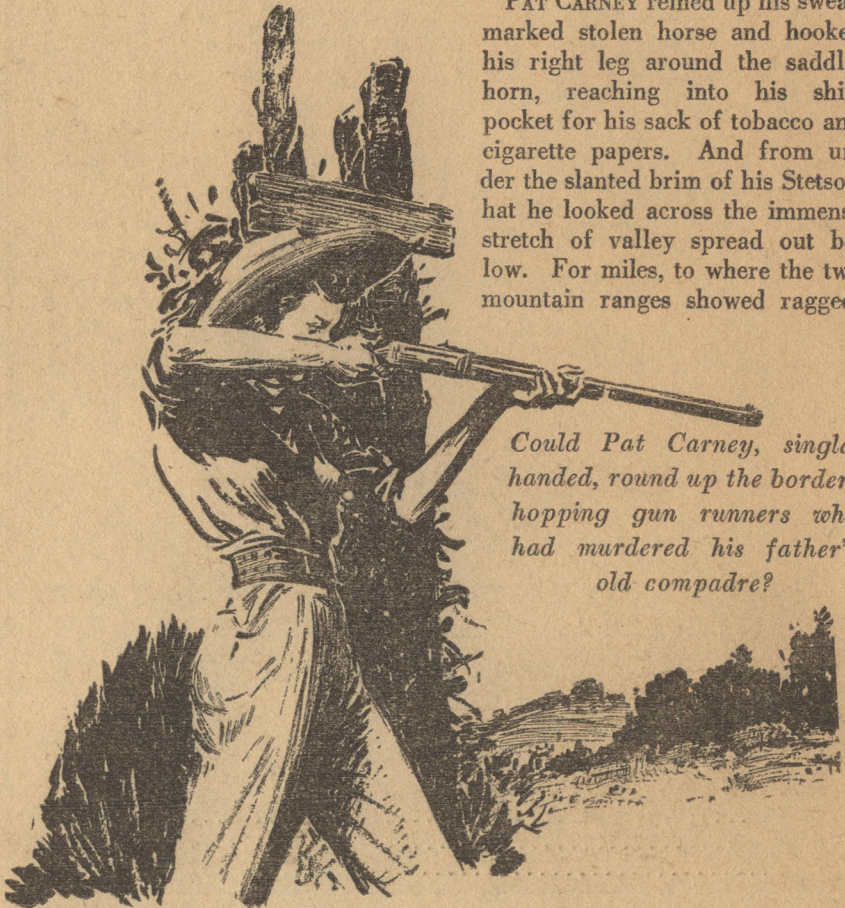
THE SAN PASQUAL FLOAT

by WALT COBURN

I

PAT CARNEY reined up his sweat-marked stolen horse and hooked his right leg around the saddle-horn, reaching into his shirt pocket for his sack of tobacco and cigarette papers. And from under the slanted brim of his Stetson hat he looked across the immense stretch of valley spread out below. For miles, to where the two mountain ranges showed ragged-

Could Pat Carney, single-handed, round up the border-hopping gun runners who had murdered his father's old compadre?



edged and tinted red in the sunrise and the farthest peaks were down across the Arizona line in Mexico. This was the great San Pasqual Valley, the old Spanish land grant called the San Pasqual Float, that straddled the Mexican border.

This was the famous San Pasqual Float, as twenty-five-year-old Pat Carney's father had described it to him countless times. Though Mike Carney had admitted to his son that he himself had never laid eyes on the San Pasqual Float.

But Pasqual O'Riley had described it countless times and in great homesick detail to Mike Carney when the two of them, Pasqual O'Riley from Arizona and Mike Carney from Montana, shared the fortunes and hardships, the hellraising and dangers of the Spanish American War.

And it was soon after the battle of San Juan Hill that troopers Pasqual O'Riley and Mike Carney, a

little drunk on victory and native booze, battle wounds bandaged, had made their deal.

"What's mine," Mike Carney had sworn a little tipsily, "is yours, Pasqual. If ever you're in a tight and need a friend that'll go through hell's heat for you, you kin locate me at the Little Rockies, in Montana. My ranch is yourn. Or if you want me to come to you, just holler."

"That goes double, Mike," Pasqual O'Riley's voice had choked with emotion and his black eyes had filled with sudden tears. "All you got to do is holler and Pasqual O'Riley will be there."

Pasqual O'Riley and Mike Carney had survived their bullet wounds and yellowjack fever and had been mustered out of the Rough Riders. They had shaken hands, renewed their their pledge. Then Mike Carney had returned to his cow outfit in Montana. Pasqual O'Riley had returned



to the great San Pasqual Float he had so graphically described so many countless times by lonely cavalry campfires.

It was typical of them that they never visited each other, never exchanged letters. Each had returned to his home range to pick up his own rope where he had dropped it to join the Rough Riders. Mike Carney had turned his little spread over to his fifteen-year-old-son Pat when he heard the bugle call. Home again, snowbound during the long winter months, Mike Carney would assure Pat that one of these times he'd turn over the outfit to him again and winter his saddle in sunny Arizona with his old friend Pasqual O'Riley on the San Pasqual Float.

But Mike Carney had never somehow gotten around to it. And now he was dead. It had been a long and lingering death that had come finally as a blessing after nearly a year of paralysis that had laid him flat and sapped his faculties. And his mind had turned back Time's clock a dozen years and he had again lived over those reckless, roistering, fun-loving, fighting days of his youth and fought the battle of San Juan Hill.

That was the year of the hard winter when the cattle were wiped out by the Montana blizzards. There had been barely enough hay to keep the remuda of saddle horses alive. Mighty few calves had to be branded that spring. Pat Carney had turned the horses in on good pasture and spent as much time as he could with his stricken father, mortgaging the ranch. Mike Carney never knew he'd died broke.

After the funeral Pat Carney had ridden back to the ranch. He'd sell the horses and let the bank take the ranch. He was packing his belongings and burning up the years' accumulation of old papers and letters, when he found the unopened envelope, there in the battered old roll-top desk. The dusty envelope was addressed to Mike Carney, Little Rockies P. O., Montana. The postmark was so blurred Pat could not make out the date. And the brief note inside bore no date, either. It was short and to the point:

Friend Mike:

I hope this finds you alive and able to come to me. Because I am in bad trouble. But with you backing me it ain't so bad as some tights we been in, you and me together. And when we get these job done here on the big San Pasqual Float, you stay. Half and half. Pardners. Is a big ranch like I told you before. Big enough for the Rough Riders—all of them. But this big San Pasqual Float is gotten too damn cramped, Mike, to hold me, Pasqual O'Riley and them damn cattle thief son of snakes that is hamstringing me. We can have fun like old times, Mike, gut-shooting them curly wolfs. Then later when the smoke clears and the dust is settle and you got any kind of families, you can send back for these. But not now. Is too bad dangerous. So you come alone. Get off the train at San Pasqual. Say nothing to nobody about these. You come through the upper pass. Look across the valley. That is San Pasqual Valley. Far on the yonder side you can see on the clear day some white buildings up in them foothills. At the foot of the mountains. That is the headquarters ranch. Come there. I will be waiting. We will sing together again about "This is the day they give babies away with a half a pound of tea," and "A hot time in the old town tonight." . . . Bring your guns. I got the cartridges. Your old compadre,

Pasqual O'Riley.

No date. A frayed envelope smudged with dirt and what might have been an old bloodstain on the back, that looked as though it had been carried in somebody's pocket too long.

Pat Riley had shoved his few belongings and a change of clothes in a big canvas warsack. He had sacked his saddle and bought a ticket for San Pasqual, Arizona. His six-shooter and cartridge belt were in the sack; his .30-30 saddle gun part of his baggage.

The train had hardly paused at the little whistle stop of San Pasqual. At two in the morning it looked like a drab little adobe town. The one Mexican at the livery and feed barn was sleeping off too much tequila. Pat Carney had saved time and perhaps bid for trouble by "borrowing" the best-looking horse in the barn. He had changed into shabby cowpuncher clothes and left his bulging warsack in a cluttered saddle room, hidden under a lot of old harness and pack saddles. Traveling light, he'd used up the rest of the night riding through the pass.

If that big San Pasqual Float was a death trap, it was almighty easy on the condemned man's eyes. It was Pat Carney's first Arizona sunrise and he sat his horse and drank it in with his eyes and ears and nostrils. A cowman's paradise. As magnificent in the red sunrise as Pasqual O'Riley had long years ago described it to Mike Carney. As Mike Carney had, in turn, pictured it to his son Pat. A good place to winter your saddle . . .

Pat Carney was wishing his father

was here. And sadness crept into his reckless young cowpuncher heart and he was all wrapped up in dreams and memories when the crashing of brush and rattle of hoofs jerked him out of it. His leg swung down and he jerked his gun, then straightened in his saddle and stood in his stirrups to watch. And it was as if a cowboy contest was being put on for his special benefit.

Over on the next ridge that was spotted with palos verdes and giant saguaro cactus, a little bunch of wild cattle had been spooked out of the brush. They scattered in all directions and close behind them a brush-popper cowhand gave chase, loop swinging, horse cocked wide open. Close in behind what looked like a two-year-old black bull. This was a wild brush-popper cowhand matching a contest with a maverick bull in a rough country. New work to the cowpuncher from Montana.

The black bull turned off and down the steep rocky, brushy slant towards the dry wash below. And the cowpuncher close behind. Wild, reckless, blood-tingling, dangerous, his horse kicking gravel, sliding the last part of the slant, scrambling into the brush-choked sandy dry wash. The cowpuncher's loop, cocked back across a faded denim shoulder, swung once, twice, then was thrown. It caught the black bull. The horse squatted and the black bull somersaulted when it hit the end of the rope. Sand puffed up in a dusty cloud. The rider was out of the saddle, hogging string ready. The cowpuncher had the black bull hog-tied when the dust cleared.

II

Pat Carney rode down his side of the slant and into the brushy, dry sand wash. He smelled the smoke of the little branding fire where the brush-popper cowpuncher's running iron was heating in the dry mesquite stick fire.

He rounded the brush and rode into the small clearing at the foot of the slant. There was the two-year-old maverick black bull hog-tied. A blowing, sweating line-backed dun gelding stood, the coiled ketch rope with its tie knot, dropping over the horn of the double-rigged saddle. A running iron heating in the little mesquite branding fire. But no sign of that hellbent brush-popper cowhand.

Then a youthful, brittle voice came from behind the brush.

"Throw away your saddle gun and six-shooter, mister. Pronto." It sounded like the voice of a boy still in his teens . . . or a girl's voice. Only girls don't spit in the devil's eye racing a maverick down that kind of a slant.

Pat Carney shifted his weight to one stirrup. He rode a short stirrup and when on foot he stood no higher than five feet seven or eight with his high-heeled boots on. But he was thick chested and heavy shouldered and his hundred and fifty pounds was tough bone and hard muscle. He was quick moving and all of it fighting meat. His wiry black hair was sweat-matted under his hat. Sweat trickled down his short-nosed, wide-mouthed, blunt-jawed face. His blue eyes were narrowed under heavy

black brows. His grin was lopsided.

"There should be," he said quietly, "some way to talk my way outa this. You wouldn't bushwhack a rank stranger, kid."

"You think not?" The brittle voice switched to Mexican-Spanish.

Pat Carney had the notion he was being cussed out. Plenty. He listened admiringly, then shook his head.

"A fine waste of good stuff," he grinned. "Me no savvy. Make it Sioux and back it with sign talk, and I might git your drift."

A .38 six-shooter cracked behind the thick mesquite clump. The bullet ripped the dented crown of Pat's sweat-stained Stetson.

"That," he tried to hold his grin, "is what the book calls the universal language."

He slid his six-shooter from its holster and tossed it on the sandy ground, then dropped his saddle gun alongside it.

"Step down," said the brittle young voice, "and brand my maverick."

Pat Carney swung from his saddle. He walked over to the branding fire and squatted on his spurred boot heels and pulled on his buckskin gloves to handle the running iron. It was cherry red. But the handle was cool enough to hold.

"What brand will I burn on that purty black hide?" he asked.

"You run on anything but the Quien Sabe, and you'll stop the next bullet with your backbone, Shorty."

"Shorty?" Pat Carney was on his feet. Fists clenched. His grin

showed white teeth but his hard gray eyes glinted.

"Step out from behind that brush, you young smart Aleck, and I'll bat your ears down and shove that pop gun down your big mouth. No bush-whackin', half-baked mongrel whelp is callin' me Shorty. Step out from behind that brush and fetch your gun along and I'll make yuh eat it. And the devil with you and your Keen Savvy brand whatever it means. Do your own brandin', you—"

Then Pat Carney's voice choked and he let out a yelp of pain. He hadn't expected it and so hadn't dodged the thrown knife that hissed through the air, a swift sliver of shining steel. The sharp-pointed double-edged blade pinned his brush-scarred leather chaps to the saddle muscle of his right thigh. It bit into his hide and flesh less than an inch, its black ebony handle quivering.

"Be thankful, Mister Shorty, that it ain't stuck in your heart. And keep your cussing clean. I'm a lady."

She came out from behind the mesquite brush then. Small, five feet one or two, she looked like a growing boy in her old brush-scarred leather chaps and faded denim brush jacket, her Stetson hat tilted back on a mop of very curly chestnut-brown hair. Her nose was short and freckled and she had a firm chin, tight-lipped red mouth, and eyebrows that were black and a trifle heavy for a girl. Her eyes were a deep dark green, almost black under thick lashes. There was a silver-mounted ivory-handled gun in her hand—a .38 on a Colt frontier model frame. She was slim and her

hands and booted feet were small. But that pair of small tanned hands had handled a rope and hogging string and held a gun steady. She wasn't fooling. Anger blazed in her green eyes.

"It's a long walk to your stolen ranch, Mister Shorty. You'll be lucky if I don't set you afoot. Now burn on my Quien Sabe iron. And save him for a bull. And none of your back talk. You sure give up head when you're pin-scratched. Toss me the knife. Easy. And get your job done, you hired thief. *La-drone*. Murdering *cabrón!*"

Pat Carney yanked out the knife blade and wiped a few drops of blood from the sharp-pointed dagger blade and then deliberately broke the slim blade with his two gloved hands.

"I hate a knife," he said flatly, and picked up the running iron.

He had seen a brand on some cattle he'd jumped out of the brush. The brand looked like two Quarter Circles facing and not quite linking. He couldn't fit a name to it. So he reckoned it could be called the Quien Sabe which he remembered from his meagre knowledge of the Mexican tongue means "Who Knows?" So he burned on a fairly neat-looking brand. Remembering the earmark, he cropped the left ear and swallow-forked the right one, then jerked off the hogging string.

That black bull came from historic Spanish stock, from the strain of Spanish fighting bulls that were used in the bull rings. Now the young bull was on the prod. Pat Carney tailed him up and swung his weight from the bull's tail. He headed the

bull straight at the girl and ran along as fast as his legs would travel as the bull lowered its head and charged.

The girl stood her ground. Then she threw herself sideways and onto the ground as Pat Carney threw his weight to one side and yanked the charging bull off its headlong course and let go. The bull kicked sand over them both as it charged on, headed for freedom. And Pat made a quick dive and grabbed the silver-mounted gun and wrenched it from the girl's hand. She was a little scared and the rest of it was wildcat fury. Pat Carney held her arms, twisted her around before she kicked his shins raw, grinned at her and kissed her roughly. Then he let go and ducked back out of reach, holding her gun.

She wiped at her scarlet mouth with the back of her hand. Pat Carney got his six-shooter and saddle gun. Then he unloaded her gun and tossed it at her feet.

"Call yourself lucky, you young wildcat, that I ain't as ornery as you claim me to be. Because we're alone out here and nobody would hear you holler."

Pat Carney walked over to his horse. The girl stared at him, fists clenched, eyes glittering with fury. Then she forced a smile.

"The Yaquis"—she was breathing quickly—"have a way to treat an enemy. They strip him and tie him with his chest and belly against a saguaro and his arms and legs tied around it. Then they chop down the

saguaro and they roll it and the man down a steep hill.

"Or they daub his bare hide with molasses and stake 'im out on an ant hill," grinned Pat Carney. "But up where I come from the Sioux used to burn 'em at the stake. . . . Makes conversation, Wildcat. But what's it got to do with me'n you?"

Then he heard the sounds of men and horses. And a mile or two away coming down a long brush spotted ridge towards them Pat Carney saw half a dozen riders coming at a long trot. Gun barrels caught the sun.

"Your outfit, Wildcat?" He swung into his saddle.

"My vaqueros, Shorty. Mexicans; some half-breed Yaquis. The major domo is old Tio Bernabe. He would take a lot of pleasure from slicing off your ears and pulling your tongue out by the roots. If that Figure 8 horse you're forkin' is fast enough, maybe you can outrun your hard luck. Adios, Shorty. You'd better fan the breeze."

Pat Carney scowled down at her, grinning twistedly. "You got a name besides Wildcat?"

"Miss Wildcat to you, Mister Shorty."

Pat pulled off his bullet-ripped hat and bowed across his saddlehorn. Then he hit a long trot and held it until he had put a lot of distance between himself and the girl and her Mexican cowpunchers.

But they did not take after him and he wondered if the girl had held them back. He grinned to himself and rolled and lit a cigarette. The tobacco tasted good. He wondered who the girl was. When he got to

the San Pasqual headquarters ranch he'd ask Pasqual O'Riley who owned the Quien Sabe brand.

III

Distance is a deceptive thing to measure with the naked eye in the clear desert air of the big Southwest. It hadn't looked too far but it turned out to be a long day's ride on a leg-weary horse. And dry. The San Pasqual turned out to be one of those dry rivers. Water flooded its sandy length only during the heavy rains. There were wells in the valley if you knew where they were located; windmills that pumped water from the wells into banked reservoirs called tanks. But for a stranger headed down and across the San Pasqual Valley there was no water unless he just happened to ride up on one of those tanks.

Then a wind whipped up from nowhere and before noon it was blowing hard and dry and hot as a blast furnace, searing a man's eyeballs and parching his skin and cracking his lips and drying out his throat and nostrils. Pat's tongue was like flannel and his eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot and half blind from the sun's brassy glare and the invisible fine sand that was hot and merciless.

It was dusk when Pat Carney reached the whitewashed adobe buildings that had looked like an easy ride that morning. His horse was played out and there is nothing more wearisome on a man than riding a tired horse. And the last miles were a gradual climb up into the foothills. Thirst is torturous pun-

ishment on man and horse and Pat Carney swore he wouldn't swap his little mortgaged Montana spread for all the cow country in Arizona.

The whitewashed adobe buildings and the mesquite corrals were still a mile away. The dim trail passed a little cemetery with a crude wayside shrine built by the Mexicans. Most of the graves, marked by weathered crosses, were old. But there was one grave not so old. It was marked by a heavy cross with the name of the dead man carved deep into the heavy wooden slab at the foot of the grave.

Pat Carney leaned from his saddle to squint, half-blinded, at the name carved there. And he got a shock that was like a hard blow in his empty belly. Because the name carved there was PASQUAL O'RILEY.

The grave was not old. Nor was it too new. The wooden cross and foot slab had weathered a little. Six months, a year even. As long, perhaps, as that unopened letter, mislaid, had gathered dust in the littered old desk at the Carney ranch in Montana.

One thing struck Pat Carney like a gut shot. He'd gotten here too late. His father's old pardner from Rough Rider days had called for help and Mike Carney had been unable to come. And Mike Carney's son had come too late. Then Pat Carney bent lower from his saddle and read the smaller lettering carved there under the dead man's name. And he read it all. PASQUAL O'RILEY—MURDERED.

When Pat Carney straightened up in his saddle his hand was on his six-shooter and his aching, half-blinded eyes cut furtive glances into

the gathering shadows of dusk. Then his thirsty horse moved on at a leg-weary shuffle and Pat Carney from Montana rode on warily, his own fatigue thrown off. The whitewashed adobe buildings and empty corrals up ahead took on a grayish look and there was a silence here that tightened a man's scalp and the wind whined through the brush and cactus, and the giant saguaro cactus, ghostly monuments in the twilight, seemed to whisper warnings.

Then Pat was riding past the empty corrals and whitewashed adobe buildings. No sign of life. It was like a ghost ranch, gray-shadowed, deserted, fallen into the first decay of sad neglect. Nobody lived here any more. The big wooden paddles of the old home-made windmill creaked dismally. There were huge wooden troughs, brimming full with clear water. The sweat-marked horse buried his nose in the water while Pat Carney swung stiffly from his saddle and walked to the well.

He hauled up a bucket of fresh water by a hand windlass and drank slowly and sparingly. Then he bent low and poured the rest of the water over his bared head. He lowered the empty bucket on its rope and hauled it up filled and set it on the wide flat adobe wall. And it was then that his half-blinded eyes saw the sign nailed to a mesquite post alongside the well. And in the dusk he made out its crude painted lettering:

AVISO! WARNING!

THIS WELL IS POISONED.

The water he had drunk sloshed in Pat Carney's empty belly. He laughed. It was a short, mirthless and bitter kind of a laugh. Poisoned. And the horse that had packed him here, game-hearted and played-out, poisoned. Then a cold fury swept over him. A futile kind of anger.

"You murderin' sidewinders! A horse can't read!"

He cursed aloud in a croaking voice. Then went rigid. A man's voice sounded from the dark gray shadows of the mesquite corrals behind him.

"And you don't believe in signs, stranger."

Pat Carney's right hand dropped to the butt of his six-shooter. That flat-toned voice called a grim warning.

"Take it easy. Lead poison kills quick."

Pat Carney had sense enough to play it cautious. There was something deadly in the flat-toned sound of that voice. He did not want to be shot. Water poisoned or not, he didn't want lead in his back. He lifted both hands slowly to the level of his wide shoulders. His sun-cracked lips spread in a crooked grin. Twice since sunrise, he'd been caught off guard. Caught with his shirt tail out, he told himself.

"Mebbyso," he croaked, "a man'd be better off dyin' quick of your six-shooter lead poison than from poisoned water."

"Mebby the water ain't poisoned, stranger. Might be it's a warnin' to spook off them superstitious Quien Sabe Mexicans."

No poison pains were griping

Pat's belly yet. "You oughta know," he said bitterly.

"Yeah. . . . Let's quit stallin', stranger. Spread 'em face up. Who are you? What fetches you here on a Figger 8 horse?"

Pat Carney had to think fast. His life might depend on the right answer.

"Ignorance," he said bluntly. "Boneheaded ignorance. I shore wouldn't charge in here a-purpose."

"Where'd you git that Figger 8 horse?"

"Borrowed the loan of that geldin' at San Pasqual. I was in a hurry."

"A hurry to git just where?"

"Just yonderly. You ever had that feelin'?"

"You might have a law badge pinned to your undershirt."

"You're dead wrong, mister."

"You could be one of them Arizona Rangers?"

"I seen my first Arizona sunrise this mornin'," said Pat Carney. "I come from Montana."

"That could be the truth. I seen that single rig saddle."

There was an uneasy silence. The man hidden behind the corral was looking Pat over from head to foot, sizing him up.

"I hate to just up and kill a rank stranger, cold-blooded." The man sounded like he was thinking aloud. "On the other hand, I got my orders."

"I'd like to talk you out o' the notion," admitted Pat Carney.

"I savvy how you feel. Reckon you kin think up one good reason to keep alive awhile?"

"Not off hand. You might name a price."

"How much you got on yuh?"

"About five hundred bucks."

"And I could take it off your dead carcass."

"Your boss might wanta look me over. On the hoof."

"He might." A more cheerful note crept into the man's voice. "He might, at that. Big Joe and Pasqual might git somethin' out o' yuh. But you won't, like it. You'll be wishin' I'd put you out o' your misery."

"Pasqual?"

"Pasqual O'Riley."

"Pasqual O'Riley's dead," said Pat Carney. "I rode past his grave."

"That's the old man. This Pasqual O'Riley is his son. His only son. Heir to the San Pasqual Float."

"Then you better not gut-shoot me."

"You a friend of Pasqual's?"

"That'd be between me and Pasqual O'Riley."

"You'll have to shed your guns. And ante that five hundred. Lay the dough on the ground with your six-shooter, then back up to the corral with your hands up. One leetle wrong play and I'll bust your back with a .45 slug."

So there was a young Pasqual O'Riley. Pat would show him the letter. The sons of Mike Carney and Pasqual O'Riley would play the game out. So be it. Pat Carney unbuckled the filled cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter and dropped the belt and gun on the ground. Then he followed it with the sweat-damp money belt he wore under his shirt and undershirt and next to his hide.

But he kept the letter he had secreted in the lining of one of his boots. Then he backed up against the mesquite corral.

A six-shooter barrel chopped down on his head from behind. The inside of Pat Carney's head exploded. He was out like a light.

His hands were tied behind him when he came alive and he was inside a house. A candle burned in an old Mexican silver candlestick. The white adobe walls were bare. The Mexican tiled floor was unswept and littered with old cigarette butts and tracked-in dirt. Bars were on the windows of the eighteen-inch adobe walls. But the door was open and Pat could look out and see men and horses, laden pack mules, and lighted lanterns. Ten or a dozen men moved around, unsaddling horses, slipping off packs from the mules. They were tough-looking men, packing guns. And beyond was an open campfire and a camp cook busy with his Dutch ovens.

Pat Carney tried to stand up but his legs were tied. He managed to sit up, his back against the wall. His head was throbbing with pain. His tongue was dry again. But he blinked away the pain and watched what went on outside. A tarp slid off one of the heavy packs. Long boxes were roped to the pack saddle. One of the boxes broke open under the hasty handling as it slipped and fell to the ground. And Pat Carney caught a brief glimpse of carbines packed in heavy gun grease.

A harsh voice was cursing and a hard man bulked against the lantern

light. A giant of a man wearing two cartridge belts and holstered guns. His pale bloodshot eyes shining in the lamplight.

"Clumsy fools!"

"Damned grease melted onto the outside of them boxes, Big Joe. They're slipp'ry. And heavy. . . . Don't start cussin' me, you yellow bellied—"

"Big Joe Flanders can cuss you, or anyone else, and make you like it!" The big man's hand dropped to one of the guns he packed. He was wearing the holsters tied to his legs. And he wore faded Levis, boots and a buckskin jacket.

Pat Carney knew the answer. This was gun running—across the Mexican border where another revolution was cooking to a boil. . . . Right now smuggling guns paid big money. Faster, bigger money than raising cattle in a drought-stricken Arizona.

A remuda of horses and mules was being corralled. The smugglers were changing to fresh saddle horses and pack mules, working fast against the coming dawn.

Then a tall man stooped to get through the six-foot doorway. He stood, legs spread, in the candlelight. Tall and splendidly proportioned, he was dressed in shabby leather charro pants and jacket and an army shirt, a crimson silk neck handkerchief knotted loosely around a muscular neck. His Mexican sombrero was crusted with tarnished silver and gold thread woven into the heavy design of Mexico's coat of arms. He was, in fact, wearing the hard-used dress uniform of a Mexican Rurale, the famous and dreaded mounted constab-

ulary of Mexico. Like Big Joe, he wore two guns—silver-handled six-shooters in carved holsters. His skin was deeply tanned and shaved except for a neat black mustache. His hair was black with reddish highlights. And from under black brows that met above a hawk-beaked nose glinted a pair of light-gray eyes that had the cold shine of polished steel. His tight-lipped mouth twisted and white teeth showed. It was a chilling kind of a grin.

"I am Pasqual O'Riley," he spoke in a voice that matched his handsome swagger. "Who are you, hombre?"

"I kin talk better on my feet," said Pat Carney, "with my hands free."

"*Como no?* Why not? And also die more like a man, no? The adobe wall at your back. Blindfolded or not, as you weesh, when the firing squad shoots."

O'Riley walked across the dirty floor and bent over Pat Carney. A sharp knife blade flickered in front of the prisoner's eyes, so close he flinched and the handsome caballero was chuckling as he cut the ropes that tied Pat Carney's hands and feet. Then he stood back, smiling, the knife in his hand. And the young Montana cowman was strangely reminded of the Wildcat girl and her knife.

"You come from Montana. You are bound yonderly. How much did you pay that drunken cabrón to keep you on the ice till Pasqual O'Riley got here?"

"It don't matter much, does it? I could use a drink. Water."

"There is an olla hanging by the door. A gourd dipper. Is good

clean water. No poison. That ees a bloff, that sign. Kind of joke on somebody. A man is not a fool enough to poison hees own well, no?"

Pat Carney dipped the water from the red earthenware olla and drank thirstily.

"You are too young in the years, hombre, to be that Mike Carney from Montana I hear so moch about from my father." There was a sharp glint in Pasqual O'Riley's eyes.

"I'm Pat Carney. Mike Carney was my father. Like Pasqual O'Riley, Mike Carney is dead."

The steel-gray eyes cut Pat Carney a hard, searching stare. A scrutiny that the bloodshot hard blue puckered eyes of the Montanan met and held. And for some reason Pat Carney did not like what he saw and he was suddenly wary and on guard and cautious. But he grinned flatly and when the next question came he was ready to parry it.

"What brings you here, then?" The Mexican accent was gone. "You came a long ways, Señor Pat Carney, to visit a dead man's grave. Or perhaps you have some kind of a written paper. Like a partnership agreement between my dead father, Pasqual O'Riley, and your dead father who you claim was Mike Carney? The San Pasqual Float. . . . You have come down and across the valley. Is big, no? And in spite of the dry year, when the rain did not come, is water and feed and enough cattle left. A half partnership in the San Pasqual Float is something. . . . Show me such a paper, señor. Prove you are the son of that Mike

Carney and—"O'Riley made a large gesture and his white teeth flashed.

"And the son of the dead Pasqual O'Riley makes the son of Mike Carney welcome. Compadres, no?" There was no warmth in those steel eyes.

Pat Carney grinned faintly and shook his wiry black head. "No. I never saw any kind of an agreement. I'm claimin' no part of your San Pasqual Float."

"Then what brings you here, hombre?" The mask was off. The false overture of comradeship was withdrawn as easily as it had been made.

The naked steel of the knife matched the gold glitter in the handsome caballero's eyes. And the knife looked wicked in the flickering candlelight.

Pat Carney took a backward step that put his husky back against the dirty white wall. He was ready to dodge the knife if it was thrown, tense and crouched and set to tackle this Pasqual O'Riley low and hard. A football tackle. Pat had played quarterback on his high school team at Great Falls. He hadn't forgotten all he'd learned in four years of football and he was giving that handsome swashbuckler the odds of a knife and a pair of fancy guns. They'd get him, but he'd go down fighting. . . .

Then Big Joe bulked huge in the doorway, a gun in his hand, his pale eyes wicked.

"What's goin' on here?" he growled at Pasqual O'Riley. "We got no time to waste on this hombre! A bullet in the guts—" He thumbed

back the hammer of the gun in his big hand. And Pat Carney looked into the round black muzzle of sudden death.

"Not so quick on the trigger, Joe," Pasqual O'Riley reached out and gripped the big man's gun barrel and gave it a quick twist.

The gun was wrenched from the big hand. The beard-stubbed giant's face reddened with fury, then whitened. There was murder in his pale eyes. But his own gun was cocked and carelessly pointed at his big paunch.

"Don't try to take the deal, Joe, when I've got it. It's a big jackpot. I want a look at the cards Pat Carney is holding."

"And who is Pat Carney? Who sold him chips in our game?"

"Here's your gun, Joe." Pasqual O'Riley let the hammer down and handed it, butt first, to the big renegade. "You get the outfit ready to hit the trail. I'll finish my talk with this hombre."

The big renegade took the gun and backed out the door. A moment later his harsh voice was giving orders again.

"Some day," smiled Pasqual O'Riley, "I'll put some bullets in Joe Flanders' guts."

Then his steel eyes studied Pat Carney again. "Big Joe's playin' for keeps, hombre."

Pat Carney nodded and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "You move fast, feller. Saved my life. And that puts me in your debt."

"Big Joe Flanders don't know about the agreement between Pasqual O'Riley and Mike Carney. He's

thick-skulled. But he's the best gun runner along the border. There's a price on his head. He's afraid you're a Ranger. So are his renegades. They're a tough gang of border jumpers. Chalk it up as a miracle, hombre, if you ride away from here alive. . . . Now I'll check the bet to you, Pat Carney."

"I got nothin' to bet. Nothin' to win. Only my two-bit hide to lose. I don't want no part of your game. What I've seen of it, it stinks bad."

"And so you have seen too much, hombre. You came here to claim half the San Pasqual Float. There was an agreement between Pasqual O'Riley and Mike Carney. You might be fool enough to have that agreement on you." A silver-handled, silver-mounted gun was in Pasqual O'Riley's hand. "Strip. Down to your hide, hombre. Pronto."

Pat Carney obeyed. Big Joe played for keeps, did he? Well, that steel-eyed caballero wasn't playing for fun.

And while Pat Carney stood naked, his back to the wall, Pasqual searched Pat's clothes swiftly, expertly, tossing each garment back to its owner. The boots last. He had looked inside and even examined the boot legs. But the letter Pat had sewn inside the lining of the boot top went undiscovered.

"Either you got smart enough to put it in the bank or turn it over to a shyster lawyer," Pasqual growled. "Or you handed it over to that little she-devil Barbara. . . . *Madre de Dios!* I am onto it now.

She sent for you, no?" Pasqual broke into a stream of cursing.

It didn't make too much sense. But the vitriolic profanity gave Pat a minute to think. The silver-mounted gun was pointed at him while Pasqual O'Riley cursed himself breathless. He was sweating a little and his steel eyes were wicked.

"Nobody but a locoed fool would come here like you did, hombre. Alone. What did you expect to find here? What did you think you could win? Did you think I would be damned fool enough to let you throw in with me? You think you can bluff me? Me, Pasqual O'Riley? This San Pasqual Float is mine, hombre. I have proved it in the courts. I am the only male heir to what Pasqual O'Riley left here when he died. And the only way she can get a share of it is to marry me."

"What about the agreement between Pasqual O'Riley and Mike Carney?" Pat Carney played his hand as though he held aces. "What if that agreement is safe—where you can't get it? Like you said, I'd be a locoed fool to blunder alone into your wolf trap. Supposin' you or that Big Joe thing killed me? She and Tio Bernabe know I rode here. It'll be one murder you won't git away with."

"Murder?" The color drained from Pasqual O'Riley's handsome face. "I swear by his grave I did not murder him. *Por Dios*, you can't prove it! So that is your game, eh?"

Fear shadowed his eyes there in the candlelight. The gun in his hand wavered unsteadily. Pat Carney had played a blind card and it was an ace.

"Then he did send a letter?" Pasqual O'Riley's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "What did Pasqual O'Riley say in that letter to Mike Carney, eh?"

"Enough to hang you," Pat Carney grinned flatly, playing another blind card, "if I don't ride away from here alive."

"So it is that kind of a trap? You are fool enough to get yourself killed so that the Rangers can hang me for it? You fool! *Cabrón!* To let her use you like a human bait. So you get killed. And I hang for that. And she gets the San Pasqual Float. You and I are dead. But she is alive and laughing at two dead fools. You think she loves you? Pah! Even if you escape here alive and go back to her she will spit in your face. Laugh in your eyes. Curse you for a fool. And gamble your last dollar on this, hombre, Barbara O'Riley will not shed a tear on your grave. That sister of mine has poison in her blood. You will do better, Señor Pat Carney, to make your deal with me."

"Either way, I fill a grave."

Big Joe shoved his head and shoulders into the doorway. His eyes looked ugly. His voice was a harsh rumble.

"We're ready to start. What tricks you playing in here, Pasqual? You double-cross me, you half-breed, and I'll make you wish you were born dead."

"Nobody's double-crossin' you, Joe," said Pasqual O'Riley. "I got what I wanted to sweat out o' this hombre. He's a Ranger. He rode

here to smell around. So we'll leave him like we found him. Hogtied. Clubfoot riding herd on 'im. Clubfoot took 'im alive. He can kill him after we pull out. We'll be gone. He'll be Clubfoot's prisoner. Keeps our hands clean. Send Clubfoot in here to tie up his prisoner."

Big Joe grunted and went back outside. A moment later a rawboned man with a misshapen foot hobbled in, smelling of sweat and whiskey.

"Hogtie your prisoner, Clubfoot. Keep him tied up till daybreak. Then turn him loose and give him a horse to ride. Ride with him across the valley to the upper pass. Kill him there and fetch back the horse. Earn that money you took away from him. You got that straight in your skull, Clubfoot?"

The crippled renegade spat tobacco juice on the floor. His blood-shot eyes were shifty and murderous.

"Yeah. I'll git the job done."

Pasqual O'Riley kept Pat Carney covered while Clubfoot tied his hands behind his back. Then the clubfooted renegade spat on his hands, grinned, hauled off and knocked Pat flat with a vicious swing that flattened the Montanan's nose and sent blinding pain into his eyes. He spat blood as he lay there. Clubfoot bent to tie his legs and Pat Carney kicked him hard. Kicked him in the face with both feet. There was the sickening crunching sound of smashed bone. He'd broken Clubfoot's splayed nose and kicked his teeth loose. Then the outlaw spat blood and tobacco juice and began kicking the bound prisoner. Savage, vicious, booted kicks until Pasqual O'Riley

told him to quit it before he kicked the prisoner to death.

"I'll remember you like you are, hombre," Pasqual said mockingly. "Like you'll look when Barbara O'Riley finds you dead in the pass near her place. With a bullet in your back. She can bury you there. That damned old Tio Bernabe can dig another grave, like the grave he dug for Pasqual O'Riley. And may that one twist in his grave. He sent for Mike Carney. So you came. And I have paid you off. And let Barbara O'Riley explain your dead carcass to the Law. She's got as much as I have to lose to the son of Mike Carney. Adios, hombre."

V

The gun-runner pack train pulled out, headed south towards the lower end of the long valley where it leaked through the ends of two small mountain ranges and into Old Mexico.

Sick with pain and half blind from it and the blood that smeared his face, Pat Carney lay there on the dirty floor and watched through the open doorway as the pack mules, loaded with balanced packs that held boxes of rifles and carbines or cases of ammunition, strung out. Big Joe riding in the lead, barked orders that meant little and were given no attention. There was something almost ridiculous about his blustering but there was also something that was brutal and ruthless and dangerous.

Pat Carney counted thirty pack mules and ten heavily armed and tough-looking border renegades rid-

ing strung out along the moving pack train.

Pasqual O'Riley brought up the rear, riding the best looking palomino gelding Pat Carney had ever laid eyes on. On the palomino was a silver-mounted Mexican saddle with its huge flat horn thickly crusted with embossed gold and silver. A carbine was in the saddle scabbard on one side, a heavy machete in a carved leather sheath. O'Riley's silver-crusted sombrero tilted at a rakish angle on his head and shadowing his cruel steel slitted eyes. He cut a handsome figure and his huge roweled silver-mounted spurs chimed like bells with the motion of his palomino. He was a little drunk.

"Die hard, cabrón!" he called back across his shoulder.

Pat Carney sat on the floor, his bound legs shoved out in front, his back, with his hands tied, against the scarred dirty whitewashed adobe wall. There was the taste of blood in his mouth and the stench of it in his nostrils and he felt empty and sick inside his cold belly. Not just sick from pain, because he was tough enough to stand punishment. But Mike Carney had thought a lot of his Rough Rider pardner Pasqual O'Riley who had been half Irish and half Mexican and reckless and brave and big-hearted and loyal, his word as good as a banker's bond, his code of honor a splendid thing, his generosity a byword. And Mike Carney had passed down to his son Pat the shining sterling Damon and Pythias friendship like a valued heritage. It was an almost legendary treasure for

Mike Carney's son to keep untarnished. Something to drink a toast to, something to die for if need be. . . .

Well, Pat Carney was keeping faith with his dead father, with dead Pasqual O'Riley. But both those great fighting Irishmen must be turning in their graves now. Young Pasqual O'Riley had fouled that legendary comradeship and his share of the heritage of fighting brotherhood. He was staining it with the black blot of murder. Hired murder, at that. It made Pat Carney sick as a poisoned hound.

And there was something deep and ugly here. Puzzling. That swaggering half-drunken Pasqual O'Riley claimed to be the son of the fabulous Pasqual O'Riley. And he said the girl Barbara was the daughter of Pasqual O'Riley who had been murdered, yet almost in the same breath he had bragged tipsily that the only way she could hope to get her share of her heritage called the San Pasqual Float would be to marry him, Pasqual O'Riley, son of the dead father of them both. A sister doesn't marry her brother, either side of the Mexican border. . . . It didn't tally up right.

Clubfoot's cursing put an end to Pat Carney's puzzled thoughts. The renegade had not bothered to wash the drying blood from his long-jawed dirty stubbled face and his bloodshot eyes glittered savagely from the bloody mask. He spat blood and tobacco juice and cursed the prisoner. Then turned his abuse on the departed renegade Big Joe Flanders

and young Pasqual O'Riley.

"That devil has cussed me out fer the last time. . . . And that thievin' breed. Robbed me, by the hell, of that money belt. Five hundred bucks. Says he'll give it back to me when I've killed you, you hard-luck jinx! Him and his drunken hophead jokes. Gits a skin full of tequila and smokes the marijuana he smuggles back across the line."

Clubfoot uncorked a bottle of colorless tequila and tilted it against his smashed mouth and drank the fiery stuff like it was water. And a crafty glint showed in his small beady black eyes.

"I'll learn that pair of high-chinned sons. I'll set a trap that'll hang 'em. And use your dead carcass fer bait, damn you!"

He walked over to where Pat Carney sat propped against the wall and kicked him hard in the belly.

"That Pasqual O'Riley takes me fer a fool. Thinks I'll risk my hide herdin' you across the long valley where Tio Bernabe would give a purty to ketch me and torture me to death. I got a notion that beats that'n all to hell. I'm killin' you here. Then I'm sellin' Big Joe and Pasqual O'Riley out to Jawn Law."

Clubfoot had heard enough to make him suspicious and he added up his own tally.

"You're a damned Ranger, mister. Big Joe told me so. So I'm killin' you like I'd tromp the head off a rattlesnake. And your Ranger amigos will find your dead carcass here. And when Joe and Pasqual O'Riley git back here tomorrow night with a load of smuggled dope, them

Rangers will be bushed up here a-waitin' fer 'em with bench warrants. I'll sing a song to your Jawunny Laws that'll be a shore sweet tone in their ears. It'll hang Big Joe and that half-breed. The Rangers'll find your dead carcass. Like as not they'll take no chances with that Joe hombre an' Pasqual O'Riley. They'll gut-shoot that high-ridin' pair an' tell it to their dead carcasses. . . . Time's a-slippin', Ranger. Time we got the job done."

Clubfoot opened the long whetted blade of his jackknife and cut the rope that bound Pat Carney's booted ankles. Then he kicked the prisoner onto his feet. Pat stood there groggily, legs braced, his hands tied behind his back.

"Git goin', Ranger." Clubfoot's six-shooter was gripped in his long dirty hand. "Out that door. And then you kin run for it. The Mexicans has a name fer it. They call it *Ley del Fuego*—The Law of Fire. They use it on an escapin' prisoner. That's you, Ranger. Git a move on. I'll give you a head start. Then we'll see kin you outrun a bullet." Clubfoot's voice was a drunken shout now.

He gave Pat Carney a savage kick in the pants. Booted him out the door. This was it. The end of the trail. The answer to that letter from dead Pasqual O'Riley to dead Mike Carney.

Moonlight outside. Dark patches of black shadow. A hundred yards of open ground between here and the mesquite corrals. Out there somewhere Pat Carney would go down with a bullet in his husky back.

Pat Carney summoned up all his wits and strength and nerve. He had been fast and tricky when he carried the football down the field for a touchdown. Dodging, twisting, zigzagging, he used to run the hundred yards in close to track record, wearing football clothes. He was heavier now and he'd never run much in high-heeled boots. But he couldn't do his choosing. This was a tight. And the odds a thousand to one. Damn the odds. . . .

Pat Carney cut a quick look across his shoulder. Clubfoot had a six-shooter in one hand, a half-empty bottle of tequila in the other. Even as Pat Carney cut him that swift look, Clubfoot raised the bottle to his smashed mouth.

This was the go. Pat Carney dug his toes into the ground and took a flying leap for a start and landed running. Zigzag. Doubled forward, running as he had never run before.

He heard the brittle sound of the dropped bottle. Clubfoot's drunken taunting laugh.

"Run, you damn Ranger!"

Then the loud crashing roar of a gun. But no bullet cut Pat Carney down. And through the gun echoes tore the wild harsh, pain-twisted scream of a man in mortal agony. Behind Pat where Clubfoot stood in the open doorway, the candlelight inside silhouetting his lanky club-footed frame. But Pat Carney never looked back, never slacked his headlong speed. That horrible screaming and cursing filled the night with a hideous din as Pat Carney dove headlong through the open gateway of the high mesquite corral and threw him-

self flat on the ground, rolling over and in behind the shelter of the corral. His lungs were bursting as he panted for breath.

"I bet that busted the world record," sounded a voice inside the corral. It was an unsteady voice, brittle with shaky laughter and terror. "You outran a bullet, Shorty!"

"You—why you damn' little Wildcat!" Pat Carney's voice cracked.

The girl was yanking at the knotted rope that tied his wrists. Panting as hard as he was breathing.

"If you hadn't busted . . . my knife . . . I could cut the rope—"

At last Pat's hands were free and he flexed his cramped arms and then those arms were around the girl and she was trembling as if she was stricken by a sudden chill. And Clubfoot was no longer screaming and slobbering curses.

"I'll be all right . . . in a minute. . . . I never killed a man before." Her small voice was a sob.

Pat Carney no longer felt any pain, any empty-bellied nausea. There was a warm glow inside him and his blood pounded rapidly. He buried his face in the girl's curly mop of dark hair and held her like that until she quit trembling.

"Is your name Barbara O'Riley?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. Of course."

"You ever hear of Mike Carney?"

"My papa's great compadre from the war the Rough Riders won for Tio Sam and the Stars and Stripes? And they gave the babies away with a pound of tea—"

"And a hot time in the old town

tonight," Pat Carney was grinning. "I'm Pat Carney. Mike Carney's son. I got a letter Pasqual O'Riley wrote to Mike Carney—"

"I mailed that letter. It was in the pocket of my papa's jacket. When Tio Bernabe and I found him dead. Murdered. Always my papa told me all those stories about his Compadre Mike. How Mike Carney would come even from the grave to fight beside him. . . . *Madre mia*, why didn't you tell me you were that Mike Carney's son when I made you brand the bull because you ride a Figure 8 horse and that brand is my cousin's brand? That cousin who drags a brave name in the dirt. That Pasqual O'Riley."

"He's not your brother, then? Pasqual O'Riley wasn't his father?"

"Adopted. He is no more than some kind of a cousin. What you call the shirt-tail relative. My papa wants a son but I am born wrong and am nothing but a girl. So he adopts that boy for a son. Gives him the name of Pasqual O'Riley. Signs papers at court. Adoption papers.

"Then that Pasqual gets wild. One scrape into another. Stealing Quien Sabe cattle and horses, gambling off the money, till my papa kicks him off the San Pasqual Float. So he joins the Rurales. And they kick him out when they learn he is mixed up with that no good Big Joe Flanders running guns to the rebels and smuggling out opium and other dopes.

"They use the pass at the lower end of the San Pasqual Float for the smuggling. When my papa finds

out and catches them, Big Joe and that adopted cabrón who wears his brave name, they murder my papa. Shoot him in the back. . . .

"My papa is sick inside his heart on account of that young Pasqual. So he writes to his old Compadre Mike to help him wipe out the renegade gang. I find that letter. I mail it at San Pasqual. But that is almost a year ago. Mike Carney does not come. Nobody comes. That young Pasqual says I must marry him because he is the one who owns the San Pasqual Float. He thinks all he has to do is whistle and all the girls in the country run to throw their arms around his neck. I guess I am the only girl along the border who hates that Pasqual. . . . I am what you call me. Wildcat."

"Miss Wildcat. . . . Mrs. Shorty, if I kin talk you into it some day."

Pat Carney might have gotten his answer to that then and there if they had not been interrupted.

There was the clatter of shod hoofs coming back out of the moonlit night. Big Joe's harsh cursing in an ugly mixture of Mexican and broken English. Pasqual O'Riley's voice, sharp with alarm and bitter hatred, calling back insults. And off in the distance the rattle of gunfire.

The Arizona Rangers and Border Patrol on one side of the border, the Rurales on the Mexican side, had sprung an ambush on the gun runners. Big Joe and Pasqual O'Riley had gotten away, leaving their renegades to die fighting or throw away their guns and be sent to the Mexican penal island of Tres Marias or the

hell-hole Arizona prison at Yuma.

Big Joe and Pasqual were shouting blame on each other as they rode up out of the night. Their horses were dripping sweat and spurred leg-weary.

"Clubfoot!" yelled Pasqual O'Riley. "You damned Clubfoot! Wrangle the horse pasture. Fetch in the remuda. We're afoot! You drunken, clubfooted fool! *Pronto! Pronto!*"

But Clubfoot had gone far beyond the human call and brutal commands of Pasqual O'Riley and his henchman. Clubfoot lay sprawled face down in the dirt in a muck of his own puddling blood.

They rode up on his dead body. And for a long moment there was a silence broken only by the creak of saddle leather and the bell-like tinkle of Pasqual's spurs and the blowing of their played-out horses.

"What the devil! Clubfoot, you fool, what's up?"

"*Como diablos! Que diablo!* You Pat Carney! Where are you?" Pasqual's voice was shrill and brittle with fear and alarm.

Pat Carney took the saddle carbine the girl thrust at him in the dark. There was an empty shell in the barrel. Its bullet had shot Clubfoot in the belly. Four cartridges in the box magazine.

Barbara had more .30-40 cartridges for the U. S. Cavalry carbine. But they were in a little leather sack on her saddle. She had her six-shooter, and the belt around her slim middle sagged with the weight of the .38 special cartridges to fit the hand gun. She had left her horse hidden

behind the heavy brush two hundred yards away.

So they were trapped here in the high mesquite corral. Pat Carney and Barbara O'Riley afoot. Even as Big Joe and Pasqual O'Riley had set themselves afoot when they spurred the last cruel mile out of their game-hearted horses.

There was something akin to Fate about it that pleased Pat Carney. Or it would have given him a lot of elation if he didn't have Barbara O'Riley here with him. Love had come swiftly, as all things came to Pat Carney. She was the daughter of Pasqual O'Riley and he was the son of Mike Carney. A letter from the grave had thrown them together here. And Pat Carney welcomed the fighting chance to show off his gun prowess. Those were their common enemies. To kill Big Joe Flanders and that adopted half-breed who had dirtied the name of Pasqual O'Riley was a job he relished. Pay off the debt of those old Rough Rider pardners. What more could a fighting cowhand ask for? Pat's pulse pounded. His battered face spread in a blood-crustred grin.

But he dared not call out his fighting challenge. He could not risk letting this girl he loved so fiercely now be hit by stray bullets. He had asked her for more cartridges for the carbine and she'd whispered back that there were four in the magazine and that was all. He'd grinned in the dark and said four was a-plenty.

"Crawl into the brandin' chute, Wildcat. Hug the ground. And say a little prayer." Pat Carney whis-

pered in her hair, then kissed her hard. And this time his kiss was returned by soft warm lips that clung.

VI

Pat Carney had meant for Barbara O'Riley to keep her six-shooter and use it if it came to the worst. But she unbuckled the cartridge belt with its holstered gun and shoved it at him with a small shiver.

"I couldn't kill again, Pat. I don't want to hold another gun. Kill that no-account Joe first. Him I am scared of. But I can handle that cousin of mine with my tongue. . . . I pray for you, Mike Carney's son. Our Madre de Dios will protect you for me. . . ."

Then she was gone, with scarcely a sound. And Pat Carney crouched there in the black shadows of the high mesquite corral that was like a stockade. Her cartridge belt and six-shooter looped around his neck because it was too small to buckle around his husky middle, lean-bellied though he was in build. And he gripped the cavalry carbine, levering a fresh cartridge into its breech.

Big Joe and Pasqual O'Riley had dismounted, examined Clubfoot's dead body. Then they had searched the empty adobe cabin, neglecting, in their desperate excitement, to blow out the candlelight. They came out again, their carbines in their hands. Bewildered, desperate, silent and grim-lipped, the liquor dying in their guts.

Pasqual O'Riley rolled and lit a black-paper cigarette and pulled the marijuana smoke deep into his lungs,

letting it filter slowly from his nostrils.

"That damned Pat Carney! How did he do it? Where'd he get a gun? Why didn't he take Clubfoot's guns after he shot him? Where'd he get to?"

"He took Clubfoot's horse and he had help, you drunken marijuana-drugged fool!"

"Shut up, you big gruntin' wart-hog. You ran us into that law trap. Lost us our outfit. Take your own blame, you big cabrón. . . . *Que diablo!*" Pasquale cursed the played-out horses that stood, heads down, dripping with sweat, trembling with exhaustion, sleek coats spur-ripped and bloody.

Then the dread thought seemed to hit them both at the same time. That they might not be alone here.

"Caramba! If somebody shot Clubfoot and turned Pat Carney loose, Joe, they might be bushed up here. Watchin'. Guns cocked. Their damn gunsights lined on us!"

They stood, their guns gripped, looking all around. Pasqual's marijuana cigarette was burned down to a short stub. He took a last deep drag and spat it out. Then he pointed towards the big, rambling, whitewashed adobe hacienda that stood nearly a hundred yards apart from the other buildings and the corrals.

"When the law gets here we'll have to make a stand-off there at old Pasqual O'Riley's house till we can make a getaway. There's grub and guns there. Cartridges and booze. If nobody cuts us down between here

and the big hacienda we'll—"

"Step foot inside that house, you murderer," called the brittle voice of Barbara O'Riley, "and the ghost of my murdered father will strike you both dead!"

Pasqual O'Riley spat out a stream of curses. Then he laughed and there was a goading elation in his voice. Immense relief from fear.

"So it's you, you little she-devil! You shot Clubfoot. Where's that hombre Pat Carney? Hiding behind what should be the woman's skirts, no?"

"That's about the size of it, you mongrel spur jingler. You bragged how you and that big know-it-all renegade play for keeps. My white chips is in the jackpot, misters. Jackpot's open!"

Pat Carney stepped out of the mesquite stockade corral, out into the open. Pasqual's carbine spat flame and the bullet struck the gate post a few inches from Pat Carney's head. Big Joe's bullet nicked his ribs.

Then Pat Carney's cavalry carbine was at his shoulder and it spewed fire and the recoil nudged his shoulder. Big Joe caught the .30-40 bullet in his big belly and grunted as though he'd been kicked by a mule. And the big gun runner's next shots went wild. He staggered a step or two and then went down on one knee but he kept shooting.

Pat Carney felt the thudding, stabbing, ripping tear of a bullet slashing his thigh. He lined his sights for a shot at Pasqual O'Riley and pulled the trigger and saw the tall, handsome killer in shabby leather

charro clothes sway a little on his long widespread legs and Pasqual's teeth were bared as he shot wildly at the short, stocky, bowlegged young cowman from Montana.

Bullets kicked the dirt and spat into the mesquite stockade corral and whined past Pat Carney's head. He got Big Joe in his sights again and took split second aim, then squeezed the trigger. The big renegade's hat had fallen off and he was crouched low on one knee and Pat Carney's bullet hit him in the forehead above his pale eyes and he toppled over on his bearded face.

Then the cavalry carbine in Pat Carney's hand swung to point at the half-breed who had been given the legal name of Pasqual O'Riley.

"This is Barbara O'Riley's gun!" Pat Carney's voice came harshly from behind gritted teeth. "This is for Pasqual O'Riley and Mike Carney! And may God have mercy on your murder-stained soul!" Then he pulled the trigger.

The swaggering killer knew that Death was coming in a few split seconds. He wanted to scream for mercy. Beg for his life. Crawl on his belly and shed tears and whine like a dog and pray to a Señor Dios whose name had never passed his lips save in profanity.

But out of the moonlit night had sounded the brittle, taunting laughter of a girl—the daughter of the Pasqual O'Riley he had murdered and whose gallant name he had defiled. And that taunting laugh had in those last brief seconds that remained, driven the craven cowardice from his heart and replaced it with

a terrible hatred. And his white teeth had bared in a snarl. The gun in his hand lifted, steadied in a last brief second, then spat fire. Just as the .30-40 bullet from Pat Carney's borrowed carbine smashed through his ribs and tore his heart to shreds.

Pat Carney and Pasqual O'Riley went down at the same time.

Pat Carney came alive quite a while later. There were a lot of tall candles in a huge candelabra and their flickering lights looked like stars. He was in a large room with heavy beams. A handsome old Mexican with magnificent snow-white mustache stood there, and a tall man whom Pat Carney later learned was the Captain of the Arizona Rangers was telling some other law officers about Pasqual O'Riley and Mike Carney.

"I soldiered with that fightin' pair in the Philippines. With the Rough Riders. Bucky O'Neil's troop. Bucky was from Prescott, Arizona. Killed in that charge of San Juan Hill. . . . Mike Carney and Pasqual O'Riley claimed they had charmed lives and bullet-proof hides. They proved the first statement by savin' each other's hides half a dozen times. But they weren't bullet-proof. They must've carried some fancy scars to their graves. . . . Bucky O'Neil was yellin' how they never molded the bullet with his name on it when a slug hit him in the mouth and he was dead when he fell out of his saddle. . . . How's that young Carney comin' along, Doc?"

"If that ain't a grin on his face," said a man who was taping a white

bandage around Pat Carney's head, "then my eyesight needs specs. . . . He's all yours now, Barbara. A little damaged, but he'll be in shape before long to cut a fancy pigeon wing at his own wedding."

"You hear, Mister Shorty?" Tears were in Barbara's eyes and her voice was husky. But her lips were warm when she bent over and kissed him.

"Yes, ma'am, Miss Wildcat."

"You lost an ear. Almost. Pasqual shot the top of it off."

"Which ear?" he asked.

"The left. But what difference?"

"Crop the left. One of these days you kin mark the right ear with a swallowfork. But don't burn your Quien Sabe on my hide."

The Ranger Captain slit the boot and took out the letter Pasqual O'Riley had written to Mike Carney. Pat Carney told him to keep it as a souvenir of the old Rough Rider days.

Then later, a month later, on their wedding night at the San Pasqual Float hacienda, Pat Carney's bride handed him a very official-looking document, complete with gold seals and red, white and blue ribbon, the other seal holding down red, white and green ribbon. The seals of the United States of America and of

Mexico. It was an agreement that put the old Spanish grant known officially on the Arizona records as the San Pasqual Float, in the joint names of Barbara O'Riley and Patrick Carney, Husband and wife. And to be handed down to their children and their children's children, etc., as the San Pasqual Float.

There had never been a written agreement between Pasqual O'Riley and Mike Carney. Those two adventurers who had left wives and children behind to seek high adventure with the famed Rough Riders had not believed in written agreements between partners. But Pasqual O'Riley had used the non-existent agreement as a threat and club over the head of his blackleg foster son.

"This is for us, Pat," Barbara said quietly. "For you and me. We will frame it. For our children and our grandchildren to learn to read the words in Spanish and English, no?"

"Our children and their children. . . . You braggin', Wildcat?"

"Looking ahead a ways, Shorty."

While in the big living room where the wine flowed, the Ranger Captain in a service-scarred Rough Rider uniform was singing:

Oh, this is the day
They give babies away
With a half a pound of tea!

THE END

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JOHNNY CRENSHAW'S WEDDING CAKE

by GIFF CHESHIRE

With Buffalo Creel's gunnies on a bushwhack rampage, Carl Wenfrel decided it was time he started cooking with lead, too!

THE big oven was heating, filling the pin-neat kitchen of the bakery with the warm spicy odors Carl Wenfrel loved. A gleaming kerosene lamp, thonged to a rafter, lent its own bright cheer to the room. Carl whistled to himself as he tilted the

big, highly polished pot and whipped more batter for Johnny Crenshaw's wedding cake. It was taking much batter, and it would strain the capacity of the oven to bake it. The cake would have to be a big one, for every soul on Hector Flats would

naturally be on hand for the wedding of Penny Bishop and Johnny Crenshaw.

Carl Wenfrel had saved this night before the wedding specially to make the cake. After the shop was closed he would have all the time he wanted to bake the many layers, smooth on the icing and fix the colored stripes and rosettes just as he wanted them to be. Johnny and Penny did not know about the cake. It was to be a surprise, quite as if anything could add to the happiness of the coming day for them.

The stocky, flour-whitened baker smiled to himself as he whipped with his big beater. It would only show Johnny again that Carl Wenfrel could never forget. It might also make up a little for the fact that Rex Reyburn would not be at the wedding.

Sound on the back porch drew Carl's eyes annoyedly toward the kitchen door. He did not want to be disturbed. Yet even his closest friends seldom visited him at night. It must be important. Carl went to the door to investigate.

A man stood there uncertainly, a pretty poor specimen such as sometimes came to Carl's back door to beg for a hand-out. He seemed frightened for he drew back into the shadows as the yellow light fell across the porch. Then suddenly he bolted past Carl into the kitchen.

"Shut the door quick, mister!"

Carl closed the door and turned, his round, ruddy face wearing a frown. "I don't want you in here. What do you want?"

"Mister, you got to hide me! Just

a little while, then I'll skin out!"

"Why should I hide you? If you wanted food, then you would be hungry and I would give it to you. But if you want only to hide, it is probably because you have done something and you should be found."

"I ain't done nothing, honest—but they'll kill me!"

"Kill you?" Carl lifted his eyebrows. He could not understand the violence that was always breaking out in this land. "Maybe you had better tell me why, then I will decide whether I want to help you."

The drifter had moved to a darkened corner of the kitchen. He could be of any age, Carl decided, a wasted, spineless creature such as swirled in the back eddies of life. He began to jabber.

"I found this jasper laying there in the dry wash. He was shot in the back. Honest, I didn't have nothing to do with it! But I was hungry and burning up for a drink. So I frisked him, but he didn't have nothing on him. All I took was the ring. Then I played the fool, mister. I tried to trade it for a drink in the saloon up the street. That barkeep sure looked like I'd hit him in the face with a dead cat. He grabbed the ring and hightailed it for the back room. And I lit a shuck!"

"What makes you think they would want to kill you?"

"Mister, I know when I've busted in on somebody else's whizzer! If you'd seen that jasper's eyes pop! That ring wasn't worth much. Looked like somebody'd beaten it out of a dime—"

"What's that you say?" Carl cried.

It came all together, the crash of a gun outside, the splintering of glass, then the sight of the pitiful creature dying. He slid limply to the floor, blood welling from his temple and gushing from his nose. Carl plunged through a near door into a dark storeroom. Horror filled him, not for what had just happened, but for what he realized must have happened previously.

That would be Johnny Crenshaw's ring! Carl knew it with mounting alarm, for he had made the ring and given it to Johnny. And this drifter had said he took it from the body of a man shot in the back and lying somewhere in a dry wash. Carl was rocked with concern.

Everyone in town knew that yesterday Rex Reyburn, three days drunk, had sent a challenge to Johnny. Everyone had laid that to jealousy and liquor and lack of self-control. Rex and Johnny had been friends and partners on the big RC spread until they split over Penny. Rex had known Penny first and figured that Johnny had double-crossed him.

But why had the barkeep over in Buffalo Creel's Silver Steer Saloon acted so strangely at the sight of Johnny's ring? Carl lifted fingers to stroke his stubborn chin. His direct mind went with unerring instinct to the most plausible answer. Buffalo Creel knew all about Johnny's accident. He would not have been alarmed if he thought Rex had done it. He probably had been fearful suddenly that the drifter had seen more than he actually had. He or

one of his henchmen had shot the drifter through the window.

With a shock Carl realized the danger to himself. If he was right, Creel would not know how much the drifter had told him. Creel would be after him, just as he had gone after the drifter. But the more urgent thing was Johnny Crenshaw. Had he been dead when the drifter discovered him? How long ago had that been and where was the dry wash?

Carl Wenfrel was a gentle man, and in the Switzerland he had not seen for five years men had lived for peace. Sometimes others had been deceived by that and emboldened, only to discover that the placid Carl was not a coward. Aware that even now Creel might be seeking his life, Carl slid swiftly across the kitchen, looking down as he passed the dead drifter. He went out through the front of the bake shop, shedding his apron and getting his hat and coat on the way.

It was late, but merriment was unabated in the Silver Steer. As it is the world over, in Hector Flats a wedding was the occasion for prolonged revelry by friends and enemies. Many of the men in the Silver Steer were no friends of either Johnny Crenshaw or of Rex Reyburn. These were Buffalo Creel and his hard-cases and the handful of cattlemen who trailed with Creel.

As he thought about Johnny's wedding a hard lump formed in Carl's throat. He could not help thinking of that night two years before when Johnny had won his eternal grati-

tude. Marlena had been living then, Carl's wife. And that night, bitter and stormy as it was, her time had been at hand to give Carl his child. Doc Sprey, on a call into the Teninos, had been stormbound there. As night drew in upon the town, the storm's increasing ferocity coupled with Marlena's suffering to create in Carl an unbearable concern.

Word of Marlena's plight passed through the town, and it was Johnny Crenshaw who quietly left a game in the Silver Steer, got his horse from the livery and rode away through the storm. It was not Johnny's fault that when he and Doc Sprey reached Carl's porch in the first streaks of dawn Marlena was gone. The town wives had been unable to help her, for Marlena was ever as fragile as she had been beautiful. Later Carl had made Johnny the ring and given it to him, and though no word was spoken a pact of friendship had been sealed.

Carl Wenfrel supposed it was too late to help Johnny now. Yet there were many things he could do, and he would do them gladly. He thought of Penny, with the lump in his throat aching. She had made her own choice, and she had chosen well. Those two had been on the verge of great happiness, such as Carl and Marlena Wenfrel had known.

He moved down the street toward the hotel. Eastward a few stars stood above the Teninos, brilliant in the spread of sable sky. Here and there saddle horses loomed out of the darkness as Carl passed the hitchracks. The only sound was that from the

Silver Steer. At the end of the second block Carl turned and climbed a pair of stairs to the high verandah of the hotel. Dick Sleets was half asleep at the pine-board desk inside.

"I want to see Rex Reyburn," Carl told him. "Is he here?"

"In 212—if you can wake him up. He's stinking drunk."

Carl climbed to the second floor. There was no response to his knock and, trying the knob, he found the door unlocked. Carl stepped inside. He struck a match and lighted the table lamp. The room was stuffy and he quickly opened a window. Rex Reyburn lay skewwise on the bed, dressed and filthy, his head lolling. It was a shame to see him so, for he was a handsome man and clean when he was sober. Carl shook him. "Rex!" It did no good, and Carl laid several stinging slaps on Reyburn's unshaven cheeks.

Reyburn grunted in protest, but finally his eyes opened. Presently he mumbled. "Shoo, Carl. Whatcha want?" His reeking whiskey breath lifted to Carl's nostrils.

"You must listen," Carl said. "You've got to answer a question. You hated Johnny Crenshaw because he is marrying the woman you wanted. Yesterday you sent word to Johnny you were looking for him."

"You're damn ri'! An' the double-crossing son's been dodging me!"

"You'll be glad of that, one day. Penny made her own choice. Had it been you, Johnny would have wished you luck. Now he's been shot in the back. Did you do it?"

"What's that, man?"

"Johnny's been shot in the back. Bushwhacked, you call it."

"And you think I done it? Why, you—" Reyburn tried to lift himself upright, his bloodshot eyes blazing.

Alcohol had sapped him. His eyes rolled upward, his head snapped back, and he slumped on the bed again. Carl threw the blankets over him, blew out the light and left the room. He was certain now of what he had only guessed before. It was Buffalo Creel's work. When Johnny and Rex had been friends and partners they had kept law on Hector Flats. They had held Creel and his kind in check. Creel had been glad to see the rift come over Penny. He had worked on Rex, building up his jealousy, convincing the sodden man he had been double-crossed. He had probably goaded Rex into spitting out his bitter challenge, seeing his chance to remove both Johnny and Rex and have his own way on the flats.

Rex Reyburn was a fool and of no use, so it was up to Carl. The methodical baker was not underestimating the enormity of the task he was undertaking when he went into the hot reeking Silver Steer. The dozen card tables were filled, the bar was crowded, and every man there had too much hard liquor under his belt.

Carl passed through the batwings and paused, letting his gaze move over the crowd. He did not like this place, which smelled so strongly of Buffalo Creel and his evil interests. Creel and Spur Hologin were in a game at the far end of the room. In the cone of light Creel showed the

solidness of the animal that had lent him his nickname, and his hat was pushed back tipsily on his large round head. Hologin had lost an eye somewhere in his unsavory past, which lent a special look of evil to his flushed narrow face. Carl looked at them carefully, then his gaze swept on, seeking Joe Vost.

Malevolent and unsocial, Joe Vost stood drinking alone at the end of the bar, with the other customers willingly granting him elbow room. Carl's attention fixed upon him judiciously. To a man like Joe Vost a back shooting or a shot through a window would be less work than pleasure. Joe would be his man. And Joe stood there, more or less alone, his coarse black hair spilling over his eyes, not a dozen steps from the back door. Carl moved down the room and filled the open space next to him.

Vost swung around, his lips sneering, his small agate eyes frosty. Then abrupt interest flickered in those eyes, and Carl felt their coldness go through to his spine. He had no knowledge of guns and had never carried one. He had only one thing to lend him a bit of confidence, the years he had spent in the gymnasiums in the old country. They had given him rippling muscles and a physical coordination unsuspected in Hector Flats. He had only that to put up against Vost's killer prowess.

Carl had the wrist of Vost's gun arm in a crushing grip before the gunman knew what was happening. It looked like an easy effort on

Carl's part, and pain and surprise surged into the other man's eyes.

"I will crush the wrist so it will never be of use again," Carl warned in a low voice, "if you make a fuss."

Instinct nearly tore an oath from Vost's lips. Carl increased the pressure, skilfully grinding nerves against bone, and saw reason asserting itself. A question formed in Vost's eyes, which Carl answered. "We will go out the back door, side by side. You will give no sign that there is anything unusual about this."

The gun hand that was Vost's principal tool was helplessly arrested, with pain stabbing to his shoulder. He seemed to realize that Carl could do what he had threatened but was not armed otherwise. A break might come outside. He responded to Carl's guiding pressure, and together they strode toward the rear door. Out of the corner of his eye Carl watched Creel and Spur Hologin. He could not tell if any signal passed to them from Joe Vost. But the pair was aware of what was taking place. Their faces sobered, their eyes went hard.

The alley that ran behind the false-fronted structures on the main street was pitch dark. Ahead the light still burned in the kitchen of the bake shop and Carl could see the shattered window. Vost growled, "What're you up to, Wenfrel?" and Carl returned, "You will see." He took Vost into the bakery kitchen. The gunman looked down at the dead drifter, lifted his killer eyes defiantly to Carl's. Carl knew he had the right man. His pressure

on Vost's gun arm had never lessened, and now he took the man's gun. He let the arm go, then, and unshelled the gun and tossed it under a table. Shorn of his fangs, Vost blanched. Carl had suspected he was a brave man only when he had the edge.

Carl would have considered it unsporting to do what he now proceeded to do if so much had not depended on it. He moved forward suddenly. Vost's fists lashed out, but Carl did not mean to fight him. He caught Vost and turned him, and before the other knew it had him helpless in a crotch-and-neck hold, with his knee in the small of the man's back.

"I will break you in two unless you tell me where Johnny Crenshaw is!" he promised. "If you tell me, I will let you go."

Joe Vost threshed helplessly and unintelligible curses broke past the constriction at his throat. Slowly Carl increased the pressure on his spine, knowing that few men could endure the awful feeling of their backbone being pulled apart. He had learned this trick well, in the old days at the gymnasium, as a means of self-defense. He applied a slow, mounting strain, then abruptly loosened his elbow clamp on Vost's throat. The man had had enough.

"Washburn's Gulch, damn you!" Vost gasped hoarsely. "Where the Boonstown road crosses it. About a mile beyond Johnson's! I'll get you for this!"

Carl smiled in grim satisfaction.

He knew the place and could find it, even in the dark. He set Vost down on his feet.

Hatred sprung into Joe Vost's eyes as he massaged sore muscles. "You'll never get there, Wenfrel! You'll never get there!"

"Go!" Carl ordered. "You ought to die, but I'll keep my promise. Get out!"

With a poisonous look, Vost spun and darted through the door. Carl moved swiftly, knowing the alarm would be carried directly to Buffalo Creel. Creel would be convinced now that Carl knew the truth and he would want Carl Wenfrel's life.

Carl blew out the lamp and slipped through the front way again. He was grateful for the shrouding darkness and the cow ponies strung along the hitchracks . . .

The first streaks of dawn were seeping into the sky over the Teninos when Carl reached Washburn's Gulch. He had ridden hard, but he was neither horseman nor plainsman, and twice he had lost his bearings. Perhaps it was well, for if the more expert Creel had decided to lay an ambush somewhere along the way it would have been easy.

He stopped just short of the long dry wash that the trail threaded, fearing a trap might have been laid for him there. He left the spent roan in a thicket and proceeded on foot up the eastern cutbank, pausing frequently, carefully probing the way ahead before he moved again. He reached the far end, and a bewildering disappointment rose in him.

There was no sign of Johnny Crenshaw.

He crept into a stand of jackpine, and abruptly a voice said: "Stand, hombre! And lift them arms!"

Relief surged through Carl. "Johnny!" he shouted. "It's me—Carl Wenfrel!"

Though Johnny Crenshaw was still alive, a glance told Carl the young rancher was in a bad way. He had propped himself up under a tree, and a six-gun lay across his lap. His shirt was stained with blood, and his cheeks and eyes were gaunt from the draining. Yet a trace of his old smile flickered over his lips.

"You doggone cookie wrangler!" Johnny gasped.

Carl ripped up his own shirt, which was always scrupulously clean, and bound Johnny's wound. The bullet had gone into Johnny's back under the short ribs, well away from the spine, and probably it had missed the lungs, or Johnny would not now be alive. It hurt Johnny to talk when he gasped out the story. He had no idea who had bushwhacked him. He had regained consciousness during the night and crawled into the brush. His horse had spooked. Johnny had been unconscious much of the time since, too weak to try to reach a ranch.

"Anyone of several men might have done it," said Johnny.

"Rex Reyburn made gun talk," Carl pointed out.

"You think Rex would bushwhack a man?" demanded Johnny.

Carl sighed. "For enemies, you are a strange pair." He decided that he would have to ride back to John-

son's and borrow a buckboard. For now that he knew Johnny was still alive, he was going to get him to the doctor as swiftly as possible, Creel or no Creel. He did not tell Johnny about that. Johnny Crenshaw had enough to endure on this morning of his intended wedding day.

Carl was on the point of mounting to start for Johnson's when he heard the telltale drum of horses' hoofs. He knew without seeing them that it would be Buffalo Creel and his riders. They must have come here in the darkness and, failing to find Johnny, guessed that somehow Carl had beaten them. Since then they must have been scouring the country between Washburn's Gulch and town, hoping to flush their quarry. Carl hurried back to Johnny and told him all he suspected.

"I reckon you're right, Carl. Creel knows you'll tell me what you know. They'll try to kill and hide you. Me, too, when they find Vost's aim was a little off last night. Prop me up and find yourself a hole, boy!"

"Maybe—maybe they still won't find us, Johnny!"

Yet Carl entertained no such hope, and he knew Johnny did not, either. Creel must have grown aware that they were still in the vicinity of the wash, or why was he returning? They would go over the site with a fine-tooth comb. Carl's throat grew dry while he waited. Presently he saw five riders break over the distant, morning washed rise. It would be Creel, Hologin and Vost, with a couple of reinforcements. There was

no time to move Johnny to a better hiding place.

The party thundered into the wash and down its length and back again. They dismounted, and after that Carl could not see them without exposing himself too much. Johnny had examined his gun and laid his ammunition belt close by. Johnny did not look afraid, and suddenly Carl wasn't either. He was only baffled, not knowing what he could do to help.

Johnny put the seal of doom on their predicament. "In the light they can see the blood I spilled. They'll follow it straight to us."

Muscle knots appeared on Carl's big jaw. So be it. He had set out to bake Johnny a wedding cake and here he was beside Johnny, facing death. Everything depended on Johnny, but Carl would do what little he could.

Sound told him that men were moving toward them. Carl rolled up rocks to make a fort for Johnny and helped him turn onto his belly behind them. Johnny grinned, and Carl smiled back. It was not so bad, when you were with your friend. Carl stretched out beside Johnny. If Johnny went first he would take the gun and do the best he could while the thing lasted.

It became apparent that Buffalo Creel intended to get it over with as quickly as possible, for this was an inhabited section and there was danger of somebody happening along. Carl had no hope of that, but Creel did not intend to risk it, for abruptly gunfire opened in the thin brush

ahead. They were skulking from tree to tree, on three sides. Carl groaned involuntarily. Then the movement ceased.

Johnny Crenshaw was not kicking about the odds. His gun spoke sharply and a man tumbled from behind a tree. Lead nicked the rocks and puffed dust all around. To his surprise Carl found himself wishing they would come on.

The wish was quickly granted. Creel's men surged ahead, growing careless of cover in their confidence. Carl did not know what instinct moved him, but suddenly he was on his feet, refusing to be shot down without a fight. Then he saw Joe Vost, coming in from the left.

Carl surged across the intervening space, and the surprise of his move checked the gun in Vost's fist for a split second. Then it spoke, a mite too late, and though Carl felt a searing burn run against his side, he kept going.

He collided with Vost with terrific impact. Vost struggled with his gun, and for a second Carl expected it to explode in his face. Desperation lent him speed and power. With Vost whipping with the gun, Carl caught him in the crotch-and-neck strangle. This time he did not hesitate, and when he threw the body from him it lay broken and still.

Carl whirled, remembering that gunfire had been crackling all around him, wondering why he had not been riddled with lead. There were three bodies sprawled on the ground, not twenty feet from Johnny.

"You—you got them all!" Carl gasped.

Johnny grinned. "I only got one. Buffalo Creel." He lifted his voice. "Come out, Rex, you lead-slapping galoot!"

Rex Reyburn emerged from behind a tree and walked toward them. His eyes were bloodshot, his clothes rumpled, but he looked steady. His jaw had its firm thrust again.

"I knew it was you," Johnny said. His eyes were shining.

Reyburn would not meet those eyes. Carl understood. When a man harbors hatred, however wrongly, it is not easily forgotten.

"I was sure stewed when Carl told me you'd been bushwhacked," he mumbled. "The loco son figured I done it! I wasn't too drunk but I understood that! And plenty of others might figure it, too. So I drunk a gallon of coffee and took a bath in the creek. I kind o' figured it'd be Washburn's Gulch, and I headed this way. Then I saw Buffalo was beating the country for you. I trailed them here." He looked at Johnny steadily, as if trying to make himself clear. "Be damned if I'm going to have it said I'd *bushwhack* you!"

The fire was going good under the big oven again, and the dead drifter had been taken away. Carl had the kitchen spic and span, and the spiciness was in the air again. He was happy, for Johnny Crenshaw was in bed over in Doc Sprey's house, and the doctor said he was well enough for the wedding* to go ahead as planned, though Johnny would have to be married in bed.

The wedding cake was baked and

iced, and it was a beautiful thing. Carl was stirring coloring into a fresh batch of icing to make the stripes and rosettes. He was stiff and sore, for the bandage the doctor had put on his ribs was a tight one.

Carl frowned when he heard the knock on the back door. He did not want to be bothered, and he remembered with distaste all the trouble the knock last night had brought. But that trouble was over. He went to the door and opened it.

Rex Reyburn stood there. He had shaved and cleaned up and looked a different man. He grinned sheepishly. "Thought I'd drop in a minute, Carl."

"Sure. I'm glad you did, Rex."

Carl was suddenly embarrassed about Johnny's wedding cake. Rex had saved Johnny's life but that did not alter the fact that Johnny was marrying the girl Rex had hoped to have. He had made that plain, up there at the wash.

Rex looked at the cake. "It's real purty, Carl."

Carl beamed. "Wait until you see the rosettes, Rex, and—!"

The little bell rang, warning Carl that there was a customer out front. It was old Jake Cushman who, after he had bought his daily loaf, always wanted to ravel the town's affairs with Carl. It was five minutes before Carl could get back to the kitchen.

Reyburn was gone. Carl looked at the cake as he came across the room and he swore under his breath. Rex had ruined it!

But no. As Carl stood over it he saw that Rex had decorated it far better than Carl Wenfrel might have. At least Johnny would think so. The colored icing had dripped and the letters were crude. But on top of the cake Rex had printed:

GOOD LUCK
JOHNNY

THE END



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



1. Noghnorl
2. Uceasy
3. Spach
4. Sandickqu
5. Knabclay

6. Wosbelly
7. Bohleb
8. Reyjk
9. Handlenap
10. Oseno

11. Buckleherry
12. Selkilt
13. Ratsy
14. Peshe
15. Mostdrans

Bringing Pete Randolph out of the high country alive and unharmed would net Mike Pardee a small fortune but lighted dynamite would have been safer to handle than that

TOUGH WITNESS

by SETH RANGER

I

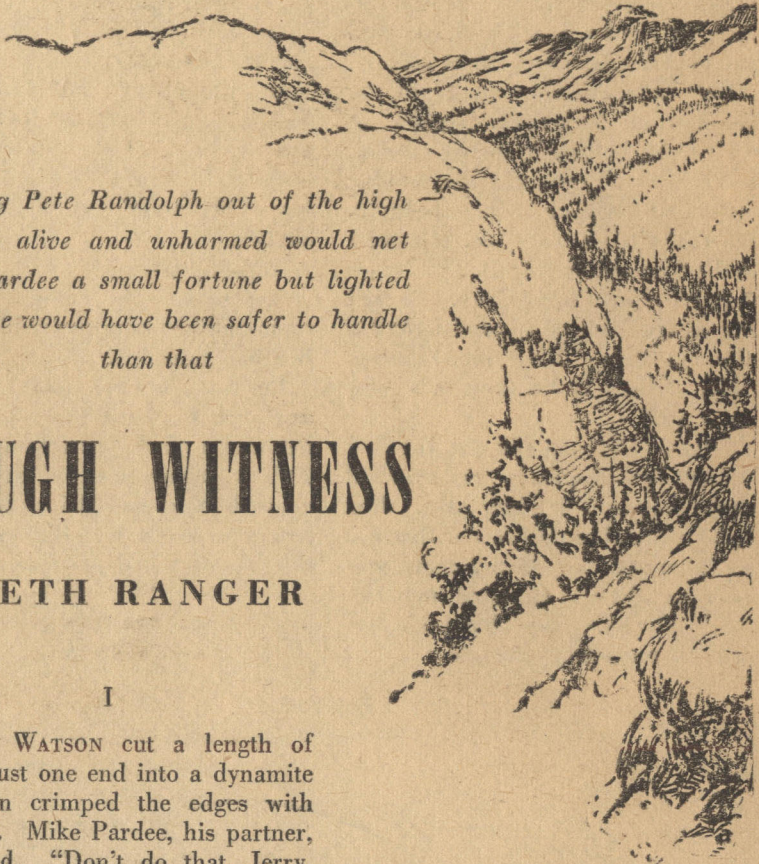
JERRY WATSON cut a length of fuse, thrust one end into a dynamite cap, then crimped the edges with his teeth. Mike Pardee, his partner, shuddered. "Don't do that, Jerry. The cap might explode. Then what?"

"I wouldn't know a thing about it," Jerry said. "One minute I'd be capping a fuse and the next St. Peter would be saying: 'Try these wings on for size!'"

"Yeah, and if we don't hit that vein pretty quick, a warden will be handing us striped suits and saying: 'Try *these* on for size. So

you're miners? That's fine. We've got a job for you making big stones into little ones.'"

Mike Pardee was serious. Three times in the last two months men from the district attorney's office had been checking on the mine. They wanted to send Mike to the pen on a charge of using the United States mails to defraud.





Mike had been a ranger in the National Park service for several years. Park visitors come to a ranger with their troubles. They want to know where to fish, climb mountains or take pictures; or they get lost or hurt and the rangers have to bring them out, often at the risk of their own lives and limbs. After a while visitors feel that the ranger is a very

old friend. They tell him their life history, and then they want to know all about the ranger. Is he married? Does he expect to be a ranger all his life?

Gradually Mike told them about Jerry and the gold mine. "Jerry's an old-time hard-rock man," he would say. "He knows ore, and he thinks we've really got a mine. Gradually the values are getting better. I work in the park and keep Jerry supplied with grub, powder and steel. When I get a little money ahead I lay off in the slack season and give him a hand."

Some of them had said: "Say, if you organize a stock company to develop the mine, put me down for a few shares." Then a park visitor who often promoted propositions

that ran into the millions had said: "Mike, you're going at this wrong. Organize a company, sell stock, put on a crew and start taking out gold within a few months. The way you're going at it, you'll be an old man before the mine begins to pay. With a company, you can do the job right, you'll make more money in the long run, your stockholders will get their dividends and everybody will be happy. I'll show you how to go about it."

Usually it cost thousands of dollars for this particular man to show anyone "how to go about it." But he liked Mike's rugged honesty and the way Mike had treated him. He was glad to give him a break.

Mike had organized his company and had written park visitors about it. He hadn't offered them stock, but had waited until they had requested a chance to buy. Then he had talked business. Money came in in small amounts and Mike had put on a crew, with Jerry Watson in charge.

All of which had aroused the ire of Dolph Rucker. Dolph, big, loud-taking and domineering, was a member of the sure-thing gentry. He soared over the country like a bird of prey and when someone with the gambling spirit developed a mine he moved in. His method was simple—he became a minority stockholder, then he raised so much trouble with obstructive tactics that the others were glad to sell out to him, or buy him out. In either case, Dolph Rucker named the price.

When Rucker tried to buy into

Mike Pardee's mine, Mike refused to sell a single share of stock. He did a little missionary work on the other stockholders, and they also refused. Now Dolph was out for revenge.

He had written to federal officers stating that Mike had taken advantage of his position as a National Parks ranger to promote a private stock deal. Mike had denied this. Now he was trying to prove that he really had a mine and that it was not a stock-selling deal. If the vein petered out, the future looked bleak. With the treasury empty, he was faced with the prospect of levying an assessment to carry on. Here again he was in a jackpot, because he hadn't sufficient money to pay his own assessment.

Therefore, it was with something approaching prayer that he touched a match to the fuses and ran from the mine, with Jerry Watson at his heels. The latter had timed the blasts so that the first would shake up the rock, and subsequent blasts would throw it away from the end of the drift.

A series of growls came from the depths and they waited impatiently for the smoke to clear. Mike was the first to enter. He turned his miner's lamp on the vein and shook his head. It was pinching out. A cautious streak, which he invariably put down, whispered: "Better call off all bets and make the best deal that you can. Why throw good money after bad?" But pioneer shrewdness shouted: "Listen, brother, many a cautious man quit when the goal was around the corner. More than one miner has reopened an abandoned

mine and struck it rich within a few weeks. Don't quit!"

When he came out of the mine he said: "Well, Jerry, we've got to raise more dough. If I can throw some of my own money in here, without levying an assessment, it will be proof of my good faith."

"Shucks, everybody knows your faith is sound," Jerry said.

"Everybody except the district attorney, who doesn't know anything about me and is likely to rely on the evidence of the mine itself," Mike countered.

"Well, where you going to get the money?" Jerry wanted to know.

"There're rewards out for wanted men," Mike answered. "The quickest way is to run down one of them and bring him in. You can't raise money swinging a pick and shovel. And we've got to raise it quick."

"And get yourself killed," protested Jerry. "You're no gun-fighter."

"That's right, but I know the mountains," Mike pointed out. "That's my only stock in trade and I'd better rely on it."

"Then you aren't going after outlaws?"

"Outlaws in the mountains," Mike answered.

Mike went to town and checked on wanted men. The sheriff gave him a stack of descriptions and Mike spent hours going through them and studying the men's features. Some had disappeared over the Mexican border; several were roaming the desert, and a number had gone into hiding in the high country.

"What about Pete Randolph?" Mike asked. "This doesn't make sense. Here's a man accused of no crime whatever, and yet there's three thousand dollars cash reward if he's delivered to the sheriff of Kenny County."

"His crime is contempt of court," explained the sheriff. "He's wanted in a lawsuit. Papers were served, but he was bought off by Dolph Rucker—"

"Dolph Rucker!" Mike fairly shouted the name. "What's the story?"

"Rucker has been trying to freeze out stockholders in the Sheep Mountain Gold Mining Co. and get control. Ed Jenson, who's representing the little fellows, got onto the deal and accused Rucker of fraud. That was just what Rucker wanted. He brought suit against Jenson and his group for defamation of character."

"I get it," Mike said, "unless Jenson can prove Rucker is a crook, he's stuck for heavy damages."

"That's right," the sheriff answered. "Jenson and the other stockholders would have to unload their stock to pay off. And who do you suppose will buy their stock?"

"Dolph Rucker, of course," Mike said. "As long as he has a finger in the pie a man would be crazy to buy a single share of stock." He lit a cigarette and puffed mechanically. "Rucker has been pulling deals like this for a long time. Invariably he squirms out of his tight spots and leaves someone holding the sack."

"In this case," the sheriff went on, "Rucker knew that Pete Randolph's

story would confirm Jenson's charge of fraud, so he hired Pete to lose himself in the mountains. When the case came to trial and Randolph wasn't on hand the judge issued a contempt of court warrant and ordered the sheriff to serve it. The sheriff found Pete Randolph, but Pete just laughed at him. "Arrest me," he said, "but you've got to back-pack me out. I won't walk a step, and if I'm hurt, I'll sue you for damages and collect on your bond."

"And that stopped the sheriff?"

"The snow was six to eight feet deep. It was a snowshoe job and the sheriff couldn't figure any way of taking Pete Randolph out without running the risk of injuring him. Suppose he lashed him to a sled and the sled overturned? Damages for internal injury," the sheriff said. "Randolph hasn't brains enough to think out a smooth trick like that. It's an example of Dolph Rucker's scheming. Jenson is desperate—that's why they're offering such a big reward. Nobody has figured a way of getting Pete Randolph out of the snow country without risking a lawsuit. He'll have to be brought out, practically wrapped in cotton."

"Even then he'd be an unfriendly witness," Mke argued, "so what's the point in bringing him out."

"Pete Randolph would start by lying on the witness stand but a good lawyer would trap him in a few minutes. Pete would see a perjury charge in the offing, and being a high-class rat would save himself by spilling the truth about Rucker. Rucker knows this," the sheriff concluded, "and he can afford to pay Randolph

plenty to hide out. Besides, they claim Old Man Suddreth's daughter is the slickest little trick in the whole mountain country, and Randolph is camped near the Suddreths' place."

Mike Pardee could see plenty of dynamite in the situation, but he also saw three thousand dollars. And that sum would buy a nice amount of powder, steel and fuse. On the other hand, if he slipped and Pete Randolph brought suit for personal injury, it would open Rucker's way into Mike's mine.

"With a little luck, Rucker would have two mines by the throat," Mike's voice was sober. "Still . . . three thousand dollars is three thousand dollars."

II

Ten days later Mike Pardee rode up to the Sheep Mountain Mine. It was closed and the watchman explained that he represented the court. "Neither side can come on the property," he said.

It was an old and rather pathetic story to Mike. The ramshackle buildings and worn machinery, the little ball mill and the small tailings dump, told of a few men, with little money behind them, working hard to develop a property that would eventually pay fine dividends if they managed to hang on. It was, in a sense, Mike's own story.

Mike looked up Sheriff Elliott—tall, lean with a weathered face, and friendly blue eyes which Mike sensed could turn to ice on occasion. "We'll go see the judge, Pardee," Elliott said. "As a judge, he's impartial.

But as a man, he hates Rucker. Rucker knows it, but he's satisfied with Judge Grambs, reasoning that in an effort to be fair the judge will unconsciously lean his way."

Judge Grambs shook hands cordially, but his black eyes probed Mike. The judge was a man of medium build, slow-spoken and thoughtful. Mike decided Judge Grambs didn't lose his temper easily, but when temper did get beyond control he made a job of it.

He showed signs of blowing up when Mike mentioned his business. "I've been postponing the case in the interests of justice," he said, "but I can't keep it up. Rucker's lawyer is hounding me to bring the case to trial. I don't know what you can do, young man, but with me, as the sailor says, any old port in a storm. Tomorrow, when Rucker's lawyer shows up, I'll have to tell him I am again postponing a trial because a new man is going after Pete Randolph. And that means, sir, that Rucker will be on your neck."

"He's already riding me," Mike commented.

"Then he'll start raking you with his spurs."

While Mike was getting ready to hunt Randolph, a telegram came from Jerry Watson. It read:

Rucker must have heard what you are doing. He charges you with defaming his character; has brought a damage suit, and your stock is tied up. Good luck, and stay with it.

Mike whistled softly. "He's a jump ahead of things as usual. The

only way to beat an hombre like that is to get a jump ahead of *him*."

The following day Mike made his plans. He called on Judge Grambs.

"Judge," he said, "it's three miles to snowline. I'd like you to spend the day with me. Of course we won't get into the deep snow of the high country, but it'll take us into the open. Have you ever used skis?"

"No, sir, I haven't," the judge answered. "I never thought I'd be at my best with barrel staves tied on my boots. Give me a good horse every time."

"In my line of work," Mike said quietly, "I've used skis quite a lot. I'd like you to . . . see me in action."

Judge Grambs gave him a penetrating look. "Young man, has this anything to do with the case? If so, I must refuse."

"It may have some bearing on the case," admitted Mike. "Put it this way: I would say that the Court will be adding to his experience and wisdom, so that if certain angles should develop, he will be better armed to decide the points involved."

A trace of a smile played around Judge Grambs' lips. "Very well put, young man," he said, "I shall be happy to spend a day with you in the mountains. But positively not on skis."

They left early the next morning, and when Judge Grambs returned home that night his face was ruddy from a day in the open, and his eyes sparkled. It was evident that he had broadened his knowledge and was highly pleased. He shook hands with Mike and said: "Good night, Pardee.

Drop in first thing in the morning and I'll issue you a bench warrant to be served on Pete Randolph."

"And I'll do my best to find him and bring him out," Mike promised.

"I'm setting the trial for the seventeenth," the judge said. "And there'll be no more postponements. Rucker is demanding a showdown. Legally he's entitled to it. And . . . I think he'll get it."

Mike Pardee stowed sleeping bag, grub, toboggan and skis in a spring wagon and drove to the end of the Edith Creek road. Here there was an abandoned farm, with a cabin, barn and fenced-in clearing. He put the wagon in the barn and turned the horses loose to graze. The snow was down to nearby ridges, but it would be another month before the clearing was covered except by light falls which would quickly melt. The horses would get by in good shape.

Mike spent the night in the cabin and early in the morning packed his supplies to snowline and returned for the toboggan and skis. It was a tough business, dragging the heavy toboggan and the long skis through the thick brush. Mike camped at snowline and early the next morning began the climb to high country, dragging the loaded toboggan behind him.

The snow lay heavy in the high country and he moved slowly among the ridges, sometimes skirting the ragged edge of nothing to avoid canyons.

Late the second night, he smelled wood smoke and just before dark saw a sizable log building in a clear-

ing. A buck deer hung from the limb of a tree.

"Killing deer out of season," Mike chuckled, "Well, I'm serving a bench warrant. For once I'm not a combination forest ranger and game warden."

Mike had always enforced the game laws because it was his sworn duty, but he had never gone out of his way to investigate too closely meat that those in the high country killed for food.

A man with hair like frost on charcoal, and a black mustache, looked up in surprise when Mike came into the clearing. Then a defensive gleam came into his blue eyes.

"You're Frank Suddreth?" Mike asked. "I'm Mike Pardee. I'm looking over the country."

"You're a game warden or marshal looking for poachers or stills," Suddreth declared. "I can spot your kind as far as I can see 'em."

"I'm hunting neither poachers or stills," Mike assured him. "And if you're frying deer liver tonight I'll enjoy some."

Suddreth looked at Mike a long time. "I believe you," he said at last. "I'm making a third guess. You're after Randolph."

"You're entitled to your own opinion," Mike replied. "An officer after a wanted man travels light, though. I'm seeing the country on skis—and dragging a toboggan behind me."

"You're a cool customer, Pardee," Suddreth said evenly, "and so is Randolph. This will be worth watching. Why don't you ask me if I'll tip off Randolph?"

"I'm seeing the country on skis," repeated Mike.

"I won't tip him off," Suddreth said a little mockingly. "He can spot a lawman as far as I can."

"How about putting me up for a few days?"

"I make my living putting up folks who want to climb mountains, hunt, fish or prowl around on skis," Suddreth said. "Come along."

He led the way to the cabin. The snow was packed down in the immediate area, but even so, it was above the lower floor windows. The floor itself was high enough to leave plenty of basement storage room. There was a large main room, with a big stone fireplace, a room that was apparently used as a loafing place and dining room. In addition to the long table and a number of straight-backed chairs, there were comfortable chairs, well-cushioned, before the fireplace.

Homemade tables covered with pipe racks, ash trays, old newspapers and dog-eared magazines were placed along the walls. People read a lot on the raw winter nights, Mike concluded.

There was an odor of burning pitch in the air, and a girl came in, poked a log and smoke, drifting into the room, was sucked up the chimney.

"This is my daughter, Dorothy," Suddreth told Mike. "Dorothy, we have a visitor—Mike Pardee, a young man who is seeing the country on skis."

Dorothy Suddreth was a pretty,

pert-looking girl with dark hair and eyes.

"I'm happy to meet you," she said, "and you'll find a lot of country up here."

Mike saw the back of the largest chair move and he realized for the first time that someone was in it. A sandy head came into view, turned, and Mike saw a man his own weight, with heavy cheeks, thick lips, and suspicious eyes, studying him.

"You gentlemen may as well meet now as later," Dorothy said, "Mr. Randolph, this is Mr. Pardee, who is seeing the country on skis."

They were mentioning skis constantly, and Mike wondered if the girl was covertly laughing at him, as her father undoubtedly was doing.

Randolph made no attempt to get up, nor did he extend his hand. He cleared away a foot-square spot on the table at his elbow and said: "You can put that bench warrant down there, officer. I'll glance over it when I get around to it. Right now, I'm wondering how this story came out. They're fighting over a water-hole."

"As long as there's a West they'll be fighting over waterholes," Mike said evenly.

"And grass and mines," Randolph added.

"We live in an interesting country," said Mike.

"I'll show you your room," Suddreth told Mike. They went up to the second floor and Suddreth led Mike into a room overlooking the various trails radiating from the cabin. The trails were mostly drifted over with snow, Mike saw. But

good blazes, high up on the trees, would keep a man from getting lost except in a blizzard.

"Nobody ever locks doors around here," explained Suddreth, "but if you want a key I'll get you one."

"Don't bother," Mike said.

Suddreth went below. Dorothy was taking pies from the oven, and her face was flushed and glowing rosily from the heat.

"Well, Dot, you saw two clever men in a sparring match a few minutes ago," her father remarked.

"I thought Pete won," the girl said.

"He got no worse than a draw," conceded Suddreth. "But you must remember that Pete was on his own ground and Pardee hadn't had time to get his bearings. It was only the first round."

"He'll never take Pete out of the country," the girl declared. "Too many men have tried it. In the summer he's among the peaks where they can't find him. In the winter he's here where the snow is so deep a man has all he can do to take care of himself, let alone take away a resisting prisoner."

At the supper table Mike met the other two members of the Suddreth household—Aunt Elsie who did the cooking, and Old Fritz who seemed to take charge of the outside work.

Dorothy watched the two men during the meal. Randolph said no more about a bench warrant, but he studied Mike, searching for little slips that might reveal his purpose. Dorothy was more sure than ever that Mike was going to make an arrest, but she couldn't understand why he

was taking his time about it.

That evening they sat before the fireplace discussing mountain climbing and skiing. Dorothy had skis; but hadn't used them much on steep slopes.

"I'll be around here awhile," Mike said. "I'll be glad to show you what little I know."

For the first time Randolph's eyes lost their calm, calculating light. They burned with hate as the man stared at Mike. "So that's the way it is?" Pardee thought. "Well, I can't blame him. Dorothy's the sort of girl that would make even a drifter settle down and get a job."

Mike went to bed early, but not to sleep. He heard Randolph come up the stairs and go into his room. A key clicked in a lock and Mike said softly: "So they don't lock doors around here? Well, Randolph is locking his. I wonder if he's afraid I'll come into his room and put something over on him?"

The next morning Dorothy's skis were sticking in the snow outside of the door. Mike took the hint and after breakfast said: "How about the first lesson? Pick the steepest, longest hill that you can find."

The girl smiled quietly and he knew why an hour later when she pointed to a steep slope, almost clear of timber for a half mile. It extended another half mile above them.

"We call it Lover's Leap," Dorothy explained, "because no lover has ever leaped."

Mike grinned. "Will you marry me, Dorothy?"

She looked startled, until she re-

alized that he was carrying out the Lover's Leap idea. "No, never!" she answered.

"Then farewell, cruel world!" Mike said dramatically and started down the slope. She saw his skis leap and heave as they smashed through the new snow. Just when it looked as if he had reached a speed beyond control, he turned them slightly. Snow piled up and fell away in front of them, and he came to a stop.

He climbed the slope, and caught his breath. "Where does that slope end?"

"A half mile north of Edith Creek," answered Dorothy. "And you scared me green. I was sure you'd be dashed to pieces against the boulders."

"One of the most important points in skiing," Mike said, "is to avoid boulders and trees. Smacking into a tree at forty or fifty miles an hour doesn't leave one looking exactly pretty!"

Mike had seen similar slopes in various mountain regions. A glacier breaks off, or a combined rock and snowslide move downward sweeping everything into the lower country. Boulders are knocked loose, huge trees smashed out by the roots, and even small ridges are moved by the tremendous momentum the slide generates.

The slide leaves a ragged surface of broken rocks, protruding roots and debris, but a good fall of snow smooths everything. And yet wild animals, instinctively realizing the dangers of snowslides avoid the easy, smooth area for the safer route

through the timbered country.

"On slopes like that," Mike warned Dorothy, "you must be careful. Heavy snow slows you down. You can control your speed. Fast snow is another name for suicide." He led the way to a steep slope that ended in a small snow-filled basin.

"If it's too fast for you," Mike explained to the girl, "you'll just end up in a drift." He gave her a few pointers, watched her, corrected her faults, then watched her try again. It was noon before either realized it.

They returned to the cabin to find Suddreth and Aunt Elsie getting a meal. Mike went up to his room and looked around. "Someone's been through my stuff," he murmured. "I wish I'd caught him."

The following morning Old Fritz met Mike at breakfast. "I'm goin' down for the mail," he said. "Any letters you want to send?"

"Yes," Mike answered. His eyes plainly said: "That's a tough trip for a man of your age."

Old Fritz chuckled. "I'm a snowshoe man myself. Take her slow and easy and git thar is my motto."

Mike wrote a brief letter to Jerry Watson. It read:

Dear Jerry:

There's good skiing up here. I'm having a fine vacation. Good hunting, too. I spotted a fine buck, but the season isn't open yet. Anything you need, go ahead and buy. I'll dig up the money when the time comes.

"Jerry will chuckle when he gets this," Mike mused. "He'll know what I'm trying to tell him and he'll

buy that powder and steel that we need."

When Old Fritz departed, he carried several letters for Randolph. Two miles from the cabin, Randolph overtook him.

"Fritz," he panted, "I was supposed to put money in one of those letters and I forgot. Let me have 'em!"

The old man fumbled in his pocket and brought out the packet. "Pick it out," he said. He sat down and lit his pipe.

Randolph carefully opened Jerry Watson's letter, read it, and returned it to the envelope. He licked the flap, hoping there was enough glue remaining to make it stick.

"Thanks, Fritz," he said.

Old Fritz resumed his way, muttering: "Mike Pardee's makin' a nervous wreck out of that cuss. If Mike would just arrest him, we'd see some fun, but he don't make a move. Sometimes I figger Mike really is up here to enjoy the skiin'."

A half mile from the cabin, Randolph met Dorothy. "Just the one I want to see," he said. He was tense, his nerves like fiddle strings. "You're getting pretty thick with Mike Pardee, aren't you? Well, stop it. I've got plans for you myself. As soon as things are straightened up, I expect to make a home for us. Rucker has promised me a soft job—"

"Pete," the girl cut in, "why did you follow Fritz? Did you get hold of Mike's mail?"

"No," he retorted savagely. Then: "Don't you believe me? Do you think I'm lying?"

"I've never caught you in a lie yet," the girl answered. "Come on, we'll go back to the cabin."

"I'll go back. But I want you to stop seeing so much of Pardee," Randolph said. "He's plenty interested in you. . . ."

As they skirted the edge of Lover's Leap, neither noticed Mike Pardee standing in a thicket, studying the slope. He was no eavesdropper, but he couldn't help overhearing Randolph's words. And he resented the man's possessive manner, his way of giving the girl orders. Then her answer came distinctly: "It takes two to fall in love, Pete. I'm learning a lot from Mike Pardee. And a lot about him."

III

Old Fritz brought letters for everyone when he returned the following day. Mike wasn't expecting any mail, but there was a letter from Ed Jenson of the Sheep Mountain Mine. "Don't fail us, Pardee," Mike read. "If you can bring out Randolph, we swim. If you don't, we sink. Three thousand dollars that came hard from a lot of little fellows is in the bank waiting for you."

When Mike looked up from reading the letter, Randolph's eyes were on him. Again the man's face revealed the strain. Tiny beads of moisture were on his forehead. He watched Mike walk to the window, study the weather, shake his head, and return to a chair before the fireplace. Mike sat down, lit a cigar and relaxed.

One morning a pair of burly

strangers arrived at the Suddreth place.

"I'm Jack Crosby," one said. "And this is Bill Vance. We're looking for big-game country."

"This is it," Suddreth answered, adding significantly: "There's all kinds of big game up here. I can put you up."

Mike Pardee wasn't looking at Crosby and Vance. He was studying the relief visible on Randolph's face. "So reinforcements have arrived?" he said softly. "It looks as if I'd have to earn that money."

Suddreth performed the introductions. No trace of recognition passed between Randolph and the newcomers. Vance brought out a bottle and poured everyone a drink that evening but when he offered Mike a second one, the latter declined.

"I can't take it," he said. "Two drinks make me sleepy. I'm no addition to a party."

He pretended to doze off a few minutes later, aroused himself with a start, yawned, and went upstairs. A half hour later he heard Randolph's heavy step. The man went into his room. Mike listened, breathing heavily, slowly. He heard nothing until his door opened softly. Someone, barefooted, had entered his room. Mike continued his heavy breathing, and he saw a vague shadow move to the chair where he had left his pants. He heard small change jingle, then the rattle of papers.

Swinging his feet clear of the bed, Mike landed with a bound. A gun went deep into his stomach, but he clawed it aside and heard it clatter

to the floor. A fist crashed against his ribs. Then his fist drove through the other's defense and connected with the jaw.

They fought silently, bare feet making little sound. Only their heavy breathing and the shifting of chairs as they bumped into them was audible. A head came down and charged, ramming Mike against the wall with a rib-shattering force. He almost went down. The man's arms were around his waist, and his head kept smashing him against the wall.

He jerked his right arm free and cracked the other across the back of the neck. The man dropped, the strength leaving his body with a rush. Mike thought of a wet grain sack dropped on a barn floor. He lit a lamp and looked down. Randolph was out cold.

"First time in my life I ever used a rabbit punch," Mike mused. "For that matter, it's the first time in my life I ever fought a man as foul-hitting as Randolph. Hope he isn't dead."

He walked to the head of the stairs. "Come up here, folks. Someone was prowling my room. We had a fight in the dark and he's out cold."

Suddreth, Vance and Crosby raced up the stairs. "Randolph?" Suddreth said. "Tried to rob you, eh?"

"Let's not jump at conclusions," Vance said. "Maybe the two quarreled. Randolph told me Pardee and him didn't get along."

"What was he doing, barefooted, in my room?" Mike said.

Suddreth felt the lamp, just below the wick. "It hasn't been lit long,"

he said. "It's still cold. It isn't likely they'd meet and talk things over in the dark. What shall we do, Pardee?"

"Revive Randolph," Mike answered.

They carried Randolph to his own room. The door had been left slightly ajar, the bedding and sheets were awry—everything prepared to make it look as if Randolph was sleeping should something go wrong with his plans. It would take but seconds to cross the hall and roll into bed.

Randolph awakened with a start and spent a few moments gathering his wits. "What's wrong?" he demanded. "What's everyone in my room for?" He dabbed at his face with his hand. "My nose is bleeding. What happened?"

"You prowled my room," Mike said, "and got caught at it."

Randolph passed his hand before his eyes and shook his head. "Sleep-walking again," he muttered. "I thought I'd cured myself of it. It's got me into a lot of trouble."

"Why not forget it, Pardee?" Vance suggested. "We can't help what we do in our sleep."

"Why not?" agreed Mike.

He turned in and when he awakened it was snowing lightly. He dressed, packed his belongings, carried them downstairs, brought the toboggan to the door and stuck his skis up in the snow.

"Leaving?" Dorothy asked. There was an anxious note in her voice.

"Yes. Early this morning," he answered.

She drew a long breath. "I've learned a lot from you, Mike," she said. "Things I never dreamed that I could do on skis." She was puzzled. Had last night's affair unnerved him? She doubted it. Like her father, she was confident he had come to arrest Randolph, but he hadn't made a move. Had he lost his nerve? She refused to believe that, either.

The others came down and breakfast was eaten with no reference to the previous night's doings. After breakfast, Mike stood up. He drew a paper from his pocket.

"This is what you were after last night, and didn't get, Randolph," he said. "A bench warrant. You're under arrest. We're leaving in an hour."

A nasty smile played around Randolph's lips. "Take me, Pardee," he said. "And if I'm injured in any way—"

"I know, I know," Mike cut in. "Get your things on."

"I'm not making a move," Randolph said.

"Mister, you're making this tough on yourself," Mike warned. "I was told what to expect." He went upstairs to the man's room, packed a few things and brought them down. "Put on this coat—"

"I'm not making a move," Randolph said.

Mike shrugged and carried the stuff to the toboggan. Vance sat down beside Randolph. "Listen, Pete," he said, "he may have an idea of dragging you out on that tobog-

gan, though from the softness of the snow, I don't think he can make it. It'd take an ox to get through some of the drifts. But anyway we'll be down the trail, and if it looks as if he might make it, we'll take care of him. Rucker's orders are strict—you're to be kept away from the courtroom at all costs."

Crosby and Vance looked up Suddreth. "We're checking out," Vance said. "It's beginning to snow, and we think we better get started. We don't want to be snowed in."

"It has a nice start," Suddreth agreed. "Did you get your big game located?"

"Yes," Vance said, adding to himself: "And real close in, too."

There was an odd tightness about Dorothy Suddreth's mouth as she watched the two start down the trail for the lower country. She had spent her life on the frontier, and she could sense when things were shaping themselves for a showdown. She cornered Mike.

"Listen, Mike. Vance and Crosby are up to something," she said nervously. "I wish you'd wait."

Mike grinned. "Can't do it. Randolph is due in Judge Grambs' court tomorrow." He walked over to Randolph. "You can make yourself a dead weight, like so much putty, but be mighty careful that you don't start resisting. This is no sleep walking deal."

Mike picked Randolph up and staggered toward the door, which Dorothy hastily opened. Suddreth watched narrowly for signs of rough treatment. There were none. Put-

ting Randolph on the toboggan, Mike wrapped a blanket around him and lashed him firmly.

Suddreth laughed. "The last four generations of Suddreths have been on the frontier, Randolph, but you're the first any of us ever heard of who tried to outfox the law, by just making yourself a dead weight. Most wanted men throw up their hands and cooperate when John Law catches up with them." He turned to Mike. "You'll never make it in this kind of weather. It'll take seven or eight hours to reach Edith Creek."

"I'm not going the regular trail," Mike answered. "I'm taking him down Lover's Leap!"

"You can't do that," Randolph shouted, his face going white. "We'll be killed. Listen, Pardee, I'll walk. I'll go along like a good dog—"

"And have Vance and Crosby waiting to take you from me," Mike retorted. "Besides, if I don't go through with it, you'll claim, in court, that I used threat of bodily harm to induce you to walk out. It looks as if your chickens are coming home to roost."

"This is murder!" Randolph whined. "Stop him, Suddreth. Dorothy! Don't let him start! I'm lashed! I'm helpless!" Neither made a move. "Listen, Pardee, I'll talk. Rucker *did* pull plenty of crooked deals on the Sheep Mountain crowd. Jenson didn't defame his character when he warned the stockholders that Rucker was a crook. It was a plan to freeze out the little guys. This was it. . . ." He talked furiously to Suddreth and his daugh-

ter but Mike, busy putting on the skis, ignored him.

Moving slowly, Mike dragged the toboggan to the crest of Lover's Leap, then kicked off. A low moan escaped Randolph's lips, and his face turned ashen. Mike had straddled the toboggan, a ski on either side. His hands gripped the lines attached to the front end, and in a sense, toboggan, skis and man were a single unit. Mike guided the sled by shifting the front end with the ropes.

Snow filled the air, whipping against Randolph's face, fiercely swirling about Mike's legs. Mike could hear Randolph's teeth grind as he set them. The man's breath came in sharp gasps. Mike grinned. "The smart guy," he thought, "who was going to make officers carry him out."

The trees were almost a blur. The toboggan leaped over a hummock and slammed down hard, squirting snow, like waves from a boat, from either side. The *slap, slap* of skis dinned in Randolph's ears.

He raised his head and yelled: "Look out for those trees!" The timber at the end of the long run seemed to be leaping at him. The air was cold, but sweat streamed from Randolph's face, and he yelled again. They passed between two trees, so close that he could have touched them had his arms been free.

Twisting and gliding, Mike put the toboggan through the forest. The snow thinned and they bounced over wet grass to a rough stop.

"Here we are!" Mike said. "And Vance and Crosby are crouched in

the high country waiting for me to show up. They're in for a cold day." He removed his skis, stood them against a tree, then unlashd Randolph.

The man staggered around, straightened up and began regaining his normal defiance. "Whatever I said," he growled, "was under duress. It won't stand up in court. And I'll deny saying it."

"I suppose you will," Mike agreed so cheerfully that Randolph was worried.

Randolph sat down again. "You'll have to pack me the rest of the way. I won't budge an inch."

Mike tossed his prisoner over his shoulder, struck through the wet brush and ten minutes later emerged, breathing hard, on the edge of the clearing. He handcuffed Randolph to a tree, hitched up the horses, then shifted his prisoner to the spring wagon.

As he drove into town, several stockholders let out whoops of pure joy. Jenson came running. "Am I glad to see you, Pardee," he yelled. "But why did you wait until the morning of the trial? We've been half crazy. Rucker brought Kehoe with him—one of the best lawyers in the State. He's set for the kill."

"I had to wait for a fall of soft snow to slow up the surface of Lover's Leap," Mike answered. "I tested it every day that I was up there, and it was always too fast for a toboggan."

"Well, you've delivered your man," Jenson said, "and here's your check for three thousand dollars."

"I hate to stick you for that sum," Mike told him, "but it was the amount that brought me into the case. I've a mine of my own, you know."

"It's a lot of money, all right," Jenson agreed, "but it won't come out of our pockets in the long run. If we win, and we *will* win now that Randolph is here, we'll bring suit against Rucker for all costs. And that three thousand dollars will be included. Poetic justice."

When Jenson's lawyer called Pete Randolph to the witness stand the latter looked Judge Grambs in the eyes with something approaching contempt.

"I stand on my constitutional rights," he said, "and refuse to testify on the grounds that what I say might incriminate me."

Mike Pardee could almost feel the wave of disappointment that swept through the stockholders. He stood up. "I'll testify as to what Randolph confessed," he said.

Kehoe and Randolph held a hasty conference, then the lawyer said: "I object to this man's testimony on the ground that it was obtained through duress and the fear of grave personal injury—that is, to bring Randolph out over a snowslide known as Lover's Leap."

"I was bringing him out in the line of duty," Mike answered, "because he refused to walk out. He confessed as a bribe to prevent me carrying out my sworn duty. The bribe was refused."

"You may testify, Mr. Pardee," Judge Grambs said.

Mike repeated Randolph's words and as he finished, Kehoe was on his feet. "Randolph denies this as a trumped-up story. It is one man's word against another, and the jury should be instructed to disregard it."

"I'll confirm Mr. Pardee's words," Dorothy Suddreth said from the back of the courtroom. "I was present."

Mike started at the sound of her voice. He wondered how she had got into town so quickly.

In a low, grave voice, the girl confirmed Mike's testimony. There was almost no cross-examination. Kehoe was on his feet again. "I've talked to Randolph," he said, "and we are prepared to prove that he was subjected to the highest form of cruelty. Bound to a sled or toboggan, helpless, unable to move hand or foot, he was taken at incredible speed down an icy slope, studded with boulders and trees. Every instant he expected to be dashed to pieces and horribly mangled. No torture of the inquisition . . ."

Judge Grambs waited until the lawyer had finished. Then he said: "Objection overruled, and the testimony admitted. No intimidation was involved. Rather, it suggests an attempt to bribe an officer carrying out his duty. Randolph's fears were groundless. The method employed by Pardee is commonly used by park rangers to bring out skiers, mountain climbers and others who are injured in the high country. Instead of being something to fear, it is rather thrilling. Before Pardee left to bring out Randolph, he invited me to spend a day with him in the

mountains. I was bound to a toboggan and brought down the steepest slope as a matter of education, to the end that I might make a just ruling in this case."

He looked at Randolph. Wise in the ways of the world, Judge Grambs knew a rat when he saw one. Pete Randolph was out to save himself from a contempt charge—perhaps, even, the charge of attempted bribe. He licked his dry lips and stood up.

"I'll testify, your honor," he said thickly.

Mike Pardee left the courtroom while Randolph was on the stand. A dozen important things demanded

his immediate attention. He tackled the most important one first.

"Dorothy, how did you get here?" he asked.

"I came down Lover's Leap on skis," she answered. "As you taught me."

"Listen, you taught me a few things, too," Mike said. "As soon as we settle the action Rucker brought against my mine—and that shouldn't take long the way things are going—I'll be back."

"I'll be waiting for you," Dorothy said, "in the high country. And when we leave, I want to make the Lover's Leap run on the toboggan."

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



Wayne D. Overholser

who hails from the wheat country above Walla Walla, Washington, tells us one of the reasons he decided to become a Western writer is the memory of the stirring tales his pioneer granddaddy used to tell Wayne when he was a lad. "And I'm mighty proud of my pioneer heritage," he says. "My parents moved, when I was very young, to Central Oregon which, in its day, has had its share of gunmen and powder-smoke, its vigilantes and sheep-cattle wars, and produced some mighty

colorful and famous men. I was brought up in this picturesque country which still retains the spirit of the Old West. I hope, one day, to write its history."

Wayne now lives, with his wife and young son, in what he describes as "the most exciting part of the West—Bend, Oregon, located between the Cascade Mountains, with their great forests of Ponderosa pine and the high Oregon desert covered with sage and juniper. For diversions he collects stamps and plays chess but claims his real hobby is collecting Western lore—a hobby which has paid us all dividends in his warmly human stories of our early-day frontiers. SATAN BUYS A WAR, which appears in our next issue, is just such a story, peopled with the rugged, vigorous characters of a day gone by, working out their destiny in a land of incredible danger and hardship.

Also in our thrill-packed lineup for May are Walt Coburn, Rod Patterson, Tom W. Blackburn, Lee E. Wells, Norman A. Fox—plus many other features and departments.

RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING

THE turkey is the chief contribution of the New World to the domesticated birds kept by man. Long before the coming of the white man to this continent, the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest raised turkeys, keeping them, however, for their feathers which were used as decorations in certain religious ceremonies. To the Pueblos the turkey was a sacred bird and seldom eaten. As a new article of table fare, turkeys were brought from Mexico back to Spain as early as 1519 and they soon spread through all Europe. But they are predominately an American bird as well as an American tradition. And a Western bird, at that.



Gold dust was the accepted currency in the West's bonanza gold camps during their early heyday. The "dust," usually carried by the miners in "pokes" or pouches, was generally of two kinds: Clean or bankable dust and "dirty" dust. In the "bankable" dust the gold particles were washed free of all silt and sand. The "dirty" dust was gold that still contained some associated impurities, such as sand, etc., and was discounted accordingly when payments were made with it.



Decent care of livestock was ingrained in most old-time cowboys. A strong bond of companionship often existed between a range rider and the horse that was his working partner. Even so most large cattle outfits had strict rules regarding the treatment of stock. One such outfit's rule went something like this: "The abuse of horses, mules or cattle by any employee will not be tolerated. Anyone who strikes his horse or mule over the head, or spurs it in the shoulder, or in any other manner neglects to care for it while in his charge will be instantly dismissed from the company's service."



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.

BASIN OF DOOM

by WILLIAM HEUMAN



Bat Hemsley didn't pick his side in that bitter cattle-sheep war—Tate Morrison's arrogant gun hellions picked it for him—with gunsmoke

I

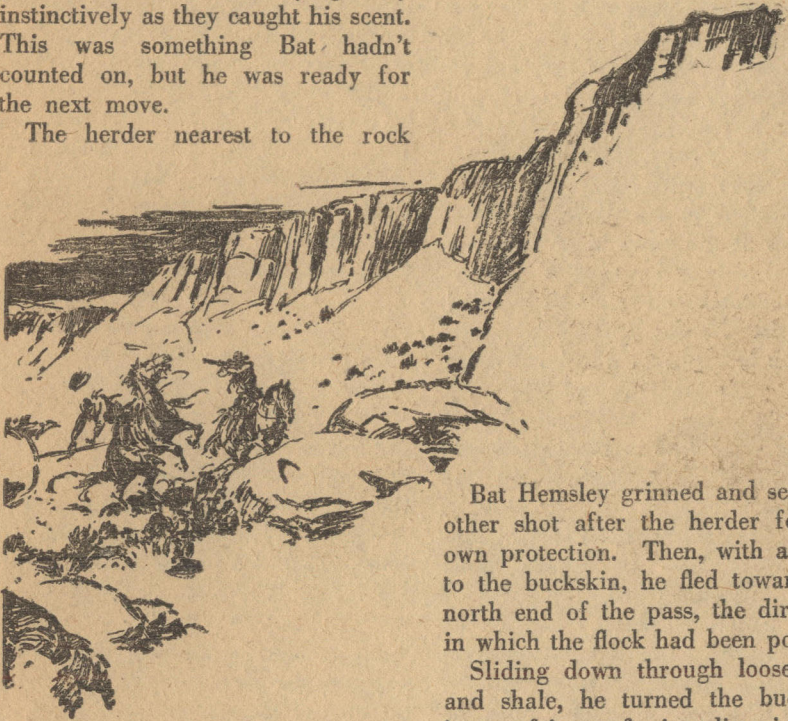
He caught the scent of sheep up on this ridge, and with the scent of sheep was always the scent of trouble. They came out through the timber with a sliver of silver moon shining down on them—a straggly line of woollies with a half dozen riders herding them along.

Bat Hemsley sat on the buckskin horse, keeping in the shadows of the rock ledge. With his left hand he snubbed out the cigarette, rubbing it against the wall; his right hand rested on the hickory butt of a heavy Navy Colt. He knew these sheep herders hadn't seen him, and they wouldn't know him if they had because this was strange country to

him. But men who drove sheep at night did so for a reason, and their trigger fingers might be itchy.

The flock passed within twenty yards of where he sat, shying away instinctively as they caught his scent. This was something Bat hadn't counted on, but he was ready for the next move.

The herder nearest to the rock



ledge swore aloud, and then his gun cracked, orange flame spitting into the black of the night. Bat could see him dimly, a high shape against the dull white of the sheep flock.

The slug ricocheted off the ledge, and Bat heard it whine as it fled away. His own Navy roared, making the echoes bounce back and forth across this pass. He fired high, not wishing to kill the man. The shot had its effect as the herder put spurs to his horse and raced back toward the tail.

Bat Hemsley grinned and sent another shot after the herder for his own protection. Then, with a word to the buckskin, he fled toward the north end of the pass, the direction in which the flock had been pointed.

Sliding down through loose rock and shale, he turned the buckskin into a fringe of pine, listening for sounds of pursuit, and hearing none. He grinned as he thought of the scare he'd put into the sheepherders. These men, he knew, were bringing sheep into a cow country, and they'd been afraid, anticipating trouble. Now they'd be convinced that a passing or waiting rider had spotted them and they'd be jittery all night.

The woods petered out at the base of the divide, and Bat sent the buckskin across open plains until he hit more timber with a stream flowing through it. He made his night camp

by this stream, picketing his horse a little way down among the trees.

According to the saloonkeeper at Red Rock, the big Arrow Ranch was hiring help for the fall roundup, and the Arrow was supposed to be two hours' ride over the pass.

"Arrow is the biggest brand in these parts," the saloonkeeper had said. "You work for Tate Morrison, friend, an' you're sittin' high."

Bat didn't particularly care where he sat at the present time. He'd had his shot at the silver mine fields in Nevada and he'd served a year as town marshal in the tough town of Leesville. He was drifting back now to these new ranges which had been opened up in Montana and Wyoming.

The saloonman had noticed that big Navy hanging at Bat's right side and he'd grinned, half-closing one blue eye.

"Tate's kind o' anxious to hire boys that know how to handle them things," he murmured.

Bat hadn't asked why because he knew he'd find out if he stopped at the Arrow Ranch or in Metropole, the next town. Vaguely, now, he had an idea what the bartender meant. That flock of sheep coming over the pass in the dead of night meant one thing—trouble. Every cowman in the county would be up in arms when it was learned that sheep were in.

Changing his mind about stopping at the Arrow Ranch immediately, Bat lingered in the hills till high noon the next day, and then rode leisurely toward Metropole. Before a man dropped his anchor he should

know all the coves and harbors along the coast.

It was nearly two o'clock with a hot sun boiling overhead when he rode into Metropole, a tall, loose-limbed man, swaying easily in the saddle, faded black sombrero pulled down over a pair of smoky-gray eyes. There was a break in the bridge of his nose, and a tiny whitish scar on his left cheekbone, indicating the close passage of a bullet.

Metropole's main street was nearly deserted when he came in, studying the lay of the streets, noting the position of the main buildings. On more than one occasion such knowledge had saved his life.

This road on which he entered the town became the main street, passing the big Chesterfield Hotel on the left, and the red brick building of the Metropole National Bank on the right, and ending abruptly at an intersection—a cross street going right and left, forming as it were, a "T."

He'd passed six saloons before he reached the head of the "T," and at three of the six, men had come to the batwing doors to stare out at him as he rode by.

Bat Hemsley's eyes flickered. This, and that shepherd firing at him the previous night, was the gauge by which he judged the temper of the town. Metropole was anticipating trouble, and every passing rider was regarded with suspicion.

Bat dismounted outside a small restaurant a few doors down from the Chesterfield Hotel. He was tying the buckskin at the rack when a girl came out of the hotel door and

stood on the porch staring at him grimly.

The tall rider didn't look directly at her, but he could read the anger in her dark eyes as he slapped the buckskin on the flank and went up the two wooden steps to the restaurant. She was slenderly built, with dark hair and a small, almost blunt nose.

With his hand on the restaurant door knob, Bat Hemsley glanced at her deliberately, feeling the coldness in the eyes. She was still watching him, hands on hips. There was a faint smile around the corners of the tall man's mouth as he went inside.

He chose a seat near the window so he could look out and see what effect his entry had made on this town. The window was dirty and they couldn't see him from the outside.

The girl with the dark hair had swung up on a black gelding and was riding furiously around the corner of the "T" intersection. A bald-headed old man hurried out of the Plymouth Saloon, crossed the road and disappeared in the side door of the Metropole Bank building. There were windows above the bank, and this second floor probably served as offices.

Indistinctly, Bat saw two men standing by the middle window, looking across at the restaurant in which he sat. A gaunt, middle-aged woman came out from the rear of the restaurant and took his order. She said little, but her lips were tight and definitely unfriendly.

Bat ate the bacon and eggs served

to him and sipped his hot coffee with relish. The bald-headed little man came out of the bank building and scurried back to the saloon again, having finished his errand.

A gaunt man with a thin face and sloping shoulders came around the corner on a dapple-gray horse, dismounting outside the restaurant. This man wore a five-pointed silver star on his calfskin vest. His arms were unnaturally long and they hung loosely as he came toward the door.

Bat Hemsley watched him with interest, realizing that this man had just received the news of the entrance of a stranger and was paying his respects.

The sheriff of Metropole opened the door, glanced around the room and then came toward Bat's table. The woman restaurant keeper watched him from the door of the kitchen, saying nothing. The restaurant was empty except for these three.

Bat rolled a cigarette, leaned back in the chair, and regarded the law officer quizzically. It wasn't the usual custom, he knew, for a sheriff to greet all strangers.

"Name's Cranston," the sheriff stated blandly. He stood at the other side of the table, both hands caressing the wooden top of a chair. This man, Bat knew, had seen trouble before, and he was expecting it again, wearily, regretfully, and knowing it couldn't be avoided.

Bat Hemsley nodded, but didn't offer to give his name. He lit the cigarette and blew out smoke. A half dozen riders passed outside, dis-

mounting at one of the saloons up the street. The horses kicked up a cloud of dust and it hung over the street, but Bat could still see the two men up above the Metropole National Bank.

"Ridin' through?" Cranston asked.

Bat shrugged. "*Quien sabe?*"

"This town ain't healthy," Sheriff Cranston stated. "Not for strangers."

"Why?" asked Bat. He watched the way Cranston's long fingers coiled around the top of the chair.

"It's hot," Cranston told him. "If you ain't got business here, I'd advise you to ride."

Bat smiled and regarded the cigarette. "I've been in hot towns before," he said.

Cranston gave him a long look before straightening up. "I wouldn't doubt that, friend," he murmured. "Just thought I'd tell you."

"Thanks," Bat acknowledged. He watched this tired sheriff pass out the door. Cranston knew what must come to pass when sheepmen and cattlemen mixed. Bat Hemsley puffed on his cigarette, watching the sheriff climb into the saddle and move away. Both sides, Bat realized, had started to bring in new hands—men quick on the draw—to substantiate their claims. This town of Metropole didn't know as yet which side the stranger was on.

II

Bat Hemsley paid his bill a few moments later and went out. He stood on the walk, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully, giving the whole town a good look at him.

Several of the riders who had come in earlier were outside the saloon, smoking, watching him carefully. Sheriff Cranston rode by again, but this time didn't look at Bat.

Bat strolled up the street toward the saloon, knowing that trouble lay in that direction, and not caring much.

One of the punchers outside the saloon stepped over to the edge of the boardwalk. He was a chunky man with a barrellike body and bow legs. His hair was a tawny red under a battered flat-crowned sombrero. Pale, greenish eyes stared at Bat Hemsley through slits.

Bat returned the gaze levelly, and then looked straight up the street. The red-headed puncher's next move was one Bat had encountered before, and he smiled inwardly, thinking how strange it was that these things never varied. This town wasn't sure about him as yet and they had to find out.

The redhead spat directly in Bat Hemsley's path, the spittle missing the toe of the tall man's boot by an inch as Bat pulled up. The three other riders lounging outside the saloon watched, saying nothing, faces expressionless.

Bat Hemsley saw Sheriff Cranston sitting astride his horse a block up the street, shoulders hunched, staring at them, but not coming down.

"Your move," the redhead said.

Bat glanced down at his boot with interest, and he made his move very swiftly, without even looking at his man. Steel springs coiled inside his body and then recoiled as Hemsley hit the blocky man with his right

shoulder, catching him in the chest as he plunged forward.

The redhead gasped as he staggered back into the gutter, Bat after him, raining savage blows into his face, sending him reeling directly across the road, between two horses at a rack, and against that rack.

The puncher tried to fight back, hold his ground, but Bat kept on top of him every instant, never stopping. Hard fists gouged the redhead's face, cutting it, beating him into the dust as he sagged against the hitching rack.

Sheriff Cranston came down the street, riding slowly, rubbing his jaw in a characteristic gesture. The three punchers on the walk hadn't moved from their positions. One of them was rolling a smoke nervously as the red-headed man went down, groveling in the dust, face bleeding from several wounds.

Bat Hemsley walked back across the road, stared at these three men quietly, and went inside. His knuckles were raw from the contact with the puncher's hard face. Few people had seen the fight which had ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Standing at the bar, Bat heard horses moving out a few moments later, and he knew the punchers were leaving. The story would travel very quickly from now on. He would have a reputation in this country and other men would try to tear it down. Some would come with guns because it had ever been so.

Cranston came through the door, heading for the bar. He edged be-

side Bat and spoke quietly as he poured himself a drink.

"That was Red Grogan," the sheriff of Metropole said. "Ramrod for the Arrow outfit. If you're a sheepman, mister, you better get the hell out of town."

"You speakin' as sheriff?" Bat asked easily.

Cranston shook his head. "I like to see a kid with guts," he stated flatly, "an' I don't like to see him shot in the back."

"That the way they play in this town?" Bat wanted to know.

Sheriff Cranston's reply was all comprehensive. "This is a sheep war, mister," he observed.

Bat had his drink and then registered at the Chesterfield Hotel, the clerk giving him a quick look as he wrote his name on the book.

The clerk was nervous, a youngish man with spectacles, and a receding chin. "Staying long?" he asked, and then acted as if he regretted the question.

Bat placed the pen back on the rack and tipped his hat up. "This town's damned interested in how long I stay," he murmured.

Hurriedly the clerk shoved a key at him. "Room 7," he gulped.

Bat had a question for him. "Who was the dark-haired girl came out of here when I rode in?" he asked. He knew the clerk had seen him because the desk faced an open window.

"Miss Shirley Blaine," the bespectacled young man stated. "Ed Blaine's sister."

"Blaine a cattleman?" Bat wanted to know.

The clerk moistened his lips. He

smiled a little. "Hard to tell these days," he stated.

Bat Hemsley went up the stairs and found his room. It was quite evident from the clerk's remark that the poorer ranchers were bringing in sheep, or had threatened to bring in sheep, and the old cattlemen were fighting it. Which side was the stronger was another matter, but from the hints that had been dropped by Sheriff Cranston, it would seem the cattlemen had the upper hand.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon and Bat slept till seven. He washed his face from a white porcelain basin and walked over to the window. Night was falling in Metropole, and the air was cooling, reviving. Bat Hemsley watched the lights going on, and he saw the riders coming in, moving in down the road he'd ridden earlier in the day, swinging into the main street from those two angles of the "T."

Two men paused outside the bank building across the way and glanced up toward his room. This town knew he'd registered at the hotel, and they were awaiting his next move. Bat grinned, not quite knowing what that would be himself.

At eight o'clock he went downstairs and sauntered into the hotel dining room, taking a seat near the fireplace. This room was half-filled now, and men looked up at him curiously, giving Bat Hemsley the impression that he'd been expected a long while.

After awhile he went into the Kingdom Come Saloon, getting here the same vague impression. At the long bar men turned to look at him

as he wagged for a drink. One small man with a wrinkled brown face slid up alongside of him, studied him in the mirror, and then remarked:

"Tate will see you, friend, in the office."

Bat downed his drink before replying. "Where?" he asked.

"Over the Wells-Fargo building," the puncher murmured.

Bat didn't say any more, and the small man ambled away without haste. The Wells-Fargo building was at the head of the "T" intersection, a small brick building. Bat had noticed it as he was going into the restaurant.

He stood in front of the darkened building a few minutes later. The windows were heavily barred, but Wells-Fargo had closed for the night. One light twinkled in the windows up above.

Standing here Bat saw the rider coming out of the darkness, moving at a furious pace. The man yelled drunkenly, but Bat was on his guard, having seen this stunt before also.

The horseman cut around the corner just as Bat stepped into the shadow of the doorway. He flattened himself against the wall, hearing a revolver crack. The slug passed through the open doorway and thudded into the wooden staircase beyond.

Bat Hemsley slid the Navy out of the holster, but it was already too late for a shot. The rider had kept going and was turning into an alley. Bat saw men come out of saloons up the street and stare in his direction.

Bat listened to the rider until the sound was gone. Then he went up the stairs. A light glowed at the head, and then a man came out of a door and nodded to him. It was the small man who'd spoken to him in the Kingdom Come Saloon.

"What's the shootin'?" he asked.

"A drunk," Bat said quietly, knowing that the man who'd fired that shot had been no more drunk than himself.

The small man held the door open for him and Bat saw the tobacco smoke thick in the room, indicating that more than one man was inside. He hesitated for a fraction of a second while the small puncher murmured:

"Reckon you ain't so tough, mister."

Bat Hemsley grinned and went in. Five men were in the room, and one of them was Red Grogan, several pieces of adhesive tape stuck on his battered face. With him were the three men who'd watched the fight outside the saloon. Another man was there—a tall man with powerful shoulders and a shock of golden hair. He had a heavy jaw with the strong mouth of a bulldog. His eyes were amber-colored, narrowing now as he studied the man before him.

"That's not Dilson," he said flatly. He had a cigar in his hand and he stuck it in his jaws now, placing his hands in his pockets. He rocked on the soles of his shoes, beginning to grin a little.

"Who the devil is he, Morrison?" Red Grogan snorted.

"A range bum," Tate Morrison

observed coolly, "or one of Blaine's new riders. I didn't get your name, friend," he said to Bat.

"Reckon I didn't give it," Bat Hemsley told him. He stood with his back to the door, making sure that he'd closed it behind him. His hands were at his sides and he watched this Arrow crew intently, seeing the strength in this Tate Morrison. The mouth was a brutal one, wide, thin-lipped, and the jaw was the jaw of a man who had his own way in many things.

"That won't get you anywhere," Morrison smiled. "Blaine send you?"

Bat shrugged. He had these six men in front of him and he intended to keep them there. The small chap who had brought him in was walking toward the wall, getting over at Bat's right.

"You can get back where you were, friend," Bat observed. The small puncher stopped and looked at Bat curiously. There was another room up here with a curtain across the entrance, and Bat Hemsley didn't like that.

"I asked you a question," Morrison snapped.

"You can go to hell," Bat told him. "That's how far it'll get you."

Morrison ripped the cigar from his mouth and took a step forward, the light in his eyes. Bat Hemsley's right hand dropped to the butt of the Navy and rested there.

"You want some of what your ramrod got?" he asked casually. "You can step into the street, mister. This place is kind of stuffy."

Tate Morrison started to laugh, big shoulders heaving. A voice called from the other room:

"Better drop it, kid."

Bat saw the blue muzzle of a .45 sticking out from behind the curtain, trained on his stomach. A lean, grizzled man with sunbleached yellow hair poked his face into the room. He was smiling.

"Take his gun," Tate Morrison said.

Bat Hemsley's fingers lingered on the Navy, weighing his chances. They were very slim at this time. That tall man with the bleached hair had him covered very completely, and Morrison was probably strong enough in this town to back up any play his punchers might make.

Bat's fingers slid away from the gun and he watched Red Grogan moving up to him, a wicked grin on his face. One of the redhead's eyes was closed and he peered out of the other as he slid the gunbelt from Bat's hips and tossed it across the room.

Then, rearing back, the Arrow ramrod threw a terrific punch for Bat Hemsley's face. It was entirely unexpected, but Bat managed to get his head back a little. The blow was a glancing one, knocking him back against the door.

The small puncher came up from the other side, pushed Bat away from the door and stood in front of it. Tate Morrison was grinning, saying nothing.

"All right," Bat grated, knowing what was coming. He lunged toward Grogan, lashing out with his fists. Grogan had drawn a gun and was

trying to slash it across Bat's face.

"Get him," Morrison said coolly. The other punchers closed in.

Bat knocked Grogan to his knees with a blow to the cheek. He was turning when a gun slapped against the back of his head. A haze started to lift in front of him. He whirled around, trying to punch at these men, seeing their faces indistinctly.

They were striking at him, knocking him to the floor. He grabbed the knees of one man and tried to pull himself up, but they threw him off. Again he heard Tate Morrison's voice: "Get him."

Red Grogan was up on his feet, plunging in, fists beating into Bat Hemsley's face. The tall man could feel the pain and the bite, the taste of blood in his mouth. They beat him to his knees again, and he felt a sharp boot in his ribs.

The voices were becoming blurred and the haze was thicker. The darkness rolled around him until all he could remember was Red Grogan's leering, brutal face in front of him and how much he wanted to hit it.

III

Someone had Bat by the shoulders now and he tried to get up and swing. A man was talking, coolly, soothingly:

"You should have listened to me, friend," Sheriff Cranston said.

Bat Hemsley found himself sitting against the wall of the Wells-Fargo building. It was still dark, and Cranston was squatting beside him. He felt the pain from his battered face, and the bruises on the body

where he'd been kicked.

Cranston helped him to his feet and Bat felt for his gunbelt, remembering then that it was gone.

"I'm not askin' who did it," Cranston observed dryly, "but I got my own opinions." He started to walk Bat along the street. "You can wash up in my place, son," he said.

Bat walked stiffly, saying nothing now, anger making him hot and then cold. He let Cranston lead him into the office and he sat down while the sheriff got out a basin of water and a towel.

"You're alive," the sheriff of Metropole observed, "an' that's somethin'."

"Is it?" Bat asked quietly. "How long was I out there?"

Cranston shrugged. "I saw you go out of the Kingdom Come at nine

o'clock," he said. "It was ten when I found you sitting against the wall of the Wells-Fargo building."

"Any Arrow riders in town?" Bat asked next.

Cranston shook his head. "Tate Morrison rode out ten minutes ago." He wet the towel and washed the blood from Bat's face. "This wasn't your fight to begin with, kid," he added. "You're in the middle of a big war an' you'll get burned."

"That might be," Bat agreed tonelessly.

"Nobody knows whose side you're on," Cranston grinned, "an' they're both gunnin' for you."

"I picked my side," murmured Bat, "a few minutes ago."

Sheriff Cranston stepped back and stared at him. "You're no sheep-man," he said.

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"Where do I find Ed Blaine?" Bat Hemsley wanted to know.

Cranston didn't say anything for a few moments. "I reckon if I were to pick sides," he said at last, "I'd side with Ed myself. Wearin' a badge I have to ride the fence, an' it's hell."

He went on cleaning the cuts on Bat's face. "Now that you're stayin', kid," he said, "you should know what you're up against. Young Blaine is bringin' sheep into the Basin an' he's got every right in the world to do it. Ed represents the small cattle owners who have been buckin' the big Arrow outfit for a dozen years or more. This thing started years ago when Ed's father an' big Jupe Morrison, Tate's uncle, were gunnin' for each other. Jupe got Bill Blaine, an' now the descendants are carryin' on the fight."

Bat Hemsley nodded. Most cattle was begun in much the same manner.

"Tate's after Blaine's range," Cranston went on, "an' he's been squeezin' him hard for years. Ed lost a lot o' stock. Maybe they strayed, an' maybe Tate knows somethin' about it. Anyway, Ed Blaine knows there's money in sheep these days an' he sees a way to git back on his feet. At the north end o' the Basin are a dozen small ranchers who think the same way he does."

"So the sheep came in last night?" Bat asked.

Cranston's eyes widened. "You saw that?" He went on quickly. "The small ranchers are up at the north end o' the Basin an' Arrow is at the south. A hundred and fifty feet o' the Metropole River runs be-

tween 'em. In this kind o' country cattle and sheep can go together. I'm not sayin' it's so all over."

"Morrison has to drive Blaine's woollies out of the country," Bat smiled. "Pronto."

Cranston nodded. "Ed Blaine is the first to run against Morrison's orders for the Basin. If he holds out the others will be runnin' sheep within a few weeks." He paused. "Tate might even make his play to-night. He's built like that; he has old Jupe's blood in him."

Bat Hemsley purchased another six-gun in the hardware shop at the far end of town. He was riding out of Metropole in another ten minutes, heading north toward Ed Blaine's Flying Cross Ranch. His face still hurt from the pounding the Arrow men had given to him, but the greater pain was inside and that had to be assuaged.

Cranston had given explicit instructions and Bat hugged the west rim of the Basin, splashing across the Metropole River at the fording place. There was a moon tonight—another thin sliver, sliding in and out of the cloud banks.

Another hour, hugging this low rim of hills which bordered the basin, and he raised the lights of Sam Vane's Hat outfit. About a mile beyond Vane's place was the Flying Cross.

"Sam," Cranston had said, "might work in with Ed Blaine in the show-down, but I couldn't say for sure. They all know what'll happen if Ed is wiped out by Morrison."

Bat Hemsley sighted the lights of

the Flying Cross spread shining on a slope dead ahead. He pulled up now, proceeding at a more leisurely pace. Young Blaine might be expecting unwelcome visitors tonight, and the sight of a man who was supposed to be working for the cattle interests, might set off a nervous gun.

A line of willows grew along the roadway here, terminating at the Flying Cross corral. Bat walked the horse easily, listening for sounds in the night. This ranch was very quiet, and then another thought struck him. Blaine and his crew were most likely out with the sheep for that was where Tate Morrison would strike.

Within twenty-five yards of the silent house, Bat pulled up and scratched his head. There were lights in the house, but otherwise it seemed deserted. Vaguely, he wondered where Blaine was grazing his wool-lies. The young rancher had probably picked out one of the protected valleys which ran into the basin proper.

Bat was about to lift his voice in a call to the house when a rifle cracked from the darkness of the porch. The slug kicked up dust at his horse's feet, and the animal bucked until Bat got it under control.

"I'm alone," he sang out quickly.

"What do you want?" a woman's voice demanded.

Bat grinned, remembering the girl on the porch outside the Chesterfield Hotel.

"Ed Blaine here?" he asked. He was riding forward when the rifle cracked again.

"Keep your hands up," the girl said tersely.

Bat Hemsley lifted his hands over his head. He stopped a few yards from the porch. A slim shadow darted down the steps, rifle in hand. The girl came around in back of Bat and slid the six-gun from the holster.

"Kind of nervous," Bat suggested mildly. "This is a friendly visit, ma'am." The horse stepped into the light from one of the windows and she could see him clearly.

"You're one of Morrison's gunhands," Shirley Blaine said accusingly. "I should shoot you down."

"Morrison's crew nearly did that for you," Bat told her. She could see his battered face and she was silent. "I rode in here looking for a job," Bat went on. "Everybody thinks I'm either a cattle or a sheepman."

"What *are* you?" she asked curiously.

"Sheep now," Bat said quietly. "I'm looking for Ed Blaine."

"You could be a spy sent out by Morrison," Shirley Blaine observed coolly.

Very distinctly, Bat Hemsley heard the thud of horses' hoofs coming down that willow-lined road. He slid out of the saddle, slapped the buckskin on the flank and watched it trot away toward the corral. Without a word he reached forward and took the six-gun from the girl's hands.

"Get up on the porch," he murmured.

She obeyed without a word, but she held her ground when Bat suggested that she go inside the house.

"This is my home," Shirley Blaine stated. "I was born here."

Bat heard the two horsemen stop out near the corral. Like himself, they were evidently puzzled by the fact that there had been no challenge. He could hear them whispering out there in the darkness, and then a voice called sharply:

"Hello, the house."

Bat Hemsley stiffened, and Shirley Blaine murmured:

"Grogan—Arrow foreman."

"Inside," Bat whispered tersely.

"There'll be gunplay."

This time she didn't hesitate, catching the chillness in his voice. He heard the door slide shut, and he was sure the two men had heard it also. They'd been walking toward the house, but they stopped now—twenty yards away. Bat caught the glint of metal, moonlight reflecting on the barrel of a six-gun.

He stood up in the shadows, his own gun in hand. The buckskin had pulled up by the corral and one of the two men went over to look at him.

"Here's the hoss that bucko was ridin'," a man whispered. Bat recognized the voice as belonging to the small man with the wrinkled face.

"What in thunder's he doin' here?" Grogan growled.

"After your hide, Red," Bat Hemsley called softly. At the same time he skipped across the porch.

Red Grogan's gun exploded just as Bat reached the porch steps. The leaden slug slammed into the boards, and Grogan yelled as he saw Bat coming down the steps. He tried to shoot again, swiveling his gun quickly to line it on Bat.

Bat Hemsley threw two shots, both of them going home. He was still running forward, feeling the hot breath of a bullet as the small man opened on him, and then ran around the corral.

Grogan was down, muttering to himself, a gurgling sound in his throat which could not be simulated. Bat moved around him, hearing the door open to the rear. A horseman hammered away up the road.

"Mister?" Shirley Blaine called. "Mister . . . you all right?"

"Damn him," murmured Red Grogan. "He is."

When Bat knelt down beside Red, the man was dead. Shirley ran up breathlessly. Bat Hemsley struck a match and held it up to Grogan's face. When the match went out he stood up.

"I reckon you'd better tell me where your brother is," he said slowly. "Morrison will be on the way with his crew now. He sent these two chaps to see whether anyone was here."

"I'll take you," the girl said. She was looking at him queerly, as if she were wondering what manner of man he was.

"It ain't a nice thing," Bat said moodily, "when five or six go on one."

"No," Shirley whispered. She came out of the barn a few minutes later with a saddled horse. "Ed's up at the mouth of Long Valley," she explained. "He's holed up in the ruins of old Fort Hartley with three men. There is no other way into the valley except past the fort."

Bat Hemsley slid into the saddle

and followed the girl as she led him away from the house.

"It'll be a fight to the finish now," the girl observed, "with Grogan dead."

"Didn't your brother expect that?"

Bat asked quietly.

"Yes," she said.

They reached the old fort in twenty minutes and a man rose out of a heap of broken rock to challenge them.

"All right, George," Shirley said.

"Jehoshaphat!" George growled.

"What you doin' here, Miss Blaine?"

"Where's Ed?" the girl wanted to know.

George sang out: "Ed."

Bat Hemsley sat on the buckskin, noting the position of this fort. A stream of water, probably a brook running into the Metropole River, flowed past the abandoned fort. The walls were down for the most part, but there were a few brick chimney places and heaps of rubble scattered about. Beyond, in the valley, Bat heard the bleating of sheep. He caught the smell and he grimaced. This was his fight, he remembered, not because he liked sheep but because Tate Morrison disliked them.

IV

Ed Blaine came up, a slim, youngish man with a lean face. He walked back with them to a fire they had burning in a gutted cellar, and Bat could see the lines around the man's mouth.

"You shouldn't have come here, Shirley," Blaine said sternly.

"I brought another hand," explained Shirley.

Bat studied the three men with young Blaine. George, the sentinel, seemed to be the oldest, a grizzled long-jawed man with faded blue eyes. A kid of about eighteen, but with a hard face and carrotty hair, stood back in the shadows staring at Bat suspiciously. The third man Bat had heard called Nevada. He was short, sawed-off, with very broad shoulders, and a perpetual smile on his face.

Bat Hemsley watched these three—Ed Blaine's crew, seeing only Nevada as potentially dangerous. The kid wanted to be hard, but he might break and run; George had shot his bolt years ago and he wouldn't be a match for the tough crowd Tate Morrison would bring out with him this night, or the next. Ed Blaine himself was no gun fighter, but he was stubborn; he'd sworn that he would bring sheep into the country and he'd done it. Now he had to back up his bluff with cold lead.

"You were one of Morrison's men," Blaine said quietly. "What happened?"

"He just killed Red Grogan," Shirley cut in. "In our front yard, Ed. Grogan fired first."

Bat saw the tough kid's eyes widen; Nevada's smile broadened. George rolled a cigarette and studied the tall man with interest.

"I rode into the Basin, looking for a job," Bat Hemsley said without emotion. "Morrison figured I was one of his men—a gunhand he'd hired, sight unseen. When he found

out I wasn't, he had his boys take me on."

Ed Blaine looked into Bat's battered face and nodded sympathetically.

"I'm fighting Morrison from now on," Bat said. "I fight with you or I fight alone." He shrugged. "Alone it will take longer."

"We can use you," Blaine assured him.

"Get a man back up on those rocks," Bat told him.

Young Blaine blinked and then nodded to George.

Nevada was still smiling. "Seems like I run across you in the silver fields," he said at last. "Around Leesville?"

"I was in Leesville," Bat said briefly.

"Town marshal." Nevada chuckled. "Ed, you better let this hombre run the fight from now on. He lives on it."

Ed Blaine stared into the fire. "We intend to hold the valley as long as we can," he stated. "Morrison can bring out two or three times as many men as I have, but we'll try to hold it anyway."

"The girl should be home," Bat said, without looking at Shirley. "I'm thinkin' Morrison will come out tonight when he learns Grogan is dead. He's not the kind can let that stand till the sun comes up. Guess you know that."

Shirley looked at Bat, and then at her brother. She was holding a riding quirt in her hands, swinging it.

"Nobody at the house," Nevada stated, "but a dead man, an' he ain't much company for a pretty gal."

"Ride to Sam Vane's place," Ed Blaine told his sister. "You'll be safe there."

Bat Hemsley watched the girl walk her horse away into the darkness. She wasn't excited, and she wasn't afraid. She'd seen Red Grogan die and there had been no hysterics.

"Sam should be in this," the red-haired kid grated. "Damn his soul."

"We'll fight them alone," Ed Blaine said. "I started this."

"But the rest of these small ranchers will reap the rewards," Nevada smiled.

"Horses!" George sang out from his post. "Plenty of 'em."

Bat stepped forward and kicked out the fire. "Where are your horses?" he asked suddenly.

Blaine was about to run up and join George. He stopped now. "We're not leaving this place," he said flatly.

"These other boys have a right to live," Bat said, "so they can fight another day."

"We got the animals upon the slope behind the fort," Nevada told him. "We kin get out that way if Morrison breaks through and surrounds us."

"Up front," Bat called sharply. "Scatter out an' let 'em fire first."

"Comin' fast," George called urgently.

Bat Hemsley squatted among the rocks a few yards from the older man. He could hear the beat of many horses now, and he saw the dark shapes bobbing in the saddles.

"Must be a dozen of 'em," George said laconically.

"All right," shouted Blaine. "Pull up, Morrison."

The horsemen stopped abruptly. Bat could hear them talking. Tate Morrison's voice came softly.

"Ride 'em down."

The Arrow men scattered and came straight forward, one flank moving toward the valley entrance, and the others heading for the fort.

The kid, to Bat's left, let out an oath, and then began to fire wildly. Bat opened up on the riders in front of him. The light was bad and they were moving fast, presenting poor targets. A rider came within fifteen yards of his gun, and Bat shot him from the saddle.

He heard the kid still swearing, and then Nevada's gun started to boom from the rear.

"They're gettin' in behind us," the blocky man yelled.

Bat raced back, stumbling over the rough ground. He emptied the six-gun at the charging men, saw them break and swerve to the right.

"It's hot," Nevada chuckled. A slug had grazed his cheek, cutting the skin. Blood slid down from his chin.

"Comin' again," George called softly. Morrison's men had gone back, but they were charging once more. "Where's the kid?" George wanted to know. "Where's Albie?"

Ed Blaine was swearing now. "He took a piece of lead, George."

Bat Hemsley made his way over to where Blaine was crouching beside Albie.

"Bad?" he asked.

"He's still breathing," muttered Blaine. "I don't like this."

"You wanted a war," Bat said. "You got it, friend." He reached down and grabbed Albie around the shoulders. "We're pulling out," he added. "Get the boys up on the slope."

George and Nevada were firing steadily from their hiding places.

"They're crawlin' up," Nevada told Bat. "Can't see a damn one of 'em out there."

"We're taking the kid up to the horses," Bat whispered, "We'll wait for you."

"Where we goin'?" asked Nevada curiously.

"We'll see," Bat said.

They crawled up the slope, having a hard time with the wounded Albie. The kid started to groan once, and Bat felt the blood on his chest.

"I figured we got at least two of 'em," George observed. "That makes maybe ten to worry about."

The horses were concealed in a little hollow up beyond the brim of the hill. Bat got Albie into the saddle and waited until Nevada came up, panting. Ed Blaine wasn't saying anything. He just sat in the saddle and waited for Bat to do the talking.

"You won't have any sheep after tonight," Bat stated. "You knew that, Blaine."

"I had a thousand head in that flock," the rancher said. "It was a test to see if Morrison could drive me out. If he couldn't I figured on bringin' in another thousand, an' that'll break me."

"You figure on runnin'?" Bat Hemsley asked next.

"I've been run out now," Blaine muttered miserably. The crew waited restlessly. They heard a score of shots far up the valley and Ed Blaine winced as he heard the Arrow men shooting down his sheep.

"This Morrison licks a man by knockin' him down," Bat Hemsley observed. "He stays on top because the other man don't get up."

"What would you do?" asked Blaine almost listlessly.

"I'm headin' for the Arrow Ranch," Bat told him quietly. "Any of you boys feel like comin' along?"

Nevada let out a soft whoop, and George swore. Bat Hemsley swung the buckskin around and headed south. He didn't look back but he knew they were all coming—even Albie, rocking in the saddle, but conscious now. George had tied up the bullet hole in the kid's shoulder and he'd be able to hold out till they reached a doctor.

"Where we goin'?" Albie whispered once.

"Arrow Ranch," George chuckled. "We're gonna welcome Tate Morrison when he comes home."

"Damn!" Albie grinned.

Then they were out in the Basin again with Bat relinquishing the lead to Nevada.

"This is the last place they'll be lookin' for us," the stocky man said as they rode past the big Arrow corals. There were no lights in the bunkhouse, but a Chinaman came out of the kitchen door, blinking, a white apron round his waist.

"Pack your stuff," Bat said. "Move into Metropole." The Chinaman was still staring at him when

Bat kicked in the bunkhouse door and fumbled around till he found the table and the lamp. The Flying Cross men watched him as he kicked a few mattresses and blankets together on the floor and then dropped the lamp on the heap. In a few moments the flames were leaping toward the ceiling.

"We're burnin' 'em out," Nevada grinned.

Ed Blaine stood in the firelight outside the door, a worried look in his eyes. Bat Hemsley paused beside him.

"This building worth as much as your sheep?" he asked grimly.

"No," Blaine answered.

"They asked for a war." Bat's voice was brusque. "Now they got it. I'm fighting 'em here, and I'm fighting 'em in the hills. I'll fight Arrow wherever I find the brand."

"You got a man with you," Nevada told him.

"And another," George chimed in.

"I stick with my outfit," Albie said weakly.

Only Ed Blaine said nothing as the flames broke through the roof and they had to retreat because of the heat.

"Hold tight, Albie," Bat told the kid. "We're hangin' around till Morrison comes back. Then we're headin' for Red Rock an' a doctor."

"I'm all right," Albie growled.

"Sounds like 'em," George said. They heard a distant shout.

"Scatter," ordered Bat. "Let 'em come into the light." The Flying Cross crew took cover behind the corral and the barn. Bat squatted down behind one of the pillars on

the porch. The Arrow yard was lit up with the light of day. Sparks flew across the intervening space between the bunk house and the barn, catching the hay in the open loft. That, too, started to burn.

"Give 'em blue blazes!" Albie yelled shrilly, and Bat Hemsley grinned. This kid was finding himself in the heat of battle. He had been trying to be tough all along, but he wasn't sure of himself. Now with a piece of lead in his shoulder he was ready to face the big boss of Metropole.

Several riders spurred up almost into the light, and then swerved away. Bat heard the hoofbeats around the back of the house, and then Tate Morrison's yell.

Bursting through the door, Bat tumbled through the darkened rooms and into the kitchen. The Chinese cook, a fat man with a queue, was coming out of an adjoining room. Bat waved the gun at him, chased him back inside, and then opened the screen door leading to a smaller back porch.

It was darker back here but there was sufficient light for him to see two men hopping out of their saddles. As they hit the ground, six-guns in hand, Bat called softly:

"Hold it."

One of them was a lantern-jawed man Bat had seen in the room over the Wells-Fargo office. This chap had come at Bat with a gun barrel. He hesitated now for a fraction of a second, blazed one fast shot toward the porch, and then tried to get into the shadows.

Bat Hemsley's slug caught him with one foot in the air. He died before the toe touched the ground again. The other man had darted away to the left and was behind a stalled buckboard. Bat saw the flare of his gun and he heard the slug dig itself into the wall of the building.

Bat fired at the flare, missed, and then stepped back inside the door. There was an open window, looking out on the rear yard, and Bat stood beside it till the Arrow man made an attempt to cross to the corral. He picked this man off, dropping him within a few feet of the lantern-jawed fellow.

The shooting was heavy again in the front of the house, and Bat retreated through the rooms. Coming out the front door, he saw George on the ground, shaking his head stupidly, gun in hand. Nevada was crouching behind the burning barn, refilling his six-gun. Ed Blaine had his rifle up and it shot orange flame as an Arrow rider tried to charge into the inclosure.

A man had crept around the barn and was coming up on Nevada's rear. Bat Hemsley let out a loud whoop. He shot hastily to warn the Flying Cross man. His shot missed, but Nevada, spinning around very fast, didn't.

"All right, bucko," another voice called from the end of the porch. Bat Hemsley had heard that voice before. Tate Morrison, big, blond-haired, hatless, face tight with hatred, was looking over the low railing, his six-gun resting on the wood. The distance was only about twenty feet

and a man couldn't miss at that range.

Bat made his play, knowing that he was holding the short end. He looked into the muzzle of Morrison's gun and swung his own around. Something struck him on the left side, spinning him around, but he retained his grip on the six-gun, managed to get it up, and emptied the cylinders.

He was sinking down against the wall, looking for Morrison's head over the railing, but not seeing him. Nevada was yelling, and then Ed Blaine came up on the porch.

"Riders coming!" Blaine shouted. "You all right, Hemsley?"

Bat looked at him stupidly. There was no strength left in his body. He felt blood sliding down his chest and he tried to locate the wound.

Nevada came up on the porch, face flushed. "Sam Vane's here," he roared, "an' Freeman Brown—an' a lot o' the other ranchers from our end. They're makin' Morrison call his bluff."

Bat Hemsley saw the riders coming in, more than a dozen of them. Then he saw a dark-haired girl, hatless, face white.

"Hey!" George called softly. He was up on his knees, holding his right arm. He pointed to the body of a man sprawled out on the ground at the far end of the porch. "I reckon Tate got it this time."

Ed Blaine ran over and looked down. "He's dead," he muttered. "One of your shots got him, mister."

Bat smiled wryly. "One of his got me too, friend," he asserted.

Shirley Blaine leaped from her horse and came toward them at a run. Albie came up the steps also, tottering, gun in hand, grinning foolishly. Ed Blaine was down beside Bat cutting open his shirt.

"You can't kill that hombre," Nevada said, "He's too tough."

"This is close enough," muttered Blaine. "It's low in the shoulder, but Doc Wallman can fix him up."

Bat took a deep breath and grinned up at the girl who was kneeling beside him.

"I reckon this wasn't my day, ma'am," he said. "Your brother can run all the sheep he wants to now."

"We'll have no trouble on that score," Blaine assured him. "I'm calling a meeting of the ranchers at the north end of the Basin. We'll establish our line so that sheep can graze in the valleys and slopes of the Basin, and cattle on the best grass." He paused. "I'm running cattle as well as sheep, Hemsley," he stated quietly. "If you want a job, I need a good foreman for the beef."

"My line," Bat told him. "I don't like the smell of the other things."

"You'll take the job?" asked Blaine.

Bat nodded. He looked at Shirley Blaine, seeing the smile break out on her face.

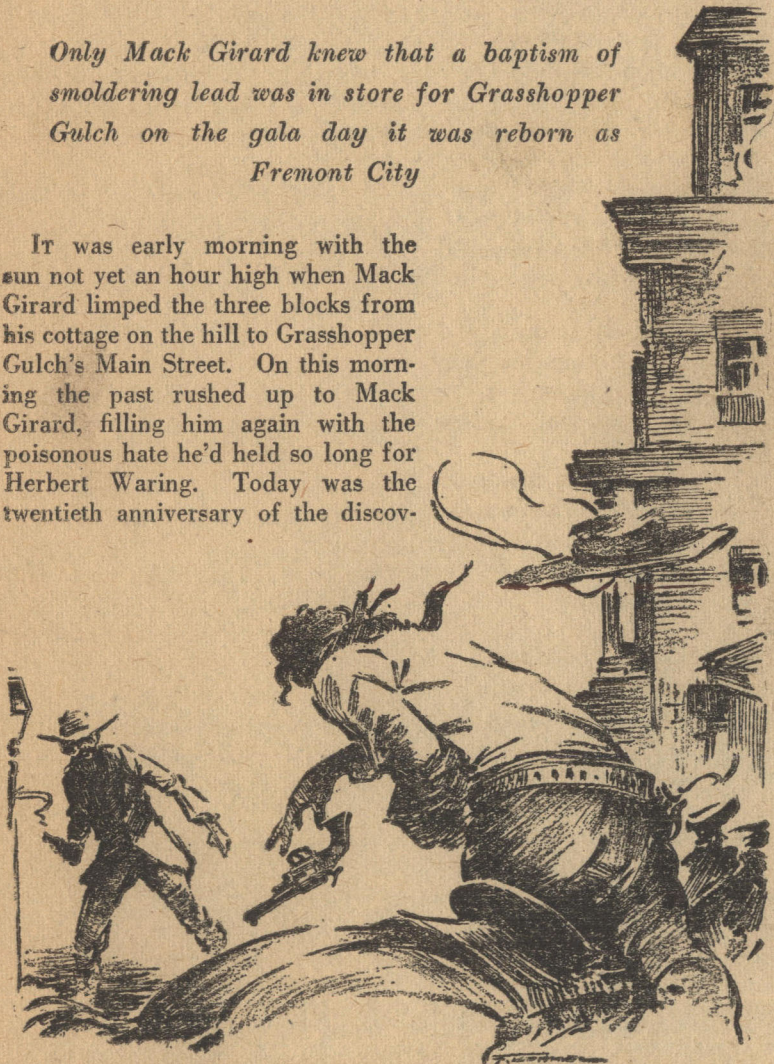
"Did I say this wasn't my day?" he asked softly. "Reckon maybe I was wrong!"

GHOST OF GLORY

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Only Mack Girard knew that a baptism of smoldering lead was in store for Grasshopper Gulch on the gala day it was reborn as Fremont City

It was early morning with the sun not yet an hour high when Mack Girard limped the three blocks from his cottage on the hill to Grasshopper Gulch's Main Street. On this morning the past rushed up to Mack Girard, filling him again with the poisonous hate he'd held so long for Herbert Waring. Today was the twentieth anniversary of the discov-



ery of gold in the Gulch. The gold had long ago gone, but cattle and timber had remained. Today Grasshopper Gulch, once a brawling mining camp, became a city.

Grasshopper Gulch had been a good-enough name when the streets were deep with dust and the buildings were thin frame structures or tents, when there was no water system and folks bought their water in barrels brought from the upper creek, and no charge for the polliwogs. The law, then, was the .45 carried on the hip of the town marshal, and it had been Mack Girard who first carried that law. Now, pausing briefly in front of the new post office with the bright sunlight upon his bony face, Mack looked at the bullet scar on his stiff right wrist, looked down at his short left leg, and the bitter memories came back in high flood tide.

Today Grasshopper Gulch became Fremont City. Grasshopper Gulch wasn't a good name for a city that had grown up, a city proud of its past and proud of its future. So said Herbert Waring, and Herbert Waring, the banker, was the man who counted in this town. Today was to see the biggest celebration that Grasshopper Gulch had ever known. The governor was to be here. He'd make a speech, and so, too, would Herbert Waring and other men who had seen Grasshopper Gulch grow up. Exactly at noon there was to be re-enacted the famous Stanton Gang holdup that had cleaned out Waring's first bank almost eighteen years ago. In the afternoon there would be a rodeo.

Mack started to turn into the post office to give the building its morning cleaning when he heard a horse's hoofs on the pavement. He paused, his craggy face lighting up when he saw that the rider was Bob Stanton. Bob was the son of Al Stanton who was supposed to have held up Herbert Waring's bank. Bob had never seen his father since that time. He had little remembrance of him, and only Mack's word against the town's that it wasn't Al Stanton who had held up the bank.

"Morning, Bob," Mack called, and stepped to the curb.

Bob reined up, and grinned down at Mack. "Fine morning, Mack. Fine morning for old Grasshopper Gulch to get a new handle."

Mack nodded, sobering as the bitter memories flowed back. "Yeah, fine morning for Waring to get up on the platform and gab about how much he had to do with making this burg."

The grin fled from Bob's lean face. He was thinking, Mack guessed, that he was a fool to come to town on the day the robbery was to be re-enacted. Folks would look at him, and there would be fingers pointed at him and whispers would run through the crowd that this leggy man with the ice-blue eyes was the son of the notorious Al Stanton.

"Ain't you out purty early?" Mack asked quickly.

"I camped up the Gulch a piece," Bob said. "Wanted to get into town in time to get cleaned up."

"Go up to the house—" Mack began.

"You know danged well I couldn't do that," Bob cut in. "I'll get me a bath and a shave before I go to see Sue. How is she, Mack?"

"I reckon she still loves you," Mack answered. Then he laid his eyes sharply on young Stanton, and asked bluntly: "Why in tunket don't you pop the question? You can't expect a girl to wait forever."

"Mebbe she'd better get hooked up with some other gent," Bob muttered.

"You're loco," Mack said gruffly. He knew what was in Bob's mind. The boy was thinking that Sue Girard wouldn't marry a man whose father had been an outlaw, and Mack, knowing his daughter better than Bob Stanton did, knew that it wasn't so.

Bob looked down the street to where Herbert Waring's bank building stood, and asked: "The holdup was right there, wasn't it?"

Mack nodded. He looked again at the bullet scar on his wrist, felt again the red-hot slash of lead into his left knee, felt himself falling into the dust as the outlaws piled out of the bank, coin bags in their hands. Still he'd kept firing, brought one man down, sent a second rolling out of his saddle to pitch headlong into the street. Then another slug had smashed his wrist, and the bandits were gone in a rolling cloud of dust, the gold with them.

One man died. The second lived to say that Al Stanton headed the gang. He'd stood trial and received a short sentence from Judge Blaine. There was bitter talk that Mack Gi-

rard hadn't shot the outlaw chief because he was Mack's friend, and Herbert Waring had been the one to make most of that talk. So Mack had lost his job, and there were those who still believed that Mack Girard knew it was Al Stanton who had led the owlhoot pack.

"It was there, all right," Mack said somberly, and thought of the letter in his coat pocket, the letter that had lain undiscovered in the post office all these years. That letter might have cleared Al Stanton if it had been found eighteen years ago. Mack thought of showing it to Bob, and instantly gave the thought up. "How're things around Glass Butte?"

Bob's face darkened. "Not too good, Mack. I reckon Waring will always have to run things wherever he is. His Box W keeps crowding me. I was sure a danged fool for going there."

"You got a good buy," said Mack. "Need any money?"

"I'll get along," Bob answered. "Thanks, Mack. You've done more for me now than I deserve." He paused, looking thoughtfully at the man on the sidewalk. "There's some funny things going on up there on Waring's Box W. Looks to me like they're cleaning their range. It don't make sense this time of year. His steers ain't in no shape to ship."

"There are some funny things about the way Waring runs his bank, too," Mack said.

Bob lifted his reins. "Well, I'll get a hotel room, and clean up. See you later, Mack."

It was mid-morning by the time Mack finished his work, and left the post office. The town had come alive now. Within an hour or so there would be the speeches. Then the holdup would be re-enacted. Mack moved slowly along the sidewalk, seeing few he knew, pausing now and again to watch the crowd of punchers, loggers, and mill men who surged restlessly along the street.

It was a big crowd and a rough one, and anything could happen before the day was out. Mack thought of Ed Rourke, the present town marshal, who was to play his part in the holdup. He was to use blanks when the shooting started, go down on his face as if he was hit, and there'd be a man playing the part of young Herbert Waring who would come running out of the bank crying: "It was the Stanton gang."

Mack cursed softly. They had all been friends in those days; Mack Girard, Al Stanton, and Herbert Waring. That was why folks had sympathized with Waring when he appeared so broken up over the robbery. Why, too, money had been raised to help Waring start another bank. It was Waring's friends, folks said, Mack Girard, the marshal, and Al Stanton, the outlaw, who had betrayed him.

Now, as Mack turned up the hill toward his cottage, he could see the big house above his, the house Waring had built and where he lived now, the finest house in the county.

All this was in Mack's mind as he opened the gate, and walked up the path to his house, a bitterness that had long ago filled his mind

with black hate, and made him tell himself a thousand times a day that if ever a man needed killing, it was Herbert Waring. The same long-barreled .45 was in his bureau drawer that he had used the day of the holdup.

It would be a grim kind of justice if Mack took that gun, went up to Waring's fine house, and killed him today, this very day when Herbert Waring was to make his speech and bow before the crowd and take the glory for the new name of Fremont City. There was talk that Waring would seek election to the State Senate in the fall. Yes, Mack Girard told himself, this would be a good day for Herbert Waring to die. The thought was dark in him when he stepped upon his porch. His daughter, Sue, was there to meet him, a slim-figured, fair girl who now was strangely excited.

"There's a man in the front room who wants to see you," Sue whispered. "He wouldn't tell me his name. He's awfully worried that somebody's going to discover he's here."

Mack nodded, and stepped into the living room. For a moment he thought the lanky man with the guns on his hips was a stranger. The man made a quick turn from the window when he heard Mack come in, long-fingered hands hovering close to the black butts of his holstered .45's. Then a quick smile cut the frost from his face.

"Mack, you old son," he said and came across the room in long strides, his hand out.

Mack gripped the hand, and wasn't sure for that moment whether he was in his right mind or not. This was Al Stanton. An older, leaner Al Stanton than he had known, with gray in his temples and the black beard that he had once worn shaved off, but it was Al Stanton.

"I reckon I wouldn't have been more surprised if the sun just hadn't come up today," Mack said as if he still couldn't quite believe what he saw. "Al, you know what day this is?"

The smile fled from Stanton's face, leaving it cold and set. "Twenty years ago old Gabe Jones found gold here in the Gulch, and now they're having a big celebration. Yeah, I know."

"And Waring's having some boys play out the holdup that you were supposed to have pulled," Mack added.

"I know that, too, but here's something you don't know. This is no phony today. It's the real thing with Waring arranging things so his own bank can be held up just like it was before."

Mack stared at Stanton blankly. "You sure?"

"I know about these things, Mack. I've been in Mexico most of the time since Waring framed me for that holdup, but I've ridden the back trails between here and there enough to know the boys who make their guns earn their living. It's Juke Ferren and his bunch. The plan is for them to ride in just a little ahead of the bunch Waring has ready to play robber. Folks will think it's only the game. Ferren's boys will

go into the bank, the marshal shoots a few blanks, and they ride out. Before anybody finds out it's the McCoy, Jukes and his boys will be gone."

A crooked smile came to Mack Girard's lips. "I reckon this is what we've been waiting for. We'll tip the marshal off, and we'll stop the thing dead. We've got Waring where we want him."

"No good." Stanton shook his head. "Who would believe me? And how could we prove Waring was behind it?" He went back to the window, looked out, and immediately stepped away. "Somebody's coming."

Mack looked, and grinned at Stanton. "That's your boy Bob."

Stanton's mouth opened in surprise. "Bob?" He stepped to the window again. "He's a fine-looking boy, Mack."

"He's all right. I'm proud of him. I raised him till he was big enough to go to work on a ranch. Now he's got a little spread of his own out past Glass Buttes. Waring's Box W is right beside him and crowding him. It'll mean trouble. Al, I was thinking as I walked up the hill that this would be a good day to shoot Herb Waring."

"And stretch rope?" Stanton shook his head. "No need of that, Mack. You've been sitting on the right side of the law and treated rotten. Me, I've been looking at it from the other side. There must be a way of taking care of Herb that'd clear my name and keep you from hanging." He watched Bob leave

the house with Sue. "They're sweet on each other?"

"Yes," Mack said, "but Bob's never asked her to marry him."

"Why?" demanded Stanton. "Is he ashamed of me? Is that it?"

"No. He don't believe you did it, but he— Hell, man, you know how it would be with a boy that's proud like Bob is." Mack took the faded envelope from his pocket. "Funny thing happened the other day, Al. I've been janitor of the old post office and now I'm swamping out the new building. The old one was the same as it was when you were here. I reckon this letter must have got dropped back of a desk and slid in behind the baseboard. I found it the other day after we'd moved everything into the new building. Al, this letter was written eighteen years ago to Frog Buel."

"It was Buel's outfit that pulled the holdup," Stanton said excitedly. "Wasn't that letter ever mailed?"

"It never went out of the Grasshopper Gulch post office." Mack slipped the letter from the envelope and unfolded it. "Here's what it says. 'The Stanton legend has been built up. See that your boys wear dusters and bandannas. If any of them have hard luck tell them to swear that their boss was Al Stanton. I'll see that they get off easy. I'll expect your visit at noon of the 20th.' There's no heading, no date, and no signature, but I'd recognize Bert Waring's writing any time. It hasn't changed in eighteen years."

Stanton reached for the letter, and

studied it. "The Stanton legend," he breathed. "I guess he did a good job of building it up."

"You were a wild one then," Mack said thoughtfully. "I'm remembering a couple of drunks you went on that were something to give a man fame. You practically cleaned out the Empire the last time. Then you killed that ornery Bull Callister, which same gave you a rep. Waring says the twentieth. The robbery was on the twenty-seventh of August. You'd been out of town for a month. Looks like when Frog Buel didn't show Waring got another letter off to him. Meanwhile there'd been a couple of stages held up north of here, and you got the blame for that."

"You ever have any idea why I was out of town?" asked Stanton.

Mack shook his head. "I've often wondered. It sure played in with Waring's plans."

"Yeah," Stanton said darkly. "He fixed it so it would. It was the first day of August that he got hold of me, and said he had something big. He claimed that old man Hoskins had been prospecting over on the John Day, and that he'd hit a strike that would make the old Canyon City mines look like peanuts. I knew Waring had been grubstaking Hoskins, so I took it all in. He gave me five hundred dollars, and told me to hike out for Canyon City. He didn't know where Hoskins was. He said the old man had been mighty close about telling anything, but that he'd said a bunch of hard cases were watching him, and Waring figured he'd need help. I was to look

for him till I found him. I looked, all right, but I never found him. I don't know yet where he was. Anyhow, I got a letter from Waring in September saying I'd better make a run for it, that there was a warrant out for me on account of the holdup. He said he'd take care of Bob, and that I'd better stay clear till they found out who did do the job."

"So you made a run for it," muttered Mack, "instead of coming back and fighting it."

"I was young," Stanton said, "and scared, but from what I've heard since I'd have been a fool to come back. They'd have put a rope around my neck the minute I'd showed my face in the Gulch. But that's water over the dam. You were the one that took care of Bob, and that's a debt I can't repay."

"There's no repaying to be done. All I want out of life is to see Herb Waring dead, and Bob get a fair chance on his spread." Mack left the room, and when he came back with the long-barreled Colt he'd used the day he'd fought Frog Buel's gang, his face was bleak. "For eighteen years I've done every dirty job there was to make a living. Folks that used to respect me because I'd been a square marshal looked at me like I was a skunk smelling to high heaven, and treated me the same."

"Why didn't you pull stakes?"

Mack looked down at the gun, balancing it in his hand. "I ain't right sure, Al. Mebbe it was to get Waring when the sign was right, but it never was till now. He's been on top all the time, sanctimonious as

hell, people kowtowing to him all over the Gulch. Now I'm going down to the courthouse where he's talking, and I'll plug him. Then I'll tell folks exactly what he is."

"And you'll prove it?" Stanton laughed shortly. "Listen, Mack, you're all wrong. You've been sitting here, taking all the dirt that life could give you until you're full of poison. Use your head. We've got to wait until we hold the aces."

"Nobody holds aces when they play with Waring," retorted Mack. "What's the use of waiting? That's all I've done. I'm tired of waiting. What's it got me?"

"Two swell kids," Stanton said gently. "Your girl and my boy. How will your girl feel if they hang you for murder? You say Bob hasn't asked Sue to marry him because of me. What would your killing Waring do to Sue?"

Mack Girard's face showed the hopelessness that was in him. "All right, Al. I'll listen."

"There's one thing that's different now than it was eighteen years ago," Stanton said. "Frog Buel was a square-shooter as outlaws go. Waring fixed things for him, and Buel made an even split with him a week later. Juke Ferren's different. He'd kill his mother for a nickel. Now I figger Waring is smart enough to know that, so he won't trust Ferren. I'm guessing he'll have the dinero somewhere else already divided for the split. Mebbe he's just paying Ferren for the job so he can clean his own safe when he feels like it. I'm thinking Ferren won't leave till he gets what he's got coming."

Mack nodded his agreement. "Then what's our play?"

"You keep your eyes on Waring. I'll be down at the foot of the Gulch. I'll watch Ferren's gang ride by. Mebbe I can figger out where they're going."

Mack slipped the gun inside his waistband, buttoned his coat, and moved toward the door. "All right, Al. We'll play it your way."

The sidewalks on both sides of Main Street were jammed by the time Mack Girard reached the street. On the other side of the pavement Herbert Waring had stepped to the curb and held up his hands for silence. A moment later the boisterous run of talk along the street died, the crowd giving Waring the respectful attention that it felt was due a great man.

"Some of you have wondered why we are today re-enacting the Stanton gang holdup which took place almost eighteen years ago," Waring orated pompously. "Our purpose is partly to entertain you, giving you one of the highlights of Grasshopper Gulch's history as a portion of the Fremont City Day celebration. More than that, we seek to demonstrate that the old days of lawlessness are gone forever. What could happen eighteen years ago could not happen now with the effective law enforcement that we have today."

Some one yelled: "Hurray for Ed Rourke." Others took it up until it was a continual roar along the entire street.

For a moment Herbert Waring stood there, smiling a little in his be-

nign way, a large, handsome man in his black broadcloth suit and white shirt. He turned to bulky Ed Rourke and patted him on the back.

"You should cheer our marshal," he went on when the crowd fell silent again, saying it as if he were glad to share the spotlight. "Much of our peace and prosperity we owe to Ed Rourke. Now I'm asking everybody to stand back off the street. We don't want anybody hurt, and the boys will be along within a few minutes. The holdup will be re-enacted exactly as it occurred that tragic day eighteen years ago. That is," he smiled as if admitting greater age than the rest of them, "as nearly as Judge Blaine and I and the rest of the old-timers who were here then remember it. We hope you enjoy it, folks."

Mack Girard thought bitterly: "All of the old-timers but me." He watched Ed Rourke cross the street to his side. Waring said something to Judge Blaine and the governor who had been with him. Then, he, too, crossed the street to stand about twenty feet to Mack's right.

Mack looked at his watch. It was fifteen minutes yet. That is, it should have been fifteen minutes, but he was remembering that Al Stanton had said Juke Ferren and his outfit aimed to hit town and go through the motions of robbing the bank before the scheduled time. Before Mack had slipped his watch back into his pocket they came, five of them, dressed in dusters and wearing bandanas just as the outlaws had eighteen years ago.

They knew their parts well, Mack admitted to himself. They reined up in front of the bank. Three of them went in. Two stayed in the street with the horses. The seconds ticked by and the crowd seemed scarcely to breathe. Then the three came out, coin bags in their hands. It was then that Ed Rourke stepped into the street, his gun spitting fire. The outlaws swung into their saddles, fired back at Rourke, but none of them went down. Rourke had fallen, but kept on firing just as Mack Girard had done in the first holdup.

Someone next to Mack yelled, "Hell, that's no fake," and dived past Mack for the protection of the alley. Mack whipped his eyes down the street, and what he saw made him doubt that his eyes were telling him the truth. Al Stanton was in the center of the street on the other side of the five outlaws, both guns in his hands and both working in a steady rhythm. The men on the horses whirled their mounts to get away from Stanton's deadly fire, and then another strange thing happened. The governor, a bearded old ex-cattleman who would have looked more at home in his cowboy duds than the store suit he wore, was in the street on the other side of the outlaws cutting off their retreat. There was a blazing gun in the governor's hand, and there could be no doubt about his familiarity with it.

Miraculously the street had cleared, for the traditions of the old Grasshopper Gulch were stronger in these people than those of the new Fremont City. There were only Al

Stanton, the governor, and the five outlaws in the street, two of them lying on the pavement. The other three, rattled by this unexpected twist of events that had ripped apart their carefully laid plans, dug steel into their mounts and broke for the alley behind Mack Girard.

Then Mack came alive. He jerked the Colt from his waistband. There was nothing fast about the speed with which he drew his gun, but once the Colt was in his hand he could shoot as straight as he ever did. One more outlaw spilled out of his saddle, and then the other two were on Mack. He fired squarely into one man's face, saw the little hole about where the fellow's nose should have been, and almost simultaneously the remaining outlaw blasted consciousness from Mack Girard.

It was late that night when Mack came around again. He was alone. There was a low-burning lamp on the bureau. Gradually as his vision cleared he saw that he was lying in his own bed. From the living room he heard the rumble of talk.

Presently Mack heard light steps, and he turned his head to see Sue in the doorway. "Who's out there?" Mack asked, "and what in thunder happened?"

"I'll get them, dad," Sue said, and when she came back Al Stanton and the governor were with her. "Knowing dad as I do, I'd say you'd better tell him what's happened."

"I reckon you saw the most of it," Stanton said. "I didn't tell you everything this afternoon because I

thought it would be better if you just kept an eye on Waring. Besides, I wasn't sure till I recognized the horses that I had the right hunch. I waited at the other end of the street till they got out of the bank, and when I saw it was Ferren's horses I cut loose. You got one of 'em, Mack, dead center. The one that hit you had a slug in his side, and he slid out of his saddle before he rode out of the alley."

"Waring?"

"In jail where he belongs," the governor said grimly. "He was in his house getting ready to vamoose when we called on him. He had fifty thousand dollars in a valise, and he couldn't talk himself out of that."

"Ferren didn't get hit bad," Stanton added, "and he's the kind of a huckleberry who'll talk his head off to save his neck. When he got done talking there was nothing for Waring to do but look forward to a plenty long term in the pen. They slugged the cashier so it would look like a real job, and aimed to hide out for a spell in Waring's house." Herb had got rid of his daughter and the cook for a few days, figuring that was one place the law would never look."

Mack stared at the governor. "How did you get in on this?"

The governor chuckled. "Stanton came to the capital and laid his cards on the table. We'd been watching Waring. He was in too many things and spending too much money. If his bank had gone it would have

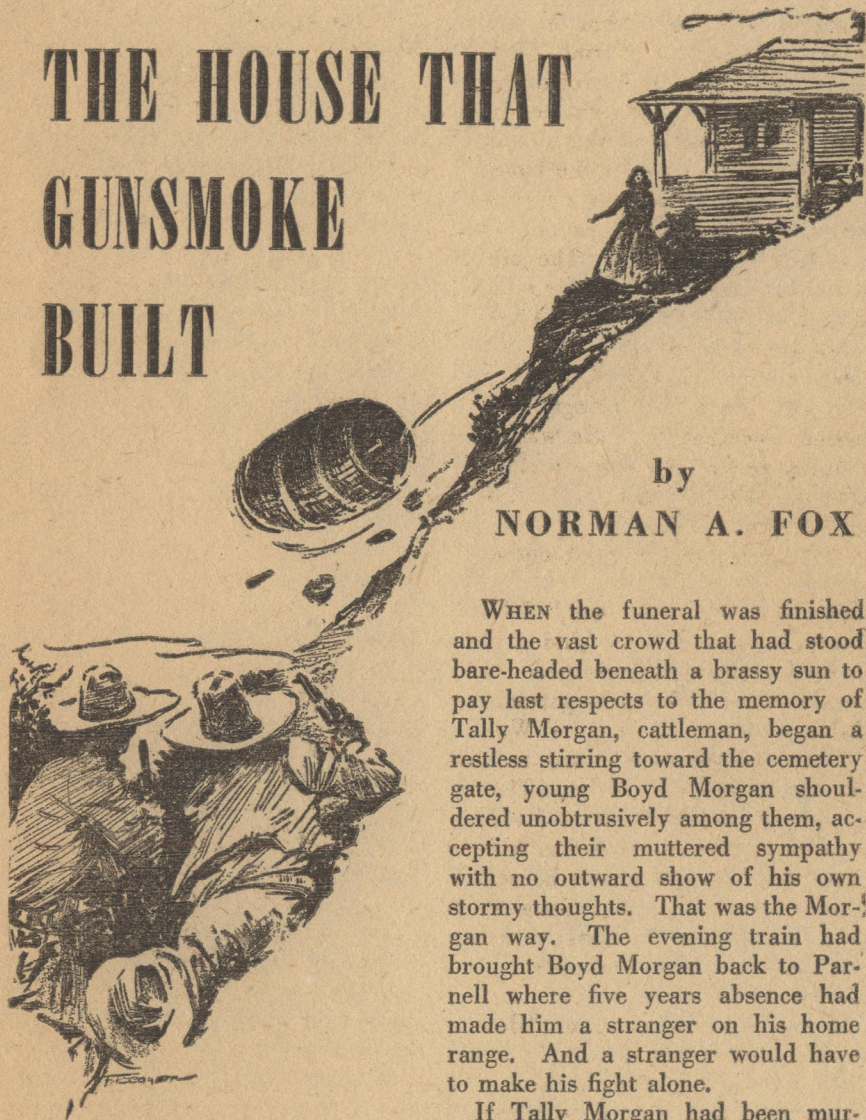
ruined this whole county. It wasn't a two-bit proposition like the time his first bank was robbed and he went under. So I came, ready to take a hand when the sign was right. After reading the letter to Waring that you found, he decided to talk about the first robbery. I'll make it my business to spread the story over the county. Everybody's going to know that neither you nor Stanton had any part in that crime." He turned to Stanton. "And now before I go back to the hotel, I want to tell you two men that I'm proud of you and what you did today."

After the governor and Stanton left, Sue lingered. "Bob got first in the riding this afternoon, dad, and with Waring gone, he says there won't be anything keeping him from making a good ranch out of his spread. He was thinking you and his dad might like to live up there with us."

"I reckon I would, Sue."

After Sue had gone and Mack was alone again, he thought about these eighteen years and was surprised at his lack of hate for Herbert Waring. He'd hated too long and too much, and he had had no reward for it. Now, destiny, in its own inscrutable way, had at last put things in order. Waring wasn't dead, but he might as well be. Bob Stanton would have a chance to make good. These were the things Mack had told Al Stanton he wanted. Now he had them, and with them was a peace in Mack Girard that eighteen years of bitterness had not brought him.

THE HOUSE THAT GUNSMOKE BUILT



by
NORMAN A. FOX

WHEN the funeral was finished and the vast crowd that had stood bare-headed beneath a brassy sun to pay last respects to the memory of Tally Morgan, cattleman, began a restless stirring toward the cemetery gate, young Boyd Morgan shouldered unobtrusively among them, accepting their muttered sympathy with no outward show of his own stormy thoughts. That was the Morgan way. The evening train had brought Boyd Morgan back to Parnell where five years absence had made him a stranger on his home range. And a stranger would have to make his fight alone.

If Tally Morgan had been murdered, a hundred men would be crying for vengeance—older men who'd brought cattle to this northland and helped Tally Morgan carve an empire out of the prairies—newer men whose hands were calloused from

"You've done your building with lies and trickery," Boyd Morgan told Abe Pritchard. "That's why you'll never live in the house Tally Morgan built!"

the plow, sod-busting men who'd conquered Tally Morgan's kind in their own impassive way, then come to respect the whang-leather breed they'd vanquished. But Tally Morgan had died peacefully, worn out like a saddle that has served its usefulness. And remembering that, the son of Tally Morgan wondered what scant measure of sympathy he might command when he made his stand.

At the gate, Coralie Lang brushed Boyd's elbow. A slim man of medium height, still Boyd towered a full head above her, and he awaited her words with a mingled eagerness and regret. Always a grave girl, she was graver now. She said: "Sorry I didn't see you last night, Boyd. I'm keeping my shop closed the rest of the day. We could talk there."

"I'll have to see you later," Boyd answered. "I've got some business to tend to."

This sun-scorched flat ran unbroken to the town itself, and Parnell lay sprawled upon the levelness of the prairie, but above the town rose a bluff and the house stood perched upon it, aged and immense and still clinging to grandeur. Coralie nodded toward the house.

"Up there?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

She drew in her breath, the sound like a sob, and turning then, she headed quickly toward Parnell and her millinery shop. Boyd followed after her, but when he reached the boardwalk he angled over to a mercantile store where its owner, just returned from the funeral, was twisting a key in the door.

"You sent the grub up to the house like I asked?" asked Boyd.

"A month's supply," the storekeeper answered and gave him a quick and speculative look.

"Good," Morgan said and went striding off again.

Finding the trail, he toiled upward to the house, and, drawing nearer, he could see how the sun had blistered it and the wind had battered the shutters and the years had worked their quiet havoc. He'd been born in this house and he'd slept here last night; his valise was in an upstairs room and he got his gun and cartridge belt from it and strapped them under his dark coat. Then he took a stand on the broad porch, looking down upon Parnell and seeing the wagons churn the dust as farmer and rancher, in for the funeral, headed for the far range. Soon they were gone and Parnell fell into a sun-stricken somnolence and there was silence save for the soft rustling of the cottonwoods along the main street.

Presently Abe Pritchard came toiling up the hill.

An exceedingly bony man, garbed always in staid black, this Pritchard had the look of a Yankee trader, but there was none of New England's honesty in his narrow face. Power had given him an added arrogance in the five years since Boyd Morgan had seen him, but Pritchard, within speaking distance, said affably enough: "Good morning, Morgan. I've come about this house."

"I had a letter from Sheriff Andy Webb," Morgan said. "He claimed

the house was sold to you for unpaid taxes. That's a lie, Pritchard. Dad and I swapped letters all the time I was gone. If Tally Morgan had needed tax money he'd have asked me for it. He had his pride, but we were both Morgans."

Pritchard drew forth a huge bandanna and mopped his high forehead. "Come now," he said. "The courthouse records show clearly that this house is mine. But I'm a fair man, Morgan, and I'll pay you any reasonable sum for a clear and undisputable title."

"And then?"

"I'll put it in good repair and move in. I've done well here, Morgan. The homesteader influx has meant added trade for the town and I've my own store and livery stable and some plans for taking up land. I need a home befitting my station in the community, and I've always had my eye on this one."

"This house belongs to the Morgans," Boyd said. "Now git!"

Whereupon the affability fell from Abe Pritchard and he said harshly: "I was only trying to make it easy for you, you young whippersnapper. Can't you understand that the day is done when the Morgan name was big on this range? You've a ranch of your own over in the Judith country, they say. What can you gain by keeping me out of this house?"

"My father fought Indians and rustlers to make this country safe enough so that snakes like you could come crawling in, Pritchard," Boyd said. "He built this house with gunsmoke, honest gunsmoke, and pride and sweat. You've done *your* build-

ing with lies and trickery, and you hated Tally Morgan because until the day of his death he was big enough to stand between you and most of your dirty schemes. And you'll never live in the house that Tally Morgan built."

"Just let me remind you that you've no legal leg to stand upon," rasped Pritchard. "That means that people won't dare side you. And I'll be coming back, feller."

He went stiffly down the hill and Boyd Morgan looked after him thoughtfully, then turned into the house and sought his father's room and began rummaging through the old desk. He found the tin box that held the important papers and forced it open. There were tax receipts inside, but none bore a date less than three years old. Aloud he said: "Pritchard would have thought of this. And he had his chance to go through this box in the days between dad's dying and my getting here."

Out into the kitchen, Boyd surveyed the heaped food supplies which the mercantile store had delivered and, mindful of another need if a siege should shape up, he went outside and found a huge barrel beneath a rain spout. The barrel was bone-dry at this season and he wheeled it into the house and proceeded to fill it, making many trips, bucket in hand, to the pump in the back yard.

This done, he came to the porch again to find three men toiling up the slope. Abe Pritchard was one, the others a pair lately in his employ,

and Boyd Morgan knew their gun-hung breed. Now they had their .45's uncased. Leveling his own gun, Morgan sent shots spattering, and the three broke, scattering to the cover of rocks that strewed the slope's bottom. Retreating into the house's vast hallway, Morgan stood in the shadows, his eyes alert, his gun ready. The siege was on.

There was a long, hot afternoon of this, those guns below barking intermittently, Morgan replying in kind but spacing his shots, the town drowsing the while, though men poked their heads from doorways and had their look. Thus was the ancient might of the Morgans pitted against this new power that had become Abe Pritchard's, and that made it a battle of giants with lesser men knowing no course but to hold neutral.

In mid-afternoon, though, there came one lone figure from Parnell's street. Coralie Lang walked toward the house with an aristocrat's disdain for the death that was in the air. She had brief words with Abe Pritchard, and she came up the hill then, the guns falling silent. When she reached the porch, Morgan drew her into the hallway saying harshly: "What fool business is this? Those boys below are playing for keeps!"

"Pritchard won't let them shoot while I'm here," she said. "He thinks I've come to try and talk you out of this stand."

"And that's what fetched you?"

Coralie looked at him long and silently, trying hard to find words. Then: "I never thought I'd throw

myself at any man. Not even you, Boyd. But there were letters between us these last five years. I . . . I supposed—"

That took some of the grimness out of him, mellowing his eyes. "I've built a nice little spread over in the Judith country," he said. "I built it for you, Coralie."

She raised her face to him, all woman, all eagerness. "A train comes through tonight!"

He turned grim again. "I won't be on it," he said.

"Then nothing counts with you but *this*?"

Now it was Boyd who groped for words, wanting desperately to make her understand. "I know Pritchard's kind," he finally said. "He's grown big, and he'll grow bigger. Once there was Tally Morgan to buck him, and this house is the symbol of Tally Morgan, my dad's last hold on the power and importance that once was his—the power he used to keep this range decent. Don't you see that if Abe Pritchard moves in here he will have made his greatest conquest? Don't you see that people, seeing him sit where Tally Morgan once sat, will bow down to him. But as long as a Morgan holds this house, then the Morgans still stand between Pritchard and something he wants. It's living proof to the little fellows that Pritchard can be beaten. Do you savvy that?"

"I only understand that one Morgan was buried today and another may be buried tomorrow," said Coralie. "Why do you make a fight

for people who won't even come to side you?"

"The townspeople don't count; they've already lost themselves to Pritchard. It's the men of the range who've got to be taught that the Morgan way is the only way to buck Pritchard. I couldn't ask them to side me; I have no proof that Pritchard's claim on this house is false. But when Pritchard begins scheming them out of their own land, they'll look at the house of Morgan—and remember."

Coralie shook her head and went down the hill and, once she was past where Pritchard and his men were posted, Morgan expected the guns to start speaking. But another man came toiling up the hill and the truce continued to hold, for this man was Sheriff Andy Webb.

A rotund, weary-shouldered man, Webb had gotten his first votes because Tally Morgan had nodded his way, but that had been thirty years before. Now Webb stood before the porch and said: "Don't you think you'd better give up this foolishness, Boyd?"

Looking at the sheriff, Boyd Morgan saw all the men of this range, blinded, bewildered and not too sure of themselves, and he felt a thrust of pity.

"You know confounded well, Andy, that dad never let his taxes lapse," he said.

Webb shrugged. "If Pritchard bought somebody, it was the county treasurer, not me. I wouldn't know about that. But I don't want you dead, son. That's why I'm here."

A sudden, heady anger washed

through Morgan and he said: "Get down that slope! Get back to the man whose boots you're ready to lick before I put a bullet through the badge you're not fit to wear!"

He sent a bullet to geyser dirt at Webb's feet, and the sheriff went running down the slope, and it was Morgan's thought then that his anger had now put four guns against him instead of three. But Andy Webb went off into the town, taking no stand, and the three below began shooting again.

There came a certain deathly monotony to all this, a situation deadlocked with those three hunkered in the rocks below and Morgan with the house to shelter him, and no change through the ensuing hours. As the afternoon ended and the gray of twilight began seeping over Parnell, hunger drove Morgan to the kitchen. He hastily snatched food he could carry to the hallway and made a wary meal there.

His was the dismal knowledge that with the coming of night the showdown would shape itself. Cloaked by darkness, Pritchard and his men would circle the house, approaching it from the sides and behind, perhaps, and there were too many doors and windows to permit one lone man to make an adequate stand.

So thinking, Boyd grew increasingly alert, probing the thickening shadows down there among the rocks, straining his eyes for any slight movement, feeling his own tension built with the spreading darkness.

Then something white glimmered on the slope trail, and he might have fired if Coralie's voice had not come to him.

"It's me, Boyd!" she cried. "Pritchard's let me through again."

He risked moving out of the doorway, bewilderment in his eyes as he looked down upon her. She came so close that the perfume of her hair was in his nostrils, and she said: "I had to come again. To bring you these."

She was pressing papers into his hand, and Boyd stared at them, not understanding, until she said: "Your dad sent for me the night he died. He knew Pritchard wanted this house; Pritchard had tried to buy him out many times and when Tally refused, Pritchard hinted that he'd get the house anyway. He was a wise man, your father, and he must have guessed Pritchard's intentions. So Tally Morgan gave me these to keep. They're the tax receipts, right up to date."

"You've had these all the time?" Boyd asked, puzzled.

"I could have given them to you this afternoon. But I wanted you to drop this fight."

"And now—"

Coralie's voice was sharp with bitterness. "Now I know you'll stay here till Pritchard kills you. But at least I want you to know that you're making a just fight."

He stood staring at the tax receipts, torn between a fierce elation because he had them and a fiercer regret because this girl was forever lost to him.

"This makes everything different," he said. "When you go down the slope, find Andy Webb and tell him all about this."

She said, "Very well," and took a step toward the trail.

Below, a gun blossomed redly against the night and a gout of dirt lifted near the girl. Pritchard's voice rose jeeringly. "Stay put, miss. You're not coming down this slope unless young Morgan comes with you. And he'll have to come with his hands in the air."

A great anger upon him, Boyd shouted: "Why you dirty, scheming devil! Andy Webb won't stomach *this!*"

"I'll worry about Webb later," Pritchard replied. "Surrender, Morgan, or the girl stays cooped up with you to take her chances with the bullets."

Then lead made a steady buzzing about them, and Morgan got a tight hold on Coralie's arm, dragging her across the porch and into the hallway. He said fiercely, "He's beaten me now, and he knows it! Pritchard



let you through this last time just to hogtie me!"

"Nothing's changed," Coralie said wearily. "You still don't have to surrender."

In the gloom Boyd had come up against the water barrel, and through the dark thread of his thoughts ran the bright sheen of an inspiration. Tilting the barrel over, he let the water spill out. Then he wheeled the barrel to the shadows of the porch and eased himself into it.

"You can do this for me, Coralie," he said. "You can give the barrel a shove."

"Down the slope?" Horror edged her voice. "They'll kill you before you reach bottom."

"They'll kill me anyway, even if my hands are in the air," he pointed out. "It's the only chance to surprise them."

He felt her weight against the barrel then, and a sudden fear gripped him that they might be able to see her and send a bullet. Then she had the barrel moving, and it went clattering down the porch steps and hit the slope and began rolling wildly, careening downward while Boyd Morgan fought against dizziness and held to a futile hope that the enemy guns might stay mute another moment.

But no, those guns were thundering, for Pritchard and his men, seeing that shapeless juggernaut bounding out of the night, triggered instinctively. But the barrel fetched up hard against a rock and burst open, and out of it lurched Boyd Morgan, stunned and bruised and

dizzy, but keeping a steady hold on his gun.

A man loomed from behind the rock, so close that Morgan could hear his breathing, and Morgan shot as the fellow hoisted his gun. He spun then to see Abe Pritchard scurrying to a better shelter, firing as he went. Spearing a shot at Pritchard, Boyd saw the man go down in a tangle of arms and legs. Surprise had given Morgan this slight edge, but there was the third man somewhere in the shadows and that last man was laying his lead with calculated precision. Snapping a quick shot at the gun flashes, Morgan sensed that he had missed, but the third man folded at the middle and went down in a shapeless heap.

That was because another gun had blazed in the night and another man was looming in the darkness, and his bulk identified him as Sheriff Andy Webb. Letting his gun sag, Morgan said: "So you finally took cards. And on my side. I'm wondering why?"

"Because I got to thinking about all this," Webb answered. "I began to see that if you went down before Pritchard today, I'd probably be making the same fight myself before very long. Alone."

Looking at the sheriff, Boyd Morgan once again saw all the men of this range, and he knew now that men were never so blinded and bewildered but what they might not be sure of themselves when a lesson was properly taught. He said: "I'm leaving you with a clean town, Webb. I'll be back from time to time to pay my taxes on the house and to see

that you keep the town as the Morgans left it."

"You're going?"

Far out across the prairies a train whistle echoed cerily and Morgan said: "On that train. My valise is up at the house. Send it to my Judith spread. And you'll find Coralie Lang up at the house, too. Tell her I'm beholden to her. Will you do that?"

"Sure," Webb said and went lumbering off into the darkness.

Boyd Morgan stood beneath the depot's eaves, watching the mailbag being tossed from the train, watching the crew lower the spout from the water tank. And it was while he stood here, triumphant yet finding no final glory in his triumph, that he felt a touch upon his arm and turned once again to look down upon Coralie Lang.

"Andy Webb told me," she said. "Were you leaving without even saying good-bye, Boyd?"

He found himself with a need to busy his hands, and he shaped up a cigarette. "I figgered it best," he said finally. "You'd want no part of me now, Coralie. You'd always be remembering that I put what seemed like a fool stubbornness ahead of you."

"That's how I felt when I first climbed the slope today," admitted Coralie. "It wasn't until Sheriff Webb came to me tonight that I really began to understand what you were doing and why you were

doing it. Webb had his shoulders squared when he reached the house on the hill, Boyd. He's been a good sheriff in his way, and he'll be a better one from now on. He only needed a Morgan to show him the way."

Still Boyd couldn't fathom the change in her or understand the warmth in her voice, but now she said: "I wanted you alive, Boyd. That was all that counted with me. But if you'd stayed alive by letting Pritchard take over the house, you wouldn't have been the man I've known . . . and loved. With a woman the heart comes first, the logic later. Now do you understand?"

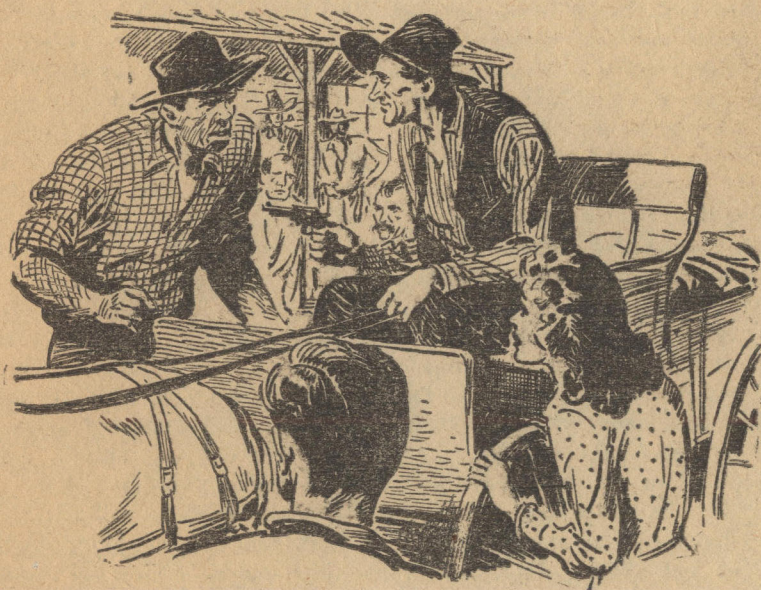
The train was chuffing to a start. Boyd got her by the hand and they went running together, and he hoisted her up the steps of the coach and swung aboard after her. He felt the breeze in his face, and he had his last look at Parnell and high on the hill he saw the sturdy silhouette of the house that Tally Morgan had built, the proud house, the unsullied monument for lesser men to look upon when they needed the strength and the spirit that had been Tally Morgan's.

When he seated himself beside Coralie, Boyd wondered if she'd read his thoughts, for she put her hand on his and she said: "Down in the Judith country we'll build another house, Boyd, a smaller house. But we'll use the same material. It stands well against all the winds."

*While Stede Hunecutt ruled with an iron hand,
Danny Blue could only hope to help the cowed
people of Aspen Flat with music and a*

FIDDLER'S LUCK

by L. P. HOLMES



DANNY BLUE played no favorites. Folks were folks to Danny, whether he found them in a lone sheepherder camp way back in the Gallatin Hills, a big cow outfit in the rich Sundown Basin, or in an isolated, clannish, suspicious little mountain settlement like Aspen Flat. To all of them Danny brought his cheerful smile,

his ready wit, and his music. And in exchange for that music there was always a meal and a bed with a few dollars thrown in when he played for a dance.

Which suited Danny Blue right down to the ground. For his wants were few and he was a firm believer in the vagabond philosophy that a

man could only eat so much at a sitting, wear only so many clothes and sleep in only one bunk at a time. With his battered old buckboard, his team of staid and faithful horses, his blanket roll, his precious instruments carefully cased and packed, Danny ambled happily down the trail of life and at every turn of that trail found some sort of satisfaction to convince him that he was the richest man alive.

Like now, rolling along under the cool mountain timber on his way to Aspen Flat, the air in his nostrils rich with balsam fragrance, the fresh-washed green of dwarf mountain maple a visual delight, while from every moist and shadowy nook the dogwood watched his passing with shy, snowy eyes.

These things Danny noted and appreciated somewhat subconsciously, for his thoughts were reaching ahead to Aspen Flat and Connie Furnow. Four years before had been Danny's first visit to Aspen Flat, and his arrival had been an event to these isolated, music-hungry folk. Their first suspicions broken down, they had hailed him with open arms and had held him there for two full weeks, dancing to his music, singing to it, or just plain listening, with hungry ears and rapt eyes.

There had been one girl, all dark eyes and hair, whose reaction to Danny Blue's homespun music had been deeper than that of any of the others. It went beyond just listening. It was an almost moving worship of Danny's collection of musical instruments. His fiddle, his guitar, his banjo, but mainly the fiddle.

Connie Furnow had hovered about Danny Blue like his shadow, and once Danny had seen her stroke the back of his fiddle with a touch almost reverent. Moved by her interest, Danny had shown her how to hold the instrument, how to draw the bow across the singing strings. And such had been her delight, Danny had not forgotten. For on the next trip in he brought her an old fiddle he'd traded away from a heavy-handed sheepherder. He had taught her how to tune the instrument, how to finger it. And then he had left her to her own devices, confident of the result. For Connie Furnow had the touch.

And that, Danny Blue knew, was what counted. You had to have the touch to make a fiddle sing. Connie Furnow had it. She had the touch and she had the ear. And each time Danny stopped by he marveled more and more at her progress.

The steady shuffling trot of the buckboard team broke as the animals shied slightly at sight of a tall, raw-boned figure which, with rifle across one arm, had appeared from nowhere into the road ahead. Danny set the brake, pulled to a halt.

"Howdy, Jed!" he said cheerfully. "What brings you up here? After a venison, maybe? How are things at the Flat?"

Jed Halliday shrugged. "Things don't change much in these parts. We just go along. One thing you won't like. Stede Hunecutt busted up that fiddle you gave to Connie Furnow."

Danny Blue, startled, said: "And why did he do that?"

"Reckon Stede got jealous of that fiddle. Connie had no time for

Stede's love makin', while she had that fiddle to play. Stede allowed that the woman he's fixin' to marry would have plenty of other things to do around a cabin than just play a fiddle."

Anger, rare to Danny, colored his tone. "That was a dirty trick, Jed. . . . What did you have to say to Stede about it?"

Jed Halliday looked away, flushing darkly under the weathered brown of his lean young face. "You don't say things to Stede Hunecutt when he's in one of his tempers. The reason I been layin' out up here for the past week was so I could warn you the way Stede feels. Heard you were moving through the Gallatins and knew you'd be heading this way before long. Danny, you look out for Stede. He's plenty mean, lately. He whopped Lodie Furnow, pretty bad."

"Why? Because Lodie said something to him about busting up Connie's fiddle?"

Jed nodded, still looking away.

"I'm not afraid of Stede Hunecutt," Danny Blue said softly. "He's just a big, dirty bully, and deep down inside him there's a streak of coward a yard wide. One of these days somebody is going to dig that streak out."

Danny, though he knew that Jed Halliday's vigil of waiting was over with now, did not invite the young mountaineer to ride down to Aspen Flat with him, for this would have advertised to Stede Hunecutt that Jed had carried the story about Connie Furnow's fiddle. Danny just kicked

off the brake and said: "Thanks for telling me, Jed."

The road dropped down and down. Here and there, where it broke around the shoulder of a ridge, Danny could see the Flat spread below, a little world apart, and kept so by a backward clannishness brought across the plains by a wagon train of hill folks, who had first settled here during the days of the great hegira of the gold-rush boom.

There were three main families. The Hallidays, the Furnows and the Hunecutts. On the first trip Danny had made in here, old Manly Halliday had been the patriarch leader of the little community. But the following winter had been too much for the old man and with his passing it now seemed that Stede Hunecutt was bullying and blustering his way to the top. And had shown his mastery by busting up Connie Furnow's fiddle, and whopping Lodie, Connie's brother, for having something to say about it.

Danny Blue's cheerful eyes darkened and grew a trifle squinty and while he drove with one hand, he reached down into a duffle sack behind the buckboard seat and brought forth a snub-nosed gun of ancient vintage which he pushed from sight under the sheepskin seat cushion, but easy to his hand.

Danny reined to a halt in front of the little, log-built store and trading post which Lodie Furnow ran. Farther along, Danny saw a gaunt figure, carrying a rifle, slide from sight into a cabin, and he knew that Jed Halliday, taking a short cut

down the mountain, had arrived at the Flat as quickly as he.

Lodie Furnow came out of the store. Lodie was tall and thin and not too strong-looking. Only a couple of years older than Connie, he was still boyish-looking. But his young face was cut and swollen and bruised and he moved a trifle stiffly—all the results of that whopping he had taken from Stede Hunecutt.

"Howdy, Lodie," chirruped Danny Blue. "Where's my star pupil, that sister of yours?"

Connie Furnow answered that question herself. She came flying out, all big, tear-wet eyes and tossing black hair, and she clung to the buckboard wheel and looked up at Danny with the misery of a hurt child.

"My fiddle, Danny," she wailed. "Stede Hunecutt . . . he busted it. And . . . and he whopped Lodie wicked, when Lodie tried to stop him. He—"

"And why did he bust your fiddle, Connie?" asked Danny.

She flared with spirit. "Because I wouldn't listen to him and his love makin'. Because I hate him and he knows it. Because—"

"Here comes Stede, now," said Lodie Furnow. "Him and Boze Lander. Danny, don't you mind anything Stede says. You're always welcome to stay with Connie and me."

Stede Hunecutt moved with a swagger. He was thick and heavy and his voice was harsh. "Your welcome in these parts is about wore out, Blue. We can get along without you."

"Dannie is always welcome with Connie and me," said Lodie quietly.

Stede Hunecutt swung his round, heavy head as he glared at Lodie. "You can have another lesson if you want it," he threatened.

Lodie met Stede's glare without quailing. Stede could whip Lodie physically, but never daunt Lodie's spirit. Lodie said again: "Danny, you'll be staying with Connie and me."

Watching and listening, measuring currents and cross currents, Danny Blue saw mountain folk gathering from all sides. Men and women, old and young, they drifted in silently, saying nothing, just watching and listening. One of them was Jed Halliday.

"Thankee, Lodie," Danny said clearly. "I'll stay with you."

Stede Hunecutt snarled. "No! You won't be staying here or anywhere else in the Flat. You're heading out."

Danny looked down at Stede. "And what have you got against me, Stede?"

That made Stede flounder somewhat. He finally blurted: "You give our people ideas. You fill their heads full of foolishness."

"Such as . . . music?"

"Maybe. It don't matter. I'm telling you to keep traveling."

"And Lodie and Connie want me to stay," murmured Danny. "So—I stay."

It had come about rather deftly. Stede Hunecutt realized that somehow he'd gotten as far out on a limb as a hard-run coon. He'd made

his talk, had spilled his bluster, and it hadn't worked. Flat people were all around, watching and listening. They'd heard him make his talk. And Danny Blue wasn't cowering, wasn't scaring. Stede wasn't fast enough in the head to figure a graceful way out. He knew only one answer, to smash out, ponderous and brutal.

He moved closer to the buck-board, reached out toward Danny's instrument cases. "You'll git," he said thickly, "or I'll smash this stuff to pieces."

"You'll smash nothing," said Danny curtly. "You'll not lay a hand on anything that's mine." The musician's kindly old face was seamed and grim.

The black rage in Stede Huncutt broke. He cursed, grabbed hold of Danny's fiddle case. Then he froze in that position, for he was looking into the muzzle of Danny's snub-nosed gun.

"Let be, Stede," said Danny. "Let be!"

Stede swallowed thickly. "You'd draw a gun—on me—here in Aspen Flat? Among my own people?"

"Here or anywhere, Stede. And use it, too, if you force my hand. Let go of that fiddle case!"

Stede let go and backed away, licking his lips. He felt cold all over. For he'd been looking into the eye of death, and knew it. He looked around, felt the silent impact of the eyes and judgment of the group. He knew he was being measured, weighed, and the scales were swinging against him. But he couldn't do anything now. Not

against that snub-nosed gun, and the grim-faced, wiry little man behind it.

"This ain't done with, yet!" he growled and swaggered off, with the lank, loose-mouthed Boze Lander at his heels.

A long, quiet sigh ran through the watching and listening mountain folk. Some came over to the buck-board and spoke to Danny with friendliness. At the outer edge of the circle, Danny saw Jed Halliday fill his chest, stretch his long, raw-boned body. And Danny smiled, very faintly, to himself.

Cool, still dusk blanketed Aspen Flat. Connie was getting supper for Danny, Lodie and herself when there was a knock on the door. Jed Halliday came in and laid a package on the table.

"Venison," he said briefly. "Back-strap meat. Figured Danny might like a feed."

Connie Furnow acknowledged the gift with just a nod of her dark head, not looking at Jed. And Jed, uncomfortable, but loath to go, backed up against the wall near the door and hunkered down on his heels.

"Last time I was in you were talking about bringing in some white-faced cattle, Jed, and getting rid of all this mongrel, poor beef stuff you folks been running in the Flat," Danny said. "Any luck?"

Jed shook his head. "Stede Huncutt, he 'lowed the cattle we got are good enough. He's agin' white faces."

Danny Blue was startled at the reaction this brought from Connie.

She whirled and stared at Jed.

"Of course Stede Hunecutt is against white-faced cattle," she flared. "He's against anything that's new and different—and better because he can't understand such things and he's scared of them! So there isn't any change, because Stede Hunecutt doesn't want it, even though most of the rest of us do. If I was only a man I'd show Stede Hunecutt! I'd show him!"

Jed flushed darkly. "Ain't no profit in fightin' among ourselves. My pap used to say, when he was bossin' the Flat, that there wasn't no profit in stirrin' up trouble."

"I don't care what your pap said," stormed Connie. "If I was a man I wouldn't stand for Stede Hunecutt, stupid and poison-mean like he is, to boss the Flat. He ain't fit to boss it. If I was a man I'd challenge him, and I'd whop him and then I'd boss the Flat, and boss it right. Lodie . . . Lodie knows what I mean."

Jed shifted restlessly, got swiftly to his feet and went out.

"You kind of switched Jed pretty heavy, Connie," Lodie said quietly.

Connie tossed her dark head. "I don't switch him 'less he needs it."

Danny Blue didn't mention the busted fiddle during supper. He talked of other things, of late gossip he had heard of this and that along the outside range. But when the meal was over and the dishes washed, Danny saw Connie's dark eyes turn to where he had stacked his instruments in a corner.

"All the way in I been wonderin' how your playin' was comin' along,

Connie," Danny said. "Take my fiddle and show me."

The girl's hands fairly shook with eagerness as she took the instrument from its case, tried the strings softly for tune, tightened the bow to taste, tucked the fiddle under her soft chin and began to play.

Danny got his guitar, strummed it softly, then said: "Turn out the light, Lodie. Music in the dusk is always good music. Connie, play 'Lorena.'"

So Lodie turned the lamp out and Connie played "Lorena," and Danny made his guitar croon and hum in deep, rich under notes while the fiddle sang and sobbed sad and haunting strains. And when they had finished, it was Connie gulping back a sob, she was that happy.

"It's a warm night, Lodie," Danny said. "Open the door and the windows. Connie, see can you recollect that 'Red River Valley' tune I taught you last time around?"

Connie could and she did, and the music drifted out of open window and door and carried through the still, deep dusk. And it brought them, as Danny knew it would. They came stealing in out of the shadows, men and women, old and young, gathering around the door and under the windows. A few of the bolder ones slipped inside, and one of these was Jed Halliday. And all were very still, scarcely breathing as they listened.

Connie played on and on and wherever she led, Danny followed faultlessly with the deep, rich strumming of his guitar. There were

brisk, cheerful tunes, like "Turkey in the Straw" and "Buckskin Billy," which made eager toes begin to tap. There were old folks songs and a spiritual or two which brought tightened throats and a vagrant tear.

And then Danny, who well knew the way it was with a fiddle and its master, said: "Dream a while, Connie. Just dream. I'll be following you."

So Connie dreamed and the fiddle sang those dreams. It was music that had never been written, songs that had never been named. It was the rose gold of sunrise, the flaming scarlet of sunset. It was rain, it was wind, it was sunshine. It was the world of Connie Furnow, as she knew and loved it. And it was the hopes and dreams of a slim young girl woman, lost in the ecstasy of expression.

It was music such as the listening mountain folk had never heard before, but it was music they understood, for this world of Connie Furnow's was their world also, lifting all about them. And they wanted it never to stop.

There was one who could not understand it, though. And because he could not understand, he hated and feared it. Stede Hunecutt, standing well back in the outside dark. It made no sense to Stede Hunecutt, this wild, throbbing music. It was a world beyond him, something which was thrusting him out, shutting a door in his face. He had always felt that way about Connie Furnow's fiddle playing. It was something he could not reach, could

not touch. And so he hated it.

It was the cause of the black rage that had gripped him the day he had smashed Connie's old fiddle, and then whopped Lodie Furnow so savagely when Lodie tried to interfere. And it was the cause of the black rage which gripped him now. He was the dark despoiler, determined to crush a beauty which evaded and taunted him.

He was cursing to himself, Stede Hunecutt was, while his fury grew and grew and finally burst from him in profane flood. He came charging in, heavy and dark.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "Stop that damned racket. Folks should be sleepin', not listenin' to that. Stop it!"

That savage roar from Stede Hunecutt broke the spell. The singing of the fiddle fell away, died. Listening folks, jarred rudely back to earth, set up a murmur of complaint. And in the cabin Danny Blue said softly: "Well, Jed?"

And Jed, drawing a big breath, answered: "I see it now, Danny."

Jed moved outside, into the deepening dark. He was tall and straight and his head was high. And his voice rang as he called: "You—Stede! I'm coming for you. You're not big enough to boss this Flat. You ain't big enough to boss anything. I'm coming for you, Stede!"

They met out there in the wide open and Stede Hunecutt, intent on the one thing he did understand—brute force—came charging in and pounded Jed Halliday down with a swinging, savage blow. Then he

leaped at the prone figure, kicking out with heavy boots.

Jed, though dazed, instinctively rolled toward, instead of away from those charging boots, and so muffled the first impact of them and tripped Stede, bringing him down heavily. Then Jed threw himself across Stede and beat at Stede's round head until that head seemed to bounce between clubbed fists and the unyielding ground.

Stede fought back wildly, lurching and rolling and finally broke free, stumbling to his feet, tasting the salt of his own blood on battered lips. And Jed was up to face him, the all of him tight with raw-boned, surging power. And there was power in his voice, too, a strange, exultant power as he panted: "Danny Blue, he allowed there was a wide streak of coward in you, Stede—should someone dig it out. I aim to dig it out, now!"

They crashed together, chest to chest and the big test was on.

Back in the cabin, Connie Furnow was whimpering softly: "Jed . . . Jed . . . he'll be hurt!"

"Yes, Jed will be hurt," Danny Blue said quietly. "But not too much. Jed has never known himself, until now. He's going to be amazed at what he finds."

"That Boze Lander—he's Stede's side-kick," Lodie said. "He's an outsider, Boze is, and he'll side Stede, should he get the chance. And that won't be fair to Jed. We better get out there, Danny."

"We're going out there," said Danny.

They might have been two moun-

tain wolves, fighting in the dark. Boze Lander was watching close, sidling in, waiting a chance. Lodie Furnow said warningly: "You git back, Boze—well back. This is a pick handle I got here."

Lander moved back.

The two fighters were just one dark tangle and the odor of the fight, of sweat and blood lifted from them. Now and then, for a short moment, they would part, then rush together again, ripping and tearing and pounding. They were lost to the world, now—lost to everything except the lust to crush and destroy. There were blows struck which brought panting groans. There were muffled thuds of fists driving home to taut bodies. There were sharp, spating blows as knotted fists crashed against bleeding faces. There was the rasp and choke of hard-won breath. Beyond that they made no sound.

No sound until Jed Halliday's voice, thick and hoarse, but triumphant: "You're going, Stede—you're going. I'm diggin' closer to that streak—closer!"

Danny Blue drew a deep, quiet breath. Yes, Jed was being hurt, but he was finding himself, too, which was what really counted.

The fight was shifting, slowly but surely—and in one direction. It was Jed Halliday who was moving ahead, Stede Hunecutt who was giving back. Jed was digging close to that streak.

Then, suddenly, he was in it. He knocked Stede down, and when Stede came up, Jed knocked him down again, and Stede was very slow com-

ing back, this time. He was down long enough for Jed to have put the boots to him, which would have been his right, as the rules of that game were being played. But he did not. He waited for Stede to get up.

Danny Blue, watching that, nodded. "The Flat will be in good hands now," he murmured.

Stede Hunecutt made his last, desperate bid. He managed to close with Jed and got a leg lock on him and tried to wrestle him down. Here was the test of pure strength, and there was more of it in Jed's rosy, rawboned body than there was in Stede's thick brutishness.

Stede seemed to quit, right then and there, tried to get away and Jed caught him with a looping, smashing punch. Stede went down again, and stayed there, thoroughly beaten.

It was over. And Aspen Flat had a new boss.

A group of the older men helped Stede Hunecutt to his feet and Danny Blue heard one of them say: "Jed, he whopped you fair, Stede. He's

boss now. Should you see it so, you can stay, Stede. If you can't see it so, then you'll have to move on."

Danny Blue was whistling happily as he went back into the Furnow cabin. And he kept on whistling at what he saw. The lamp was going again and Connie Furnow had Jed Halliday sitting quiet, while she washed the blood from his face with little, tender pats of her slim, swift hands. And though Connie was whimpering and sniffing, Jed was grinning.

"It was there, like you said, Danny," Jed declared. "That streak. And I dug it out."

Danny nodded. "You dug it out, Jed."

"You'll be bringing Connie in a new fiddle, Danny," Jed said. "I got the money saved up."

"I'll bring it in," promised Danny.

An older man stuck his head in the door. He asked: "We'll be fixin' to raise white-face cows, Jed?"

"We'll be fixin' to raise white faces," said Jed.

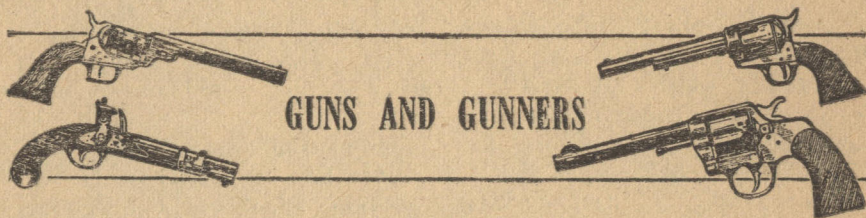
THE END



THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

If you give a hang about rounding up those sidewinder Japs and Nazis, you'll help tighten the noose by putting every dollar you can into

WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!



GUNS AND GUNNERS

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

WAR scatters most of the boys. When you have an opportunity to visit old friends again, you appreciate it. And as usual, when gun bugs get together, war or no war, they talk guns.

Not so long ago, I visited my old friend, Henry Davis, promotion chief at the big Remington plant in Bridgeport. On his desk I noticed a collection of stuff acquired through taking apart just an ordinary shotgun shell.

"I wonder if many of the boys really realize just what goes into that simple little thing called a shot shell," Henry remarked as I commented on his dissection. "All through the war the boys keep asking us why we can't supply all of those things needed for hunting. You know the story. Tell them."

It started me thinking. There is a great deal more to a shot shell than a handful of paper, lead, and brass. Many chemicals are used—chemicals important to the war effort. To name just a few—chromic acid, sulphuric acid, nitric acid, ammonia, glycerine, grain alcohol, ethyl alcohol, lead styphnate, mercury fulminate, barium nitrate, calcium silicide, bleached shellac, sodium hy-

droxide, acetone, ether, graphite, nitroglycerine, cellulose, nitrocellulose, paraffin, tapioca starch, phenolphthalein, diorthoxenylmonophenylphosphate—and many others.

Metals, too, are widely used. There is steel, brass, copper, lead, antimony, sodium, barium, sulphur, potassium—well, that starts you thinking.

And then comes paper—not just any paper, but a special type of strong, tough material which will roll into a stiff tube and stand the enormous pressure of the powder charge in the chamber of your gun without splitting or tearing. It must be rolled tightly, colored, glued into a solid tube, and waxed to make it water resistant. Down inside the head is a big rolled wad of another type of special paper, water or moisture resistant, tough, and rigid. This strengthens the head of the case.

Brass was formed into the outside of the head, prior to the war. Within, in many cartridges, was a special steel liner to strengthen it further. Wartime loads have a steel head, created when there was a shortage of brass.

Then come those things we call

wads. Made of waxed cow-hair felt, these are very important. A shot shell will not work properly without those wads. They cushion the charge as it is being blown through the barrel. They prevent leakage of the gas past the column of shot passing through the barrel.

And the shot, itself, is not simple. Year after year, letters reach me asking this question: "What is the difference between soft shot and chilled shot?" Not a great deal, to be honest about it, although they are made by different methods. And soft shot is pure lead, while chilled shot has a small amount of antimony in it to harden it. Soft shot is becoming obsolete—chilled shot causes no wear on a barrel and gives better performance.

An entire book could be written on the subject of the work which goes into the making of a shot shell and the components of it. Only a hasty sketch can be given here. But we must not forget the powder.

All shotgun shells have, for many years, been loaded with smokeless powder. Powder begins life as cellulose or vegetable fiber. Mostly pure cotton has been used, but it was found that certain types of wood could be used. This is a wartime process, recently developed.

Whichever is used, it must be pure and free from dirt, oils and other

contamination. It is then treated with a mixture of nitric and sulphuric acids to become nitrocellulose, a deadly explosive. This explosive is further treated to become powder, through the addition of ether, alcohol, sometimes nitroglycerine, and many other chemicals and minerals. Finally, after a lengthy process, you get powder.

Then there is the primer, a copper or brass cup containing a complicated explosive so that when the mixture is jammed by the blow of the hammer or firing pin, it explodes and ignites the powder.

You have the case, the powder primer, wads and shot. Then big machines put them together, measuring out just the right amount of powder and shot, inserting them in the case, ramming the wads in with just the right pressure, and forming the crimp on the case. After they are loaded, many are fired as samples, to test velocity, pressure and performance.

Even before the war, America made the best shot shells in the world—and at the lowest price. The next time you fire one of them, think of all the work and materials that go into one of these, and don't blame the ammunition makers because they are "hard to get." Uncle Sam comes first—your turn will come again one of these days.

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. He will continue to answer all letters from readers. Address your inquiries to Captain Phillip B. 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.



MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

NEVADA with its more than a hundred thousand square miles of thinly populated territory, much of it semi-arid, has long held a strong lure for the desert prospector. And, no doubt about it, the gold is there. Millions of dollars' worth have already been mined from the State's widely scattered placer camps.

Nevada-minded W.B., an Easterner from the Bronx, New York, has his head set on tackling a particular section out there. "I have spent a lot of time in the Southwest," he writes, "and have done considerable prospecting. My next trip I am thinking of gold prospecting in the Sawtooth district in northern Pershing County, Nevada. Anything you can tell me about that area will be appreciated."

To start with, W.B., as far as gold-mining in the West goes, the Sawtooth district is a fairly recent discovery. It wasn't until 1931 that placer gold was first found there in the local desert sands. Quite a few claims were staked at the time and it is said that some of the luckier early arrivals took out as much as thirty-five dollars a day using simple equipment and homemade dry washers.

Later one prospector working his claim alone reported that an average of twelve wheelbarrow loads of gravel netted him \$7. This chap employed a hand rocker for washing the gold out of the gravel and hauled his needed water from Mandalay Springs, three miles away.

Still later an attempt was made to dry-wash big blocks of the gold-bearing gravel on a large scale, but we understand this venture didn't pan out and was not financially successful. Last we actually heard of the Sawtooth district—that was before Pearl Harbor—only a handful of prospectors were out there dry-washing for gold.

It's possible some more of that thirty-five-dollar-a-day stuff still remains to be discovered in that general district. Placer gold has already been found there over a fairly level area of some six square miles. One of the unusual features of the deposits is that the best values reported have been found at shallow depths. Much of the richer gold lay concentrated on a false clay bedrock only eight inches to two feet below the ground surface.

Puncturing this false bedrock and

sinking a shaft clear down to the true bedrock below might provide interesting results should a real bedrock pay streak be located. At least the idea certainly affords thought for speculation.

The gold gravels so far worked in the district have been rough and angular with a pleasantly small percentage of boulders but with a considerable amount of sticky clay present in some places. This clayey material needs to be thorough sun-dried and pulverized before a decent job of saving the gold can be done with dry washers.

And here's a tip: Some fragments of barren white quartz are usually found on the surface of the gravel that contains gold. Prospectors out there use the quartz as an indicator of where to test the gravel and look for gold. The gold particles in the Sawtooth district are fairly coarse, a factor that aids materially in making them saveable by small-scale mining methods or by dry washing.

Any way you take it, getting out to Sawtooth district is a dirt-road travel proposition. The section is up near the Humboldt county line about fifty miles north of Lovelock, the nearest sizable town and the distributing center for a large area where both stock-raising and mining is carried on. Sulphur, Nevada, a station on the Western Pacific Rail-

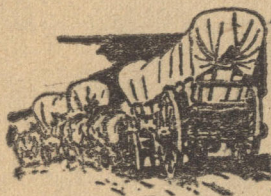
road is about twenty-five miles west of the district.

Besides the Sawtooth district there are other gold-placer localities in the same general area—notably Rosebud Canyon and the Rabbit Hole district north and west of Rabbit Hole Spring. Rosebud Canyon, twelve miles south of Sulphur, and the ravines tributary to it, were worked as far back as the 1880's and considerable gold was recovered. Old shafts sunk to bedrock in the Canyon gravels are all the way from forty to ninety feet deep.

The Rabbit Hole district adjoins the older Rosebud Canyon district and at one time one of the richer gold recoveries at Rabbit Hole was made by panning the gravel with water obtained from a well in Rosebud Canyon. About ten years ago the Rabbit Hole placer ground covering an area of roughly five square miles was classed as one of the important placer districts in Nevada and as many as 150 gold prospectors worked the area with dry washers and rockers. Most of these men reported averaging wages or better from their claims.

There are several similarities about the gold occurrence in both the Sawtooth and Rabbit Hole districts. In both cases the gold recovered is generally coarse and nuggety, and the best pay gravel so far discovered appears to lie on a false clay bedrock.

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.



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

It takes two to go saddle fishing—the fisherman and the horse. And both had better know what they are doing because trout fishing from the hurricane deck of a saddle pony is a tricky sport.

Some cowboy probably invented this thrilling twist to the intriguing art of tempting a wary trout with a well-cast fly. Horseback fishing, as practised in the cold, clear mountain streams of the West, is something any Compleat Angler ought to try once. Having tried it, the chances are he'll find wading a purling brook tame by comparison.

The tyro at saddle fishing is likely to object on the ground that a horse splashing through a trout stream will scare the daylights out of the proverbially shy fish. Old hands at the game pooh-pooh this tenderfoot notion. In fact, they claim the fish are less wary of a horse plopping through a creek than of a man slipping along the banks beside it.

S.B., writing from Lakewood, Ohio, says he is a trout-fishing enthusiast but one thing he has never tried is dropping his favorite Gray Hackle over a trout pool from the saddle of a horse. "Is fishing really ever done that way out West?"

he asks. "If so, how about some dope on it? I think a lot of readers besides myself would be interested."

It's done all right, S.B. You know how it is with cowboys. They hate to walk. They'll try most anything from horseback, and trout fishing is one of them. A fellow on horseback can follow the back trails, getting up to the little-fished headwaters of the mountain streams that are hard to reach by any other means.

Having used his horse to put him where the fish are biting, the cowboy naturally sees no reason for not fishing from his kak. And he doesn't even need a creel along. His saddlebags will hold the catch. The rod? He can carry that broken down in the rifle scabbard at the side of his horse and put it together when he is ready to fish.

As for bait, the dyed-in-the-wool Westerner on a saddle-fishing trip may take a few flies along in case the "rainbows" are feeling fussy. The chances are he'll simply catch himself a handful of grasshoppers when he reaches his destination and use them for bait.

There is one hazard to horseback fishing—the big ones. Small trout

are best caught from a saddle and they are good eating at campfire supper time, too.

But should a whopper rise to your bait, say the granddaddy guardian of a choice hiding place that will need a net in order to bring him ashore, you are in for a busy time, a lot of trouble and probably a lost fish if you try to land him from horseback. In such an emergency, if there are several in the party, better have someone alight and do the netting.

Brook trout are cold-water fish. They prefer clear, cool streams in mountain country and like to hang around where the natural current will carry the food to them. Books have been written and endless arguments held on how to catch a trout—and what with. No one knows all the answers.

There are some pertinent facts, however, about trout that are well worth remembering. Trout are plenty smart. They are sly, cunning and wary. And they are lightning-fast. Ever notice that small or average-size trout do most of the darting around in open water? That's often because some older, larger fish has pre-empted himself an excellent nearby, protected feeding spot and is keeping the little fellows out. Trout will do that.

Watch those open-water trout, and you may discover one reason why

you are not catching as many of them as you ought to. Watch them as they move around, following this and that downstream, not quite sure what it is. Notice how fast they grab first at an insect, then at a tiny piece of stick, ejecting the latter as soon as it enters the mouth. These younger fish are still trying out things, discovering what is good to eat and what is not. They make split-second decisions, spitting out quickly anything unwanted. And they will use the same speed spitting out an artificial fly unless you hook them the instant they sample the bait.

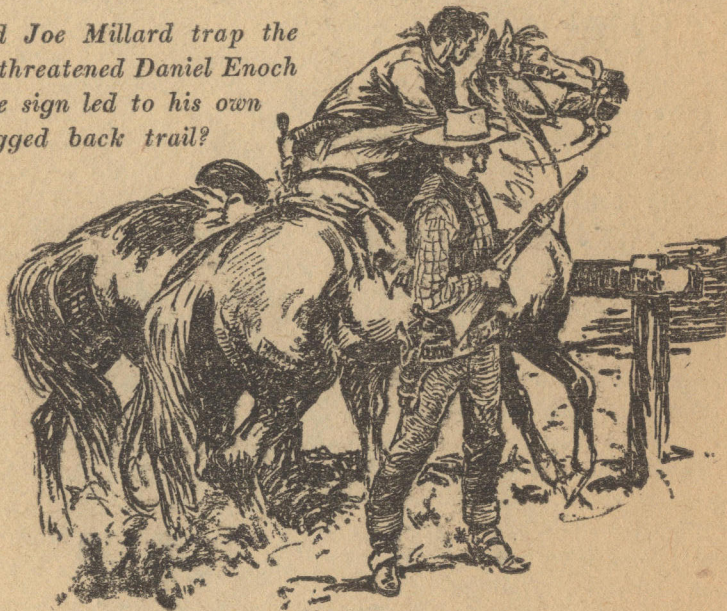
The necessity for lightning-fast hook setting does not apply in the same degree to a bigger, older trout. The full-grown fish feels more sure of himself. He wastes little time testing strange items. When he makes a lunge at something he feels he knows what he's getting, and takes a solid snap. Even when that something happens to be a tempting fly on the end of a rod, once he has made up his mind, he goes after it whole hog. This gives the fisherman just a trifle more time in which to come across with the peppery snap, or the quick roll of the wrist that will lodge the hook firmly in his quarry. Once you have got him on the line the rest is between you and the fish.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

DEATH REACHES OUT

by C. K. SHAW

How could Joe Millard trap the killer who threatened Daniel Enoch—when the sign led to his own trouble-fogged back trail?



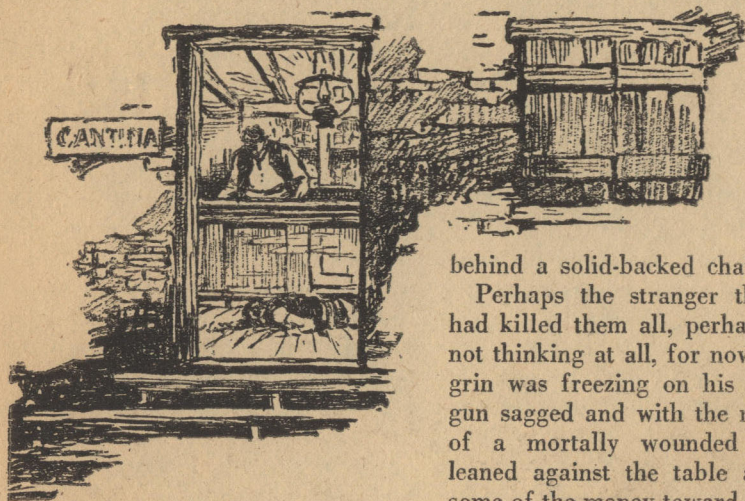
I

JOE MILLARD witnessed the infernal plot from its inception to its sanguinary end. The ashen-eyed stranger flashed a roll of bills to pay for his single drink, and Joe saw two jackallike men size up the money with covetous eyes. The stranger tossed off his drink and turned away from the bar with the smoothness of drifting sand. His muscles rippled, smoothed, rippled again, and Joe knew he was not going to be easy pickings.

Wariness appeared in the eyes of the two jackals. They consulted together hastily, then one of them left the saloon. He returned shortly with a companion so like himself and his partner all three might have been molded from the same lump of clay.

The three fell into a card game, playing for high stakes. When the stranger sauntered over to their table, he was invited to sit into the game and he accepted with a one-sided grin.

Joe Millard told himself it was



not his funeral. A man coming back to the world after eight years in prison could not afford to meddle in such a double-barreled dose of trouble as this deal promised to be.

The trio waxed bold under the stranger's affability. The play to strip their victim came rapidly, and was not even cloaked with decent smoothness. Suddenly the stranger leaped upward from his chair with an angry cry at the man on his right. A livid whiteness stabbed at him from the hand of the neighbor to his left. The bark of that first gun was like the bugling of a horn from hell. The killer pack answered with a triple attack.

The stranger fought coolly, a crooked grin clinging to his lips as his gun bucked. One of his enemies went down, then a second pitched to the side, his weapon belching into the floor. The third man had thrown himself backward and now crouched

behind a solid-backed chair.

Perhaps the stranger thought he had killed them all, perhaps he was not thinking at all, for now that half grin was freezing on his lips. His gun sagged and with the movements of a mortally wounded man, he leaned against the table and raked some of the money toward him. The third jackal lifted from his shelter and aimed at his victim's back.

Joe Millard told himself again that this was not his funeral, but an inner compulsion made him plant a bullet in the third man's shoulder. The bartender cursed Joe and leaped for his shotgun. Joe sped a bullet past his ear that made him change his mind.

The stranger lurched for the door, at Joe's order, the money of the card table bulging his pocket. Together they landed in the street, and Joe covered the door with a rifle as the stranger hauled to the saddle of the horse he had left standing at the front rail. Joe's horse was there too, for he was as much a stranger here as the other man. He mounted, and, riding sideways in the saddle that he might watch the star-lit sweep of road behind him, pulled away from the saloon.

There was no pursuit. The bartender was the only uninjured man

left in that building, and he was evidently wiping the night's adventure off as a total loss to the establishment. The little town was only a wide spot in the trail, and if there was any other life besides that which had shown in the saloon there was no evidence of it.

An hour later Joe eased his companion from the saddle to dress his wounds. It was difficult work in the dark, but cold water and whiskey gave the man strength to ride on until midnight. Then Joe gave him more whiskey, and he slept a little, muttering of some mission he must fulfil. But the morning light showed his eyes glazing with approaching death. He looked up at Joe, unafraid of what he knew lay ahead of him.

"How come you risked your neck in that fracas last night?" he asked.

"I guess I recalled a time when I was trying to escape a gun trap myself," Joe replied.

"What's your business?" the dying man asked. "Where are you going? Talk, pard. I might have a way to repay you for what you did for me."

"I'm going to Poverty Ridge in the Sangre De Cristo Mountains of New Mexico," Joe told him. "No business, especially."

The man thought this over. "Known much thereabouts?" he asked.

Joe shook his head. "I went there when I was just turned sixteen, left six months later." His voice tightened. "I went to prison for a ten-year stretch. I'm out in eight for good behavior."

"You started young in the business of . . . of . . ."

"Of bank robbing," Joe said somberly. "It was my first job. The law popped up and hell busted loose. I was taken along with five others. I was young and only one man on the jury was bitter against me. He hung out and got me ten years."

The stranger half lifted up. "And now you're going back to kill him!"

Joe shook his head. "That man visited me in jail and said he wanted me doctored the same as he'd doctor a sick animal. It took me a long time to understand his meaning. Now I'm going back to Poverty Ridge to thank Daniel Enoch."

"Daniel Enoch," the dying man whispered. "Pard, fate has drawn a card in this little game of yours and mine. Any man riding this trail would probably be headed for that strip of cattle country in New Mexico, but seldom would two men be riding to see the same person. I was headed for Enoch's Bar JO, only my business was with his daughter Mary. Read this letter in my pocket; it'll save me a lot of talk."

The letter was one of recommendation for the bearer, Frank Ellis, to Mary Enoch, and it was signed Tom Beldon. It ended on a note of caution to the girl regarding her secret need for a gunman.

"Tom Beldon and Daniel Enoch are old friends," the wounded man whispered. "The girl wrote that her father must not know she was hiring a gunman to protect his life, and that she was wanting Beldon to send a man she could trust—send him secretly." Frank Ellis bit at his blood-

less lips. "I've let Tom Beldon down," he groaned.

Joe met the haunted eyes. "Where shall I send this money in your pocket?" he asked. "And I'll sell your horse and saddle and add that."

"The money and horse and outfit are yours; you've earned them. But I'm going to leave you something else besides just money—I'm willing you that letter you're holding, and the name of Frank Ellis, and that gunman's job for Mary Enoch!" Ellis' eyes were asking desperately that Joe understand. "You said you were going back to thank Daniel Enoch. This way would be more than thanks."

Joe fingered the letter, slowly fitted it into his inner vest pocket. "I'll carry this letter to the girl, and I'll tell her how I came by it. I'll tell Daniel Enoch who I am. Then I'll see about this job."

Frank Ellis smiled a little crooked grin. "It pays well," he whispered, "and money is always handy. So long . . . pard."

He closed his eyes and died quietly. Joe buried him and piled rocks on the grave, feeling a strange heaviness at the parting from a pard of only a few hours.

II

A week later, Joe Millard rode up to the stable at Daniel Enoch's Bar JO Ranch.

"Stranger, ain't you?" came a sharp query. An old puncher built like a gnarled oak, had come to the doorway. His big-jointed right hand was at the butt of his gun. "What's your business?"

"I want to see Mary Enoch. She's expecting me," Joe replied.

It was twilight, but Joe could see suspicion come to the old man's bleak eyes.

"She told me to watch for you. Come along."

The old man called to the corral for a puncher to come and stable. Joe's horse, then he started up the path to the house. From the front porch they entered a hall, and the old man jerked his head toward a door at the right.

"She's in there," he said brusquely, and stomped away.

Joe tapped on the door and a woman's voice asked who was there. He walked into the room without answering, for he had determined not to give his real name until he met Daniel Enoch. There was intrigue on the Bar JO, the squinting eyes of the old puncher had been the first evidence of it. Now there was this white-faced girl rising as though fascinated, from behind a large desk. Where there was intrigue, a man just released from prison must move with caution.

The girl's eyes were brown, her cheeks softly curved, her chin firmly squared.

"Who are you?" she asked.

Joe handed her the letter Frank Ellis had given him. Hastily she read it.

"I only hope you haven't come too late," she whispered. "I wanted you to guard my father against a man who has threatened his life. A man father sent to jail eight years ago. Joe Millard. But today Millard struck and—"

Joe Millard! The office spun. *Joe Millard!*

As the girl talked on, telling how her father had been ambushed, the hall door was jerked open and a slender blond man entered, icy blue eyes set in a wedge-shaped face.

"Mary, you didn't keep your promise to send for me!" he cried.

"Mr. Ellis," Mary said to Joe, "this is my brother, Todd Enoch."

Joe had recovered some from his shock, enough to note the unlikeness of this brother and sister. Young Enoch faced Joe hostilely.

"Conditions have changed since my sister sent for you. We don't need you now. Catching father's murderer is my job!"

"Todd!" the girl breathed. "Father's not dead yet! We must guard him carefully."

Todd Enoch swung on her. "Can a hired gunman watch father as closely as I? Mary, this man's presence is an insult to me! I'm dismissing him here and now!"

The girl's face washed of its last drop of color. "You were guarding him today, Todd, and yet . . . yet . . . it happened!"

"So you blame me for that, too!" the young man said hoarsely.

"Oh, Todd, I'm only trying to guard father. The job is too big for one man," the girl pleaded. "Please see it my way."

A rap sounded on the door and the doctor was admitted. He held up a bullet for Mary and Todd to see. "It didn't go as close to the heart as I thought at first. Daniel will live."

The doctor went back to his pa-

tient, and Todd strode about, speaking half sentences in a thin voice. Joe Millard strained to catch every word. The picture was building up before his burning eyes. A murderer, masquerading under the name of Joe Millard, had sent a threatening note. Joe recalled the court scene eight years old now, when he had cursed Daniel Enoch. Some evil mind was recalling the curses of that hot-headed kid, twisting them to his advantage.

Mary wiped the tears of relief from her eyes and spoke to Joe. "Father will live! I want you to guard him every minute! Your wages will be the one hundred a month I promised, and five hundred when you bring in Joe Millard."

Todd Enoch faced his sister. "If Ellis stays, it will be on one condition. No money, not a thin dime, unless he brings us this killer." His lips curled. "And he'll be wasting his time to stay, for I'm getting to Joe Millard first!"

The girl bore up under the pelting words with straight shoulders. "I hired this man," she said. "I promised him wages. I intend to keep my word."

"Promises! Your word!" Todd Enoch scoffed. "Mary, this man is a professional gunman. A hired killer! Promises mean nothing to a man of his caliber."

Joe stepped close to young Enoch. "I'm not a professional murderer. In the future remember that." He pointed to the letter of recommendation on the desk. "The man who wrote that letter said there was nothing dishonorable in this . . . deal."

"And there isn't!" the girl cried. "Frank Ellis, you're working for me, and I want you to stay until Joe Millard is caught."

"Has anyone seen Millard?" Joe asked.

No one had.

"Then why are you so certain it was Millard who shot your father?" Joe asked the girl. "Hasn't Daniel Enoch other enemies?"

"Millard signed the threatening note my father received," Mary said. She looked at her brother. "No," she whispered, "father has no other enemies."

Later in the evening as Joe Millard was walking up the path from the barn to the house, he was stopped by the old puncher who had questioned him as he arrived at the Bar JO. Joe knew his name now, Cass Wilson. The oldster had been with Daniel Enoch since the founding of the Bar JO.

Wilson fired a question at Joe without the courtesy of a greeting.

"Ellis, what's your business on this ranch? I got a right to ask, for as long as Dan'el lives, I'm lookin' after his interests."

"Doesn't his son do that?" Joe asked.

"Dan'el has his reports from me," snapped Wilson. "I ain't told him about you yet, and when I do, I want to know what your business is so's he won't worry."

"How about letting *me* tell Daniel Enoch my business?" Joe said.

The old man's eyes pinched to glittering lines. "Dan'el is too sick to talk with strangers. Here comes

Todd . . . it'd be better if you didn't mention to him what I just asked you. But understand that I aim to know your business, and soon."

He branched off to the bunkhouse and Joe went up the path to meet Todd. There was plenty of power in Cass Wilson yet—and poison.

"What did Wilson want with you?" Todd asked when they met.

"Asked how I wanted my horse cared for," Joe lied.

The answer seemed to satisfy Enoch. "He may try to pry some information out of you later, but don't talk," he said crisply. "Cass Wilson has lived hard—life doesn't mean any more to him than a gust of wind. He's killed three men."

Joe wasn't surprised at what Todd told him but he said nothing. They walked on up the path to the house and entered by the front door. Joe noted how the hall cut straight through the center of the building to the kitchen at the back. On the right side of the hall was the office door, and the door leading to the long dining-room; on the left side were the bedrooms. There were three of them, and Daniel Enoch lay in the middle room. Joe had learned that Todd's room was the one nearest the kitchen, and Mary's was to the front.

Mary Enoch joined Joe and her brother in the office, bringing a pot of coffee with her. They settled down to try to plan together for Daniel Enoch's safety, but nothing suggested by Joe or Mary satisfied Todd. Stubbornly Mary clung to her determination to keep the man

she called Frank Ellis, close to the house. Todd contended that he should be sent out into the hills to try to pick up some word of Joe Millard's whereabouts.

When the back door slammed, and there followed the dragging of spurs down the hall, Todd rose stiffly to his feet. "Cass mustn't see father this late!" he said.

"Father sent for him to come as soon as he'd had supper," Mary said.

After that, Todd took little interest in the conversation. He seemed to be listening for the dragging of those spurs again. The sound came very shortly, and this time toward the office. The door was pushed open and Cass Wilson entered, hat low over his pinched eyes.

"I'm sleepin' in your room to-night, Todd," he said. "Dan'el wants me there 'cause it's got the door leadin' into his."

Todd went white with fury. His finger shook as he stabbed it at Wilson. "You've been poisoning father against me again!" he charged. "Could I help it if Joe Millard got in that ambush shot?"

"Dan'el ain't blamin' you for that," Cass Wilson said dryly. "Him and me has made our beds down side by side for twenty years on the cow trails. Now that he's helpless, he wants me by him. Come get your stuff."

The old man turned and clumped away, and Todd followed him. Mary Enoch sat stiffly in her chair, fear widening her brown eyes. Joe stepped close to her.

"I'm here to help you," he said,

"but I'll have to know more. Tell me, why does Daniel Enoch choose Cass Wilson above his own son?"

The girl was trembling. "You're going beyond your job," she said coldly. "Never mind my brother, or me, or Cass Wilson—think only of Millard!"

"Why did Daniel Enoch do this?" Joe insisted.

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"Miss Enoch, why does Todd hate me so? And why did he object to your hiring protection for your father?"

She clenched her hands. "He wanted to catch Millard himself," she whispered. "Having you here hurts his pride."

"But you didn't trust him to get Joe Millard," Joe pressed her. "And now your father doesn't trust him. What does this add up to?"

She rose and faced him. "I do trust Todd, but he isn't a gunman! That's why father wants Cass with him."

Joe held her glance to his. "Your brother wears a gun; that means he knows how to handle it. Cass Wilson is old, his sight is dimmed, his muscles are cramped. You're not being honest, Miss Enoch. You want me to save your father, but you won't give me the help I need."

She still met his glance. "I wish I could tell you how things stood on the Bar JO," she whispered. "But I don't know and I won't repeat to you my guesses."

"Will you arrange a meeting between me and your father?"

She drew back. "No! He wouldn't

approve of a gunman being hired on the Bar JO. And you mustn't tell Cass, either."

The step of Todd Enoch struck in the hall, and Mary dropped back to her chair.

"Father is set on having Cass sleep in my room," Todd said angrily. "Mary, did Cass visit father today?"

"Yes, when you were with that man from Cherry Creek."

"I expected you'd remind me of that," Todd snapped. "That fellow came with word about our north line camp. I went to check up. I thought I could trust you to keep Cass out of father's room!"

Joe Millard knew Cherry Creek as a section where families lived in huts, and boys learned to carry rifles at six years of age. He wondered why the mention of the section brought on a clash between Mary and Todd.

"Father insisted on seeing Cass," Mary said wearily. Then she spoke to Joe. "I want you to stay in the woodshed tonight and keep a sharp watch. I left blankets for you."

Todd stopped his pacing abruptly. "I'm sleeping in this room tonight, on this sofa. You go along to bed," he told his sister. "I'll take Ellis out the back way to the shed."

Mary slipped quietly across the hall to her room, and Todd spoke briefly to Joe Millard. "This is no job for a woman to be mixed into. If you make any discoveries, report them to me—not Mary."

III

When the house had quieted for the night, Joe left the shed at the

rear of the kitchen, and circled to the willows by the creek. He fingered the buttons on his vest as he settled down with his back to a tree. A letter was in his inner pocket addressed to Joe Millard. To keep such a badge of identification was unsafe, but he was thinking of a moment when he might have to confront a false Joe Millard. Then that letter would be valuable.

An hour passed. The moon went down, leaving the big Bar JO house in a gentle star-lit darkness. The utter quietness made the woman's scream coming from the house travel like a streak of lightning. Before the sound died, Joe was at the house, pounding on the front door. Mary Enoch let him in.

"He's here!" the girl cried. "In the house!"

Joe felt the pistol in her hand as he pushed her aside to leap into the hall. A light flashed in Daniel Enoch's room, and old Cass cursed.

"Dan'el's all right!" he cried.

Cass and Todd came from the bedroom to the hall.

"Search!" Mary begged them. "Don't let him escape!"

After a prolonged search of the house the men returned to the hall empty-handed.

"There's nobody in the house, and nobody escaped," Cass growled.

"You've likely thrown father into a chill with your crazy screams, Mary," Todd snapped at the girl.

She faced him fiercely. "But the killer was in this hall! As close as you are to me! I could hear him breathe . . . I could feel him!"

"Quiet down, Mary," Cass cau-

tioned, jerking his head toward the sick room. "Me and Todd was here the second after you screamed. You was dreamin'."

"I wasn't dreaming," the girl insisted.

"Your nerves are snapping," said Todd. "If the killer had been in this hall, we'd have gotten him."

A voice came from the bedroom where Daniel Enoch lay. "Come here, all of you."

"Don't excite father any more than you already have," Todd warned his sister, and he nudged Joe to stay in the hall.

The girl went to her father's room, and Joe moved until he could see her as she bent over the bed. "I had a bad dream," she said soothingly. "I'm sorry. Try not to be upset."

"What strange voice did I hear in the hall?" Daniel Enoch asked.

"An overnight guest, father."

"Call him here."

"Don't excite him," Todd whispered as he brushed close to Joe.

Joe Millard wondered if Daniel Enoch would recognize him. If he should, being dragged in this way would make a poor beginning. The man on the bed was gaunt with wide-set feverish eyes, broad cheeks and a blocky chin, but he seemed surprisingly strong. He frowned when he heard Joe's voice.

"Frank Ellis, eh?" he said. "Mr. Ellis, do you usually sleep with your clothes on, including your gun?"

"I just didn't feel like undressing," Joe replied quietly.

"Why didn't you tell me this man was here, Cass?" Enoch asked.

"Didn't figure it was important enough to mention," answered Wilson.

Daniel Enoch turned his hollow eyes toward his daughter. "So you heard somebody in my room?"

"I was dreaming, father . . ."

"Mary, don't play at this game of sparing my nerves! What did you hear?"

"A step!" the girl breathed. "I ran for this room. He came into the hall, *I felt him!* Then I screamed."

"What do you make of this, Todd?" the old man asked.

"Father, there was nobody here. Mary was dreaming. She's breaking under this strain."

"Go back to bed, all of you," Daniel Enoch said wearily. "Try to sleep, Mary."

Cass Wilson went with Mary, Todd and Joe from the sick room to the office. The old puncher spoke severely to the girl.

"You can't break this way, Mary. Dan'el needs you."

"I'm not breaking!" the girl whispered. "The killer was in this house!"

"Nobody could have left this house without me and Todd hearin' him," Cass Wilson said shortly.

"Then he's still here!" the girl cried. "*Waiting to kill father!*"

Todd's breath came in a gust. "Mary, go on to bed and try to sleep. I'll sit up 'til morning."

"I'm not breaking," Mary protested, her voice thin with fear. "Don't keep saying that!" She turned to Joe. "I want you to watch every minute—every second!"

Wilson's eyes slitted to glimmering lines. "It's time I knew who this Ellis is, and his business," he said. "Mary, have you hired a gunman?"

The girl's head lifted. "I hired this man to help guard father."

"And where was he just now when you screamed?" Todd snarled.

"Outside!" Mary flared. "I let him in myself."

"Cass," Todd said, "hiring this gunman was no idea of mine. Mary sent for him against my wishes."

The old puncher turned to the girl. "Go to bed; I'm having a talk with this Ellis." His lips tightened. "He'll likely be gone come mornin'."

"Cass, you can't fire him!" Mary said.

"Can't I?" There was a thin thread of enjoyment in the tones.

"No! This is my father's ranch. It's part mine and—"

"There's not an inch of it yours as long as Dan'el lives," Cass Wilson snapped. "Now both of you go!"

Todd shrugged and moved toward the door. "Come, Mary," he said. "Cass is right this time. Frank Ellis has to go."

The girl stood a second, then turned and left the room with her brother. Cass Wilson locked the door and faced Joe Millard.

"A hired killer!" he snarled.

Joe spoke. "I came here to help Mary Enoch, but I'm not taking any talk off you or Todd about being a hired killer. I warned Todd, now I'm warning you, Wilson."

The old man's eyes were lines of fire. "What did you want to talk with Dan'el about?" he demanded.

"I wanted to ask him if he had any other enemies besides Joe Millard. An enemy that might be using Millard's name as a blind."

Wilson's head came forward on his wrinkled neck, his breath rattled. "Ellis, you talk like a man holdin' a joker. Who told you Dan'el had another enemy?"

Joe answered indirectly. "Would a man just out of eight years of prison sign his name to a death threat? Wouldn't he kill Enoch and crawl away—without attracting attention?"

"You think along funny lines, Ellis," Wilson growled. "I'm goin' to keep you on. You might figure out some more new angles." His eyes squinted to evil lines. "Only you'll report to me instead of Mary." He chuckled dryly, the light dancing in his eyes. "Now we'll call Todd and see if he knows anything about this *other* enemy."

Todd had been pacing up and down the hall and came instantly when Cass beckoned. His lips tightened against his teeth as he saw the glittering light in Wilson's eyes.

"Todd," the old puncher said, "Ellis thinks it might not have been Joe Millard that tried to kill Dan'el. He thinks it might be *another* enemy usin' Millard's name."

"Father has no other enemies," Todd breathed.

"There's the gent from Cherry Crick," Wilson said dryly. "Tell Ellis about him."

"He doesn't exist!" snapped Todd. "He's part of a lie you've built up to push father and me apart! No one but you ever heard of this man

from Cherry Creek or his threat against father!"

Todd became suddenly aware of the old man's slitted eyes, and of the knotted hand sliding toward a holster.

"Tell Ellis about the greenish-eyed man with the limp," Cass ordered.

Todd's hand tensed above his gun. "You made up the whole story!" he whispered. "I'm going to . . . to . . ."

"To kill me for makin' it up, eh? Todd, that might cause Dan'el to draw up them papers he spoke about."

Todd's flare of rebellion winked out. He swung to Joe. "Cass claims he caught a man from Cherry Creek with some rustled Bar JO beef stuff. The fellow claimed he'd paid me for the cattle. Would I steal my own stuff?"

"Dan'el's beef," Cass Wilson corrected. "You stole Dan'el's cattle and sold them. That Cherry Crick man threatened to get even with Dan'el for takin' the cattle back."

Todd licked his dry lips. "It's a black lie," he whispered.

The old puncher turned to Joe. "Tomorrow I want you to go to Cherry Crick and find this green-eyed man with the limp. Hear his story. He might be figurin' if he was rid of Dan'el, he could force Todd to give back them cattle."

He turned to the door. "I'm goin' now."

Todd listened to Wilson's spurs drag on the hall floor, then turned to Joe. "He's sending you to Cherry Creek to be rid of you. He might

even have you murdered there!"

"Why would he risk murdering me?"

"Cass hates me," Todd explained bitterly. "He knows the day the Bar JO comes into my hands, his star has set! He built up this lie to try to force me and father apart. Now he's sending you there to search for a man who doesn't exist. He's sly as a snake!" Todd's forehead grew moist. "If you're murdered on Cherry Creek, he'll say I planned it to keep you from finding out about this man with the limp."

Todd's eyes were insanely bright with fear. "It might be," he whispered hoarsely, "that if you rode to Cherry Creek, you'd return to find father dead. That might be his game!"

"But you just said when Daniel Enoch died, Cass Wilson's day would be over. Would he hasten that time?"

Todd's eyes grew haunted. "You're dragging the whole miserable story out of me. Father threatened to make a will leaving the Bar JO to Cass. Maybe he already has!"

"Do you mean it might be Cass Wilson who ambushed your father?"

Todd dropped to a chair and buried his face in his hands. "I don't know myself what I mean."

He would say nothing more after that. Joe left him pacing the office and went back through the kitchen to the shed. He heard a stir and drew his gun.

"Who's there?" he asked, keeping to the protection of a tree.

"Mr. Ellis!" came the whisper of Mary Enoch, and Joe reholstered his

gun. The girl moved close to him.

"What did Cass say to you?" she asked.

"He's sending me to Cherry Creek to search for . . . a certain man."

Mary moaned softly. Then hostility flared. "I'll not let you go. Ellis, you're working for me. You're to stay at the Bar JO!"

"Miss Enoch," Joe said, "could the man trying to kill your father be this greenish-eyed fellow with the limp?"

"The man trying to kill my father is Joe Millard!" Mary breathed.

There was a catch in her voice, and she was trembling. Joe took one of her hands in his. "I'm not a hired killer," he said. "This is the first time I've ever been on a job like this. I'm staying with it until the man who tried to kill Daniel Enoch is caught. I'm staying until you're freed of this terrible strain. Try to trust me."

"I do trust you," she whispered. "I . . . I feel so much safer with you here."

"Thank you, Mary Enoch," Joe said. "Now answer my questions as completely as you can. How long has this feud existed between Cass and your brother? What started it?"

"I grew up knowing they hated each other," Mary whispered. "Father listens to Cass as though his word was gospel, and that makes Todd furious. Lately Todd has feared father may will this ranch to Cass. But there's something else—some hold Cass has over Todd."

"This threat, was it before the incident of the Cherry Creek man?"

"Long before. It's as old as their hate, it seems to me."

Before Mary returned to bed, Joe promised her he would not leave the ranch on the morrow.

"No matter how Cass rants at you!" she breathed. "Refuse! Stay close to father!"

IV

The following morning Joe first saw Cass Wilson at the stable. The old puncher was saddling a horse. His eyes were squinted to a narrow line as he led the animal forth, and he seemed to have forgotten that he had ordered Frank Ellis to ride to Cherry Creek. He did not seem to see anyone except Todd Enoch. Enoch was striding down the trail to the barn from the house, and Joe stepped into the shelter of the corral to hear what words were exchanged.

Todd stopped close to Cass, his face gray. "Father tells me you're going to the bank," Todd said.

Cass Wilson's lips pulled away from his teeth. "Yeah, the bank," he admitted.

"What fresh lies did you manufacture to bring father round?" Todd asked bitterly.

"Daniel and me ain't fools," Wilson said. He stepped onto his horse stiffly, but once in the saddle his seat was solid as iron. He chuckled dryly as he touched spurs and lifted his horse in a single step, to a gallop. Todd watched him go with haunted eyes.

Todd moved toward the barn like a man walking in a terrible dream. Joe stepped up to watch him me-

chanically saddle a horse. When he brought the animal into the yard and saw Joe, he had gained enough composure to speak.

"Tell Mary I'm going to Cherry Creek," he said. Then his voice fired up. "Ellis, I'm going to ride out every inch of that stinking stream to prove to father that Cass Wilson is lying! I'm going to prove there's no such man as Cass describes! Stay close to the house; remember you're the only man on guard." He mounted, spun his horse and raced south, the direction of Cherry Creek.

It was noon before Joe saw Mary Enoch. Then she came to the front porch and sat down beside him.

"I waited until father was asleep before I tried to see you," she said. "Did Cass object to your not going to Cherry Creek? Where's Todd?"

Joe told her of the conversation he had overheard. It might add to her worry for the moment, but it was best she know and shed what light she could. Her eyes turned to his in a tortured stare.

"It means father is willing the ranch to Cass," she whispered. "The bank is where he keeps the old will. Cass is taking a new one there to deposit. Poor Todd."

She grasped Joe's arm, a new fear widening her eyes. "You must watch Todd that he doesn't kill Cass. There'll be nothing holding him back now."

"He's still fighting," Joe reminded her.

She shook her head. "Father won't change now. And how can Todd prove this man never existed? All

the men on Cherry Creek could swear he had never been there, and father would still believe Cass."

It was evening when Todd Enoch returned. Mary and Joe were in the office waiting for him. With triumph in his voice, he told them that he had six men who would swear that such a man as Cass had described, had never been seen on Cherry Creek.

"Father will have to believe it!" he said. "Is Cass with him now? I want them together when I give this proof!"

Mary checked him as he turned to the hall door. "Cass isn't home yet," she said. "Father is worried."

Todd blinked. "Cass should have been here an hour ago. He's probably buying all his friends a drink, celebrating coming into the Bar JO!"

Todd was treating Mary with more consideration than Joe had yet seen him show. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm going to prove Cass has lied about me." Then his voice changed. "What a break it would be for Cass if Joe Millard broke through our guard tonight and killed father before he had changed the will."

Mary shuddered. "Don't talk that way, Todd. It's like your weighing father's life against the Bar JO."

Todd's wedge-shaped face grew flushed. "I'll watch Cass tonight. He's going to put up a hard fight. He might even—"

"Todd, you scare me!" Mary breathed.

Todd leaned closer to her. "Mary, last night when you say you felt that killer in the hall, where was Cass?"

"Todd, stop this! We'll all go crazy! Cass came running the instant I screamed, the same as you. Be sane!"

"Maybe it isn't a time for sanity," he whispered. Then he dropped to a chair and buried his face in his hands.

The sound of galloping hoofs came and Todd spoke without lifting his face. "It's Cass. Father can rest easy now."

But it was a stranger that Joe Millard saw swing down from a sweat-drenched horse. "It's a messenger," he said sharply.

The three of them met the man on the porch, and the words he flung at them were like an explosion. Mindful of the sick man in the house, the messenger whispered, but the words seemed touched with fire.

"Cass Wilson's been murdered!"

"Murdered!" Mary breathed.

"Murdered!" Todd Enoch repeated after her.

The details were meager. The body had been found where it had lain since morning. Cass had never reached town. He had been shot from cover.

"An ambush the same as Daniel's was," the messenger growled.

Todd planned rapidly for a searching party to trail the murderer. He sent all of the Bar JO men except the one at the stable, and the man who was to drive the buckboard after Cass Wilson's body.

Mary, Todd and Joe Millard returned to the office. Daniel Enoch called from his room and Mary went to him. He wanted to know whom

they had been talking with on the porch.

"Dan Fredricks," she said, and told him Todd had returned with some good news.

Daniel Enoch did not ask what this good news was, but inquired about Cass Wilson. When the men of the searching party rode away, the sick man's suspicions flared.

"Send Todd here," he ordered. "You're keeping something from me!"

Todd entered his father's room, but Daniel Enoch would hear none of his quieting words. "What's wrong—don't lie to me!" he said sternly.

"Red King threw Cass at the Amber Creek Crossing," Todd began. "He's hurt and I'm sending the buckboard for him."

"And these men who just rode away?"

Todd was silent a second, then he spoke bluntly. "It's no use to lie, you've got to know soon. Cass has been murdered. Another Joe Millard job."

The sick man gasped for breath. Joe could see from where he stood in the hall how the news had shocked Daniel Enoch. "Cass dead!" he whispered. "Dead!" Then he lifted his elbow. "Another Joe Millard job, you say?" he asked his son.

"He was shot from ambush, the same as you," Todd said.

"Yes, another Joe Millard job," breathed Enoch. "Both of you go now. Leave me alone to think."

Joe followed Mary and Todd back into the office.

"Why do you think it was Millard

who killed Cass?" Joe asked Todd.

Todd ran his fingers through his hair, standing it on end "Millard is starting in to whittle down father's guards," he said.

"It might have been the green-eyed man from Cherry Creek," Joe said.

Todd swung on him. "No such man exists!" He began to pace. Slowly he twined his fingers together. He spoke as though to himself. "It's good I can prove where I was this morning—people may be asking."

"Todd!" Mary cried. "Nobody will ask."

He looked at her. "I'm just remembering that Cass carried that will," he said. "If it's been stolen, I'm in a hot spot!" Then he gulped a breath. "But it will be in his pocket. Nobody would steal that!"

A few hours later the buckboard returned with the body of Cass Wilson. With Mary and Joe at his side Todd began to search for the will. His fingers moved slowly at first as though hating their work. Toward the last they flew in frantic haste. He stepped back from the body.

"It's gone!" he whispered.

They returned to the office, leaving the body of the old puncher in the bunkhouse, under the care of the two Bar JO men left on the ranch. Shortly afterward Daniel Enoch called for Todd to come to him. Mary looked at Joe when they were alone.

"Who could have stolen that will?" she questioned. There was a new fear in her eyes.

Joe was thinking of many things.

The green-eyed man from Cherry Creek might have killed Cass to keep him from further talk. Or Todd might have done it. An alibi delivered from Cherry Creek meant nothing. But if Todd had stolen the will, how did he hope to gain? Daniel Enoch would suspect him and make a fresh will giving the ranch to one of the other old hands, or to Mary.

"Who could have killed Cass?" Mary whispered.

Todd returned before Joe had time to venture a reply. "Father is delirious," he said grimly. "He asked what time Cass was killed, and he was thinking of the will. I could tell by his eyes. He suspects everyone. His eyes burned holes through me. He asked three times about you, Ellis. He thinks you might have been hired to do away with Cass."

Mary pressed her palms to her cheeks and moaned.

Todd began to pace. "Father refuses to allow me to sleep in my own bed," he said grimly, "so I'll stay here on the sofa."

Mary touched her brother's arm. "Don't feel so bitter towards father. He's sick at heart tonight as well as in body. He and Cass have been together through many bitter trials." She turned to Joe. "When Todd's mother died, Cass was with father, and when my mother died, he was there. Hear the old house creak, even it seems to be in mourning."

"Mary!" Todd cried at her as though the words shocked him. "For Heaven's sake, everybody go and

(Continued on page 126)

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leave me alone!" He relented when he saw the girl's hurt face, and spoke almost kindly. "I can't be hypocrite enough to mourn Cass' death, and with that will gone, it's almost as though he's still reaching back to torment me!"

Mary and Joe left Todd and stopped a few minutes in the hall to talk.

"So you and Todd are only half brother and sister," Joe said. "Now it's easier to understand why you're so unlike. You have the eyes and . . . and character of your father, Mary." He used her name naturally and it made them seem better acquainted.

Joe told the girl that he was going to be on guard that night outside her and her father's window. He wanted her window left open so if he should need to enter the house in haste, he would not have to wait for a door to be unlocked.

A half hour after Joe had taken up his watch, Todd Enoch came to Mary's room with a glass of milk. Joe could hear clearly through the open window. The blind was tightly drawn, but the words carried.

"Drink it," Todd urged his sister. "You must keep up your strength, for dad's sake if not for your own."

Then Todd went to his father's room with a glass of milk. Joe could not hear so well because here the window was closed, but Daniel Enoch did not seem pleased by his son's thoughtfulness. After that the house settled to quietness. It was dark ex-

cept for the dim light in the sick man's room.

It was an hour later when Joe heard Todd moving from the office where he was sleeping, into the hall. He came to his sister's open door and spoke her name softly. Then he edged close to her bed.

"*Mary!*" he whispered in a louder tone.

Joe felt the tense voice like sandpaper at his spine. Mary Enoch had not stirred. Todd left his sister's room and moved toward his father's. Joe Millard slid cautiously in through the open window and followed. He paused a moment to listen to the deep breathing of the girl. It seemed unnaturally heavy. Joe thought of the milk Todd had brought her. Drugged!

He tested each step for squeaking boards as he moved into the hall. Daniel Enoch's lamp was burning, and by this light Joe could see the sick man's face. It was a gray, chiseled mass as Enoch came slowly to a sitting position. His glance was fixed on something out of line with Joe's vision.

"I'm not asleep—I didn't drink the milk you brought me," Daniel Enoch whispered. "Go back to bed or I'll call Mary."

Todd Enoch's whisper replied. "Mary drank her milk!"

The sick man tensed until the cords stood out in his neck. "Todd, I have my gun here beside me. Don't come another step!"

Joe Millard was easing forward to come into line with Todd Enoch. Now he knew the whole horrible truth. It was like something dis-

forted that might come in a nightmare.

Joe gained the door and leaped. He had caught the picture of Todd standing over a gun. In that instant Todd sprang at his father and fired. Daniel Enoch's body shuddered, but it did not immediately fall back. In the flash when Joe might have gunned Todd, he dared not fire because of the man reared up behind Todd on the bed. Then Todd saw Joe and his gun spit a second time.

Joe leaped into the exploding weapon and felt a bullet tear at his shoulder. He wrenched the gun away and he and Todd grappled. They strained and swayed until Joe's fingers found Todd's throat and closed. He knew then he was going to win, even with his strength-letting wound. Todd's hot body began to sag.

The two men sitting in the bunkhouse with Cass Wilson's body had heard the shots and now their feet were beating toward the house. In a second they would arrive. But help came before them, help for Todd Enoch. Mary, dazed and stumbling, gun in hand, appeared in the hall doorway. When she saw her brother folding to his knees in the arms of an antagonist, she jabbed her gun into that antagonist and fired. Joe Millard relaxed his hold on Todd and swayed back to the wall.

"Mary!" he whispered. "It's Todd . . . he's the one!"

The two Bar JO men crashed into the room, took in the picture of

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Mary's smoking gun, Todd struggling to his feet, Joe Millard bleeding and disheveled leaning against the wall.

Todd Enoch laid out an accusing finger at Joe. "The murderer!" he whispered from a bruised throat. "He killed father!"

V

Mary Enoch stood at the head of her father's bed, staring at Joe Millard. "You!" she breathed.

"Mary," Joe begged. "Listen to me! Todd drugged you with the milk. He's the one who killed Daniel Enoch!"

"Shoot him, Mary!" Todd commanded. "Let him die like a dog!"

The girl stood with the gun frozen in her hand. The two punchers had taken hold of Joe and stripped him of his weapon. He continued to see no one but Mary, talk to no one but her. Todd Enoch saw the gun on the sheet beside his father's relaxed fingers and pounced upon it in savage triumph. One of the Bar JO men had to keep him from killing Joe.

"Not here, Todd," the man argued. "This isn't the time."

"Any time is the right time!" growled Todd. "I came through the door as this fellow was pulling the trigger on father. He turned to kill me and I shot him, but he managed to twist my gun away and choke me. Mary, don't listen to his lies!"

"Let him tell his story," Mary said in a dull voice. "There's plenty of time to kill him." She laid her gun

on the night stand beside her father's bed and sank to her knees. Her fingers moved through the gray hair, caressed the square-jawed face. Then her hand tensed on the drawn cheek.

"He isn't dead!" she breathed.

"He is dead!" Todd Enoch snapped.

One of the punchers stepped to the bed and felt for the pulse. "Get some water, Mary," he said. "He's still alive."

Todd looked at the gray face on the pillow, his eyes wild in his white face. He stood like that, on spread legs, while they bathed the wounded man's face in cold water.

The puncher guarding Joe patted his sagging body for extra guns and began to go through his pockets. Too late Joe recalled that letter bearing his name, and stiffened. The puncher jabbed him with a gun. Joe knew resistance was useless. He was disarmed and he was bleeding from two wounds. He sat hunched forward as the man drew the envelope out and held it toward the dim light. A growl began to boil in his throat.

"We got Joe Millard!" he cried.

Joe Millard! The name swung every face toward the puncher.

Mary took the letter. "From the prison," she said. She looked at Joe. "You played with father like a cat with a mouse!" she cried.

Todd Enoch's eyes had begun to glitter. "Joe Millard! Give me back my gun!" His shrill voice rode harshly through the house. It penetrated the sleeping brain of Daniel Enoch, and the wounded man opened

his eyes. As a blind man stares, he looked up at the ceiling.

Mary reached for the gun on the night stand. "You crawled into this house like a snake," she said in a low, emotionless voice to Joe. "I'm going to kill you."

Joe met her glance with steady eyes.

"I brought you here," she said. "I smoothed the way for you—now I must end it."

"Mary, put that gun down," Joe said. "I didn't kill your father." He pointed to the bed. "Keep Todd away from Daniel Enoch. He drugged you tonight so he could kill him."

"Stop lying!" the girl cried. The gun trembled so violently she laid it back on the night stand. "Take him away!" she ordered the puncher guarding Joe.

"Mary!" came a voice from the bed.

The girl dropped to her knees and stroked her father's forehead. "Don't try to talk," she whispered. "Just rest!"

The eyes in the square, gray face focused on Todd Enoch. "Todd . . . is . . ." he began.

"He's delirious!" Todd cried.

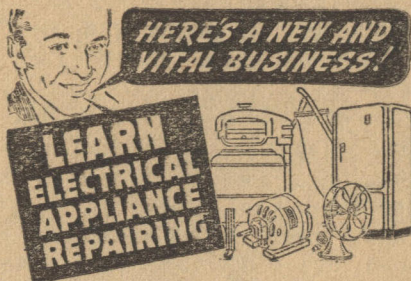
"You make the charge before you've heard him," Joe Millard said. "You're afraid!"

"Todd . . ." whispered the wounded man.

"Todd saved your life, father," Mary whispered. "That's the killer there . . . Joe Millard!" She pointed.

The wounded man lifted his head from the pillow. "Mary, Todd tried

(Continued on page 130)



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(Continued from page 129)

to kill me!" he whispered fiercely.

"He's out of his head!" Todd breathed.

"Todd would have killed me but for . . . the stranger," Daniel Enoch whispered. "Look at his face . . . the mark of Cain is there!"

Mary rose from her kneeling position at the bed. Her face was white and accusing as she looked at her brother. "It was you!" she said dully.

"Mary, he's delirious!" Todd cried.

"He is not delirious," the girl said. "That killer I felt in the hall was you!"

Todd leaped for the gun on the night stand, but one of the punchers was ahead of him.

"Lift me up!" Daniel Enoch ordered Mary, as Todd was crowded to the wall under the threatening hand of the Bar JO man. Mary put another pillow under the head of the wounded man so he might see about the room better. He looked at Joe.

"So you're Joe Millard. That's why you were able to start Cass thinking along the right track! Todd killed Cass because he knew he had to work fast. He planned to kill me tonight before I could make out a new will. I may be dying, so there's something I must say.

"Todd isn't my son . . . not a drop of Enoch blood flows in his veins." Daniel Enoch rested a second, then

continued. "My first wife and baby both died back in Kansas. A friend of mine, condemned by the law to die, begged me to take his son. I took him as my own, though Cass never liked the idea. I thought a rightful bringing up would stamp out Todd's bad blood but Cass was right."

He closed his eyes and Mary lowered his head to the pillow.

Todd was taken across the mountains to a strong jail, for Daniel Enoch was grimly determined that the death of Cass Wilson should be avenged.

The doctor smiled as he came into the office after visiting Daniel Enoch. "He's doing fine," he said to Joe and Mary. "That old rawhider sure takes a lot of killing."

After the doctor drove away, Joe and Mary stood at the door watching the dust cloud made by his team, grow smaller. Joe took the girl's hand in his and she left it there.

"Your father has asked me to stay and work on the Bar JO," he said.

Mary looked at him and smiled. "I want you to stay, too, Joe." Her brown eyes were so deep and quiet now, her voice soft.

They were still standing there after the dust cloud had taken itself over the hill. Mary's hand still rested in Joe's and he knew they would go through life that way together.

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 39.

1. longhorn
2. cayuse
3. chaps
4. quicksand
5. claybank
6. sowbelly
7. hobble
8. jerky
9. Panhandle
10. noose
11. huckleberry
12. skillet
13. stray
14. sheep
15. sandstorm

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