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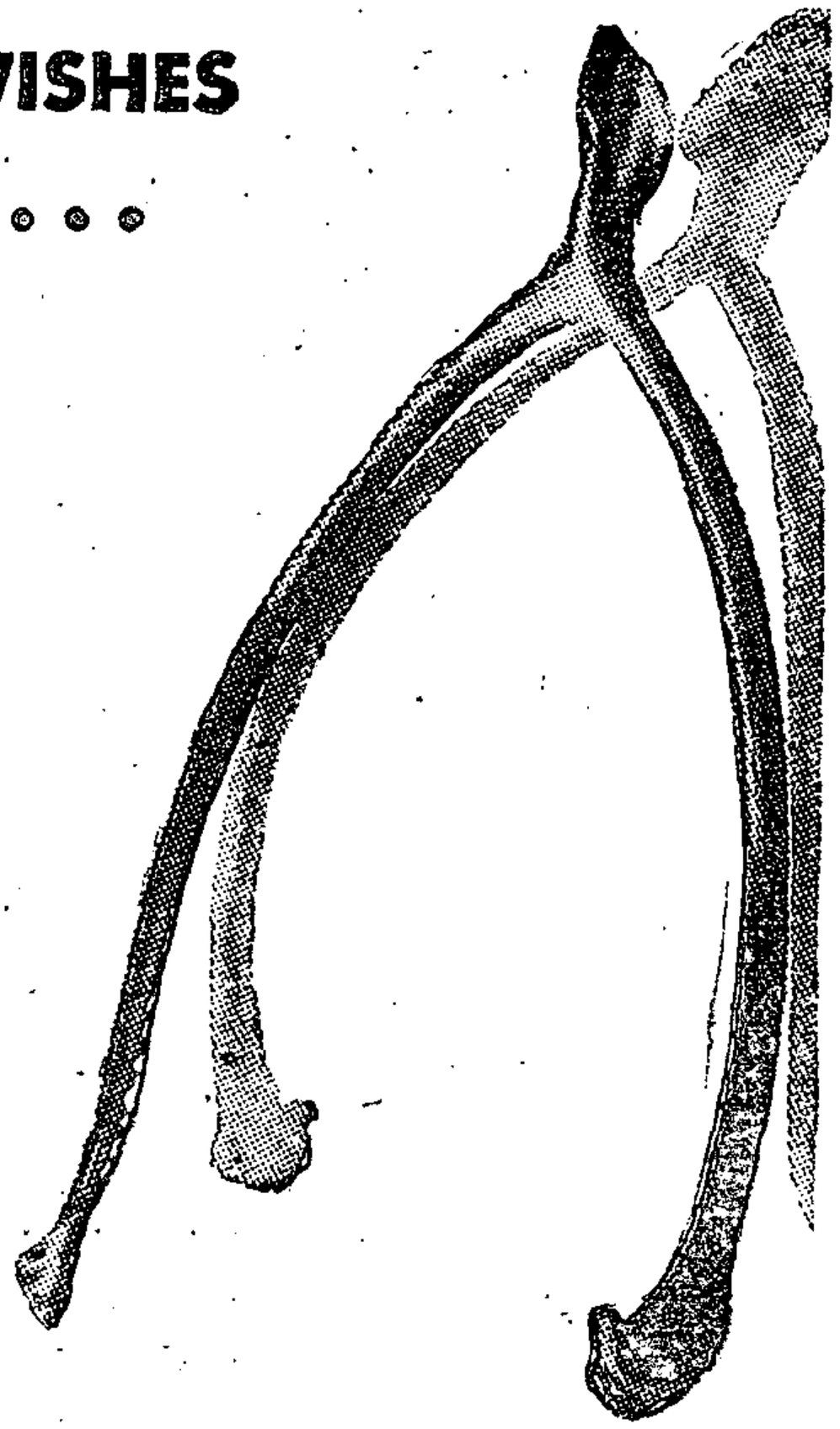

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SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

Editor
JOHN BURR

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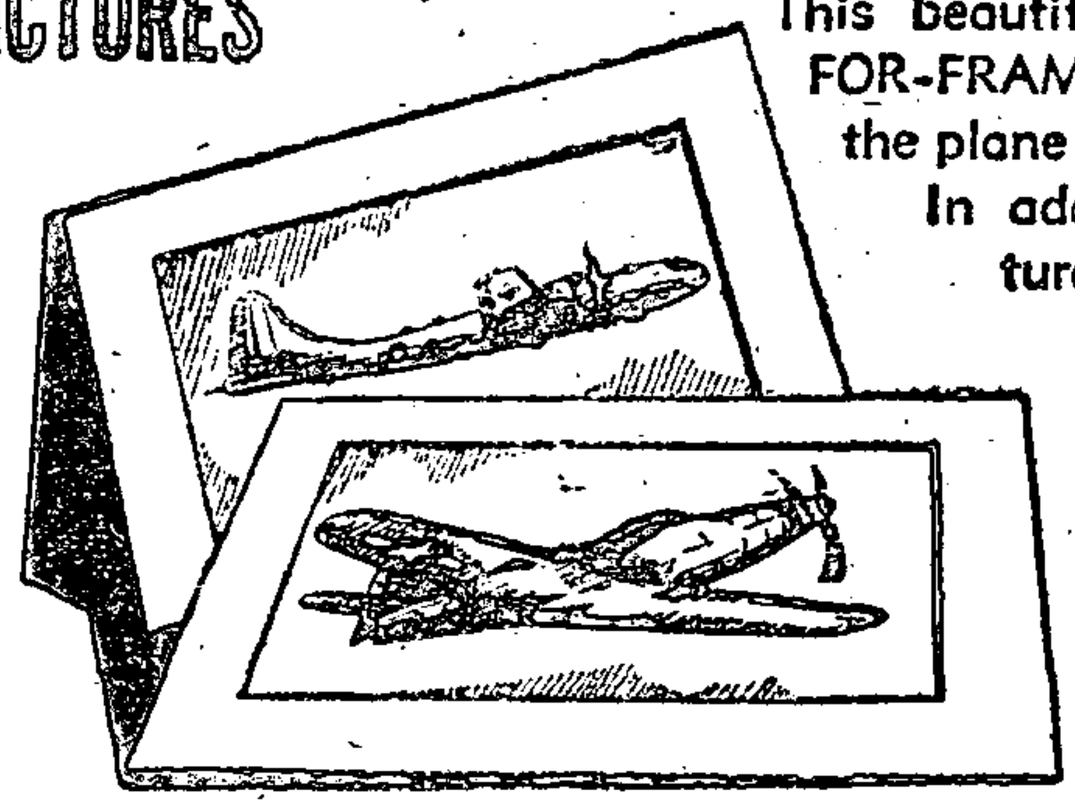

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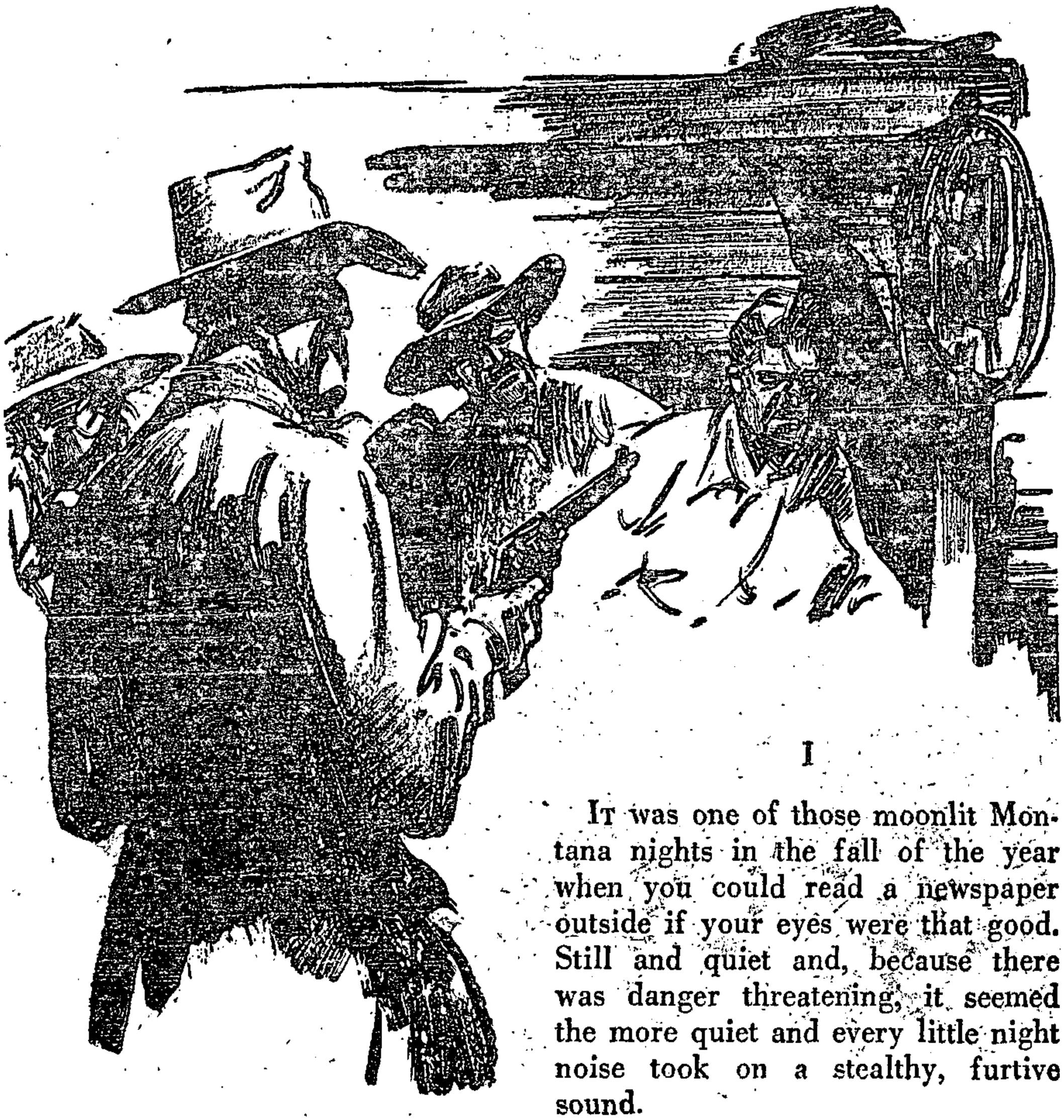
TRIGGER TAMED

by WALT COBURN

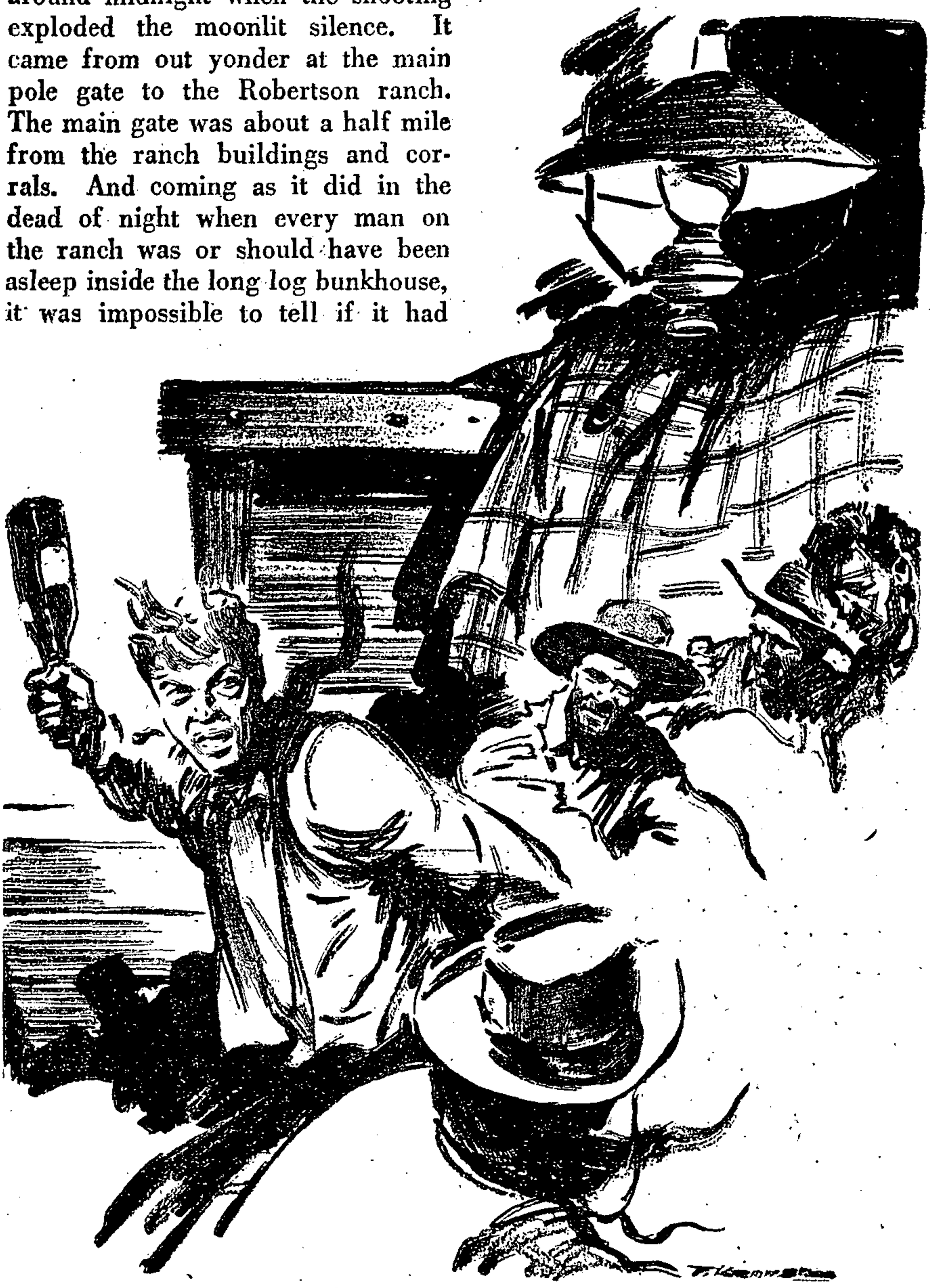
Blasting lead might scatter the renegades who had seized the R-On-A-Rail but it would take an hombre with more than gun savvy to finish up the job



I

It was one of those moonlit Montana nights in the fall of the year when you could read a newspaper outside if your eyes were that good. Still and quiet and, because there was danger threatening, it seemed the more quiet and every little night noise took on a stealthy, furtive sound.

It must have been somewhere around midnight when the shooting exploded the moonlit silence. It came from out yonder at the main pole gate to the Robertson ranch. The main gate was about a half mile from the ranch buildings and corrals. And coming as it did in the dead of night when every man on the ranch was or should have been asleep inside the long log bunkhouse, it was impossible to tell if it had



been one shot or several shots blending. More likely, though, some prowler had tripped off the shotgun trap at the big pole gate and the twin barrels of the old 10-gauge shotgun had torn the night apart with buckshot, for through the dying echoes of gunfire sounded the clanging of the big bell that hung from the high cross pole that bridged the tops of the twenty-foot-high gate posts.

Inside the bunkhouse men stirred in the darkness. The door was kept barred, the panes of the closed windows were covered with a heavy smear of dark green paint and the blinds were pulled down across the opaque windows so there was no ventilation to speak of in the big log building. The air further fouled by stale tobacco smoke and the stench of sweat and unwashed clothes, it was an evil-smelling thick darkness.

Canvas rustled as bed tarps were flung back. Snores and heavy breathing stilled. A man cleared his throat making a loud, harsh sound. Pants and overalls were pulled on. Soaked feet stamped into boots whose spurs had been left on. Cartridge belts with holstered six-shooters were buckled on. A dozen men or more were dressing in the darkness but nobody struck a light.

The gun echoes had died. The clanging of the big gate bell stilled. Outside in the moonlit night it was deathly still and quiet once more.

A rasping nasal voice spoke in the thick darkness of the bunkhouse. "Who set the shotgun trap?"

There was no reply to the question.

"You, Lonnie?"

"No."

"By hell, it's your chore, ain't it?" The voice was an angry snarl.

"You know I wouldn't be settin' the shotgun trap," came the reply in a clear-toned, youthful voice, "when we're expectin' the Old Man and Becky home from town. You know I never set that trap tonight, Zack."

"But if Becky stayed in town," sounded a third voice that had an unpleasant chuckle cunningly hidden in it, "and the Old Man come home by hisself with a hide full of rotgut, and somebody like young Lonnie had fergot and loaded the shotgun trap, and the damned thing went off when he reached up an' pulled the bell rope, now by grab that'd be a hell of a josh on the Old Man. Now wouldn't it, though?" And he chuckled out loud.

"We'd give the Old Man a shore purty funeral," said a flat-toned voice from the far end of the row of double bunks. "Shore be proud to give the Old Man a first-rate plantin'. Young Lonnie could plant a flower bush on the grave."

"Shut up your noise, you fools!" snarled Zack. "I'm tryin' to listen. . . . Now where the hell you think you're a-goin', Lonnie?"

There was the sound of heavy scuffling near the closed door, thudding blows, grunts. Spurs jingled as a man crashed to the floor. The snarling Zack was breathing heavily and cursing.

"You're growin' too big fer them

little britches of yourn, Lonnie. By hell, you fergit who's ramroddin' this R-on-a-Rail outfit. Crawl back into your bunk. . . . Jasper, you and Toad quit runnin' off at the head and stand your guard at them winders. You, you blasted Lonnie, light the lantern."

Lonnie lit the lantern and adjusted the burning wick. Lonnie Robertson was the Old Man's grandson. In his early twenties, he was tall, slim, with hair the color of new rope, and puckered sky-blue eyes. His nose was too short, his upper lip too long and his mouth too wide and he had the cowed attitude of having been kicked around and bullied and abused from early childhood.

Big, rawboned, lantern-jawed, hawk-beaked Zack Robertson watched him with pale-gray eyes that were bloodshot and slitted. There was a week's stubble of dirty yellow beard on his long horse face. A crooked grin split his thin-lipped mouth.

Zack was Old Man Robertson's oldest nephew. Ramrod, ranch foreman, roundup wagon boss for the big R-on-a-Rail cow outfit. Tough as a boot, he held his top-hand job with the Old Man by being that much tougher than the other kin who all wanted his position. He had a six-shooter in his hand now and his back was against the log wall beside the closed door.

They were all Robertsons here in the bunkhouse—nephews, cousins, shirt-tail kin. Those related by marriage took the name of Robertson and did their toughest to live up to it. The Robertson R-on-a-Rail was one of the toughest cow outfits in the big Northwest cattle country. Ornery tough.

Old Man Robertson had sent for his kinfolks when his two sons got killed by the Invaders at the start of the blood-spattered range war that had spilled across the border from Wyoming nearly ten years ago.

Those gun-slinger Invaders, as the Old Man called the nester ranchers who had come up out of the badlands like so many gray wolves on the prowl to whittle on his cattle and run off his horses, had no right to the land they squatted on. They were rank outsiders with no more than a long rope and a running iron and guns to back their claims. They had killed Old Man Robertson's two sons, leaving him a small grandson Lonnie and a smaller granddaughter Rebecca to raise when the smallpox epidemic wiped out the Robertson women.

"So I sent for a few kinfolks," Old Man Robertson told it in the cow town of Sandstone, "to rally 'round and lend a hand while I put up a stand agin' them curly wolves from the badlands. I figgered blood was thicker'n alkali water. And they shore come a-runnin'. The devil in hell alone knows where all them shirt-tail kin sprung from. It rained Robertsons till the R-on-a-Rail was lousy with 'em. Some of the damndest-lookin' things you ever laid eyes on. And me still on crutches an' shot to hell. They moved in like a swarm of buzzards, eyin' me fer all the world like they was a-watchin' a dyin' carcass. Then they commenced a-janglin' amongst their-

selves, killin' one another off. That weeded out the sorriest of the pack. So my best bet was to pick the toughest man in the outfit and tell him to ramrod the spread. Then I fetched Lonnie and Becky to town fer the schoolin' season and moved in with the kids till them In-vader bullet holes in my hide healed. Now it's the In-vaders and the Robertson cousins. Dawg eat dawg. Before it's over and done with, it'll make that Wyoming range war look like a gatherment of Sunday School teachers. Kill 'em all off on both sides plumb down to the last gun-slinger and there won't be no loss to Montana. Me, I'll settle down in Sandstone with young Lonnie an' little Becky. Mebbyso git me a saloon. . . ."

But Old Man Robertson had been talking through his old Stetson and his whiskey talk fooled nobody—not even himself, after a while. That grizzled cowman was too tough, too almighty prideful, to let a mongrel pack like that take away the outfit he had built up in early pioneer days. That R-on-a-Rail was a brand that stood for something, like a proud coat of arms. The old man's two sons, Lon and Sam, had been born there on the old home ranch, grown to manhood there, married good women, and died with their boots on. The Old Man had his dreams of one day handing over the big R-on-a-Rail outfit to Lonnie and Becky, and sitting back in the shade of the giant cottonwoods. Town life irked him. Each time he rode out to the home ranch, it looked worse than it had the time before. And back in town, at the saloon he had bought and ran, he heard the R-on-a-Rail outfit cursed . . . Five years . . . Going on ten years. Then Old Man Robertson left Becky in school and took Lonnie along and moved back to the home ranch.

"It's time," the Old Man told his grandson, "you commenced fightin' for what'll some day be all yourn, Lonnie. Your daddy died a-fightin'. It's high time you commenced showin' somethin' of his tough streak. Git out and make a hand."

II

Young Lonnie Robertson did not want to be a tough cowhand. He had spent all his summer vacations out there on the ranch, working through the end of every calf roundup in June after school had let out through the beef roundup in the fall until school opened in September. And when he had graduated from high school the Old Man had sent him out there for good to learn all there was to learn about the cattle business.

The Old Man was a stern taskmaster. Weakness was something he would not tolerate in any man, especially in his own grandson.

"Zack Robertson is the best damned cowman ever hit the country," the Old Man told young Lonnie. "He'll learn you the business. When you git it learnt, then take the outfit away from Zack. Now you git out there and make a hand."

Lonnie Robertson had made a hand. He had a way with horses. And he was a natural cowhand.

Cowpunching was his life and he took to it. In spite of the fact that big Zack worked him harder than he dared work any of his tougher cousins, making him do all the dirty, menial chores no real cowpuncher would stoop to, still Lonnie liked it. And even Zack had to admit that Lonnie was worth any half a dozen Robertsons in the outfit.

"But he's as yeller-bellied as a coyote," Zack told the Old Man. "He's got rabbit blood. The sorriest thing in the outfit kin cuss Lonnie out and he'll walk away from it without takin' his own part. Lonnie Robertson is a damned coward. Don't take my word fer it. Lemme call him over here. I'll make him admit it."

The Old Man had spared Lonnie and himself that humiliation. But later he took the boy aside.

"Zack claims you got a yeller streak. Damned if I know where you come by it. I'd ruther see you dead than called a coward. Why don't you kill off one or two of 'em? There's no law agin' killin' any of these things. And the rest of 'em will tip their hats to you from there on. Hell, shoot 'em in the back if you ain't got the guts to face 'em in the open. Kill yourself a Robertson!"

It left Lonnie feeling sick enough to crawl off somewhere and die. He took the Old Man's contemptuous cussing meekly and without a word of even puny argument. What was the use? How could he explain to the Old Man that he had been taking Zack's abuse since he could remember and from the time he was too young and small to fight back. And the other Robertsons had been bigger and older and they were all tough and ornery. Whip one and they'd jump you like a pack. Habit, long habit like that, is hard to break. And by now Lonnie had begun to believe he was a rank coward. He knew how it felt to have cold fear crawl inside him. He knew all the ugly sensations of fear and shame and humiliation.

Now, tonight, here in the bunkhouse, that fear broke out in a cold sweat on his hide. There was the taste of blood in his mouth and he felt the dull throbbing of pain where big Zack's fist had smashed him. Somebody had loaded and set the shotgun trap out at the big pole gate. The Old Man had sent word that he would be out to the home ranch tonight. The big pole gate was kept padlocked at night with the shotgun trap set so that if anybody tried smashing the big padlock and chain, it tripped the wire that set off the hidden shotgun. Two barrels loaded with buckshot would tear a man apart. But if you pulled the dangling bell rope the loud clang would fetch somebody from the ranch to open the gate to friends, or to kill any enemy who might be there at the locked gate.

Jasper Robertson liked to play cruel practical jokes. His last joke had been a cunning arrangement so that when you pulled the bell rope it tripped the shotgun trap.

"It scairt the hell out o' Cousin Bulger Robertson," chuckled Jasper, "night before last."

"It blowed Cousin Bulger's head plumb off," said Toad.

"That's what I mean, Toad." Jasper grinned.

Jasper was nearly seven feet tall, rawboned and unkempt-looking. His eyes were badly crossed and he had a grin that slid around on his loose-lipped mouth. You could never tell when Jasper was looking at you, you never quite knew what he was chuckling about. And he was a dead shot.

Lonnie wanted to get out to the big gate. He pictured the Old Man lying there on the ground, riddled with buckshot, dead or dying. He had no love for his grandfather. The Old Man was too stern and hard-handed and bitter to let anybody care for him. But it was, Lonnie kept telling himself, a miserable way for the Old Man to die. Alone out there, mortally wounded, and knowing in his tough old cowman's heart that his own grandson did not have the nerve to come to him.

Old Man Robertson seldom rode alone, night or day. Wherever he went he took Becky with him. They wouldn't bushwhack the Old Man while he had his granddaughter along.

"Even the McDaniels boys ain't that lowdown," the Old Man said.

When Pete and Travis McDaniels heard that they grinned. They were the last of the small ranchers the Old Man had called the Invaders. Black-haired, black-eyed, hard-riding, as near fearless as men come, Pete and Travis McDaniels were not, never had been nor ever calculated on being, bushwhackers. They rode together mostly, but they worked in the open when they killed. Their enemies called them half-breeds but they were black Irish.

"It ain't the McDaniels boys," grinned Travis McDaniels, "that the Old Man's scared will drygulch him. It's his own Robertson kin."

Lonnie had buckled on his cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter. His eyes cut a quick look around the bunkhouse. He was getting a quick count on the Robertsons. Two of them were missing. Not exactly missing, either. Every night Zack would put two, sometimes four, of his Robertson kin on night guard. They would be bushed up somewhere near the gate, or riding the fence, or squatted in the black shadows with saddle guns and six-shooters and a quart of booze.

Big Zack kept his back to the wall. He was almighty careful never to let anybody get in behind him.

Toad, shorter than most of the others, heavy-set, sandy-haired and pockmarked, stared hard at Zack then turned his hard green eyes on the leering Jasper.

"Ain't it your two brothers on guard tonight, Jasper?" he spoke in his flat-toned voice.

"Yeah. Them damn twins. I earmarked 'em when they was yearlin's so's I could tell 'em apart." Jasper chuckled.

The big gate bell clanged in the distance. Every man in the bunkhouse stiffened and tensed. There was something demanding and urgent in the loud clanging of the big bell. It had a sinister sound.

Cold sweat beaded on Lonnie's bruised face. If that was the Old Man out yonder, badly wounded . . .

He started for the door. They all watched him. The leering grin was wiped from Jasper's face and his skin looked a dirty gray color in the lantern light.

"The Old Man's hurt, Zack." Lonnie's voice was dry-throated. "I'm goin' to him."

Big Zack nodded. He let Lonnie get to the door, let him slide back the heavy bolt. Then he stepped forward, swinging the six-shooter in his hand like a club. Its long blued-steel barrel caught Lonnie alongside the jaw and knocked him sideways and backwards. Zack clubbed him again with the gun barrel and Lonnie went to his knees. There was blood flowing from the long rip along his cheek and jaw and his eyes were a little glazed. He reached for his six-shooter. Zack let him draw the gun, then kicked it out of his hand and kicked him in the face and belly. Lonnie grunted and doubled over on his knees, toppling sideways onto the floor.

III

Shod hoofs pounded outside. Then the door was shoved wide open, Old Man Robertson stood framed in the doorway. Tall, big-boned, white-haired, white-mustached. Blood spattered his clothes. There was a six-shooter in his hand. The deep-set steel gray-blue eyes on either side of his jutting nose peered through ragged brows.

"You brave-hearted sons!" The Old Man's voice filled the bunkhouse with an angry rumble. "One of these nights them McDaniels boys will ride over here and they'll double their ketch ropes and they'll whup the mongrel pack of you plumb out o' the country . . . Git up on your laigs, Lonnie. What you doin' down there on your hands an' knees? Lickin' Zack's dirty boots?"

Lonnie was groggy. Pain racked his body and his head felt as though it had been split wide open with a dull rusty ax. Nausea crawled deep inside him and he hoped he would not be sick here in front of the Old Man. He groped around on the floor until his right hand closed over the butt of his gun, then he got slowly to his feet. The Old Man wasn't even looking at him.

Old Man Robertson kicked the door shut and leaned against it, his eyes glittering wickedly as he stared down big Zack and the cross-eyed Jasper and the burly Toad. His long-barreled six-shooter swung slowly in a sweeping arc that covered them all and there was something about this gaunt gray old cowman that made them flinch and cringe under the cold contempt of his stare.

"That shotgun trap of yourn," said the Old Man, "ain't in workin' order."

"I never set it," said Zack, his voice surly. "Settin' the shotgun trap is Lonnie's job . . ." His voice died away under the Old Man's stare.

"Somebody," the Old Man went on, "monkeyed with it. Sighted the infernal thing in the other direction." A wicked grin twitched the hard mouth partly hidden under the heavy drooping white mustache.

"The damned thing went off all right," Old Man Robertson continued, "when I yanked the bell rope. Both barrels. Couple of fellers that was layin' in the brush inside the fence and to one side of the gate, they got it. Both loads of buckshot. . . . What's left of 'em looks like it was them two younger twin brothers of yourn, Jasper. Mebbyso you kin read their earmarks!"

Jasper's grin slid across his dirty whiskered face. What showed of his skin beneath the dirt and whiskers was a sickly yellow color.

"The way it looked to me," said the Old Man, "they was sleepin' off a heavy jag and somebody must've jobbed 'em. Aimed the shotgun at where they was a-layin'. So when the bell rope was yanked, them drunken twins got both barrels. I bet they was su'prised when it was them and not Old Man Robertson that woke up in hell . . . eh, Jasper?"

Jasper's grin slid out of control. "You . . . you done the job . . ." There was no trace of a chuckle left in his voice. He looked sick as a poisoned mongrel.

Old Man Robertson's yellow teeth bared in a wolfish grin. He was staring now at the burly pockmarked Toad. Toad did not look like the other Robertson cousins. With his short bowed legs, thick belly and chest, his widespread mouth, splayed nose and protruding eyes, he looked like a warty toad squatting, ready to leap. Ugly and repulsive.

"Shore potent likker you bin 'stillin' for this outfit, Toad. There was a dram left in the twins' bottle. One swaller was enough to peel the hide off a man's tongue. No wonder it knocked 'em out cold."

The giant Jasper turned on the squatty Toad with a snaggle-toothed snarl. Toad slid his gun from its holster.

"Change your mind, Jasper," Toad's voice croaked, "or I'll gut-shoot you." And the corners of his huge mouth spread as the lanky Jasper backed away from the gun.

Then the Old Man was eying big Zack Robertson. Zack had his back to the log wall, his big hand on his holstered gun.

"You knowed I was comin' alone, Zack, that I'd be at the gate about midnight. You heard the shootin'. You heard me ring the bell. Why didn't you ride out yonder to unlock the gate?"

"You got a key to the padlock," said Zack. "It's Lonnie's job to set shotgun trap. He said he didn't set it on account of we knowed you'd be comin' out to the ranch tonight.

That shootin' could have bin the McDaniels boys and a bunch of their tough hands, shootin' to draw us out into a bushwhacker trap. It looked to me like them twins would be showin' up here directly with the news. When they didn't come, I got uneasy. Anyhow, I was fixin' to ride out to the gate when you busted in."

"How's about that, Lonnie?" asked Old Man Robertson without taking his hard steely stare from big Zack.

Lonnie wiped the back of his hand across his smashed mouth. Big Zack was glaring hard at him, trying to scare him into silence. This was it. This was where Lonnie either had to back up the Old Man or back down under the warning glare of Zack. Lonnie was scared of big Zack. But he was more scared of the Old Man's terrible wrath.

"Zack," Lonnie found his voice, "is a liar. I tried twice to git out the door to git to the gate. Zack stopped me both times. There wasn't a man in here had any notion of goin' to your help!"

"So I figured," said Old Man Robertson. "But I'm su'prised to find out you got the guts to speak up. I'll be fu'ther su'prised if you got more guts to back up what you said. Go slosh your head in the water bucket. Take a shot of Toad's white mule moonshine if your guts need heatin' up . . . Dammit, git a move on! Don't stand back like a mammyless calf at a roundup!" The Old Man's voice cracked like a bullwhip.

Lonnie moved. He sloshed cold water on his aching head and bruised, bleeding face. There was a jug of Toad's moonshine on the shelf and he pulled the cork and gulped down the fiery corn likker.

"Shed your guns, Zack," ordered the Old Man. "Lonnie Robertson is goin' to whup you down to his size and tromp your guts out. . . . Use a club if you need an equalizer, Lonnie. I'll keep the rest of this inbred mongrel tribe off your back!"

IV

It was the first time in his life Lonnie Robertson had ever taken more than a taste of Toad's moonshine rotgut. He felt it hit his belly and send its fiery glow into his veins. It melted the pain and cleared his brain and it gave him the drunken courage he so badly needed. He was still scared. But the old, old paralyzing fear was gone and he doubled his fists and moved towards big Zack slowly, cautiously.

Zack tossed his six-shooter on the bunk with a flat grin and spat on his big hands. Fixing Lonnie with a hard, pale-eyed contemptuous stare, he dropped both big muscled arms until they hung limp, and shoved out his grinning jaw.

"Hit it, Lonnie! Come on! Hit it!"

The Old Man stepped in behind the slow-moving Lonnie and kicked him hard in the seat of his pants. Lonnie straightened up, jumped. Somebody—Jasper, perhaps—laughed. And then Lonnie Robertson went wild. He was drunk. Drunk on the forty-rod likker. Drunk on shame and humiliation and a sudden

desperate fury. That savage kick in the rear had sent him off balance and he had staggered against the bunk. When he shoved out a hand to grab something to keep from falling, he grabbed the top bunk and his hand slid over the edge of the bunk and closed over the neck of an empty bottle. He pushed himself away and onto braced legs and whirled and he was swinging the bottle like a club when he charged.

Big Zack tried to protect his head but he got his arms up too late. The bottle smashed down across the side of his head and broke. It was a wicked swinging blow with all of Lonnie's weight behind it. Big Zack's pale bloodshot eyes rolled back in their sockets and his head lobbed sideways and down on his bull neck as his two hundred pounds of big bone and tough hard muscle sagged limply and he went down with a heavy crash. He was out like a light, limp as a sack of meat.

Lonnie stood on widespread legs, gripping the neck of the broken bottle, staring with glazed blue eyes at the motionless hulk of the big ramrod who had bullied and abused him and put the fear in him for so long it had become an almost incurable disease. And he could not grasp the quick realization that he had done this to Big Zack. Then the Old Man's snarling voice, like a bucket of ice water thrown in his face, snapped him out of it.

"Don't stand there like a gentle cow waitin' fer milkin' time! You got 'im down. Tromp his guts out!" the Old Man's voice crackled.

Lonnie looked at the smashed bottle in his hand and threw it on the pine-board floor. Pain throbbed in his head and there was the taste of blood in his mouth. He was giddy and drunk and the fear had left him. He gave big Zack's limp hulk a kick that was more indifferent than it was brutal. Then he grinned at the Old Man and shook his head.

"I'd rather tackle Jasper," he said. "Or Toad."

"Big Zack will kill you when he comes outa it," growled Old Man Robertson. "Finish your job while you got the bulge. You got to kill a man like Zack to whup 'im."

"Then I'll kill him. But not like this. Not cold-blooded murder. Can't you savvy that, gran'paw?"

"Don't 'gran'paw' me. You ain't got the warp, that's all."

The booze was making Lonnie drunker. He pulled his six-shooter. He was pale and his eyes were fever bright and a little glazed. His own voice sounded odd in his ears as his bruised mouth spread in a grin.

"I'll take you on now, Jasper. You've called me some dirty names. You're a cock-eyed, half-witted, yellow-bellied, bushwhackin' murderer. I kin kill you before you git your gun. Why don't you laugh, Jasper? It's a josh on you. Go for your gun."

Jasper lifted both long arms high, the grin sliding across his dirty, whiskered face. Sweat stood out on his unwashed skin.

"You gone locoed, Lonnie?" He tried to laugh. It was a dismal failure.

"Mebby. Locoed drunk, Jasper.

. . . If you won't fight, get out, damn you!"

"Fight," said Old Man Robertson, "or hit the breeze."

Jasper sidled towards the door. As he passed, the Old Man gave him a vicious kick that propelled him the rest of the way.

Lonnie did not see Jasper open the door and let himself out and slam the door behind him. Lonnie's gun was pointed at Toad's wide belly and his eyes were blue glass.

"I can't miss that paunch of yours, Toad. I just can't miss. You've abused me for the last time, you frog-faced thing. I've laid awake nights dreamin' out all that's goin' on now. Sweatin'. Shiverin'. Scared. Mebby I'm scared now, Toad. Why don't you find out?"

The grin on Lonnie's blood-spattered pale face looked ghastly. Toad backed slowly towards the door. He dared not reach for a gun. Lonnie was crazy drunk. Drunk enough to shoot him. Toad was no coward but he did not want to die. Not now.

"Drag Big Zack out when you go, Toad," said the Old Man flatly. "You others want some of Lonnie's medicine, hang around. If you don't, then drag it. Ten minutes from now me and Lonnie is goin' to commence killin' off every shirt-tail Robertson cousin we kin find at the end of our gun sights. You kin make it easy on yourselves, Toad. Now git gone!"

Big Zack Robertson was coming awake, blinking the pain and blood from his pale eyes. Lonnie stepped over to where the big ramrod was getting onto his hands and knees. Without warning, teeth bared in a ghastly grin, Lonnie Robertson smashed Zack in the face. Blood spurted. Big Zack went down, covering his head and face with his big arms.

"Git up, Zack," Lonnie taunted. "So I kin club you down again with a gun barrel. Why don't you stand up and fight?"

Lonnie Robertson called big Zack all the fighting names he could lay tongue to as he jerked him onto his hands and knees and on out the doorway into the night.

The Old Man told Toad and Jasper who had lingered outside in the dark, to load Zack on his horse, and he warned all of them to get off the ranch.

"We'll come back!" muttered Zack. "By the hell, we'll come back!"

It did not take them long to saddle their horses at the barn and ride off into the night. They had to ride across a wide strip of moonlit clearing and they crossed it with their horses spurred to a run.

Old Man Robertson had blown out the bunkhouse lantern. He stood in the darkness with a saddle carbine. Somewhere in the dark cabin Lonnie Robertson was being sick. The Old Man waited outside in the shadows.

When the last of the Robertsons had gone the Old Man told his grandson to come on out of that boar's nest and go on down to the crick and soak himself sober. And then they'd see how much fighting guts Lonnie actually had after he'd got rid of Toad's poison booze.

"You put up a good show while it

lasted," growled the Old Man, "but if you got to be locoed drunk to fight, then you better crawl off somewheres and swaller the end of your gun barrel and pull the trigger. Because I don't want no part of you."

Lonnie came out on long legs that did not track too well. He went on down to the creek where he stripped to the hide and he lay there in the cold creek water a long while until he was washed clean and the bitter taste gargled out of his mouth and throat. He was shivering with cold, and sober when he climbed out and he walked naked to the big log house where the Old Man lived when he came to the ranch and where Lonnie had been born. Zack, Jasper and Toad had never been allowed inside the locked doors of that house but Lonnie had his own room in it. Lonnie dressed in clean clothes and his town boots, and pulled on a new Stetson hat. Then he walked into the front parlor where Old Man Robertson was sitting in a big old rawhide chair with a cigar and a tumbler of bonded whiskey. Lonnie hitched up his sagging cartridge belt with its six-shooter. His hat tilted back. His bloodshot eyes were as clear blue now as the rain-washed Montana sky. His grin was flat-lipped.

"There's only one way to find out," Lonnie said; "if I've got the guts to put up a fight when I'm not locoed drunk. Till then I can't promise anything."

Old Man Robertson looked his grandson over from head to foot with slow appraisal. Then he motioned to the bottle of bonded whiskey and an empty glass.

"This kind of booze, unless you swill it like a hawg," he growled, "won't hurt you. You need a drink. Take it."

V

The Old Man's gaunt leathery face had a grayish look. His eyes, glinting through shaggy brows, were shining steel. He slumped down in the big rawhide armchair with his glass of raw whiskey and puffed on the black cigar clamped in a corner of his mouth under the drooping white mustache.

He motioned Lonnie to a chair. Lonnie poured himself a short drink and sat down with it. He did not want the drink. The very smell of whiskey was enough to make him gag. But he knew he had to down that drink or call down the Old Man's abuse on himself. He cut his grandfather a covert look that caught the Old Man with his guard down. The grizzled tough cattleman looked old and tired and worried. Whipped but unwilling to admit it. And Lonnie let the silence between them grow heavy and uneasy.

He had no real affection for this hard-bitten old cattleman who was his grandfather. There were times when he hated the Old Man and it was a bitter hatred. But he could not hate Old Man Robertson now. Because the Old Man had the look of a gaunt old gray timber wolf that has been trapped and is wearing his fangs out fighting the steel trap holding him. And Lonnie waited now for the Old Man to break the awkward silence.

"You fail me now, Lonnie," Old Man Robertson's voice fell like a heavy blow across the silence, "and I got nothing left to live for."

And then when he did not go on and Lonnie lacked the temerity to ask a single question, it was as though the hush of death had fallen like a pall over the old log house.

"Becky"—the Old Man's voice was toneless—"quit me."

Lonnie almost dropped his untouched drink. "What . . . what do you mean?"

"Becky has gone. She quit the Old Man. Quit me in a tight—after all I done for her. Raised her. Give her an education. Her own bank account. Everything she ever wanted, I give her. Now when I can't give her no more because I'm broke, she quit me."

Lonnie shook his head. He knew his cousin Becky, or thought he knew her, as well as that young lady knew herself. She was headstrong and willful, but it wasn't like her to quit the Old Man. Old Man Robertson's one soft spot was his love for his granddaughter. And she cared for him as though he was a small boy and she was his mother. To be sure, they quarreled when their tempers clashed. Becky had a lot of her grandfather's traits. But it certainly was not like Becky to run out on the Old Man. Lonnie would not believe it.

"Where did Becky go?" he asked.

"I don't know where she went . . ."

It was the first time Lonnie had ever heard Old Man Robertson tell a deliberate lie. The Old Man made a poor liar. He gulped down his raw whiskey now to cover it up. Lonnie let it ride.

Lonnie had one guess coming and took it. Becky had run off and married one of the McDaniels brothers, Pete or Travis. In open defiance of the Old Man's strict orders, Becky had danced with both the McDaniels boys more than once, flirted with them openly. There had been some hot-tempered arguments between Becky and her grandfather about the two spur-jingling, swaggering McDaniels boys. Becky had red hair and gray eyes like her grandfather. She was small and trimly made and sat a horse as though she had been raised in the saddle, which she had. Peter and Travis McDaniels were the best pick of young cowmen in that part of the country. Becky had taken them away from a lot of girls just for the devilment of it. Or perhaps because she actually cared for one of them.

Lonnie tried another question. "What's that you said about bein' broke?"

"Big Zack and his outfit have stolen me broke. And if you had the brains of a sheepherder you'd have ketched onto Zack and told me. You bin here at the home ranch keepin' the outfit's books. You worked through every calf and beef roundup. You bin too damned dumb to see what went on, or too scared of that big Zack to open your trap. . . . The ranch is bogged plumb down in debt. And what's become of my R-on-a-Rail cattle?"

The Old Man was pacing the floor with long-legged strides. He limped

heavily from old bullet wounds that had left him crippled for life.

"If you had the guts of a cottontail rabbit—"

Lonnie flushed hotly under the wrath of his cowman grandfather. Since he could remember, it had been like this. And always he had taken it without much in the way of protest until it had gotten to be a habit. He had carried his hurts and humiliation and silent resentment off like a whipped dog, alone, licking his wounds.

Lonnie got up out of his chair, holding his partly filled glass of whiskey that he had not tasted. Now he flung the whiskey, glass and all, into the empty fireplace. The smashing of the glass tumbler halted the Old Man in his tracks.

"No wonder Becky left you." Lonnie's voice sounded brittle. "She's got a right to her happiness. A hell of a future for a girl, keeping house for an ornery old hellion who wouldn't let her out of his sight because he had to hide behind a woman's petticoats for protection against the mongrel kinfolks he hired to do his dirty work. So Becky ran off with one of the McDaniels boys. Well, I wish her luck."

Old Man Robertson stood there staring at his grandson blankly, too astonished to open his mouth. It was like having your wind kicked out by a pet lamb.

"You've cussed me out since I kin remember," Lonnie went on. "You worked me when I was ten-twelve years old, and you expected and got the work of a forty-a-month cowhand out of me. While other kids enjoyed school vacations I cleaned the barn and worked in the hayfield and rode fence. And you turned me over to that big bulldozer Zack and told him to make a cowhand out o' me. Instead of a pat on the back, I got a kick in the pants. A word of praise would have done more good than all the cussing I've bin taking for years.

"Now you expect loyalty from me. And even while you demand it, you can't break the habit of calling me a coward and a quitter. I've earned every dollar you ever handed me. Earned it a hundred times. I don't owe you anything in the way of loyalty. You're my grandfather. And I've got all the reasons on earth to hate you. Name me one reason why I should fight for you and your R-on-a-Rail."

"You gone locoed?" Old Man Robertson was glaring at his grandson.

"Call it that. Call it anything you want. I asked for one reason why I should side you in a tight. Name it."

"This outfit will be yourn when I die. Yourn and Becky's. It's wrote in my will."

"I don't want any part of your outfit. Neither does Becky. If I claimed it all right now, I've paid more than it's worth. But I don't want it."

Old Man Robertson's big fists clenched. His eyes slitted. His voice was choked with a terrible wrath.

"I was a damned fool ever to hope you'd stand by an old man in a tight. Git out that door, you young whelp!

Git off my ranch! You're the sorriest excuse fer a man I ever laid eyes on!"

Lonnie Robertson stood on wide-spread legs. He stared back at the Old Man, a slow grin spreading across his tanned, bruised face.

"That," he said, "is what I mean. You're poisoned with it. Bite yourself and you'd die like a rattlesnake of your own poison." Lonnie was talking now in a quiet tone.

The Old Man peered at him as though he was seeing him for the first time. Lonnie stood his ground and his slow grin widened.

"You had two sons," Lonnie went on. "Becky's father. My father. You raised 'em according to your own lights. You patterned 'em after yourself. You sent your two sons out to be killed and you got bushwhacked yourself because you claimed all the free range in sight and tried to hold it with a gun. Any other rancher who tried to make a decent living on what open country there was, you called a cattle rustler and those men were lawless invaders in your eyes. They had as much right to the free range as you ever had. But you told 'em to quit the country or you'd kill 'em off. Who did you think you was? The—"

"Git!" The Old Man was livid with fury now. "Git out o' my house before I kill yuh!"

"I'll finish what I started to say. You killed your two sons. Just as certain as if you done the actual bushwhacking," said Lonnie. "Deep in your ornery old heart, you know it. And it's poison in your veins . . ."

All the color drained from the Old Man's gaunt face, leaving his skin an ugly dry gray like leather with the life gone out of it. His anger ebbed and there was a stricken look in his peering steel-gray eyes.

"What . . . what you drivin' at, boy?"

"You sent for Zack and Jasper and Toad," said Lonnie quietly, "before your two sons got killed. You figured you needed that kind of renegade help. Zack and Jasper and Toad were outlaws. They used to hang out around the Hole in the Wall. Their bushwhacker guns were for hire to the highest bidder. They came when you sent for 'em. They showed up soon after your two sons were drygulched and after you'd bin shot up when you rode into a bushwhacker trap one night. Your sons never lived long enough to tell who killed 'em. And it was too dark for you to see the bushwhackers that shot you off your horse and left you for dead. Even now you don't have proof that it was your own renegade shirt-tail Robertson kin, Zack and Jasper and Toad, that killed your two sons and didn't do such a thorough job on you. But that's your suspicion. And I've seen enough and heard enough to know that's who killed my father and Becky's father."

Old Man Robertson poured himself a drink and gulped it down. "I bin livin' in hell," he muttered.

"A hell of your own makin'," Lonnie went on brutally. "They set the shotgun trap for you tonight. They found out somehow that you wouldn't have Becky along. And they held me prisoner inside the

bunkhouse. The twins must've got drunk on the job. Zack and Jasper and Toad stayed in the bunkhouse to alibi themselves when you got killed at the gate. They'd have had me for a witness to prove that alibi. . . . You turned the shotgun on the twins?"

"I had a hunch it was rigged to the bell rope. So instead of ringin' the bell I pawed through the brush till I located the shotgun. I was disengagin' the trip wire on it when the twins woke up and ketched me at it. I let 'em have both barrels. That jangled the bell. I looked over their dead carcasses an' drawed my own conclusions. Rung the bell to see if anybody would show up. And when nobody come to the gate I unlocked it and come on. And I'll play the rest of it out alone and accordin' to my lights. You kin git the hell gone now, Lonnie. You've spoke your speech. Now go. I'm playin' my string out. Alone."

Lonnie rolled and lit a cigarette. He blew out the match flame and grinned.

"If it's all the same to you, gran'paw," he said, "I'll work on crick water. I never could git the taste for booze. Anyhow I got to prove it to myself that I've got the guts that don't need whiskey for a brave-maker." He walked over to the gun rack and took a saddle carbine from it.

"What," asked Old Man Robertson, "are you aimin' to do with that gun?"

"I'm killin' me a few shirt-tail cousins. I'm goin' after Zack and Jasper and Toad. Becky didn't quit you. Neither will I. We're back to back at the showdown, gran'paw. But I'll be damned if I know why."

VI

It surely griped Old Man Robertson to show any softness of heart. He kept muttering into his drooping white mustache that old age was finally getting him down. But he sat his horse straight-backed and his hard gray eyes were sharp as whetted steel. There was no tiring him out; he was as tough as rawhide. It was a forty-mile ride to the McDaniels home ranch. The Old Man and Lonnie rode most of it in silence. The second sweat dried on their leg-weary horses.

Pete and Travis McDaniels met them at the barn. The two brothers looked enough alike to be twins but Travis was older by five years. They were about five feet eight in height, broad-shouldered, lean-flanked, a little bowlegged. Their hair was wiry black and their features were blunt. They were grinning but their hands were on their guns. There was no way of reading their opaque black eyes.

Old Man Robertson's gnarled hands rested on his saddlehorn and he leaned a little forward to peer down at the two McDaniels brothers.

Lonnie sat his saddle with his weight in his left stirrup. His face was a little flushed. Pete McDaniels grinned at Lonnie. There was a sort of taunting challenge to the grin. They were about the same age.

Old Man Robertson started to say something but before he could get

out a word, Lonnie had swung from his saddle. His bridle reins dropped to the ground. He hitched up his sagging cartridge belt and grinned flatly.

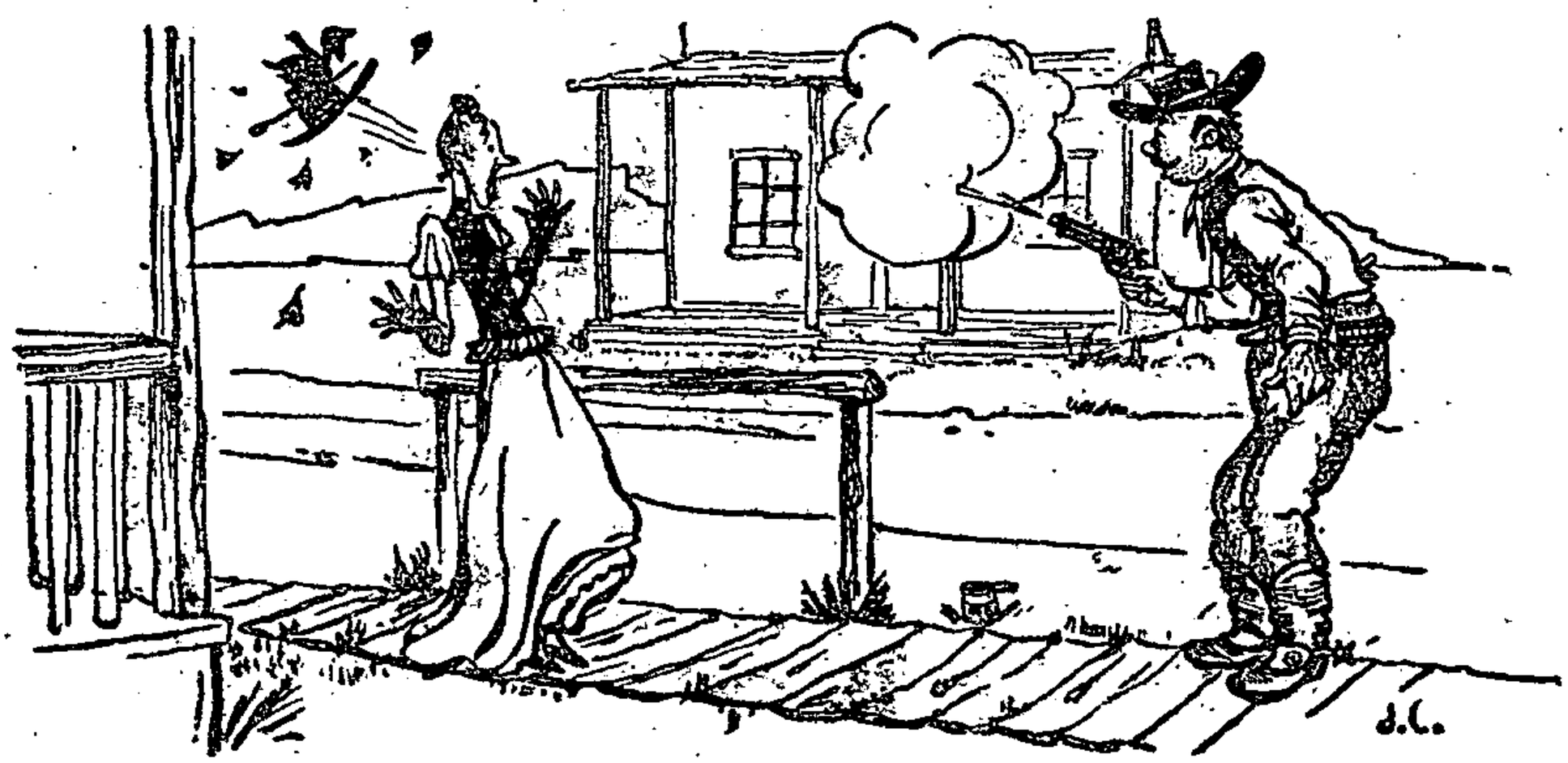
"Put up your dukes, Pete," he said. "I'm goin' to give you a whippin'. After that me'n the Old Man will borrow the loan of a change of horses. We're makin' a Winchester cut on that trail herd the Robertsons is holdin' down on the river. . . . Put 'em up, Pete."

Old Man Robertson straightened up in his saddle. "What's got into you, Lonnie? You never said nothin'—"

"Pete run Lonnie off the last time Lonnie slipped over after dark to come girlin'," explained Travis with a grin. "Turn your head if you can't stand the sight of Robertson blood. Pete'll slap Lonnie's ears off."

But Lonnie wasn't giving Pete McDaniels much chance to do any ear slapping. Before Pete was set, Lonnie was on top of him, fists swinging. Pete was still grinning when Lonnie hit him. It was a looping right and awkward but it had speed and weight behind it and there was the splatting crunch of broken bone. Pete reeled backward, off-balance, pain from his smashed nose blinding him. Lonnie followed it up with a clumsy rush, hardly feeling the thudding pain of Pete's hammering fists as he flailed Pete into a clinch and rushed him off his feet. They went down with a heavy thud. Lonnie landed on top straddling Pete with long legs, and pounded Pete's blood-spattered face with both fists.

"I quit, you damn fool! Let up!" Pete McDaniels yelled. "I got a-plenty, damn it! Can't you take a josh? Haul 'im off, Travis!"



"Oops! Sorry, ma'am, I shore thought thet varmint wuz a-roostin'."

"Got enough, Pete?" panted Lonnie.

"You deef? I bin hollerin' since you commenced. Look what you done to my nose."

Lonnie scrambled to his feet. Pete was spitting dirt and blood but he was grinning at Lonnie like he was happy about it. He shoved out his hand and Lonnie took it warily.

"It's worth a busted beak, Travis," said Pete McDaniels, "to find out Lonnie Robertson ain't got rabbit blood. I hope Maude was a-watchin'."

"Maude McDaniels," Travis McDaniels spoke to Old Man Robertson. "Our kid sister. Lonnie's bin ridin' down a string of horses comin' to see her. And just for the hell of it, Pete spooked Lonnie off. We got a laugh out o' it. That is, me'n Pete. Maude ain't cooked us a decent meal since. Shucks, we kot nothin' agin' Lonnie, except that he never had the sand to take his own part agin' them Robertsons that taken over R-on-a-Rail. Lonnie has done the McDaniels boys more'n one range favor and said nothin' about it. . . . You go on to the house, Lonnie. See kin you fix it with Maude to make us a decent pot of coffee."

"Hold on!" Old Man Robertson's voice was a growl. "What you done with Becky?"

"Becky?" Travis McDaniels shook his head. "What do you mean, sir?"

"Ain't Becky here?" asked Lonnie.

"Didn't she run off with one of you McDaniels brothers?" growled the Old Man.

"No, sir," Travis and Pete shook their heads. "No, *sir!*"

Old Man Robertson gripped his saddlehorn until his knuckles whitened. Lonnie was scowling.

"You mean," said Travis, "that Becky Robertson's gone?"

"She pulled out," Old Man Robertson told him, "night before last. Got her horse and rode off. Without a word. Never left a note to tell why ner where she'd gone."

Lonnie Robertson was already jerking the saddle off his played-out horse. His jaws clamped and his eyes were as cold as blue ice.

"You told Becky," he spoke quietly to the Old Man, "what you told me? About Zack and them stealin' you broke?"

"I did. I told Becky how—"

"That I lacked the guts or brains or both," Lonnie cut in, "to step in and stop it. . . . She ripped the hide off me when she stopped at the home ranch tó change horses. I don't know where she learns all them fightin' names . . . Step down, gran'paw. If Pete and Travis won't loan us the use of a couple of fresh horses, I'll whup Travis and set him and Pete afoot for the two geldin's they got saddled. I know where we'll cut Becky's sign. But we got to git there first or she'll be fightin' off big Zack and Jasper and Toad. Rattle your hocks, gran'paw. . . . Do I have to knock you down, Travis, to git a change of horses?"

"Somebody bin feedin' you raw meat, Lonnie?" Travis was grinning as he beckoned Lonnie into the barn.

"Lonnie," the Old Man yanked off his saddle and bridle and followed them into the barn, "guzzled hisself a swaller of Toad's panther spit, busted

a bottle acrost big Zack's head, run Zack and the other renegade Robertsons off the ranch, cussed me up one side and down the other, and piloted me here without so much as tellin' me the time of day. And where we're headed for now is somethin' else he ain't said."

But Old Man Robertson was as tickled as a kid with his first pair of red-topped, brass-toed boots.

Travis led a couple of grain-fed geldings from their stalls. "Best top horses in the McDaniels remuda. Ride 'em like you owned 'em. You mind if me'n my brother Pete trail along, Mister Lonnie?"

"Proud to have even a McDaniels," grinned Lonnie. "Fetch your saddle guns."

Pete McDaniels cupped his hands to his mouth and called out towards the house.

"You better cut your primpin' short, sis, if you want a last look at what you swore to marry. Hurry up an' you kin mebbyso git here in time to kiss 'im on the run as he goes past at a high lope. Little Lamb Lonnie has turned warthog and I got a busted beak to show for it. Looks like we're takin' the war trail, with Warthog Lonnie a-ridin' in the lead."

Maude McDaniels came running. Her mop of curly black hair tossed defiantly and her dark eyes flashed under heavy black lashes. She was small—built, her brothers teased her, like a quarter horse—with a healthy glow coloring a velvet tanned skin. Her black brows were perhaps a little too heavy for a girl. Red lips parted to show strong, very white teeth. When she saw the blood dripping from her brother Pete's nose she laughed gaily.

"It's Lonnie's day to howl," said Pete. "Showin' off like a circus actor. He's bin grazin' on loco weed. Watch out he don't bite."

Maude threw both arms around Lonnie's neck and kissed him hard on the mouth. Lonnie was red-eared but happy.

Old Man Robertson was pretty much bewildered and was trying to take it in his stride. Maude told him to let Lonnie saddle his horse for him and she took his hand and dragged him to the house for a cup of strong black coffee and a quick bait of hot grub.

"Becky claims you're a fraud," she told him. "She says that underneath that rawhide is a heart as big as a bucket. And I wish she'd been here to watch Lonnie drag it out o' that smart-Aleck Pete. Wasn't that something, grandpaw?"

"It didn't prove a doggoned thing," muttered Lonnie. "Pete never half tried. The darned fool kept laughin' at me even when he hollered quits. Pete or Travis kin lick me without workin' up a sweat."

"I wouldn't gamble on that," said Travis. "Where we bound for, Lonnie?"

"That big holdin' pasture on the river. Big Zack throwed a herd in there that bulged the barb wire. Some R-on-a-Rail stuff, a lot of your cattle and some of every stray brand in the country. The bulk of it is in the irons Zack and Jasper and Toad has registered in their names. It's a short week's drive acrost the

Wyoming line where big Zack's got buyers waitin' with the foldin' money to lay on the barrelhead. A month's roundup gatherment of cattle and there's two thousand head of stolen cattle and the herd trimmed and ready for the trail. And that's where Becky went. Alone, seein' she didn't come past here and pick you and Pete up to take along."

"But what the hell is Becky—"

"Some idea she got about cuttin' the fence and turnin' loose that big herd in the holdin' pasture. They'll kill her if they ketch her at it. Let's git there!"

Lonnie and Pete rode in the lead, Travis and the Old Man right behind them. All of them packed saddle guns. And Lonnie took them down through the badlands by way of a short cut known to only a few men.

Lonnie said that Becky had stopped at the R-on-a-Rail home ranch the day before. Lonnie was alone there. Zack and the others were down at the holding pasture. Zack had not let Lonnie near the big mixed herd the outfit had gathered and trimmed and thrown into the huge pasture on the river.

Becky had been excited. She had heard about the big gatherment of strays and had found out that Zack, Jasper and Toad had registered brands and had been putting a lot of R-on-a-Rail cattle into those brands. She said the Old Man had just found it out and realized that Zack, Jasper and Toad were rustling his cattle, using every method known to cattle thieves, altering brands, branding stuff they had sleeper-marked or picked up on the calf roundup last spring.

Lonnie had told Becky to take it easy. To ride on back to town.

"Tell the Old Man to have some Law waitin' for the trail herd at the Wyoming line," Lonnie had told the excited girl. "It's a job for the stock inspectors."

That was when Becky Robertson had blown up. She had called Lonnie a coward and a quitter and a lot of hard names. She had told him she was riding to the McDaniels ranch. She'd get Pete and Travis to help her cut that fence and spill that big herd back across the badlands. Then she had saddled a fresh horse and ridden away in one of her wildest tempers, leaving Lonnie there alone at the ranch feeling like a whipped cur dog, he said.

"At the time," he grinned ruefully, "it seemed to me that the wise thing to do was to send word to the Law to stop that herd at the Wyoming line."

"That," said Pete McDaniels, "is what me'n Travis had in mind when you told Maude to tell us about that big herd Zack was buildin' down on the river." Pete grinned and felt of his swollen nose.

"That's what I come to tell you and Travis," said Lonnie. "You wasn't anywhere around. Maude asked me to get down and she'd make coffee. So I told her to tell you and Travis I'd let you know when and where the trail herd would cross the Wyoming line. We was standin' under the big cottonwood out o' the moonlight and, doggone it, somehow or other before I knowed

it, I'd kissed Maude. So help me, that was the first and only time I'd ever made a pass at your sister. And then you rode up. Goshamighty, I was shore spooked!"

Pete tilted back his head and laughed. "You'll have to kick the pants off me for laughin', pardner. But the way you dropped sis and forked your horse and quit the flats was a record of some kind that'll never be busted. . . .You bashful, to start with. It was Maudie that made the pass at you, son. That's how it happened, but she'll knife me in the back if you tell her I said so. When that kid sister of mine wants somethin', she goes after it. Most mebby she gits it. But gamble your hat on this: The kid sister never went after but one man. And if you don't think she got 'im, you just try to slip your hobbles, mister."

Pete's voice was purposely loud. Lonnie said he needn't beller it to the wide world. He cut a look back across his shoulder and saw the Old Man chuckling and swapping looks with Travis.

"He better not try to dodge out o' that little gal's loop," said Old Man Robertson. "That was better coffee than ever Becky made in her life. . . . Had whiskers on it. And that pie . . . How long has this courtin' bin goin' on, anyhow?"

"Just started to bud," said Travis, "when Pete nipped it."

"Deserved a busted nose, then."

"Amen to that," said Travis. "We bin tryin' to git Lonnie for a long time—since that night ten years ago when he found our dad bushwhacked on the road home. Shot up bad and afoot. Lonnie was just a kid but he got Dad McDaniels loaded on his horse and climbed up behind and held him in the saddle all the way to the ranch. Them bushwhackin' Robertsons would've killed Lonnie if they had run into him. And while he lay a-dyin', Dad McDaniels made me'n Pete promise we'd never tell on Lonnie and that if ever he needed help, we was to side him to the finish. And when the sign was right we was to tell Old Man Robertson that his two sons was killed by big Zack and Jasper and Toad Robertson. Dad was drygulched because he'd seen 'em do the killin' . . ."

"Why in tarnation didn't you McDaniels boys come to me long ago?" demanded the Old Man.

Travis McDaniels grinned twistedly. "Did anybody ever tell you, sir, that you are a hard man to approach thataway?"

The Old Man snorted. "My grandson mentioned the fact durin' the night."

They were deep in the broken badlands when they found Becky Robertson. Her hands were tied to the horn of her saddle, her feet tied in the stirrups and the bridle pulled off her sweat-marked horse. Her flannel shirt was ripped and caked with dried blood. Quirt welts ridged her skin. But her dry-eyed anger overrode the exhaustion and pain of the brutal quirting Zack, Jasper and Toad had given her when they caught her hazing the last of the cattle

through broken gaps in the big barbed wire holding pasture.

"Just stake me to a gun," she gritted while Travis McDaniels held her in his arms and cussed softly. "I'll take my own part.. And I won't miss when I line my gun sights on those three inbred renegade Robertsons."

Travis McDaniels said he didn't want a she-killer for the mother of his children. He told Becky to ride on to the McDaniels ranch and help Maude build a double wedding cake. There were enough men in the family to do the gun fighting.

"And don't cut Lonnie them dirty looks, honey. He's doin' all right for hisself. See how he practiced on Pete?"

"Lonnie run 'em all off the ranch, baby," said the Old Man. "Made bunch quitters out o' them shirt-tail kin. Do like Travis tells you. Swap them chaps fer a kitchen apron. A rollin' pin, not a six-shooter, is the proper weapon fer a lady. . . . Reckon you kin make it to the McDaniels ranch, baby?"

"Of course. My horse is sweaty but he was fresh saddled an hour ago. And I'm sorry, Lonnie. You had it figured right. Travis might be able in time to do something about this hair-triggered temper of mine."

Travis said he wouldn't dull or blunt her temper for all the cattle in Montana, though he might just fetch Big Zack's quirt back to remind her. But behind his grin and his joshing his black eyes glittered. It was going to be tough on big Zack if they took that burly ramrod alive.

About an hour later they heard the bawling of cattle and the shouts of cowpunchers. And they reined up, their hands on their guns, to make war medicine.

VII

Lonnie Robertson knew that he hadn't proved anything yet—to the Old Man or to himself. For all he knew or anybody knew, he was a rank coward at heart. And until he had licked this thing called cowardice, he wasn't going back to Maude McDaniels. But he did not put it into words.

"Wait here," said Lonnie, "while I scout ahead some." And he rode off into the broken badlands and out of sight.

When he had gone Old Man Robertson nodded to Travis and Pete McDaniels and slid his carbine from its saddle scabbard.

"We better kind o' scatter, boys. Keep Lonnie in sight and try to git up inside gun range. But don't let him ketch on we're right behind him. Sabby?"

Pete and Travis nodded. They savvied, all right. They admired the Old Man for his understanding of Lonnie and they never let on they caught the unsteady quaver in the voice of the tough old cowman or that they saw that his hard steely eyes were a little misted.

Lonnie Robertson was proving himself, going far past the border of mere courage. It took more than just a brave man to ride alone into the

kind of danger yonder. Big Zack and Jasper and Toad were cunning and cold-blooded bushwhacker killers. They did not believe in giving a man any kind of a fighting chance. According to their code, only damned fools fought in the open, and only a weak-brained idiot gave an enemy the slightest part of an even break for his gun. Lonnie Robertson, desperate in his desire to prove his own courage, was riding to certain death, because those cattle rustlers never worked blindly. They would have mounted guards posted at hidden vantage points. Alert. Ready to signal the warning of danger.

Lonnie must have known that. He must have realized they would not meet him out in the open. But he never reined up. He rode straight ahead, his saddle carbine out of its scabbard and ready. Gambling against all the bushwhacker odds that he would get some kind of fighting chance to use a gun. It was broken country, covered with brush patches, scrub pines and jutting sandstone rimrocks. Ahead was an open strip. Beyond that was the upper gate to the big holding pasture where Zack and his men were throwing their drives of cattle into one big holdup. The cattle were bawling but he could no longer make out the sound of men. Their scattered shouts had died out. They had gotten the signal that riders were coming.

There was a little ridge behind Lonnie and off to his right where an outcropping of sandstone rimrock showed. And now from the brush that grew back from the rimrock's edge came the sharp crack of a .30-30 saddle carbine. One . . . two . . . three . . . four shots in rapid succession.

And from behind the heavy patches of buckbrush on the far side of the open strip came the grunting scream of a wounded man. Another man cursed harshly. A third man's grisly chuckling broke into a rasping cry of pain. Then big Zack Robertson's bellowing voice sounded.

"Dammit to hell, who's shootin' at us? There's that coyote Lonnie. Git 'im! Must be the Old Man up yonder. Smoke the ol' sidewinder out! You, Jasper! Toad! Heat your gun barrels!"

From the sandstone rimrock came Pete McDaniels' cowpuncher yipping.

"Like sittin' ducks, Travis. I got 'em all at the end of my gun sights. . . . Lonnie, you damn fool!"

Lonnie's lean face was as white as blood-smeared alkali as he bent low along the neck of his borrowed horse and spurred straight across the open clearing. And all that saved him from being shot from his saddle was the fast gunfire of Pete McDaniels. Pete's bullets were driving big Zack and the lanky Jasper and the squatty Toad out from behind the flimsy shelter of the brush. Driving them out of their bushwhacker trap and sending them out into the open to fight. And for the first time in their lives they had to buck something like fighting odds.

Because even as they ran for it, Travis McDaniels and Old Man

Robertson rode up out of the scrub pines to block their getaway. They whirled their horses and in those next brief seconds Lonnie Robertson saw Zack and Jasper and Toad riding out of the buckbrush and straight at him, their horses spurred to a run and their guns spewing streaks of fire.

Lonnie felt the burning thudding rip of a bullet grazing his ribs. He ducked instinctively as bullets whined and snarled past his head. And he did not realize he had yanked his running horse to a sliding halt, that his teeth were bared in a flat-lipped snarl, that the saddle carbine in his hands was spewing fire. Nor did he feel the recoil kicking the gun stock against his shoulder as he levered fresh cartridges into the breech and pulled the trigger.

As though he was in the grip of some bad nightmare, he saw one horse swerve and whirl and its rider, his face the face of big Zack, with blood spurting from it, pitch headlong onto the ground.

The lanky Jasper was riding at Lonnie now, grinning horribly, swaying in his saddle as though he was drunk, blood smearing his shirt where a .30-30 bullet had ripped him. Then Lonnie sent two bullets into the lanky Jasper's swaying frame and Jasper went backwards out of his saddle. One foot hung in the stirrup and the horse kicked and pitched, its shod hoofs mangling Jasper's head until the spurred boot slid free of the stirrup and the fear-maddened horse stampeded on across the clearing.

Toad, squatty in the saddle, veered off to Lonnie's right. Lonnie threw away his empty carbine and jerked his six-shooter. He could see Toad's face, greenish, a wide-mouthed, pock-marked frog face with pop eyes. Low in the saddle, bowed legs locked around the barrel of his horse, Toad was riding away. Lonnie shot at him, wondering vaguely why Toad wasn't shooting. Not until later did he know that Toad was dead in his saddle, shot through the heart by a .30-30 bullet from Old Man Robertson's saddle carbine, even as the lanky Jasper had been mortally hit before Lonnie's first bullet struck his tall frame. Travis had shot Jasper and the bullet had turned the lanky cross-eyed renegade back.

Down through the badlands the lesser shirt-tail Robertson kin were whipping over and under with quirts and ropes to get out of the country before death mowed them down. With big Zack and Jasper and Toad dead, they were so many rabbits. Some of them were panicky to the point of throwing away their guns and yelling for mercy as they outran the gunfire that drove them forever out of Montana.

So it was all finished now but the talking it over and Lonnie Robertson sat his horse out in the broad middle

of the clearing. There was an empty six-shooter in his hand, a grin frozen on his pale face. But his eyes were as clear and hard and blue as deep winter ice. Fear no longer chilled him. No cold sweat bathed him in a clammy sodden bath.

"A hell of a time," he heard the voice of Old Man Robertson, "to tell the boy to come in out o' the rain. . . ."

The Old Man rode up to him. Pulling the cork of a quart of whiskey with his big yellow teeth, he spat out the cork and handed the bottle to his grandson.

"It'll taste all right this time, son."

There was no need to cork the bottle, not while Pete and Travis rode along to help lower it.

They took the empty saddles from the sweat-marked R - on - a - Rail geldings and turned the horses loose. The dead bodies of Zack and Jasper and Toad were left where they lay. The Old Man said the Law might want a look at 'em. And he didn't reckon any self-respecting varmint would bother such stinkin' carcasses.

Lonnie let them wrap a tight bandage around his bullet-nicked ribs. He told the truth when he said he didn't feel much pain.

"Mebbyso it's because I feel too good inside."

He was the only cold-sober one of the four that rode up to the McDaniels' barn at moonrise. The others dropped back to kill the last of the whiskey. And when Lonnie swung from his saddle a girl ran out of the barn, dropping her gun. And she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, sobbing and laughing shakily.

Lonnie blinked. Then he grinned and said he'd be damned. Because it was his cousin Becky.

"You can have the Lonnie Lamb now, Maude," Becky said. "Here's Travis."

It was the first time Becky had called him "Lonnie Lamb" to his face. And oddly enough it sounded like some kind of a rare compliment.

"But don't let it get started," Lonnie told Maude when he took her in his arms and kissed her clumsily. "A doggoned nickname like that kin stick like a sand burr."

"And you'd be kept busy busting noses, Lonnie Lamb . . . And that's the first, last and only time I'll ever call you that."

"I'd hire Pete to whip 'em. I'm no fightin' man."

And Lonnie Robertson meant just that. He had come back to the McDaniels ranch without his guns. He had left them back yonder with the dead bodies of big Zack and the lanky Jasper and the ugly Toad.

THE END

The war is over but remember that Uncle Sam still needs all the scrap paper you can salvage—so don't waste *waste paper!*

DRAGGIN' IN THE TREE

by S. OMAR BARKER

The cowboy ain't no lumberjack, an' if you want the facks,
One thing he ain't the fondest of is choppin' with an ax.
But when December snow has got the range all wrapped in white,
There is one job of choppin' that he seems to like all right.
A sharp ax on his shoulder, he will ride off up the draw
Until he finds an evergreen without a single flaw.
A spruce, a fir, a juniper that's shaped just to a T
To set up in a corner for the ranchhouse Christmas tree.

As like as not, last summer while a-ridin' after cows,
He noticed just the tree he wants, with green an' graceful boughs
That's stout enough to ornament without no droop nor saggin',
But still a tree that ain't too big to fetch without a wagon.
It may be that he picked it out when August sun was hot,
But he knows where to find it, for his mind has marked the spot.
It ain't no chore to chop it down, an' if the snow is deep,
He drags it in behind his horse. It warms him up a heap
To see them rancher kids run out a-hollerin' with glee
To watch him an' admire him when he's bringin' in the tree.

Them kids may not belong to him, but that don't matter none—
His boss' brood, a nester's brats—it's still a heap of fun
To some ol' lonesome cowpoke, an' it sets his heart aglow
To come a-draggin' in the tree across the Christmas snow.
Sometimes when there's a schoolmarm an' she wants a tree at school,
She gets half a dozen, for you'll find that as a rule
At least that many cowboys, in sweet education's cause,
Will somehow get to feelin' that they're kin to Santy Claus!

Sometimes the rangeland's lonesome an' sometimes it's kind o' grim,
But not when every ranchhouse has a Christmas tree to trim.
An' though the wild cowpuncher ain't no hand to swing an ax,
Across the white December snow you'll often find his tracks
A-leadin' to the timber, then back out again once more,
A-draggin' in the Christmas tree—his purt' near favorite chore!

Could Judge Jim Fortune protect a girl from wharf rats without running into trouble with other varmints on the Embarcadero?

JUDGE JIM MEETS A LADY

by M. HOWARD LANE

JAMES FORTUNE, better known to his Portsmouth Square associates as Judge Jim, strolled the Embarcadero, the tip of his gold-headed stick casually scattering rats half the size of tomcats from his path. It was the rush of a half dozen through a pile of once elaborate furniture that brought an anguished squeal from the other side of the mound.

The sound stopped Judge Jim in his tracks. "My friend," he told

himself solemnly, "that sound never came from the throat of a man!"

His light steps started him almost soundlessly around the huge pile of cargo. It was no different from a hundred other mountains of such strewn over bay front sands, for this was the early spring of 1850, and there was a forest of masts spread over the bay where deserted ships creaked on rusty anchor chains while their crews sought gold along the Sacramento and the Yuba and the American.

There was no storage room in San Francisco for supplies, and not a man willing to haul them if there had been. *The Belle of Boston* was even now swinging at anchor just offshore, and Judge Jim had heard that mates were holding the crew aboard at gunpoint. Guns, he thought cynically, that would probably waver come nightfall, for the mates were likely as eager as the crew to jump ship, and be off up the river to Captain Cutter's Fort. *The Belle* had, however, disgorged a load of mail and it had allowed a full complement of passengers to come ashore.

A not particularly philanthropic interest in them had brought Judge Jim down the steep hills from Portsmouth Square. He had found in the past that it sometimes paid to mingle with the newcomers and proffer a word of advice, or let it be delicately known that Bronson's Golden Palace in the Plaza served the finest liquors, had the straightest games, and the prettiest dancing girls in San Francisco. If strangers found him dealing at one of the tables, they were likely to return his small favors by spending what coin was still in their pockets bucking his own particular tiger.

Yes, a man sometimes made fine contacts on Steamer Day, but Judge Jim had arrived a little late this afternoon, due to an unforeseen interruption in Sydneytown sprawled at the base of Telegraph Hill. A group of toughs had been trying to drag an elderly gentleman into the chaparral labyrinth of gulches and gullies where many of them lived.

To halt such business it had been necessary for Judge Jim to use the gold head of his ebony stick on the noggins of two of them. A third had then recognized him and yelled that "Fortune is a bad man to mix it with!" He and his companions had fled and Judge Jim had paused to revive the groggy prospector and point him back toward the safer precincts of the Plaza. The prospector's hair had been red as fire, odd in a man in the neighborhood of sixty, and the very thickness of it had probably saved him a cracked skull.

He'd muttered something about having to meet *The Belle* "because thar's valuable cargo aboard 'er for me, but I'm danged if I can recollect jest what it is, my pate's so addled right now—"

That little interruption had taken time, but Judge Jim had never found that it hurt to lend a fellow human a helping hand.

So now with a pleasant sense of curiosity rising in him, he rounded the mountainous heap of cargo, and what he saw was certainly enough

to make his belated visit to the Embarcadero well worth while. For standing atop a brass-bound trunk was a lady, and a young one by the trim look of the ankles she was displaying as she held her dress and many petticoats high above her shoe tops.

The rats Judge Jim had chased through the furniture had paused about the base of her trunk, and he was willing to swear that they too were admiring the little lady atop it.

"Ma'am," he said, and swept his gray beaver from well-combed dark hair, "it will give me great pleasure to chase the varmints away, unless you enjoy the cooling sea breeze against your ah . . . limbs."

The girl's face was heart-shaped, piquant. Her cheeks were pink and her hair beneath a demure bonnet was vivid auburn. She was quite the prettiest girl Judge Jim had yet seen in San Francisco.

His stick expertly scattered the rats, and when he looked up the girl had lowered her skirts and hopped down from the trunk. He found her brown eyes appraising his slender, black-clad length, the diamond studs in his frilled shirt front and the lean, almost austere regularity of his features. If the girl was as wise as he guessed she might be, she would easily comprehend his profession, and he had his moment of regret. Nice girls did not take to gamblers, and he began to wish that he'd opened a proper law office as he'd intended doing. The only trouble was that 'Friscans had little use for lawyers. They were either in too big a hurry to get up the river, or they found it simpler to settle their disputes with fists and guns. Thus it had been the natural thing for a healthy young man with a normal appetite to take to the tables.

The girl did not, however, seem to mind his obvious appearance. In fact Judge Jim found a smile on her pleasingly full red lips. "Ma'am," he said with a little bow, "the varmints have vanished. If I could be of assistance—"

And that was how it came about that the gambling fraternity taking their afternoon stroll about Portsmouth Square got the shock of their lives at the sight of Judge Jim Fortune carrying a brass-bound trunk to the porch of Mother Carey's Boarding House. He dropped it from his shoulders with something close to a sigh, and swabbed inelegant beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"You've been very kind, Mr. Fortune," Mary Small said, and her brown eyes twinkled, and her lips smiled. "I would say you make a very adequate porter. I heard on *The Belle* that they are paid ten dollars a day and more here in the City, which is a scandalous sum of money for a man to make."

"You won't think so," Judge Jim told her a trifle grimly, "after you pay Mother Carey a dollar apiece for your breakfast eggs!"

He watched the smile leave her face, and the twinkle depart from her eye, but he knew she was not thinking about the price of eggs. On the long climb up from the Embarcadero Mary Small had seemed eager

to talk. She had told Judge Jim much of her history.

Boston born, she and her mother had watched Ben Small join other California gold seekers after the word got about the land that Mr. Marshall had discovered dust and nuggets in the tailrace of Captain Sutter's Colomna sawmill.

From almost the first Ben Small's letters had been glowing, and better yet they'd been acompanied by small pokes of gold dust, proving his statements that California was the land of opportunity and the right place for a man to make a scad.

However, there'd always been a faint note of mystery in the letters, for Ben Small had often said in the missives that "all the gold ain't in river gravel. There's better ways for a man to make his stake than grubbing for it with pick and shovel."

The obvious thought had crossed Judge Jim's mind that perhaps Ben Small had taken to the highways with a mask over his face. There were plenty of rogues doing it, but he refrained from mentioning his surmise to the pretty, obviously worried girl from Boston.

Mary's mother, he also learned, had died of fever the past year, and the girl had decided that it was time to come to California. Her father had seemed agreeable.

"He was to meet *The Belle,*" Mary had said, "and dad isn't the man to go back on his word. That's why you find me here waiting for him. But . . . but it looks as though he isn't coming, and I'm worried."

She was not the first wayfayer stranded in San Francisco. Probably wouldn't be the last, and Jim Fortune had pointed out that with evening coming on and a tule fog ready to roll in from the bay-shore swamps she couldn't stay alone on the Embarcadero. He had suggested Mother Carey's as probably the most respectable place for a young lady to take lodging.

"It's right on the Plaza, ma'am, or Portsmouth Square as it's come to be known. From a chair on the porch you can get a good view of the whole square, and sooner or later your father will show up there."

So he had boosted her trunk onto his back, and they had trudged up the sandy streets to Mother Carey's. Now because he was strangely loath to leave her, Judge Jim made a careful chore of returning his handkerchief to breast pocket while he sought for a further subject they could discuss.

Finding it, his own rather thin lips smiled down at her. "Ma'am," he said, and gestured a little reluctantly at the gilt facade of Bronson's Golden Palace, "my place of business is in there, and most of those who come down river from the mines find it a congenial spot to spend an hour. If you will describe your father, I'll keep an eye out for him. There is really no need for you to feel alarmed," he went on. "Some-

times the wind is wrong on the bay, and occasionally schooners have to await the turn of the tide to cross the delta bar. He will undoubtedly arrive tonight, and I will likely see him before you. As I have said, most men come to wet their whistles at the Palace."

"Father will be easy to recognize," Mary Small said with certainty. "He is a solid, brawny man, very close to sixty years old, and he has the reddest hair you have ever seen. It is the color of fire, brighter than mine, and I imagine he will be wearing it long as seems to be the fashion here. He—"

But Jim Fortune had heard enough and he was glad that poker had taught him the advantage of a countenance impervious to surprise.

He knew now the nature of the "valuable cargo" that had been awaiting Ben Small aboard *The Belle of Boston*. For that brawny redhead he'd rescued on the fringe of Sydneytown could be none other than the father of this Boston girl.

"Ma'am," he said a little hurriedly, "I must be getting myself gone. Don't you be worrying now, for your father will show up all fit and fancy free. There is one more thing I might advise. That is to stay close here. The Plaza is no place for a lady to be strolling without proper escort, particularly after dark."

It was no place for a man with diamonds in his shirt, and a solitaire flashing on one finger to be strolling either, even if his name was Jim Fortune, and he had a reputation for being able to take care of himself. Footpads lurked in shadowed alleys, and rarely a night went by that some miner or San Franciscan did not wake up with a sore head or slit throat.

Nor had Mr. Bronson been particularly pleased when one of his most accomplished housemen had politely informed him that his table would be closed that night.

"It's this way, Jake," Judge Jim had explained with a certain unusual desperation in his normally smooth voice, "I'm laying off tonight to track down a big red-headed gazaboo who got waylaid and beat up some this afternoon down in Sydneytown. He acted half-seas over when I pulled him out of the ruckus, and he's apt to be wandering around goodness only knows where. I've got to try and find him. If you should happen to see him send him over to Mother Carey's—"

"To that flip of a girl you brought up from the *The Belle* this afternoon," Bronson interrupted sourly. "Oh yes, me'n some of the boys saw you packin' a trunk half the size of yourself, and I guessed right then that I'd be losin' you. Women raise hob with men, particularly good dealers. Go on, get along with you. A man with half his mind on a pretty face has got no business dealing cards. Here,"—he brought a shining double-barreled derringer made by Mr. Remington from his coat pocket—"stick this in your pants. You might need it."

And now as he moved with long strides down the slant of Market Street toward the Embarcadero

shore, Jim Fortune was not so sure but what Jake Bronson had had it about right.

He'd looked through every saloon bounding the Plaza, and found not the slightest trace of Ben Small. Cautious inquiries had elicited only negative answers. The big redhead had vanished, apparently into the foggy night. The Embarcadero was Jim's last bet, for near the quays where river schooners and barges docked, some enterprising souls had beached a mouldering hulk and converted it into Stinker Joe's Emporium. River men sometimes made it their first stop, and usually their last before setting sail for Sacramento. Even an addle-pate might likely remember this bay-shore haunt, for habit would take him there.

The night-covered hills were as bright as though a myriad of stars had fallen to earth. Tents crowded every available gulch and hummock, and lantern light shining through their transparent walls made Telegraph Hill resemble a tall, bright pillar. And there was enough light coming in from either side to show Jim Fortune three men trailing him with the silent patience of coyotes.

He hadn't noticed them in the crowds that filled Portsmouth Square, but right now he had a strong hunch that they'd been after him even then. He also felt willing to bet a doubloon that they were the trio he'd caned that afternoon.

Perhaps a desire to pay him back for their sore heads had set them on his trail, but perhaps also their motive was more potent. Judge Jim recalled now that that trio of thugs had seemed more interested in taking Ben Small with them than in rifling his pockets. And that wasn't the logical way for footpads to act. Usually they were content with a man's poke, not his person.

"Mighty queer," Jim thought. "He wasn't a man worth holding for ransom because nobody in town seems to know him. So why would those buckos want to drag him into Sydneytown?"

There was one way to find out, Judge Jim decided, and he rubbed his hand over the pocket that held the derringer, then flipped his stick so the gold head would become its useful end. An unpleasant patch of darkness lay just ahead, and behind him Judge Jim heard the sudden thump of running feet. He sighed and thought of Mary Small, and he remembered that Mr. Bronson had made a wise remark when he'd stated that women raised hob with good dealers.

Why, they even made a man think of earning a living far away from the gaming tables! They also gave him a new sense of responsibility. Mary Small would certainly be in a fine fix if something should happen to him before he located her father. So it was his task to deal with these footpads before they dealt with him. A prudent man hearing their rush would take to his heels and doubtless that was what they expected him to do. Fleet of foot from other chases, they'd then run him down, tackle him from behind and make short work of his diamond studs even if they weren't real.

But being a man who enjoyed surprising others, Judge Jim didn't run. He turned instead at the edge of the darkness, and met their rush head-on.

One took the knob of his cane full in the solar plexus and doubled forward. Judge Jim tapped him expertly on the noggin, and ducked beneath the club another swung at him. The derringer came into his fingers, spoke once. The footpad dropped his club and whirled away, howling that he'd been murdered. The other, with no liking for odds that were now man to man turned the opposite way with an equally loud yell and disappeared into the drifting tule fog.

"Neat," Judge Jim murmured, "if I do say so myself." He pocketed the derringer, and thoughtfully kicked the ribs of the man lying at his feet.

The footpad groaned and rolled over. He took a look at Fortune's stick and cautiously tried to inch away.

"Sit still," Judge Jim told him. "We'll just charge this episode up to experience if you're of a mind to tell me a few things. Otherwise we'll see if the sheriff will put you aboard the brig, *Euphemia*. I hear the rats there have a taste for prisoners' toes."

"Not that!" the man begged chokily. "So help me, guv'nor, I'll tell ye all I know—which ain't much," he added hastily.

"Likely enough," Jim said calmly. "Principally I'm interested in why you and your friends were so anxious to have Ben Small pay a visit to your Sydneytown tent."

The footpad's mouth worked. His eyes had the gleam of surprise in them. "You mean you don't know?"

There was some surprise in Judge Jim too, but he masked it. "And how and what would I be knowing?" he asked.

"Why, we watched ye talkin' with him this afternoon, and figured in his gratitude he'd give ye the tip on the new diggin's he's discovered. In Stinker Joe's we heard him say that all the gold warn't in river gravel. That there war better ways for a man to make his stake than grubbin' for it with pick and shovel. So we trailed him figuring he'd discovered a lode claim so rich a man could pick the nuggets right out o' the rocks. We was goin' to make 'im tell us where he got the gold. But by the time our heads cleared from the whackin' ye give 'em, he'd up and disappeared. We ain't seen airy sign of him since, and that's why we took to follerin' you. So help me, guv'nor, that's the truth!"

The words had the right ring, Judge Jim was willing to admit, principally because a part of Ben Small's talk was the same as he'd written more than once to his daughter. What could the man mean, anyway?"

"Cut the nobs off your head and sell 'em for eggs," Judge Jim counseled. "If we meet again, I'll crack your skull for keeps."

"You won't be seein' me any more," the footpad promised. "I know when I've had enough!"

So, still knowing little more than he had to start with, Judge Jim continued his walk to Stinker Joe's. Doors had been cut in the side of the hulk, and the main cabin made a perfectly adequate saloon. It was as misty with smoke as the bay with tule fog. Squinting through it, Jim saw no sign of the man he sought. Ben Small was not here.

He greeted the barkeep and proffered his poke, and a bottle and glass were set at his elbow. The barkeep's thick fingers raised an adequate pinch of dust, and he grinned.

"I keeps my job by the amount I can raise in a pinch," he confided.

"There'll be another pinch for your own pocket," Jim told him, "if you can tell me where I can locate a brawny gent with the reddest hair you've ever seen."

"Why, that'll be the easiest money I'll ever make," the barkeep chuckled, "but ye'll have to go to Sacramento to find him. Ben Small will be the one you're wanting. We put him on Captain Sutter's lugger bound up river at the swing of the tide. 'Twas time for him to go home. He was half-seas over, and mumblin' about some valuable cargo *The Belle* was to have brought him this afternoon. But he couldn't name it, and we couldn't see airy sign of it about his person so we just loaded him aboard and told the skipper to see he got home safe."

Judge Jim watched another healthy pinch of dust leave his poke, and made a second query. "Would you know of any other schooner that might be heading upstream come morning?"

"Captain Jack's *River Queen* is set to sail with the tide," the barkeep said promptly. "Leave me the passage money, and I'll buy ye deck space."

Judge Jim sighed and watched more gold dribble from his considerably flattened poke. "Make that passage for two!" he said equably.

"'Tis no hour for a gentleman to be callin' on a lady," said Mother Carey, "but seein' as it's you, Jim Fortune, I'll ask her to come downstairs. Wait right here in my parlor and don't be turnin' the lights down low, because I'll be watching!"

Judge Jim grinned, and he found the smile coming quite easily to his mouth. It had been some time, he thought, since his well-schooled face had unbent so regularly, and he found the sensation pleasant.

Mary Small had changed into bright and rustly silk, and she had pinched her cheeks until they were full of color. She made a little curtsy at the door, and her eyes were happy when Judge Jim gravely bowed.

"I have news for you that is both good and bad," he said, having decided that some of the truth would have to be told her. "I've learned that your father suffered some slight injury to his head in . . . er . . . a fall, and friends put him aboard Captain Sutter's *Sacramento*. He has gone up the river, and we will follow in the morning aboard the *River Queen*."

"We?" Mary Small's brown eyes seemed to take on an extraordinarily vivid sparkle. "Why, Mr. Fortune,

however will the Golden Palace get along without you?"

"That," Judge Jim told her somewhat stiffly, "will be Mr. Bronson's problem."

She walked with him to the door, and he could not refuse the hand she gave him. It was soft and small and warm, and it seemed filled with some current Jim Fortune was certain he'd never felt before. He left in some confusion, deciding he needed a drink worse than sleep.

They rode to the Embarcadero in style the next morning behind a pair of spanking bays hitched to a carriage, and the price it cost him thinned Judge Jim's poke considerably. However, it didn't seem to matter so very much. A gambler's money was easy come and easy go. He wondered irrelevantly just how it would feel to have calluses across the palms of his hands.

There were other passengers, shadowy on the forward deck, but it was still too dark to make out their faces. Finding seats on a broad hogshead of Peruvian beef proved simple enough, and for awhile they were silent as Captain Jack's crew worked with sail and oars and tiller. The tide bounced the schooner as they passed Yuerba Buena and Angel Island, then the dawn wind caught the sails, and the Kanaka cook passed steaming cups of coffee.

"I would be enjoying every minute of this trip," Mary Small said softly, "if it wasn't for my worry about father. Mr. Fortune, we'll neither of us ever be able to thank you enough for your courtesy."

"The pleasure," Jim cleared his throat, and realized with some shock that he was speaking the truth, "is all mine, ma'am."

"You might," said the girl, "call me Mary."

But the dawn had brightened enough now for Judge Jim to see the passengers up forward, and he lost, temporarily, his interest in Mary Small. The three men lolling up there were the footpads he'd met on Market Street. One of them touched a lump on his head and grinned derisively.

It was noon of the next day when the *River Queen* nosed into Captain Sutter's Embarcadero along the foot of Sacramento's Front Street, and Judge Jim Fortune, red-eyed and weary but still gallant, handed Mary Small into a skiff that had come out to the ship seeking passengers to ferry ashore. One of the ship's Kanaka crew had already taken the footpads to land, but Judge Jim had the strong suspicion they'd be waiting like hounds ready to take up the chase once he and Mary Small set foot ashore.

Twice his luck had held against the trio, but the third time that threesome might have their inning, and he had Mary to worry about now. It prompted his question to their ferryman, and at the oarsman's answer Judge Jim was certain that Lady

Luck had settled on his shoulder.

"Do you," he asked, "happen to know Ben Small?"

"Ben?" the oarsman straightened his back and grinned. "Why, that I do, friend. Took him home yistiddy when the *Sacramento* docked. Ye'll pardon me, ma'am, but I'll sure say he musta had a time for hisself in 'Frisco. Why he's still half-seas over, a-mutterin' about a valuable cargo he war supposed to have picked off'n *The Belle of Boston.*"

"I," Mary Small said, "am that cargo!"

"Glory be!" the oarsman gasped, and his small craft swung downstream like a sprinting bronco.

"Where," asked Judge Jim, "are you taking us?"

"Why, tuh see Ben," the oarsman snorted. "Iff'n the sight of his daughter don't sober him up, nothin' will!"

"Jim," Mary said as the skiff leaped downstream, "it looks like we're heading toward that beautiful island we saw near the mouth of Steamboat Slough."

"Yes," Judge Jim said slowly, and he was remembering the shine in Mary Small's eyes when they'd passed it less than an hour ago. An island like an emerald in a setting of azure. Rich, dark land, green with growing vegetables and young fruit trees.

"That's what I'd like," Mary Small had whispered with her hand on his arm. "A place to raise things. Dad always wanted the same. But you can't grow much but potted geraniums in a Boston flat."

A suspicion, horrible yet fascinating was growing in Judge Jim Fortune. Then the island was coming into view and he couldn't find the heart to ask any more questions.

There was a small float and back in the trees, a big white house. A red-headed man with a hoe in his hand and a lurch to his walk came down a path as the oarsman swung alongside the dock.

"Thar's your father, ma'am," the ferryman said, "and I'll wager he'll be right glad to see ye. He's made more dinero with that hoe than any of them a-breakin' their backs diggin' gold to buy the produce he grows. Why, the prices he gits are enough to make an honest farmer blush—"

"Dad!" Mary cried, and she jumped to the dock—in a flurry of bright skirts. "Dad!"

"Heaven help us," Ben Small rumbled, and his body straightened. "Now it all comes back to me. Them 'Frisco blatherskites cracked me over the noggin and I lost track of what had taken me down the river. All I can recollect is a nice young feller lendin' me a hand. Why, thar he is with ye!"

Judge Jim climbed to the dock, and the bright flares of Portsmouth Square seemed far away. Mr. Bronson would not be seeing him again, he guessed, and then a shout from upstream turned him, and he watched another skiff with three men aboard come curving toward the dock. One of them, with a pair of noticeable lumps on his head, was brandishing a big Dragoon Colt. He leaped aboard the float like a pirate boarding a prize galleon, and Judge Jim

Fortune looked him over ironically.

"Friend," he said, "if you feel like turning to plows instead of plunder, I'm sure Mr. Small will show you that all the gold isn't in river gravel."

"A sodbuster!" The footpad's revolver sagged. "A blasted sodbuster! Why, partner, no offense meant but I think we'll stick to 'Frisco!" The man turned as fast as he'd come and rejoined his comrades, and Judge Jim felt a familiar small hand on his arm.

"Mr. Fortune," Mary Small inquired primly, "will you be following them back to the . . . ah . . . bright lights?"

Judge Jim looked down at her and he could feel that current from her fingers stronger than ever. "Why, Mary," he said gravely, "the light in your eyes is brighter than any I have seen along the Embarcadero."

"And so it will always be," she murmured, and Judge Jim thought he heard her add the words: "for you . . ."

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY

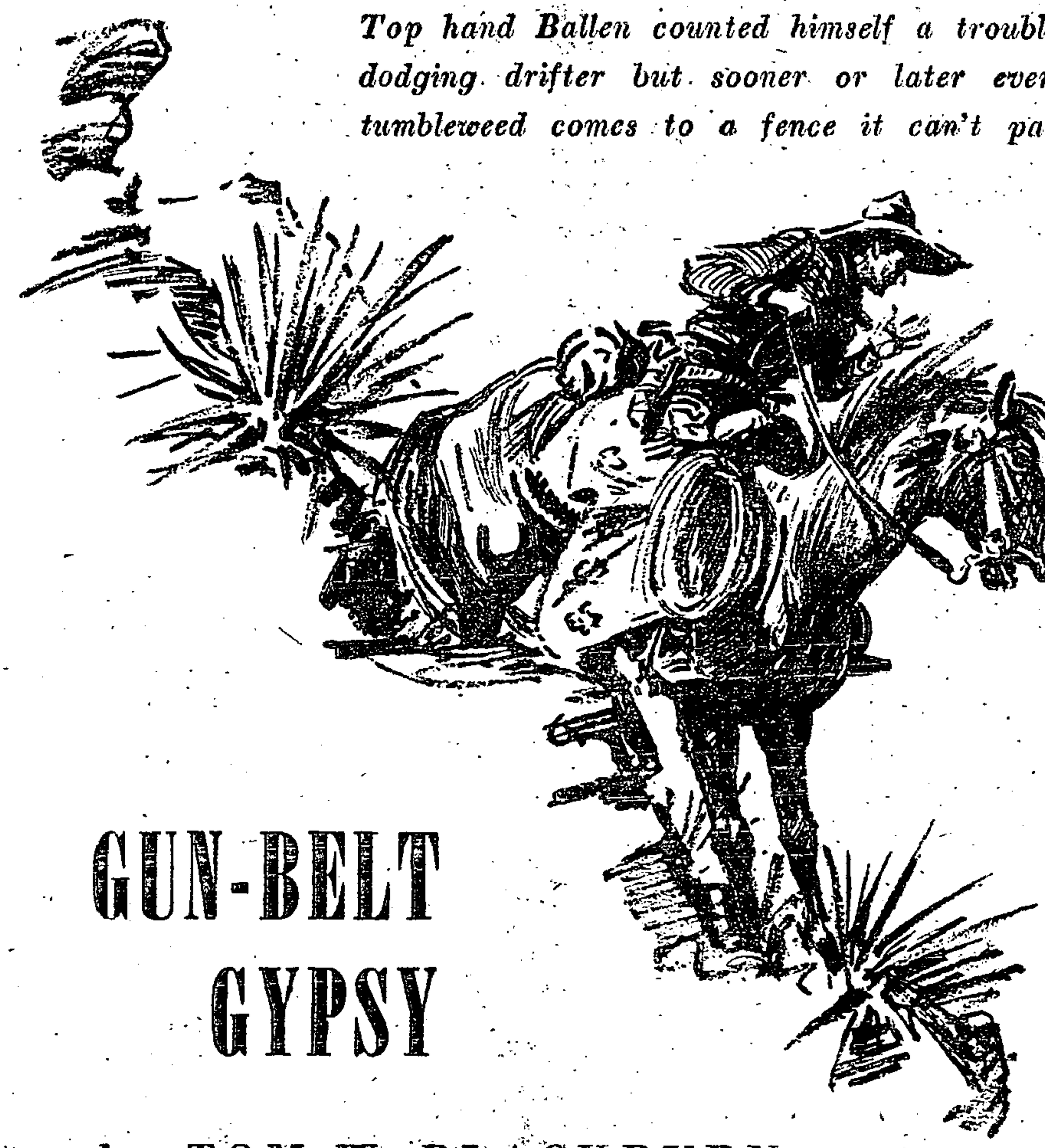
Jim Kjelgaard

though born in New York City was raised in the mountains of Pennsylvania, in what we surmise was a sportsman's paradise, for Jim tells us "our farm was surrounded by wonderful game country and perfect trout streams." While making no claims to being an Izaak Walton, Jim allows he does a reasonable facsimile of fishing, as well as shooting, an opinion we regard as an understatement, for anyone with Kjelgaard's flair for wild life stories must have more than a speaking acquaintance with the formidable denizens of the woodlands.

"After many jobs, none of which I liked —except that of caretaker of an estate umpteen miles back in the woods at fifty a month and found with nothing to do— these duties were particularly appealing— I quit and went beaver trapping," he says. "Discovered that beavers are very hard-boiled animals indeed. Started writing a few years ago and, despite threat of bodily harm from editors, I'm still at it. Married to a beautiful gal and we have a daughter, Karen, who on her fifth birthday assured me that the ideal presents would be a gun that shoots, a cowboy hat and a horse—preferably a wild one! Living at present in Wisconsin. Now there's a State! We're near such a stretch of river as you've never seen—weeds and lilies and reeds, but the fish. . . ."

Uh-huh—we wish we were there, too, but we're mighty glad Kjelgaard has taken time out from filling his creel and "eager-beaver" trouble to send us MAN ENOUGH, which you'll find in the January issue along wtih tales by Walt Coburn, L. L. Foreman, S. Omar Barker, Clint MacLeod, Giff Cheshire and many others.

Top hand Ballen counted himself a trouble-dodging drifter but sooner or later every tumbleweed comes to a fence it can't pass



GUN-BELT GYPSY

by TOM W. BLACKBURN

I

JIM BALLEN, big, full of a youthful vigor and rated a top hand wherever beef were run, held that a man worked for only three things from this world: food, fun and enough drink to flavor the two. When steady riders talked of the iron for which they rode as the best outfit in the world, and the old man from whom they drew their pay as the whitest gent under the sun, and the patch of graze and handful of stock each hoped to own one day, as a saddle man's biggest ambition, Ballen always laughed.

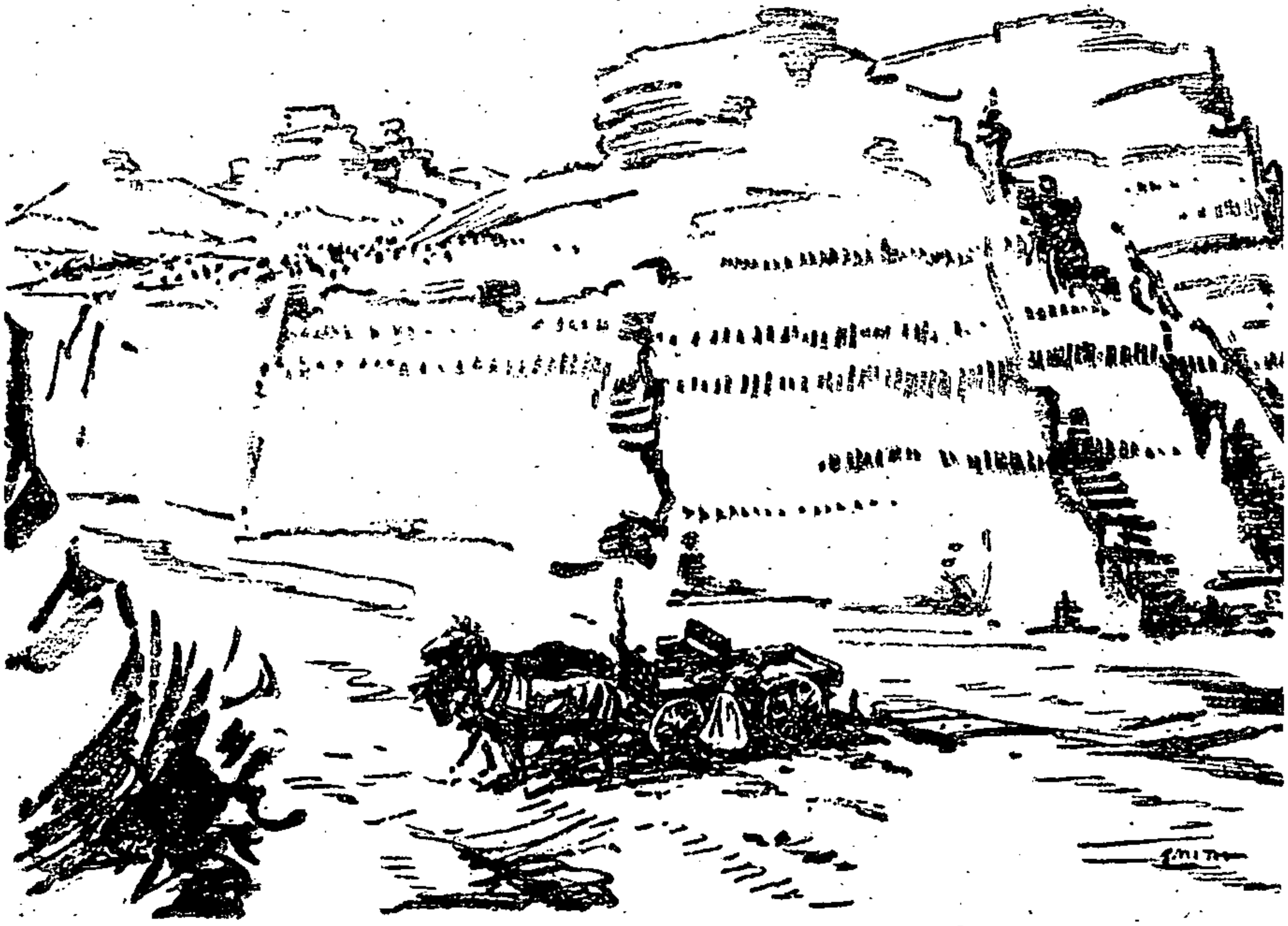
It was more a laugh of pity than of scorn. Ballen set himself in no seat of judgment on his fellows, but he did feel sorry for the mistake

they made. He could show them proof a hundred times over, in men they all knew, that the senselessness of loyalty had led good comrades into deep and dangerous troubles in which they actually held no stake of their own. He could show them at least one old hand on every spread whose eyes were dull with disappointment and whose spirit was broken because he could not meet the demands made upon him by his own ambition.

This was not for Jim Ballen. When a man hired him, he hired his judgment and his professional skills and the consideration any decent hombre would show his boss, but no more.

Sitting in the sombre public room of the Rimrock Funeral Parlors, listening with only half an ear to the scant testimony offered at this coroner's inquest into the death of Big Bob Toland, Ballen thought about these things. The fact that he was thinking about them was no accident. He was foreman of the TD Ranch. He had worked for Big Bob Toland until yesterday. From today on, he would be working for Ned Toland, Bob's graying, pleasant and wholly useless brother. And Ned Toland was looking fixedly across the room at him as though begging for help.

Coates, the coroner, had gone into the back room with the jury—maybe to look once again at Big Bob, lying like so much dressed beef in a big plain box back there. Coates came back into the room while Jim was thinking about Ned Toland and the silent plea in his eyes. This was an



important inquest. Most of Rimrock that counted for anything, good or bad, had turned out for it. Coates cleared his throat carefully and said:

"We, the coroner and the jury, after due deliberation, have arrived at a verdict on the cause or causes contributing to the death of the subject deceased, to wit: Robert Toland received fatal injuries from gunshot wounds inflicted by a person or persons unknown. Because of the uncertain evidence available, we hold it possible the deceased may have inflicted the wounds himself. Therefore, in accordance with the laws of this commonwealth, which forbid the casting of a suspicion of guilt without convincing proof, we find the said Robert Toland died by self-destruction. In other words, gentlemen—suicide!"

There was a gusty run of breath in the room. Men rose and started to file out. Two men were grinning. One was Jim Ballen, although his grin held no humor beyond a mocking scorn for a panel of jurors so easily persuaded to trade their sovereign rights to administer justice for release from fear of personal harm. The other grinning man was Tod Manley, the arrogant, heavy-bodied man who owned the Crescent, the Toland TD's nearest neighbor. Manley stopped in front of Ned Toland, gave him his hand without erasing his smile and moved on to the outside. Ballen heard him offering the crowd on the walk there a free drink at the Red Moon across the street.

Coates went back to his quarters and the jury filed out of the back room, hurried across the dim parlor, and poured relievedly into the sunshine outside. Ned Toland got up and crossed to where Ballen was still seated. He dropped into the chair beside Ballen just as Jim had known he would do.

"Jim," Toland said uneasily, "I've got a hell of a chore on my hands. There's no point in me making a bluff with you, is there?"

Ballen shook his head. He knew what Toland meant, but the man seemed determined to put it into words, this once, anyhow.

"I've lived off Bob for thirty years," Toland went on. "For the last ten of that time, I've lived on the TD. I've pretended I've been doing my part, that I'd learned something about running the ranch, and Bob—bless him—pretended the same thing. But I know and you know and most of the hands know, I reckon, that the TD runs deeper than I can wade."

Ballen nodded again. If a man couldn't be smart and able and willing to stand on his own two feet, it was at least something when he was honest enough to admit his own weakness. Jim had never liked Ned Toland, but he was willing to make the man this concession, now.

"The ranch," Toland went on, "is at the top of a greased skid, headed for hell. I don't reckon I could save it alone, even if I tried. But I'd like to salvage something for Bob's girl. I wrote her what has happened, but I told her to stay with her aunt and finish up her school, at least until fall. I told her she'd be

in the way here. I figured if you'd stick with me, we could turn the TD to cash or something before the jaws *reaching in on it close tight.* Will you stay?"

"You still aim to pay wages, don't you, Ned?" Ballen asked tartly.

Surprised, Toland nodded.

"Then nothing's changed that I can see. Your money's as good as Bob's, as long as it lasts."

Toland stood up. Jim walked with him to the door. Toland paused just within the portal.

"As long as it lasts . . ." Toland said thoughtfully. "Sounds funny. Ballen, it may not last very long. There's something you should know. Bob was murdered. I saw him die. The man who killed him doesn't know that, but I think he guesses it. I may be next!" Toland stepped outside then, crossed to the hitch rack, mounted a TD pony and turned out of town.

Vaguely thinking a drink would wash the musty taste of Coates' funeral parlors out of his mouth, Ballen crossed toward the Red Moon. Before he reached it, Tod Manley came out, angled to meet him and drew him into the ell before the barber shop, closed during the noon hour.

"You'll be leaving the TD, I suppose, Ballen?" Manley suggested. "Being one of Big Bob's men especially, you won't want any piece of what's likely to happen to that spread with Ned Toland running it."

Ballen met Manley's level stare.

"You've got me wrong, Manley," he said quietly. "I never was Bob Toland's man. I'm Jim Ballen's man —aim to keep on being so. I like my quarters and I like the work on the TD. Reckon I'll stay while *there's cash for pay.*"

A scowl drew lines deep above Manley's arrogant nose. He rubbed his toe in the dust on the walk.

"I'll put it this way, then, Ballen," he said blandly. "You know I took a note from Bob a season ago for some feeders he wanted to run in. He hadn't picked it up when this . . . accident . . . happened. With some of my money tied up in the TD, I've got an interest there. I don't want you in the foreman's saddle!"

"Personal, Manley?" Ballen asked with sudden chillness.

Manley shook his head blandly. "Not at all, Jim," he said. "You rate top hand from here to the border. I know that. I just don't want you on the TD. That's no warning. It's a piece of information. You're smart enough to be interested. Stop by when you pull out and tell me which direction you want to drift this time. I'll give you some letters to take along that'll do you real good."

"When I leave the TD—and I'll leave it like I've done a dozen others —it won't be because it's what you want, Manley," Jim said deliberately. "I don't need your letters. I've gotten good jobs before and I can again. I won't move till I'm ready and when I do, I won't starve!"

Manley shrugged.

"Maybe not," he agreed pleasantly. "But you might die, Jim . . ."

Ballen poked a finger out at the round belly of the man before him.

"If that's a threat, Manley," he

said icily, "don't try to make it come true! When Coates gets my carcass, if he ever does, there won't be any hogwash about suicide. He'll know damned well who plowed me under because he'll be planting the other hombre at the same time!"

II

Riding back to the TD late in the day, Jim Ballen added up the run of trouble brought to a head by Big Bob Toland's death. The verdict at the inquest had been ridiculous to any who had known the dead rancher well. The TD was active, profitable, expanding. Big Bob Toland was respected and had friends. And he was building the TD with purpose. His wife was long dead, but he had a daughter in school in St. Louis. Toland's sucess was for her and there was as much likelihood that he had committed suicide as there was that a swift river would run uphill. Life had been important to Big Bob Toland.

Jim felt sorry for the dead rancher's tin-plated brother. Ned's fear that the next bullet was for him was likely sound. Ned had been in Rimrock with his brother the night Bob had been found dead in a hotel room with his gun, which had an empty chamber, in his hand and powder burns in his hair. The trip to town had been on some piece of business about which Jim and the hands had known nothing, but the reason for the trip was probably well known to Ned. It was very possible that—as he had said—Ned had seen his brother killed and knew who had fired the shot. There was a possibility, too, that the killer was fully aware of this. Ned Toland was in a bad corner, for a fact.

But that was Ned's concern. Jim Ballen, when he worried, worried for himself. For instance, Manley's thinly veiled threats were plain enough. Either Manley had pulled the trigger himself or he had hired the job done or aimed to profit by it. It was obvious that Manley intended to use Bob Toland's small note, which he claimed to hold, as a lever to take over the TD. But Jim was a little puzzled as to how Manley had fitted him into the picture.

A fair guess was that Manley thought Jim was closer to his employers than he actually was. The fact that Manley had assumed Jim knew about the Toland note he held when it was actually news to Jim was an indication of this. Otherwise Manley, who played all cards close to his vest, would not have mentioned the loan. The threats were probably the result of Manley's conviction that Ned Toland had already told the TD foreman all he knew about his brother's death. Even Manley would see that getting rid of Jim Ballen might be more difficult than erasing either of the Tolands and he had tried this easy way.

Jim grinned without humor. This was the kind of bait to which a loyal man would rise. A loyal man would think of the good TD money he had earned and the friendships he had made on the ranch and what an even-handed boss Bob Toland had been, and he'd pitch into the tangle facing the TD and fight like the place was-

his own till he was cut down in the struggle. But the Ballens were not that kind of fools.

Ballen dismounted at White Creek to let the sweat run from under his saddle and to give his pony a moment of muzzling at the crystal water. Gossip ran swiftly in the grass country. A man won his name or lost it according to how he was measured on the grapevine. If a man got a name for running from trouble, he could still hire out as a ramrod, but he'd face a tough chore to hold the jobs he got. He'd have to light down at each new bunk, ball his fists, and persuade his new crew, one at a time, that the grapevine had figured him wrong. Such persuasion was hard work. It was better to avoid the name in the first place.

For this single reason and for no other, Jim decided he'd stick to the TD, at least long enough for the word to go out that he had spit in Tod Manley's eyes. When he quit his present bunk, he wanted it known he had done so for good cause and not because there was rabbit in his legs.

Jim remounted directly, and rode up from the White Creek ford. As he topped the rise of the bank, he saw a sudden blossoming of white on the fringe of a willow thicket. At the same instant a swift rush of wind buffeted his side and tugged angrily at the skirt of his jacket. His pony buck-jumped nervously at the roar of the shot. Jim kicked his feet free of stirrups and tumbled to the ground on the far side of the dancing animal. The pony shied on out of his way and Jim braced himself on one knee. His second probing shot brought a man walking crazily on his toes out of the willows. His third and fourth slugs battered the sagging figure into complete lifelessness before it struck the ground.

Jim crossed to the man. He did not know the face. Leaving the body, he plowed into the willows and found what proof he needed—a ground-tied pony wearing Tod Manley's Crescent brand. He led the animal out and hoisted the dead man across the saddle. Lashing the body securely in place and slipping the pony's bridle, Jim started it on its way toward its home ranch with a hard slap on the rump.

He caught up his own mount then, turned angrily, and rode back through the White Creek ford with splashing haste to return to Rimrock. If Manley was going to work this fast, the hell with the grapevine! When a man gets a bushwhack slug through the tail of his jacket, it's time to hunt a new trail!

Jim had money due from the TD. Ned Toland was likely still about town. He'd collect and quit and ride. There were more good jobs in the world than one man could ever hold and more peaceful grass than one man could ever cross. Only a fool would stay where his skin was a pawn in someone else's troubles.

Jim came in at the lower end of town and left his pony at the livery. "See he gets a rub down and a good bottom of oats," he told the hostler. "He's going to need them!"

Moving up the street, Jim turned

next into the mercantile, his mind running over the condition of his gear, hanging in a war bag above his bunk in the TD bunkhouse. He ordered a box of shells for his belt gun, a saddle skillet and tin cup, a pouch of coffee, an end of bacon, two cans of tomatoes, and a box of biscuit mix.

"I'll pick up the lot in an hour or so," he told the clerk as he dumped his pockets on the counter to pay for the order.

Collecting his scattering of change, he turned back to the street and went to the hotel. Ned Toland was registered but not in his room. Ned had been in the Red Moon, but not within the last couple of hours. The barber next door had shaved him, but had not seen him since.

Ballen was impatient, but he understood. Ned was hiding out. Jim had himself seen several Crescent saddles along the rails. He felt a little uneasy, too. Still, he wanted his due from the TD and he could only get it from Ned. He would have searched the town more thoroughly, knowing such a search would locate the man, but there was certain risk for himself. If Manley had hired one rifle to line sights against him, there might be other Crescent riders about with the same orders.

Dark came and settled heavily over Rimrock. Half an hour after sunset, a party of horsemen cantered into town. They rode briskly and Tod Manley, at their head, looked sullen with anger. Watching from the hotel room in which he had himself holed up to wait for Toland's reappearance, Jim risked a wry grin at the cavalcade. It was a fair bet that the bushwhacker from the White Creek ford had reached the Crescent and Tod Manley had not liked the limp way the man rode his saddle.

Jim grinned, but he began to swear, too. Damn Ned Toland! It was all right for the man to keep under cover, but he ought to let his own hands know where he was! This was rapidly developing into a tight corner. Jim had intended to pick up his pay, snag the supplies he had purchased, circle widely to the TD for his gear, and drift while night made drifting good. Now Manley was in town and would be watching sharp with a double score against the TD ramrod.

The Crescent crew turned into the Red Moon. Ballen was grumblingly thinking he'd best light out without his pay, when a furtive figure darted out the door of Svenson's Hot Baths, next the saloon, and angled hurriedly for the hotel. Baths—what a hell of a hole to hide out in!

With some of his impatience flattening his lips, Ballen stepped out into the upper hall of the hotel and met Ned Toland as he came hurrying along it.

"It's about time!" Jim growled at him. "I've been waiting since before sundown!"

Toland looked surprised, pleased and apologetic, all at the same time. He hooked Jim's arm and pulled him into a room across the hall.

"So you've been waiting—and I thought you'd head for the ranch and run out on me! By hell, Ballen, I'm glad I was wrong about you!"

Toland's relief was patent in his voice. Jim tried to interrupt him, but Toland hurried on, talking as though an old dike had ruptured within him, letting the words flood wildly.

"With you sticking, Ballen, we can save a lot of the TD for Teresa! We might even bluff our way clear. It's worth a try. I'll give you ammunition, Jim: Bob and Tod Manley were never too close. You know that. Sort of live and let live. But more'n a year ago, the two of them got to talking in the Red Moon. Bob offhand said something about wishing he had a little spare cash with which to take a flier on some feeders. Manley suggested he was a little flush at the time. You know Bob; business was business. He sat down and wrote out a little note against the TD. Manley took it and handed him the cash. Four months later, Bob paid that loan back in full. At the time Manley couldn't lay his hand on the note Bob had given him. Everything was friendly, so Bob told Manley to send the note around when he ran across it.

"Bob had forgotten that note when a Crescent man dropped by and said his boss wanted to see Bob about an old piece of business. I hadn't forgotten. I made Bob take me when he headed for town. We put up here, right in this room, leaving word at the Red Moon that we were here—"

Toland stopped and pointed at the window behind him.

"There's a fire escape out there. When Manley came, seeing that he expected to meet Bob alone, I climbed out there and Bob shut the window behind me. Manley came in—I think now he came up the back stairs at the other end of the building, since nobody saw him come in—and directly he showed this old note, demanding payment of it again. When Bob got sore and refused, Manley grinned, pulled a gun with the smoothest draw you ever saw, and had it against Bob's head before he could move for surprise. Bob hadn't hit the floor before Manley had Bob's gun, was raising the window and firing the piece through his own coat, all wadded up. Shoving the gun in Bob's hand, he climbed out the window, swung right past me, and dropped to the ground.

Ned paused again and swabbed at his face with a kerchief.

"I'd swear he saw me. Maybe he knew I didn't have the guts to talk for fear of him. Maybe he figured he couldn't risk nailing two Tolands in the same room the same night. Maybe he was saving me for later. I don't know. But I do know this, if he was saving me to get Teresa out here from St. Louis to where he could get his hands on her, he missed his sights. I told you I've written her to stay where she is till the fire's dead here. I've done that much, at least. And with you to back me, Ballen, I'll give that murdering son the fight my brother never got the chance to make!"

Ned's color was high. His eyes were flashing with a fire Jim had never seen. There was a kind of iron in evidence which had never before shown through his incompetence. Ballen felt a touch of admiration. He felt, also, a quick and

heady anger at the full facts behind Big Bob Toland's death. But Jim Ballen was still his own man and loyalty was still for others when his own skin was in the game.

"I wasn't waiting to sign on for war, Ned," he said quietly. "I want my time."

Ned Toland's face paled. His narrow shoulders, which had squared off, hunched again. He spoke in a slow, dead voice.

"I'm no man to call you a coward, Ballen," he said heavily, "and I was a fool to raise my own hopes. A drifter's a drifter, and a gypsy's a gypsy. I figured you out of this in the beginning. I should have known that's where you'd end up. But a water-bellied old man and a girl in school can't fight a stinking coyote pack alone, and you could do a man's chore if you stayed."

There was no censure in Toland's voice, only a flat statement of fact. There was no scorn in his tone. Yet Jim Ballen squirmed under the words as no sulphurous tirade had ever made him squirm. Ned shrugged wearily, pulled a thin packet of bills from his pocket, and started peeling them off with mechanical listlessness. In the midst of this, a voice spoke coolly:

"That's perfect, gents. We'll stop it right there!"

Ballen wheeled, his hand dropping, but he went rigid and motionless. Tod Manley was in the window with two of his hands and the guns of all three were level. Grinning wickedly, Manley swung his legs over the sill. Passing behind Jim, he lifted Jim's gun, retained it, and dropped his own back into leather. Chuckling, he slapped Jim on the back with mock camaraderie.

"You've played my hand nice, Ballen," he approved. "Your gun is going to kill Ned, here. Ned is going to die holding money in his hand. Plainly, the two of you have been fighting over it. If there's any doubt you didn't expect wild trouble when you came up here to see Ned, the orders you left about your horse at the livery and the sack of gear waiting for you at the mercantile will make a liar out of you, even if you talk like a saint. You're going to hang for Toland's death, Ballen—proof that when I give a man advice on the street, it's good advice. It's only a pity I can't hang you again for the man you tagged this afternoon at White Creek. But once is enough. You're going to hang. With her uncle dead, Teresa Toland's not going to stay forever in St. Louis. I hear she's a pretty wench, now. But it doesn't make much difference. I'm going to take over the TD—and with clean skirts!"

Manley laughed, took a single step backward. As he did so, the gun in his hand—Jim Ballen's gun—raised a little and spat flame. Ned Toland grunted with involuntary reaction to sudden deathly hurt, turned a single look of pleading accusation on Ballen, and sank to the floor.

III

Jim Ballen had seen hard men, had ramrodded them. And he had himself been known a time or two as a

hard kind. He had just heard how Tod Manley had a few days before shoved a gun against Big Bob Toland's temple in this very room and blown half of his head away. But he was not prepared for Manley's utter ruthlessness, for the sure and mocking pleasure with which Manley watched bumbling Ned Toland's weak face when death struck him.

Ballen was too stunned to produce ordered thought or to feel the sear of the anger certain to come. He moved with a kind of involuntary reflex. Ducking into a crouch, he launched himself at Manley like a leaping cat. His spring was too slow to save Ned Toland, but it caught Manley off guard. Ballen crashed heavily into the man and had gripped his gun hand before Manley was aware of the attack.

The Crescent owner struggled, then, but it was too late. Jim Ballen's hands were powerful and they were driven now with a sick and disgusted fury. He tore the gun from Manley's grip and brought it down solidly across the crown of Manley's head. The blow stunned his antagonist, sent him reeling with glazed eyes, but did not drop him. Ballen was shaking with an urge to beat the man's skull to ruin, but one of the two Crescent hands who had been with their boss in the window reappeared there, squinting for a chance at a shot.

As Manley reeled free of him, Ballen shot one Crescent rider in the face an instant before the man loosed his own fire. Plaster dropped somewhere behind Ballen as the man's slug ripped past him. The rider vanished from the window and Ballen, driven by the knowledge that all Rimrock would be pouring toward the gun sound at the hotel, flung over the window sill himself, dropped from the platform there to the ground, and sprinted for the livery.

With both of the Tolands dead, Ballen no longer had a job and he was wise enough to know Tod Manley had been sure the setting of the stage was complete before he came by the window to Toland's room. Rimrock would be led to believe, regardless of circumstances, that the gypsy ramrod of the TD had killed his remaining boss. The hue and cry would be swiftly raised. Back pay and rabbit's legs or no, Jim Ballen knew that now was the time to ride and ride hard.

The hostler at the livery, apparently drawn with other townsmen toward the hotel by the commotion there, was not about the barn. Jim saddled his pony with swift surety, rode out the back way and struck back up parallel to the run of Rimrock's street on his way to safety. Holding his animal down to a quiet pace until he was clear of the town, he saw a bulky figure climbing from a lighted window on the second floor of the hotel. Identification was positive. The townsmen were crowded in front and could not see this.

Tod Manley had plainly recovered enough to escape from that room of death. And there could be no doubt that, dazed as he was, the Crescent owner was leaving behind sufficient evidence to hang a running man

high. Ballen's jaw clamped. Only a fool would not run. He had no stake in this beyond his own life and he aimed to preserve that. He was grateful for an often expensive vanity in horseflesh which made the pony between his knees without a peer in local valleys for sustained and breathless speed. Rimrock would be able to make up no posse he could not outride.

Shouts beat up before Ballen was beyond earshot. He knew Toland's body had been found—likely by earnest citizens who lost much time in noisily battering down a hall door while a dazed murderer escaped by an unguarded rear window. He knew, also, that Tod Manley would be busy among those shouting, angry men, cleverly establishing a smooth alibi for himself and slyly adding fresh coals to the fires of suspicion so readily kindled by Jim's own absence, his orders to the hostler, and the trail supplies he had purchased at the mercantile.

Ballen was a fugitive. He knew this. He would be grimly pursued. He knew this, also. But neither was of concern. He would escape and always there was the beckoning of distant hills and strange trails. A devil's brew was stirring behind him in Rimrock, but he was shut of it. He settled to his ride, not at all concerned with whether Rimrock named him killer or not, so long as he was done with the troubles steaming there.

Once, toward dawn, Jim saw again the stricken look of hurt appeal which had racked Ned Toland's good-natured, easy-going face. Again, he thought with brief sympathy of the mess which now faced Big Bob Toland's daughter. She was alone and facing an enemy against whom neither her father or his brother had been able to stand. But these were vagrant thoughts and Jim discarded them to consider matters closer to his own skin.

He had been sick in Toland's room in the Rimrock hotel, sick and shaken with a helpless fury. That unsteadiness had clung in a measure through most of the night. But by midmorning, when he was riding across a high plateau in bright sunlight, they vanished and he felt again the reckless, careless anticipation which was so familiar a part of his life—anticipation and curiosity toward the next bend in the road, the next vista of limitless country, and the kind of job he might find in some snug valley in the blue distance.

At noon he was in high spirits. He discounted the hunger in his belly and the fact that heavy clouds over a divide ahead evidenced one of the torrential rains which ocasionally plagued the high country in summer. A cloudburst was pouring on the divide. Ballen knew by wry experience that dry arroyos were apt to surge suddenly with the sullen might of flash floods running out their course from the distant storm.

Too, should no such raging barrier rise across his trail, chances were that before nightfall Jim was likely to ride under the storm itself. However, prospect of an enforced detour or drenched gear did not dampen his spirits. He was once

more adrift, free of troubles left behind, and headed for greener grass.

In early afternoon, wanting outlet for his brighter mood and something to take away the lingering taste of having stood motionless while a man killed his employer in cold blood, Jim deliberately slackened his pace, letting the grim, persistent posse whose dust he could occasionally see come up on him a little.

He had been at this little game for perhaps an hour, shaving it a little closer all of the time until it became a question of how soon the riders tailing him would break from cover and sight him before he dodged around the next turn or dropped over the crest of the next low ridge, when he reached the big barranca.

He had not forgotten the storm. He paused on the banks of the barranca as he had on the edge of a dozen smaller arroyos, to study the country which it drained. Any draws running from the ridge where the storm still muttered darkly, he crossed at a swift, headlong pace. When water came down one of these desert watercourses, it came fast.

This big channel, he saw, following its tortuous course, was a main feeder from the thunder-crowned divide. Water would certainly come down it before night. Even as he made this practised judgment, he heard an ominous sound and saw, half a mile away, the incongruous sight of a plume of water, flung high in the air where the arroyo made a sharp turn. He swore under his breath. With spurs to urge his mount, he'd barely make it across. A second thought struck him. The persistence of the posse on his heels had become annoying. He chuckled. This barranca would make an end to their riding—and he would be clear, on the far side.

He tipped his mount down the shelving bank, and in the same instant, he saw the buckboard, hung up on a driftwood stump about which its driver had tried to make too sharp a turn on the floor of the wash. By the time he had hit the sandy bottom at the foot of the bank, he had seen the rest of it. The driver of the buckboard was a woman. She was no top driver, at best. Her efforts at forcing the team to drag the vehicle over the obstacle were worse than useless. And she was wholly unaware of the water rushing toward her at express-train speed.

Ballen's soft swearing took on a ragged edge. He had not bargained for this. At any moment he expected the posse to break into the open behind him and sight him ahead. Once they had done so, their perseverance would be next to unshakable. And if they did not see him, he'd have to deal with them with no flooded barranca for protection. There wasn't time to lend a hand and make it on across the wash.

Sand flew as he kneed the pony toward the buckboard. The woman, now on the ground and staring perplexedly at the sand-washed stump thrust up under the bed ahead of the rear axle, turned hostile eyes on Ballen. He had obviously appeared too suddenly for her. He had a glimpse of a set mouth and features which were strong without

losing a single soft line of beauty.

She was the kind of woman who turned men in their tracks on a busy street with envy and admiration in their eyes and respectful comment on their lips. Jim would have liked a moment in which to guess why she was here, who she was, and where she was going, traveling this arid open alone. But there was time for neither speculation nor introduction. He flung from saddle and braced himself under one rear hub.

"Onto the seat!" he grunted. "Give the team the whip and drive like blazes for the bank. Quick—flood coming!"

The last broke the back of her alarm, suspicion and resentment. She climbed hastily onto the seat, seized the lines, and flung the whip out at the animals in harness. They lunged ahead. Jim Ballen linked his hands under the hub and heaved upward with an effort which jerked the slack from his joints. The buckboard tipped crazily, grated, caught, then slithered on over the stump. The girl did not look back. Ballen caught the tailboard of the wagon and ran unevenly behind it. His pony, deserted, snorted and ran for the bank, head held to one side to avoid the trailing reins.

A muted roar became audible and swept toward the ford. Jim looked upstream. A sullen, titantic wall of ochre water thrashed from an upstream turn and swept down the straight channel above the ford. The girl stood recklessly upright, her eyes wild as she lashed the team again. Ballen's pony made it to the bank and scrambled up. The team hit the slant just as the water sucked past, rolling boulders and a great wall of debris before it and rising so fast that it buffeted Ballen, nearly tearing his grip loose from the tailgate before he, too, was dragged free.

The girl let the team halt of its own accord on the plateau level. Ballen, thinking still of the posse, was heading for his pony when the girl called after him in an unsteady voice.

"Wait!" she cried. "Wait a minute. You can't cross there, now. And I've got to thank you when I get my breath. You saved my life!"

Jim reached his mount and swung to saddle. He looked back then. The looking was good. A woman who owes a man a debt is a pleasant woman for that man to know. Ballen knew he was running to rare luck and he regretted he couldn't linger. But the posse's dust was rising ominously behind a near knoll and he did not wish to hang in Rimrock for even so pretty a face as this. The girl followed his gaze. She seemed suddenly to understand.

"The law?" she asked quietly.

Ballen nodded.

"From Rimrock?"

He nodded again.

"Why are you running from it?"

Jim saw a way to break free, to end this dangerous delay. Shocked, the girl's questions might end. She looked to be of a kind short on sympathy for the lawless. He spoke with rude bluntness.

"My name, ma'am, is Jim Ballen," he said. "Ned Toland, a rancher, was killed last night in town. I'm running because I don't want my neck stretched—yet!"

The girl's face blanched as though in a kind of horror. Her hands clenched. Her lips tightened. Ballen had expected a tirade of loathing. Instead, there was one more question, terse and direct.

"Did you kill this Ned—Toland?"

Ballen shook his head. "No, ma'am, I didn't," he said shortly, "but running is easier than proving I didn't!"

The scorn and aversion Ballen had expected earlier came into the girl's expression, then. Her eyes condemned him. Hot color stung her cheeks. Her hands unclenched and clenched again.

"The ugliest thing in the world is a man with no backbone," she said quietly. "Even a tumbleweed doesn't blow with the wind until it's dead! If you're right in anything, then that thing is worth fighting to prove. If you're wrong in anything, no amount of running can make you right. You think this is the easy way." The girl laughed shortly. "That's a drifter's talk!"

Ballen, who had never let another's words turn him from a purpose in which he believed, was stung, now. He had admired this girl. Now he was angry. He wanted to answer her, but she gave him no chance.

"You're a coward, Jim Ballen," she went on ruthlessly, "when you run from trouble you could whip. But I owe you something and I'll trade you your life—for now—for saving mine. Quick, get over the edge and down onto that bench, pony and all. I'll turn back the posse. I'll give you back the start you lost in helping me. But when I reach Rimrock, I'll tell the truth. You'll be hunted down some day. Now quick, get down!"

Ballen reined his pony down the bank onto a little bench which lay almost at water level and under a steeply vertical section of the arroyo bank. It was poor cover, but the best available. It seemed he had hardly reached it and dismounted to muzzle his pony before riders thundered up about the buckboard above him.

There were hurried questions asked and answers given. The girl had seen a man. He had crossed this barranca in one direction as she crossed it in the other, just before the flood struck. He was a tall man, he appeared to be in a great hurry, he answered the description given, and he had already disappeared into the broken country beyond the far bank of the arroyo.

In an incredibly short time the girl had robbed Tod Manley's posse of its impatience, had turned its attention from the fugitive it pursued to the girl it had discovered, and at the same time no posseman had been permitted curiosity enough to approach the lip of the bank under which Ballen crouched. There was a deal of talk which Ballen was unable to hear while the posse was making ready to turn back toward Rimrock with the girl in its company. Then one exchange stood out in a sudden silence:

"Yes, I'm going to Rimrock," the girl's clear voice said firmly. "I quit the train last night at Center when I learned storms had closed the line in to Ten Mile Junction. I

rented this rig and started to drive across to Rimrock this morning. I'm in a hurry. My family is in trouble there."

"Your family, miss?" someone asked.

"The Tolands, of the TD," the girl said with stony courage. "Robert Toland was my father. I have come home. . . ."

IV

These few simple words hit Jim Ballen like the stroke of a maul. He was not aware of receding sounds until long after the whole party was well on its way to Rimrock.

Ned Toland had said that he had written his niece after her father's death, ordering her to stay in St. Louis until the TD had shaken off the grim troubles clouding it. Had Ballen not remembered this, he thought he would have known the moment he saw this girl that she was Teresa Toland, heading home. Having seen her, it was not hard to understand that she would never heed the orders of a man like her Uncle Ned and that she would come to trouble without wasting a second when the trouble faced her own blood.

Ballen felt hot and belated shame for his bluntness on the arroyo bank. Teresa Toland must have left St. Louis upon receipt of the news of her father's death. She must have been hurrying home with the belief that between the two of them, she and Ned Toland could fight off the shadows closing in on the ranch her father had built for her. Without warning and with merciless directness, she had been told by a stranger that she no longer had even Ned Toland's poor support to which she could cling. But in spite of this shock and the emptiness it must have brought, she had kept her word. She had turned back the posse. This evidence of a strength underlying her beauty stirred fresh admiration in Jim Ballen.

Twisted in his saddle and still on the bench where she had sent him to hide, he rolled a cigarette, touched it alight and smoked it through hungrily. When it was hot between his finger tips, he cast it away and edged the pony up onto the plateau level. Dust rising above the buckboard and the retreating posse lifted above the knoll in the distance. He was clear.

Strangely, the thought gave him no satisfaction. His excitement and eagerness were dead. His mind turned constantly back to Rimrock and the things which would face Teresa Toland there. It was a grim prospect. And his mind kept turning back to the girl, herself.

Patently, she had known who he was the moment he gave her his name. That was to be expected. Even in school she must have kept in eager touch with her father and all that affected the TD. Certainly she would at least know the name of the foreman on the spread. She had known him and she had been willing to take his flat statement that he had not killed her uncle.

But what galled Ballen and galled him hard was her scorn—her frank and utter disgust over the fact that he was running from the Rimrock posse. She had given him no chance

to explain why he ran. Honestly, he knew that had he told her that he considered the trouble at the TD no personal risk of his own, she would not have seen it. Her eyes would have narrowed more, her voice would have grown more caustic.

Jim Ballen could be called a fool and feel no burning rancor because there were times when he had been a fool. He could be called second rate in his trade and accept that; some men might be better. But to be called a coward—that cut.

Ballen killed time on the bank of the arroyo, ostensibly waiting for the water ahead of him to go down, but he was still killing time long after his pony could have shouldered through the now lifeless current. He killed the time in a strong effort to persuade himself not to be a fool. However, he failed because of the constant prodding of a pair of challenging, disapproving eyes he kept seeing again, staring down from the seat of a muddy buckboard.

When he rode away from the barranca, it was toward Rimrock—and with the posse a scant half hour ahead of him, escorting Teresa Toland into the net Tod Manley had spread for the final snaring of the TD property.

A hundred vague plans crossed Ballen's mind, a hundred arguments and reasons. He told himself his return to Rimrock was for Jim Ballen alone, not for the look in any pair of feminine eyes which ever saw light. He argued he would drift into town quietly on the off-chance of squaring himself. He would keep out of sight and watch Manley's game with Teresa Toland. He agreed he'd make no hostile move unless the girl's life was actually in danger, that he'd make no move to save the title to any ranch, that he'd tangle with Manley only if the odds turned right, there was gain for himself, and the risk was low.

He bedded down at nightfall, convinced of this. He rode next day past the place where the girl had paused in the night hours with the posse for a brief rest, and read the sign there. He rode on through the better part of the daylight hours, repeating his arguments and promises to himself. But when he dropped down a rise to the foot of Rimrock's straggling street at dusk and his weary pony kept plodding straight ahead, he made no effort to check the animal or turn it from the track.

Instead, he eased his gun in its holster, pushed his hat back a little and straightened in his saddle. Light at dusk is bad and townsmen are busy with their own thoughts at close of day. A wry grin pulled at Ballen's lips as he rode straight toward the center of town without being recognized by the hurrying figures about him.

He grinned, but he had no illusions. This was as wild and reckless a thing as a man might do. This was proof, if he still needed proof, that no man knows all of the forces which shape his actions. It was incongruous that Jim Ballen, who had always ridden no saddle but his own, should have come back into a

trap like this—out of vanity and a woman.

Rimrock knew a posse had driven him out of town, swinging hang ropes at their saddlehorns. Rimrock knew he was a man with sense. The town did not expect him back. Consequently, it was not looking for him along the street. But recognition was inevitable. When it came, regardless of how surprised the men along this street might be, they would remember he had reputedly killed harmless Ned Toland and run from the consequences of his deed. They would move, to the last man. Hell would be cold compared to Rimrock, then!

Ballen continued to ride slowly. He was within a hundred yards of that strip of street across which the Red Moon and the Rimrock Hotel faced each other when a step sounded on the hardened ruts behind him. He turned his head a little and saw Teresa Toland, trying to overtake him. He reined close to the walk to avoid the obviousness of a meeting in the middle of the street and waited. The girl ran up and caught the near leg of his pants.

"You fool!" she breathed. "You changeable, reckless fool!"

Ballen's eyes must have betrayed his surprise. The girl was immediately apologetic and frantically earnest.

"It was my fault, I know," she said hurriedly. "I urged you on. I was pretty unkind, out on the trail. I didn't understand what I do now. But listen, if you came to help me, I don't need it. I don't need it, understand? Everything is all right with me, now. But not with you. You're still wanted. Get out of here, quickly. Get out and stay out—forget about Rimrock. Hurry!"

Ballen understood none of this. He thought it unlikely even as clever a woman as Teresa Toland appeared to be could have wrested an acceptable settlement from Tod Manley. He didn't understand how everything could be all right with this girl, and himself still be wanted for the murder of her uncle. But he did not want to be cornered in talk on this street when passing townsmen, changing shadows, and open doorways screamed for his attention. He turned the pony. The girl clutched at him again.

"I got you into this. Get out—quickly—for me!"

Ballen spoken then.

"Ma'am, I reckon I rode in here thinking I was doing it for you—like you said. I don't think so, now. There's a chore I want to see done, a gent I want to talk to. And I'd better get on."

He touched the pony with his spurs and the animal pulled away. The girl looked after Ballen. She was so urgent in her plea that he half believed what she had been trying to tell him—that she had made a satisfactory peace with Manley. Still, there was a stubborn something in him which drove him on. He had lied, he knew, when he said it was his own chore he wanted done. What drove him was stronger than any want he had ever known.

He had reached the middle of the street—the girl still stood where she

had overtaken him—when a man looked up into his face, swallowed and wheeled in high excitement.

"Ballen!" he bellowed. "It's Ballen. He's here! Ballen's in town!"

Eyes shuttled to Jim's face and figure, made recognition, and flattened with the beginnings of mass anger. Scattered figures which had been hurrying over evening chores seemed to pour together, swelling with astonishing speed. While Jim's horse was taking a dozen strides, a crowd formed in this fashion and a man rumbled the thought in every head:

"Get the sneaking son! Come home to be hanged, eh?"

The crowd started forward. Ballen quit his saddle then in a smooth movement. He touched ground with his gun in his hand and he waved it at the foremost of the crowd.

"There's been a bad mistake made," he said with ringing evenness. "I aim to correct it. There's a man I aim to see. When I'm done, if you think my neck still fits your rope, come get me. Till then, the first mother's son of you that prods too close goes out like a light!"

Steel in his voice carried conviction. The surge of the crowd eased, but the anger rose constantly in pitch. Ballen watched the crowd and the street. Two men came out of the Red Moon. One came down the steps of the Rimrock Hotel. They joined in the middle of the street and started down toward him across the hundred yards of distance which lay between. They were fanned out a little, each man with his own room to move. They were Tod Manley, Starrett, who was his foreman, and a flame-headed rider from the Crescent whose name Ballen did not know.

They came down half the intervening distance and slowed.

"Come in to give up, Ballen?" Manley called.

"I came in for you, Tod!" Ballen said flatly.

"For me?" Manley seemed genuinely astonished. Ballen admired the way in which the man played upon the tense and listening crowd.

"For you," Jim agreed stonily, overriding the restlessness of townsmen who would have surged toward him. "I'm fed up, Manley. I might hang for a better man, but not for a snake that does his killing without warning! You shot Big Bob Toland and thought you got away with it. You killed old Ned when you found out he had seen his brother die and that he knew the note you hold was paid long ago. You killed him, too, to remove another claim to the TD. You aim to have that spread. Now, before you can kill Miss Toland and get the title you want, you've got to make a try at killing me, too!"

Manley appeared to be smiling.

"This is ridiculous, Ballen," he said unhurriedly. He made his voice seem counseling and reasonable. "This play is no good, even for you. You can force me, but what are the odds? It's in front of the whole town. Dropping me won't save your neck. You're a murderer, to begin with. Another pair of boot toes pointing at the sky only makes it

worse. You're a fool, Ballen. You should have kept riding. Coming back doesn't make the rope any softer!"

The ease of his speech made Manley sound brave and untroubled but Ballen knew courage was not behind the slow words. While Manley talked, the two men beside him fanned out. He had been giving them time. Jim saw now that even if he should change his mind and decide not to force this through, Manley would do so, relying on his hired guns. Manley was afraid of him. Manley was afraid that somehow he might escape hanging. This way Manley would be sure. He could watch Ballen die in front of him.

Ballen saw something else, too, almost at the same instant that he realized there would be no backing out. If he killed Manley in this exchange, he would have removed the last proof of his own innocence: One of the Crescent riders who had been at Ned Toland's window had died before Ballen's gun the night of Ned Toland's murder. Manley was cautious enough to have killed the other or sent him out of the country. Manley was the sole witness left. Yet, if he didn't die here on this street and in front of this crowd, Jim Ballen would. There was no middle road.

Jim spoke quietly: "Make your play, Manley!"

The crowd sucked in its breath. Manley stiffened a little but made no move toward his belted gun. Starrett, on his right, and Red, on his left, each flanking his boss, were the ones who took up the blunt challenge.

Ballen knew Starrett. He had seen him often enough to have a gauge of the way the man moved, of what might be expected. The red-headed rider he did not know. Therefore, when he lifted his gun from its holster, he lined it against Red. Decision to do this was automatic, the unconscious kind of reflex calculation of odds which makes it possible for an occasional man to survive incredible danger.

Starrett was fast, faster than ordinary because he recognized a driving need for speed, but the red-haired rider was one of the magicians produced by fate—a man with a lightning gun hand and little else. Red's gun cleared a marked fraction ahead of Ballen's own, and spat fire. Realizing he was beaten in the instant before the man fired, Ballen checked his own finger and swung his body a little. Red's slug struck him a jolting blow near the point of the left shoulder, but the slight swing of Ballen's body had changed the angle and the missile tore out of his flesh again after short travel through it.

Shock raced from the wound, far ahead of pain. The feeling was no more than that of a solid blow. And twisted as he was, Ballen was solid on his feet. He fired, saw Red drop his piece, turn, and double over the buckle of his belt. He saw this out of focus, however, for Starrett's gun was level and his attention was fixed there. The shot which cut the red-haired rider out of the way and that he flung at Starrett seemed to run

together. Starrett's piece fired, but at a slight angle upward. The slug passed so far over Ballen's head that he did not see it. Neither did he see Starrett stagger to one side and slowly collapse.

His attention had leaped on to Manley, for whom he had stood against these other two. A fraction of a second behind the shot he flung at Starrett, Ballen felt lead strike him again. It staggered him. He caught his balance, squared toward Manley, and was hit again. This second touch was low—the thigh, he thought—and it spilled him. The fall saved him from Manley's third shot. In the dust, he looked up to see the man coolly cocking his piece for a fourth try.

A queer kind of pride tugged at Ballen. He wanted no part of the dust. He wanted no fluke chance he might win by shooting as he lay prone. He heard the crowd grunt and was aware there was grudging admiration in the sound, as he shoved his knees under him and pushed unsteadily upright again. As he rose he heard a woman's voice, low and urgent and throatily pleading:

"Jim! Jim—no!"

Manley seemed surprised as he rose. The man hurried his assured handling of his gun, gave over his vanity, and snapped another shot. It went a little wide. Ballen's feet were firmly planted, then. Hurt, which he knew was tormenting nerves throughout his body, seemed somewhere beyond this instant. His gun came up smoothly, its hammer lying wickedly back like the ears of a cornered wolf. He felt his hand tighten. The hammer leaped forward. The gun jumped. The crowd grunted again and Tod Manley, who had been so sure of himself, so mockingly ruthless and apparently secure from hurt, sobbed with a peculiar, thin, high sound, then turned his back and ran a dozen uncertain steps before the death which had already struck tripped him and he plunged forward on his face.

Jim dropped his gun. Need for it was gone. He turned laboriously and moved with carefully steady strides toward the tightly bunched townsmen. The strange grunt of admiration ran through the crowd again. Voices separated themselves from the general sound.

"Mother in heaven, get the man a doctor!"

"Somebody bring blankets and get him onto them; we'll carry him to the jail!"

"It looks like we've gotten cheated of a trial . . ."

Ballen heard these. But mostly he heard a soft, insistent voice at his side:

"Jim . . . Jim Ballen, are you all right . . . for just a little?"

"I'm all right, ma'am," Ballen answered carefully.

The girl wheeled away from him then, her voice rising authoritatively.

"Here you," she spoke crisply to the approaching townsmen. "Make a litter and get him to the hotel! The hotel, I said—not the jail!"

There was mild protest.

"Jim Ballen's no killer!" the girl said sharply. "He's foreman of the

TD and he's finished a job for dad and Uncle Ned—and for me. Here's proof. Here's a letter I got in St. Louis from Uncle Ned. Read it, then see who's a killer. If you want to stretch a rope, hang Tod Manley's body!"

Ballen saw a letter pass from the girl's hand. He would have liked to read Ned Toland's words to his niece, but he knew what they said. He knew why Teresa Toland had badgered him so sharply at the flooded barranca. And he knew, now, why Manley's death had not left him without a witness to his own innocence. Ned Toland had written his niece the details of her father's death. And being the uncertain old man he had been, Ned had wishfully written also of the TD foreman who could do so much for the Tolands if he were not a drifter.

A drifter! Ballen smiled. Here at last, was one tumbleweed come to a fence it could not pass. He must have voiced the thought aloud. Men had made a stretcher and were forcing him onto it. As they did so, clinging to his hand and her face close enough to his ears for the words to reach him, Teresa Toland spoke earnestly, her voice catching.

"I'm sorry, Jim! I didn't know what it would be. I had learned by the time you came back to town. I tried to lie to you, to tell you it was all right. I tried to make you understand the TD wasn't worth what you'd have to face—that what I said to you at the barranca was wrong. But you wouldn't listen. You had come back to fight for the TD!"

Ballen shook his head, grinning.

"I did not!" he said flatly. "Jim Ballen always fights for himself and . . ." he stopped and his grin grew wider ". . . and something he wants!"

"And you'll get what you want now?" the girl asked softly.

Ballen looked up at her face.

"I reckon," he said.

Teresa Toland grinned then, too, and her hand closed more tightly on his.

"I reckon so, too," she agreed.

Ballen closed his eyes and the hurt in him fled.

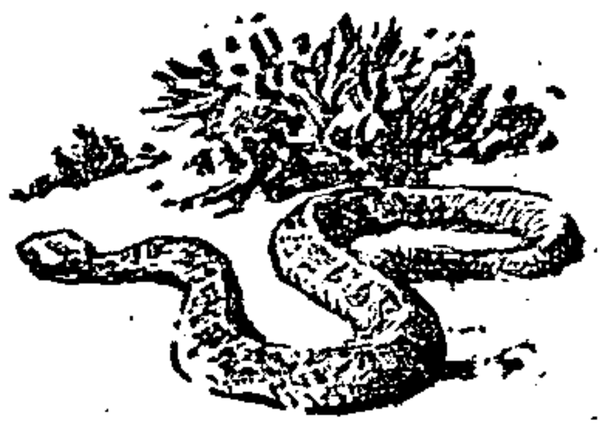
She was beautiful, he thought, and his kind of woman. Somehow trading the boundaries of one ranch for the wide horizons he had once ridden amounted to little. There were horizons included in Teresa Toland's agreement with him which would anchor the north wind to whatever land held her, too. He answered the warm grip of her hand.

THE END

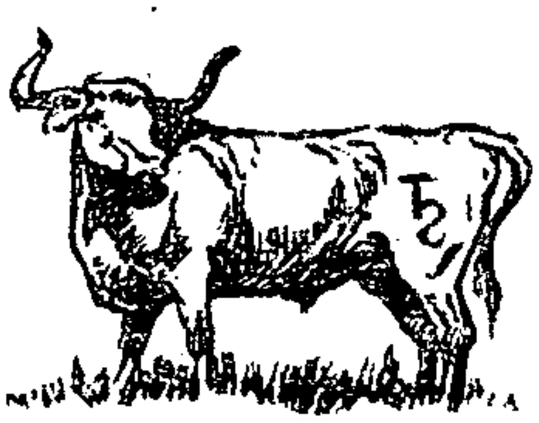
RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING

"Cayuse" is one of the cowboy's words for a horse, and in modern times it is usually applied in a derogatory sense as referring to a small scrub horse or scrawny Indian pony not worth much in horseflesh. The name comes from a Pacific Northwest tribe of Indians who lived in the upland country of eastern Oregon around the headwaters of the Walla Walla and Umatilla Rivers. The Cayuses were "horse" Indians who, as a matter of fact, both possessed and rode excellent horses. There is a Cayuse Indian Reservation east of Pendleton, Oregon, home of the famous Pendleton Roundup.



The Easterner outdoors is likely to be wary of snakes basking in the sun. In the desert country of the Southwest it is shade, not sun that reptiles such as the dangerous rattler seek, and in summer the time to watch out for them is at night or during the cool of the morning and late evening. Scientists have proved that a snake exposed to the direct rays of the desert summer sun will die in less than five minutes.



Branding cattle on the left side is an old habit in the West. A large number of cattlemen still follow the custom. While many explanations have been given for branding on the left rather than the right side of a cow critter, probably the best reason is our unconscious habit of writing from left to right. It is more natural to write, and also read a brand, say J Bar B, if it is written towards the stern of an animal than vice versa. This applies particularly to the old running iron brands often spread-eagled on the sides of cattle in the early open-range days in Texas. It was easier to read such a brand particularly if the animal was moving. Later when stamp irons came into general use for branding, the left side habit was more or less automatically continued.

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.

CHRISTMAS CACHE

by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

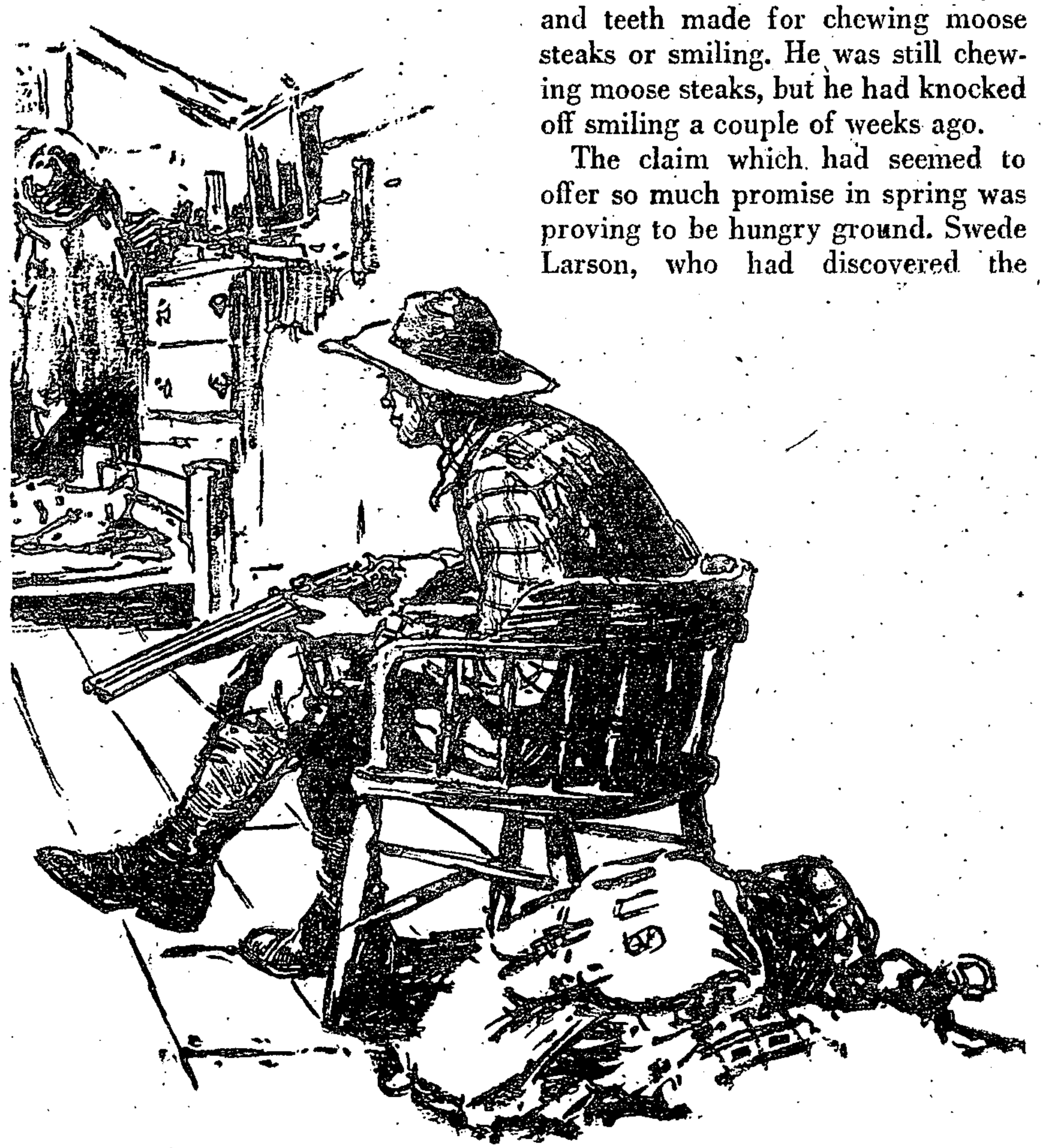
A bonanza that meant a Yuletide holiday at home was good news to Mike Kelly—until he found he had four conniving gold thieves to thank for it!

I

MIKE KELLY combed the blue muck out of his beard, and growled disgustedly: "If this was white clay, I'd look like Santa Claus. And I guess that's as close as I'll come to Santa Claus this Christmas. Thaw the drift, scoop up the dirt, take it into the cabin so it won't freeze before you pan it. Look hopefully in the bottom for nuggets and see only colors, then do it all over again. Merry Christmas, Mister Kelly!"

Bathed, shaved and dressed in clean clothes, Mike looked like any healthy young man of twenty-two. He had black hair, Irish blue eyes, and teeth made for chewing moose steaks or smiling. He was still chewing moose steaks, but he had knocked off smiling a couple of weeks ago.

The claim which had seemed to offer so much promise in spring was proving to be hungry ground. Swede Larson, who had discovered the



ground, and had taken a small fortune out of it, had sold the claim to Mike Kelly and his partner, Slicker Lyman. Swede had been fair about the deal. He explained that he had enough money for a man his age; that he couldn't stand the wet and cold any longer; and that there was a very good chance that the pay streak, which he had lost, could be located again. Until he had lost it, the dirt had been getting progressively richer. Young men, Swede Larson had suggested, willing to work hard and gamble, might take out a million dollars. Or they might not take out grub money.

Mike and Slicker had bought the claim and gone to work. During the summer they had thawed the frozen gravel with cold water. Mike, who was resourceful, had rigged up a windmill to pump water out of the mine. Now that the freeze-up had come, he had used tin cans and made a conduit with a huge funnel. The wind blowing into the funnel kept the fire going in the mine, thawing the ground. A smoke pipe carried the foul air away.

Where most operations would have come to a standstill, Mike and Slicker kept driving themselves. Mike's reason was to prove to a girl that Alaskan mining was a paying business. Marion had wanted him to take over the management of her father's farm. In time, she had argued, it would belong to them.

But Mike had stoutly insisted that if he farmed he would be a square peg in a round hole. "Give me a year or two to prove that I can make a go of mining," he had asked.

"I'll give you until a year from next Christmas," Marion had agreed. "That will give you two summer seasons to prove your point. Prove it and I'll marry you . . . if you want me."

"If I don't prove it, I'll admit mining isn't my life's work, and I'll go to work on your dad's farm," Mike had promised. "But never forget this: Farmer, or miner, I won't amount to much or be happy unless I'm married to you."

Slicker Lyman, looking for easy money, was also working hard to strike the pay streak so that he could get back to civilization. Slicker was in love; in love with his partner's fiancée. He had never met her, but Mike had put her picture up in the cabin, and Slicker spent hours looking at her. He knew all about the farm. The set-up looked good to him—a beautiful blond girl, the heiress to a big farm, with fine dairy stock, great barns and hundreds of acres of rich soil.

"Say," Slicker told himself, "wouldn't I like to land in a soft spot like that! I'd learn the farming game, then hire men to do the work."

After several months of reflection, he began asking himself: "Why not grab that girl, Slicker? Mike's a fool. He deserves to lose her. And me? Well, if I haven't lost my touch in this hellish country, I've always had a way with girls."

Wisely, Slicker never let Mike sense his thoughts. As the days grew shorter and colder, his fertile brain gradually formed a plan. Mike wanted to spend Christmas with

Marion for sentimental reasons. Slicker wanted to spend Christmas where it was warm, with good food and a cheerful fire burning. Marion filled the bill in every detail.

Now it was late November and time for him to act. Delay along the trail or on the southbound steamer trip might mean missing the Christmas holidays. When Mike came in that night, Slicker had a moose mulligan on the stove and sourdough biscuits in the oven. It was his week to cook.

"I've been thinking," Slicker said as he put the stew on the table.

"If you'd think up some way of thawing ground faster," Mike said wearily, "it'd help."

"But I don't think along those lines," answered Slicker. "I'll make you a proposition. The way it looks to me, even if we do strike pay dirt, there won't be enough for two of us. I'll give you five thousand dollars for your half of the mine. Or you give me five thousand for my share."

"How'll we decide?" Mike asked. "We both want to hang onto the mine."

"Yeah," said Slicker, "we both want the mine. Well, suppose we flip a coin. Heads you buy my share. Tails I buy yours."

"Heads I win," Mike said. "Okay."

Slicker flipped the coin. It struck the floor, bounced and went spinning against the wall, then bounced back and stopped, heads up.

"Heads you win," Slicker said. He picked up the coin and put it into his pocket. It was a very special coin, because it had a woman's head on both sides. "You always was a lucky cuss, Mike. I'd like to bet that you'll strike better pay inside thirty days, or at least before Christmas." He grinned. "Wouldn't it be swell if Santa left that lost pay streak in your pocket?"

"It's there, somewhere," Mike answered. "An earthquake pushed the pay streak up or down. It's just a question of time before I strike it." He searched his belongings and found his checkbook. The balance had remained the same since he and Slicker had bought the mine from Larson. It was a little over five thousand dollars. Mike wrote out a check and gave it to his former partner.

"It isn't rubber," he said. "It won't bounce."

"I guess I might as well hit the trail," Slicker decided. "No need of sticking around and eating your grub. Besides, I'd like to see some bright lights for a change. I'd like to have somebody bring a meal to me and ask: 'Is everything satisfactory, sir?'"

"I like that myself," admitted Mike, "but . . . there's something about mining . . ."

While Slicker was packing, Mike wrote a letter to Marion, explaining the odds against getting home by Christmas. "I've bought Slicker's share, and expect to keep thawing and panning until the wood pile is gone," he wrote. "If I strike it in time, I'll break all records getting home. But it seems crazy to let go now, when pay might be right around the corner." The remainder of the letter was the sort a girl would ex-

pect to get from the man who loved her.

Mike finished the letter and gave it to Slicker. "Mail it when you get to Seattle, please," he said.

"Sure," Slicker answered. He planned to do better than that. He was going to deliver it in person.

"Why don't you start early tomorrow?" suggested Mike.

"I thought I'd make a Hudson's Bay start," Slicker answered.

"Then you'd better swing by the Gordon boys' cabin, and take out their mail," said Mike. "You may be their only chance to get letters out in several weeks."

Slicker finished making up a light pack and said: "Well, good luck, Mike." They shook hands, and Mike watched his former partner start up the ridge above their mine. It was a low ridge, left there by some earth convulsion. The Gordon brothers' mine, a family corporation made up of four brothers, was just beyond the ridge. The four were big, rangy men who said little and kept to themselves, but whenever one went to the trading post, thirty miles away, he always carried out mail, and brought back any letters waiting for Mike or Slicker. Usually there were a dozen or more for Mike, for Marion wrote regularly.

II

A sense of loneliness gripped Mike after Slicker's departure. He prowled around the cabin, put things in order, lit his pipe, then sat down and stared a long time at Marion's picture.

"Blast it!" he growled. "I'd like to be home for Christmas. But I still have faith in this old hole in the ground. If it were possible to bring in drilling equipment, I could punch holes down until I located the pay streak. But I'm too far from the nearest port."

He thought of the mountain range that each pound of equipment would have to be back-packed over. "The drilling gear itself would be worth its weight in gold by the time I got it onto the property," he concluded. "Well, if I don't hit the pay streak, I'll pick up a paper thirty or forty years from now and read how a big outfit, shipping in a drill by rail, struck a million dollar pay streak." Then, resolutely, he put Christmas out of his mind.

He was mucking two days later, when he heard someone coming. It was Del Gordon, the oldest and smartest of the brothers. Del answered Mike's greeting with a smile, an act which threatened to crack his long, dour face.

"Slicker went through," Del said, in his clipped phrases. "Said he'd sold out to you. I got the idea he's pulled a trick. Figgered to keep you tied up here while he makes a play for your girl."

Mike was about to lash out with a retort, then decided to hear Del's story before defending his former partner.

"I figgered you might think more of your girl than you do of a hole in the ground," Del continued. "Thought you might like to sell. One outfit in these parts could handle the property as a whole. Mebbe git some big money to come in. We're doin'

it the hard way, breakin' our backs, shortenin' our lives."

The wood, thawing the gravel, burned steadily, sending Del Gordon's shadow dancing against the dripping walls. He looked like some sinister fiend sent to haunt a superstitious man. Del's eyes shifted from Mike's face to the walls, and frequently they narrowed, as if he were studying the formation so intently as to form a photographic impression.

"What price did you have in mind?" asked Mike.

"Eleven thousand," Del answered. "Seven cash, balance to be paid next September after the cleanup. Interest ten percent."

"I'll stick it out here," Mike said. "You know how it goes—a man sells and a month later the new owner strikes big pay."

"Yeah," agreed Del. "Those are the ones you hear about. You never hear about the new owner goin' busted because the pay streak peters out. Well, I can see we speak the same language. We're real miners. But you can't blame me for tryin'."

"I might try to buy you out sometime," Mike said. "Glad you dropped over."

"The boys figgered you might get lonesome once in awhile," Del remarked as he got ready to leave. "Joe's gone on a mountain sheep hunt. He should be back Saturday. Why not come over Sunday morning, and we'll have roast sheep." When Mike hesitated, Del added: "Why not take a day off? No sense in workin' yourself to death."

"Thanks," Mike said, "I'll be over around eleven o'clock."

"We'll be expectin' you," Del said. "An' Sam's been foolin' 'round with somethin' he's got growin' old in a charred keg. It speaks with authority."

"Sounds good," Mike agreed.

After Del left, Mike finished an extra long shift. Del had sown seeds of suspicion and they were sprouting. "Nothing makes sense," Mike growled. "Why should Del Gordon get so friendly? Why should Slicker make a play for Marion? Anyway, how would Del know that? No, it's a trick on Del's part to get me out of the country or to force me to sell out. But it won't work!"

Mike began getting a meal. "Still," he reasoned, "Slicker wouldn't tip me off if he was making a play for Marion. He'd be too smart for that." He walked over and looked at the picture. "I haven't dusted you off in weeks," he said, reaching for a rag. "Housekeeping goes by the board when you're as busy as I am."

He picked up the framed photograph, turned it over, and stared. The dusty surface on the back was covered with finger prints along the left-hand edge. "Slicker's left-handed," Mike said wrathfully. "He used to pick this picture up and look at it." He was breathing hard, with restrained fury. "So that's why he wasn't put out when he lost the toss of the coin and had to buy me out. Come to think of it, Slicker was the one who suggested the deal . . . I'm heading for home—as soon as I pan the dirt the fire is thawing out."

He turned in, but in too savage a mood to sleep. He pictured Slicker making his way to the Coast. "I can overtake him without much trouble," he told himself. "Still, if he was lucky, he caught the steamer south and it might be a couple of weeks before I caught one. I'd better pull out right away. . . . Yeah, and play into the Gordons' hands, maybe. . . . It looks as if things've got me coming and going."

He thawed the dirt most of the following day, then panned, but the colors gave him no encouragement.

"Shucks, you can get colors anywhere," he roared. "If I wasn't such a stubborn fool I'd take the Gordons' offer." He calmed down somewhat over a smoke, and decided to delay until after his visit with the Gordons.

Early Sunday morning Mike built up a good fire in the drift, piled on a mixture of green and dry fuel so that the flames would burn slowly and steadily, then headed for the Gordons' cabin. As he neared their claim, he could smell mountain sheep roasting. He saw a small head with the fine curved horns stuck on a pole. They had killed a young one.

When Del Gordon saw Mike his face took on the wrinkles and dents that passed for a smile. His bared lips revealed the finest set of broken snags above ground. "Glad you could make it, Kelly," he said. "Joe got three sheep. Brought in the youngest—a ram. Went after another. Afraid a wolverine might get it. He'll be along soon. Come in."

"What's the game?" Mike thought. "He's so cordial it's hurting him."

Del gave Mike a stiff drink which

was something like fire spluttering along a fuse, then exploding a dynamite charge.

"To pay streaks and plenty of 'em!" Del said.

"I can drink to that," declared Mike.

Shortly before the meal was ready, Del began peering toward a nearby ridge. "Joe should be here most any time now," he remarked. When Joe came in sight, Del said: "Finish your drink, Kelly, and I'll give Joe a hand. He looks all tuckered out."

Before Mike could offer to help, Del was out the door and hurrying to meet his brother. "Did you get the job done?" he asked anxiously.

"Yeah," Joe said. "I hid out on that ridge above Kelly's claim. As soon as he cleared out, I went down to his cabin, looked around, then went into the mine. I pulled back his fire, and found the ground thawed a couple of feet deep. It was kind o' stiff, like dough. I stirred in three thousand dollars' worth of nuggets, pushed the dirt back into the hole, then shoved the fire up against it." He laughed. "I'd like to see the look on his face when he strikes that salted pocket. He'll go plumb crazy and light out for the States and that gal."

"Sounds like you done a good job," commented Del.

"I made it look natural," Joe answered. "Seems like that was a lot of gold to spend for salt though."

"If it works, and I don't see how it can miss," Del answered, "it's gettin' what we want for a song. Suppose that pocket only had a thousand dollars' worth? He'd stay right on the job figgerin' to hit the main pay streak any time. But three thousand! Watch him hit the trail. Prob'ly won't even stop to ask if we've got any mail to go in. Say, you didn't leave any tracks in that mine?"

"Not me," Joe said with a wise grin. "I snuck into the cabin and put on Kelly's own muckin' boots." They were nearing their own cabin now, and Joe asked: "He really believed I was up after this sheep?"

"Sure," Del chuckled. "And you've got the sheep to prove it."

Del's brother Pete wasn't the type of man Mike would have picked for a partner, but he knew how to cook. Everything was good, from the soup to the pie made of dried apricots. Mike had the feeling that it was the sort of a meal given a man about to die on the gallows, but the feeling was based on a hunch rather than anything Gordon did. There were moments when he felt ashamed of his suspicions.

When he started home that night, Del was yelling: "Too bad we didn't get acquainted sooner. Let's get together at Christmas."

"Right," Mike answered, "but I'll throw the party this time, if I'm here then. If I hit pay, I'm going to light out for the States."

When Del closed the door after Mike, he turned to his brothers. "Let's get good and drunk. Kelly's goin' to strike pay."

III

Mike Kelly awakened with a hangover. He soaked his head in cold water, growling because his tongue was thick and a fog appeared to have

moved into the cabin. "Guess I'm going soft," he muttered. "Or else that stuff sure had a wallop."

Shortly after noon Mike descended the ladder into the mine. The smell of burned wood lingered in the pockets, but the fire was out and a heap of ashes marked the thawed area. He scraped the ashes away, drove a shovel into the muck and dumped it into a bucket. When the bucket was filled he started to lift it, and had to take another hold. "Getting weak, too," he complained. He dumped the dirt into a larger bucket, went back and refilled it. When there were three bucketsful in the big bucket, he went up and windlassed it to the top. He swung the load onto a hand sled, dragged it to the cabin, and with a series of heaves got the bucket into the cabin.

He began panning mechanically, but suddenly a dull yellow color caught his eye. Letting out a yell, he lifted a nugget from the pan. Impatiently he poured off the remaining water and scraped through the gravel with his fingers. There were two nuggets weighing about an ounce each and several smaller ones. The sand contained a trace of fine gold, too.

Mike ran to the shaft and dumped down a supply of dry and green wood. Going below, he cleaned out all of the thawed ground and built another fire. When he turned in that night, every pound of thawed dirt was in the cabin. He went to bed thinking: "I may be home for Christmas yet!"

Mike had no headache when he awakened next morning. He cooked himself breakfast, poured warm water into the tub containing the gravel, and began panning. By night he had panned every ounce of dirt carefully. He weighed the gold and estimated the value.

"Three thousand dollars!" he exclaimed. "We'll see what the remainder of the thawed ground is like." Again he went below, removed the ashes, and brought a couple of hundred pounds to the cabin. It was midnight, but he panned for a half hour. Getting nothing, he finished the job. When he turned in, he was puzzled.

"Nothing but colors again. I must've hit a pocket. That's encouraging. It means other pockets. And it means I'm going home and show Marion the gold. That should be enough. Gold, virgin gold, does something to people. Alaska and mining will look good to her then." He rolled over in his bunk several times, impatience and restlessness upon him. "I wonder if I'll be lucky and catch the steamer Slicker goes out on?"

The next morning Mike poured gold from a moosehide poke, and looked at it a long time. "Yes," he mused, "gold does something to people. It fills them with ambition, gives them courage to take long chances. It keeps them hanging on like a pup to a bone. And there's another thing it does—it makes men scheme."

He put his cabin in order that day and rolled up the bedding, hanging it on wires so that mice couldn't chew it up. He filled the cabin with dry wood. If someone in bad shape

happened to stumble onto it, dry wood might be the margin between life and death. He closed the mine shaft, putting heavy timbers above it, then early the following morning he dropped in on the Gordons.

"Struck a pocket," he explained to the brothers. "I'm hitting the trail. I'll be glad to take out your letters."

They gave Mike a drink from the charred keg, and while he was slowly downing it, they wrote hurried scrawls to friends and relatives. About an hour later they watched him leave, and when he was out of sight, Dell said: "Follow the cuss, Joe. Make sure he's really headin' out of the country. It'd be bad for us if he doubled back."

Joe was gone twenty-four hours, and when he returned he said: "That cuss can sure burn up the trail. Acted like he was tryin' to catch a boat. Del, have you got that lost pay streak figgered out yet?"

Del Gordon had spread a roll of heavy paper like the kind meat markets use, on the table. The designs he had drawn were crude, but they were reasonably accurate. "The day I called on Kelly," he explained, "I studied the wall formation of his mine. I knowed where the Swede had lost the pay streak. If I could find layers of rock, clay and gravel exactly like I saw on his walls, then I figgered I'd be close to the lost pay streak. I went over there to compare the Swede's formation with ours. Ours weren't nothin' like the Swede's. And where Kelly began his driftin' as he hunted for the lost pay streak, the formation was exactly like ours. Do you know what that proved?"

"Yeah," Joe answered. "It proved Kelly and us was both barkin' up the wrong tree. And if we kept at it long enough we'd tunnel straight through the ridge and either meet or pass each other."

"That's right," Del said. "First there was an ancient creek loaded with gold. I put it down on the map as 'Ancient Creek.' There there was a commotion. Ancient Creek was covered up, but water had to go somewheres, so another creek followed the old channel part way, then made a channel of its own. The clay turned into a false bedrock."

"You sure know your minin', Del," Joe remarked.

"Been at it all my life," Del answered with pride. "Then along comes another commotion. Earthquake caused, like as not, by faults slippin' hundreds of miles inside the earth. Some dirt is pushed up by the pressure. That's the ridge between us and Kelly's. Some is pushed down. And when dirt went down, that lost pay streak went with it."

"I see," Joe said. "We punched holes to bedrock all over the place, and couldn't pick up the ancient channel. So we know where the gold ain't. It ain't on our ground. So it's got to be on Kelly's."

"You're catchin' on, my boy," Del said.

"Then why ain't Kelly found that ancient channel?"

"Kelly's smart. If he'd ever got a look inside our bedrock holes or

drifts, he'd know as much as we do. But by bein' unfriendly, makin' him keep his distance, we made sure he never got a look. Boiled down, it amounts to this: We know where the gold *ain't* on our place. We know where it couldn't be on Kelly's ground. The map shows the way the formations lay. And so . . ." He walked over to the map and made a cross. "It's gotta be here. He's a determined cuss, a real miner. He'd have found it in time. But we ain't waitin'. We're pannin' and thawin' all winter long. We're cleanin' up on that pay streak, and puttin' the gold into our ground to be found in three, four years when things have quieted down."

"Kelly'll be askin' us about the shafts he finds on his place," Joe argued.

"We'll tell him some men come in and worked the ground and that we figgered he'd sold out. How's he goin' to prove otherwise?" Del asked. "Answer is, he can't."

Within four days after they started thawing ground on Kelly's claim, the Gordons found formations near the surface similar to that uncovered in the Swede's operation. Again Del studied his map and tried to visualize a stream flowing thousands of years ago. Each man started a fire at the points Del indicated, and for a week it was thaw, dig, pan, then repeat the performance.

They kept the fires going night and day, sleeping near them whenever they had the chance. It was Joe who suddenly yelled: "Come here!" His voice was almost hysterical. He was ten feet down and bedrock, pushed up when the ridge was thrust above the surrounding area, was covered with a yellowish, blackish sand.

One by one they went into the hole and came up with nuggets. "We've struck it!" Del cried! "We'll start workin' both ways—up the channel and down. Get Kelly's oil can funnel over here and keep the wind blowin' on the fire. It takes wood, but it sure thaws ground. Joe, you hook up the dogs, and sled in only dry wood. Search every timber patch for dead trees. Every day, at this rate, means four or five thousand dollars."

They were big, tough men to start with, but within ten days each had shed around thirty pounds. They became heavy-eyed, and their nerves were on edge. They answered each other sharply. But when every shovelful of gravel means gold, an impulse seems to whisper: "One more shovelful! Just one more. Sure, you're ready to drop in your tracks, but you can get another shovelful out of your remaining strength."

As they drove their shovels into the gravel and forced the half-frozen stuff out, the man panning helped drop the load into one of several five gallon tins of boiling water. Tailing dumps containing fine gold and even nuggets froze in strange patterns in the hasty operation.

"It's like the Klondike," Del said. "Gold in tin cans, pokes, men's pockets—anything that'll hold it. And nobody on guard because the preachers and thieves hadn't got into the country yet."

"The preachers didn't steal, did they?" Joe asked.

"Hell, no! It seems like when the preachers come into the country, the thieves figger they can take a chance. A miners' court don't feel so much like hangin' a sluice-box thief when there's a parson around. They're more likely to give him a blue ticket out of camp."

The next afternoon Joe, on his knees, panning, gasped and almost fell into a can of hot water. Del yanked him back. "Fainted, eh?" he said thickly. "I guess we'd all better go to Kelly's and rest up. We've made a good start on this cleanup. Santa Claus may go South this year, but he's leavin' most of his pack right here."

"You figgered it all out," Joe said wearily. "You never made a slip."

"I never make a slip," Del answered. "Know why? Because I plan and figger all the chances of things goin' haywire. Besides I ain't been a miner all my life for nothin'. The hard part about this is goin' to be waitin' until Kelly quits raisin' hell. When he knows he can't hang this business on us, then we can suddenly begin findin' our mine prosperous."

He started for Kelly's cabin, walking heavily. His brothers followed, Joe driving the dogs. They cooked a meal, dumped the gold into the largest can, then rolled into bed. Almost instantly they were asleep.

IV

Del awakened with a start. The first streaks of light, marking the beginning of the short day, were trickling through the cabin window.

"Joe," he demanded, "what in thunder are you sleepin' in that chair for?"

"I ain't," answered Joe, "I'm sleepin' in the bunk under you."

"Then who the devil is it?" Del demanded.

"It's Mike Kelly," the man in the chair said, "and I'm not asleep. It wouldn't pay, Gordon. Not when I'm dealing with you fellows. By the way, I'm holding a sawed-off shotgun in my hands. It's loaded with buckshot. The triggers are fixed so they'll pull right easy."

"What's the idea?"

"Now that's a silly question for a smart man like Del Gordon to ask," Mike said. "Another thing, don't keep feeling around under your blankets for guns and knives. I collected them. You boys slept like logs. You must've been all in last night. Joe, roll out and get a fire going. The rest of you stay in bed. And here's a little point to keep in mind: Every minute, day and night from now on you're going to try to get the upper hand. I can't be constantly on guard. You may jump me and get away with it. But if I see a queer move on the part of *any* of you, I'm going to shoot the man nearest me."

They exchanged glances as Joe lighted a candle and started the fire. The glances were confident, plainly indicating they expected to turn the situation in their favor.

Mike relaxed and watched Joe get breakfast. He made the Gordons lie face downward on the floor while he

ate, then he kept the shotgun on them while they had breakfast. There was nothing wrong with their appetites, and Mike knew they weren't worrying about the future.

"Kelly, we made a play and lost," Del said. "Now you're making a play and you're going to lose. Why not take your gold and clear out? Forget the whole business. If you try to get us to jail, we're going to do something about it. So you've everything to lose and nothing to gain except revenge."

"Revenge doesn't figure in this deal," Mike replied. "You're just plain thieves or claim jumpers. Your breed has to be put away so that honest men can prospect. I'd be a five-center if I shut my eyes to what you pulled."

"What about Slicker cutting in on your girl?" Del asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Things are beginning to make sense," said Mike. "I had a puzzle to start with. Now the pattern is taking form. A little piece here, another there, and pretty soon you get enough of the picture so that you don't have to put in the other pieces. You haven't asked why I happened to double back and check on you."

Del was on the defensive now. Mike could see confidence begin to drain from the other two Gordons.

"The first piece was when you dropped into my mine and studied the formation," Mike explained. "The second was when you invited me to dinner. That was when you salted my mine."

Del licked his lips. "You're crazy," he said. "Why'd I salt your mine? You salt ground so you can sell it to some sucker. You don't do it to ground a man owns."

"You do if you want to make him think he's struck a pocket, and the pay streak isn't far away," Mike answered. "Particularly if the man knows that a slick partner is making a play for his girl. Okay, I knew it was salted and that the Gordons did it, so it was up to me to help you play out your hand. And that meant heading for the States.—I thought Joe never would stop trailing me," he ended wryly.

Del turned savagely on his brother. "I told you not to let him see you, Joe. And why didn't you make sure he didn't come back?"

"Oh, don't blame Joe," Mike said. "You made a bigger slip when you *salted* my ground."

"How?" Del was in a dangerous mood. He prided himself on never making a slip. "How? Just tell me how?"

"I will when I get around to it," Mike replied.

Del sneered. "I didn't make a slip. Damn it, are you goin' to have some sense, or are you goin' to try and jail us? You'd better think it over."

"I had plenty of time to think it over," Mike answered, "while I was watching you locate my pay streak. I'll admit, Del, you showed plenty of savvy when you worked out that map of the formations."

Del swore furiously. He was just beginning to realize that in locating the pay streak he had not only saved Mike a season's work, but had also

done the mining for him. "If you're going to take us in," he said, "you'd better let us rest a day or two. We're in bad shape."

"And it's four to one," Mike reminded him, "so the worse shape you fellows are in, the better my chances. We hit the trail at noon."

At first the Gordons' new strategy was not apparent. They remained sullen, but acted like defeated men. Joe drove the dog team, with its load of grub, camp gear and gold. His brothers took turns breaking trail and Mike followed, gun carried lightly, like a hunter who momentarily expects to flush game.

"Watch Kelly's face," Del told his brothers. "When his mind ain't on us, he's thinkin' about Slicker cuttin' in on his girl. He's plenty worried. Slow down the pace, and in a few days he'll crack."

Their pace became a crawl toward evening, and when Mike caught onto the game and ordered them to speed up, Del retorted: "We're in bad shape. We're doin' our best."

"I know the shape you're in," Mike said flatly. "Make up your mind. Speed up—or else!"

"Or else what?"

"That's another piece of information you'll learn later, along with how I spotted salt on my claim," Mike replied.

When they camped that night, Mike made them strip and get into their sleeping bags. Then he took their clothes, drove the dogs down the trail about a mile and made a camp of his own. He took the precaution of sleeping a short distance from the dogs. There was always the chance one of the Gordons might rig up some clothes and get the jump on him.

In this manner Mike got a good night's sleep the remainder of the week. But the four brothers were continuing their crafty tricks to slow him down. They crawled up the slopes and managed to turn the sled off the trail and into small canyons on several occasions. In each instance they lost an hour or two dragging sled, dogs and load through heavy snow to the trail.

"You might as well get some sense into your head," Del said. "Turn us loose and spend Christmas with that girl of your'n. With luck you could catch the next boat, and if it didn't lose too much time on account of storms or fog, you'd still make it home for Christmas."

"It's a good bargaining point," Mike replied, "but it isn't good enough. I'm going to see that you enjoy a Christmas dinner in jail—even if I miss my own." He was silent a moment, then he said: "Beginning tomorrow morning you're speeding up. I'm going to catch that boat."

When he drove up hours before daybreak the next morning, the Gordons were still asleep in their bags. He cooked breakfast, and when he had eaten, he gave Joe his clothes. When Joe was dressed Mike said:

"Now get moving down the trail."

"What about us?" Del yelled in alarm.

"Joe will be back with your clothes in three or four hours," Mike answered and drove down the trail.

At noon Mike gave Joe a cold lunch and ate one himself. Joe kept shaking his head in a puzzled sort of way. In his opinion Mike had it all over Del in pulling surprises from his bag of tricks.

"My plan is simple, Joe," Mike said. "I'm taking the dogs, sled and grub. That leaves you fellows with your sleeping bags to back-pack, plus cooking utensils and ax. You'll be traveling light, so I need a head start. By the time you back-track and take your brothers' clothes, I'll have a day's start on you."

"I guess that's right," Joe admitted, "but still I don't get the idea."

"Each morning as I break camp, I'll cache one day's grub for you fellows. It's up to you. You can make a fair day's mushing or go to bed hungry. I don't give a damn." Mike made up a small pack. "Here's tonight's and tomorrow's grub for the Gordon brothers. There'll be an equal amount where I make camp tonight. Now get on your way. I imagine your brothers are wondering what's going on."

V

As the country was mostly down grade, Mike's load almost carried itself. It was only a matter of keeping the sled headed right, and snubbing it down the pitches. Late one night Mike fought his way through a snowy pass, and looked down on salt water. The bay was bleak and deserted except for a scattering of cabin lights along the beach. Several clusters of lights marked the trading posts and outfitters' buildings.

"Steamer's pulled out," Mike growled. He was dog tired, and just then a sledload of gold didn't seem important. "Keep going," he told the dogs.

It was midnight when he arrived. He stopped in front of the commissioner's office, went over and shook the door. Eli Sexton, the commissioner, stuck his head out.

"Unless it's something that can't wait until morning," he called, "get the hell out and let a man sleep. I've been up two nights helping the postmaster distribute Christmas mail."

"How long ago did the steamer leave?" Mike asked.

"Four o'clock this afternoon. Next one a month from today—with luck," Eli said. "Hey, aren't you that chechahco, Mike Kelly, that bought out the Swede? And didn't your partner catch a steamer out around Thanksgiving time?"

"That's right. I want to swear

out a warrant for the Gordon brothers," Mike answered.

"A warrant for the Gordon brothers, eh? It's about time. Funny, but I'm not tired or sleepy now," Sexton said. A moment later he opened the door, stirred up the fire, and put a bottle before Mike. "Now tell me about it."

"Suppose you call in the marshal?" Mike suggested. "It'll save me telling the story twice."

The marshal arrived in about ten minutes. The two men listened to Mike's story. "I'll issue the warrants," Eli said when Mike had finished. "Serving them, Walt, is up to you."

Walt Bogan shook his head. "Arresting the Gordons is going to be a long, hard job. They shift from hell to breakfast when there's a warrant out for them. And when a man does arrest 'em they generally get off because the evidence isn't heavy enough to convict. But this case seems to be different."

"It is," Mike replied. "This time the Gordons are heading your way. They got themselves hungry and rundown working my mine, and they can't afford to miss meals. They had their choice of following me in and getting their next day's ration each night, or going back home, which meant many days' travel, on empty stomachs."

"That's all I need to know," the marshal said. "We're hightailing it out as soon as you can get a little rest. You'll be my chief deputy."

"Thanks for the compliment," Mike replied, "but I'm staying right here in Gold Pan Post for a twelve-hour sleep, then heading for Squaw Bay on a straight, non-stop trek to catch that steamer."

"I'm afraid you'll have to stay," the marshal said firmly. "In an emergency a marshal has the right to call on any citizen to act as a deputy. The Gordons have been an emergency in these parts a long time. Until they overplayed their hand with you, Mike, we never got anything definite on them. It seemed like they always left some sucker holding the sack."

"Now listen to reason," Mike pleaded. "Just for the Gordons you're going to deprive me of eating Christmas dinner with my girl down in the States. They're plenty of better men who'll be glad to act as your deputy."

"But they don't know the trail and the Gordons like you do," Bogan argued. Hunger may force the Gordons closer and closer to Gold Pan Post, but they're figuring ways to outfox John Law the last minute. Sorry, Mike, but I can't weaken. Besides, you've got to stay until the next steamer comes. There's special delivery mail aboard for you."

"How do you know?"

"While I was helping Scoop Tuesley distribute the Christmas mail," Sexton said, "a message came asking if a special delivery package addressed to Mike Kelly could be delivered to him at his mine. Scoop replied that legally the post office isn't required to deliver special mail that far, but that he'd see what could be done."

"When's the package due?" Mike

asked. It would be from Marion, he reasoned, and proof that she wasn't expecting him for Christmas, after all. If such was the case, was she admiring him for sticking to his guns, or was she sending him a sort of farewell gift?

"Steamer's due in about a week," Eli replied. "She'll make several stops before arriving at Gold Pan Post."

"Yeah, and while I'm waiting for a special delivery package, and helping you nab the Gordons, Slicker's getting in his dirty work," Mike growled, looking at the marshal.

"Haven't much faith in that girl, have you?" Bogan suggested. "As marshal I herewith demand your help as a special deputy. Put up your hand and be sworn in."

"I've all the faith in the world in that girl," retorted Mike. "We made a deal. Unless I come through with my end, she can call it off. She has her side of it."

"Sure," Bogan agreed, "and I have my side as marshal. Put up your hand and be sworn in."

"Damn you!" Mike said savagely. "You've got me cornered and you know it. You've the whole United States of America behind you. What a Christmas I'll have! Well," he said resignedly. "You don't need to worry, Bogan, I won't try to get even for this by stalling. I'll give you my best."

"Your square reputation is well known to me," Bogan answered as he pinned a deputy's badge on Mike. "Now go get some sleep while I sweep out a big cell for the Gordons."

From the moment Mike took the trail, he set a killing pace. The marshal was tough, but Mike was driven by wrath and Bogan found it difficult to keep up at times. He was relieved when Mike stopped by a recent campfire. A small food cache was visible in an overhanging tree.

"This is where I figured they'd stop and you'd pick 'em up," Mike explained.

"We'll settle down here," Bogan said, "and surprise 'em, just as you planned."

"That wasn't exactly what I planned," Mike answered. "I hoped that they would be hungry enough to come this far. If not, I felt sure you could round 'em up. I told them there'd be food here. They know it. They know, too, that you'll probably be here, and so—"

"And so?"

"And so we'll cross 'em up by driving on to the next camp where they're sure to be. We'll be in bad shape, but I think we can get there before they wake up," Mike said.

Bogan muttered and wearily followed his ruthless pace-setter. By four o'clock in the morning, the marshal was sure that his legs were going to break off at the hips. "I sure got myself into a mess when I forced this cuss to be a deputy," he thought. "He's tough, but he's tired, too. When he slips he don't get his balance as easy as he did when we started out. His steps aren't as long—a sure sign he's tired. But my steps are a blasted sight shorter."

When the marshal thought he couldn't go another yard, Mike

stopped. "Their camp is a hundred yards away," he said. "But let's not disturb the boys. They're tired and need their sleep. And . . . so do we."

They spread their sleeping bags and silently crawled into them. Hours later they awakened to the odor of frying moose steak. They left their bags and stepped from the thicket.

"Just in time for breakfast, eh?" Mike suggested. "The marshal and I are hungry."

The Gordons swore when they realized how neatly they had been trapped.

"You didn't leave no extra grub in the caches," Joe complained. "But we're your prisoners, so we got to do as you say. But why didn't you catch that steamer? I thought nothin' could stop you from gettin' home by Christmas."

"The marshal had other ideas," Mike answered. "Let's split the grub evenly. The marshal and I cached fresh grub as we came in. There'll be a square meal for all hands at noon."

The men ate in silence. They were silent on the trail, and progress was slow because the prisoners were thin and tired, and Mike and Bogan were in none too good condition themselves. Mike was in no hurry now. He had missed the only steamer that could possibly make train connections in Seattle in time to get him home for Christmas.

Mike amused himself by watching Joe, who kept shaking his head in a puzzled sort of way whenever he studied Del. When they finally sighted Gold Pan Post, Joe said: "Kelly, how did you know that we salted your mine? I can't figger it myself."

The other Gordons stopped dead in their tracks, awaiting the answer.

"That was Del's mistake, I guess," Mike answered. "He forgot that there are different kinds of placer gold—depending on how much it has worn down since leaving the lode, and what chemical stains have affected it. When I washed out nuggets unlike any that had been uncovered in the area I knew there was only one answer—salting. You know the rest, Joe."

Joe turned savagely on his brother. "So you're the fine feathered rooster that never makes a slip," he sneered. "Well, you've slipped us into the pen for a long stretch. And when we get out, I, the dumb one, am goin' to try my hand at runnin' the fambly." He thought this over a moment, then exploded: "No, damned if I'm goin' to wait that long. I'm startin' right now by pleadin' guilty, savin' the gov'ment expense and maybe gettin' shorter terms so we can get out sooner and make a fresh start."

"Let's get going again, then," Mike said. Joe's attitude suited him. It would save many days hanging around a courthouse while the trial was in progress. Mike pushed ahead, and when he at last saw the trading post, a steamer was tied up to the wharf.

A grin spread over Walt Bogan's tired face. "It looks as if the post office won't have to go out of its way

to deliver that special delivery package," he remarked. "You'll soon be there."

"But it won't be like Christmas at home," Mike said gloomily.

VI

It was late when they herded their prisoners into the Gold Pan Post jail. "Come over to my cabin," the marshal invited. "You can take a hot bath and shave and the wife will get us a bite to eat."

"I want my mail," Mike said doggedly. "There might be a letter from Marion."

"Post office is closed," Bogan replied. "But I'll drop in on Tuesley and ask if your package came. I might talk him into getting it for you."

When Bogan returned, Mike was slicked up and was wearing one of the marshal's suits. "No sense in dolling up like this," he said, self-consciously, "but Mrs. Bogan insisted on it. Tomorrow I'll get me a new outfit. Any letters?"

"No, but Scoop said he'd have the package over to his place after we've eaten. From what he said, there's more'n one," the marshal said.

Mrs. Bogan poked her head through the door. "Let the boy eat, Walt," she scolded. "Naturally he's anxious to see what Santa Claus sent."

Mike bolted his food, then set off for the Tuesley home followed by the Bogans. As he opened the door, a lusty gobble greeted him.

"Special delivery package," Tuesley said. "Sign here."

Mike signed mechanically, his eyes on a huge turkey in a crate. A sign read: "Don't Eat Until Christmas."

The next package carried a similar warning. "Probably the rest of the fixin's for a big Christmas dinner," Tuesley remarked.

Mike signed for it and asked: "Any more?"

"Yes, one more . . . in the parlor," Tuesley replied. "This one should have been marked, 'Handle With Care.'"

"Marion is back of all this," declared Mike. "She made up her mind that if I couldn't have a Christmas in the States, I'd have one up here."

He opened the door and stared. "Marion!" he yelled. "Why—there's no 'Don't Greet Until Christmas!' sign on you," he shouted, then moved in with open arms.

After awhile Marion smiled and said: "Mike, please let me get my breath."

Mike kept his arm around her as he turned to Walt Bogan. "You knew she was the special delivery package all the time?" he accused.

"Yep," the marshal answered. "She wanted to know who would deliver her to the mine before Christmas. So it was up to me to keep you here until she arrived, or else spoil her surprise. That was why I got tough and swore you in as a deputy."

"Remember, Mike," Marion said, "you agreed that if you didn't make a strike by Christmas, you'd give up the mining idea? Well, I met an old miner and got to talking with

him. I learned that mining gets into the blood, and that in your case it wasn't a silly whim, but it would be your life work. I realized that I hadn't been fair. And I knew, too, that, good times or bad, pay dirt or hungry ground, I only wanted to be Mrs. Mike Kelly. I didn't want you coming home to me when, if you stayed with it a little longer, you might strike pay, and so . . . I came to you and . . . brought Christmas with me."

"We'll arrange a wedding right here," Mrs. Tuesley said, "but I doubt if you'll approve of Marion's plan to honeymoon at the mine, Mike." She turned to the girl. "Mike's worked too hard. He needs a rest until breakup time in the spring. Besides . . . well, tell her, Mike."

"Hold out your hands," Mike ordered. "Both of 'em." He opened a moosehide poke and spilled the contents into her palms.

"Oh!" Marion exclaimed. "Gold! You struck it! You really struck it!"

"Nuggets from our mine," Mike explained. "And thousands of ounces yet to be dug. I feel so good that I cheerfully forgive Slicker for trying to pull several slick tricks on me."

"Slicker! That partner of yours!" Marion cried scornfully. "I met him in Seattle. There was a little piece about him in a newspaper, and I looked him up. He was arrested for fooling people with some kind of a trick coin. He'd get people to bet with him, then say: 'Heads I win. Heads you lose!' And what do you think? There was a head on each side of the coin. They caught him cheating and put him in jail."

Mike wasn't a man to gloat over Slicker eating Christmas dinner in jail. He put his arm a little tighter around Marion and said softly: "Heads I won . . . and bit the jackpot."

THE END

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

1. rowruf
2. tougud
3. ferwol
4. gob
5. newit
6. rewolfnus
7. firdt
8. riccle
9. lexa
10. goober
11. pumj
12. riderout
13. pre
14. derlinb
15. dorp

NEW RANGE

by JIM WEST

Not gold or silver but the kind of graze that would put tallow on prime beef was the goal of our earliest "prospectors"

WHEN the first long strings of cattle were pointed up the Western Trail, destined for new homes on the open range of Montana's eastern plains, adventure rode with every herd. Grass hunters had preceded the stock, pushing into the new country months ahead of the advancing cattle. These men, pioneers in spirit, skilled in cow business, "prospected" for new range with every bit as much care and frontier American enterprise as the early gold prospectors displayed when they combed the mountains of the West for gold.

Grass was their objective. Ample land was available for the using. Stockmen moving into new range established widespread cattle dominions without holding title to more than a small portion of the land in many instances. Often all that was actually owned were water rights and the headquarters ranch site. Yet owning relatively few *acres*, a stockman's beef herds might roam over as much as a hundred square *miles* of range.

That was in the era of free grass when the West was young and the range was new. Much of the grazable plains country was empty. Vast stretches of it in the northern region, notably the general basin area of the Upper Missouri River comprised a grassland country made to order for the herds that moved in during the 1880's, mostly from the older cattle country to the south in Texas.

Originally this section of the West was buffalo country, a land where antelope dotted the skyline in small, nervous herds quick to take flight at the first warning of danger. It was Indian country too.

Then in the fall of 1877 in the low, rolling Bearpaw Mountains of northern Montana near the present town of Chinook, county seat of Blaine County, Chief Joseph, leader of the

Nez Perce Indians, surrendered to General Nelson A. Miles. Joseph, rather than be confined to an Idaho reservation, had brought his followers to the Bearpaws and camped there, thinking he was safe in Canada, his ultimate destination.

Discovering his mistake when General Miles attacked, the Indian leader made his decision to sue for peace after a bitter four-day battle.

"I am tired. My people are weary," he is said to have addressed the American commander. "Our chiefs are dead, our little children freezing. We have no blankets for the old women, or for the sick and wounded. We have no food. Hear me, Great White Warrior! From where the sun now stands, Chief Joseph will fight no more forever."

General Miles accepted the surrender. At one sweep it ended the major Indian wars in the West and opened the whole of the Upper Missouri River basin to occupation by stockmen spreading out in search of new range. Cattle, they had learned, could winter on the northern plains.

There were exceptional winters that took their toll. During the hard winter of 1886-7 thousands of cattle died on the open ranges of the Upper Missouri. Yet in spite of this the 1880's and the 1890's were the heyday of free grass in Montana.

Conditions changed in time, and with the coming of the homesteaders in droves during the early 1900's. But many of the brands and cattle dynasties founded when the country was an unbroken expanse of still new range are important cattle spreads today. Soundly started, they have lasted through good times and bad, through peaceful years and cattle wars.

Taking up new range in the early West involved a definite procedure. Much of the eventual success or failure of the entire enterprise depended on how well the preliminary work was done. Simply driving a herd of cattle out onto the plains past the last established ranch was not enough.

The range was prospected first, for grass and other things. Usually old cowhands—not necessarily men old in years but men old in the cattle business and skilled in pioneering—moved out across the new country well in advance of those who waited behind with the cattle.

Often the range prospectors had a full year's start. Sometimes the owner of the spread went with them. At other times the owner stayed behind with the stock held at some outpost trail town and awaited the range prospectors' return, content to stake his whole future on their judgment.

The grass hunters traveled light, pushing into the wilderness without benefit of chuck wagon or other foofooraw. Usually they went in pairs, each riding his own mount and with his rifle slung across the saddle. Each man led his own pack horse carrying his bedding and such staple food supplies as were necessary for the long months spent alone on the empty plains. For meat the range prospectors relied mainly on their guns and whatever kind of game the range afforded.

No matter when they set out, range prospectors in the northern plains country made it a point to return to the waiting herd in time to get the cattle started towards the new range as early as possible in the spring. Cattle savvy motivated this fever for an early start. Spring arrival on the new range gave travel-tired stock a full summer season in which to rest and build flesh, and such cattle better withstood the rigors of their winter in the north.

Primarily, experienced range scouts sought out grass of course. But they looked for other things as well—water and shelter. Those three things, grass, water and shelter, were the requisites of successful cattle ranching on the northern plains. For summering the stock, adequate forage and sufficient water were essential. For winter range, shelter was perhaps the most important item.

In winter cattle could eat snow. A relatively dry region was often preferred at this season because the pasturage it afforded, even if leaner than that on well-watered range, was not so likely to be eaten off and cropped down during the summer as was forage close to water. Thus the drier sections generally maintained their stands of brown grass, cured on the stalk, as a natural winter reserve kept that way by the grazing habits of the cattle themselves.

Good winter range of this type lay in the winding coulees, on the upland plateaus and along the draws of the broken butte country that stood back from the richer, better-watered bottomlands. These broken regions also provided the necessary winter shelter and protection against the biting winds and howling blizzards that raged across the open plains during the winter months. Lack of such shelter caused more winter cattle deaths than did the actual cold itself.

The range prospectors on the northern plains sought out therefore a section that offered the ideal combination of rich summer graze with adequate water and a nearby background of topographically rough shelter providing winter range. When they found it, next thing was to locate a suitable site for the home ranchhouse, corral and such other outbuildings as would be required. Outpost buildings could be nothing more than soddys or dugouts on the plains, but the ranch headquarters was generally a substantial structure.

Stream sites were favored for ranch headquarters whenever possible. Water was handy. And so were cottonwood trees from which logs could be hewn for building the spread's ranchhouse. Smaller wood could be used for timber for the corrals, and thickets along the stream edge afforded a plentiful supply of fuel for the cook stove, or the bunkhouse heater that was kept glowing during the long, cold winter months.

Grass was the range prospector's objective, but not until he had found grass plus these other things was he ready to turn back or tell the owner of the herd that his job was done and the cattle could be moved forward to fatten and increase on the range his scouting foresight had picked out.

At first when the new range coun-

try of the northern plains began to be "settled" isolated stockmen lived with their cowboys virtually alone in the wilderness. Gradually neighbors moved in. The country filled up, in the language of the pioneers, when other ranchers established themselves perhaps as little as thirty or forty miles away.

Later the open range became even more thickly settled. Little ranchers, starting shoestring spreads with a few hundred head of cattle or less sought their share of free grass. And pretty soon, even before the advent of the hoeman, there was talk of overstocking, and overgrazing began to be an ever threatening problem.

To start with, gradual overstocking of new range in the West was, in a measure, held in check by the nature of the pioneer cattle business. Annual roundups for spring calf branding, the beef cuts and so forth were essentially community affairs in open-range country. Everybody pitched in. Hands from all the spreads utilizing the range were needed to help with the job. By flatly informing a newcomer that though the grass was free, help wasn't and none would be forthcoming at roundup time, older spreads could more or less control who did and who didn't run stock on a particular section of range.

Pioneer stockmen of a neighborhood often united in this manner in refusing to work with anyone who put another herd on ground they felt was already holding as many cattle as it could. Even so in a world that is at best imperfect, there always have been those who for their own gain have no compunction about tromping on their neighbor's interests.

Free grass was destined to the evils of overstocking.

The tough part of the setup lay in the fact that when a section of range became worn out because more cattle had been put on it than the land could properly support, the loss fell on all the users. It fell just as heavily on the stockman who ran his right share of cattle every year as on the man who crowded on too many head of his own brand.

Today free grass and the open range are memories. Range on the public domain is regulated to the stock it will hold, and administered under the provisions of the Taylor Grazing Act by officials of the Grazing Service—a Federal Bureau.

The open range served its purpose, as did the grass hunters, the pioneers who pushed into the wilderness in search of new homes for the stockmen's herds of bawling dogies. For all its hardships, rough fare and the monotony of long days in the saddle, prospecting for free grass provided some of the most thrilling chapters in the saga of the early West. With the range prospector rode the hopes and dreams of the frontier cattleman, and it was he who planted the seed of empire on the empty plains.

THE END

THE RED TRAIL OF OJO WILLIAMS

by EARL W. SCOTT

Not even a sidewinder's merciless torture could make old Marty Defoe reveal the secret that had already brought death to his pard

WHEN Ojo Williams, the gambler, gunned down Pappy Roscoe in a stud game at Malpais Flats and hit the breeze, Pappy's claim pardner, Marty Defoe, went to see gray-haired Judge Mayes.

"That lazy Sheriff Lew Markley'd never ketch Ojo, jedge," Marty insisted, after telling his story. "I want you should telegraph Frontier Sheriff Bill Hazlett in 'Paso." As a retainer, Marty pledged a portion of his gold cache out on Mustang Mountain.

Suspicious noises outside the judge's office window made Marty get up and peer out into the dark, but he could see nothing and he sat down and resumed his conversation with Mayes.

Far stars were spattering a lonely midnight as Marty headed for the Malpais trail and home. "Be back day after tomorrow," he'd promised the judge, and that meant hurry. As he urged old Ace, his burro, to greater speed, Marty's thoughts milled in weary confusion.

There was the letter he'd started to his nephew, little Marty, over in Tombstone. For the first time he had set down on paper the secret of the cache. He was getting old and it was high time the younker knew

Ace brayed approvingly as Pappy rolled the stone into place and declared: "There, dagnabit, I'm havin' my way for onct!"

there'd be funds for his education. But what had he done with the dang thing, Marty wondered. He must finish and mail it. Now Pappy's share would also go to the lad. Being kinless, he'd have wanted it that way. Long evenings the two old prospectors had jotted down their doings together in an old tally book.

"Jest to give the button somethin' to keep 'im busy," Pappy had often said. "Kids go fer treasure huntin'."

Now would come the entry of Pappy's death. And it would never do to say his killer got away.

With his mind so preoccupied Marty gave small heed to the trail behind where the black shadow of a rider was hounding his footsteps through the crooked maze of gullies and mesquite. Sunup found him working the burro through the last stand of pine into the clearing around the cabin.

Load loosened, old Ace sank grunting into dooryard dust to roll trail sweat from his bony haunches. Marty's glance lifted. Three hundred yards up the mountainside, masked by thick second growth, was the mouth of the bat cave.

"Better'n a Territory bank, by criminey and coyote whiskers," Pappy had often insisted. "Who'd think of lookin' for a pot of dinero in a dang bat roost?"

The short tunnel, hollowed out by some long-dry stream, angled twenty yards into the mountain, to fan suddenly into the cave's vastness. In spite of guano deposits the air was fresh and cool, fed by a rugged fissure running hundreds of yards skyward further up the mountain.

Marty hurried inside the cabin to busy himself with breakfast. Bone weary from the long trip, his nostrils quivered in anticipation at the aroma of boiling coffee. Then, in the act of spooning flapjack batter onto the sizzling skillet, the scuff of boots at the door swung him round.

"Howdy, pardner." The malicious grin under the black mustache was satanic and deadly.

"Ojo Williams," breathed Marty. His spoon hand trembled, dripping batter on the floor.

"It ain't no mirage," the other offered, whipping free his wide Stetson and batting trail dust from his black clothes. Hardness crawled over his swarthy face as he stepped into the cabin and, parting his long coat tails, sank on to a table bench.

Marty's face had gone gray under its tan, but the spoon had ceased trembling.

"Wal," he demanded, "what in tarnation do *you* want here?"

Ojo shrugged. "Sort of interested in that story you told the judge last night," he explained, eyes glittering under lazy lids. "But first, some grub, eh pardner? Night-long jackass trailin' over malpais whets yer appetite."

Marty's grizzled jaw slid out and his eyes held steady, but inside he was sick at heart. He was remembering that noise by the window. Ojo on the prod, eh? Not satisfied with his killer's gold, he'd hidden out to trail Pappy's pard back to its source. Probably Pappy'd had done some boasting during that fatal stud game, too. Liquor always loosed his tongue. But even as Marty found

himself saying, "Me cook fer the likes of you?" he was thinking, "Maybe it'd be smart. Might stall along." At least it would give him time to think and he might have a chance to get his hogleg off the wall there in the corner.

"Sure you'll cook," snarled Ojo. "Get goin', Santy Claus."

The gambler ate ravenously, wolfing the nicely browned flapjacks and guzzling cup after cup of coffee. Scraping pan bottom, Marty turned from the stove, making for the cupboard in the corner. The two goods boxes spiked together, one atop the other and crudely shelved, held dishes, cutlery and incidentals. Beside it stood a freshly opened sack of flour, and just above hung his gun. He stooped over, then his hand flashed out tugging at the holstered weapon. Behind him Ojo laughed, the sound harsh above the crackle of the fire.

"Forget it, oldster. Think I was weaned yesterday?" Slowly Marty heeled about to stare into the black nose of a derringer. Ojo kicked over the bench.

"Reckon it's time for business, anyway," Ojo declared and, stepping across, seized the heavy gun with his left hand and tossed it crashing through the window.

"I don't know what yer idea is, Williams," Marty said desperately, "but whatever 'tis, won't do you no good."

"Meanin' you don't aim to talk, eh?" growled Ojo. "Well, I'll find that cache if I have to burn this shack down—an' you in it," he added.

Marty wet his lips and said nothing. Once Ojo had the gold, it would all end the same. The gambler would never leave him alive. He glanced up to see the beady black eyes studying him speculatively.

"Look, oldster," Ojo said craftily, "tell you what. Sayin' it's a good-sized pot, I won't scrape the bottom. It can all be sort of friendlylike and nobody hurt."

"You killed Pappy Roscoe in cold blood!" flared Marty. "I'd never tell yuh nothin'."

Shoulders bunched, Ojo unleashed an open-handed slap that sent Marty reeling against the cupboard. It rocked crazily, pitching pans and dishes to the floor and toppling a jug of molasses that oozed drearily from shelf to shelf. Marty, sliding to his knees, saw Ojo's boot swing back for a kick and rolled away as the toe bored in. Pouncing on the foot with both hands, he twisted it savagely, whirling the upright gambler and sending him crashing to the floor. Surprised curses poured from Ojo's mustached lips as he whipped over, sending a second boot heel crunching against Marty's skull. Total darkness descended on the old prospector.

He came too, the shock of splashed water in his face and the anxious eyes of Ojo Williams bending above him. Movement was enough to prove he was spread-eagled on the bunk, wrists and ankles anchored to the four corners. For some reason, his boots had been jerked off. Marty puzzled over that as Ojo straightened

up, a look of relief on his hard face.

"Might have knowed an old rat like you'd take a lot of killin'," he grunted.

Marty groaned. There was the taste of salt on his lips, oozing blood from the temple wound, he guessed. His tortured eyes went to the door. The sun speared directly across the sill. It was past noon. He'd been unconscious for some time apparently.

Ojo was rolling a cigarette. He struck a match, inhaling and studying Marty speculatively through smoke.

"That offer of mine still holds, oldster," he said. "Say the word and I'll cut you loose."

Grimly Marty shook his head and turned his face to the wall. Ojo's breath made a sucking sound. "Like that eh?" he spoke through set teeth. "Listen, ever hear of the old Yaqui runnin' iron trick? Made a lot of hombres talk in its time. Mighty handy, you havin' that old B Box brandin' iron for a poker. Happen to notice where it was? Wal, it's in the stove gettin' nice and warm. That's just in case you stay hammer-headed."

Marty groaned, stomach crawling. He could almost feel the sizzling iron on the soles of his feet. Cripple him for life, it might. Put him in a rocking chair. Wearily he closed his eyes. He wondered if, in spite of it all, Ojo might not find the cache. Bill Hazlett would never come then and there'd be no money for little Marty's education. On the other hand, if Ojo killed him, the old iron pot of gold on its hidden shelf in the bat cave might stay there 'till Judgment Day.

Thought of the boy brought memory of the unfinished letter. He'd been a fool, Marty thought, not to have finished it to mail in town. He'd told of the hiding place in that letter. He recalled sitting at the table there painfully pencilling out instructions.

"... yuh'd never know, son, where the cave was. Yuh got to watch fer the bats," he'd written. "They come pourin' out old Mustang Mountain's side just at sunset. That's whur you go in. Jest foller yer nose in the dark 'till yuh count sixty, slowlike. Yuh hit the main cave then an' reachin' up, shoulder high on a man, is a shelf. There's guano there, maybe a hundred year old, so don't worry none. Prowl round some 'till you find the iron cookin' pot. It's half full of gold dust and nuggets. . . ."

He'd written a little more and put the unfinished letter—where? It came in a flash. In the old tally book containing the diary. And that book, telling clearly the cache secret, lay in the open cabinet yonder, within easy arm's reach, half drowned in oozing molasses.

Marty craned round at the thought, eyes flying wide. The grunting Ojo was straightening from the stove, grim malevolence twisting his features, and the red-hot branding iron clutched in his hand.

Marty lunged frantically, straining at his bound wrists and ankles. Ojo chuckled deep in his throat, pausing to let full terror creep through Marty's bones. Outside the gambler's

horse stomped patiently. A bottle fly buzzed at the broken pane. Its whirring wings suggested searing flesh and Marty choked, wetting dry lips. It had grown unbearably hot in the cabin with the gambler's built-up fire. Sweat poured down Marty's face, salted his mouth where the blood had dried. And sweat stood on Ojo's swarthy temples, trickled from his chin.

"Tell, or fry, oldster!" He dropped the tip of the iron, inches from Marty's bound feet.

"The devil with yuh," Marty choked, jaws knotting. Came the smell of scorched flesh, raw pain needling the length of his right leg.

Slowly Marty's tensed muscles relaxed as heat, punishment and lack of food brought blackness once more.

The slow afternoon dragged by like some hellish nightmare. Twice during those hours Marty revived only to pass out again under Ojo's abuse. There came the time when he realized he was awake. Numbed and miserable, he lay staring out across the long shadows of the slope. Evening was near and it had grown cooler. As consciousness grew, Marty's eyes settled on the cabinet. It had been thoroughly ransacked. Some of the jumbled contents had spewed to the floor. The tally book sprawled open-faced beside a stove leg. Its pages were torn and rumpled and several were glued fast by the dripping syrup. A wan grin began tugging at Marty's fevered lips. So here was why Ojo had failed to discover the secret though it was under his very hand.

Lounging in the open door, the gambler turned. His tailored coat showed mussed and dusty. String tie dangled loosely about the soiled crumpled collar and his sweaty cheeks were scummed with blackish beard. Viciously he ground a cigarette butt under his heel and crossed over.

"I'm givin' yuh just one more chance," he grated. "Then I'm lettin' lead through yer ornery stubborn hide—if—"

His words were completely drowned in the raucous bray of old Ace, demanding supper. As wave after wave of sound rolled up the slope, echoing, Marty's eyes swept around, widening in comprehension.

"Hell and termater cans!" he breathed. It was most as though the burro had kicked consciousness into him. For a long moment he lay, memory acutely conscious of another day on that brush-dotted hillside beyond the window. Of a stooped familiar figure, hobbling toward him, Stetson flapping.

"There, dagnabit," Pappy Roscoe seemed to be saying. "Like it or not, I'm havin' my way for onct."

Outside the braying faltered, ceased like the slowing of a rusty hinge. But facing ugly reality again, Marty's tortured glance held something of suggested triumph, of fresh decision.

Deliberately he eyed the fallen tally book until, sure of Ojo's observation, he turned away guiltily, licking his fevered lips

"So," breathed Ojo, sucking in his breath, "you been holdin' out, eh?" He pounced on the book, cursing at

the sticky leaves, but this time prying them open carefully one at a time.

"You dang coyote," blustered Marty, but the gambler only chuckled.

Then he grew very quiet. Marty, craning, could see him bending over the unfinished letter. It had been well vised between gummy pages. Exultantly Ojo began reading aloud as his excitement mounted.

". . . watch fer the bats," he muttered. They come pouring straight out old Mustang's side just at sunset. That's where you go in . . ." His gloating eyes raced on. " . . . on a shelf," he whispered. "Iron pot full of dust and nuggets."

"Loco old fool!" Ojo yelled, waving the sticky letter. "I've a mind to plug you where you lie." Instead he lunged for the door, soon to appear running up the steep slope, long coat tails flapping. Fifty yards of this and he paused, legs spread, glaring about. The gold light was slowly fading on the hill. When dusk suddenly fell with the sinking sun . . .

Marty Defoe, forgetful of his throbbing feet and pain-wracked stiffened joints, craned toward that window. He scarcely dared breathe, dim eyes glowing with strange excitement, stiff lips muttering a prayer.

Gold, mauve, blue, the light fused. Dark had fallen and with it from unseen quarter on the hill, a gray cloud lifted swiftly. It funneled out toward the darkening sky in a vast covey of fluttering wings! Marty could hear Ojo's yell as he clambered upward. Nearing a dense clump of shrubs, beside a burned pine, the gambler paused uncertainly. Watching fearfully below, Marty strained at his bonds and fresh sweat oozed from his throbbing temples. Then gasping in relief, he sagged back, eyes closing. For the gambler was plunging forward again.

Up, up Ojo went, apparently urged by the frantic effort to reach the opening while the bats yet flew. Reaching a jagged outcropping of pinnacled rock, he hesitated, peering about. A few gray creatures still whirred past his head. He seemed confused, striking at them. Then in quick decision he stepped forward to disappear from sight.

There came the faint echo of a long cry drifting hollowly through the half dark. It was swallowed by thick enveloping silence.

"Good old Ace," Marty muttered. "Funny he'd make me remember."

Dawn of the second day was just touching the hump of Mustang's shoulder when hoofs clattered up the trail and three dusty riders dismounted to shoulder through the cabin door.

"Sufferin' catfish!" exclaimed the short, gray-haired man, eyes glaring about under the wide hat brim. "Seein' Ojo's black hitched out front we might have knowed."

"Howdy, jedge." The words came from the bunk in a hoarse whisper. "Sort o' reckoned you might come."

"You pore old cuss!" gasped Judge Mayes. "Hey, Bill give us a hand." A tall booted man trailed by a pudgy hombre sporting a sheriff's badge on his greasy vest, crowded forward and together he and the judge tore free the lengths

of knotted lass rope from Marty's wrists and ankles.

"Get water, Markley," ordered Mayes, easing the old man to a more comfortable position. While the fat sheriff busied himself filling the bucket, the stranger fished the branding iron from the floor.

"Pulled the old Yaqui trick, eh?" he offered, lips hard. "Look at his feet, judge."

"Yeah, I see," Mayes spoke through his teeth. He had stooped closer, letting liquor dribble through Marty's cracked and blackened lips from a pocket flask.

"But where is the skunk?" Lew Markley spread his hand, speaking from the bunk end.

"Yonder with the bats," Marty croaked, eyes opening. A faint grin tugged at his whiskered lips.

"Bats?"

"Git up the hill to that burned pine yonder. Jest beyond that should be a smooth rock two fellers can jest about move . . . covers a hole." Marty gestured weakly. "Roll 'er off and crawl in . . . leads to a cave. Ojo's thar . . . or what's left of 'im . . ." He sagged back weakly, eyes closed.

"You and Markley'd best have a look, Bill," Mayes said. "I'll stay with Marty here." The stranger nodded wordlessly and, loosening his low-slung bone-handled Colt, he swung around and out the door. Markley followed, muttering something about cave dark and pausing only long enough to fish the battered lantern from its hook beside the door.

Twenty minutes later they were back, grim-faced, powdered with gray guano dust from their heads to their feet.

"Well?" Mayes' questioning glance lifted from the bench beside the bunk. There was an open bucket of lard and clean flour-sack strips on the table. Marty's feet were swathed bundles of white on the rumpled blanket.

"Ojo's there, all right." The tall man jerked a thumb. "What's left of 'im is coyote bait, though. How in thunder—"

"You'd be Bill Hazlett." Marty's voice broke in, hollow eyes peering from the pillow. "You shore travel fast."

The tall man grinned. For the moment his austere face was almost pleasant.

"The judge's wire caught me in Tucson," he explained. "Havin' more'n one tally on Señor Williams, I burned up leather."

"A Mex saw Ojo hittin' out 'crost the Malpais t'other night," confirmed Markley.

"So we adds two and two when you didn't show up in the Flats yesterday," clipped the judge, scowling the fat sheriff to silence. "But you're talkin' too much, Marty."

"Talkin' won't hurt me," Marty said. "I'm fitter'n a fiddle," and he told them how Ojo had worked trying to make him talk.

"Any man'd break, gittin' branded," offered Markley.

"Tain't so," flared Marty. "I'd never told 'less old Ace had brayed. Yuh see, back when Pappy Roscoe and me was about to start fer town,

last thing he did was go up to git some lucre from the cache pot. He'd allus worried 'bout leavin' that cave mouth open, but rollin' that rock off was a tough job fer two old rats like us, so I always objected, holdin' that nobody'd know about the gold pot even if they *did* find the cave. Anyways that mornin' Pappy got stubborn and toppled the rock 'crost the opening. He was tellin' me 'bout it comin' down the slope and right then old Ace let out with his bray. Ace brayin' that way ag'in right when Ojo was burnin' up my feet, tells me how I can trick the skunk. Yuh see, in the letter I'd started writin' my nephew, I'd told him the way to find the cache was to watch the bats comin' out at sunset. That letter was glued fast in the leaves of the tally book, so I pretends to let Ojo catch me starin' at the book lyin' there on the floor. He couldn't burn the trail up fast enough gittin' up the slope after he reads that letter, and the bats did the rest!"

"But danged if I can see—" began Markley.

"You wouldn't," cut in Marty. "Them bats hated fightin' that downdraft from the big shaft worse'n poison so they allus used the side way out through Pappy's and my tunnel . . ."

"And with that blocked off, they had to come out the top hole," suggested Bill Hazlett.

Marty nodded, wincing with pain. "Yuh see, I'd plump fergot Pappy blockin' our tunnel 'till old Ace brayed that away an' made me remember. Got a bad scare when Ojo stopped right square in front of that burned pine, but he went on up . . ."

". . . and dove two hundred feet to hell," finished the judge, admiration in his eyes. "Of all the quick thinkin'!"

"Kind o' left me in the soup, at that," Marty confirmed weakly. "If you hadn't come . . ." he shuddered, "Say, I'm jest wonderin', how in tophet *did* yuh find this place?"

"Checked your claim filing back in the Flats," Hazlett answered.

"Huh," grunted Marty. "Who ever named *me* a smart man?"

THE END

Despite her ruthless crew of salmon thieves, the predatory Silver King *was helpless against an enemy that trailed her through fog and darkness*

TRAP TRICK

by JOSEPH F. HOOK

THE cannery wharf of Auke Bay was crowded with fishing craft as the *Silver King* dropped anchor some distance out, awaiting its turn to unload its cargo of salmon.

It was a night black with rain clouds. A bitterly cold wind was sweeping in from Icy Strait, its breath laden with moisture from a rolling fog bank. The Bay was choppy.

Big Mike Mattison, the skipper, Seattle Sam Redmond, Hank Fellows and Corny Clark went into the cabin of the forty-five-foot purse seiner. She was low in the water, her hold filled with salmon clear to the hatch coaming.

"Hope the cannery don't keep us layin' out here at anchor all night," Big Mike grumbled as he shuffled the cards for a game of seven-up. "With the salmon runnin' their tails off, we gotta clean up while the cleanin's good."

The game and the small stakes were not enough to curb Big Mike's impatience longer than the first round. Lifting his huge bulk off the bench, he stepped to the cabin door and flung it wide. He stood staring toward the cannery lights, irritably kicking a toe against the backwash board.

Seattle Sam, gaunt and wiry, raked in the winnings. Pot-bellied Hank Fellers, ripping out an oath, started shuffling the cards. Corny Clark, the smallest of the crew, still wearing a cook's greasy apron, reached for a bottle and let the powerful brew gurgle down his throat.

"Reckon I'll row ashore and see how long they're gonna keep us waitin'," Big Mike growled.

He was stepping across the board when a voice hailed him from the deck of an outbound troller.

"Ahoy, *Silver King!* They's room now at the wharf!"

"Up with the mud hook and get that Diesel started!" Big Mike barked, striding toward the pilothouse. "Hustle!"

Big Mike nosed the purse seiner slowly into the brightness of the conveyor floodlights. A worker signaled him to an empty berth. Cannery workers caught the tossed lines, making the craft fast. The superintendent waved a hand. A cannery crew dropped aboard and started tonging the silver beauties on to the moving conveyor slats, while a checker kept tally.

A short time later the superintendent handed Big Mike a roll of bills, along with the tally sheet.

Big Mike's black eyes sparkled as he stepped into the cabin. With thick, clumsy fingers he divided the roll on the table. He crumbled the tallest pile in a powerful, hamlike fist and pocketed it. Each of the other men reached for his share, took a swig from the bottle and grinned.

Then the *Silver King* warped out of her berth, making room for the next loaded craft. Her bow pointed toward Eagle Cove, straight into the teeth of the wind from Icy Strait. Her running lights were barely visible because of moisture collecting on the protecting glass from the fog. Ahead lay a black wall. Astern, even the usual phosphorescent glow of the frothing wake was invisible.

Corny Clark came up on deck from the engine room, wiping his hands on a wad of waste. He entered the pilothouse where everything was shrouded in darkness except for a pin point of light that barely illuminated true north on the compass. Big Mike leaned far out the opon window, a hand on a wheel spoke, eyes straining to pierce the darkness, ears alert for the faintest unusual sound.

Not a word was spoken until Seattle Sam and Hank Fellows entered.

"It's gonna be a wild night to work," Seattle Sam said presently. "She's getting thicker, and the water's beginning to smoke up."

Big Mike withdrew his head and glared balefully at him.

"How'd you expect me to listen for other craft," he snarled, "if you can't keep that big trap of yours closed, you lug?"

Suddenly, the beam of a powerful searchlight stabbed through the darkness. It swept the choppy water in a half circle, coming to rest blindingly on the purse seiner, illuminating the pilothouse.

Big Mike snatched at the siren cord, gave his course, and swung the wheel hard over. A more powerful siren answered, and the long white finger of light daked the *Silver King* from stem to stern. Engine exhausts roared louder and louder, and a long, gray craft streaked past.

"The Coast Guard cutter!" Corny Clark exclaimed.

Silence followed while the *Silver King* dipped and rolled in the bigger craft's backwash. Then Big Mike roared: "Clear out o' here now, you guys, an' watch for the signal. That cutter ain't the only craft that's liable to ram us tonight; and most of 'em don't carry searchlights."

The three men left, groping their way along the heaving, slippery deck to the cabin. Hank broke out a fresh bottle, Corny shuffled the cards, and the game of seven-up was continued.

The *Silver King* plowed on, waves smashing against her sturdy hull with thudding impact. Finally Big Mike's huge hand slid up the wall and touched a button.

Back in the cabin the light blinked on and off, three times. Instantly the men came to their feet. Hank and Seattle Sam stepped out on deck. Bending down, Corny dragged a packing case from beneath a bunk, picked it up, and followed. The movements of each man were precise, mechanical.

They gathered in the eye of the ship, peering into the blackness. The big Diesel was throttled to half speed.

A tiny pin point of yellow light suddenly appeared.

"There she is!" Big Mike observed, leaning far out of the pilothouse window. "You boys got that box ready?"

"All set, skipper," Seattle Sam replied.

The yellow light grew brighter as the *Silver King* approached. Big Mike shut off the engine, and the crew could hear the *slup-slup* of water against piling. Soon it loomed up close at hand, like a forest of trees denuded of their branches.

Big Mike touched a button. A cluster of floodlights atop the mast blazed out, illuminating the webbing of an enormous salmon trap and the outline of the spiller and brailer rigging.

As the *Silver King's* blunt bow bumped against the fender log, a loud voice shouted a warning.

"Shove off, or I'll blow you to Hades!"

"Keep yore shirt on, watchman," Big Mike boomed, as Seattle Sam and Hank slipped over the gunwale and made fast to the fender log

cleats. "This is the *Silver King*, out of Auke Bay, bringin' groceries from the cannery. We didn't figger on gettin' a bawlin' out for doin' a favor for—"

"Groceries?" the watchman queried. "For me?"

"You heard me the first time," bellowed Big Mike.

"Sorry I spoke too soon," the watchman said, "but a guy's gotta be careful who he lets near a trap."

"You said a mouthful, feller," Big Mike agreed with a hearty laugh.

Corny came along the deck from the bow, carrying the box. He climbed to the cross walk and started toward the watchman, followed by Hank.

"Here y'are," Corny said.

"I'll tote it into the cabin," offered the watchman. "Then I'll make some hot coffee."

He put down his rifle and extended both hands for the box. Hank reached around Corny with a sap and brought it down with a plop on the watchman's skull. The man fell on the cross walk without a groan.

"That trick gets 'em all," Corny grinned.

"All except the watchman at the Aleut Inlet trap," said Seattle Sam. "He was more suspicious than the others."

Big Mike left the pilothouse and climbed to the cross walk. He took one look at the unconscious man and kicked his rifle into the trap. Then he moved on to the spiller. Thousands of captive salmon churned the water to foam.

"By Satan, this section's filled to the brim!" he exclaimed. "Drag that watchman aside and let's get the brailer goin'. You can tie a chunk of iron to his legs and heave him overboard later. Up with the webbin', boys!"

Suddenly a long ribbon of flame lanced the darkness far astern of the pirate boat, followed by a crashing roar and the *phut* of a heavy rifle slug striking into the spiller piling just above Seattle Sam's head. He ducked and let out a startled curse. Corny Clark straightened his short frame with a jerk, staring wide-eyed into the darkness.

"The Coast Guard cutter!" he yelled, turning and running along the cross walk toward the boat. "It's tailed us in the fog!"

Seattle Sam and Hank were hard on his heels as he hit the deck in a flying leap and dodged into the pilothouse. The burly skipper remained on the trap, arms rigid at his sides, huge fists clenched. He started mumbling something, when another flash and explosion came from the wall of night. The bullet ripped a long sliver from the very cross walk on which he was standing, and went whining off into the distance.

The next moment he was beside his crew in the pilothouse, oaths spilling from thick lips. His stubby finger jabbed a switch. Out went the floodlights at the loading boom masthead. His hand instinctively found the air valve and opened it. Machinery rumbled below deck and the big Diesel took hold. Big Mike yanked the throttle and kicked in the clutch with a bang, as Seattle Sam grabbed

a fire ax from its cleats and rushed out on deck.

Two swift strokes cut the mooring lines. Under the thrust of her powerful propeller, the *Silver King* lunged ahead like a hound unleashed. Another flash and roar from the darkness drove Seattle Sam back to the pilothouse.

"Lucky for us them damn brass hats didn't have sense enough to wait till we was gun'le deep with a cargo of salmon," Big Mike growled. "They'd have overhauled us in less'n a mile."

A bullet ripped through the pilothouse, shattering the glass and drilling a hole through Big Mike's sea cap in its passage. Corny Clark threw himself on the floor, whimpering. Seattle Sam and Hank Fellows swung around as one, staring aft with livid faces and trembling lips. Staring at a solid wall of blackness which they expected every second to be blasted by the penetrating ray of the cutter's searchlight.

Spinning the wheel from port to starboard, Big Mike laid a zigzag course.

"Where you heading for?" demanded Seattle Sam. "We can't outrun that cutter!"

"Mebbe we can't," Big Mike replied through clenched teeth, "but we can lose it in this fog." He switched off the pilothouse light.

"It ain't thick enough for that," Seattle Sam protested. "What's the matter with running into Eagle Cove?"

"All the brass hats would have to do is wait at the entrance for us till the fog lifted; then we'd be trapped, see? I savvy what I'm doin', feller."

"Mebbe you do," Hank cut in wildly. "But I want solid land under my feet and brush I can hide in!"

"That's me too," cried Seattle Sam. "Come on, Hank, let's get going!"

Rushing from the pilothouse, they ran aft to the dory. Corny started to follow, but Big Mike's fingers fastened in his collar, slammed him back on the floor.

"You stay right there in case I need you, or I'll kick your damned teeth down your throat!" Big Mike bellowed.

The pounding of the engine was deafening, but not enough to drown out the next report from the darkness astern, nor the sound of the bullet thudding into the pilothouse woodwork.

"You'd better heave to—give up!" Corny whimpered. "Pretty soon them brass hats will open up with a cannon! They'll blow us to hell, Big Mike!"

Big Mike locked the wheel and stepped to the door. He paused a moment on the threshold. "Listen, you snivelin' fool," he said. "They dassent shell us. No matter what they've got on us, they dassent do that. They wanna haul us into court and make us talk. You savvy that—make us talk? Well, if they do overhaul us, Corny, we ain't talkin', see?"

"We ain't talking," Corny repeated. "That's right, Big Mike, we ain't talking. If one of us talks, they'll . . . they'll hang us all!"

The skipper's hand reached back raspingly along the wall until his fingers touched a switch. The shaded

floodlights at the masthead illuminated the after deck through the swirling fog. Seattle Sam and Hank Fellows were lifting the dory from its chocks.

"Switch off them damn floodlights!" Seattle Sam shouted. "The brass hats'll see us and—"

"Yeah, I'll shut 'em off. Like this!" Big Mike bellowed, pulling a gun. Jets of flame tipped the muzzle in rapid succession.

Seattle Sam twisted half around and then plunged over the side. Hank Fellows' head bowed on his chest and he fell forward across the gunwale and slid into the sea.

At the instant the blackness astern of the purse seiner was lanced through with crimson flame. A bullet ripped slivers from the cabin corner. Big Mike shoved the gun hastily in the shoulder holster and ducked back into the pilothouse.

Corny was sitting up, trembling with terror.

"You wasn't still thinkin' of leavin' me too, was you, Corny?" Big Mike smiled wickedly, again taking the wheel.

"No, no, Big Mike, not me. Only . . . only—"

"Only nothin', Corny. Them brass hats couldn't see what happened through the fog. But just in case they catch up to us, here's somethin' to remember. Seattle Sam and Hank Fellow slugged that watchman. They're dead and can't talk for theirselves. Get it?"

"Yeah . . . I get it . . . Big Mike," Corny answered, struggling to his hands and knees.

Behind Big Mike, Corny suddenly darted a hand inside his shirt. Straightening like a flash, he drew back his arm. The long blade of a butcher knife flashed downward, burying itself to the hilt in the skipper's back.

The wheel ceased turning. The *Silver King* held a steady course for a few moments, as Big Mike's fingers fastened around the spokes in a death grip. For what seemed to Corny like ages, he stood watching convulsive shudders travel the length of the man's great frame. At last Big Mike fell to the floor, dead.

"Now you ain't talking, neither, Big Mike," Corny almost screamed. "And you ain't stopping me from making a break for it, after I've finished taking care of you."

It was a task for him, small as he was, to drag the heavy corpse over the backwash board, on to the deck and to the gunwale. There he paused for breath, terror-laden eyes trying to pierce the gloom astern. Then he stopped and started to lift the body, grunting and cursing.

There came a crimson flash and a roar out of the night. A bullet thudded into the body, the impact tearing it from Corny's arms. With a scream of fright, he ran back to the pilothouse and crouched, muttering incoherently.

He didn't see the next flash a moment later, but he felt the rush of air as the heavy slug ripped through the pilothouse. The wheel turned creakingly with no steadying hand upon it, and the *Silver King* started yawing wildly.

Corny leaped to his feet, yanked out the clutch, and closed the throt-

tle. The roaring rumble of the Diesel ceased. Then he jabbed a thumb at the switch button, and instantly the whole ship was flooded with light.

Rushing from the pilothouse, he was met by a bullet that plowed a strip of hardwood from the deck, flinging it stingingly against his face. Not halting a second in his stride, but rather increasing it, Corny raced aft, leaped upon the turntable and flung himself down on the coils of purse netting.

"Don't . . . don't shoot no more, fellers!" he screamed. "I give up! I . . . I—"

He paused with gaping mouth and wildly staring eyes. The only sound to be heard was the slapping of white caps against the boat's hull and the eerie echo of his own voice. The silence seemed thicker, more clinging, than the blackness of night and the curtain of fog.

It was ghostly, that silence, tearing the already fear-crazed killer's nerves to shreds. He raised up, then, listening for the throb of engines. Not a sound rewarded him. He waited, tense, wondering, eyes aching from the strain of trying to pierce the black wall beyond the floodlights' glare.

Presently a dark object moved at the edge of that glare, joined the curtain of night, and the next moment crossed it. For an instant Corny thought it was the cutter's dinghy, but as it approached and became clearer, he gasped aloud.

The craft was not a dinghy, but a dugout, a light, tricky shell that could skim through water like a gull and outride a storm that would sink a steamer.

Corny's eyes widened slowly when he caught sight of the sole occupant. He was little more than a kid, with the down of teen years still upon his chin and cheeks. A heavy-caliber Winchester rifle lay across his knees.

But there was nothing youthful about the cold eyes that were fixed steadily on Corny; nothing youthful about the grim set of his thin lips.

"Why . . . why, where's the cutter?" Corny exclaimed in an astonished whisper. "I thought—"

"Ain't no cutter," the kid replied laconically.

"Ain't no cutter!" Corny cried. "Then how did you—"

The kid lowered the paddle, barely touching the water with it, and the sensitive craft came closer to the purse seiner's counter. Still with eyes fixed balefully on Corny, the kid reached a hand over the side and began hauling in the slack of a line. The sort of line commercial trollers use, twisted seine cord, hundreds of feet long and stout enough to hold a plunging, fighting, sixty-pound king salmon.

Fascinated, Corny watched it coming in over the side of the light craft. His glance followed it to the end. It had been made fast to the rudder bar of the *Silver King*, under the counter.

"So we've . . . we've been towing you!" muttered Corny.

"All the way from Auke Bay," the kid said.

Without taking his eyes from Corny, the kid came over the purse seiner's gunwale, dripping wet from

the fog, and covered the man on the net with his rifle. One glance at the big bore was enough for Corny to realize the weapon's capacity for destruction.

"Climb down offen there, or I'll blow you off," the kid threatened in a low, clear voice. "And keep them paws high till you're in the pilothouse."

He barely glanced at Big Mike's body in the scupper as he passed, driving Corny ahead at rifle point. Inside the pilothouse he ordered: "Start that engine, quick."

Air hissed into the starter, and the engine rumbled. The kid nodded toward the clutch, and Corny kicked it in, taking the wheel at the same time. He was recovering some of his lost nerve now, realizing he had only a kid to deal with instead of a Coast Guard skipper.

"Well, where do you want me to steer?" he asked boldly.

"Back to the Eagle Cove trap," the kid replied in a toneless voice. "We'll pick up the watchman you sapped."

Terror returned to Corny's eyes. "Aw, see here now, kid," he began, "I—" A vicious prod in the back from the rifle barrel snapped his jaws shut, forcing him to bite off the rest of the sentence.

Fully aware now that the kid's mastery of the situation was something to be reckoned with, Corny decided to steer the *Silver King* toward shore and beach her, taking a chance of making a dash into the brush. But he'd barely started the maneuver when the ice-cold muzzle of the kid's old Winchester touched the base of his skull, feeling like the touch of death's clammy lips.

"I know which way is back," the kid warned. "Don't try any more tricks."

While still a distance from the trap, the now conscious watchman's shouts for help proved as effective as a light beacon.

Catching sight of Corny, he started cursing him, but the presence of the kid's rifle barrel in the middle of the salmon pirate's back, stopped him.

"He's one of the crew that slugged me!" he cried. "He had the bait—a box of groceries. He—"

"I saw it all," the kid cut in.

"You saw it all?" the watchman repeated in surprise. "Where was you while all this was—"

"Watching from way astern. They was towing me. I made fast in Auke Bay. I savvy all about that box of groceries trick. I saw it pulled before."

"Before? You mean— Say, who are you, kid?"

"Better get aboard and we'll talk on the way back to Auke Bay," the kid suggested tersely.

"But where's the rest of that murderous crew?"

"They's a big guy, laying in the starboard scupper with a knife in his back, who shot two of 'em," the kid explained. "The only guy who could have knifed him was the one left alive." He prodded Corny with the rifle.

"Lay down," the kid ordered Corny, when they entered the pilothouse, and tied him hand and foot with lengths of stout salmon line.

Then he handed the watchman his rifle and took the wheel.

"Don't plug him unless you have to," he said with a nod toward the man on the floor, "'cause I want to see him swing."

The watchman glanced at him wonderingly. "Back there on the trap you said you saw that box trick pulled before, kid. What you mean?"

"They pulled it on my dad," the kid replied in a husky voice, "back at Aleut Inlet. He was trap watchman for the Diamond X Canning Company. I was spending the summer with him. I saw it all from the cabin. Saw 'em sap him and weight him, and toss him off the cross walk. There wasn't nothing I could do—one unarmed kid against four men. But they hadn't seen me, and didn't think to search the cabin, being in too much of a hurry to brail the salmon."

"You saw them, eh?" the watchman observed sympathetically.

The kid nodded. "I've been hanging around the canneries in my boat, watching for 'em. I wasn't able to read the boat's name in the dark, but I couldn't forget them faces. A friend of dad's loaned me this old rifle. Lucky for me they showed up at night."

"You'd ought to have put the Coast Guard wise, kid," the watchman told him.

"It was my job," the kid said simply.

"Son," the watchman said with unconcealed emotion, "I got a poke of money cached on the trap. It's all yours, for saving my life."

"I don't want your money, mister," the kid refused. "Now the job's done, all I want is to see this killer swing."

Corny Clark sat up with a cry of horror, realizing that the body of Big Mike, lying knifed in the scupper, would be damning evidence. The watchman jammed the rifle barrel against his chest, forcing him back down.

"There was four of 'em, kid, and I'll testify to that. You're bringing one back alive," the watchman said. "The Diamond X Comp'ny pays a bounty of five hundred a head for salmon-trap pirates."

"That's right, mister."

"Two thousand bucks would give a kid like you a right smart start in life, wouldn't it? I reckon your dad would have wanted it that way."

"No," the kid replied thoughtfully, "I don't reckon he would, mister. He'd want me to give the money to mother and take up where he left off. And that's what I'm goin' to do."

THE END

When it told its story of treachery, that white-handled blade pinned a murder brand right where it belonged—on a double-crossing killer.

THE TALKING KNIFE

by

A. W. HOUSTON

TWO MEN sat in the jail's office. One was Tom Gleason, a large, powerful, gray-haired man in his late fifties who had been sheriff of Inyo County for twenty years. The other man was Bart Sneed. He was a scrawny, thin-faced runt with weak mouth and beady black eyes that were never still.

"Yuh say Jake Peters disappeared on his way to town, Bart?" Sheriff Gleason asked.

"Yep, that's what happened," answered Bart. "He left our diggin's

three days ago. He had plenty of time to make the trip. When he hadn't returned this mornin' I saddled up and came to town. I was worried 'bout him."

"Why?"

"Well, he had our total cleanup, ten thousand in dust," Bart explained. "He was takin' it in to the bank and was goin' to fetch back some grub. I inquired at the bank but he'd never been in to deposit the dust."

"Why didn't yuh both make the trip?" Gleason wanted to know.

"It was thisaway, sheriff," answered Bart. "We've hit some mighty rich placer ground on Shotgun Creek. We figgered one of us should stay and keep an eye on the diggin's. The other could take the dust in and bring back supplies."

"Anybody know yuh made a strike?" Gleason asked, trying without success to catch Bart's darting eyes.

"Nary a soul," replied Bart. "But I don't think Jake was held up."

"What happened then?" questioned Gleason.

"I hate to say it 'bout Jake but I think he skipped out," Bart said. "Ten thousand is a lot of money. That's a good stake for any man."

Sheriff Gleason drummed his fingers on the desk. That didn't sound like Jake Peters. He wasn't the kind to run out on a pardner. Still, gold did funny things to men at times. It sometimes made the most honest men into the worst of criminals. Now if it had been Bart Sneed that had skipped, Gleason wouldn't have been surprised. He had never fully trusted Sneed, although he had no reason for his distrust. It was just those eyes. He wouldn't trust any man with eyes like Sneed's.

"It might be, but I can hardly believe it," Gleason said finally. "I've known Jake a good many years. I'd have staked my life that there wasn't any snake blood in him."

"I can't figger it any other way," insisted Bart. "He's gone, the gold's gone. If Jake was held up and robbed, there'd be some signs. I couldn't find any. There was no hoof prints of either his saddle or pack hoss."

Bart pulled a plug of tobacco from his pocket. From another pocket he produced a white, bone-handled knife. Opening the blade, he whittled off a large chew of tobacco.

Gleason's gray eyes grew hard and cold. "Ain't that Jake's knife?" he asked sharply.

"Why, y-yes it is," Bart answered, a little startled. "I borrowed it from Jake four-five days back and forgot to return it."

"I see." Gleason's voice was thoughtful. "Speakin' of knives reminds me of a story. If yuh have a few minutes I'll tell it to yuh."

"Shoot," said Bart with a grin.

"Some twenty years ago two men and a boy were prospecting in the Furnace Range," Gleason commenced. "We'll call the men Jack and Sam, and the boy Jacky. The kid was Jack's son and about twelve at the time. Jack's wife had died so he had taken the button on this trip with him."

Sheriff Gleason stopped to light a stogie, then continued: "Their water and grub was gettin' low when Jack accidentally stumbled into a small gulch that was rich with gold. The prospectors almost went crazy. The two of them and the boy worked like beavers and in a week they had dry-washed out better than a hundred thousand dollars in nuggets. By that time their food was completely gone and they had only two canteens of water left. It was about thirty-five miles to the nearest waterhole. The men knew they had to get out. They left at daylight the next mornin'. They'd have made it but they ran into a sand storm. When the storm let up they were lost."

"I've prospected that country," Bart remarked. "Those sand storms are hell on wheels. I almost lost my life in one."

"The three wandered around the desert at the edge of Death Valley for two days. They discarded their guns and all gear, but they still clung to the gold and Jack kept his pocket knife. They nursed their water supply closely. Jack barely wet his lips. He gave the biggest share to the boy." Gleason stopped to relight his stogie, then went on: "The third day found them without a drop of water and almost dead. That afternoon they staggered onto a small waterhole. There was water enough to revive them. They camped there that night."

"They were lucky," stated Bart. "Waterholes down there are scarce as hen's teeth."

"The next mornin' they felt better and decided to push on," the sheriff continued. "The waterhole had given them their bearin's. They were at Owl Springs. Twenty miles west was Granite Wells. If they could make it that far, they'd be all right. It wasn't far from there in the Desert Wells, then to Mojave. They had discarded their empty canteens, so the trip would have to be made without water. As they were fixing to leave, Sam asked to borrow Jack's knife. He said he wanted to fix his boot. Jack handed the knife over. Sam opened it and lunged at Jack. Jack tried to fight back but, weak and unarmed, he never had a chance. Sam plunged the knife into his heart."

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed Bart.

"The button had watched the fight in horror," Gleason went on. "He was powerless to do anything to help his dad. Sam tried to cash the boy in too, but couldn't catch him. He finally gave it up, figgerin' the kid would die anyway before he could get out of the desert. Sam gathered all the gold, filled up on water and struck out.

"The button would have died but Lady Luck took a hand. An hour after Pete left, a prospector hit Owl Springs for water. He fed the boy and listened to his story. The prospector decided they could overtake Pete but they never even got started. Another one of those sand storms swooped down. They hugged the waterhole all that day and night. By mornin' the storm had died and the two started out. They got to Granite Wells finally but there was no indication that Sam had ever reached there. The prospector figgered Sam had

perished in the storm. Man or beast couldn't travel in one of those storms and live. The boy wasn't so sure. He had taken the knife from his dad's heart. He made a vow to put it in the heart of the man that had killed him. He searched for many years but never found a trace of Sam. He finally came to the belief that the killer had died in that storm. Some place in the desert on the south edge of Death Valley is a skeleton and better than a hundred thousand in gold. So far it's never been found."

"Mighty strange story," muttered Bart.

"Yes, and the strangest part is how it affected the kid," Gleason continued. "The horror of what happened had left him with a queer mental twist that he never outgrew. He had seen a man borrow his dad's knife. He had seen his dad die by that same knife. It left him with an unnatural fear of lending his knife. No man, woman or child could borrow it."

"Plumb queer, all right," Bart agreed.

"I'm kind of glad he was," Gleason said softly. "Bart, *you* killed Jake."

"Yuh're locoed as hell," Bart cried, his face turning a dirty gray with fear. "Why should I kill Jake?"

"Yuh wanted the gold and that rich claim," Gleason stated bluntly. He shifted his position so his gun would be handy. "Yuh see, Bart, Jake Peters was that button. It was his father that was knifed. That's the same knife yuh got in your pocket. I was the prospector that found the button there at Owl Springs. I was Jake's best friend but even *I* couldn't borrow his knife. The only way yuh could have gotten it was to kill Jake. Yuh took it off his dead body."

"Damn you!" snarled Bart and clawed for his gun.

Sheriff Gleason had been expecting that and was ready. His hand hit his gun and brought it up spewing hot lead. Bart never had a chance. Those slugs slammed him back in his chair. He died trying to pull the trigger of his gun.

Gleason reached into Bart's pocket and removed the knife.

"I'll just keep this in memory of Jake," he murmured. "It's really a talkin' knife. It shouted out real loud that Bart was a murderer. If it wasn't for that knife I'd never have solved the case. Well, like I always said, it's the little things that trap a killer."

THE END

***The only** point in the United States where four States meet is at the north western tip of New Mexico, where that State, Colorado, Utah and Arizona come together.*

MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

GOLD founded Montana. Of all her widespread mineral resources it was the rich deposits of yellow metal that first earned her the nickname of The Treasure State. Montana mining men are looking forward to a gold comeback in the days to come. They predict that improved recovery methods matched by good judgment and sound business practice will provide plenty of opportunity for further gold mining in the future.

Gold is an old story in Montana. The metal was discovered in Last Chance Gulch, now Helena's Main Street, in 1864. A year before that one of the world's richest gold strikes was made at Alder Gulch. Virginia City, the boom town that grew up at the new diggings was for a time the Territorial capital. Alder Gulch's first year's yield of placer gold has been estimated at ten million dollars or more.

Before either Last Chance Gulch or Alder Gulch was discovered, Grasshopper Creek, Montana's first big strike, was going strong. Rich deposits of placer gold were opened up there in the summer of 1862. Bannack blossomed out overnight. Before a year was over it was a mining camp of nearly a thousand persons.

Throughout the years of Montana's growth and settlement, and right up to the present time, gold mining has remained an important industry. Before the war in 1940, for instance, the State's gold production was valued at more than nine and a half million dollars.

Whether the future will see any more history-making bonanza gold strikes in The Treasure State is problematical. Cautious mining men declare it isn't likely. The gold areas have been too well prospected in the past. But there are large deposits of relatively low-grade placer gold, stuff that will run perhaps twenty cents of gold to the cubic yard of gravel. Lean pickings that, for the individual or small operator. Yet it is the sort of stuff that can pay handsomely when mined by a dredge in a large-scale operation.

For individual or small outfits there are still chances of finding workable deposits, perhaps even of making a better-than-average small-scale strike. Though geologists generally consider that most of the likely bonanzas have already been discovered, it is quite possible placers of value may yet be found in some of the more isolated and inaccessible regions. It is also possible that small

areas over-looked in former operations may be found and profitably worked in the future.

Most of the early-day prospectors had their minds set on rich deposits of *coarse* gold. Frequently they passed up deposits in which the gold was more finely divided, and as a consequence more difficult to save. Some of these localities may offer opportunities to experienced prospectors with patience, or to inventive miners with the ingenuity to devise successful methods of their own for saving fine gold *economically.*

That word "economically" is important. Fine gold *can* be saved. The trick is to save it at a cost comfortably under the value of the gold recovered.

From fine gold it is but a short jump to the consideration of flour gold, another potential source of further riches in placer gold. Economical, commercial recovery of the values contained in the huge deposits of flour gold known to exist in the West is still one of the placer miner's most tantalizing unsolved problems.

Flour gold is generally defined as placer gold so finely divided that from 170 to 500 individual particles are required to equal the value of one cent, figured at the old standard gold value of $20.67 an ounce.

The Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers in Montana and the Snake River in Idaho are famous sources of flour-gold deposits. The superfine gold particles have been found in the Missouri from its headwaters near Helena clear down to Fort Benton, 150 miles away. The same type of hard-to-save gold colors has been reported along the Yellowstone River from its northwestern Wyoming headwaters throughout its course in southern Montana and as far east as Billings. That figures out to a 400-mile stretch of river carrying flour gold.

Some years ago the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology undertook to sample and test the Missouri River's gold-bearing bars in the vicinity of Fort Benton. The tests covered about 100 miles of main river, and several tributary streams.

Gold was found, though the Bureau reported the results as disappointing. It had to because while almost half the tests showed colors, anywhere from 6 to 8 up to 100 to 110 to the pan, the stuff was flour gold—too fine for profitable recovery by standard placer mining operations.

All of which should offer some imaginative scientist, or perhaps a lucky amateur with a bent for tackling gold-recovery problems, food for thought. And it ought to answer Reader G.K.'s recent letter from Omaha, Nebraska, asking us about Montana as a gold-mining State—and about flour gold.

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

CHRISTMAS trees are as much a part of the Christmas holiday season as *jolly old Santa Claus* himself and providing the ten million of them needed each year for the Yuletide market has grown into a big business in this country.

It is true that a large percentage of Christmas trees still come as a sideline, cut from farmers' pasture land, or from thinning out the wood lot. Many come from Canada's vast woodlands. But each year more and more trees are literally grown to order, and marketed wholesale from regular Christmas tree farms.

In many places, from New England clear out to the Pacific Northwest, Christmas tree farming is an established and well-organized business.

H. F., writing from Oak Park, Illinois, says the thing he always liked best about Christmas was the gaily decorated tree beneath which were piled the family gifts and the toys from Santa's bag. Some day he plans to settle out West—in Washington or Oregon. And he would like, he says, to make a business out of growing Christmas trees. Right now the questions uppermost in his mind are, "Can this be done?" and "How much land does it take?"

To start with, H. F., Christmas tree farming *can* be done in the Pacific Northwest. One of the first and most successful of such enterprises out there was started more than sixty years ago. It is still going strong.

The amount of land required depends, of course, on the size of the undertaking contemplated. It is best not to start in on too large a scale. Profitable Christmas tree farming can be done on comparatively small tracts. For instance, and still referring to Pacific Northwest farms, one forty-acre farm reportedly yielded 12,000 Christmas trees a year for twenty years. This was an especially good farm, well cared for.

Estimates on the yield of larger farms differ, perhaps because, like any farm crop, production varies with soil conditions as well as according to the skill and management given individual farms. A tract of 120 acres reportedly harvested 24,000 trees in one year. Under intensive cultivation about as high as 3,000 trees can be planted to the acre. As the trees attain market size, this should return anywhere from 250 to 500 harvestable trees per acre each year. A lot depends on the size of tree desired.

Small table-top trees should be

well-formed, symmetrical and anywhere from one to three feet in height. The usual family-size tree, the one that, tinsel-trimmed and lighted, stands in the corner of the living or dining room at Christmas, runs from five to seven, and sometimes even eight feet. Church and institution trees, or trees for use in hotel lobbies and so forth average from ten to twelve feet high.

Using year-old seedlings as starting stock, it takes from five years up to grow a market-size tree. In any event and regardless of the size trees to be harvested, continuous pruning must be done to keep the trees from becoming too crowded as they attain their growth and to weed out scrawny, ill-formed specimens. Such culls would have little or no value were they allowed to grow and meanwhile would be using up space and consuming soil food that might better be devoted to first-grade trees.

In the East, Balsam fir with its regular spreading branches culminating in a spirelike top and its rich fragance is the most popular Christmas tree variety. In the Pacific Northwest Douglas fir is largely grown as a commercial Christmas tree crop. Both red and white spruce are also used as Christmas trees.

While we are on the subject, a new wrinkle, still largely in the experimental stage, has been developed by Christmas tree growers in the Pacific Northwest. It is said to have originated in Mason County, Washington. If successful, the method may revolutionize the business because it provides an *annual* crop of trees from a single stump.

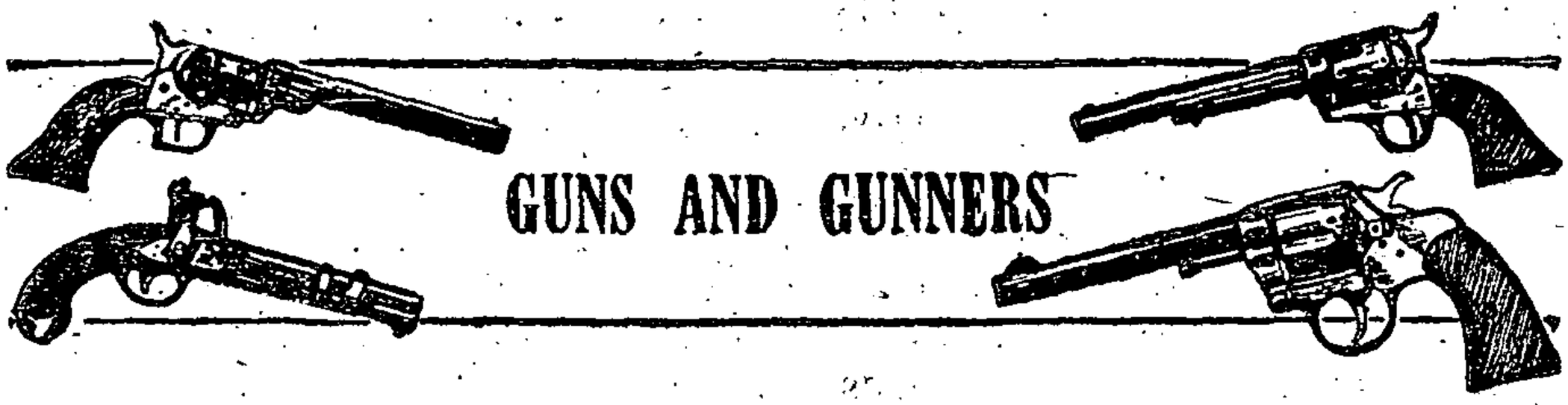
Normally, trees are harvested by cutting them close to the ground and letting the old stump die. Under the new system, using Douglas fir, in actual experiment, three successive ceiling-height trees have been cut from a single stump and the original tree, still going strong, can probably continue to yield trees for forty or fifty years.

The new method is simplicity itself. Instead of cutting a tree close to the ground it is cut just above the second layer of branches. The stump continues to live, and it has been found that Nature, with her customary way of asserting herself, will in time pick one of the left-on branches out of which to form a new trunk for the abbreviated tree.

Instead of lying out nearly flat, that particular branch will straighten out and point directly upward, then begin to put out new branches of its own. After about five years this auxiliary trunk becomes a full-fledged, well-formed marketable Christmas tree itself. It can be harvested as was the original tree and the regrowing process repeated.

Chain crops from a single stump may be the next innovation in Christmas tree farming.

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.



GUNS AND GUNNERS

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

NÜRNBERG, GERMANY—Well, boys, I've spent several days at the big Bavarian factory of Rheinische Westfälian Sprengstoff A. G.—better known as the RWS plant—in Nürnberg and the nearby town of Stadeln. This was a most interesting trip. In the first place, RWS has two main plants—one at Nürnberg proper and the other at Stadeln, a few miles from Fürth, which is as close to Nürnberg as Brooklyn is to New York City. The Nürnberg plant was the address and the administrative offices of the firm. It seems, though, that Allied bombers didn't like it, and they gave it the works. So much so that operations were suspended early in 1945 due to lack of a plant. Some of the buildings are standing, but they are sort of busted.

Not so Stadeln. Nürnberg employed about 1,500 people; Stadeln had over 5,000. Nürnberg always made only cartridge cases and bullets, sending them to the Stadeln plant for loading. Stadeln loaded the cartridge cases for the Nürnberg plant and for at least one other large plant. They also loaded their own make.

It was many months ago when I visited Nürnberg, but I took notes so I could tell the story when it was no longer a military secret. First of all I called at the plant as an officer in charge of Technical Intelligence. The military detachment at Nürnberg plant looked up Mr. Kalb, the assistant director, who spoke English.

When I identified myself, he wanted to know if I was the Captain Phil Sharpe of America whom they had supplied with much technical information over a period of twenty years. Once I admitted it, the place was mine. They told me that I must visit their Stadeln plant and meet Director Weiss, who had often spoken of me. They showed me what was left of the plant and of their manufacturing operations, and permitted me to confiscate such material as the U.S. Army desired—not that I wouldn't have done it, anyway, but they were anxious to cooperate.

Because of other commitments, I couldn't visit their Stadeln plant that afternoon. Besides, I know ammunition plants—you don't visit them in an afternoon. So the next morning I went over. Director Weiss was most obliging. Although a German, he had been rescued from a Gestapo camp by Americans, and there was nothing he wouldn't do for me. He

arranged an interpreter and called in his engineering staff so that my questions might be answered properly. Then came several days of studying the plant.

It is the largest sporting ammunition plant, they tell me, on the European continent. Some 130 buildings compose the most beautiful factory I have ever seen. It is set in a pine woods, with permanent structures, beautiful roads and groves in which the employees lunched and relaxed beneath the trees.

Strange as it may seem, the RWS plant here manufactured sporting ammunition throughout the war. I saw millions of rounds of it in their warehouse which we confiscated. They did this with the approval of the High Command. I imagine that Hitler, Goering, Goebbels, and all of the high-ranking Nazi officials did plenty of hunting. Some of the ammunition is being used by your Phil Sharpe to hunt the elusive but prominent German deer and roebuck. I also expect shortly to down me a couple of *auerhahn*—a bird almost the size of our wild turkey—and, they tell me, very good eating.

Anyway, I enjoyed the visit. I saw how they made ammunition, and since it was spring, I had some of the most delicious strawberries I have ever tasted—or was it because a fellow on duty for three years doesn't get a chance to eat many fresh strawberries?

Herr Weiss wants to make sporting ammunition again. Perhaps some day the plant may. I can say that they have some very fine equipment with which to produce it. I think that some of you boys may recall that back around 1935, I told you of the very fine accuracy of their ammunition in the rimfire field. They had told me that this ammunition was made by a then-new process. They prime the shells before heading and thus get uniform primer distribution through the rim without smearing the mixture over the inside walls of the case to mix with the powder and thus give non-uniform ignition.

At the RWS plant they have machines to prime the unheaded .22 cases, insert a paper wad or foil, and then form the head or rim. They have fewer accidents necessitating scrapping of cases than we do, and they prime their cases dry, whereas we prime wet, and dehydrate. In the United States we drop a daub of wet priming dough into a headed case, then spin it into the hollow rim with a wood or ivory dowell. At the Fürth-Stadeln plant they dry-prime and head. No smears on the case walls, only good ammunition.

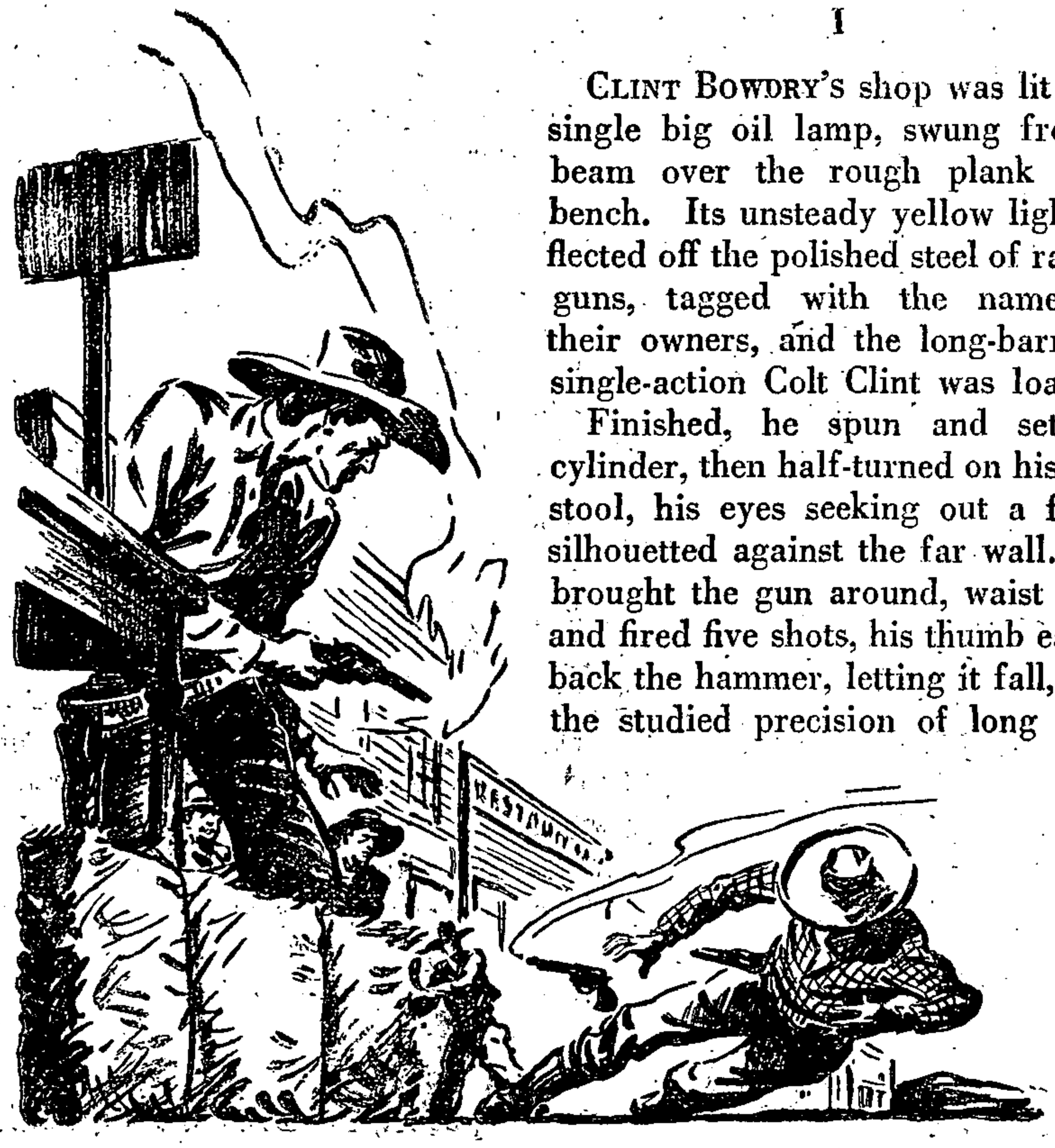
Some of these days, when things return to normal, I want to visit this plant once again and see sporting ammunition being produced. I hope that America adopts some of the innovations I have seen.

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. Although he will still answer letters from readers, we ask your indulgence, as the war emergency will naturally cause some delay. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.

KILLER'S TRADEMARK

by NELSON WILLIAM BAKER

Clint Bowdry's relentless search for the gun that had killed his parents could only lead him into a lead-baited death trap



I

CLINT BOWDRY'S shop was lit by a single big oil lamp, swung from a beam over the rough plank work bench. Its unsteady yellow light reflected off the polished steel of racked guns, tagged with the names of their owners, and the long-barreled, single-action Colt Clint was loading.

Finished, he spun and set the cylinder, then half-turned on his high stool, his eyes seeking out a figure silhouetted against the far wall. He brought the gun around, waist high, and fired five shots, his thumb earing back the hammer, letting it fall, with the studied precision of long prac-

tice. It never occurred to him that those shots were fast—so fast that one roaring blast blended with the next in an almost continuous roll of sound. He was aware only of the tense hope that built in him each time he drove lead into the cardboard man figure propped against a bale of hay at one end of his shop—expectant hope that each new gun he fired might be the one that had killed his parents.

His face intent, Clint laid the smoking gun down and slid off his stool. He was tall when he stood, with a cowboy's loose-jointedness. The green eyeshade that divided his mane of black hair from his high forehead threw sallow shadows across his gaunt, aquiline face, accentuating the hollows beneath his cheekbones.

He glanced at Doc Weed, sitting with his chair tipped against the wall, a small, gray, white-mustached man, the loose flesh of one cheek punched out by a ball of tobacco. He felt Doc's kindly blue eyes following him. Doc was fine, Clint thought; like a father to him. He limped the twenty cluttered feet of his workshop, setting his weight gently on a shattered left leg that had robbed him of the saddle life he loved, and stopped before the cardboard figure. He looked briefly at the five ragged holes high in what would have been a man's left breast, and felt a kind of somber satisfaction flow through him.

Doc was at his elbow. "Five shots a coffee mug would cover," he said meditatively. "Son, I'd hate to have you gunnin' for me."

"The gun's placing them now," Clint explained. "It beats me how a man could let his gun get lead-fouled like that. All it needed was a good cleaning."

Doc smiled. "We ain't all as finicky as you are, Clint. You love them guns you work with."

"And hate 'em!" Clint said, the words strong and full of meaning. A gaunt look of pain dulled the steel grayness of his eyes.

Doc frowned and spat in the scrap box. "Your leg painin' you, son?"

Clint shook his head slowly. "You fixed that leg two years ago, Doc. The pain's inside, where your pills and scalpels can't touch it. It won't ease until I learn who murdered mother and dad—and settle with them."

"You're killin' yourself by slow degrees, son," Doc told him gently. "Twenty-one last month, and you look forty." He shook his head self-reproachfully. "I should never have give you them bullets that killed your folks. But you dogged the life plumb out of me for 'em. Clint, why don't you give up this crazy idea of findin' the gun that fired them bullets?"

"Because, Doc," Clint said soberly, "I'm going to find it—if it takes the rest of my life. Guns are like trail sign. They leave tracks on their bullets, like a shod horse leaves tracks. Any imperfection or mark on a shoe will show up. So will a mark on the inside of a gun barrel leave its sign on a bullet."

He took a small tin box from his pocket, rembved the lid, and rolled

two misshapen chunks of lead into his palm—.45 slugs, with the dark stain of dried blood still clinging to them. He moved into the light and held them close for Doc to see, pointing to the base of one of the bullets, where the grooves cut in the lead by the barrel rifling showed unmarred.

"See this line cut down the middle of the groove, Doc?" he asked. "It shows plain on both these slugs, which means the same gun fired them. There's a burr in the rifling of that gun that cut this line. Wait a minute."

He stepped back to the cardboard figure, moved it aside, and with his knife dug an embedded bullet out of the hay backstop. He took it to the light for comparison.

"You can see the difference at a glance," he pointed out. "The groove is smooth as glass and wider, on this bullet."

Doc's faded eyes held wisdom. "It's plain enough, Clint. But when you find that gun, how you goin' to prove the man that owns it fired the shots that killed your folks?"

"I'll take care of that when it comes," answered Clint. "It'll depend on who that man is."

Doc spoke with mild impatience. "I can't see your point, son. Sheriff Dawson cleared the case as a plain raid by renegades, but I suppose you still hold to the notion that the Collins boys might have done it."

Clint shrugged. "Dad would never go into the Collins' Cattle Pool, like the rest of you. He told Nick and Luke straight he thought it was crooked. Besides, they'd always wanted the Bone. Tried to buy dad out ever since I can remember. Why, I never could figure out, but they must have had a reason."

Doc pushed back his stiff-brimmed hat, and a silence built up. Conglomerate sounds from the Saturday night crowd on Piute's main street filtered into the shop, and the wooden sign over the door creaked as a gust of wind swung it. Clint wiped oil from the gun, memory stabbing at him sharply.

II

It had been warm that summer evening two years ago, when Clint had ridden in toward the Bone, his parents' cattle ranch at the head of Jawbone Canyon. Ravenous from a day of line-fence repairing, he had let his thoughts dwell with pleasant expectation on supper. He had seen the cool tops of the cottonwoods, then the big saddle-stock corrals, and he had pulled his horse up short, blinking. The corrals had been empty, the gates wide open. He had hit the yard at a hard run—and found death awaiting him.

There were two limp, pitiful figures sprawled at the foot of the steps. His mother and father. Fine, honest, God-loving folks. He had come off his horse and bent over them, shock and disbelief in his heart. Then he had seen the dull red stains, and wild grief-stricken panic had gripped his youthful brain. He had leaped on his horse and torn its sides with his blunt spurs, heading for Piute and the sheriff. Suddenly a rifle had cracked from the brush, and he had felt as if his leg were

being torn from his body. That had been all he remembered until Doc Weed had brought him to his senses and had let him tell his story to Sheriff Dawson.

After that there had been months of grief, pain and anxiety, while Doc nursed Clint back to health. Friends had come to see him, among them Ed and Jenny Downs, childhood playmates from the adjoining Pitchfork. Clint remembered how the girl's fresh, clean beauty and warm-hearted kindness had eased the pain. Then there had been disappointment, when Sheriff Dawson made no arrests. He had, he explained, been forced to put down the case as one more of the all-too-frequent raids by rustling renegades.

That, Clint remembered, had brought him scorn for the slipshod patterns of the law. He had voiced his suspicions of the Collins brothers, of course. There had been calls at the Bone by Nick or Luke, sometimes both, he had pointed out, with the subject always turning to their Cattle Pool, and ending with his father's flat refusal to allow the Collinses to handle Bone stock. There had been hot words, even threats, he had argued, and the Collinses were gunmen. But Sheriff Dawson had smiled, and explained patiently that every angle had been investigated, which, Clint supposed now, had been true.

Then Doc had reluctantly given him the disheartening news that the bushwhacker's bullet had shattered a bone, leaving him whole, but game-legged, and putting an end to his saddle days. There had not been much left, Clint remembered, but an unreasoning thirst for reprisal, and a mind muddled by doubt and suspicion.

It had been natural for Clint to turn to the one thing that had occupied his interest since childhood—guns. Even in his early teens, men had brought their guns to the Bone for him to repair. With the money he received when the Bone was sold, he had opened a gun shop in town, and had avidly studied every work on guns he could get his hands on, purely, he realized now, to keep his mind from breaking under the strain of those first terrible months.

But the bullets had changed that. Doc Weed, who was Piute's medico and coroner, had inadvertently let slip that he possessed the bullets that had killed Jim and Flora Bowdry. The bullets had lent a purpose to Clint's work, had shown him a way he might track down the murderer. He knew now that he would have stolen those bullets, had Doc not finally yielded and given them to him.

The bell on the screen door jangled, announcing someone's entrance into the front room of the shop. Clint was sliding off his stool when Luke Collins stepped boldly into the workshop, his brother, Nick, looming behind him. A strapping, swarthy, arrogant pair, their blood tie was plainly evident in the sameness of their powerful frames. They carried their guns low, and thonged to their lean thighs, like men seeking trouble, Clint thought. Their dark faces were alike—the kind that

could twist up in a snarl of pure hate and killer temper, or beam disarming good nature.

This was the first visit the brothers had paid Clint since he had opened for business a year ago. His eyes held to Luke. If he had no other reason to dislike the man, there was Jenny Downs. Luke had always been at the girl's feet, like a great pestiferous dog.

"Nice place you got, Bowdry," Luke said. His full lips smiled condescendingly; but his eyes glistened like two black buttons.

Clint was curt. "Something you want?"

Luke shook his head. "We were passin' an' heard shots, so we come back to look around. Judged the shootin' might be from here."

Clint made no reply, and a silence drew tight.

Doc scraped his feet. "Sheriff Dawson deputizin' you boys regular now on Saturday nights?" he asked.

"Only while Pool herds are comin' in," said Luke. "Lots of boys in town tonight. No trouble yet. But if it comes, me an' Nick can handle it."

Clint felt Luke's direct glance. Was there a challenge in those staring black eyes, he wondered, or was it something born of suspicion in his mind? He wanted to lift the guns from Luke's low-hung holster, from Nick's holster, and check them against that suspicion. But that was an impossible thing. His eyes were on the guns when Luke turned and playfully pushed Nick through the door, saying: "Stick close, Doc, an' keep your pen handy. If them rustlers make a play tonight, you'll have to write out some death certificates."

When they had gone, Clint said sharply: "The Pool's been losing prime stock to rustlers ever since I can remember, Doc, and no one's ever cottoned onto how they steal it, or where they haze it. About time some of you Poolers began to suspect it's an inside job."

Doc smiled. "Think it might be the Collins boys?"

"It might be," answered Clint flatly.

Doc grunted, got up, snapped his hat tight, and moved toward the door. "I've got to go, son. I'll see you later."

III

The day was Monday, Clint saw by his calendar, and he wondered at the sluggish march of time during the past two years of his life. But a plan was forming. The waiting would be over soon, and he could take action. Doc—innocently, of course—had been a help. Nick and Luke Collins had, unintentionally too, sowed the germ of the plan. Clint snugged the barrel of a carbine between the cork-lined jaws of his vise, thinking of Nick and Luke's expert shooting. Luke had a swift draw and a dead eye, and was no doubt the most dangerous gunman the Jawbone had ever produced. Nick had a sneaking nature; he was the kind who would rely on a shot in the back.

There was bright sunlight beyond the shop window, and distant, pine-clothed California hills. Clint drew his thoughtful stare from that pic-

ture, as his doorbell jangled, and stepped into the front room.

He found Jenny Downs at his counter. The sunlight alive in her auburn hair and soft brown eyes, she was pretty, very pretty, and that mental admission brought a flush to Clint's gaunt cheeks. He greeted her with a smile that almost immediately changed to a frown of bewilderment. For the big six-shooter the girl was spilling from a flour sack looked incongruous against the background of her dainty gingham frock and gay sunbonnet. She returned his smile, and her eyes danced with merriment.

"No, Clint, I haven't taken to toting a gun," she assured him. "It's Ed's. He wants you to put it in top shape. He'll stop for it Wednesday or Thursday."

Clint lifted the weapon. "I'll have it ready."

The girl's face sobered. "Clint, you should get out more into the open. It's . . . it isn't healthy for you to stay so close to your work."

"It would be better," Clint agreed. "Tell me, Jenny, what's doing lately out at the old Bone?"

The girl dropped her eyes. "Nothing new. The Pool is still using the range and outbuildings. They finished their head count this morning."

"What of the rustling?" Clint asked.

Jenny's face tightened. "They struck again last night, Clint. Luke said there was a gun fight, and two of our men were killed. We heard the shooting at the Pitchfork. This morning the Poolers held a meeting and called Luke on the carpet. He said he had doubled the night guard on the herd, but the rustlers shot their way through. I'd have thought you heard, Clint."

Clint shook his head. "You were right, Jenny. I've been keeping my nose too close to the shop here. I'll be getting out more." And he meant that.

"Do, please, Clint." Jenny left him a warm smile as she went out.

Clint took the gun to his bench, finding it difficult to bring his attention to business. The Colt was a fine weapon, he saw, and showed evidence of good care. Ed would see to that. As boys, he and Ed had shared a love of guns, he remembered. Clint swabbed out the barrel and looked through it carefully. He took five shells from a box and thumbed them into the cylinder, then turned, firing them into the cardboard figure against the far wall. Only as he moved toward the target did thought associate itself with the action that had become habit with him. A smile brushed his lips. It was a waste of time and ammunition, he thought, to put Ed's gun to the test. Yet, self-indulgently, he went through with it.

For long minutes, the shock of the discovery obliterated Clint's reasoning power. He stared at the bullets he had dug from the back stop, comparing the mark again and again with that on the bullets in the little tin box. It was there plain enough —the burr-cut line down the middle of the groove in the leaden pellets. There could be no mistake. Ed Downs' Colt had fired the bullets that

had killed Clint Bowdry's parents!

At Peak's General Store they told him that Jenny had left for the Pitchfork about twenty minutes before. He limped down the street to Lacey's Livery Barn, and told the stableman to hitch up a buckboard. When it came, he pulled himself into the seat and whipped the team to a fast trot. He had forgotten to take off his green eyeshade, and his black hair flew in the wind. He was not thinking. Thought now was too confused.

The rising pall of dust ahead would be from Jenny's rig. Clint stirred his team to greater speed, until the dust cloud was thick in his nostrils. He drew into the Pitchfork yard almost abreast of the girl, and called: "Jenny!"

The timbre of his voice brought her, wide-eyed, to the bunkboard. He held the gun out on the palm of his hand.

"How long has Ed had this?" he asked.

She glanced at it, frowning. "Why, since yesterday, Clint. Luke Collins gave it to him. Why?"

Clint thought she must have seen the tension drain from him. He laid the gun on the seat and smiled. The pattern was back in its frame, fitting tighter now than before.

"I've got track of something I must make sure of," he said. "I'll tell you about it later."

"You'd better, Clint Bowdry. How you startled me!"

"I didn't aim to," Clint told her. "How did Luke happen to give Ed this gun?"

The girl shrugged lightly. "Ed had wanted it for a long time. It was Luke's favorite gun, so he said. Yesterday was Ed's birthday, and Luke gave it to him."

"To impress you," Clint said, and it was not a question. The girl flushed, and he felt very discourteous. He picked up the reins, adding hastily: "I hope you come to see me again the next time you're in town."

"I shan't pester you," she said tartly.

Excitement stirred Clint's blood as he drew near the Bone, his old home ranch. Now would be the time for him to look around, as he had planned.

It was very painful to drive into the dooryard—the first time since the tragedy of two years ago—and see the old familiar things. Clint steeled himself. Everything was much the same. The corrals showed use, and the yard was pitted with cattle tracks from the recent Pool count. The house was boarded up. There was no one in sight, and the place was very still. He drove down the rutty road leading to the narrow cleft that was the head of Jawbone Canyon. As he had expected, there was no sign that stock had passed over the road.

He climbed from the buckboard and limped a short way down the narrow, rocky trail. He knew the country well, and he could read trail sign. His father had taught him that, and it was in the Bowdry pioneer blood. This was not a trail for cattle—but cattle had passed over it. A good many, and the sign was fresh.

It was enough to convince Clint that the thing he had suspected was being done. The rustlers had hazed the stolen Pool stock down Jawbone Canyon, of course, penning it at Koehler, moving it out over the Santa Fe. The Bone was ideally situated for this purpose. Nick and Luke Collins had wanted the Bone, had the run of it now. It made logic.

Clint leaned against a cold sandstone slab, easing the strain on his game leg. The bullet struck a foot from his head, stinging his face with rock splinters. He saw no place to take cover. Reaction sent him flat on his face in the hard trail. This was a clinching factor, he thought. A second splattering pellet made him wish he had thought of the possibility that his interest in the Bone would be met with gunsmoke.

A third bullet, numbing his ear with concussion, brought Clint vivid memory of a wily coyote trick. He jerked his muscles, kicked his feet, feigning the death spasm, then lay still. The bullets stopped. He listened for sounds of the hidden rifleman's approach, but none came. The man, he judged, must be high on the sheer canyon wall, where descent was impossible. Yet he waited, the sun ablaze on his back, until a whisper of wings close above him told of investigating buzzards. That should reassure a hidden watcher that his bullets had driven home. But even then he was cautious, moving slowly, watchfully.

It was past noon when he reached his gun shop in town. Doc was waiting for him, with beer and sandwiches. While he ate, Doc elaborated on the rustling, the big Pool meeting.

"The Poolers are gettin' tired of this continual rustlin', Clint," Doc said soberly. "You'll be interested to know there was some talk that the Collins boys haven't been runnin' the Pool for the good of all an' general."

Clint was casual. "About time." He let Doc talk himself out, then he said: "While the Pool punchers are in town, Doc, I'm going to run an open shooting match, with prizes. Piute needs recreation, after all the hard work and trouble. I'm going to ask you, Jenny and Ed Downs, and Sheriff Dawson to help me. How about it?"

Doc's glance was quizzical. "Why, it's a good idea, son. But you might's well hand Luke Collins first prize as a present. There ain't a man in town can touch him at gun work."

Clint shrugged. "There might be."

IV

Piute had taken to Clint Bowdry's proposed shooting match with all the enthusiasm a troubled, worked-out cowtown could muster for gaiety and diversion. This was Wednesday, the day of the match, and lean, bronze-faced, gun-hung men filled the streets, gathering in groups in front of Clint's gun shop to view the prizes displayed in the window.

The match was to take place on the main street, which was roped off. Clint had his table, and the toe pole for the contestants, set up in front of the sheriff's office. His man-shaped, cardboard targets, with their hay-bale backstops, were placed at

measured intervals down the street. A gaily painted placard labeled "Rustler" hung around each target's neck—that had been Jenny's idea. She was there, pretty and full of life. Doc, Ed and Sheriff Dawson were shoving the crowd back to give the shooters room.

Clint glanced over the list of contestants, names Doc had taken down. Yes, they were there. Nick had signed up for the rifle match; Luke for the draw fire.

Clint ran the rifle match first, and was glad the man who won first prize had not been shooting at him that day in Jawbone Canyon. Nick Collins didn't do so well, he saw. Nick had scored close misses at the long-range target. Clint judged Nick might do better at a moving target—such as a man on a running horse.

It was noon before the rifle match was over. The crowd dispersed for food and drink, talking excitedly of the draw-fire match to follow. Clint forced himself to eat, but his food lay in a lump in his stomach. Just before the match, he went to his shop, unlocked his strong box, and took out a holstered gun. He got a magnifying glass from his bench, and placed both in a sack.

When he reached the crowd, Doc was just calling off the first contestant. The match went smoothly, building in excitement as it neared the finish. Finally, but two men remained at the line. The crowd was on its toes.

"Ed Downs and Luke Collins!" Doc whispered beneath his mustache. "I hope Ed beats him!"

Clint said tightly: "He mustn't."

Luke was grinning, Clint saw, slapping Ed's back and saying something loud enough for the crowd to hear.

"You're gettin' odds, kid," he was telling Ed. "You're shootin' my pet gun there. Ten to one, I beat you, anyway."

Clint raised his voice. "Folks, you heard Luke say Ed is shooting his pet gun. There's a bet on between the contestants in this final match. I'll ask Sheriff Dawson to hold stakes."

It went off with gratifying speed. Ed was fast and true, Clint saw, but Luke was a master at draw fire. The win put a vain swagger in Luke's walk. His talk was loud and self-centered. That was good, Clint thought. That was part of the pattern. The crowd quieted. Luke grinned, waiting.

"It gives me pleasure to present this fine hand gun, as first prize, to the winner of the draw-fire match—Luke Collins," Clint announced.

There was brief applause. Luke swaggered up, took the gun, and would have turned away, but Clint said, "Wait," then pitched his voice for the crowd.

"As winner of Piute's first draw-fire match, Luke Collins, I'd like to ask you some questions." He said aside to Doc Weed, "Doc, write this down for the *County Journal*," then turned back to Luke. "We all heard you speak about this pet gun of yours that Ed Downs was shooting, Luke. I think the crowd would like

(*Continued on page 128.*)

From under their daily mountains of paper work, many a secretary, and many an executive, has paid conscious or unconscious tribute to the wartime efficiency of the Smith-Corona typewriter. Its easy "write," speed in action and freedom from repairs have earned it a special place in the affections of its users.

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(*Continued from page 126.*)

to hear where you got that gun, how long you've had it, and why Ed happened to be shooting it against you in that final match."

Luke was eating up the glory, of course. He grinned at Jenny Downs, said: "Nick, yonder, give me that gun four years ago. It fit my hand, an' I liked the balance. No man outside of me ever fired it till I give it to Ed Downs on his twenty-first birthday last Sunday. I figured the kid had gun savvy. He proved it a minute ago by runnin' second to me in that final match."

Clint waited until Doc's pen stopped moving, then, striving to keep his voice casual, said: "Thanks, Luke. If you're good enough to beat Ed with a strange gun, you must be plain dynamite with that pet gun of yours. Just to let the crowd see you in action with it, I'll challenge you to a friendly draw-fire match. You set the distance. Doc, Sheriff Dawson and Ed will time and judge score."

Luke agreed with alacrity. The crowd yelled and applauded. Luke set the distance at a hundred feet. Clint sent the target boy to set up a fresh silhouette target, a fresh hay-bale back stop. That was important. He took his own gun from the sack, buckled it on, tied it down, tilting the butt slightly forward. He watched Luke, grinning confidence, flip a coin, and said: "Heads." It came up "tails." Luke would shoot first. That was good.

"Ed, gimme my old gun," Luke yelled. "I never seen Bowdry shoot. Mebbe he's good." Ed brought the gun. Luke laughed boisterously as he checked the load, twirled the gun, and dropped it into his oiled holster. "Ready, Bowdry?"

Clint said, "Ready," and stepped up to the firing line. He felt Doc's eyes, Jenny's, and knew they wondered.

Luke's stance was easy, he saw; his body lax, hands hanging loosely. His black eyes were fixed on the target, waiting.

Doc had his watch in his hand. He said: "Ready, Luke—fire!"

Luke's hand blurred. His gun flamed as it left the holster, his left hand, stiff and flat, swept back and forward, fanning the hammer. The shots rolled fast, very fast, but Clint could count them. The crowd gasped. Luke was good.

"Fresh target, Jimmie," Clint said to the target boy, "and take the hay bale behind Luke's target to my table. Sure now."

The boy was quick. Clint watched him shift the bales, dragging Luke's back. Then Doc was shouting: "Ready, Clint—fire!"

Clint drew, his thumb earing back the hammer, letting it slip, as his gun cleared and lined to his eye. The shots rolled like thunder. There was no counting them. He saw the target shudder, as though brushed by wind. He knew he was finished only when the hammer clicked on space, when the crowd let its breath go in a great sigh. He heard Luke mutter, "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" and looked at the man. Luke's face was gray.

Then the crowd was inspecting the

targets, talking in awed voices. Clint felt their glances. He looked at the targets briefly and saw that Luke's bullets had sprayed the upper half of the figure. His own five shots he could have covered with his open hand." He felt no elation, only cold, driving eagerness to get the thing finished. He reloaded, holstered his gun and stepped to his table.

"Doc, Sheriff Dawson, will you step over here and help me prove a point?" he asked. The timbre of his voice must have hushed the crowd. They moved close, craning necks, while he and the target boy heaved the hay bale up onto the table. Clint opened his knife.

"You all know Luke's bullets are here in this bale that backstopped his target," he said clearly. "Bullets from the pet gun he admits he's owned for four years, and that no man but himself fired during that time. Doc has Luke's statement down in writing, witnessed by everyone here. Sheriff Dawson, take this knife and dig two of Luke's bullets out of that bale. Be careful not to mar them."

Frowning, the sheriff complied. Clint had the little tin box open when he finished, the magnifying glass ready. He said to Doc: "Doc, I want you to tell the people of Piute what's in this box."

There was understanding, admiration, in Doc's eyes now. He raised his voice confidently. "Why, them two pellets are the bullets that killed Jim and Flora Bowdry, Clint's folks. In my capacity as coroner, I took 'em

(*Continued on page 130*)

(*Continued from page 129.*)

from the bodies, personal, two years ago."

Watchful, Clint poured the bullets from the box into Sheriff Dawson's palm beside the two dug from the bale. He placed the magnifying glass in the sheriff's free hand.

"Sheriff, if you know a horse leaves a peculiar shoe-print, you can single his track out from a dozen others," he said. "By that same token, any defect in a gun barrel will leave its sign on a bullet. The burr-cut line you see in a rifling-cut groove on those four bullets proves the same gun fired them all."

His eyes lifted suddenly, spearing Luke Collins, holding him, tallow-faced. His voice was clear and cold.

"Tell them, Luke, how you tried for years to get the Bone Ranch, so you could headquarter Pool stock there, to make it simpler for you and Nick and your renegade crew to run the prime beef you've been stealing from Poolers down Jawbone Canyon to the Santa Fe. Then tell them how you shot my parents to death on their doorstep because my father had cottoned onto your crooked game. Tell them, Luke Collins, then make your play—quick, or you'll fail!"

No one tried to intervene. The crowd scrambled. Then Luke was standing alone. His mouth gaped. His frozen silence shouted his guilt. He must have known that to stir now meant death, for he made no move toward his gun.

"Clint!" Jenny Downs cried sharply. "Oh, look out for Nick!"

Clint found Nick by the scurry of the crowd to get clear. Nick's gun was lined. But discovery must have unnerved him. His shot went wild. Without compunction, Clint killed him. He heard the sing of lead past his temple. That would be Luke making his play. Clint swung, his gun rolling its thunder. Then Luke was down, kicking his life out in the street dust.

The thing was done. The pattern was complete. Clint was suddenly conscious of people around him. Doc, Ed, Sheriff Dawson, Jenny. Jenny was clutching him, her cheeks wet. The look in her eyes swept all the chill from him. He smiled and touched her hair.

"I'm sorry you had to see it, Jenny," he told her.

"It was justice, Clint," she said simply.

He didn't notice the crowd dispersing quietly, Doc taking Sheriff Dawson and Ed into the Belle Star for a drink. He was thinking of the future, of Jenny and the message he had read in her eyes.

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 85.

1. furrow 2. dugout 3. wolfer 4. gob 5. twine 6. sunflower 7. drift 8. circle 9. axle 10. booger 11. jump 12. outrider 13. rep 14. blinder 15. prod

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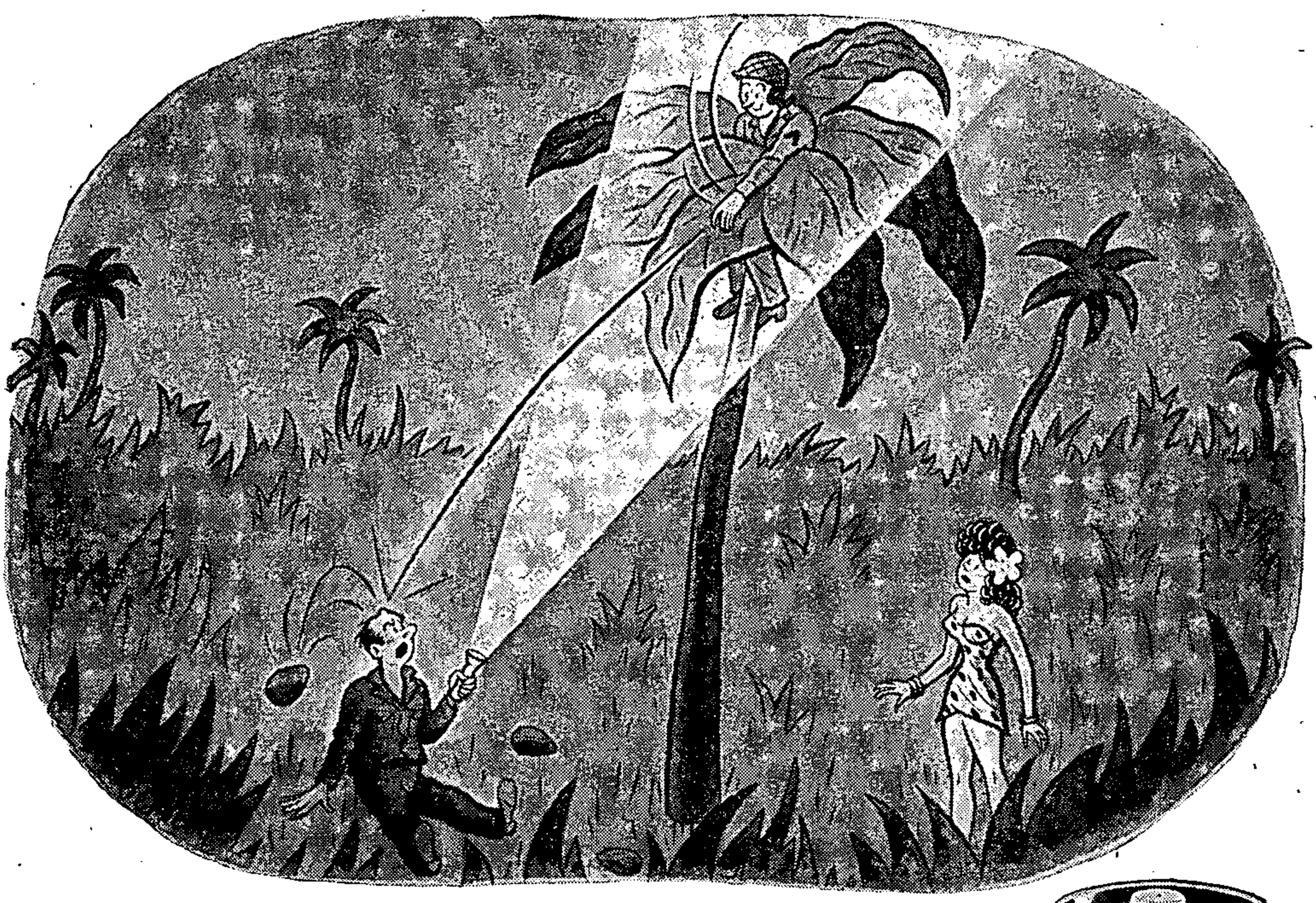

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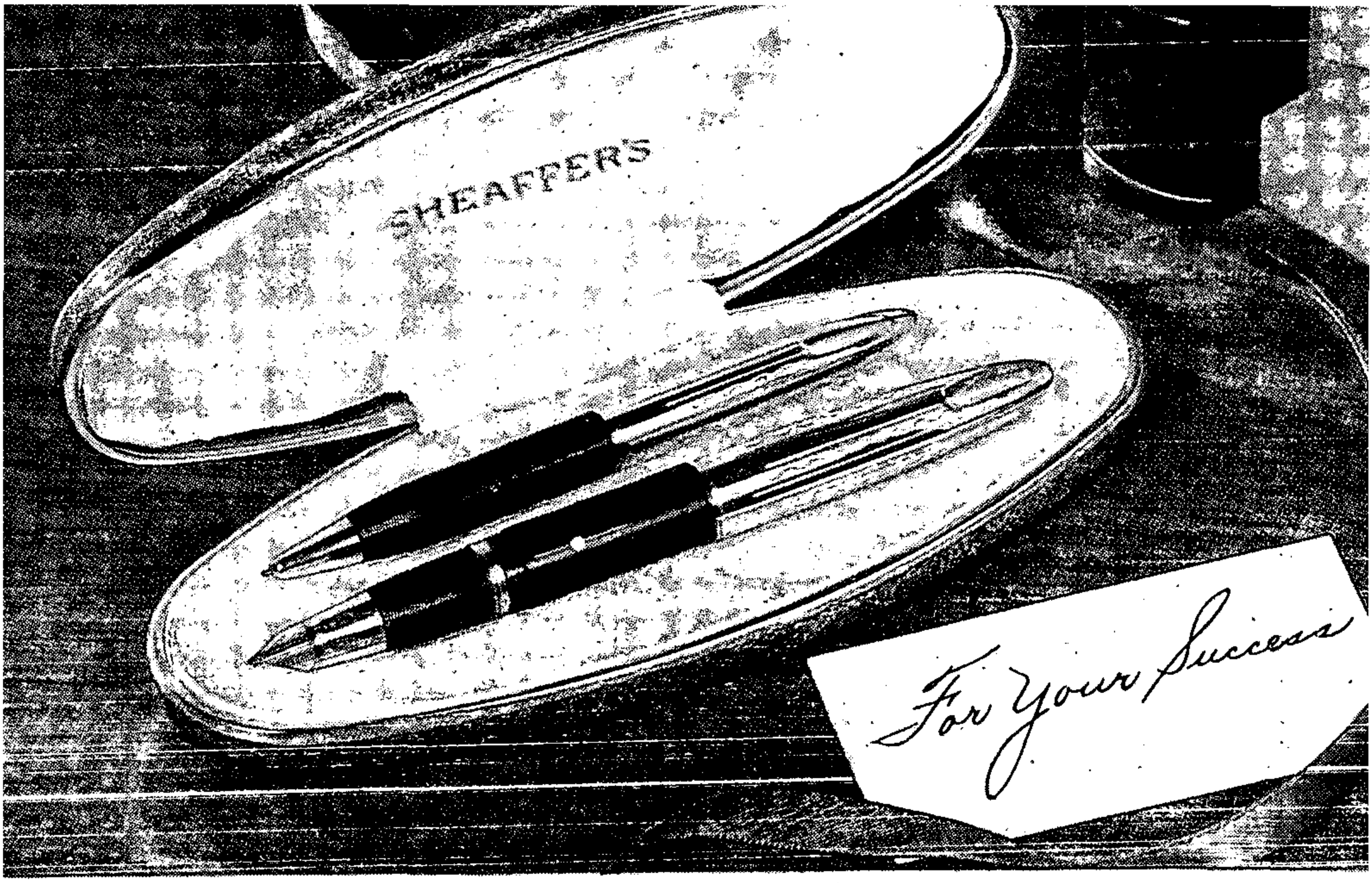

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