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STORY

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JANUARY 1946

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STREET & SMITH'S
WESTERN STORY

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JOHN BURR



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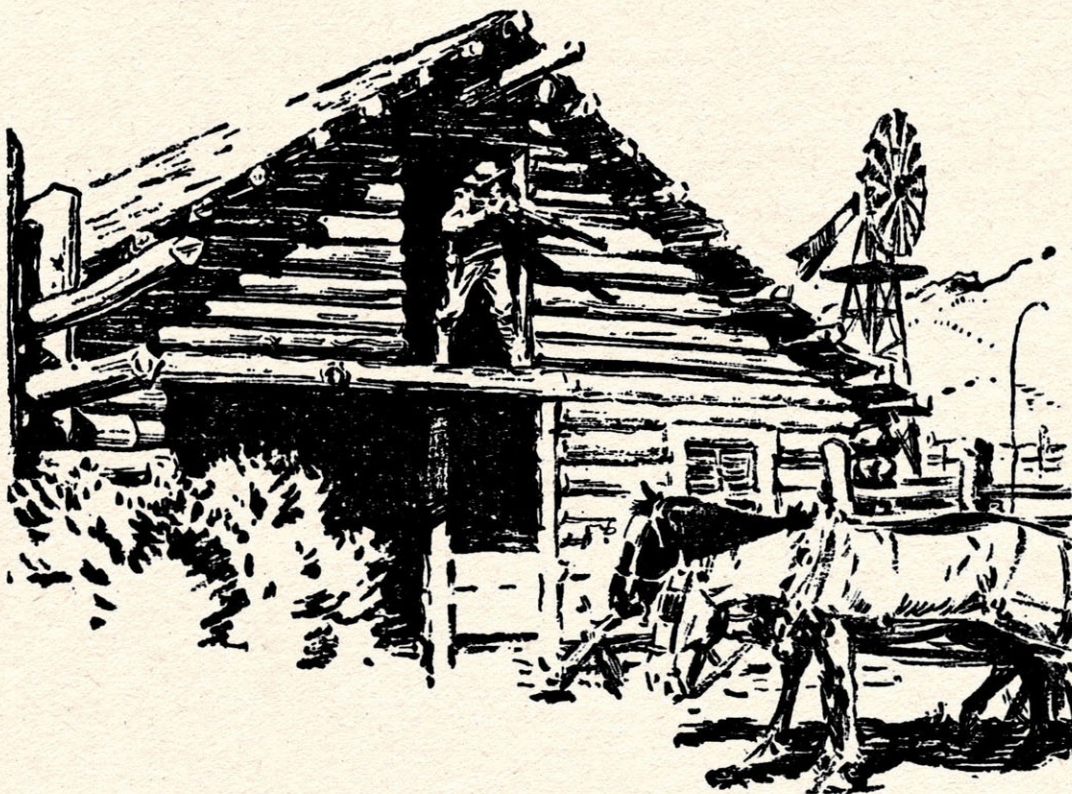
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by WALT COBURN

HANK GARRETSON'S

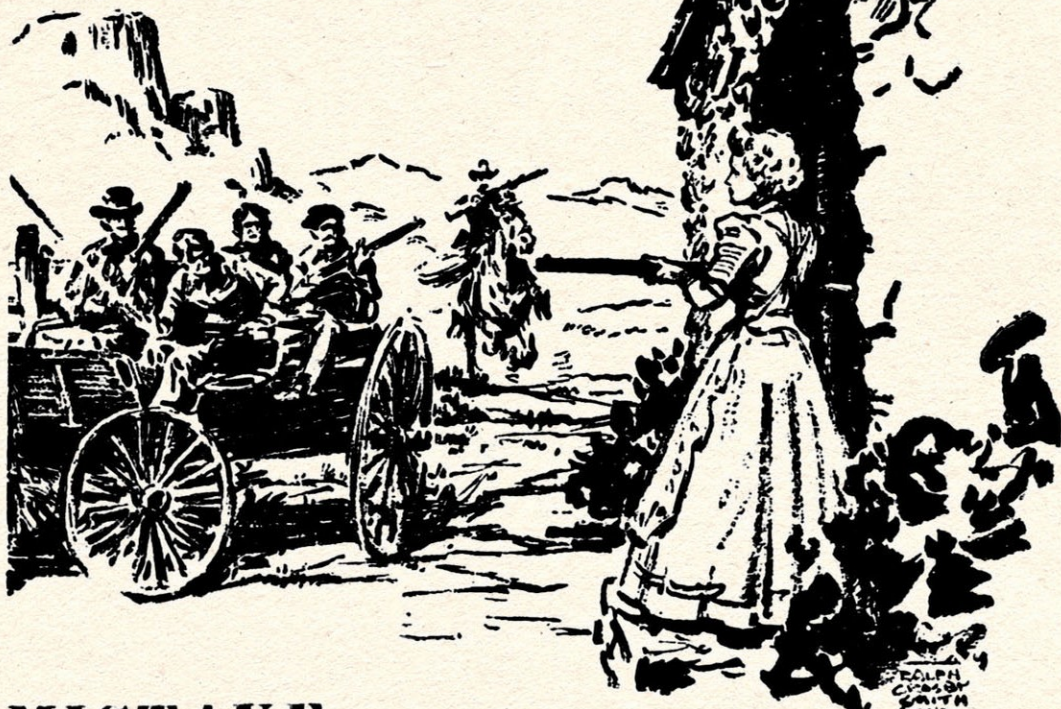
I

It was a big two-storied log-and-rock ranchhouse, completely and lavishly furnished from cellar to garret. Hank Garretson built and furnished it and then went back to Chicago with a big trainload of his HG (connected) beef steers that fall. Before he left he pulled the blinds and locked the windows and doors of the big house that had never been lived in, and put the key in his

pocket. Without putting it in so many words, because he was a forty-year-old bachelor and woman-shy, he let it get rumored around that part of the Montana cow country that he figured on fetching home a wife and that the proceeds from that trainload of steers was for a wedding trip.

There was a lot of chuckling and joshing and the womenfolks sort of turned up their noses and sniffed because every unattached female of marrying age had at one time or

What sort of danger signal was a cowman to read in the smoke that poured from the chimney of a mysterious ranchhouse that had never been lived in?



MISTAKE

another set her cap for the well-to-do bachelor cowman. But Hank Garretson had somehow, in his own quiet, bashful way, sidestepped their careful snares. And the men too winked and speculated on what kind of a bride Old Hank would fetch back to his big, ornately furnished ranchhouse.

But Hank Garretson did not fetch back a wife. As a matter of fact, he did not come back to Montana for a year or more. Then he came

alone and he was back on his ranch quite a while before anybody but Tom Bain, whose place was across the Missouri River from the HG Ranch, knew it.

Tom Bain was a man who could do an awful lot of talking without telling you anything. Hank Garretson had been gone about a month when Tom got a short letter from him.

"Friend Tom"—Bain read the letter to himself—"I run into a little

trouble back here and I don't know when I will get back to the ranch. I want you to look after my outfit for me till I get there. I'll pay you whatever you figure it's worth. If I don't come back, the outfit is all yours, lock stock and barrel. Yours truly, Hank Garretson. . . . Keep this strictly between you and me Tom. I had to shoot a skunk. He ain't dead yet but he's kicking up a hell of a stink. Enclosed is a bill of sale to my outfit. Now don't you try to help me no way because I got to play it alone. Just keep it quiet. Hope you winter good. Hank."

That was all Tom Bain heard from Hank Garretson. He never mentioned the letter but he wintered Hank Garretson's horses and cattle along with his own.

The winter ice on the big Missouri had broken up when Tom saw a light one evening over at the old log cabin at the Garretson place. He had kept a man or two over there most of the winter to shovel hay into weak cattle and the HG remuda, and to keep the waterholes chopped open. And there was a grub cache over there for any drifting riders and just in case Hank showed up. When he saw the light go on in the old log cabin Tom knew somehow that Hank Garretson had come home. So he walked down to the water's edge and hollered across the swollen muddy river.

"That you over yonder, Hank?"

Hank Garretson showed up on the opposite bank. In the gray twilight and across the wide expanse of water that overflowed the Missouri's banks Tom Bain could barely make him

out. And Hank's voice sounded unnatural, somehow, when he lifted it to a shout that could be heard above the whisper and chuckle and mutter of the flooded river.

"It's me, Tom. . . . I got back. . . . I'll settle with you one of these days when the river goes down so's a man kin cross. I'm obliged . . . for everything, Tom. Place is in shore good shape. You winter all right?"

"First rate, Hank. How'd you come out?"

"Lucky, I reckon. . . ."

Hank turned and walked back to his little old cabin. And even at that distance and in the uncertain light of dusk, it seemed to Tom Bain that big Hank Garretson had shrunk. He looked gaunt and stoop-shouldered when he stood there for a long moment outlined in the lighted doorway of his little old log cabin. Then he went in and closed the door.

And when Hank Garretson had closed the door on himself Tom Bain stared out across the river at the big dark hulk of the two-storied log-and-rock house that Hank had built for his bride. Built and furnished with a lavish hand, it loomed up now, dark, the blinds pulled, the doors locked, gloomy and forbidding and somehow sad and grim—a monument to something forever lost.

Tom Bain was short and heavy-set and hard work kept him from getting paunchy though he was well into his late thirties. He had red apple cheeks and his sky-blue eyes would pucker to merry sparkling slivers when he

grinned or laughed which was often. His sandy hair was thinning on top and graying at the temples. His short legs were saddle-muscled and bowed and he walked with a sort of rolling gait because one leg had been broken. Hank Garretson had set it the best he could for it was forty miles to the nearest doctor and they were snowed in down on the river. Hank had done a good-enough job of bone setting and he had taken care of both ranches and nursed Tom during the long weeks. That was the kind of neighbors they were. Without seeing too much of each other, they were there, just the same, in a tight.

Tom Bain knew that even if the river was down to where a man could row a boat or swim a horse across, Hank Garretson would not have welcomed a visit. In a few weeks when the river went down and if he felt like it, let Hank Garretson come on over. Till then, let it ride. But there was no trace of a grin on Tom Bain's square-jawed face and inside his barrel chest his heart beat heavily.

Because he knew that Hank Garretson was hurt and suffering and had come back to lick his wounds like some big shaggy wolfhound. Hank had a slow grin and thick wiry black hair that had started getting gray when he was thirty. He stood over six feet tall and all his two hundred pounds was big bone and solid hard muscle. He had been on his own and working hard since he could remember. There had been no carefree boyhood for a range orphan so Hank had never learned how to play. He never got drunk, he didn't

gamble. He spent his leisure time reading every magazine and book he could get hold of. He could do the ranch work of a crew of men. He was a cowman and he had a gentle way with horses.

Hank Garretson was a hard man to understand. Only Tom Bain ever got to know him at all. And right now Tom was helpless and unable to lend Hank a helping hand when he most needed it.

Hurt a big man like Hank Garretson and it went 'way deep and, like as not, would never heal. A woman could do that to a man like big old Hank Garretson. Old Hank who wasn't old but whom you called that because you could depend on him or go to him with a secret or ask his advice on a deal and get an honest opinion that was worth consideration.

So Tom Bain spent an uneasy and restless night. Hank Garretson was back. He had gone to Chicago to get married. He had built that big house and furnished it for his bride. . . . He had shot a man. And now he had come back to his ranch alone. He had not unlocked the doors of the big new house. He had shut himself up in that little old bachelor log cabin.

The moon rose. The big dark house across the river bulked black and ugly among the giant cottonwoods. Already they had given it a name. They called it "Garretson's Mistake." But most cowmen and cowpunchers would act as though it had never been built, as though Hank had not been gone all winter.

II

Tom Bain had gotten married on New Year's Day. He had married the little brown-haired, brown-eyed schoolmarm at Landusky. She was from the East and hardly a waking hour passed that she did not tell Tom that she would never, never go back. She would hunt him out at the barn or the corrals or where he was feeding cattle or chopping open the waterholes to tell him that in a breathless, starry-eyed way that made Tom Bain glow inside as though he had just taken a big shot of forty-rod. He would put aside his hay fork or ax or ketch rope to take her in his husky arms and kiss her and rumple her thick curly brown hair. Tom called her Brownie and he worshipped the tracks she made. And the little schoolmarm knew that Tom Bain was the greatest man on earth.

Yet Tom had never shown her the letter he had gotten from big Hank Garretson. All he told her that he was looking after the Garretson place till Hank got back. And it was not until he had slipped out of bed the fourth or fifth time to go into the front room to smoke in the dark that Brownie pulled on a heavy wrapper and shoved her small bare feet into moccasins and went into the kitchen. She had the fire lit in the kitchen range and a pot of coffee on to boil when Tom joined her, a sheepish grin on his face.

"Gosh, Brownie, I didn't aim to wake you. . . ."

"You know something, Tom? I wouldn't swap jobs with a queen.

I'd rather be here than anywhere on earth. Isn't it wonderful? You're handsome!"

She beamed at him. Tom had on a short red flannel nightshirt and his hat and boots. He was trying out a new hair tonic, a homemade product that smelled and looked like cattle dip. The knee-length night-shirt gave him a slighty paunchy bulge.

"Purty." He grinned at her. "You're purty as a pitcher, Brownie."

"I hope not as pretty as the pictures that used to hang on the walls of my dad's saloon. They were what the boys called racy. When I was a kid I used to get up early in the morning and fix a pot of strong coffee for my dad and cook ham and eggs for him. He'd come off night shift when the crowd thinned. And he'd tell me about the brawls. He'd been a lightweight and welter and he did his own bouncing. Some of his stories weren't exactly Sunday school stuff, but ma was dead and I had to mother him and I'd sit there all ears and eyes and pigtails while dad told it with gestures.

"I've got a trunkful of his stuff, Tom. Pictures, the blood-and-sweat-crusted old gloves he wore when he went thirty-four rounds with the world's champion to a draw—stuff like that. . . . Coffee on the stove in the gray dawn brings back those kind of memories, Tom. Dad was a great, great little guy. Tough as a pair of knuckle dusters. He bawled like a kid when I showed him my diploma. You know, my teacher's diploma. Drinks were free that

night but he didn't come home for breakfast.

"I was sitting waiting in the kitchen when Pat Murray, the big Irish cop on our beat, brought him home, carrying him in his arms like a baby. Dad was dead, his game heart had finally stopped.

"There was an Irish wake and one of the biggest funerals that part of Chicago ever attended. There were world champions and ex-champs and the cops wore white gloves and marched in pairs behind the hearse. Then I came West. I never dreamed I'd know happiness again, never dreamed there would ever be a man who sized up to my dad, that I'd ever sit in my own kitchen drinking coffee before daybreak with a cowman husband I love. Here on my own ranch where I love all of it so much that my heart aches even while I'm so darned happy I could bawl. . . . I've been awake all night, trying to think of some way to help you and that big hurt man across the river. Whipping is too good for the woman who would hurt a man like Hank Garretson—though I met him only once at a dance. How can we help him, Tom?"

"I don't know. We can't, I don't reckon. Seems like we've got all the happiness corraled this side of the river and can't give Old Hank a share of it. . . . He saved my life once. Horse stepped in a hole back in the badlands when I was rawhidin'. Busted my leg. I'd have froze to death only Hank sighted my saddled horse and back-trailed through the snow ten miles to where I was tryin'

to crawl my way through high drifts. They don't come no bigger and better than Hank Garretson. . . ."

They drank black coffee and finally dressed. While they ate breakfast they could see the light that had been burning all night in the little old cabin across the river and the big dark locked house back in the cottonwoods—Garretson's Mistake.

After daybreak Tom Bain went down to the river's edge and pretended to be busy. He was hoping that Hank Garretson would show up on the far bank and they could holler back and forth. He saw Hank go to the barn and a little later watched the big cowman ride off on what was probably sort of an inspection. Tom went back to the barn to finish his chores.

At the Bain cabin Brownie, whose name had been Mary McCarthy, and who, despite her love for Montana, still got the *Chicago Tribune* by mail, had taken a copy of that paper dated almost a year ago, from her trunk. It was already opened and folded back to an inside page. To black headlines that read:

GAMBLER SHOT. MONTANA CATTLE-
MAN ARRESTED. CABARET SINGER
HELD AS MATERIAL EYE-WITNESS

There were newspaper photographs of the wounded big-time gambler whose name was Daniel (Dapper Dan) Paddock, the cattleman, Henry (Hank) Garretson, and the beautiful cabaret singer Erin who had so far refused to divulge her real name.

The newspaper reports had been

unable to get a clear account of the shooting. Nor could the police get much in the way of information regarding the true facts of the case. The wounded gambler was not expected to live and, true to his own code, had refused to talk.

"I shot myself," was the gambler's only statement. "Accident. The lady is a stranger to me. I don't know her name. And I never saw that big cowboy in my life till you brought him here to my hospital bed. I'll put that in writing if I'm going to croak. If I don't croak . . ." With a faint smile Dapper Dan Pad-dock had let it hang like that.

The cattleman refused to talk to anyone but his attorney. He had money, a wallet bulging with hundred dollar bills. The money had come from the trainload of beef steers he had just sold at the Union Stockyards and there was enough to hire the best criminal lawyer in Chicago.

The little red-headed cabaret singer had refused to say anything of importance. Big Hank Garretson's attorney was handling her part of the case also and was getting her liberated from "protective custody" on some legal technicality. Her identity was shrouded in mystery. When some newspaperman had hinted it was good publicity, the girl had slapped his face hard.

The shooting had taken place in the lady's dressing room at the big cabaret which was owned by the wounded gambler, Dapper Dan Pad-dock.

Brownie stared hard at the picture

of the girl Erin. Her red lips were pulled so taut they looked white and bloodless. When she heard Tom Bain coming she quickly hid the newspaper in the trunk that held the cherished possessions of her dead father.

Even as Tom had kept secret the letter from Hank Garretson, so had Brownie hidden the year-old copy of the *Chicago Tribune* with its September dateline. That had been five months before her marriage to Tom Bain. And this was May.

In spite of Brownie's love for her husband, or perhaps because of that love which was so deep-rooted and strong that her heart ached, she had not shown him that newspaper account of what had happened to Hank Garretson on his trip to Chicago to fetch back a bride.

She had managed to get the mail first, and had quickly scanned every newspaper that came, before Tom Bain had a chance to read it. There was always a desperate prayer in her heart. A prayer that nothing, nothing on earth would in any way mar this splendid and beautiful love and happiness she had found.

And all the time she carried a burden of guilt. Over and over she had to argue it out with herself and in the end it was always the same. Fear of losing something of Tom Bain's love outweighed her sense of justice and her courage. And so she locked her secret in the trunk that held all that Kid McCarthy had left his daughter Mary as a heritage. No, not all. Kid McCarthy had been of champion stock. Clean as a hound's tooth, square, brave, loyal.

Mary McCarthy had inherited those traits along with her dead mother's beauty. But she was afraid to risk even a small gamble on her happiness here at this little cattle ranch on the Missouri River.

Besides, there was the odd chance that she could be wrong. The girl Erin had given no name or background. But the police knew. Big Murray, the red-faced cop on the beat who had carried Kid McCarthy home that gray dawn; Murray, who knew every kid on his beat, would know her and remember her. And they could rip off his cop's shield before he would bring shame or disgrace to the memory—of Kid McCarthy. And God and Saint Patrick love Pat Murray, the cop, for his silent loyalty to a dead friend. And the same God have mercy on little red-headed, stage-struck Maggie McCarthy who had run away from home to be a stage actress. Little Maggie, with the lilting gay voice of an Irish thrush and the spunk to run away and change her name and perhaps call herself Erin. . .

That girl Erin. High-chinned, defiant, beautiful. Mixed up with the shooting of an underworld gambler. Somehow mixed up with that big quiet-spoken, woman-shy cowman, Hank Garretson, across the river . . . Was she Maggie McCarthy and was she the girl Hank had met in Chicago when he went there with a trainload of pool cattle, the girl he had gone back to meet and to marry and to fetch back to the big house he had built and furnished for his bride? No. Things like that just don't happen in real life.

Brownie could have written back to Pat Murray, the cop. Murray was no longer pounding a beat. He was captain of detectives now. Brownie had had a Christmas card from him, a picture of him and his wife and grown children and grandchildren. She had written them, telling the big graying detective captain of her unbelievable happiness, her ranch life and her Tom Bain. She was afraid she would get a letter from Murray asking if she knew a Hank Garretson, who was being held for the shooting of a gambler named Dapper Dan Paddock, and telling her that her older sister Maggie who had run away to become an actress, was sordidly involved somehow in the shooting of the notorious gambler. But no such letter came, only a wedding present, an expensive silver coffee set with a card that brought back memories of the early-morning coffee Mary had made for Kid McCarthy and Murray when the policeman dropped in for a cup before he went off his beat. Not so much as a line or hint about Hank Garretson and never a mention of the red-headed Maggie with the voice of an Irish thrush who might call herself Erin on the billing.

Now Tom Bain came in and Brownie kissed him almost roughly.

"You're shiverin'." Tom held her at arm's length. "You look kind o' peaked. You ain't ketchin' cold or somethin', Brownie?"

"No, Tom. I'm . . . I'm scared."

"Scared of what, for gosh sakes?"

"For us. For our happiness. Scared that something will happen to it. Tom. if you didn't love me, if

you did something to hurt me, I'd never have the courage to tough it out. I'm talking like a kid and I'm twenty-five years old. But I'm scared. . .

Tom Bain was too dazed and bewildered to think clearly. A question or two now would have brought that copy of the newspaper out of the trunk. And Brownie would have told Tom she was afraid to face Hank Garretson because he would see her resemblance to her older sister Maggie who was called Erin.

And Tom had come to the house to show Brownie that letter, to ask her opinion, as a woman, on how to go about saving a man who has been stabbed in the back by another woman. And now Tom just stood there, patting her clumsily on the back and rumpling her reddish-brown curls and trying to figure out what had come over this little wife of his. The letter slipped his thoughts.

"Listen, feller"—he shook his head—"you ain't comin' down with somethin', now?"

"Distemper, maybe?" Brownie forced a smile. "Nope. Scared, Tom. Scared green I'll lose my man. There I was, like I told you before, an old maid schoolmarm out on a long limb—"

"And a kettle-paunched, game-legged, bald-headed ol' broken-down cowhand came limpin' along and the purtiest gal in all the world smiled at him and he swung a lucky loop and she was too scared to dodge."

So the icy lump of fear inside Brownie's heart thawed again as it

had so many times before. She let her husband untie her apron strings and while she changed her dress for a pair of cowpuncher overalls, a flannel shirt, boots and a Stetson hat, Tom put her new saddle on a gentle Injun paint pony he'd gotten for her. Then they rode back into the broken badlands together. There might be a cow with a newborn calf to fetch in, and Tom would point out a black-tail deer or a little bunch of antelope on a far ridge or where the sign showed a bear had come out of winter hibernation. And Brownie would watch for wild flowers. It was so easy to be happy together when you've been starved all your life for such a happiness.

If Hank Garretson sighted them from across the river he saw only two horsebackers and figured Tom Bain had himself a hired hand.

Tom and Brownie stopped on a high ridge spotted with scrub pines and they could see across the river and make out the log house called Garretson's Mistake.

"Pore Old Hank," Tom Bain broke the silence as they sat their horses, holding hands, their stirrups touching. "He didn't fetch back his bride. But, like as not, she'd have turned up her nose at that kind of a house."

"But she wouldn't, Tom. She always wanted a two-storied house. She'd love it . . . Oh!"

It was too late to stop then. Tom was looking at her. Brownie's smooth tanned cheeks flushed, then paled and she forced a pitiful little smile. The grip on his thick, muscular hand tightened with a feverish tension.

"Hang onto your hat, Tom. You're going to despise me for holding out on you. I think Hank Garretson went back to Chicago to marry my older sister Margaret. He shot a notorious gambler he found in her dressing room at the cabaret where she worked as a singer. I have the newspaper account of it. I meant to show it to you when you came to Landusky. Then you asked me to marry you and I forgot. And after that I was so happy, Tom, I was scared to show you the newspaper because it might somehow spoil our love. It's the one and only thing I've ever done that wasn't on the level, that wasn't out in the open. If you hate me for it, I'll understand."

Tom Bain reined his horse closer and took her in his arms and shook her gently, like you'd shake a small child. Then he kissed her.

"I held out the letter I got from Hank, so we're even. And while we're at it, we might as well go on over and have a big medicine talk with Hank. If she's your sister, little Brownie, she can't be wrong. And Old Hank's the salt of the earth. . . . I got the rowboat ready. I've rowed across when the big Missouri was twice this wide. We'll pick up the busted chunks of Old Hank's romance and glue 'em together. . . . What you feelin' my shoulders for?"

"Cupid's wings sprouting . . . Oh, Tom, you're . . . you're a champ!"

III

But Hank Garretson was not watching the country across the river. For a time he was absorbed in his

own ranch—the good condition of his buildings and corrals and fences, how his cattle had wintered, his little remuda of saddle and work horses. He caught his favorite horse and rode aimlessly back into the badlands.

There was a dejected droop to his big shoulders, and his gray eyes were shadowed with brooding thought. The past months had etched hard bitter lines around the corners of his wide mouth. His wiry black hair had grayed a lot and there was a grayish pallor to his skin. A cow-hand doesn't winter so good, he had told his Chicago lawyer, inside jail.

But better to stay alive in jail than be mowed down by gangster bullets, and even a jail cell was roomier than a coffin. So said the lawyer.

"Dapper Dan Paddock's boys do a neat job of work, Garretson," he had pointed out. "I can spring you under a heavy cash bond. But the law won't allow you to leave Chicago and if Paddock gives the order, you won't survive the week outside. If he walks out of the hospital alive, you'll be on the train and well on your way back to that ranch of yours before Paddock's gunmen know you're out. If Dapper Dan Paddock dies, we'll beat it in court. Meanwhile, I'm keeping you on ice. Anything you want here in jail, ask for it. Detective Captain Murray will see that you get it. . . . There's a little lady asking to see you."

Hank Garretson had flatly refused to receive visitors. The little lady especially was barred.

"I don't know," he had told his attorney, "any little lady."

Hank Garretson's voice had car-

ried as far as the ears of the red-haired, heavily veiled, slim girl in black. She gripped the arm of the burly Pat Murray.

"The scut!" muttered Detective Captain Murray of the homicide department. "I'll push the words back down his malignin' throat."

"What good would that do?" Her voice was throaty, husky. "Get me out of here quick before I make a fool of myself again."

So the little red-haired cabaret singer billed as Erin, christened Margaret McCarthy and called Maggie, did not hear big Hank Garretson tell his expensive lawyer that if he put that "little lady" on the witness stand, he, Hank Garretson, would twist the attorney's leonine head from his white-collared neck.

"Drag her into this, mister and there *will* be a killin'."

"Don't make it so tough on yourself, Garretson. In spite of you, I've built up a defense. We can't lose. It's a natural. The little lady has already made a statement in full and signed it. There was that marriage license the cops found in your inside coat pocket. Cowboy; tough gangster; beautiful girl with a voice that would have that jury of twelve good men and true sitting goggle-eyed on the edge of their chairs. I'd get an acquittal without them leaving their jury box. This is front page, Garretson. It's romance with a capital R. The mayor of Chicago will welcome the chance to perform the marriage ceremony. Captain Murray of Homicide gives the bride away and she turns out to be the daughter of the great Kid McCarthy. I'd be

a robber to accept a dollar for this job. The front-page publicity is worth a million . . ."

"Get out," Big Hank Garretson had told the famous criminal attorney, "before I break your neck, mister."

The defense attorney had gone straight to the district attorney. There was a glint of victory in his sharp, hard, yet humorous eyes.

"If Dapper Dan Paddock will only do us the favor of cashing in his chips," he declared, "this will be one for the book. It's a natural."

Captain Pat Murray of Homicide was of the same opinion. "If Dan Paddock croaks," he told the district attorney, "I've got my boys all set and ready. Within twenty-four hours I'll have Paddock's slimy gang mopped up. That big, quick-triggered cowman from Montana has handed us the Paddock Gang on a silver platter."

"That what you came to tell me, Pat?" asked the shrewd D.A. with a smile.

"I've taken little Maggie McCarthy home. To my home, sir. She'll be as safe there as she'd be inside the jail and twice that comfortable. She's a good girl, game. But her heart's busted. Then two McCarthy kids was like me own. Maggie with the voice of an Irish thrush, and as headstrong as a colt, little Mary that was a mother to us when she was still in pigtails. Me and the Champ sittin' in her kitchen—and it was scrubbed till it shined—drinkin' our mornin' coffee. . . . And one day when ye've the time to spare fer it,

I'll give ye the fight, round-by-round, when Kid McCarthy went thirty-four rounds to that robber's decision that called it a draw. Kid McCarthy was the Champ and he'll be the Champ to me so long as I'm alive. And that's his kid Maggie that used to sing little Irish songs to us boys at the station house and I've seen the tears rollin' down the cheeks of the toughest bulls in Chicago when they listened to her. And if that scut of a Dan Paddock don't die . . . But I'll be takin' up no more of your valuable time."

Dapper Dan Paddock did not die. And it was Captain Murray himself who put Hank Garretson on the train and handed him a heavy sealed envelope that held a thick sheaf of hundred-dollar banknotes and an unused marriage license made out to Henry Garretson and Margaret McCarthy. And a single-action .45 Colt six-shooter.

"There's the money ye got for that trainload of cattle, Garretson," he said brusquely. "And a marriage license that gives ye the legal right to marry one of the finest, bravest, most decent girls that ever made an innocent mistake that was misunderstood by the thickest-skulled human bein' it's ever bin my misfortune to come in contact with . . . And here's the gun ye used on Dan Paddock. Ye'd best keep it handy, because Paddock walked out o' the hospital and he's quit Chicago and he ain't the lad to forget the man who put a slug in his belly. And he won't be alone when he looks you up. So shoot first and keep on shootin' if ye live that long. And don't look cross-eyed at me or I'll forget me duty as

a police officer and, old as I am, I'll use me bare fists to beat that face o' yours to a pulp. You that ain't fit to wipe her little shoes on! Breakin' the brave heart of little Maggie McCarthy and her run off again in the night to hide the grief that's bustin' the heart inside her and the shame an' disgrace ye brought down on her beautiful red curly head. . . ."

Captain Pat Murray had stepped off the westbound as it moved on out of the station. He had left big Hank Garretson standing alone in the vestibule of the day coach with the big sealed envelope in one hand and a six-shooter gripped in his other until a wall-eyed Negro porter bumped into him. Then Hank moved on into the vacant washroom and sat down, sick inside. Sick as a poisoned hound dog.

Big Hank Garretson was still sick like that—as if he were dying of some slow poison. There was not a cloud in the May Montana sky but the sun did not shine for the big cowman. He didn't hear the warbling song of a meadowlark. He hardly knew he was again breathing the clean, sweet air of freedom. Big Hank Garretson, cattleman, was back on his home range but he might as well have returned in a pine-board coffin box.

It didn't matter whether he was locked in a jail cell or riding a good horse on his own range. And while he had not tried it, he knew that even if he got blind drunk he would still see that ugly picture that haunted him day and night.

He had walked into her dressing room because the door was not quite closed. Dressed in a tailored suit and wearing new shopmade boots, barbered; money bulging his wallet. The marriage license they had taken out a month before had been stowed carefully in his inside pocket. His heart had been pounding fit to choke him as he walked in to surprise her and carry her away back to the ranch, to live forever in the realization of the dreams they had talked out in the short time they had been together after they had met by chance one night on the lake front when the big cowman had seen a girl in black fall or jump into the deep water. He had dived in and swum out with her fighting him, and before their sodden clothes had dried while they sat in the night's shadows together, love, or something akin to love, had come to them. . . .

So he had blundered into her cabaret dressing room and found her limp in the hungry embrace of a white-collared dude with slicked-down hair and tailored tuxedo. Then as the door slammed, the man had let go the girl and his teeth had bared and his hand slid in under the tailored tuxedo coat to the shoulder-holstered gun there. Hank Garretson had shot him before he got the gun from its shoulder holster. And with the heavy echoes of the big .45 dinning his ears and the acrid fumes of burnt gunpowder in his nostrils, Hank had stood there with a smoking six-shooter in his hand, dazed, gripped in a hellish nightmare.

He had taken a couple of long-legged strides to kick the gun from

the gambler's manicured hand. And then, disregarding the badly wounded man on the floor, he had faced the girl he had come east to Chicago to marry.

Her face chalk white, her gray eyes black with horror, she had stood with her back against the wall. Her voice was no more than a husky whisper in the room.

"God help us . . ."

Then she had crumpled. A few minutes later the cops had swarmed into the room. And that was the end of something that had never been quite real. So now Hank Garretson was back on his home range, to live on and on with that to haunt him. He rode past the big log-and-rock house he had built for her. The kind of a house they had dreamed out together that first night. Only he had made it bigger and he had furnished it far more elaborately than she had talked about. There it stood now, mocking him in the broad daylight as it had mocked him last evening when he rode up. Taunting him, making a fool of him, because it stood for a strong man's folly.

He'd had a mind at first to burn it down. Only that would have been admitting defeat. No man could live long like this. He either died or he got a tail holt on himself and yanked himself up out of the deep black boghole. A man would laugh it off. Take it in his stride. Call up his common horse sense and use it. Grin at it. Just a hell of a josh on Old Hank. Cross the wide river and squat on his hunkers with Tom Bain and a bottle of booze.

"Want to hear a good story, Tom?"

A hell of a comical story about what happened to a country boy in the big city? By Satan, it's comical enough to split your sides . . ."

Laugh it off. Pull yourself up by your boot straps. The devil in hell hates a man that gets sorry for himself.

But the river looked too high and wide and swift to swim a horse across. And Hank hadn't located his rowboat and oars. Besides, who wants to hear another man tell his comical tale of woe? Tom Bain was the best friend Hank had on earth. But what the devil? A man didn't burden his friend with a load like that. Battle it out alone. Lick it. Then holler over to Tom to come across and fetch a bottle and they'd set fire to that big house Hank Garretson had built and furnished for the bride that had made a country-boy sucker out of him.

IV

It was late afternoon and his horse was marked with dried sweat when big Hank Garretson headed back from the far end of the badlands and towards his ranch. The sun and breeze had put color in his face again. But his eyes were still as bleak as a winter sky.

He was within view of the ranch building when he saw the double-seated spring wagon drawn by a weary bay team. It was coming down the long ridge along the wagon road from town. Two men set in the front seat and two more men in the rear seat. Dudes, as near as Hank Garretson could make out. Then the

slanting sun caught the blued steel of gun barrels.

Hank reined up behind a big thicket of tall buckbrush, about fifty yards from where the wagon road rutted the ground. And he sat his horse, his saddle gun gripped, and watched the spring wagon pass. It was a hired livery rig.

The four men were dudes, no doubt about that. They wore long linen dusters to protect their city clothes. They all had guns. There was a case of beer cooled by wet gunnysacks and they passed a partly emptied bottle of whiskey. One of the men on the rear seat was Dapper Dan Paddock. The other three would be his hired gunmen. They were all marked by the same big-city hardness. They were killers.

"That's the place." Dapper Dan Paddock had a flat-toned voice. "Watch it from here on in. Bury the guns. We're four travelin' salesmen that lost our way."

"And a hell of a way if you ask me," said the driver, "to come just to blast a local yokel. Why didn't we do the job in Chicago?"

"Sure, stupid. With that smart dick Murray and his boys puttin' the big rube on the train. A sure way to strap yourself in the hot seat. I'm glad I don't pay you to think for me. . ."

"Fish in the ocean!

Fish in the sea!

A red-headed gal

Made a bum out o' me!"

That was the man alongside the driver. Dapper Dan Paddock slapped him alongside the jaw with the barrel of a gun.

"Shut up!" he said flatly.

The tipsy singer rubbed the side of his hatchet jaw. "You got no ear for music. No sense of humor . . ."

"No."

"What about the dame, Danny?"

"Shut up."

"All right, all right. Only you don't give up that easy, see. And I wondered. I got it straight she's on the lam. Dusted out o' Chicago."

"I said shut up. That red-headed little wildcat will get her claws trimmed. I slapped a gun out o' her hand the night I got shot. Then I clipped her. She was out like a light when the big cowboy busted into the room. I had to hold 'er up. She's out on her feet, see. But it must've looked like a lover's clinch to the big cowboy. . . . Don't get no wrong notions about that redhead. She's decent. I know. Didn't I try all the angles? Hell, I was willin' to marry the gal. Yeah. But she don't see it like that. Ain't that a laugh? Then I still don't get out o' her damned dressin' room and she pulls a little derringer pistol. And don't think she ain't playin' for keeps. I slap it out o' her hand and hit her. On the point, see. And the red-headed daughter of Kid McCarthy is out for the count. Then that big cowboy busts in and the rat that sold me that bullet-proof vest is a liar. But it stopped the .45 slug enough to slow it down and deflect it. And ten grand fixes the doc and a few more C notes opens the hospital doors and Dapper Dan Paddock walks out. And when we get done blastin' this Garretson cowboy we make ourselves at ease and wait for the redhead to show

up. . . . Sure she'll show. Where else would a dame like that go? She's nuts about the big cowboy. Even Murray, who's like her own daddy, sec, can't stop the gal. She lams. She'll show here. And before I'm done with that little red-headed hellcat, she'll . . ."

The rest of it was lost in the rattle of the wagon wheels. Big Hank Garretson sat his horse, the sweat rolling down his taut face, some emotion surging inside him with such turbulent force he wanted to shout it to the high blue sky. He wanted to ride down the open ridge and shoot it out with that slimy tinhorn and his three gunmen. But he knew they would kill him before he got his gun barrel hot. And it was typical of the big cowman that it never occurred to him that he could kill all four of them from his brush ambush. Big Hank Garretson hadn't a drop of bushwhacker blood in his veins.

So he let them drive on down to the home ranch. They were on his range. This was cow country, not the big city. They couldn't gun-whip Hank Garretson on his own ground. Not if he used horse sense along with the guts that were no longer chilled.

Horse sense and guts. Big Hank Garretson wiped the sweat from the moist palms of his hands and sat his horse, his saddle carbine in the crook of his left arm. Hat brim slanted to shade his puckered eyes, he stared down at the ranch buildings and pole corrals about a mile below and partly hidden by the giant cottonwoods. But it was quite a while before he actually saw what he

was looking at because he was stunned and sort of deliriously happy right now from the shock of the hard-bitten words of the gun-toting city gambler. The ugly picture he had carried so long in his brain and heart was gone and he saw it as it actually had been, not as his jealous eyes had distorted it. He felt ashamed of himself and proud of that little red-headed girl whose real name was Margaret McCarthy. That ugly picture would never return but in its stead was the memory of a white-faced girl with sodden clothes and her red hair plastered with lake water. Her heavy-lashed smoke-gray eyes almost black with emotion, she had told him in a husky, throaty voice how she had lost her nerve and turned too cowardly to go on fighting a sordid world for a phoney crown to wear on her curly red head.

"My dad was a real champ. And I've got a sister who has his kind of clean fighting heart. She married a cattleman out west somewhere and found her happiness—the real pot of gold at the end of the rainbow I have been chasing by night lights. I'm not worth your getting wet, mister. You risked your life to save something worthless. I ran out on my dad and my sister. I was too proud to go back whipped by the phony life I thought I wanted. . . . Good-by, now, mister. I had to jump in the lake to find the only real man I've met since I ran out on the Champ . . ."

But Hank Garretson had not let her go when she tried to run away. He had held her as he might have held a hurt child, and for the first

time in his life he had not been tongue-tied when he tried to talk to a girl. He told her things that had been hidden deep in his heart since he was a small boy. And she had crept into his big arms and her hands had rumped and smoothed his hair and caressed his cheeks while he talked. Then Maggie McCarthy had talked out her dreams. Together they had built a two-storied log house while they sat on the park bench and a big cop smiled softly and kept any stragglers from bothering them. He had kept so far in the background that they never knew he had seen the big cowman drag a would-be suicide girl from the lake. And that was how love had come to Maggie McCarthy and Hank Garretson and that was the picture Hank had taken back to Montana when he returned to build their dream house. And it was the picture he conjured up now. He was looking down at the big log-and-rock house without actually seeing it and now his eyes gradually focused on it and he suddenly stiffened in his saddle. He rubbed his eyes like a man awakening from sleep and stared, leaning forward across his saddlehorn. There was smoke coming from the rock chimney of the big log house!

The house had been locked and the key gone. The key to that house had been lost somehow, somewhere, the night Hank had shot Dan Paddock. There had been a tag attached to the key. Hank had made the tag from a bit of Indian-polished buffalo horn. He had carved on the polished black horn: "The Key To Our Home." It had not been in the big

sealed envelope with his money and marriage license returned to him by Pat Murray. Nor had Hank asked for it.

Now smoke came from the big rock chimney. And from this distance it looked as though the blinds were raised and the curtains pulled back and the windows opened to air the big house.

Then the spring wagon with its four gun-packing men pulled up at the barn. They still wore their long linen duster coats. The leg-weary team stood in their harness, tugs-lacked, heads lowered. The men started to get out. Then they froze. The sharp crack of a .30-30 carbine shattered the stillness.

Through the gun echoes called a man's voice. It was a deep-chested, full-toned voice. A voice that could holler loud enough to be heard across the wide Missouri River at flood time, lifted now to its furthest, loudest cowpuncher bellow. The voice of Tom Bain.

"Set there! Set there till Ol' Hank Garretson shows up!"

The voice came from the barn, from up in the hayloft. That was where the shot had come from that had ripped a hole in the expensive imported hat cocked on the sleek head of Dapper Dan Paddock.

"Who the devil are you?" snapped Paddock. "The hired man? I'll make a deal with you, brother. One grand. A thousand smackers. Right on the barrelhead, doctor. How do we stand?"

"I ain't the hired man. I ain't your brother. I ain't no doctor. And

we stand right where we stood when I creased your jellybean hat. I'd pot-shoot the four of you where you set your wagon, only my misses is kind o' chicken-hearted. And my sister-in-law says mebbysso Ol' Hank is 'titled to the first shot. So I'm kind o' henpecked for the time bein', till my pardner Hank Garretson shows up."

"Who the hell are you? Who in hell's your sister-in-law?"

"You quit that cussin' when there's lady folks around, tinhorn, or the next bullet cuts under the sweatband. I'm married to Kid McCarthy's youngest daughter Mary. She and her sister Maggie are in the kitchen bakin' a cake for the weddin'. So we'll keep the shootin' out here at the barn away from the house so's the noise won't make the cake fall while it's bakin'."

Paddock and his three gunmen stirred uneasily but cautiously on the leather-cushioned seats of the spring wagon.

"One of you step down. Unhook the team so's the pore things kin water and graze. Try to rabbit and I'll drop you in your tracks. Take 'er easy. Big Hank Garretson will be showin' up directly. Then we'll open the jackpot."

V

No angel's voice could have sounded sweeter to Hank Garretson than the leather-lunged bellow of Tom Bain. And while some of its gist was a little bewildering, Hank did not take time out to figure how Tom had gotten across the river and into the

barn. How he had gotten himself married to Maggie McCarthy's sister Mary. How come Tom's missus and Maggie were there in the big house with the windows wide open and baking a wedding cake in the brand-new kitchen range. There was no time now to try to get it figured out. Tom Bain was up in the hayloft with a saddle gun and he had Dan Paddock and the gambler's three killers sitting there on the wagon seats like so many canvas-backed ducks on a pond. And those four gents were as deadly as so many coiled black diamond rattlesnakes. Tricky, too. Let Tom Bain get careless for so much as a split-second and those four fast gunmen would open up right now with all they had.

Then the kitchen door of the big house opened and Maggie McCarthy stood framed in the doorway. She was wearing a big gingham apron and the slanting sun showed the coppery sheen of her curly red hair. Though it was too far away for big Hank Garretson to get much of a look at the girl he loved, he knew it could be nobody else but Maggie. And she'd look more beautiful in a kitchen apron than in all the silks and satins she had ever worn when she sang in some dimly lit cabaret. And the only jarring bit to that domestic pattern was the rifle she had in her hands. The sunlight caught and reflected the steel barrel and her husky, throaty voice sounded across the badlands silence.

"Let me take the deal, Tom. It's my mess. . . . You want an out on this, Paddock?"

"Why not, sister? Show me the

way." Dan Paddock's voice was toneless.

"Show us all the way home, baby," said one of the gambler's gun-packing henchmen, "and I'll send you back a souvenir postcard from Frisco."

"Shut up," snapped Dapper Dan Paddock. "Deal 'em, redhead. We'll play 'em."

"Throw away your guns," Maggie called. "Then start walking. Back the road you came."

"Listen, baby, we'd look naked wit'out our rods. Ain't you got no modesty?"

"Shut up." Paddock's voice had a brittle sound. "You wanta get us mowed down? The guy upstairs in the stable ain't foolin'. And I told you the redhead plays for keeps. Toss out the artillery, boys. And the last guy back to the railroad tracks buys the beer."

"You ain't kiddin', boss?"

"I ain't dealin' 'em," said the gambler. "Just playin' the dirty deuces I get." He tossed a high-powered rifle out onto the ground and started to climb down.

"Back up!" growled Tom Bain. "Throw them guns 'way out yonder. And that means all of the shootin' irons. Rifles, hand guns, sneak guns. If I had my way, I'd make you use 'em."

Then Tom Bain must have sighted Hank Garretson who was riding out from behind the brush and heading for the ranch at a long lope.

"Come an' git it, Hank!" he belled a roundup cook's hungry call, "or I'll throw it away!"

Hank lifted his weight to stand in

his stirrups and waved his saddle gun. He came down the ridge with shod hoofs kicking up a dust cloud.

Big Hank Garretson was fighting mad. He had heard Maggie giving Dapper Dan Paddock and his three killers a getaway chance and he had no intention of letting the gambler escape that easily. He was going to make that slick tinhorn play his hand out.

He was within a hundred yards when he called his warning to the red-headed girl in the doorway.

"Get back inside and shut the door, Maggie! I got the deal now!"

It was Brownie who yanked her older sister back inside and slammed the kitchen door.

Up in the hayloft a grin spread across Tom Bain's face as he stood in the hayloft doorway, his saddle carbine gripped in both hands and covering the four men who crouched, their guns in their hands now, in the spring wagon.

The leg-weary, sweat-marked boys were still hooked to the spring wagon, heads sagging.

The man who had done the driving had been around racetracks long enough to know something about horses. The team stood facing the wide-open barn doorway. He still had the buggy whip in one hand. There was a desperate chance and he took it. It needed no more than a deft, quick twist of the wrist. The buggy whip lashed down across both bay rumps. The pain-startled horses jumped, hit their collars and the spring wagon shot forward with a sudden jerk that threw the four occu-

pants into a wild scramble. Cocked, hair-triggered guns exploded wildly. The frightened team bolted straight through the yawning doorway into the barn. A wheel hub struck one side of the doorway with a force that slewed the light spring wagon around and it careened and upset, spilling out the four men and splintering the sideboards. The bays swerved into an empty stall and slammed to a sudden halt, dragging the wreckage, kicking, snorting, quivering with excitement and fear.

Hank Garretson had spurred his horse to a run. He covered the distance in fast time. Ducking low, he kicked both feet from the stirrups as his running horse went through the doorway of the barn. He was still gripping his saddle gun as he quit the saddle. The big log barn was filled with the din of exploding guns. Bullets whined and spat into the log walls. Hank hit the dirt floor of the barn, landing on both feet, limber-kneed to take the shock. He took a couple of short running steps and then he doubled up and somersaulted and rolled over and over into an empty double stall. He was shaken and bruised but he was moving fast enough to get up and over and into a deep empty manger made of two-inch solid planks.

Save for the bay team in one stall and Hank's horse that had twisted into an empty stall at the far end of the barn that was a hundred feet long, there were no horses inside. But the four badly shaken and battered men who knew all the angles of city gangster warfare were badly

handicapped in a barn on a cattle ranch. They had been thrown out in a wild tangle of legs and arms and exploding guns. They were further bewildered by the dull gray shadowy light inside the barn. Outside it was sunlight and their eyes had not had time to focus to the dimmer light. If they had, the men might have shot straighter at the swift-moving target Hank Garretson made as he catapulted from the back of the running horse and rolled a ways before he vanished from sight into the deep manger.

Then through the crashing din there came the deep-chested voice of Tom Bain from up in the hayloft.

"I'll do mine from up here, Hank!"

The voice sounded from directly above where Hank lay in the empty manger. He looked up and saw Tom Bain's face grinning down. There was an open strip all along the log wall for shoving the hay down to drop in the row of mangers below. The mangers were so constructed they made one great long deep trough the length of the barn on both sides. A man could crawl the entire length if the mangers were empty as they were now. And at the front end of the barn was a solid plank chute about three feet square that came down from the loft into a boxed-in stall. The boxed-in stall had been built for a grain room. The grain dumped down the chute from the loft. The lower opening of the chute yawned like a black square funnel mouth not twenty feet from Hank's head and on the inside of the chute was a cleated ladder. Hank saw Tom Bain grin and nod in the direction of

the grain chute. Then Tom's head vanished from sight and a few seconds later a gun up in the loft began spitting fire.

The bullets drove Paddock and his three gunmen into a bewildered kind of panic and they began shooting up into the floor of the loft. Meanwhile Hank Garretson crawled along the deep manger as fast as he could without making too much racket. The shooting was still filling the barn with its exploding racket when Hank climbed up the dark chute into the hayloft.

Tom Bain was crouched a short distance away, a smoking gun in his hand and a grin on his sweat-streaked dusty face. Hank grinned back through a smear of blood that came from a bloody nose he had gotten when he quit his running horse.

Bullets from below were splintering up through the loft floor. The hayloft was empty save for a pile of hay about twenty feet high that Tom had forked over to the hayloft door.

Tom made a motion for silence and Hank understood and nodded. Squatted on his boot heels, Tom pointed down through the floor. Dan Paddock and his three gunmen might be wise to all the angles and twists and tricks of big city gangland gun fighting but this was probably the first time in his life that the high-stake gambler, born in the slums and cheating and fighting his way up through the years to be crowned a sort of king of the underworld, had ever been inside a barn. And his hired killers were of the same city slums breed. Their whispers, rasping, harsh with alarm and suspicion,



sounded below, punctuated now and then by a nervous shot.

They knew what a barn stall was and they had the long empty mangers figured out. But as yet they had not puzzled out the grain chute up through which Hank Garretson had climbed to the hayloft. They did not know Hank was up there. They were making a cautious, uneasy hunt for him below. Their bullets had riddled the manger a minute or so after the big cowman had crawled through it and, under the cover of Tom's misleading gunfire, gained the safety of the loft above. They kept shooting at it, Dapper Dan Paddock snapping commands from where he crouched in a corner of an empty stall with a double-action .38 in his hand.

Dan Paddock had ripped off the long linen duster. His tailored suit was torn and soiled, his silk shirt was grimed by sweat and dirt and his imported silk tie was awry. His eyes, beady and black, darted nervously. His skin was a ghastly pale-yellow color and a stubble of heavy black had cropped out since he shaved last. He crouched like some vicious, trapped animal. Always a fancy dresser, accustomed to getting what was called "the works" when he sat

each day for an hour or longer in the barber chair, it did something to his morale to be soiled and shaken up and his slicked-down heavy black hair mussed. Like an actor, he had to be properly dressed and groomed for his part. Pomaded, barbered, manicured, tailored, he could swagger into his cabaret, his bookmaking hangouts with his quick-triggered gunmen at his back, and he had many times proven himself to be deadly. But Dapper Dan Paddock was out of his element now and he reverted to type. A snarling, shifty-eyed hophead. A trapped rat. But dangerous.

"Get the big rube. Get the yokel upstairs. Blast 'em out. you guys. . . ."

The horses bothered Paddock. The shooting was spooking the bay team, tired as they were, and they jumped and kicked at the wrecked running gear of the spring wagon to which they were still hooked. In the far stall Hank's saddle horse also snorted and jumped at the gunfire. And the three gunmen were shooting wildly at every little creaking barn sound.

"The big guy ain't here, Danny. We cased the place from soup to nuts, boss. He ain't here no more. The big rube done a Houdini. Mebby he goes up the wooden chimney, see? Like a damn Santy Claus. . . ."

"Go up after 'im. We gotta lam out o' here. Go upstairs after that other, rube. . . . What a hell of a spot to be in. Cut a way out o' here and I'll roll you guys in the big dough."

VI

Up in the hayloft Tom Bain grinned at Hank Garretson. Then he called down to Dapper Dan Paddock.

"You can't buy your way out o' this, dude. Your three hired men is just wearin' theirselves out. And the comical part is we kin watch you like you was rats in a big trap shashayin' around. From what I hear, you're the dog that wears the big brass collar when you're on your own stompin' ground. Your friends would be shore proud to claim you now. That's a mighty fancy tie you got. But she looks sort o' silly tied under one ear. And your purty hair all mussed. . . Look at 'im, Hank. Is he the same dirty skunk you had to shoot back in Chicago? Must be. I kin smell the

perfume on 'im plumb up here. Kind o' fouls the clean small of a horse barn. And look at them shoes. Pearl buttons. Don't gut-shoot 'im, Hank, till he straightens that fancy necktie."

Then, when Dapper Dan Paddock crouched in a corner of the stall, teeth bared, eyes beady, gripping his gun, Tom Bain spotted the three gunmen and called down to them.

"You skinny thing crawlin' in the manger like an aig-suckin' weasel. First white man I ever ketched a-wearin' a purple silk shirt. Makes a shore easy target, don't it. Hank? No use crawlin' fu'ther, weasel, unless you want to come up the grain chute the way Hank Garretson got up here a while ago. In which case you'll git a welcome."

The man in the sweat-sodden

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purple silk shirt quit crawling. His hatchet face twitched.

"You with the checkered cap," Tom Bain called down. "No use tryin' to slip out the door unless you want to be a runnin' target. Which is all right by me'n Hank. But your boss won't like it if you coyote on 'im in a tight spot like this. I wouldn't put it past him to shoot you in the back as you go out the door. Better stand your hand."

The man wearing the checked cap halted, snarling up at the loft.

Tom Bain chuckled. "Lookit, Hank. The long slim dude in the black fuzzy hat. He's squirtin' somethin' into his arm with a little syringe. I bet he's one of them dope fiends you read about. By gosh, now, I'm shore proud to finally see one in action. What's that dope do to you, mister? You git a quick fightin' jag?"

The gunman's upper lip curled back. He had pale eyes and they stared up out of bluish sockets in a bony, pasty-colored face. He slid the hypodermic outfit into his pocket and the gun in his hand spat flame as he shot up at the loft floor.

Tom Bain shifted his position quickly as the bullets splintered up through the pine-board floor.

The other guns roared down below. Bullets ripped up through the hay-slicked pine floor. Big Hank Garretson and Tom Bain kept moving around. They waited until the futile gunfire below died out, until the horses quieted down. And then it was Hank Garretson who called down to Dapper Dan Paddock and his three gunmen.

"You're wastin' good bullets, Paddock. If we wanted, we could kill the four of you without wastin' a shot. You claim to be a gamblin' man. I'm checkin' the bet to you. I don't give a hoot what happens to them three helpers you fetched along. It's your fancy hide I'm hangin' on the fence here at my ranch. I'm givin' you a fightin' chance for your taw. Name your game, mister."

Dapper Dan Paddock was on his feet, his back to the log wall of the barn now, and he stood near enough to the open doorway to run out. Sweat beaded his face and there was a desperate cunning glinting his beady black eyes. He was of that breed whose code was never to give the sucker a break. And he did not believe the man lived who would give you an even chance in a gun fight.

"I got dough, cowboy," he offered breathlessly. "Hid out. More dough than you ever looked at all your life. Foldin' money. I don't believe in banks, see. So I got it planted where nobody but me can find it. You come along with me, see. Your pal can keep my three boys on ice till you get back with the big dough. You write your own ticket. It's purple velvet, cowboy. You'll roll in the long green and yellow dough. Fifty grand. A hundred grand. And you get the dame. So what the hell can you lose, cowboy? Just harness a fresh pair of hay burners to a buggy and we'll head for town. Name your own price, cowboy. Dapper Dan Paddock never squeals at a payoff."

"You'll squeal this time, tinhorn. If you live that long." Big Hank

Garretson's voice was quiet. Too quiet. "You must be hard of hearin'. Tom Bain told you that you couldn't buy your way out. . . . Ride herd on the three hired hands, Tom. I'm goin' down after the tinhorn sport!"

It was a twenty-foot drop from the hayloft door to the ground. Big Hank Garretson hung by one big hand, a six-shooter gripped in the other. He landed as easily and springily as a cougar. And for the fraction of a moment he made a big target as he stood square in the open doorway of the barn.

The gunmen would have shot him down had they anticipated such a bold move. And then it was too late because Tom Bain's gun was roaring up in the hayloft and he was shooting fast, not missing a shot.

Dapper Dan Paddock had not expected that kind of a move. As Hank Garretson's big bulk dropped, and the cowman stood there, almost within arm's reach of where the gambler crouched flattened against the inside log wall of the barn. Paddock leaped back as if he had been hit. The gun in his hand spewed fire and Hank felt the close whine of the slug past his ear. Then the six-shooter in his hand roared and he had the hammer thumbed back with the recoil. He fired a second and a third time into Paddock's reeling, dying body.

Paddock had lived long enough to pull the trigger on that one wild shot. No longer.

Big Hank Garretson jumped back and around the side of the doorway. Crouched there, his smoking gun in his hand, he waited.

From inside the barn came hoarse screaming and cursing but no gunfire. Then Tom Bain's big voice boomed down.

"Throw away your guns and take your stink outside. I'll shoot to kill next time I pull the trigger. . . . You all right, Hank?"

"I'm all right, Tom."

"Watch for three things that pulled up lame. I kin smell the skunk you killed. . . . Git out o' the barn, you things. You're spookin' them pore ponies."

Paddock's three gunmen came out, cursing and whining and snarling. Tom Bain climbed down the ladder from the loft and herded the three wounded gunmen out through the doorway. He wiped off sweat with his free arm, a hard-lipped grin on his face.

Tom Bain had done some fast and accurate shooting. His bullets had broken a right arm or right shoulder on two of the three. The other was meaning over a bullet-mangled left arm.

"Left-handed," said Tom Bain. "That un. Mebbyso I should've gut-shot 'em but Brownie has sort o' sawed my horns some."

They frisked the three wounded prisoners for sneak guns and sat them down inside the barn. Tom Bain opened a cupboard that held rolls of bandage and tin boxes of gall cure and bottles of horse liniment and he tossed the gunman the bandage rolls and a bottle of carbolic and filled a pail of water and told them to patch one another up. Then they could hit the wagon road to town, he informed them. Afoot. Fifty miles,



Tom Bain declared, wasn't so far for three tough things like them to travel by foot.

Then he unharnessed the bay team and turned them loose in the pasture with Hank's horse that he unsaddled.

"You"—Tom Bain grinned at Hank Garretson—"git on to the house right now, pardner. You're a long time overdue there."

Maggie McCarthy opened the door for Hank. She stood there, in a plain gingham house dress, her coppery hair shining. Her face was so pale that the sprinkling of tiny freckles showed across her nose. Her eyes were as dark as deep smoke and a smile trembled on her red mouth.

Then Hank Garretson hauled her into his arms and his face was buried in her hair.

"I . . . had the key . . . you dropped on the floor . . . dressing room," Maggie explained breathlessly. "And I let myself in after you rode away this morning. I got here during the night . . . horseback. I unsaddled and turned him loose in the pasture . . . When you'd ridden out of sight I went to work . . . cleaning house . . . It had gathered

dust, Hank . . . It's beautiful. I kept bawling like a fool kid. I was a sight when they got here . . . My kid sister Mary and that wonderful man of hers, Tom. He calls her Brownie . . . Sissy and I wept all over the place and I never thought we'd be so happy together again. And then I told Tom that Paddock and three of his gunmen were on their way here. I'd caught sight of 'em in town but they didn't see me. I had to ride hard to get a head start. They must have stayed in town a while to eat and ask the way here and get a rig and all. I wired Pat Murray and hit the trail. I'm not much of a horsebacker. . . . Anyhow here I was, getting our house in order. Tom said he'd set the skunk trap for Paddock and his gunmen while Sis and I got supper. And that brings it up to date. All but . . . This is the most wonderful home in all the world, Hank. Are you going to let me stay?"

Big Hank Garretson kept swallowing a hard aching lump in his throat and he kept blinking his eyes as though they were filled with hot sand. And for a while all he could do was rub his face in her hair. Then he lifted her face and kissed her clumsily.

When they looked around for Brownie she was nowhere in sight.

Then they heard the rattle of wheels and looked out. Two men had driven up in a buckboard. Hank said the man driving the sweat-marked team of buckskins was the sheriff. And they both recognized the big bulk of Detective Captain Pat

Murray of the Chicago police department, in spite of the new, high-crowned, wide-brimmed Stetson hat he had jammed on his grizzled head. Then Brownie came running out of the barn to throw her arms around Murray's thick bull neck and the big, battered-looking, red-faced detective was chuckling and tears dimmed his Irish blue eyes as he hugged her. By the time Maggie and Hank got there everybody was talking at once.

Big Hank Garretson shook hands with Pat Murray. Then he turned his back and bent over and told the big detective to kick him. Hard.

Murray spat on his hands, balanced himself and planted a hard kick on the seat of the big cowman's pants.

It called for a drink. Tom Bain had fetched a bottle he said was left over from his and Brownie's wedding last New Year's.

Pat Murray and the sheriff took charge of the dead Dapper Dan Paddock and the three wounded gunmen while Hank and Tom unhooked the buckskin team, unharnessed them and turned them into the pasture.

The sheriff and Pat Murray took the dead gambler and the three prisoners to town, heading back that night because the wounded men needed medical attention. Murray said the judge would throw the book

at the three of 'em. The detective captain had a thickly padded money belt he had taken off the gambler's dead body. They had counted over one hundred thousand dollars in bills of large denomination. Murray said it would be turned in with Dan Paddock's dead carcass but that later it would be released.

"It'll make ye a neat weddin' present," he told Maggie and Hank. "It's yours by rights and yours 'twill be and no argument about it now."

Hank Garretson and Maggie McCarthy were married there in the big house. Pat Murray, accompanied by his good wife, fetched the parish priest clear from Chicago. Tom Bain was best man and Brownie the matron of honor and Pat gave the bride away.

The newly married couple took no bridal trip. They were too happy, Maggie told her sister, here at their wonderful new home to leave it for even a day. She sat down at the piano that was a part of Hank's household furnishings, and played and sang for them in her husky voice, tears welling in her smoke-gray eyes. And Hank Garretson sat there worshipping her with his eyes and heart.

"And this is the house"—Tom Bain held Brownie's hand—"some fool started callin' Hank Garretson's Mistake!"

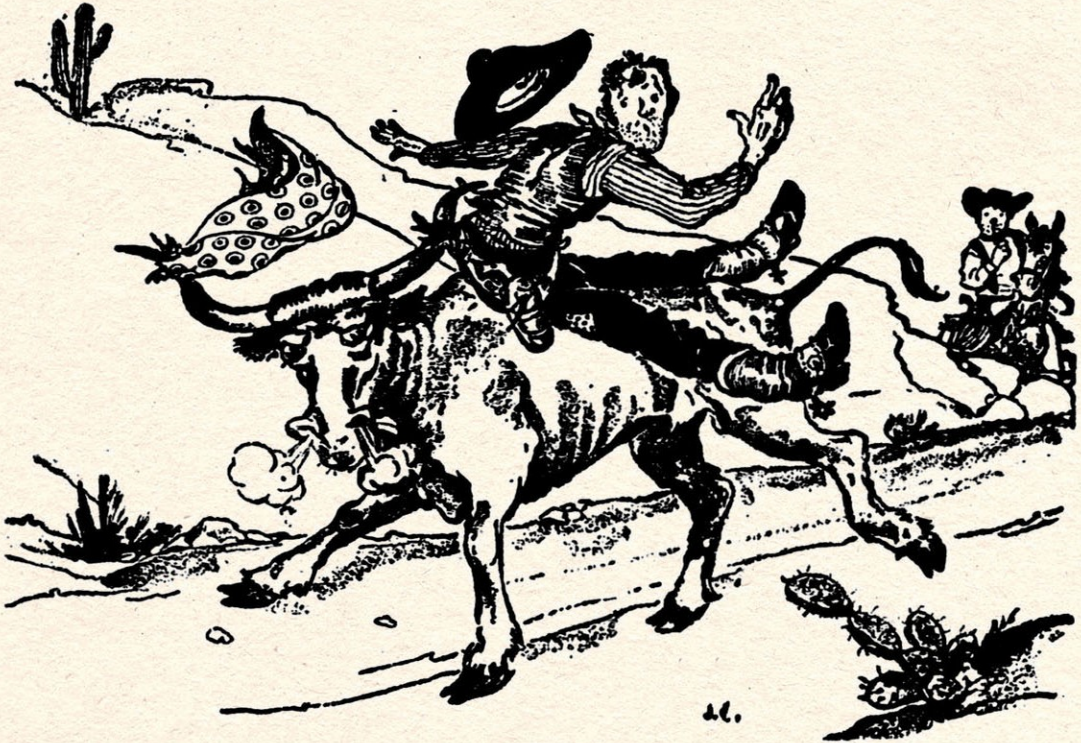
THE END



Everyone should be able to read this brand which tells you that its wearer has been honorably discharged from the U. S. armed forces of World War II.

RIDE 'IM, COWGIRL!

By S. OMAR BARKER



Meeting the girl of his dreams turned into a nightmare for Romeo, so he decided it was time to make a New Year's resolution

DRIFTIN' down the draw with a big he-blond like Romeo Jones for a pardner is a wonderful experience. So is the smallpox.

"Nogal," he says, blinking his blank blue eyes at me through the frosty frizzle of snow, "do you realize that tomorrow will be next year an' I still ain't got no wife?"

"Well, you got a boil on your neck," I shrug. "Ain't that enough?"

"Supposin' I did have me an ever-lovin' wife or sweetheart?" he says. "Chances is, the first thing she'd do tomorrow mornin' would be to throw her arms around my neck an' wish me Happy New Years—an' with that boil as sore as it is, I jest don't believe I could stand it."

"In that case," I suggest as we ride along with our heads ducked against the nip of the breeze. "why don't you

stake her out in the horse pasture till your neck gits well?"

"I sure hate to think of the pore little gal layin' out there shiverin' all night under a juniper," he sighs. "In fact, rather than commit such a croolty, Nogal, I'm goin' to make me a New Year's revolution."

"You mean 'resolution,'" I correct him. "Revolution is the name of a war."

"It's about women," he says, plumb ignoring my efforts to educate him. "You want to hear it?"

"If it's about women I've prob'ly heard it already. You ain't talked about nothin' else for the past four years."

"This time, Nogal," he avers, earnest as an underpaid preacher. "I'm makin' a revolution not even to speak to no more gals. so help me Josephine!"

"It's easy for a fish to swear off swimmin' where there ain't no water," I remind him. "From the looks of this country, there ain't no more prospect of us runnin' onto womenfolks than there is of pickin' cherries off'n a cockleburr bush."

Being a couple of hoss-straddlin' hairpins without a hangout, me and Romeo Jones was traversing the New Mexico scenery with the idea of running onto some ranch where the work was little and the wages big. So far we hadn't warmed nobody's bunkhouse blankets for long, because if there wasn't no unbranded females around for him to git romeoantic over, Romeo wouldn't stay put, and if there was, I wouldn't—for fear one of 'em might slip the matrimo-

nial hobbles on him and leave me minus a pardner.

Now it begun to look like we'd hit a stretch of the wide open spaces totally uninhabited by anything but coyotes and jack rabbits. For two whole days we hadn't even come onto a boar's-nest line camp, a squatter's dugout nor a sheepherder's chili pot.

I wouldn't exactly say we was starving, but every once in a while I could feel my stummick start clawin' at my backbone like a sick cat tryin' to climb a stovepipe.

Like I said, it was the last place on terra firma that you would expect to find anything in skirts. But no sooner have I said so than we top a little rise, and our eyes bug out with horrified astonishment. Down vonder amongst a little patch of dumpy-clump willows, a hinge-hipped ol' yaller bull seems to be stagin' a duel to the death with something in bright pink calico. Only "duel" ain't the right word, because the way he's hornin' and hookin' and brush-fightin' around, it looks like he's got a woman impaled on his horns, like as not deader than a dunked doughnut.

For half a gnat's wink Romeo and me just set there on our ponies froze stiff with horror.

"Oh, Nogal!" quavers Romeo. "What a horrible fate for one so young an' so fair!"

I ain't got time to ask him how he can tell a gal's age and looks just from a flash of pink calico, because both of us sock the hooks to our ponies and dash down there to save what we can of the remains.

Except there ain't none. Only the ripped and tore remnant of a dress snagged onto the left horn of a little ol' scrub bull, which suddenly seems to figger it's all our fault. He takes a sullen look at both of us, then chooses Romeo. Romeo's horse is bull-wise all right, but in side-stepping the charge, he plants a front foot in a badger hole and the only thing that saves Romeo from a horn hole through his appetite is a quick bulldogger's leap onto the bull's head.

Ordinarily, Romeo Jones is as good a bull thrower as the next feller, but this ol' he-cow ain't beddin' down for nobody. With a snort that blows up the seat of Romeo's pants like a balloon he takes out down the draw with both that woman's dress and ol' Romeo still swinging onto his brackets. By the time I get Romeo's pony straightened out, they're plumb out of sight.

When I overtake them the bull has got Romeo treed up a cottonwood stump so rotten at the base that it teeters every time Romeo hollers. It ain't me nor the bull he's hollering at. It's a short, tub-shaped individual in a red mackinaw and an old black hat with a twelve-inch cupola on it. This person seems to be trying to lead the tallest, scrawniest, speckled she-mule I ever looked at up alongside a big rock for mounting purposes. But this ol' hard-tail evidently ain't in favor of it.

Little Red Mackinaw and the mule are about forty yards from where the bull is throwing dirt on Romeo, and Romeo is hollering for all he cost, profanely urging this tubby

person to hurry up and climb on that blankety-blank mule and chouse this blinkety-blong-dongled bull away before he climbs the stump. I can see why he's kind o' worried, because there just ain't room on top of that stump for him and the bull both.

For a minute I find myself so spellbound by the power of Romeo's oratory that I just set there with my mouth wide open and both ears flappin'. And enduring that minute the bull spies the red mackinaw and decides that it's makin' faces at him. With a farewell switch of his tail he lifts the siege on Romeo and declares war on the mackinaw.

Instead of running for a tree or a rock, or even just running, Little Red Mackinaw just starts jumping up and down and squealing. From which it suddenly dawns on me that it's a woman. Romeo must have realized it, too.

He quits his perch like a cricket off a hot stove, and from then on it's a foot race between him an' my horse to head off that bull before he hits the target. But it ain't no use. The bull is picking up speed, bearing down on the female like a freight train on a stalled flivver. If she don't somehow side-step him at the last minute, our next job is going to be to reassemble the remnants and hunt for an easy place to dig.

"Jumpin' Jerusalem!" I hear Romeo pantin' as he passes me. "What a horrible fate for one so young an' so fair!"

Fair or not, it sure looks like that tubby chunk of womanhood in the red mackinaw has wore her last

high-towered hat. But all of a sudden, just when it looks like the gal's a bull-hooked casualty, the old speckled mule calmly but swiftly whirls her south end around and meets that bull between the eyes with a double-barreled wallop of heels that knocks him as cold as Christmas clabber.

As me and Romeo come plowing up, doggone if this female red-coat don't calmly draw an eleven-inch Bowie knife out of her belt, grab him by the ear and cut his throat. The bull's, I mean, not Romeo's—though it might have been better if she had.

"Nogal," says Romeo, solemnly pulling the tattered remnants of a pink calico dress out of his shirt front, "will you kindly ask the lady if this here is her garmint?"

"Why don't you ask me yourself, Big Handsome?" inquires the lady, wiping the Bowie knife on her Levi pants and batting her eyes up at Romeo's phenomenal physiognomy.

"He's swore off talkin' to women," I explain. "Specially, when they're so young and so fair."

"Looky here, Gooseberry Nose," she comes back at me, "if you think you're kiddin' anybody, you're wastin' your wind."

She turns to climb on her mule, but for a middle-aged, five-foot woman in tight Levis, measuring about two ax handles across the beam, that speckled big-ear is entirely too doggone tall. She can't lift her boot within a foot of the stirrup. Her face, already red and as round as the moon, gets redder still when she tries it.

"Permit me, madam!" I says, and I start to give her a boost, but she pushes me away.

"When I need any man's help I'll ask for it!" she says.

But when Romeo steps up, she gives him a twenty-tooth smile and lets him heist her. It's quite a job. When she grabs the saddlehorn, the old mule feels the cinch start to pinch and takes a nip at the seat of Romeo's pants. She don't bite deep enough to do no harm, but it makes Romeo step aft mighty sudden. She kicks at him as he goes by and Romeo says a bad word.

"Ol' Speck's just playful that-away," giggles the old gal. "She don't mean no harm. I wish I could invite you boys to supper an' spend the night with us, Big Handsome, but I'm afraid Charley wouldn't like it."

By now the prospects of another cold camp have got me to where I'd sleep in a stable and eat hay if somebody would just invite me.

"Gosh, ma'am," I says, "surely your husband wouldn't refuse food an' shelter to a couple of honest cowhands on New Year's Eve!"

"Maybe not if I had one." She cuts her eyes at Romeo. "But you see I'm just fresh out of husbands."

"Then who's Charley?"

"Goodness," she says. "Ain't you never heard of Charley Lott, the boss of the NMA Ranch?"

"Sure we have," I fib to her. "I'll bet he'll be plumb glad to put us up, too!"

"Mister," she giggles, "that proves you don't know Charley!" She turns a smile on Romeo. "Thanks for

rescuing that dress off the bull's horns. Big Handsome. He come bowin' his neck around where I was hangin' out clothes, and I flagged that pink dress at him to shoo him away and he hooked it right out of my hands, then took out over the hill with it still snagged on his horns. Charley said let him go, but I saddled Ol' Speck and took after him. I had just give it up and was riding back to the ranch when the bull came dragging you on his head, and it spooked Ol' Speck so she pitched and threw me, and—"

"That's where we came in," I interrupt before she uses up all the wind in the country. "Come on, Romeo, as long as we ain't invited to stay over night, let's cut us off a chunk of that bull meat for supper an' be travelin'!"

"Hold on a minute!" says Little Red Mackinaw. "I've got an idea! We're plumb out of fresh meat at the ranch. I'll bet if you boys would skin out a quarter of that bull and come riding in with it, Charley might anyways let you sleep in the barn! 'Course there ain't much hay to sleep on, because that darn Ed Stamper won't sell us any as long as Charley won't listen to reason. But I better quit gossipin'. I'll ride on in. The ranch is right over thataway. But don't you tell Charley I invited you, or I'll get skinned alive!"

She give her ol' speckled mule a wallop with a rope end and took out.

"Sort o' loose in the tongue for one so young an' so fair, ain't she?" I grin.

"Shut up," grunts Romeo. "Let's git the peelin' off'n this *toro*!"

We should have knowed better. About the time we get the bull half unhided, we hear a boot heel click on a rock and look up to find ourselves gazing into the business end of a .45. The hombre behind it is a big, handsome young yampus, a little too short for a telephone pole and a little too long for a bed slat.

"Just a couple of lowdown meat thieves caught red-handed!" he remarks. "I'm a notion to drill you both!"

"Don't talk like that, my good Christian friend," says Romeo, wiping the bull blood off his knife and whetting it on his boot. "You're liable to git your throat latch cut."

He steps over the bull carcass like he aims to choose this feller, gun or no gun. But there's such a thing as being too brave for your own good health. I ketch Romeo by the shirt tail and yank him back.

"Personally I'm a stranger in town, mister," I says. "All I know is that a female woman's mule in a red mackinaw kicked this bull in the head an' she told us to skin out a quarter an' pack it in if we wanted a place to stay all night. We're both too young an' innocent to mistrust a lady, so we unfolded our knives an' went to work. Ain't that all right?"

"Maybe it is, at that!" This cowboy's shoot-'em-dead scowl kind o' fades out and he begins to grin—like a fox. "Are you boys willin' to swear that you're unshuckin' this bull meat strictly on the orders of a female mule-straddler named Rosie Higginbottom?"

"Excuse me," I inquire. "did you say 'Higgin' or 'Biggin'?"

"That's her, all right," he declares. "Now listen: I been tryin' to push through a certain deal with this Rosie's boss, but I ain't makin' much headway. You see what I mean?"

"Sure," I says. "You want us to help you hold a bull-slaughterin' charge over Rosie's head in the hopes of makin' her boss agree to your proposition."

"You ketch on quick," he says. "You orta been a lawyer. Well, how about it—or would you rather be yanked into court for butchering my bull yourownselfes?"

"Personally," busts out Romeo, "nobody can't make me hold nothin' over no woman's head, unless maybe an umbrella—or a twig of mistletoe."

I notice this hombre is still handlin' his hawgleg kind o' threatenin'.

"Don't pay no attention to my pardner," I says. "He's been out in the wind too much with his mouth open. Just how do you want this wolf skun?"

"You boys pack a chunk of meat in to the NMA just like Rosie told you. Don't say nothin' to nobody about nothin'. I'll show up unexpected in the mornin', and this time Charley will either listen to me, or Rosie—maybe the whole caboodle of 'em—goes to jail an' you with 'em. Savvy?"

"Mc heap much savvy," I says.

He climbs his sorrel and starts to slope away, then draws rein to shoot us one more dose of powders.

"By the way," he says, "my name's Ed Stamper. an' I not only know how to git tough, but I've also got the

implements. Don't you boys go gittin' any fancy ideas!"

As soon as I figger Stamper is safely out of sight and hearing, I reach for my horse.

"Come on, Romeo!" I says. "Let's leak out o' here before somebody plugs the hole!"

"But you just now told this feller we'd pack in a chunk of meat an'—"

"With a gun pointin' at me, sweet-heart," I grunt, "I'm liable to tell anybody anything. I smell rat poison in this set-up an' the quicker we hunt new territory the better!"

But Romeo balks and won't go. He claims that if there's trouble with Ed Stamper afoot and Rosie Higginbottom is mixed up in it, as a member of the female race she is entitled to our gentlemanly protection. Besides, it's going to be a cold, snowy night and where else can we find shelter?

It's dusk by the time we ride in at this NMA Ranch. Rosie Higginbottom's ol' speckled mule and half a dozen more hollow-flanked lady jassacks are a-brayin' around in one corral and a bunch of mighty bony cattle bawlin' for feed in another. But there ain't more than enough hay in the *tasolera* to make one good feed for a team of Shetlin ponies. After we shove our ponies a couple handfuls of it, Rosie Higginbottom shows us where to hang the meat. then escorts us to the house.

"Charley ain't in a very good humor," she whispers. "So you better talk nice. Right in there!"

She shoves us into the dining room and shuts the door behind us without coming in herownself. There's three

pairs of Levis settin' at the table eatin' their supper—all of 'em gals. The one at the end is small, slim, shapely, sorrel-maned and as purty as a fresh-picked posy. She pops up out of her chair at the sight of me an' Romeo like one of them Texas longhorn cows fixin' to defend her calf from a wolf.

"What are you doing here?" she demands.

"Don't bust your bellyband, sister," I says. "We're lookin' for ol' Charley. We brung him a piece of fresh meat."

"What kind of meat?"

"Tough meat," I says. "Off'n a dead bull."

"Indeed! Whose bull?"

Her bossy tone somehow sort o' riles me.

"None of your business," I says. "Where's the boss?"

"Gosh-all-gophers, Nogal!" gulps Romeo. "That ain't no way to talk to a lady! 'Specially one that's so young an' so fair!"

I can tell by the way the knot on his windpipe is glugin' up and down that this is my palpatatin' pardner's 54th case of love at first sight. But this little gal ain't exactly cuttin' her eyes at him.

"Never mind the mush, Big, Blond and Blabber-Mouthed," she tells him. "Whose bull was it?"

"I rather gather he belonged to a feller named Ed Stamper," I says.

"Goody!" she says. "It serves him right!"

"The bull got killed accidental-like," I says. "'Course, bull meat ain't exactly choice, but we figgered

if ol' Charley Lott happened to be a little short of fresh beef maybe he could use it. We figured he might put us up for the night. If I ain't mistaken, me an' Charley bunked together once on a roundup over on the Cimarron."

The two other gals at the table start to giggle, but not this little lady.

"You *are* mistaken," she cuts in, stiff as rawhide. "I'm Charley Lott. It's just a nickname for Charlotte—Miss Charlotte Lanford, owner and manager of the No Men Allowed Ranch. I'm sorry, but you can't stay here tonight or any other night!"

"Ask her if anybody ever told her what starry eyes she's got," Romeo whispers out loud to me.

"Charley," I says, "my pardner's swore off speakin' to gals hisownself, but he wants me to ask you if anybody ever told you what starey eyes you've got?"

"He said 'starry' not 'starey,'" she says, prissy as a primrose. She turns to one of the other gals. "Josie, fetch some hot coffee and ask Rosie if there's any more of that burro-meat stew. Even if they are men, we can't turn them out hungry on a cold night like this."

"Tell Miss Charley she has got an awful purty dimple, Nogal," says Romeo. "An' burro stew is our fav'rite dish!"

"Don't talk silly," shrugs Charley. "I'd do as much for a dog."

"Bow-wow-wow!" busts out Romeo. He drops down on all fours and begins romping around like an Airedale pup. He winds up by sidling up alongside Charley's chair, trying to lay his head on her knee

and wagging his ears for a pat on the head. Which is what he gets—with the flat side of a tin plate. But none of them can keep from laughing, including a blushing smile from Charley herownself. So the upshoot of it is that we not only get fed, but they loan us enough soogans to keep warm with out in the barn with the rest of the jassacks. But we don't sleep very good on account of the milling around of them hungry mules and the bawling of them hungry cattle. Also Romeo gets to talkin' love talk in his sleep till I have to stuff quilt wadding in his mouth to shut him up.

The next morning danged if ol' Rosie Higginbottom don't fetch us out a pot of hot coffee even before we get up. It's right embarrassing, having a lady walk into your bedroom with all them mules looking on, but for a swaller of hot java a cowpoke will put up with purt' near anything.

"Boys," says Rosie, "I'm worried about Charley. She didn't use to be so dead set against the men."

"Maybe one of 'em made a face at her sometime," I suggest.

"No," says Rosie. "Her an' Ed Stamper was practically engaged. But they had a quarrel over who could boss a ranch the best, a man or a woman, an' Charley told him to go suck eggs. Then she made a down payment on this ol' ranch, got us gals together for a crew and set out to prove to Ed that men wasn't no more needed on a ranch than fleas on a dog. She even got us mare mules to ride so as to make the N M A Ranch an all gal outfit."

"It's a wonder she didn't put skirts on the pitchforks," I says.

"There ain't no hay to pitch with 'em anyway," sighs Rosie. "Ed Stamper's bought up all the feed in the country, an' he won't neither sell nor loan Charley any until she hollers calf rope an' agrees to marry him. The cattle an' mules are both practically starvin' an' still she won't give in. I wish you boys would do somethin' about it."

"Why, sure," beams Romeo. "We'll marry her myself an'—"

"Like hell," I says. "My mamma taught me to keep my spoon out of the other feller's mush. What we're goin' to do is to saddle up an' leak out o' here before we get mixed up in somethin' too tight to squeeze out of!"

"Aw, shucks, Nogal," begs Romeo. "Cain't we even stay for breakfast?"

So we stay, and it takes so long to do justice to Charley's pancakes that by the time we're saddled up, here comes Ed Stamper and three more cowboys.

When Charley comes out with a pitchfork to order him off the place, he bows right up to her.

"Miss Lanford," he smiles, "I've got a deputy sheriff here with a warrant for the arrest of Mrs. Rosie Higginbottom, a widow in your employ, for illegal destruction of property, to wit, one bull belonging to me, which same she killed, slaughtered, skun and butchered contrary to law. Now, honey, do you want poor Rosie to go to jail, or are you goin' to start off the New York right by bein' reasonable?" He pauses and nods to-



wards me and Romeo. "I might as well tell you," he adds for a clincher. "that I've got these two gents as witnesses."

Charley's purty face gets as pale as paste. Then I see Romeo gazin' at her with that hero-save-the-princess look in his eyes, and I make a grab for him. But I'm too late. Without even pausing to paw dirt, my pulsified pardner dives into this big Ed Stamper and wrestles him to the ground. From then on it's a fair fight and no holts barred. They're about matched for size, so neither Stamper's men nor me interfere. The other gals come running out, and altogether it makes quite an audience. Charley keeps hoverin' over the wrestlers with her pitchfork, but I can't make out which one she's tryin' to poke.

All of a sudden the seat of Romeo's pants comes to view and Rosie hollers out: "Oh m' gawsh! He's been knited!"

But what she thought was blood wasn't nothing but Romeo's red flannel underwear showing through a rip in his pants.

Being mighty modest about such things, as quick as Romeo realizes his exposed position, he busts loose and dives into one of the stalls past Rosie's old speckled mule. Now Romeo has shot apast Ol' Speck too sudden for her to kick him, but by

the time Ed Stamper gits there she's all squared away.

The sight of that speckled mule's rump and twitchin' tail stops him in his tracks. Meantime, up on the manger, Romeo pulls something out of his boot. It's a fancy little velvet box like them jewelers put diamond rings in to look more expensive. Evidently it has dropped out of Ed Stamper's pocket into Romeo's boot top during the wrastle. Now Romeo starts to open it and see what's inside.

"Hey, you yannigan!" yells Ed Stamper, getting red in the face. "Don't you open that! Throw it here!"

"If you want it, come an' git it!" Romeo challenges him.

Right then is when Ed Stamper cuts the big gut. In his anxiety to git that little box away from Romeo, he seizes Charley's pitchfork and starts to gently touch up that ol' she-mule with it—not jabbing her hard but just aiming to prod her out of the stall so he can get past.

But a pitchfork seems to be something Ol' Speck don't approve of. She kicks it so hard that the handle whams Ed Stamper alongside the head, dropping him in his tracks like a pole-axed steer, knocked out cold.

A couple of us jump in quick and drag him out of reach of ol' Speck's heels—and the next thing we know, this gal called Charley is down there beside him with her head in his lap, blubberin' over him like he was the last dang man in the world and she just couldn't spare him.

Romeo gazes at them with a kind

o' sick-cat expression, then climbs out of the manger. Ol' Speck kicks at him as he comes past, but he don't pay no attention. He don't even seem to care no more whether them gals see the rip in his pants or not. He tosses the little velvet box in Charley's lap, and a diamond engagement ring falls out.

"I reckon it's yours, sister," he grunts.

By the time Ed Stamper opens his eyes, Charley has done got his ring on and Ed don't waste no time sealing the bargain. The other two Stamper cowhands are already

makin' up to two of Charley's cowgals to beat sixty, and I see the deputy sheriff helping Rosie, the wide-beamed widow, hitch up a team of mules to a hay wagon. Looks like there ain't nothing left for me and my romeoantic pardner to do but reach for our horses.

"Gosh, Nogal!" sighs Romeo as we start driftin' down the draw on the wide open trail of a brand New Year. "She was so young an' so fair!" Then he kind o' grins. "Anyhow," he shrugs, "now I reckon them starvin' cows an' she-mules will at least git some hay!"

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



Marvin L. DeVries.

has written many types of stories but it was after a rugged apprenticeship doing script for that fabulous idol of millions, The Lone Ranger, that he decided to go in for Westerns. This present happy status is, however, the result of a circuitous trail which began after his discharge as a Marine Corps flyer in World War I, when he became fiddle-footed and took Horace Greeley's very excellent advice and went West. In a canoe, DeVries traveled across Lake-o'-the-Woods and down the Winnipeg

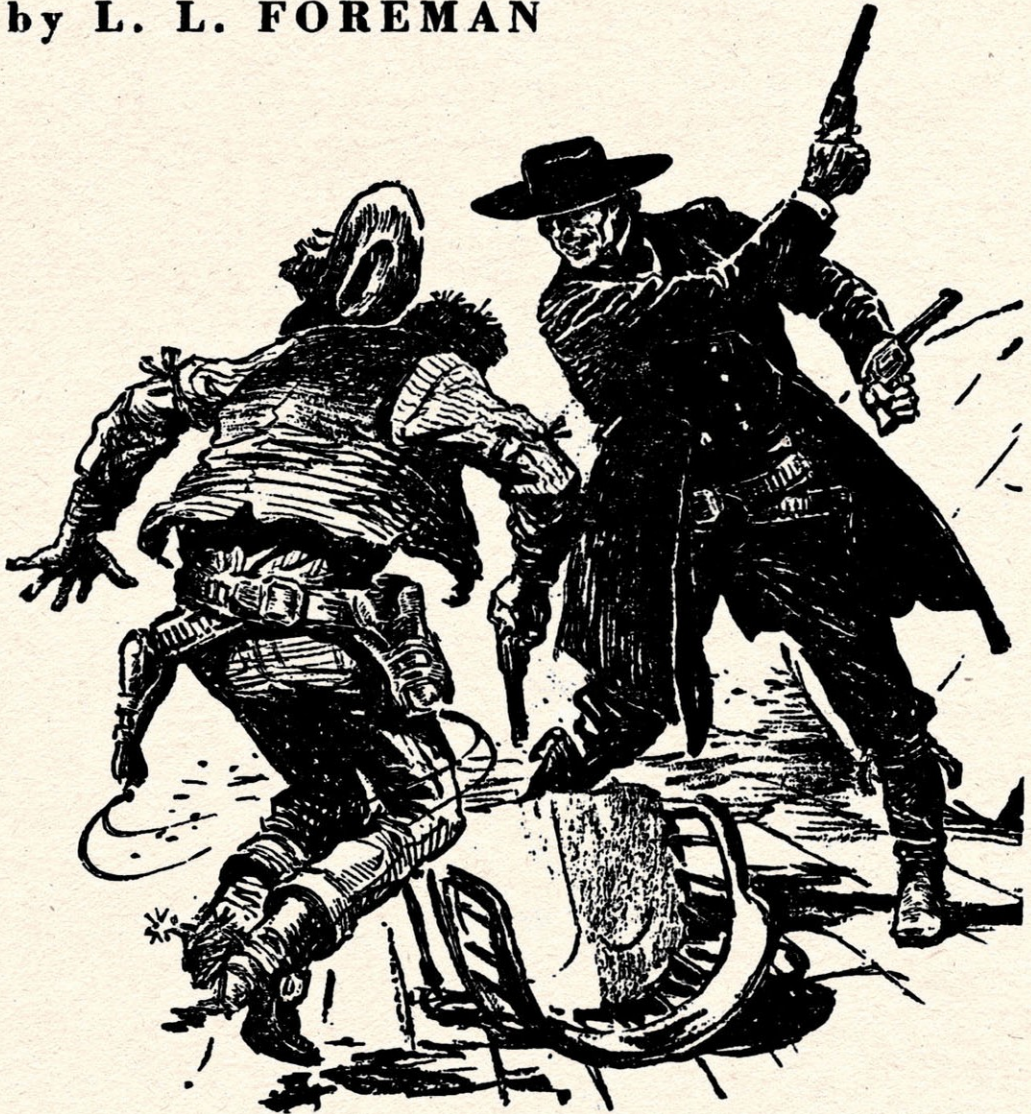
as far as Lake DuBonnet. He finally wound up in the vicinity of Riding Mountain, near Dauphin in Manitoba. Here and in Saskatchewan various and sundry activities claimed his attention until that itchy foot again gave the signal and M. L. turned up at the University of Michigan where he studied law, later practicing in Detroit.

Somehow Blackstone didn't have the lure DeVries had hoped for, and the taste of adventure he'd had in the wide-open spaces and an urge to write proved stronger than wrangling weighty tomes in an attorney's office. It was logical for him to answer The Lone Ranger's call. Married, he now lives with his wife and son in Michigan where, when not pusing his hobbies hunting and fishing, he's kept busy writing of the land of boots and saddles with, we suspect, an occasional nostalgic thought for his one-time pardner, the "justice rider." So with a hearty Heigh Ho—let's trail along with friend DeVries in next month's issue and go HELL BENT FOR ABILENE!

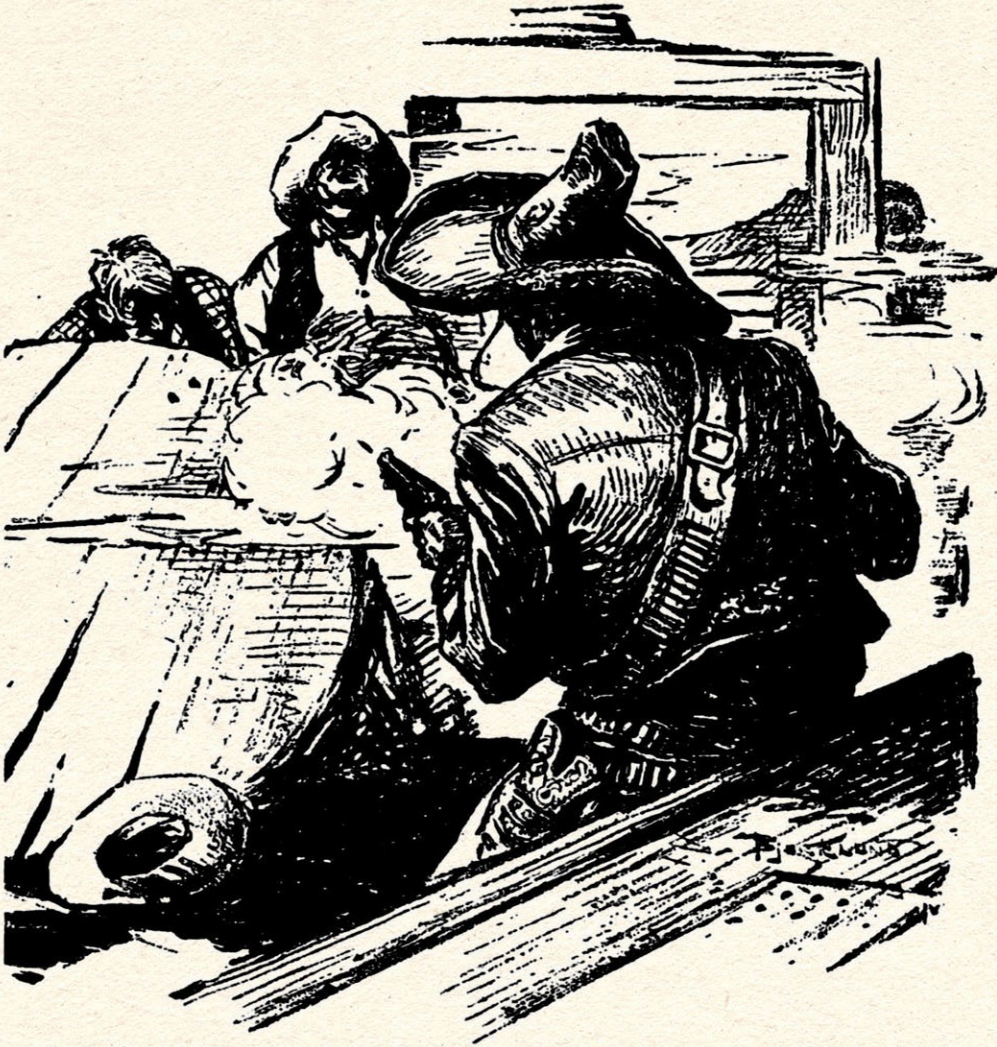
Included, too, in February will be Walt Coburn, Rod Patterson, L. P. Holmes, and C. K. Shaw, plus many other outstanding features of the range country.

POWERSMOKE PILGRIMS

by L. L. FOREMAN



Preacher Devlin had a chance to sell that tough old banker a bill of goods—if he could only depend on his quick-triggered saddle-mate, Don Ricardo, for a siding gun instead of a back-shooting double-cross



1

THEY sat in the Sowell hide-out, drinking bad whiskey because that was the only kind to be had there, while in their minds they kept constantly the knowledge that most of the law of the county was out hunting them. And they didn't care much for the Sowell hide-out, nor for the Sowell bunch, either.

"Somebody ought to trade 'em some soap for this so-called whiskey," remarked Preacher Devlin, not troubling to tone down his deep, harsh voice. "And sell the whiskey for weed killer."

He leaned back in his chair which creaked under the weight of his huge, broad-shouldered frame. He was a man of long and lonely trails, and he had the oddly remote air of one

who lived much alone. His black hat, with its flat crown and broad brim, added its note of ministerial austerity to a knee-length coat of black broadcloth. Yet despite the somber garb, he looked what he was—a man without law. There was a sardonic rakishness to the slight tilt of his hat, and the broad brim did not hide the strong, saturnine cast of his face.

He rested at ease. Only his deep-set gray eyes, icily calm and without emotion, showed by their habitual cold alertness a long acceptance of alarms and sudden violence. His ways were haunted with enemies. He was a dark enigma, like a devil in the pulpit, with a predatory beak of a nose, a wide, hard mouth stamped with a cynical quirk and eyes chill and startling against the darkly burned skin. He was a hawk, arrogant, dominant, dangerous.

The remark about soap for the Sowells drew a nod and a grin from Don Ricardo de Risa. In appearance the Don was the direct antithesis of Devlin. A debonair trimness sat well upon him, although hard use had put a hint of shabbiness on his richly brocaded sombrero, leather charro pants and fine handmade riding boots. Hard use, too, was evidenced in the smoothness of the pair of bone gun butts protruding from carved holsters suspended from crossed and cartridge-studded belts. He was of medium height, slim, graceful of movement, and his swarthy handsome face was adorned with a thin line of black mustache. His teeth were white, his eyes dark and alive. His smile and manners

were so graciously charming that they edged toward the sinister.

Ace gunman and fighting man, one-time Mexican general and at all times a subtle blend of humorous politeness and sultry mischief, Don Ricardo called himself a soldier of fortune—his only requirement being that the fortune be stacked his way.

Don Ricardo agreed that the hide-out left much to be desired. And it did. It was a boar's-nest hidden in the brush, with flimsy slabwood walls, sagging doors, and sacks hung over the glassless windows. The ramshackle stable stood only a few steps away, and flies swarmed everywhere. Encouraging the flies, just beyond the stable was a crude whiskey still. For the Sowells, raw red-eye was the staff of life. They downed a good deal of it themselves, and charged their occasional close-mouthed boarders a dollar a slug for it.

Devlin ran a bleak eye over them. He had a broad tolerance for rascality. But sodden degradation was something else. There were four Sowell men and a girl. The men had bloodshot eyes and grimy, mottled faces. One lay snoring in a corner, and the others bickered dully over a card game in the kitchen.

Don Ricardo examined his empty glass dubiously. "No doubt I can survive one more," he murmured, and rapped on the table.

The girl brought the bottle. She appeared to be the only Sowell who made use of soap, but she would have looked better in something else than the ragged Levis and shirt she had on. As it was, she was not un-

attractive. Her brown eyes were clear and her skin looked clean and soft. She wore an expression of half-defiant reserve as she filled the glasses, an expression that turned into blazing hostility as Don Ricardo suddenly grasped her wrist.

With the swift ferocity of a threatened young tigress, she swung the bottle at his sleek, dark head. He caught it neatly and took it from her, but while he was doing it she wrenched her wrist free and backed toward the kitchen. The Don rose to follow her.

"Chalk it up as an error, Rico!" Devlin yanked him back. "I reckon she's not that kind. Lay off her."

"The error is yours!" snapped Don Ricardo. His eyes held a gleam. "Did you see that birthmark above her elbow? Ah, that interests you, eh? And look!" He whipped out a gold locket on a thin chain, and sprang it open. "Brown eyes and fair hair! A resemblance, no? Do you begin to see ten thousand dollars—and perhaps more?"

"Not too damn clearly," said Devlin. "I don't trust luck that much. It hasn't been too good to me lately—nor to you. I take it."

It had been bad luck, to some extent, that drew them together. They had met in the Bordertown Bar, a palace of bottles, bright lights, cards, and a hell's own symphony of noise. They were old compadres, of a kind, but that didn't account for the unusual warmth of their greeting.

"Preacher! Amigo!"

"Lo, Rico!"

Such good will and cordiality sur-

prised both of them. There had been plenty of reasons in the past for Don Ricardo to be greeting Devlin over a pair of leveled gunsights—about as many reasons as the Preacher had for extending the same blunt courtesy to the Don.

They shook hands. Questioned considerably as to his health, Devlin admitted that it continued good. As to that, the evidence of the black and villanous-looking cigar he was chewing should have been enough.

The amenities being properly observed, Don Ricardo mentioned casually that he found himself a trifle low in cash. "If you lend me a few hundred—"

"Damn it, Rico," said Devlin, "I was just going to ask you the same thing."

The warmth cooled off rapidly between them. Normalcy returned. Their eyes drifted over the noisy bar-room crowd, from habit. Devlin brought his gaze to the gambling tables. So did Don Ricardo. Their glances met and they exchanged a brief nod of understanding. Often in the past they had matched guns and their knife-edged wits over disputed spoils. There had been a few times, however, when circumstances had thrown them together to fight and scheme side by side under a temporary truce.

"Any prospects in mind?" Devlin inquired, and the Don said he hadn't. but that perhaps they could discover something.

Their quiet search turned up a man named Bauer, who had a stack of chips high enough to arouse interest. Bauer was a red-faced, jovial

man, but with a jaw that indicated a flaring temper. A winning streak had put him in a confident mood. He bragged that he had an unbeatable system founded upon a study of all the mathematical chances in poker. He was a gambler's dream, and Devlin and Don Ricardo proceeded to find the flaws in his system. After a few hands Bauer grew slightly less jovial.

Things were going along well, when in stalked a squad of heavily gunned deputies. Devlin shoved his chair back a couple of inches, and Don Ricardo followed suit. They were instantly on guard, fully aware of the state of affairs ruling this town.

It had been a good town, from a certain viewpoint, until its businessmen decided that if it were cleaned up it would benefit business, whereupon they voted to hire men who could do it. Not having that kind of men on their side of the street, they hired some from the other side—a logical procedure which, in practice was not perfect. The hired gunmen-deputies were clamping the lid on, all right, but in so doing they were developing delusions of grandeur. They were stamping on everybody's toes, raising more hell and gun smoke than the town had ever seen in its worst days, and the only really contented businessman was the one who sold ammunition.

The squad that entered the Bordertown Bar came in by a side door, and their path to the bar took them past the poker tables. One of them, drunker than the rest, cracked a knee

against the back of Bauer's chair, cursed, and kicked the chair in retaliation.

Bauer, jolted, spilled a stack of chips and off went the last of his joviality. He sprang up and around, quickly for a man of his bulk, and knocked the deputy flat. What followed was even quicker. The deputy sat up and a gun sputtered in his fist. And down went Bauer, totally ruined for poker.

Devlin's wintry eyes took on a baleful glitter. "C'mon. Rico!" he growled. His hands dipped under his long black coat, and from Don Ricardo came an angry nod. Losing that good poker prospect made the fight strictly their affair.

Experienced fighters, they worked well together and needed no sort of rehearsed plan of campaign. Their methods were simple, direct, and effective. Devlin clunked the first deputy out cold with a gun barrel, and let the hammer down on a triggerman who thought he was coming up too fast to beat. Don Ricardo kicked a table over against three who, taking the trouble to dodge it, found themselves much too late to dodge when Rico tagged them with three shots.

By that time the place had exploded in an uproar, customers stampeding through the doors, bartenders ducking out and taking the cash drawers along, house dealers scooping up all bets and streaking for cover. The gun squad, considerably disorganized, joined in the exodus.

Devlin and Don Ricardo, finding themselves all out of deputies, car-

ried Bauer behind the bar. A lot of stamped-up dust and gunsmoke hung in the air, but that wasn't the cause of Bauer's coughing. Bauer was on his way out, and knew it. He said, dragging a gold locket and chain from his pocket: "If you fellows get clear, tell old man Kedamuir this is all I got to show for four months' work. He'll pay you for it."

"Who's he?" asked the Don.

"Markham Kedamuir, up in Gallesburg. You know . . . owns the Kedco Mine and the bank, and all the rest. There's his daughter's picture in this thing. She ran off with a gambling man a good many years ago, and her father cut her off. He's had a change of heart lately, though. Getting old. His daughter and the gambler, they're dead now, but they had a kid—a girl. Old Kedamuir wants to find her. He's never seen her and likely he never will. It's my guess she died too. She'd be around nineteen now. Name's Anne Jatimer."

"And you hired out to find her?" Devlin queried, watching the doors.

"Right." Bauer grimaced painfully. "Hell of a job, but old Kedamuir's offering ten thousand reward. All's known about her is she's got a birthmark above her left elbow, and maybe she looks like her mother. I didn't hardly know what her mother looked like, till I picked up this locket and picture of hers in a Vera Cruz pawnshop. See, it opens like this. Tricky, huh? Took me an hour to figure how it opened. I guess old Kedamuir'd give a few hundred for it, for a kind of keepsake."

Don Ricardo inserted a lean brown

hand and took the locket. He glanced at the picture in it, of a fair-haired girl with soft brown eyes. "She was pretty, that wayward one," he observed, and dropped the locket into his own pocket.

Somebody whanged loose through a window with a rifle, sprayed the back bar, and brought broken bottles and whiskey showering down on Don Ricardo's gilt-crusted sombrero. The Don registered displeasure with two rapid shots and an oath, and then every door and window spouted its smoky racket.

Devlin, chewing on his unlighted cigar, emptied and reloaded his pair of heavy, long-barreled guns. He sent a look down at Bauer, and when the flurry had slackened off he said curtly: "He's gone. Where's your horse, Rico?"

"In the livery at the rear."

"So's mine. Let's *vamos!*"

A little later they clattered fast out of town, guns thudding behind them. Don Ricardo reined his palomino over alongside Devlin's big, long-legged black. "I have heard of a hide-out over in the Peloncillos, run by some people by the name of Sowell," he called. "It might be wise to lie low till this blows over, eh?"

"Might," agreed Devlin, and they quit the road and headed toward the hills.

II

The girl stood in the kitchen doorway, stormy-eyed. The men in the kitchen glanced up at her indifferently and went on with their card game.

"'Fraid my friend here is a mite impetuous," Devlin said gravely.

"Meant no harm, though."

"I am a gentleman, I hope," put in Don Ricardo.

Devlin nodded. "Let's *all* hope so. What's your name?" he asked the girl.

The stormy brown eyes scanned his hard, forbidding face. "Cleo."

"D'you know who your folks are—or were?"

The girl's anger became shaded with surprise. "I should!" She gestured toward the drunken man snoring in the corner. "That's my father. Those are my brothers in the kitchen. My mother died four years ago. Does that answer you?"

Devlin reckoned it did. He stole an ironic glance at Don Ricardo. "Is that a birthmark on your arm?" he asked the girl.

Her lips straightened bitterly. "No. One of my brothers threw a branding iron at me one day when he was crazy drunk. Yes, it was red hot—but that's no worse than having border-jumping outlaws lay their hands on me!"

Devlin calmly plucked the gold locket from Don Ricardo's hand and tossed it to her. "Accept that as a token of our regret," he said dryly. "Rico. d'you feel like that drink now?"

"Si," sighed the Don. But in a minute he looked up and murmured reflectively, "Still, she could pass as the missing Anne Latimer, perhaps, eh? I could use that ten thousand!"

Devlin shrugged. "Who couldn't?" His eyes followed one of the Sowell brothers stumbling out the back door with an empty bottle, and he watched him halt abruptly outside and then

whirl clumsily to jump back. That was warning enough for Devlin. He kicked the chair out from under the lounging Don Ricardo, in his leap at the girl, Cleo Sowell. He had one arm around her when he hit the floor, and a gun already unsheathed. Don Ricardo went over backward, swearing surprisedly.

A salvo of shots crashed from the thick brush around the cabin, and the Sowell brother sprawled across the threshold. His two brothers reared up, dragging at their holstered guns, too drunk to remember that the flimsy walls were no protection against the fusillade pouring from all sides of the cabin. The noise woke the elder Sowell. He got up, blinked blearily at the still figure lying in the doorway, and staggered toward it, mumbling: "What the hell? What the hell . . ."

Devlin fired through the open door into a trembling thornbush. "Well, Rico," he commented dourly, "looks like our Bordertown playmates must've heard about this nice quiet hide-out you picked for us, h'm?" He held up his next shot because his sight was blocked by the elder Sowell, but he hadn't long to wait. Sowell fell, riddled, as soon as he reached the doorway, and one of his two remaining sons fell over him, trying to pick him up.

The slabwood walls were spotted with bullet holes, and the sacks hanging over the windows jerked constantly. The Bordertown peacemakers were taking no chances this time. They were shooting the place to bits, from the brush, and taking

care to show nothing of themselves.

The last Sowell man sat down again at the kitchen table. He peered almost soberly at Devlin and Don Ricardo. They were hugging the floor, and Cleo called out: "Get down, Bret—get down!"

Bret wagged his head. "Too late now," he mumbled. He fingered an empty glass, staring vacantly at her. "I always been sorry 'bout hittin' you with that iron, sis, know that? Never got round to sayin' so, somehow. Damn, we're all blowed up this time, ain't we? Sis . . . Sis . . ." He slipped off the chair, and the empty glass rolled from his hand over the floorboards.

Cleo didn't cry. She looked at her dead men, her eyes somberly fatalistic, like a trouble-hardened mother seeing her no-account children finally laid to rest. She said, looking at them: "Loose boards in the floor over there. Ditch underneath leads to the stable. They fixed that but they were too drunk to think of it, of course, when the time came to use it."

Don Ricardo promptly located the loose boards and lifted them out.

"Go ahead," Devlin said. "I'll be throwing a few shots to keep those hombres occupied. If you make it to the stable, saddle my horse for me and we'll bust out together."

The Don nodded. He dropped through the floor, gallantly helping Cleo down after him, and Devlin was alone.

With so much brush around the cabin, there was nothing visible to shoot at. Devlin pitched a couple of shots for effect, waited a minute and

thumbed off two more. He was about to spend another shell when he heard a commotion from the direction of the stable. Muttering an oath, he jumped down into the hole in the floor.

The ditch below was narrow and none too deep, but its banks were shielded by brush all the short distance to the stable, where a low gap had been left in the back wall. As he crawled into the stable he had to dodge a flying hoof. "What's your game, Rico?" he rapped.

The Don looked a shade flustered. He and Cleo were in the saddle, he on his palomino, she on a ribby buckskin. He had a hand on the bridle of the buckskin, trying to force the horse one way while Cleo, with the reins, was doing everything but co-operate. The door of the stable hung half open.

"We have your horse saddled," he said brightly.

"Gracias for that much, amigo," returned Devlin. His eyes were glinting. He sent a glance at Cleo's face and read all he needed to know. "Trying to make off with her before I got here, were you, Rico? Hang onto your hat, you slippery son o' Satan!"

He brought a gun barrel down with a whack on the palomino's flank, and the horse let out a snort and hit for the half-open door. The Don was a consummate horseman, but the move caught him unexpectedly. His fingers were torn from the buckskin's bridle, and an instant later the top of the doorway met his tall sombrero and telescoped it down

over his ears. The impact almost knocked him out of the saddle, and for a final misfortune he cracked his right leg against the door and drove it wide open. Off rode Don Ricardo through the brush, for once in his life hanging onto the saddlehorn most disgracefully, while from various points came yells and a scattering of gunfire.

Unhurriedly, Devlin mounted his black, took out a fresh cigar, clamping his teeth on the end, and gave his hat brim a yank.

"I reckon we can make it now, while they're chasing after him," he remarked. "He's a tricky cuss, that Rico, but there's times he has his uses. You didn't care to go with him, h'm?"

Cleo, calming the buckskin, shook her head. "I didn't trust him." She looked up at the dark, trouble-toughened face of the notorious gun-master. "I don't trust you, either—but I trusted him even less!"

A faint grin quirked across Devlin's wide mouth. He drew the rifle from his saddle scabbard and handed it to her. "If you shoot as straight as you talk, we stand a fair chance of breaking out o' this jackpot! Let's try it!"

To an experienced, observing eye, the town of Gallesburg lay in two distinct patterns, the main street being the dividing line, running east and west. North stood the comfortable town houses of well-to-do cattlemen and businessmen, and the small neat homes of the Kedco Mine officials and others who lived sanely and safely on regular salaries.

South of the main street, it was another kind of town. Here were the gambling saloons, dance halls, sun-warped false fronts and hitching racks, and the adobe shacks of mine laborers spread out hodge-podge like an untidy fringe. This was the old Gallesburg, turbulent and iniquitous, born of the cattle trails long before the approach of the railroad, the finding of gold, and the emergence of mining as a sound and respectable business.

The road came over the hills into town, giving the traveler a good opportunity to see what he was riding down into. Significantly, Devlin's gaze ranged south, while Cleo's touched northward.

"Devlin, I'm scared!" Cleo said hushedly. "Look at all those great big houses. People who live in houses like those . . . they'll know right away I'm not their kind! And I'm not. I'm Cleo Sowell, of the no-account Sowells. I'm not Anne Latimer."

She was no longer the Cleo Sowell, though, of the ragged Levis and shirt. In Lordsburg, coming up, Devlin had told her: "Got to make you look something more like a lady." Later, after laying out most of his thinning cash resources on her, he said: "Damned if you don't pretty near pass, at that! Reckon I might's well shoot the works and get you a lady's side saddle. Ever ride one?"

"Never even saw one!"

"You'll learn. Highly genteel, a side saddle."

Now Devlin glanced aside at Cleo's face, reading in it the fear—and the naked longing. "You know I've

got to get shed of you, don't you?" he said gruffly. "A boy, I could turn him loose and he'd get along somehow. But you're a girl. So I've got to find a right place to leave you. This looks good, and no harm in it as I can see. Here we got a cash-heavy old gent pining away for a granddaughter he's never seen, and here you come along to oblige. Hell, we're doing the old boy a favor."

Wisely, he paused to let his words do their work on her. Then he said: "Yesterday you kind o' broke through that shell o' yours. You told me you always craved a clean an' decent life. Right?"

Cleo closed her telltale eyes. "Yes," she whispered.

Devlin trimmed the end of his cigar with his teeth. "Well, little tumbleweed, here's your chance. You'll never get a better one. Forget the name o' Cleo Sowell. You're Anne Latimer. Your mother was decent an' your pa was a gambler. They died in Vera Cruz. I found you in an orphanage down in Mexico City."

She opened her eyes and gazed fully at him. "I could almost believe you're doing this for my sake, and not for that reward," she said. "Almost—but not quite! But I know I owe you plenty for all you've done for me. You've been kind to me. Kinder than I thought any man like you could be." She threw up her head, and a reckless, wild quality hardened her smile. "All right, partner, we'll go through with it! What do we do if it blows up in our faces?"

"Why." Devlin answered reason-

ably, "we'll just quit this Galesburg, about the way Rico and I quit Bordertown!"

She nodded. "On the jump—fast!"

"Correct. So you see there's nothing much to worry about. Now let's ease on down there an' say howdy to your grandpa!"

III

The man in the Galesburg Bank had thin gray hair and a pointed beard, and his eyes were pale and cold behind gold-rimmed glasses. He had been respectfully summoned from behind an oak-paneled door bearing the name of Gordon Holbrook and the title of vice president. He looked at Cleo and back at Devlin.

"She's not Anne Latimer, and you know it!" he stated deliberately, and Cleo paled a little and her glance crept toward the front exit.

A minute before, as he came out of his office, Gordon Holbrook had given a brief head-shake to a tall, patient-eyed young man waiting outside the wicket.

"Your application for a loan is refused, Venters," he said, and added a trifle less formally: "It shouldn't surprise you. Mr. Kedamuir never makes loans to gamblers."

Venters did not respond. He was gazing at Cleo, a fair-haired girl with soft brown eyes, demure in riding cloak, gloves and little arched bonnet. The patience in his eyes gave way to something less inactive. He went on gazing and gave no sign

of having heard a word spoken to him.

Devlin felt Cleo's fingers on his sleeve. He said to Holbrook: "You're quick with your judgment, for a banking man." He, too, could be deliberate and formal. He pushed open the little wicket gate. "Make way for Miss Anne Latimer and escort," he drawled, "or get stepped on! We're here to see Markham Kedamuir, not the hired help. Which door?"

Holbrook hesitated, and led the way to an unmarked door. "You will regret trying this fraud!" he said tonelessly, and preceded them into the inner sanctum of the mighty Markham Kedamuir, chief citizen of Gallesburg.

It was like being ushered into the august presence of a high dignitary of state. The room was thickly carpeted, but severely plain. Behind a massive desk sat an aged, emaciated man, poring over some papers with the aid of a reading glass. His hair, white and thin, barely covered his bony scalp. He did not look up.

Holbrook, motioning for Devlin and Cleo to wait, approached the desk soundlessly and whispered to the old man. The bony head nodded once, and Holbrook turned and beckoned.

"Mr. Kedamuir will see you," he said reverently.

"An' don't forget to salaam to his royal highness," Devlin muttered, and Cleo caught his ironic mood and flashed a grin in tune with it. They halted before the desk.

Markham Kedamuir, still studying the papers, uttered one dry word. "Proof?"

This was hardly encouraging. Devlin, who believed in pushing a bluff to its limit, once begun, rested his fists on his hips. "Look at her. And stand up!" His tone was harshly commanding. "Or are you so old that you think you can dispense with common courtesy?"

Kedamuir raised cavernous black eyes. Slowly he got to his feet, scanning Devlin curiously. "Who are you?"

"The name's Devlin."

"Ah, yes. Known as the Preacher?"

Devlin nodded assent. He never expected to get by anywhere very long without having people recognize him.

Without comment, he brushed back the sleeve of Cleo's dress, exposing the mark above her elbow. With a jerk of his thumb he indicated her brown eyes and fair hair. Lastly, he took the gold locket and chain from around her neck and laid it on the desk.

Holbrook took the locket, opened it and carefully put it down again, his pale eyes disturbed. Kedamuir bent over. Both men stared down at the little picture, and after a long moment Kedamuir said quietly: "Yes, that is my daughter. I gave her that locket on her eighteenth birthday." His black eyes had softened. "I took her to Chicago to have that picture done. It was"—he cleared his throat—"before she ran off with that scoundrel. She went to the devil after that, I suppose."

Devlin touched Cleo's toe with his foot, and she took the hint "My parents are dead," she said, truthfully enough. "I'll not hear ill of them, even from you!"

The sunken black eyes lifted to her young face. "Very well spoken, my dear. That was quite what I should expect their daughter to say. And now, would you mind stepping outside for a moment? I would like to have a few words with Mr. Devlin—privately."

Holbrook escorted Cleo to the door, closed it after her, and returned.

"Mr. Devlin, probably you are thinking that I am an unnaturally cold grandfather," Kedamuir said. "Perhaps I am. But you see, I have considered the possibility that Anne Latimer may have inherited some of her father's bad traits. Until that question is answered by observation, I think it best to leave my emotions uninvolved."

"She's okay," Devlin gave back shortly. "She's a good girl."

Kedamuir inclined his head. "My standards of good behavior may differ from yours a trifle. But never mind that. There is the matter of the reward I offered—of which I am sure you are aware. Ten thousand dollars. You are a gambler. Would you gamble it for twice that sum? Double or nothing. I believe the bet is called."

Devlin removed his cigar and examined it. "Cards or dice?"

Kedamuir's smile was frosty. "Neither. You are also a gunman of considerable note. What I have

in mind would combine your exceptional talents." He sat down and leaned forward. "We are having trouble—serious trouble. Several Kedco gold shipments have been robbed. Cattle are disappearing from my ranches. Two days ago the main Kedco mine shaft was dynamited, and my engineers tell me it will take months to put the mine back in operation."

The gambling glint faded from Devlin's gray eyes. "Better jack up your sheriff. I'm no lawman, as you may have heard!"

Kedamuir and Holbrook exchanged a glance. "We all know who is behind the trouble," Kedamuir said. "but he's too clever for our local law. Phelan Todd, who owns the Chief and a couple of other saloons, is the man. He supports a vicious gang of hoodlums in those vice dens of his, and he has openly threatened to break me. I am a law-abiding citizen, but in this case I believe I am justified in fighting fire with fire. Catch Phelan Todd in his next attempt at me—catch him with proof, and break him—and I'll double that reward to twenty thousand dollars! Think it over."

"I'll think it over till this afternoon, bank-closing time," Devlin answered, moving toward the door. "I'll be pulling out about then, so have my ten thousand ready for me—in cash!"

In the lobby of the bank he found Cleo in conversation with the young man Holbrook had called Venters, and he broke that up by stepping between them. Venters looked the tall gun devil up and down, pursed

his lips in a soundless whistle, and sauntered outside.

Cleo, too, looked Devlin up and down. "Did you have to give him a cold stare like that?" she asked. "His name is Drue Venters, and . . . and he's nice. He's got a ranch and needs a loan to make a go of it, but the bank won't help him out because he used to gamble, and Kedamuir hates gamblers so much that—"

"Sounds like he's been cryin' on your shoulder," Devlin remarked.

Cleo flushed. "We just happened to get talking about—"

"Yeah, I know how that goes. Boys will be boys. Take care o' yourself, an' good luck, case I don't see you before I leave."

Cleo's color vanished. "Devlin—don't go!"

"Huh?"

"Don't leave me alone here! I'm too scared!"

"Dammit, girl, I can't stay here! That Bordertown affair's too fresh." Devlin chewed on his unlighted cigar, scowling down at Cleo's pale face. "All right," he growled at last. "Two days. No more. By that time—" He broke off as Holbrook appeared.

Holbrook came up to them. "You'll pardon me, I hope, for my manner when you first came in," he said impersonally. "I have to look after Mr. Kedamuir's interests at all times, so it's my duty to be suspicious." He bowed slightly to Cleo. "I am to take you to the Kedamuir house and see that you are made comfortable."

Devlin went with them as far as the street. "You can let your boss know I've decided to take that gamble," he told Holbrook, and turned away to

place a considering regard upon Drue Venters.

The young ex-gambler, watching Cleo walk off with Holbrook, did not look too happy. Devlin's inspection pierced the patient eyes, and probed into dogged, weary determination. Venters stacked up as a capable young fellow, hitting a hard road. His hands were steady rolling a cigarette, and the glance he returned Devlin was cool and level.

"How much d'you need, an' how bad?" Devlin asked him abruptly.

Drue Venters lighted his cigarette. "Two thousand dollars. Damn bad. Why?"

"Maybe I can steer that much your way."

"So? Just out of sweet charity. eh—Mr. Preacher Devlin?"

Devlin gave a ghost of a grin. "You'll earn it, if you get it, don't fret! An' I'll get mine. I figure you should know this town pretty well—the ins an' outs, who's who, an' what goes on behind the fronts. I figure I could use you."

"What's the play?"

"Just a little job o' putting the lid on Phelan Todd an' company, an' making Gallesburg snug an' safe for Kedamuir—an' his granddaughter, o' course. Too big for you?"

Drue Venters dragged at his cigarette. "Yesterday, I'd've said it was." He scanned Devlin half-humorously. "Yesterday I still had some sense left. But today . . . hell, cut me in! When do we begin?"

"Know any better time than now?" Devlin queried, and stalked across to

the south side of the main street, toward Phelan Todd's Chief Saloon.

IV

They stood up to the bar, the big back-bar mirror their study guide, while around them pressed the hum of voices, clink of glass, and an everlasting, monotonous *thump-thump* bass vamping of the piano. Drue Venters was checking off some of the men in the barroom, for Devlin's information.

". . . And that long-jawed bird yonder is Si Harris. The one with him is called Concho. Gun team from Arizona. Todd's been building up his crowd with new men, and you can figure what kind he likes!"

Devlin didn't need that hint. It was an impressive bunch, and some of the faces were fairly well known to him. There were Texas trigger-men, cactus busters from Arizona and New Mexico, and nondescript characters who could have come from anywhere. Most of them had two things in common: they were gun-hung, and they had the sparing economy of movement that marked men who lived by the swiftness of their hands.

The back of the piano faced the long barroom, with a brightly colored Navajo robe hung over it. The pianist, a pale youth with restless lips, continued from one tune to another without pause. "He's a newcomer, too," Drue said. "And here comes Todd, himself."

Phelan Todd struck Devlin as two kinds of men in one, and therefore doubly worth watching. He had

wide-apart eyes set below a heavy brow, a flattened nose, and he kept his head tilted forward. But he dressed like a dandy, had the mincing step of a dancer, and in general resembled a bull that had taken a fancy to genteel ways.

"Preacher Devlin, I believe? I'm Todd." He spoke softly, in a voice not meant for softness. "Glad to meet you. You're a friend of a friend of mine, I think."

"Which one?" Devlin queried.

"Markham Kedamuir," replied Todd affably, and smiled. "The news is that he's finally found his granddaughter. That's fine. He's been having bad luck. Let's hope nothing happens to the girl."

"It better not!" Devlin's voice, too, was soft now. "His luck may change before that."

"It may," Todd conceded. "But have you noticed yet what's cropped up? Come over to the door and see." At the door, he pointed at the bank. "Look at the crowd—and more coming! The whisper's gone out that Kedamuir's bad luck has busted him and the bank's due to fail. They all want their money before the crash comes. It's a run on the bank, and it's only the beginning! Good-by, bank!"

Devlin's teeth clamped down hard on his cigar. The situation, as he had sized it up, had presented no great problems that could not be solved with a whiff of gunsmoke. But here was an element that defied violence. It had its roots in rumor, distrust and in the mob panic that could wreck any bank and ruin those behind it. The thought of the matter

of twenty thousand dollars lanced through his mind; his eyes narrowed bleakly.

As if guessing the gun master's thoughts, Todd said: "This'll wipe out old Kedamuir, I guess. Some things a man can fight, or get somebody who can fight them for him. But a whisper—how can you fight that?" He turned a fixed, false smile on Drue. "Now, you'd have done well to stick to a faro bank, instead of tying into"—his eyes flashed to Devlin—"other affairs that are a hell of a lot riskier! Let's have a drink."

He chose a chair at a table not far from the piano, and signaled a bartender. "Yes," he went on when they were served, "a man's foolish to try fighting some things, don't you agree, Devlin?"

"I'm a stranger here," Devlin said solemnly. "I wouldn't know yet." He cocked an eye at the piano and mentioned it was damned lousy music, and his gaze went blank and frozen as Todd whistled to the pale youth at the keyboard.

"Change the tune!" Todd commanded. He repeated distinctly: "Change it! Give us something with a zip in it!"

The player ran the tip of his tongue over his restless, twitching lips, staring at Devlin. He nodded. His head bobbed as he brought his hands down on the keys—and Devlin heeled himself clear of his chair, quick as a cat, a split second before a gun roared at him.

The Navajo robe rippled slightly as a second bullet tore through it,

aimed rigidly at the empty chair, and then the pianist cursed and hid himself somewhere down by the foot pedals. Seemingly deliberate and unhurried, but with his slaty eyes still holding their frozen look, Devlin flipped out a gun and fired into the piano. His first slug nicked a treble wire inside and fetched forth a single high note. His second registered a sonorous bass. The third was marked by a gasp, and the pianist came crawling out from cover on one elbow, paler than ever, shaking his head in mute surrender.

Devlin switched his chill regard to Todd, who had not moved from his seat at the table. "I savvy that piano-wire trick. I've seen it played before." His tone was flat, biting. He paid no attention when Drue strode to the robe and threw it aside, exposing a gun with a wire looped around the trigger. "What else have you got that a man can't fight, Todd?" he asked balefully.

Todd wagged his head. "Can't blame me for what a crazy piano player might do. Maybe he just doesn't like you!" He dipped his eyes at Devlin's gun, and raised them again to the stilled and very silent crowd.

Nobody moved. The Arizona gun team, Si Harris and Concho, stood watching the long blue barrel.

"What new tricks can you two tin-horns show?" asked Devlin.

They didn't answer, didn't rise to the challenge. Devlin planted a bullet between them and they didn't flinch at the report, but they slid their eyes to the neat round hole and did nothing with their hands.

"I guess," spoke up Drue, "you get no takers here, Preacher!"

Todd smiled. His smile showed strain, and his face had grown mottled as if bruised. "Don't bet on that!" He jerked his head in the direction of the stairway that led to the rented rooms above, and Devlin looked up into the dark and mocking eyes of Don Ricardo de Risa.

The Don, hands resting on hips just above the bone gun butts, descended the stairs. "Amigo!" He halted, a dozen paces from Devlin. He clicked his heels and bowed. "Something told me I should find you here in Callesburg!"

Todd's sharp glance raced between. Don Ricardo noticed it and laughed lightly, coming closer. He took Devlin's vacated chair and sat down. "I just got in a while ago. I inquired here about you." He drew out a silver-tipped cigarette and tapped it on his thumb nail. "I am told you have found the missing Anne Latimer—Kedamuir's very own granddaughter, last of the Kedamuir clan! How fortunate! How happy they must be, the gentle old man and the—"

He broke off. He bent a bright gaze upon Todd. "Must you leave us?" His glance touched Drue. "And you?"

Devlin took Todd's chair. He waited till he and the Don had the table to themselves. "Well, Rico, how's the head?"

Don Ricardo pushed back his somewhat battered sombrero, displaying a knob on his forehead. His white teeth flashed. "I still have a

slight headache. Do you feel receptive to suggestions? I suggest, first, that you kindly pay me half of that reward! After that, I shall help you figure out ways of . . . ah . . . obtaining further plunder from the Kedamuir coffers, using the girl as our private little key! The situation has many fine possibilities, no?"

Devlin's eyes glimmered a wryly humorous appreciation of the Don's engagingly candid rascality. "S'pose I tell you I haven't collected the reward yet?"

"I would be disappointed. But not discouraged."

"S'pose I tell you to go to hell?"

Don Ricardo spread his hands and looked pained. "Amigo! A word from me, and where would you be? Where would the girl be? And the reward, and other prospects? No, no, you are far too wise for that!"

Devlin placed a considering survey on the bone gun butts. In all their many clashes, he and the Don had never yet quite reached the point of matching draw for draw. They were both too deadly fast, too well aware of the other's abilities. Master against master could result only in a double fatality. And yet . . .

Don Ricardo, catching the drift of the thoughtful survey, slipped both hands to his crossed belts. His dark, handsome face grew carven and lean. "No!" he breathed. Not fearfully. Just earnestly.

Devlin rose. It ran through his mind that he was in one hell of a snarled-up bobble that was rapidly getting worse. "Rico," he said tiredly, "you're horning into a game here that's got more damned unpleas-

ant angles than double-deck poker with the deuces wild. Take my word for it, I haven't even won my ante back yet!"

Don Ricardo sighed sympathetically. "Too bad. But, of course, that is your affair. Now that I am here to . . . hem . . . encourage you, I am sure you will make an extra effort. I am impatient to begin filling my pockets before this thing blows up. Also, I happen to know that a Ranger squad is hot on our trail because of that Bordertown business! To spur you on, amigo, let me say that I shall feel forced to take matters into my own hands if the golden stream of plunder does not begin within the next few hours!"

He leaned back, smiling lazily into the coldly glittering gray eyes, and kept his hands over his gun butts till the batwing doors flapped behind Devlin.

V

Devlin had a caller that evening. A nervous tapping sounded on the door of his hotel room, and when he opened it Gordon Holbrook came in.

Furtiveness sat oddly upon Holbrook. Avoiding the window and the lighted lamp, he peered uncertainly at Devlin. "The bank," he began without preamble, "is in a desperate state! Only the closing hour saved it today! We have a good amount of cash in the vault, but not nearly enough to pay off everybody, of course. I suppose you know who spread the rumor that the bank was failing?"

"Todd?" the Preacher asked.

"Correct!" Holbrook spoke hurriedly. "Mr. Kedamuir is still a wealthy man, as far as valuable assets are concerned, but it would take time to sell those assets, and even then it would be at a tremendous loss to him. The Kedco Mine, for example, in its present condition. Meantime, the bank would fail. Business is an intricate thing, but I think you can understand it if I describe it as a large and carefully built edifice of many dependent parts. Chop away its foundations, and the whole edifice falls to ruin. The bank, in this case, is the foundation. If it's smashed, Kedamuir will soon face ruin! You grasp that?"

Devlin nodded. "I grasp the idea that if the run goes on, I stand a damned slim chance of ever collecting that twenty thousand dollars—if an' when I earn it!"

"Correct!" Holbrook said again. "So the problem is to stop the run on the bank. It means we must show everybody a perfectly plausible reason for closing the bank until some of Mr. Kedamuir's assets can be liquidated without too severe a loss to him."

He gnawed his lip. "I have a solution, which I am afraid to suggest to Mr. Kedamuir. He would strongly disapprove of it. But my duty to him impels me to take the step on my own initiative."

"What's the step?" Devlin asked him.

"Stage a . . . a fake robbery of the bank vault! T-tonight!" Holbrook spoke so fast he stammered. "We'll hide the money in the

Kedamuir house! Here are the b-bank keys!"

He almost ran out. Closing the door behind him, he stuck his head back in and whispered: "P-please—for heaven's sake—b-be careful!"

Devlin stood staring at the closed door. "Well, I'll be—" he muttered, and picked up the little bunch of keys.

Five minutes later Devlin looked into the Chief. He sighted Don Ricardo, caught his eye, and motioned for him to come outside. "Rico," he said casually, handing him the keys, "how would lootin' the b-bank suit you?"

"Bueno!" exclaimed the Don promptly. "When?"

"Meet me there at two in the mornin'," murmured Devlin, and walked off, leaving Don Ricardo smiling beatifically up at the stars.

It was not yet two o'clock in the morning when Devlin, lying fully dressed on his hotel bed, called, "Who's there?" to a knock on the door.

"Kedamuir," came the reply, in the unmistakable dry voice.

Devlin's brows drew together in quick speculation, and he took his time rising. Something had popped, that was clear, to bring Kedamuir out at this hour. His frown remained while he turned up the wick of the lighted lamp. He stepped to the door, opened it—and looked into the muzzles of four cocked guns.

It was not the face of Kedamuir that met him. It was the iron-hard visage of a man wearing the small gold badge of a United States

Marshal. Around the marshal were ranged three other badged, grim men. Very quietly, the marshal said: "Don't make a move—not a finger!" He waited a moment, motionless, the bunched muscles of his jaw betraying his tenseness. Without shifting his eyes, he spoke again. "Mr. Kedamuir! Will you come here now and identify him?"

Markham Kedamuir came up behind the marshal's three deputies. "That's the man! Do you doubt it?"

"No. Just a formality," responded the marshal. "I've seen his description too many times to mistake him! Devlin, you stayed too long! I only got word at noon that things were getting hot here. You're under arrest!"

Devlin's saturnine mask grew a shade more pronounced. "Why?"

The marshal snorted at the question. "To start with, somebody cleaned out the bank here not more'n an hour ago! Get your hands in the air and back up—Who the hell's that?"

Boots pounded the stairs, and Drue came charging in, ignoring the snapped commands of the deputies. His face was gray. "Anne!" he choked. "Devlin, they got her! They—"

It was all the chance Devlin needed. He was backing up before the leveled guns, obedient to the command, but for an instant the marshal and his deputies had their attention partly distracted by Drue. Devlin drove his foot far back against the table and lamp, and using the drive of it for his own impetus he lunged full tilt into them. The

next instant they were in the dark and trying to halt the outward-bound course of a black thunderbolt.

Drue was in the fracas, but not exactly a part of it, till somebody's elbow rammed him in the teeth. He struck out, connected, and could have followed it up if a rock-hard shoulder hadn't bunted him off his feet. It was Devlin's shoulder and it sent Drue catapulting through the door, knocking Markham Kedamuir out from under his plug hat en route. Devlin stepped on Kedamuir on his way out and inadvertently booted him halfway down the stairs.

Devlin was making the stairs at a leap before the marshal took a chance in the dark and fired after him. He didn't waste time on a suitable reply, but as soon as he hit the street another gun cut loose at him, and this one wasn't behind him. He picked out the flash in a doorway across the street, chopped a shot there, and while a murky figure rolled from the doorway other guns took up the tune fast from points elsewhere.

Boot heels hammered behind him. He whirled, and came near putting his mark on Drue before recognizing him in the dim light of the street. "Who gave you a ticket to this riot?" he grunted, blazing back into the hotel for the sake of the marshal.

"I'm stringing along on a bet," Drue retorted. He had his right hand full of gun butt and looked ripe to use it. "Devlin, I tell you Anne's been—"

"With high law up behind me, and

some o' Todd's boys chipping in yonder," Devlin interrupted, "I got no time to hear you gab about some girl! Shut up an' shoot, or get out o' here!"

He brought down his heavy man stoppers, blasted them empty to clear the street, and went sprinting for the livery stable. A roaring shotgun headed him off from there, and he dived into an alley. Drue was still with him and still trying to talk about a girl. Doors and windows banged everywhere, the whole town waking up with a shout.

"She's gone!" Drue was saying. "Happened some time after the bank was robbed!"

Devlin swore softly. A shotgun pellet had ripped his neck and it didn't feel good. "If you don't quit talking about—"

"But they've got her! Three-four masked men broke into old Kedamuir's house and grabbed her! Knifed the Mexican butler and he only lived long enough to tell about it!"

"Huh? Oh—*that* Anne!"

"Sure! Who else? They left a message. Kedamuir's got to pay fifty thousand in cash to get her back!"

"H'm!" Devlin thumbed fresh shells into his guns. "I doubt he'd pay that much to get his misspent youth back! Where's Holbrook's house? Maybe we can reach it."

"Him? What the hell good is he to us?"

"He savvies big business, an' this is a big business night! Lead the way an' do it quick!"

VI

Typical of its conservative neighborhood, Gordon Holbrook's place was a two-storied frame house with a garden and fence around it. No lights showed along the quiet street.

Drue stirred restlessly. He and Devlin stood in the black shadows of a line of planted cottonwoods, eyes and ears busy.

"What're we waiting for?" Drue demanded impatiently. "Harmless as a church, that house. Why not go over and knock?"

Devlin's eyes glimmered palely at him. "Sure, why not?"

Drue shrugged and went off. He walked up the path to the front door and knocked. It was a minute before the door swung part open. A voice murmured something, and Drue stepped inside. Devlin, listening intently, caught the sound of a brief scuffle and a low cry of alarm. The door closed on utter silence.

"Harmless as a church!" Devlin muttered, and moved on down the line of cottonwoods before crossing the moonlit street and prowling up behind the house.

Dispassionately efficient, he sought entrance into the silent building. A leap, and he drew himself noiselessly up onto the overhanging roof of the back porch. He drew his knife, cut rapidly at the molding of a window, pried the pane out, and, reaching through, unfastened the catch. He opened the window and stepped over the sill, hearing a throaty noise close by him.

The moonlight did not penetrate into this rear bedroom, and Devlin

explored for the noise. His feet came in contact with a body on the floor. He ran his hands over it, touching knotted ropes and a cloth gag, and a forehead with two knobs on it.

"How's the bankin' business, Rico?" he murmured, cutting the gag.

Don Ricardo was in no mood to savor humor. "They jumped me and clubbed me as I came out of the bank!" he spluttered. "Robbed me! Me! And they spoke of planting evidence that I looted the bank and kidnaped that girl. The thieving—"

"Save it!" Devlin cut the ropes. "Is Cleo here?"

"In the next room. I heard them carry her in, after—"

"Let's get her." Devlin found the door and eased it open. "Quiet, now! Town's popped. All cluttered up with big law and gun boogers. We're blown up here."

The next room was like the other, a square of darkness, and much the same kind of throaty noise came from it as soon as Devlin whispered Cleo's name. They found her rolled and tied in a blanket, and after Devlin cut her free he had to hold her up. She was dazed and could hardly speak, for on her head, too, was a bump.

Don Ricardo's fingers closed on Devlin's arm. "Listen!"

Stairs creaked, and from a low mumble of voices they caught a phrase: ". . . so throw him in the same room with her."

"Give me a gun!" hissed the Don in Devlin's ear.

"Hell I will! Noise'd bring the law!" Devlin darted a look at the window. No time to carry Cleo out that way. He felt around for a hiding spot and opened a wardrobe door. "Damn it, they'll see she's gone, though, and search! We might roll her up again for the time bein'. But she's—"

"No, no. I'll take her place. They won't notice in the dark. Quick—put the blanket and ropes on me!"

"Nice o' you, Rico." Devlin nearly smothered the Don in the blanket. "The lady'll thank you when she's feelin' better."

"I am, I hope, a gentleman!"

"Sure. Keep hopin' an' maybe some day you'll get there." Devlin joined Cleo in the wardrobe and softly closed the door.

Dim shapes of men bulked in the bedroom doorway, bearing something that squirmed and struggled. They put their burden on the floor, and the purring voice of Phelan Todd said: "Is the girl okay, Si?"

"I guess so. She was— Hey, these ropes is loose! Who—" Si Harris gave a yelp. "What the hell!" He was fighting with the captive in the blanket. "She's come untied!"

"Hold onto her, some of you!" Todd snapped. "Cover that window and light a lamp!"

The light of the lamp, when it came, illuminated bewildered faces as well as the furiously disgusted countenance of Don Ricardo, who had three men on top of him. A fair modicum of poise being very desirable in a gentleman, the Don relaxed and eyed Todd owlishly.

"I didn't like the other room," he explained solemnly.

His blunt and massive face wooden, Todd stood over him. "Where did the girl go?" He cocked a snub-nosed pistol. "Talk fast!"

Don Ricardo gave the pistol only a passing glance. "What girl? Is she pretty? You must introduce me! By the way, don't let that pop gun go off. Might wake up the neighbors."

"You're right, it might." Slowly Todd uncocked the pistol, dropped it in his coat pocket. "But this"—he slid a flat, double-edge dirk from his sleeve—"won't wake anybody! Talk!" He knelt and held the point of the blade between Don Ricardo's eyes, and the Don paled a little.

The Don had his code. Tattered and curiously warped here and there, it allowed for a good deal of leeway. But some things it strictly forbade. Some things a caballero could not do and still retain his dignity, his self-respect, his gallantry.

"Go to hell," he said, and closed his eyes as the point of the dirk descended.

The wardrobe door flew open with a crash, and Devlin loomed huge and blackly spectral in the lamplight, guns spurting. Gone was the needful hush. Concho, gun mate to Si Harris, spun around at the first crack of sound, hands slicing to his holsters. He stopped a bullet meant for Todd and reeled back against him, knocking him across Don Ricardo. The Don fetched up a knee, jerked loose of the startled men holding him, and, not able to unwrap himself from the blanket in

a hurry, did what he could by rolling against the legs of those nearest him.

Weaving and striking like a black panther gone berserk, Devlin burst into the group and attacked from the middle, slashing out with his heavy barrels. Somebody stumbled over the lighted lamp and crunched it with a heel, and spilled burning oil took the place of the wick, licking at the legs that slithered in it.

The room became a madhouse, men aiming blind blows through the smoky glare at the tall, hell-eyed terror who was smashing them down like a battering ram. Long-jawed Si Harris, skidding a heel in the spilled oil and falling face down in the flames, leaped up with hair ablaze and dived for the door. He uncorked a jam there, for Todd and two or three others were making an exit all at the same time, and his blazing head hit them and drove them through.

Devlin spent two shots on the doorway for final clearance, and, with a fast getaway in mind, turned toward the window. The thick drapes there were a sheet of flame, and the varnished wood wall around it had already caught. Cleo came swaying out of the wardrobe and Devlin tossed her his knife, gesturing at Drue who still lay bound with his clothes smoking. Then Devlin put his attention back on the door. There was blood down one side of his face from a gash over his eye, and his ripped neck was caked with it.

The window he abandoned for good. Nobody could get out that way, and the room was becoming a bonfire. Don Ricardo showed up

beside Devlin; he had lost his hat and half his shirt, and his eyes streamed from the smoke, but he had scooped up a couple of guns.

"We've got to get out, Preacher—now!"

"Don't I know it?"

They stared at the door. From down the stairs and along the short hall outside, bullets were pounding into the door frame. The group that had come up with Todd had been only a part of his force. The house was full of his saloon gunsters.

Drue, helping Cleo, came up to Devlin. "Got a gun to spare?" He got a shake of the head, turned to the Don, and got the same.

"Follow along with her—maybe you'll get to gather up ours!" said Devlin, and he looked at Don Ricardo and they both grinned. It was not the grin of a spoken jest, but of two men who, knowing this might be their last long gamble, shared a wry and reckless humor drawn from a mutual understanding. "C'mon, Rico!"

"With you, amigo!"

They split without a nod or word at the foot of the stairs. Devlin took the front rooms, Don Ricardo the rear, each expecting the other to carry his end and knowing it would be done.

The first room Devlin entered held three men, two at an inner door and one behind an upturned dining table. The two at the door dissolved to sagging dolls under a blast of exploding cartridges, and the other hooked his fingers and turned his face to the ceiling. The sitting room lay beyond,

and it emptied with Devlin's entrance.

He fired into a draped archway and the drapes came down, a man behind hanging futilely to them, falling. Past the archway ran a passage leading to the rear, and there Devlin came upon what was left of Todd's mob congregated in the kitchen. They were making splintered lace of a closed door, somewhere behind which Don Ricardo had been brought to a more or less temporary halt, and they were in the dark, only a bar of moonlight piercing a small side window.

Devlin bent low, entering, and they knew of his presence among them only after a man uttered a yell that was broken off. The Preacher was conscious of noise and loud voices outside the house, and of Drue advancing down the passage behind him, but these were elements outside his heeding. His eyes were on the bar of moonlight on the floor, on a cellar trap door, on the dim silhouette of a blunt face and a hand that raised the trap door, and lowered it again, and dropped from view.

He made the trap door his objective and worked toward it, one gun holstered, the other silent till he reached it and lifted it. Light came up from the cellar, outlining him for the instant while he dropped into it and let the trap door bang shut.

He got a rapid impression of two leather grips on a wooden packing case, of Todd standing by them and Holbrook lying on the earthen floor. Then Todd jumped, and vision narrowed to the snub nose of the pistol

belching a puff of thin smoke over the edge of the packing case. Devlin fired, sent slivers spraying, and at his next trigger squeeze the hammer slapped an empty shell.

Todd voiced a hoarse sound, half curse, half chuckle, and he leaned out, pistol raised high for a sight shot. The long-barreled mate to the empty gun flicked out from under the ministerial black coat, and roared once.

The thumb overlaying the pistol butt relaxed, and the pistol tipped over, dangled for a little while by its trigger guard on a weakening forefinger, and dropped off. Todd leaned on the packing case, on one elbow.

"Damn your soul!" he said, not to Devlin, but to Holbrook lying on the floor. He looked cloudily at Devlin then, almost fraternally, and his soft tone came back. "We . . . stayed too long . . . didn't we? Too long . . . the game. We always do . . . hombres like us. Some day . . . you'll . . . stay too long . . . too, Preacher . . . somewhere . . ."

The fire had eaten through the upstairs floor when Devlin climbed from the cellar with Holbrook over his shoulder, but there was no more shooting. By the flickering flare Devlin saw men with their hands raised, and Don Ricardo among them.

The taut voice of the marshal rapped from a window, "You, too, Devlin! Quick, or well—"

"An' let Holbrook tumble?" Devlin queried. "Use your head,



hombre, an' let's hold this here meetin' outside!"

He led the exodus from the house and laid Holbrook on the grass. The street was crowded, and a lot of citizens charged at the burning house with buckets. Devlin, with a gun prodding him in the back, spoke to Kedamuir. "There's stuff worth savin' in the cellar. Maybe Holbrook can tell you about it."

Holbrook's gray suit was blotched and his necktie hung out, but the deepest change was in his face. His glasses were gone, and his pale eyes showed a bitter hatred that matched the twist of his lips.

"Eight years," he said weakly. "Eight years I worked for this night . . . and missed! But I came damned close to wrecking you, Kedamuir! I used to dream of the day I'd see you ruined!"

He spoke through his teeth. "I watched my wife dying, down in Vera Cruz. An epidemic. My luck was bad. I wrote to you about her, and you wrote back saying it was

just a trick to get money out of you. I sold and pawned everything we had. It wasn't enough. She died. Your own daughter!"

Kedamuir caught his breath, and his face turned chalky. "You!" he whispered. "You're not—"

"Birch Latimer . . . that no-good gambler your daughter ran off with! I didn't let you know when she died, nor when our kid . . . Anne . . . went the same way. But I swore I'd make you taste poverty some day, and I came back north. I grew a beard and wore glasses, and changed my name, and when I showed you a batch of forged references you hired me. I worked my way up—carefully, because I had plenty of time and I planned to do this right."

The marshal inserted a word. "You helped Todd, eh?"

The dying man snorted. "Hell, he took his orders from me! We shot the full works tonight, but when Devlin broke into the game we knew it was time to get out. I went into the cellar to gather up the cache and skip, but Todd had the same idea. He caught me at it and knifed me."

He stared up at Kedamuir. "A few hundred dollars would have saved your daughter's life—don't ever forget that! I sure hope you live a long time!"

Minutes later, when the one-time gambler was quiet, the marshal touched Cleo's arm. "What he told us," he observed, "kind of makes you an imposter, and a party to conspiracy and fraud—pretty serious charges, young lady!"

Drue shoved him away. "Keep your paws off. You don't arrest her.

mister: I don't care who she is!"

The marshal looked uneasy, but the law was the law. "According to what that man said—" he began.

Devlin and Don Ricardo swapped glances. They would try all ways to break out of this jackpot, and they would try to break the girl out with them. She was, to some extent, their responsibility and their comadre. Devlin cut in on the marshal's speech.

"How d'you know that feller told the truth?" he demanded. "Hell, you can't believe these gambling men, anyhow!"

Kedamuir, coming out of a daze, smiled tiredly. "I make no charges against anybody. I want nobody arrested—nobody. Marshal, if I choose to accept her as my granddaughter, there is nothing more to be said, is there? I . . . I . . ." He faltered and stopped talking, and walked slowly away.

Said the marshal sourly: "I could think of plenty reasons for taking you in, Devlin! Better not stay here too long!"

They rode together in the early morning sunlight, northward, Devlin and Don Ricardo. The Don broke a long silence with a question.

"You saw Kedamuir before we left?"

"Yeah. Seems he knew Anne

Latimer died years ago. His lawyers finally found a record of it. He'd just got through reading it when I showed up with Cleo. But he just played along, figuring to use me, an' for a safety he sent for the marshal. I reckon I'll never try anything much on a banker again!"

"And how did you come to suspect Holbrook?"

"That gold locket. It was a trick to open, but he did it right away. Two-three things about him didn't look right. When he brought up his bright idea o' robbin' the bank to save it, I figured it for a double-cross on me an' the bank. So I let you do it, an' sure enough that's what it was!"

Don Ricardo blinked, glared, and pulled his horse to a halt. "You—you guessed what would happen? And you steered me into it!" His voice rose. "*Diablo!*"

"Take it easy," Devlin soothed him. "Kedamuir got back enough stolen gold shipments an' bank money in that cellar cache to float the bank an' plenty to spare, an' he kicked through with a bet he owed me. I paid Drue a couple thousand I owed him out of it, an' I been thinkin' maybe now I could let you have that loan you braced me for down in the Bordertown Bar."

"Amigo!" murmured the Don.

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!

*Holding fire at that buck was the hardest
thing Lannie ever had to do—yet it proved
he was*

MAN ENOUGH

by JIM KJELGAARD



LANNIE was awakened by the muffled thud of horses' hoofs. He lay on his cot, looking into the blackness that enfolded the attic like a friendly blanket and striving to hear. The door opened and shut; his father had gone out. Lannie listened tensely but the conversation of the men outside came to him as only a low-pitched rustle of voices. A few minutes later the horses galloped away and his father re-entered the cabin.

"Who was it?" Lannie heard his mother ask.

"Joe Newell and a posse. He

wanted me to join them and hunt Dave Vroman."

"Did he break jail?" Lannie's mother sounded frightened.

"Yup. Yesterday afternoon. But he ain't here. They just think he might try to beat his way back here, and they're going to watch."

Lannie swelled with pride. His father, a game warden with the entire Hardshell district to patrol, was a mighty important and busy man. But he was never so busy as on this, the first day of the deer season. Even a posse must come second to eating breakfast, saddling Nosey, and riding out to check hunters. Lannie heard his father push his breakfast dishes back and rise. Hopping out of bed, Lannie dressed, and scooted downstairs.

His father stood near the table, wearing a sombrero, a six-shooter buckled about his waist. Lannie's adoring eyes devoured him. Of all the fine things a man might do, being a game warden was assuredly the finest. His father stood so straight and fine, so rugged and strong. He turned, saw Lannie, and said:

"Hi, Buck. You're up early, aren't you?"

"I couldn't sleep any more," said Lannie.

His father thrust the lunch his wife had made inside his checkered shirt and put six new cartridges into the belt about his waist. He kissed his wife and ran a rough hand through Lannie's tousled hair.

"I'll be back this evenin'," he said.

"Be careful," warned his wife.

The door opened and closed, and Lannie's father was gone.

Lannie sat impatiently at the table, waiting for his mother to bring him a plate full of the golden-brown batter cakes that she was cooking on a griddle. He fidgeted on the chair, moving nervously back and forth and trying to keep his eyes away from the rack which held his father's rifles. Lannie knew the rifles as well as he did his own bed. There was the big .30-06 on top, the little .30-30 carbine in the center, and the light .25-20 on the very bottom of the rack.

His mother brought a platter of cakes in, put them on the table, and sat down. Lannie took a great heap of the steaming cakes on his plate, coated them with butter, and flooded them with amber maple syrup. He ate hurriedly, scarcely pausing to chew. But when he was finished he saw that he might as well have been in less of a hurry because his mother ate a leisurely breakfast.

Daylight crept slowly through the window and dimmed the flickering kerosene lamp on the table. Lannie's mother finished eating and pushed her plate aside. Lannie watched her eagerly, expectantly, knowing that she would now go out to feed the chickens and wait with the breakfast dishes until that was done. She rose, donned a sweater and pulled on a felt hat.

"Can I go out in the woods today?" Lannie asked her with studied unconcern.

"I—I don't think you'd better."

"Aw, it's safe," Lannie pleaded. "I heard pa say that that old Vroman ain't around here. And anyway he won't get past Joe Newell's posse if he tries to come. Lemme go, -ma."

"Well . . . all right. But be back for dinner."

"I will."

His mother went out the door and closed it behind her. Lannie scooted to the rack where his woolen jacket hung, put on that and his plaid cap, and tiptoed to the gun rack. He hesitated. His father had given him strict orders to stay away from the guns, under penalty of a sound spanking. Lannie's hand stole up to the .30-30, and he lifted it from the rack. He took half a dozen shells from a box, dropped them into his pocket, and hurried from the house.

The friendly half darkness of early dawn received and shielded him. He stopped in the grove of big pines that grew a hundred feet from the kitchen door. There was still time to take the gun back before his mother finished feeding the chickens. But . . .

Lannie turned to look at the beckoning wilderness that stretched before him. Since he had dreamed of anything it had been his dream to go into the wilderness with a gun, as his father did, and hunt some of the many fascinating things that were to be found there. His father had said that he might go on his twelfth birthday. But that was a year and a half away, and Lannie just couldn't wait any longer. No one would ever know that he had gone out. His mother never looked at the gun rack, and would not notice that the .30-30 was missing. And always, promptly at noon, she went out to gather the fresh eggs that the chickens had laid. Lannie could go back in the same

way he had come out, and return the gun to its rack.

Lannie turned and fled deeper into the wilderness.

Now he was no longer Lannie, the boy. He was the man, grown and hard, afraid of nothing, and about to hunt the wilderness creatures as a man would hunt them. He carried the rifle with its safety on and muzzle towards the ground, just as his father had told him many times was the proper way to carry a gun. And he moved slowly, putting each foot carefully down when he walked, always being certain that he stepped on no stone or twig that might betray his presence. For that was the way hunters walked.

A doe whistled, and fled before him with her white tail erect. Lannie stood quietly, watching her go. No hunter took pot shots at anything that moved before him, but always waited until he was sure before raising his rifle. And when he shot, he shot to kill. That, too, was the hunter's way. Lannie stole through the pine woods to the rim of a wild and almost treeless but grass-carpeted valley.

He had been there before, many times throughout the spring, summer and such of the fall as had elapsed, and he knew intimately the monster



buck that this valley harbored. Lannie had seen it first in the spring, just after the deer had shed its antlers. But he had watched those antlers grow back again. Mere stubs at first, they had become broad of beam, with many long tines that made this a prize among bucks, a hunter's dream come true. Lannie lay on his stomach and for ten minutes peered steadily into the valley. There was no sign of life there.

He looked at the sun, that had climbed into the heavens and started its westward swing. It was a little early. Every day, at or near nine o'clock by the sun, the buck emerged from a little draw beside the valley and drank from a bubbling spring in the center of it. Lannie dropped over the side of the valley and slunk through the brush that clothed it. He crawled from the bottom of the slope to a huge boulder and breathlessly raised his head.

The spring was only fifty yards away, and the wind was blowing from it to Lannie. Beyond, he commanded a fine sweep of the valley. The sun went a little farther on its westward swing, and suddenly Lannie saw the buck.

It walked from the draw into the valley, and stood looking steadily in Lannie's direction. It didn't need to look down the valley, for its nose told it of anything that might come from that direction. Lannie held very still, trying to melt into the boulder, and at long last the deer turned its head away. It walked farther into the valley, a magnificent thing with great, sweeping antlers that were raised on a proud

head and a curving, muscular neck. Inch by inch, Lannie slid the carbine over the boulder. This was the moment of which he had dreamed. His finger tightened on the trigger.

Then a look of anguish crossed his face and he lowered the gun. There was motion farther down the valley, and a flash of brown there. Lannie watched tensely, the huge buck still so close that he could not miss, and the approaching hunter that he might hit if he *did* miss. He breathed excitedly, his eyes glued on the hunter. If only the man would turn aside . . . But this was also Lannie's father's way, and his father certainly knew. It was better to let the finest trophy in the wilderness go by than take a chance on killing a human being.

The buck snorted, and turned to lope back into the draw. The approaching hunter, careless and unseeing, turned off in the opposite direction and climbed out of the valley. Rising, Lannie walked dejectedly through the woods to his father's house. He waited until the sun told him it was noon, and slipped in to return the gun to its rack.

It was dark when Lannie's father rode Nosey into the yard, unsaddled him, and put him in his stall. He came into the house, his cheeks reddened and his hair tangled under the sombrero. Lannie's mother bustled about the kitchen, getting supper ready. His father, who never talked much, sat down on a chair and stared steadily at the gun rack. Then:

"You know," he said to Lannie,

"I had the darndest, funniest feeling today. I felt just as though somebody had taken my .30-30 and gone deer hunting with it. Do you know anything about it?"

Lannie squirmed, and looked away. Slowly he swung his head to meet his father's gray eyes, and he felt the sudden flush that crimsoned his face. But nothing in his experience had ever taught him to lie, and he did not lie now.

"I took it," he admitted.

"So-o. You know what I promised you?"

"Y-yes."

"You ready?"

"I—I'm ready," Lannie choked.

He stood up, and watched his father take the light sling from the .25-20. The buckles could be removed from that sling, but it still hurt. His mother entered, and stood questioningly in the kitchen door.

"Go on out. Buck," his father ordered.

When Lannie had gone his father said quietly: "He can handle a gun. I found that out when I stood on a pinnacle over White Horse Valley this morning. The first day I can get off I'm going into town and buy him a .22 of his own. But he was careless when he took my .30-30 from the rack without permission, and I must teach him that carelessness with a gun is always punished. If ever he had a gun accident, brought about by carelessness, I'd never forgive myself." He looked at the floor.

"But those things work out funny some times," he continued meditatively. "Dave Vroman was in here. Joe Newell's posse brought him in—dead. But before they did that Vroman shot Joe through the shoulder and Pete Cass through the thigh. Lannie must never know that probably the only man he'll ever meet who should have been shot, he might have killed from a perfect ambush this morning."

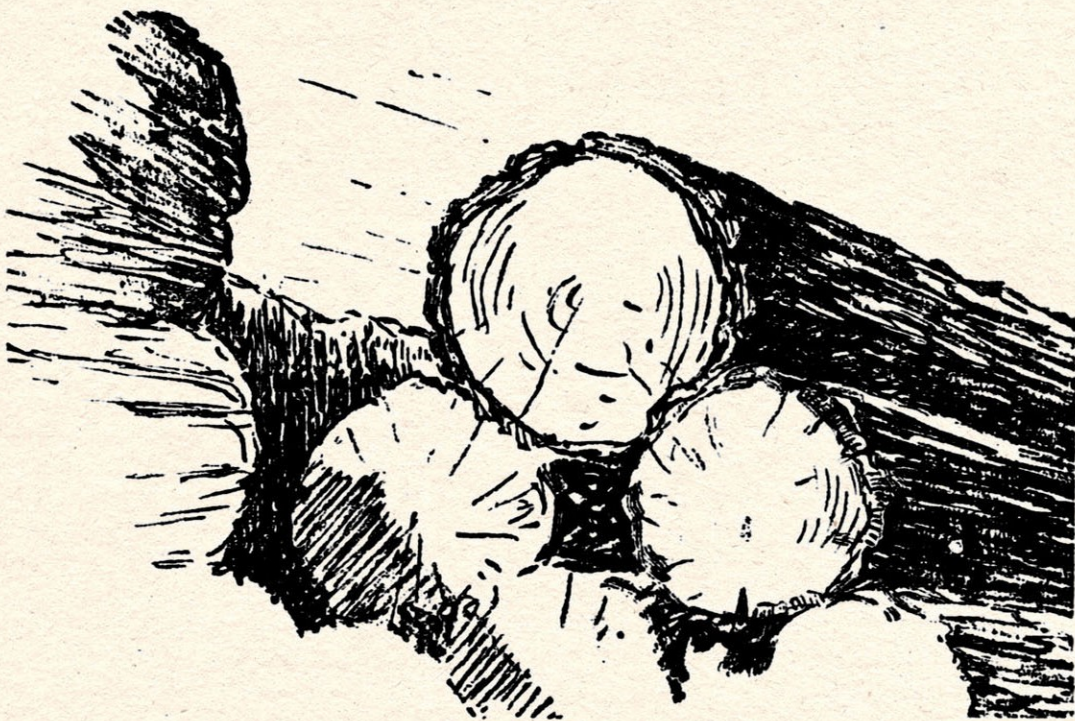
THE END



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



- | | | |
|------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1. mepb | 6. wrac | 11. stringham |
| 2. guhro | 7. keats | 12. chopon |
| 3. topron | 8. deafdall | 13. gins |
| 4. nosinev | 9. nipat | 14. fatoo |
| 5. throner | 10. zebra | 15. owlp |



TIMBERLAND TROUBLE-SHOOTER

by CLINT MacLEOD

I

AND so Cole Thorpe came back to Pinecrest. Talk of big trouble in the timberland, penetrating down into the foggy coastal cities, had fetched him from two years of exile—that and a hunger for the sight of virgin pine against the sky. He alighted

from the east-bound passenger train as unobtrusively as a man might who stood tall and sinewy in a land of big men and big trees, his pack sack slung over a shoulder, a leather brief case under his arm.

He came around the depot, his gray eyes sweeping the mill town; he breathed in the eternal tang of



“Show him a pair of calks and he’ll outrun a wolverine over the nearest ridge.” That taunt made Cole Thorpe pit himself against the killer Bull of the Woods

sawdust and listened to the high-pitched whine of the saws in North Star’s mill, finding in these things a nostalgic delight, even though they meant that the broad shadow of Mark Buckman still darkened this land. He even strode toward the mill, though he had no business there and would find nothing approximating a welcome, and thus it was that he quickly learned that the talk of

trouble had a solid foundation in fact.

There were four men beside the November-chilled water of the mill pond, and one—a big, well-dressed man who stood with arms folded and a sardonic smile on his thick lips—was Mark Buckman himself. He was merely watching. Two of the others were apparently his hirelings, brawny men from the hill camps that

turned Buckman's standing timber into logs, Cole judged from the garb of them. The fourth man also wore the laced boots and heavy breeches of a lumberjack, but he was little and old and wizened, and no match for the two burly jacks who had him hemmed in.

One jack, seizing the little man, would send him careening toward the other jack with a violent shove. The second timberman would send the little man stumbling back into the arms of the first. They were using him as Cole had seen a medicine ball used in Seattle gymnasiums. The oldster was gasping for breath; his nose was bleeding, and humiliation and rage had brought tears to his eyes. He was Tamarack McGarry, head of that small logging outfit known as the Penny Ante Pool, and he was a friend of Cole Thorpe's. Seeing him used in this fashion, Cole dropped his pack sack and briefcase and charged forward with fists cocked.

He caught them unawares; they were too intent upon their deviltry to see him coming. But the odds were three-to-one, since there'd be no help from winded old McGarry, so Cole reminded himself that there were no rules in lumberjack rough and tumble. He saw a peavey lying near the pond's rim, the property of one of the jacks, doubtless, and he seized it and came into the fight swinging it like a club. The two lumberjacks saw him coming now, and they turned their attention from McGarry to come at Cole with flailing fists. The swinging peavey leveled one of them. The fellow, trying to duck

under the impromptu club, had caught a glancing blow that drove the consciousness out of him. But the other jack closed with Cole, wrenching the peavey away and flinging it aside.

Cole broke the clinch; this man outweighed him and matched his own youthfulness, and he'd have to use skill against savagery to beat him. Bringing up his fist, Thorpe felt it connect with the jack's rocky jaw. The man tripped over his sprawled partner, and as he went down, Cole was on top of him. They rolled across the ground, a tangle of arms and legs, but Cole managed to get a hold on the other's throat, and he kept that hold, squeezing relentlessly. The blows of Buckman's jack grew weaker; Cole's head was roaring, but still his fingers tightened. And then the jack went limp beneath him, and Cole pulled himself to a stand.

It had been a quick, savage fight, but through the span of it Cole had remained conscious of Buckman's presence. He spun now, seeking the man, and he saw Buckman lunging toward the peavey which lay nearby. But old Tamarack McGarry had gotten a grip on Buckman's arm and was holding him back. With the two jacks unconscious on the ground, Buckman gave up the effort, drawing instead upon bluster as a weapon.

"So you're back, eh, Thorpe!" he thundered. "I'll have the law on you for this!"

Gray sprinkled Buckman's bushy shock of black hair, and Cole, seeing it, remembered that the man was almost old enough to be his father.

That tempered his wrath, though it still burned within him. Lunging forward, he got a grip on Buckman's throat and crotch and, lifting the man from the ground, hurled him into the mill pond. Buckman came to the surface, spluttering and choking and clawing toward a log boom. "I'll save you the trouble of taking me to the law, Buckman," Cole shouted. "I'm heading to the sheriff's office now."

Picking up his pack sack and briefcase, he got McGarry by the elbow and steered the oldster toward the business section of Pinecrest's straggly street.

"Soon as I get my breath back, I'll thank ye properly and welcome ye home, Cole," McGarry said. "'Twas the last man in the world I was expecting to see when you came at those two jacks."

"Do you still put up at the Loggers' Rest when you're in Pinecrest?" asked Cole. "Yes? Then you'd better go there and do some resting. You've been pretty badly used. I've got a little business with Sheriff Mel Farnum. I'll see you at the hotel later."

They parted before the Loggers' Rest and Cole strode on up the street to the little office of Pinecrest's law. Inside he found Mel Farnum at his desk, a gaunt, gray man who gave him a searching look, then said: "Hello, Thorpe. I've wondered when you'd come home."

Cole took the sheriff's extended hand. "I've already met Mark Buckman," he said. "He'll be up here before long to swear out a warrant, I suppose."

Farnum shrugged. "He'd better bring a good reason with it."

Smiling, Cole remarked: "It used to be said that Buckman owned every county office but the sheriff's. I take it that still holds true."

Again Farnum shrugged. "I'm the conscience of this Pinecrest country. They vote for Buckman's candidates because the fear of North Star keeps them in line. But they always manage to give me a vote, too—so they can face themselves in the mirror the next morning, I reckon. What can I do for you?"

Cole placed his brief case on Farnum's desk. "They're telling it on the coast that the pygmy is all set to fight the giant. It's Tamarack McGarry's Penny Ante Pool against Buckman's North Star outfit. I'm home to take a hand in that fight, Farnum. Might be I'll die doing it. I'd appreciate it if you'd lock this briefcase in your office safe and say nothing about it. If I come through with my hide whole, I'll be back to get it. If I turn out to be calk bait instead, you can have yourself a look inside."

Farnum took the briefcase with no apparent show of curiosity. "It'll stay here until one or the other of us takes it from the safe," he said. "And now?"

"Now I'll be having a talk with Tamarack," answered Cole. "Thanks, Mel."

He'd reached the door when the sheriff said: "By the way, Thorpe. Bull Leclair left these parts a year ago. Heard he was over on Puget Sound. Thought you'd like to know."

Cole turned, hunting the sheriff's face for whatever might have prompted those words, and, finding nothing, said again: "Thanks, Mel."

The brief November day was nearly finished when he came out into the street. A sprinkling of lumberjacks was in town; they made their roistering way from saloon to saloon, some speaking to Cole and some merely staring in silent but astonished recognition. He returned greeting for greeting, silence for silence. He could guess what was in their minds; this walking of Pinecrest's street was like walking a gauntlet, and he was glad when he finally reached the Loggers' Rest.

Tamarack McGarry was in a room at the end of a dimly lighted upper hallway, and he drew Cole inside with a glad and welcoming gesture. They said all the things men say to each other when they have been parted for a long time, but Cole was impatient to be done with small talk.

"Just how far has your fight against North Star gone?" he asked abruptly.

"Far enough that they're trying to bully me into quitting the country," McGarry replied. "Ye had a sample of their methods this afternoon. Mark Buckman has had his way in this timberland too long, me boy: he's been so big he thought an outfit like Penny Ante wasn't worth worrying about. But the people who buy his lumber have gotten sick of his sly ways. They're giving us a whack at the business if we can prove we can produce a certain amount of dimension stuff and flooring and

shingles by the end of the year. Ye can see that Buckman isn't the type to stand idly by and let us take that business away from him."

"No, he'll fight, tooth and nail," Cole agreed. "That's why I'm back. Penny Ante will need a trouble-shooter, and it's my outfit."

McGarry sighed. "That it is, lad. Ye're father—God rest his soul—was my partner, and Dan Thorpe's share has been yours since the day he died from that beating he took from Bull Leclaire. Ye're an all-around lumberman, too, Cole—good with ax and saw, and at the throttle of a dinky. But ye'll be no help to us now. 'Tis sorry I am to be the one to tell you."

An old bitterness welled up inside Cole. "I saw things in faces I met on the street," he said bleakly. "You're still remembering—all of you—that I ran away when Bull Leclaire threatened to give me the same medicine he gave dad. Yes, I ran away—ran because I turned yellow every time I thought of Leclaire and what his calks did to dad's face. He's a specialist at calking, Bull is, and he put the fear in me. But I'm back, just the same. And Bull's gone from these parts, according to Mel Farnum. We're talking about a different kind of fight, Tamarack."

McGarry shook his head. "'Tis respect for ye that's lost, lad. Ye'll be no bull of the woods when men point you out as the lad who ran away from Bull Leclaire. Sure, ye bested two of Buckman's jacks today, but 'twas luck that was with

you, they'll claim. 'Show him a pair of calks,' they'll be saying, 'and he'll outrun a wolverine over the nearest ridge.' 'Twould be better if Leclair were still here so that you might have a try at showing ye're not afraid. But Bull's gone, and so's your chance to redeem yourself. Ye can see, can't ye, lad, that ye'd do Penny Ante more harm than good by standing with us?"

"Has it ever occurred to you, Tamarack, that Leclair might have been working for Mark Buckman when he beat up dad two years ago?" Cole asked. "Dad was always arguing that Penny Ante should stand up and fight North Star for a chance at a decent living in these woods? That certainly must have worried Buckman."

"No," McGarry said decisively. "Leclair was drawing no man's pay when he beat your dad. And if he were, 'twould make no difference now."

Cole Thorpe sat silent and bitter. He had come to make a fight, to help the pygmy against the giant, to throw his weight where his loyalty lay, yet Tamarack McGarry had merely told him a truth that was beyond denial. They measured a man by his brawn and his fearlessness in the woods; this was a country that never forgave a coward. Yet Penny Ante needed him, needed him desperately, for this was a fight to the finish. And, remembering that, Cole refused to admit defeat.

"We're both too hungry to reason straight," he said with a smile. "Come on, old-timer; let's go eat before we do any more talking."

McGarry shrugged. Patently, what he'd had to say had not been to his liking, and his wizened old face was solemn with regret as he blew out the lamp. They stepped into the hallway together and McGarry bent to lock the door. Then he went to his knees as a gun roared cannonlike within the confines of the building.

A man had fired from the well of the stairs, and that man was Mark Buckman, for Cole Thorpe caught one quick glimpse of his face. Then boots thudded on the stairs and a rear door banged below. Cole let the man go, for Tamarack McGarry was needing attention. McGarry wasn't dead, but he'd been hard hit.

"My back!" he groaned as Cole cradled him in his arms.

It came to Cole Thorpe then that he'd made his point, but there was scant satisfaction in such a victory. Yet the truth was this: A bullet had taken Tamarack McGarry out of the fight between the rival logging interests for a long time to come. That left Penny Ante needing a leader, and there was only one to qualify. It was now up to Cole Thorpe, timberland pariah, and to him alone, to see that Mark Buckman was bested.

II

The shot that had felled McGarry brought a dozen men stampeding to the second floor. There were startled questions and ejaculations, but Cole paid no heed to them, dispatching Hap Manning, a friend of Tamarack's, for a doctor. The medico arrived in due time, and with him

came Sheriff Mel Farnum. By then Tamarack, unconscious now, had been moved to the bed in his hotel room. Farnum gruffly shooed the crowd outside, and when only the doctor and Cole and the patient remained, the sheriff said: "Well, who did it?"

"The North Star kingpin himself," answered Cole.

"Buckman! Did you go after him?"

Cole shook his head. "Tamarack needed attention. But I got one glimpse of Buckman's face. Isn't that enough?"

"I listened to that crowd in the hall," Farnum said wryly. "Some of them glimpsed a man who dashed down the stairs and took the hall to the rear door. That man was as big as Paul Bunyan and had sulphur smoke spurting from his nose. By tomorrow there'll be twenty of him, with horns on their heads. Excitement does that to folks. No, Thorpe, you'll need better evidence than your own eyes against Buckman, if you drag him into court. His lawyer would point out that the only witness was a Penny Ante man, hint of a frame-up and have you laughed out of court. You'll have to give me something solid when you bring a case against Mark Buckman."

Cole nodded. A man like Buckman ordinarily didn't do his own bushwhacking, and a man who accused Buckman of such a thing would be held to ridicule. Especially if that man were Cole Thorpe who was scorned as an outcast. Yet it *had* been Buckman who'd fired the shot that had put Tamarack out of

the big fight. That in itself showed a desperation on the part of the North Star owner. The North Star had power—yet the big outfit was worried. Against that power and desperation Cole would have to pit whatever puny assets the Penny Ante still commanded. Tomorrow he'd see what shape the little outfit was in. Tomorrow he'd take over.

Now there was nothing to do but wait for the doctor's pronouncement, and it came at last.

"The bullet creased his back, but it didn't touch his spine," the medico said. "He's an old man, and he'll have to lie low for a while. But he'll pull through this all right. Just see that he stays in bed."

"He'll stay there," Cole promised grimly. "He'll stay if I have to peg him down with boom chains."

With the dawn, Cole sought out Hap Manning. An expert at the throttle of a dinky engine, Hap was a man of independence who worked only when the mood was upon him. Cole persuaded him to stay with Tamarack until the oldster could be taken from the hotel, and it was the hint of menace in the air that moved Manning to accept such a tedious chore. That done, Cole set out for the Penny Ante holdings.

McGarry's mill lay miles beyond Pinecrest on the shore of a small lake at the foot of the timbered ridges that fed logs to the insatiable saws. The building itself was dilapidated but serviceable; the equipment had seen better days. And the crew who worked it was on a par with the rest

of the set-up; trimmerman, filer, decker, sawyer and superintendent, they were oldsters all, rusty with the years and with little heart left in them. They showed Cole about the premises, and he was startled to discover few logs decked beside the mill pond.

"We've been gitting ahead of the camp crew again," the superintendent explained.

"I saw the dinky sitting out there on the narrow gauge," said Cole. "You'd better get it up to camp and snake down more logs."

The superintendent sighed. "The dinky's been laid up for months. Needs repairs. We've been hoping for a good snowfall so's we could sled the logs down from camp."

Cole glanced at the unclouded sky. "We can't wait for that," he decided. "I'll look the dinky over."

"Too bad about Tamarack," the superintendent said, reverting to the news Cole had fetched. "McGarry had more than he could handle, but he did his best to keep things humming."

That was the attitude of all of them. They had no faith in this fight against North Star, Cole realized; they had been the underdogs too long even to recognize the shadow of hope. And with McGarry out of the fight, they felt lost and leaderless. They were not challenging Cole's authority—they were too listless even for that—but they pinned no faith in it.

Later Cole had a look at the dinky and made a list of needed parts. "Send one of the men to Pinecrest,"

he told the superintendent. "Today. Have him wire for any of this stuff that you haven't got on hand. We're going to get that dinky running again."

After that Cole headed for the logging camp, following the narrow-gauge railroad with long, steady, distance-eating strides. For the first few miles it was all uphill, the timber thickening as he climbed, and, at the top of the long slant, where a narrow trestle spanned a ravine, he had to rest. After that it was downhill for almost an equal distance and then, in a clearing between two benches, he reached the railroad's end.

Though the day was nearly gone by then, Cole was astonished to find the entire crew inside and clustered about a fire they'd built against the chill of this sparkling November day.

This was a "State of Maine" lumber camp, and in the long, low smoky building which was bunkhouse, cook shack and congregating place all in one, drying socks, underwear and shirts festooned the ceiling, and a dozen men sat stolidly about the heating stove that centered the place. They were the kind of men Cole had expected them to be, some old, some young, and all of them the scum of the woods, the men who found no permanent employment. North Star money had hired the better men, and North Star power had scared others away from the Penny Ante camp. There was only one man here that Cole knew, and he was the boss, big, yellow-haired Lars Sorenson who had worked for Penny Ante for many years before Cole's exile.

Looking at them, Cole sensed their dull antagonism, and he planted his feet apart and let his pack sack slip from his shoulder.

"I'm here to make a speech, boys," he announced. "Tamarack McGarry is laid up for a while, and I'm taking over. I'm easy to get along with. All you'll have to do to please me is turn out logs."

Lars Sorenson had recognized him, but he voiced no greeting. Instead his stare was a studied insult, and he said: "What goot will that do? We got logs a-plenty piled up waiting for the mill. We can't move 'em until snow comes."

Slow anger began burning in Cole, but he kept a tight hold on himself. "I'll worry about getting logs down to the mill," he said. "You boys worry about turning trees into logs. Now get at it! There's still some daylight left. Start earning your pay!"

Someone made a move to arise—there was in them a recognition of authority at least—but Sorenson laughed harshly. "We don't got to take *his* orders," he jeered. "He ban scared of his own shadow, this feller. He run away from Bull Leclair long time ago. Yust show him a pair of calks and he yump out of his skin."

Anger was mounting in Cole, and he knew that this was the crisis by which his authority would stand or fall. It wasn't Buckman money that was prompting Lars Sorenson to such open mutiny, Cole knew. No, there was no dishonesty in this big Scandinavian, only the open contempt that Cole had sampled in Pinecrest. Yet if he, Cole, was to rule

this camp he must first rule Sorenson. So he said evenly: "Stand up, Lars."

Sorenson must have recognized the challenge in that order, for he obeyed, and when the Scandinavian came erect, Cole hit him—hit him with all he had. The blow, smashing against Sorenson's nose, made the man's head rock. Sorenson's arms half rose, but his knees threatened to come unhinged, and Cole seized that moment to hit him again.

For some men that would have been the finish, but leveling Lars Sorenson was like leveling a giant tree—it took time and effort and skill and strength. With a bull-like roar, Sorenson closed in and Cole felt the tightness of the Scandinavian's arm about his waist, felt the fingers of Sorenson's free hand seeking his eyes. This was fair fighting by lumberjack rules. Cole writhed out of that embrace, used his knee and his fists, and drove Sorenson back against a bunk, pinning him there with a barrage of blows.

Sorenson grew wiser. He did not try closing with Cole again; instead he matched fist for fist, and it became a slugging fest. Every man in the place was on his feet now, but they were keeping out of it, though such advice and encouragement as they called was all for the camp boss. Cole's head rang as Sorenson's fists sent him reeling. He had kept in trim in his years of exile, but the long hike he'd had from Pinecrest that day was taking its toll.

Yet there was grim determination in him. He had to win this fight, for the outcome of a bigger battle

depended upon it. He lashed out with both fists, concentrating on offense rather than defense. He went down to the floor with Sorenson, feeling those fingers at his eyes again, and he used his teeth then and broke the man's hold and got to his feet. A bench had smashed beneath their falling weight; Cole kicked the remnants of it aside and came boring in as Sorenson arose. He had the Scandinavian tottering now, and he put everything into this attack. But it was with astonishment that he finally saw the camp boss sag to the floor to rise no more. There was still consciousness in the big man, but there was no longer any fight in him.

"I ban finished," Sorenson whispered.

Cole had to control his heaving chest before he could answer. "No, Lars, you're not finished," he panted. "You're too good a man to send down the hill. Penny Ante needs you. Are you taking my orders from here on?"

Sorenson's eyes were unfathomable, but he nodded. "Yup," he said.

Cole eyed the watching crew. "You heard him. And you heard me. Now get out into the timber. You're burning daylight!"

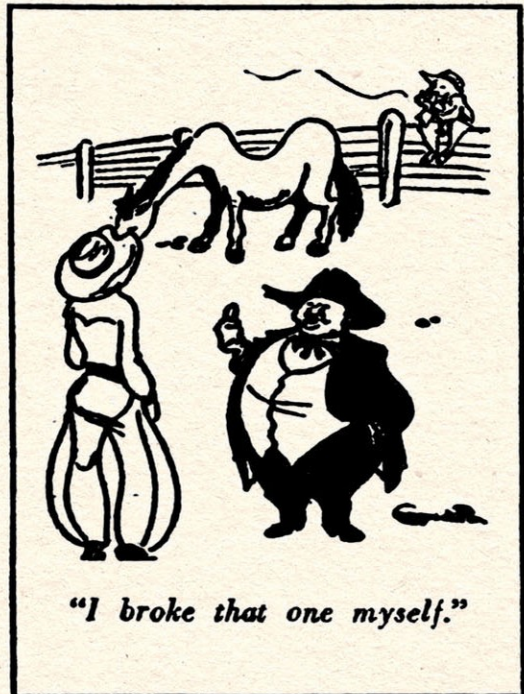
They looked from him to Sorenson, and they looked back again and silently filed from the building.

That was the beginning.

In the days that followed, Cole worked them as they'd never been worked before. The cook's cry, "Daylight in the swamp!" fetched them out of their bunks in the bleak

hours before sunrise, and Cole kept them going until darkness claimed the timberland. Yet he demanded no more of them than he demanded of himself. He was everywhere and he was everything—timber cruiser, teamster, chopper and sawyer. He stood ready to spell any man, and he bullied them and coaxed them and shamed them into efforts that had once seemed impossible. Sorenson stayed, giving silent obedience to the orders he received, and Cole had to trust the man. For Cole was not always at the camp.

There was the mill to attend to, the mill that was rapidly chewing up such logs as were still on hand. And there was the dinky to be overhauled. Cole worked often on the engine, for though the sky was now overcast and the ground was white with frost at dawntime, still the snow didn't come,



and the ice was drastic need for a means to transport the logs from the benchland to the mill below. Cole haunted the telegraph office in Pinecrest, belaboring a distant factory for parts that were slow in coming, and thoroughly intimidating the young telegraph operator who began to look upon him with awe.

He even found moments to spend with old Tamarack who was still bedded down in the Loggers' Rest but who swore lustily that each succeeding sunrise would not find him in his underwear. And Cole brought news to McGarry that put color in the oldster's cheeks—news of trees felled and trimmed and turned into logs.

There'd been little excess weight on Cole Thorpe when he'd alighted from the train in Pinecrest; by December he was thinned down to a lean, wiry hardness. But still the snow held off; there was rain and mist to make the tote roads a mire, but the sleds stood idle. Yet Cole continued to drive the crew; to him the task had resolved itself into simple terms. You turned the trees into logs; you piled the logs against the day when they could be fetched to the mill; you kept the mill working as long as there was a stick beside the pond. It was a one-two-three process, and it was going to spell the defeat of Mark Buckman.

On a blustery December evening, Cole came again to Pinecrest and to the warmth and light of the telegraph office, and this time there was news for him—more than he had expected. While he shook the sleet from his

mackinaw, the young operator said: "Word came from the factory this afternoon. Those parts for the dinky are on the way. I've checked train times for you, Mr. Thorpe. They should be here on the midnight freight."

This was the news Cole had been awaiting, and it brought a smile to his face until he saw the operator's worried frown.

"What's the rest of it?" Cole asked.

"I shouldn't tell you this," the boy said. "It's against the rules to divulge messages, and it could cost me my job. But I know what kind of fight you're making, Mr. Thorpe. The whole town's talking about how you've been making your camp hum . . ."

"What is it, boy?" Cole demanded impatiently. "What are you really trying to say?"

"You've got Mark Buckman worried," the operator blurted. "You've got him so worried that he sent a telegram not long ago. It didn't mean much to me until I heard a couple of old-timers talking about you and your dad and . . . and a fellow who used to be here . . ."

"Yes?" Cole questioned.

"Buckman sent a wire to a Puget Sound employment agency. I figure you ought to know about it. He said: 'Locate Bull Leclair and send him to Pinecrest.' I reckon you know what Buckman's got in his mind."

III

Yes, Cole Thorpe knew what Mark Buckman had in his mind. Buckman was the kind who fought warily;

he picked the weakest spot in his enemy's armor and then struck his most telling blow. Such strategy had moved him to put Tamarack McGarry out of the fight, but that maneuver had boomeranged, for McGarry's disability had put Cole in command, and Cole had gotten results in spite of all odds. Now Buckman's campaign was centered upon driving Cole from the timberland. The North Star kingpin had remembered the Achilles' heel of Penny Ante's trouble-shooter—Bull Leclaire. Leclaire of the rocky fists and the murderous calks. So Bull had been summoned—and for an obvious purpose.

Thinking of that, Cole remembered his father, old Dan Thorpe, remembered him as he'd lain beaten into insensibility by that same Bull Leclaire; and he saw his father's face once again—a face that was not a face, the features ripped into a shapeless horror by the calks of Bull Leclaire's boots.

It had been Cole Thorpe's suspicion, even then, that Mark Buckman had hired that chore done by Leclaire. Mark Buckman had had reason to fear fiery old Dan Thorpe, but there'd been no proof, for Bull Leclaire openly called no man his master. The fight between big, barrel-chested Bull and old Dan had apparently been a grudge fight, engendered by saloon talk and Dan Thorpe's criticism of Bull's savagery. And after it was over, Leclaire had announced to all and sundry that young Cole Thorpe was likewise going to taste his fists and boots. And Cole. the horror of his father's

mutilated face haunting him, had run away, only to learn that a man can run from many things, but not from himself. Now he was back. And Bull Leclaire would also be returning . . .

Cole carried this latest news to Tamarack McGarry who had been moved from the Loggers' Rest to his own little shack near the Penny Ante mill. Also, Cole fetched the needed parts for the dinky, and he'd gotten the little locomotive running before he made his report to Tamarack. The oldster, still reluctantly bedded down, listened in thoughtful silence.

"Ye scared, lad?" he asked at last.

"I don't know," Thorpe said truthfully. "I don't know." But he was wondering then if it would be Sheriff Mel Farnum who'd open that briefcase Cole had left with him.

In any case, there was work to be done, and the needs of the present took Cole's mind off the dangers of the future, though the mammoth figure of Bull Leclaire remained always at the ragged edge of his consciousness. The sawmill had stood idle half a day, the logs all gone, but now there was the dinky to fetch fresh logs from the ridges.

Since Cole had to be everywhere at once, he found one of the jacks who'd had some experience at the throttle of a dinky and elevated the man to engineer. The little locomotive chuffed triumphantly up the long slant and across the trestle and down the dip to the timbered ravine, and soon a load of logs was on its way to the mill.

It put new heart into the camp crew to see a steam loader used again, to see the logs lifted to the cars and secured by stakes and toggle chains, and they bantered one another as they went about this work, for now success was in sight. There were precious few days left for the mill to supply the quota demanded by the lumber buyer if the deadline was to be met that would mean that all the business formerly monopolized by North Star would thereafter go to Penny Ante. But as long as logs could be shunted to the mill, that deadline would be met. And Cole, hurrying from mill to camp, from camp to mill, kept an eye on both ends of the business, watched the falling leaves of the calendar, and prayed for his luck to hold.

But it didn't. The dinky broke down again; Cole suspected sabotage on the part of North Star, but there was no proof, and he could only fret and fume over the delay. Another engine part had to be sent for; Cole haunted the telegraph office once more, and by the time the part had arrived and the locomotive was made ready to run again, the mill had exhausted all the logs on hand and was standing idle. Cole spent Christmas day making a final checkup on the dinky, then listened to big Lars Sorenson who came down from camp to report that the last of the logs had been decked beside the track, awaiting the engine.

Everything depended upon the dinky now; Cole could see that. The temperature had been falling steadily, but still there was no snow. Old-timers spoke of the phenomenal

weather, recalling other erratic winters, and Cole wondered if even the sky was conspiring against him. No snow meant no possibility of sledding in time, and the day after Christmas found the land white and sparkling with frost. Thus nature betrayed Cole Thorpe in a new and disastrous manner.

"Sure, I'm a dinky man," said the lumberjack who'd been elevated to engineer by Cole. "But I'm not committing suicide! Hit those rails on the slant down to the mill with this frost? It will be like sliding to Hades on glass skids!" His head wagged dolefully, and fear was in his eyes. "That steel's rotten this morning, and there'd be those carloads of logs behind me on the down grade. Nothing doing!"

Cole didn't argue with him. Desperate as he was, he couldn't ask a man to die for Penny Ante's cause, and an unsteady hand at the throttle on such a run might be worse than none at all. It was going to take an expert dinky man to attempt the trip—and a mighty lucky one to make it. Cole himself didn't qualify, and he knew it, but he remembered a man who did.

He made it from the mill to Pinecrest in record time that morning, and he found Hap Manning in one of the saloons. He hadn't seen Manning since Tamarack McGarry had been removed from the Loggers' Rest, and he hadn't been sure that Manning was still in the vicinity, so he drew a sigh of relief when he spied the dinky man. He told Manning of the situation and the need.

Hap took a long and sober moment to consider the proposition, and Cole held his breath until that moment ran out.

"It's a job to my liking," Manning said finally. "A job to tweak the devil's nose. This is the second time you've come to me, Thorpe, and what I did before, I did for Tamarack. But old Dan Thorpe did me a turn once, and lately I've begun to think that this country's been wrong about you. Yes, I'm your man."

Relief turned Cole weak. "I don't need to tell you how important this is, Hap," he said. "We've got less than a week to go, but if we get these last logs down to the mill today, we'll have the lumber ready on time. It's as simple as that. Now get out to the mill and get the dinky up to camp. If you can do your own firing on the way up, I'll handle the shovel on the run to the mill. I'll expect you this afternoon. Meanwhile I'll cut directly overland to camp and make sure everything is ready there for you."

Out upon Pinecrest's sidewalk, Cole walked with a springier step, the feeling of success effervescent within him, and in this mood he met Mark Buckman. The big man seemed thinner than before, but he twisted his lips into a ghost of a smile and said ironically: "Is it time for congratulations? But I suppose I'm premature."

"Just by a few hours. Buckman," Cole said. "You failed with a bullet, and you failed at tampering with our dinky. It gives me pleasure to tell you you're as good as beaten."

Buckman lost his pretense of affability. "You haven't won yet!" he snapped. "The lumber buyer arrived last night to see how Penny Ante is coming along. I'll be waiting for him when he crawls around to give the business back to North Star."

Cole shouldered past the man and on, but his mood of elation was gone. Mark Buckman, cornered, was a desperate man—and not necessarily a beaten one. There was one last hand to be played, and Buckman had shown a certain surety that might not be entirely bravado.

Hitting the trail out of Pinecrest, Cole moved warily but with his usual mile-eating stride. He was mindful of possible bullets from the brush: Buckman had used an assassin's tactics once, and he might use them again. The hills were white and silent and more than once a tree snapping in the frost brought Cole to stiff attention. But he reached the camp in mid-afternoon without adventure, and here he found Sorenson and the crew, and also the lumber buyer who'd come from the mill in search of Penny Ante's trouble-shooter.

"I'm glad to meet you, Thorpe," the buyer, a hearty, red-cheeked man, said as they shook hands. "And I'm glad to learn that you stand an even chance of meeting our quota. You see, I sort of put myself out on a limb by giving Penny Ante this chance. My company is interested only in results. For years North Star has been giving us a poorer grade of service and lumber, but even then my people were afraid to swing the business to an unknown outfit

like McGarry's. I persuaded them to give Penny Ante this one try. I hope they'll not be disappointed."

"They won't," Cole assured him. "By tomorrow these logs you see decked beside the track will be turning into lumber. New Year's Eve will find the quota filled." He faced big Lars Sorenson. "I hired Manning to bring up the dinky. He should be here by now."

But Manning hadn't yet arrived, and when another hour passed and there was no sound of the engine's asthmatic wheezing on the still, frosty air, Cole's impatience turned into a gnawing worry. He was about to head along the track toward camp when Lars Sorenson spat phlegmatically and said: "She ban coming now."

Smoke bannered above the tree tops and the train chugged into view. But it was moving slowly, too slowly, and immediately Cole sensed that there was something almighty wrong about this. He watched the dinky grind to a stop, steam trailing off from it; he saw Hap Manning come down from the cab, not as a man usually alights, but falling to the ground.

Cole got to Manning first. He turned the dinky man over and cradled him in his arm, and when he saw what had been done to Manning, he marveled that the man had gotten the engine up here and marveled more that there still was consciousness in him.

"Crossing the trestle . . . saw man below . . . using an ax on the supports . . . chopping it down," Manning muttered. "Stopped engine

. . . went back . . . fought with him . . . He did this to me . . . left me . . . went back to his work . . . I managed to crawl to the cab . . . got the dinky going again . . ."

"Yes?" Cole urged.

"Sorry . . . can't make this last run for you. But you'd better hurry . . . while there's still a trestle . . . The Bull of the Woods is back . . ."

But Cole didn't need to be told. The evidence was here before him in Hap Manning's face—a face that was not a face, the features ripped into a shapeless horror by the calks of Bull Leclair's boots. And staring at Manning in hypnotic fascination, Cole Thorpe felt all the old fear and revulsion surging over him. He knew now why Mark Buckman hadn't yet been ready to concede the victory. The last card had been played, but Buckman had done the playing. Penny Ante was beaten!

IV

Beaten? Cole Thorpe gave Hap Manning into willing hands and then came to his feet, staring about. He saw the assembled crew, this scum-of-the-woods outfit that had done record logging for him; he saw the lumber buyer who'd had faith in Penny Ante and had given the little company a chance to prove that that faith was well founded. And Cole saw others, too, in his mind's eyes—Tamarack McGarry who'd been laid low by Mark Buckman's bullet, old Dan Thorpe who'd died beneath a bully's boots . . . These were people who had believed in Penny Ante. These were *his* people.

"I've handled a dinky before; I can do it again," Cole said. "Those logs have got to be loaded and gotten to the mill. But I'll need a fireman on the run. I can't *order* any man to risk his neck . . ."

He left it like that. And out of the heavy silence that followed, one man gave a hitch to his suspenders, moved his weight from one foot to the other, and spat.

"I ban purty good hand wit a shovel," said Lars Sorenson.

Cole felt a tickling sensation in his throat. He had beaten this man not long ago, and he had driven Sorenson into the woods and made him work as he'd never worked before. He'd hoped to wring results out of the big Scandinavian, if not respect, and now Lars Sorenson was volunteering to side him on that life-risking last run.

"You're on, Lars," Cole said. "Now let's get those logs loaded in jig time."

Up there on the hump of the ridge Bull Leclaire, fetched back by Mark Buckman, was using an ax to weaken the trestle over which the dinky would have to run, and Cole debated as to whether he should send men up there to drive Leclaire away. Yet what would be gained by that? Leclaire would hear the lumberjacks coming and would vanish into the woods, and if Penny Ante took time to repair whatever damage had been done, there'd be precious hours lost.

No, he'd have to take a chance on getting the dinky over the trestle before Leclaire had weakened the structure too much. His choice made,

he put everybody to work except the cook, who was caring for Hap Manning. The dinky was maneuvered onto a siding, turned around and headed in the direction of the mill again. The jammer was put into operation, and men performed miracles of effort there in the sub-zero woods. Even the lumber buyer, neutral though he was supposed to be, found the spirit of all this contagious and lent a hand. Before long the cars were loaded and coupled, and Cole Thorpe and Lars Sorenson swung into the dinky's cab.

There was no time to be wasted in farewells. Already Sorenson was throwing more coal into the firebox, giving the water gauge a glance. Cole opened the throttle, the drivers spun and caught, the loaded cars jerked, and the train was on its way. Cole methodically built his speed on this level track for the steep climb to the top of the ridge and the trestle, and he hit the slant with the throttle wide open and the cab rocking and pitching.

This was the first of the great tests to which the valiant little engine would be put. It charged the rise like a runaway horse, but it slowed as it felt the pull of the slant. Cole dropped sand to help the drivers keep a grip on the frosty rails; he tugged at the throttle without knowing he was doing so, and he saw Sorenson lean forward tensely. Steam clouds from leaking gaskets filled the cab; Sorenson shaped and reshaped out of this billowing whiteness like some rough-garbed genie. The firebox glowed redly and the Scandina-

vian jerked open the door and heaved in more coal.

Up . . . up . . . up . . . Cole leaned from the cab. The frost bit at him, and the steam enveloped him, but he was able to judge that they were more than halfway to the crest. Each train length gained, though, meant a slackening of their speed. The dinky coughed as though it were growing weary of its effort, and despair was black in Cole's heart, but still the engine inched onward. Time lost its meaning for Cole, even the desperate need that was driving them on this run was forgotten. All of effort, all of thought was centered on topping the rise, and then, suddenly, they were nosing over the crest and hitting the short level stretch to the trestle ahead.

Cole could glimpse the trestle, and it looked as it had always looked. But what of the supporting timbers beneath it? Those had been sturdy timbers. Old Dan Thorpe had had a hand in the building of this trestle—Dan Thorpe and Tamarack McGarry who'd had a dream called the Penny Ante Pool and who had fought a futile fight against the might of North Star. Cole Thorpe, a boy then, had carried water to the bridge carpenters who'd built the trestle. He'd seen what had gone into its making, and he was encouraged by the memory. But Bull Leclair had had much time to use an ax against the supports, to weaken them.

There wasn't time to build up speed before they reached the trestle, yet they reached it all too soon. The dinky went lurching out upon the

structure; Cole glimpsed a smear of pine tops far below, that and a frozen thread of creek. Nothing more. No sign of Bull Leclair. They were halfway across the trestle now, and even above the rocking of the cab, Cole thought he detected another more sinister sway, the slow weaving of the trestle beneath them. He shot a glance at Sorenson; the man looked gaunt and gray. Then the dinky was across, and so was the first of the cars, and the second, and the third. Cole expelled his breath in a wheezy sigh and sluiced the sweat from his forehead.

They had won to safety—or at least to comparative safety! There was only the last long dip down to the mill, a dangerous run, but they'd make it and victory would be theirs. Cole found his voice and said: "I'll crawl back and set the hand brakes, Lars. We'll need them on the downhill slant."

Sorenson was half-turned, gazing back over the tender to the swaying loads behind; his eyes widened and he said: "Yumpin' Yiminy!"

Cole, following the direction of the man's fixed gaze, saw then what had inspired the ejaculation. For back there, straddling the peak log of the second car's load and inching toward them was Bull Leclair, ax in hand.

"We ban going slow when we got across the trestle," Sorenson breathed. "He must have yumped on then."

"This is my job," Cole said. "He had it all figured to climb aboard if we *did* get across the trestle. He knows we'll jump the track if we

don't get those brakes set. He's risking everything on this last play to ruin us!"

Then he was clambering over the tender, getting onto the first of the logs, straddling the peak log in the same manner as Leclaire and crawling toward the man. So, after the years, Cole Thorpe was facing the man he'd run from; he could see the broad, bearded face of the Bull of the Woods, the wide, hunched spread of shoulders, and the old fear rose in him. But he got a grip on it. Like a man detached from himself, he crawled onward, crawled to the second car, and finally reached Bull Leclaire, perched high in its middle.

Leclaire had recognized him, too, and, with a snaggle-toothed, hideous grin, he raised the ax. Cole lurched under that descending blade, catching the weight of the ax handle across his shoulder, but by then he'd gotten a grip on Leclaire's right arm and was twisting hard. He saw pain and a great astonishment come into Leclaire's eyes, but the ax was dropped and lost, and then the two of them were slugging wildly at each other, clinging to the peak log with their knees and battering away.

It was a queer kind of fighting, but it was prowess against prowess and it gave neither of them an advantage. The wind tore at Cole, almost wrenching him from his perch. Then Leclaire got an arm around him, and Cole felt the man's rough hand smearing across his face. He planted a hard fist in Leclaire's midriff, the blow breaking Bull's hold. Cole smashed his knuckles into Leclaire's

face, smashed them again and again and drew grim satisfaction from the damage he wrought. Leclaire was raining blows on him, too, but suddenly it came to Cole that his own power was the greater, and he knew then that the fight was his.

A vista of timberland was blurring past them on either side, but already the timber was thinning out, and that meant that they were far down the slope toward the mill. The real test lay in whether the train could keep holding to the track without the brakes being set, and when it came to Cole that that was where his only fear lay, he knew that he'd won—won more than he'd hoped for. He was having his fight with Bull Leclaire, and he was winning that fight. Leclaire couldn't use his murderous calks, not in a fight where neither man could stand, but Cole knew it wouldn't have mattered if the man could. He was fighting Bull Leclaire, and he was unafraid. That was the real victory.

Under the barrage of blows, Leclaire was weakening, and there was something in the Bull's eyes that hadn't been there before—and that thing was fear. Fear of Cole Thorpe. It was Bull Leclaire who was afraid now, and his fear drove him to a desperate effort. Slowly Leclaire drew up his knees, slowly he came to a crouched position, his calks biting into the peak log as he managed a precarious hold. Cole saw the man's strategy then; Leclaire was risking everything in an effort to come to a stand so that he could lash out just once with a murderous spiked boot. And Leclaire made it, too, coming



erect by a marvelous feat of balance, and aiming a brutal kick. Cole saw it coming, and still there was no fear in him. He caught that boot in mid-air, twisted hard, and Leclaire, with a wild scream, was swung off balance and went hurtling to disappear from view.

For a long moment Cole merely clung to the log, fighting to get his breath back, and then he began crawling again. He found a club wedged down between two logs and he used it to put pressure on the brake wheels. He felt the train slowing, and it was easier crawling when he wormed his way back to the cab. Lars Sorenson gazed at him stoically, but there was awe and excitement in the Scandinavian's voice.

"I saw him fall," Sorenson said. "I think he break his damn neck."

A crowd was waiting when the dinky wheezed to a stop at the mill. All the mill hands were gathered to watch the arrival, and Tamarack McGarry was here too, hopping with excitement though he carried a cane for support. Sheriff Mel Farnum was on hand, too, and so was Mark Buckman. Another day that might have seemed odd, but Cole understood. Buckman had expected to find the lumber buver at the mill

and had come to witness Penny Ante's defeat and to be on hand to offer his own lumber for sale once again.

It was to the sheriff that Cole turned. "Buckman asked me to come along," Farnum explained. "He didn't know what kind of reception he'd get if he walked alone among a bunch of Penny Ante men."

"That's fine," Cole said. "Up the track you'll find what's left of Bull Leclaire. After weakening our trestle, he climbed aboard the train and tried to murder me. The fight didn't go as he'd planned. And while you're at it, Mel, you can clap a pair of cuffs on Mark Buckman here."

Buckman was a defeated man; the shadow of North Star had been lifted from the timberland the moment Cole brought the dinky to the mill siding, yet there was bluster enough left in the defeated timberman to square his shoulders this one last time.

"On what charge, Thorpe?" he demanded. "Bull Leclaire had a personal grudge against you and your dad. Whatever he did today was on his own hook."

Ignoring Buckman, Cole turned again to the sheriff. "The evidence you'll need is in that briefcase you've kept for me in your office safe, Mel. You see, in the two years I was gone from Pinecrest, I put every cent I earned into the hands of a private detective agency with instructions for them to run down evidence against Buckman. You'll find all you need. Canceled checks that

prove Leclair was taking Buckman's pay two years ago—letters—papers—proof of a dozen shady deals. If Buckman gets off with less than life, he'll be lucky."

Farnum smiled a bleak smile and rattled the handcuffs he had taken from his pocket. "I'm thinking this is the job the voters had in mind when they kept putting me back in office," he said.

Mark Buckman cast one wild glance about him as though looking for an escape but he was hemmed in securely.

Old Tamarack, his wizened face puckered in bewilderment, had a question to ask.

"Ye've had this evidence all along, lad?" he demanded. "Then why in thunder didn't ye have Buckman jailed the day ye came back to Pinecrest? 'Twould have saved you the chore of beating him in the woods. Ye had no real need, it seems to me, to fight him this last time."

"Two things brought me back, old-timer," Cole told him. "The need to beat Buckman—though that was already taken care of by the evidence

I'd gathered—and the need to beat myself, to lick the fear that sent me running from here. Buckman had hired Bull Leclair for his deviltry in the past; I gambled that Buckman, backed to the wall, would send for Leclair again. You see, I *had* to stand face to face with Leclair before I could win. Buckman gave me that chance. I wouldn't have gotten it if I'd played my trump card at the first and had Buckman jailed."

McGarry turned that over in his mind; Cole could see the dawn of understanding in the oldster's eyes.

"Ye did right!" McGarry decided, and it was a fighting lumberman speaking. "Ye've redeemed yourself in the eyes of the timberland, lad."

"Yes, and in my own eyes," Cole Thorpe said and knew that it was true. "Sheriff, will you send the doctor up to our camp? Hap Manning needs him." He put a hand on Lars Sorenson's shoulder. "Come on," he said. "Let's be getting back to the camp, Lars. There are good men waiting to hear how we made out today. We're burning daylight, feller."

THE END

RULE FOR RIDIN'

The best way to stay on
 A bronc ain't no riddle:
 Keep a leg down each side—
 An' your mind in the middle!

S. OMAR BARKER

RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING



Though any hot iron with a pointed end, or a rounded surface could be used to burn a brand on the side of a cow, the most commonly used "running iron" in the early days of the open range was a rod from the end-gate of a wagon. Often an extra supply of rods was carried along on each chuck wagon participating in large-scale roundups. A curved end was usually hammered or bent into the iron. This added to its efficiency, and made it easier to work with. In time the irons burned out, that is, they wouldn't hold sufficient heat. Such rods were discarded and a new "iron" substituted.



Bridle reins were handled in two ways by the old-time cowboys. Some used closed reins; that is, the reins were tied together and formed a loop over the horse's neck. Others preferred open or untied reins. There was a good reason for this. Cow ponies were customarily trained to stop and stay where they were when the reins trailed or were dropped to the ground. "Ground-hitched," the cowboys called it. Therefore open reins were a safety measure because if a rider was injured, fell from, or had to leave his horse suddenly, the reins immediately dropped to the ground anchoring the animal and preventing him from running away, an advantage not afforded by reins tied around the horse's neck.



One of the seldom mentioned but fairly common items of equipment frequently carried by cattle ranchers in the old days was a telescope. Cattlemen used the regular old-fashioned telescope, more generally associated with the sea than with cattle country, the kind with a single eye piece that had to be pulled out and held at arm's length to get the proper focus. The telescopes were useful in reading cattle brands at a distance, locating stray bunches from high-ground vantage points and, in Indian country, in spotting possible marauding redskins.

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.

WELCOME FOR AN OUTCAST

by JOSEPH CHADWICK



Jim Ireland's rep made him feared and hated in Garrison but only he knew Jodie Wayne's Wedding March had to be played in six-gun tempo

JIM IRELAND was wild-horse hunting back in the Blue Basin country, bringing into being once again the old — and notorious — Shamrock brand, when he heard about Jodie Wayne's coming marriage. He heard

it from old Hank Dugan, his mossy-horned hired hand, who fetched the news, along with a wagon load of supplies, from Garrison town.

"Saw the Wayne girl. Jodie." Old Hank said, talking around his to-

bacco cud. "Bumped into her coming from the dressmaker's on Liberty Street. She'd been havin' a fittin' of her weddin' dress."

Jim had just turned a stallion mustang into his pole corral. He was sweated and dusty, and his lean face was bewhiskered and wolf-gaunt. He was a big man with a black Irish strain strong within him, and now, shoving back his sombrero and rolling a smoke, he considered the news from all its angles.

A wedding dress naturally meant a wedding, and when a girl married she had to have a man picked out. In this case, it meant that Jodie Wayne was not waiting for him, Jim Ireland, but had made another choice. It was all pretty clear.

"So?" said Jim. "Who's Jodie marrying?"

"A gent named John Halliday," answered Old Hank. "Lawyer fellow, lately come to Garrison. Reckon you heard of him, Jim-boy."

Jim Ireland nodded. He knew John Halliday, all right; knew him too well. Five years before, this same John Holliday had been the prosecuting attorney up at Ruscott where the last of the wild Ireland clan, excepting Jim, had been hanged by the law.

Jim Ireland had been seventeen then, just beginning to feel himself a man. He had been at the trial, had seen justice done, and his youthful mind had been impressed. It had been a lesson to him; he had realized that the Irelands—the true family name of McCurrdie was long ago forgotten—had been wrong ones.

Rustlers could claim no pity. John Halliday, with his courtroom eloquence, had made that clear. And Young Jim Ireland had held no grudge against the attorney. But now . . .

"So Jodie is marrying this lawyer fellow?" Jim said, thinking out loud. "It's a mighty big surprise to me."

"She gave me a message for you, Jim," Hank Dugan said. "She said: 'Tell that no-good Jim Ireland that I want no trouble from him. I don't even want him to come to town. You tell him that, Hank—you hear?' Now I've told you, Jim."

Jim nodded, making no comment. He knew Old Hank was telling the truth, for that was the way Jodie Wayne talked. But why was she talking that way? Why was she marrying this lawyer, John Halliday? Jim wondered if she hadn't understood him. Five years before, when Jodie was but sixteen and he seventeen, he had said: "Grow up a little more, girl, and I'll marry you."

That had been at a dance in Garrison. Jim hadn't been invited to the dance, being an Ireland, but he had gone anyway for he knew Jodie Wayne would be there. He had danced with Jodie, and she had been a willing partner. Everyone present had been shocked, but Jodie hadn't cared. Jodie Wayne was like that, always doing something to surprise folks. She had even flaunted propriety by walking outside the town meeting hall, where the dance was held, with Jim Ireland, scion of an outlaw clan. But it had been merely a gesture to shock people.

When Jim tried to kiss her she had slapped his face.

"Outlaw!" Jodie had flung at him.

Jim was so branded, because of his father and his brothers, but this time the insult did not faze him. He grabbed Jodie and he kissed her a second time, and this second kiss the girl accepted with an answering spark. It left her breathless and staring, a little frightened of him. And that had been when Jim Ireland said: "Grow up a little more, girl, and I'll marry you."

The spark was still in Jodie, and she had said: "We'll wait and see, outlaw." But *now* she wasn't waiting.

Jim turned from Hank Dugan. He went to his bedroll and took up his gun belt, buckling it about his slim middle. He caught up his roan trail horse, saddled it up, and mounted. Old Hank watched him worriedly.

"You're ridin' into trouble, Jim," he muttered. "That whole town knows you're stuck on Jodie, and the whole danged community is against you."

"I got to find out why she didn't wait," Jim Ireland said, and rode out, heading for Garrison.

The coming of Jim Ireland to Garrison was no small thing. For more than two decades the town and the surrounding country had suffered the depredations of the clan whose name he bore. Even with the older Irelands gone, Jim was viewed with suspicion and treated as a pariah, an outcast, for people are quick to think and to say: "Once an outlaw, always an outlaw." The mark was

upon Jim Ireland, though he had never ridden the outlaw trail.

Garrison was a prosperous and growing town, and during the recent years there had come stout brick buildings to stand amid the bleak frame false fronts. Jim Ireland liked the town, as a man likes the community he calls his home town, but always he felt its hostility against him. He accepted that hostility on his infrequent visits, and did not attempt to buck it. He came and he went, making no friends and no enemies. Now, after riding all night from Blue Basin, he found Garrison bustling as a cowtown always bustled on a Saturday. But there was a difference this clear, bright Saturday. Garrison had taken on a gala mood, and it was something of a holiday, for it was the wedding day of the daughter of the countryside's biggest rancher, Sam Wayne. And such a wedding day, all Garrison would celebrate.

Jim Ireland knew that this was Jodie's wedding day without being told. He saw the preparations. There was activity at the church, a handsome white-painted and steepled building erected by Wayne money. Across from the church, on the town hall grounds, a cook tent was being put up behind the bunting-draped bandstand. There would be a barbecue and a dance after the ceremony, and it would be a public affair.

Jim saw how people on the street turned to stare at him. He could almost hear their excited whispers: "*Jim Ireland has come. There'll be trouble, sure!*"

His appearance heightened that belief, and he realized it. He had spent two months in the wastelands of Blue Basin, and such a life makes a mark on a man. It fades and wears out his clothes, makes him hunger-lean. With his crop of bristly whiskers, his rag-tag garb, Jim knew he looked much like the other Irelands had looked when on the owlhoot. But he didn't give a damn, he told himself. Why should he, with Jodie marrying another man? For the first time in his life, Jim Ireland was bitter.

He put his horse up at the livery barn, told the hostler to grain and curry the roan and paid in advance, since the liveryman eyed him with doubt.

"When's the wedding coming off?" Jim asked.

"Four o'clock," the liveryman told him.

Four o'clock. It was now ten in the morning. Jim had plenty of time to see Jodie and find out why she had not waited for him—waited until he had made a real stake. The fat liveryman followed him out of the barn.

"Jim," he said earnestly. "You ain't itching to make trouble? Jodie don't deserve that. Shucks, man; let her be. She's making a good match, one the whole town approves of. Why, Sam Wayne never would have let you marry the girl!"

"Mind your own business," Jim said and walked away.

He went to the Star Hotel, took a room where he could wash up, then went to the barber shop for a haircut

and shave. He kept thinking all the time, his mind a turmoil of bleak thoughts. He thought of what Bailey had said, about Jodie making a good match and that Sam Wayne never would have approved of Jodie marrying him, and he believed he understood why Jodie hadn't waited. Sam Wayne would want his daughter to marry a man with bright prospects; John Halliday, an educated man with ambitions, was such a man. Sam Wayne put his own value on everything. Jodie's feelings in any matter, even marriage, would not concern Big Sam Wayne.

As the barber worked on him, Jim was sure he knew how Jodie felt—knew what her feelings were. It was not guesswork on his part, either, for in the five years since their first excitement-charged meeting, at that dance, Jodie and he had strengthened the bond between themselves. Jodie had always done a lot of riding, and every month or two Jim would meet her back in the hills that were the boundary between the Wayne Ranch and the lonely Blue Basin. In the beginning those meetings were mere chance, later they were deliberate. The two of them would ride together for an hour or so, and Jim would tell her of how many horses he had caught, broken, sold—and pointedly of how much money he had in his poke.

Jodie would listen, almost without comment. After a time, she started fetching him things to eat, sometimes pies, once a cake she had herself baked. It had been pretty pleasant. Often Jodie would say: "If my dad caught me out here riding with you,

Jim Ireland, he'd tan my hide and hunt you down with a gun."

Jim would laugh. "Big Sam Wayne isn't big enough to gun for an Ireland," he bragged. "I'll put him in his place, once I'm his son-in-law."

Now, on Jodie's wedding day, Jim could remember the girl saying: "You're not his son-in-law yet, Jim Ireland."

The barber's voice broke in on Jim's thoughts. "Mister, the law is out yonder, eying my shop. You think he's worrying about you?"

Jim left the shop smelling of bay rum and feeling clean. He paused outside, rolling a quiry and giving Pete Gregg, the town marshal, a chance to come up and say his piece. Marshal Gregg was a leathery skinned old-timer, a lawman who had helped break up the Ireland wild bunch.

"Son, this is no day for you to be in town," Gregg said bluntly.

"Good a day as any, marshal."

"You wouldn't be having anything on your mind—such as, maybe, breaking up a wedding?" Marshal Gregg shook his head, denying the thought. "If I figured that you were up to that, Ireland, I'd lock you up for safekeeping until after the ceremony." He turned to pleading. "Look, bucko: everybody knows you've bragged since you were a kid about marrying Jodie Wayne, but it was loco talk. Forget it, and ride out of town."

"You've got nothing to worry about, marshal," said Jim. "If Jodie Wayne wants—*wants*, I say—to marry that John Halliday, why,

she can marry him with my blessing."

He turned and walked away, leaving the old lawman to stare worriedly after him.

By every road came the wagons, buggies and carriages of the ranch families and the farmer folk. Vehicles and horses lined most of busy Liberty Street, and the people gathered on the board sidewalks or congregated on the town hall grounds. Basket and box lunches were opened at noon, and most of the folks ate picnic style. Children scurried about, playing and chattering.

At noon Jim ate a meal in the Frisco Cafe. The restaurant was crowded with cowhands, some of them Wayne riders. All the time Jim was eating, talk was subdued and the glances cast his way were wary. From the restaurant Jim went to the Palace Saloon and Billiard Parlor. He took one drink of whiskey, then watched a couple of cowboys shooting pool. It was a few minutes after one o'clock when a man came into the saloon and said: "Ireland, you're wanted outside."

The billiard cues fell idle, and the men at the bar stopped their talk and their drinking.

"It's Jodie Wayne!" the messenger said in a stage whisper.

Every man within hearing showed surprise. Jim's mouth fell agape for an instant, then he smiled as with some secret knowledge. He strode from the Palace, swaggering now, his flat-crowned sombrero cocked jauntily to one side. The

batwings swung closed behind him and he stood on the wooden porch looking at the girl.

"Hello, Jodie," he said, and it was as though his world was all right.

He saw people along the street, staring with puzzled and shocked eyes. The men from the barroom were watching from door and windows. There was a sudden intense quiet all along Liberty Street, and the whole town of Garrison seemed to be waiting to hear what these two people would say to each other.

In a way, they were much alike. Jim Ireland was a big, handsome man, full of youth and strength. Jodie Wayne was a tall girl, and her youth was like a lovely bloom. She was a proud, strong-willed, and that made her appear haughty. But, too, they were as unlike as day and night. Jim Ireland was an outcast with a heritage of outlawry; he was a man of dark and lonely trails, even though he had yet to run afoul of the law. Jodie Wayne was a daughter of wealth, of background and schooling, and today she was to marry a man of position. At four o'clock, she was to be given in marriage. Now, a scant three hours before, she was clad in rough range clothes and sitting astride a paint horse.

"Ireland," said Jodie Wayne, "I want to talk to you. Ride out to the Peso Creek bridge. I'll be waiting."

"I'll be there, Jodie," said Jim and she swung her horse about and rode out of town. The gaping crowd still gaped, curiosity more than ever aflame.

Jim Ireland took his time walking to the livery barn for his roan horse,

sure of himself now—sure of Jodie Wayne. He saddled the roan, swung up, rode from the barn.

Jodie was waiting on the far side of the wooden bridge, in among the stand of cottonwoods. She stood beside her paint pony, but there was no welcoming smile on her face. A sudden alarm came to Jim Ireland as he reined in and dismounted.

"Jodie, what's wrong?" he asked.

Jodie held a quirt in her hand, and now she slashed at a bush with it in a gesture of annoyance. She was an honest person and never minced words.

"I knew you'd come when you heard that I was getting married," she said. "I asked your man, Dugan, to tell you to keep away but I knew you'd come. And I was right. Well, I'm glad—because you're the one man who can help me. Jim, things are in an awful mess. John Halliday is jilting me."

"That tinhorn—"

"Oh, it's not like it seems," said Jodie quickly. "John is just being . . . well, noble. You see, Jim, there's something in his past that isn't quite . . . quite right. He made a mistake some years ago and, though he tried to live it down, it's now come home to roost. He came out to the ranch this morning to tell me, to say it wouldn't be right for him to marry me. A man who knows about his mistake has come to town, to blackmail him. This man wants money—a lot of money, now that John seems about to marry into a rich family—and if he doesn't get it,

he'll talk so that everyone knows about that mistake of John's."

It seemed to Jim Ireland that something was tearing savagely at his heart. This was not at all what he had expected, or hoped for.

"What you expect me to do?" he asked flatly.

"Make John see that he's being foolish," said Jodie. "Go to him and tell him he can't do such a thing to me. Jim, I love him. . . . Oh, I know that hurts you, but it's so! The first time I saw John Halliday, I knew he was the man for me. You and I, Jim . . . well, the thing between us was something that could never be. You were the first man who ever kissed me, and you being one of the wild Irelands made things exciting, gave my dull life a sort of spice." Jodie shook her head in emphatic denial. "But we never were for each other."

"Then why ask me to hold your man for you?" Jim demanded almost savagely. He was hurt; there was despair in him. "Why ask *me*?"

"Because I believe you're my friend," said Jodie. "Because I have no one else to turn to, not even my father. If Big Sam Wayne should even guess that there was something not quite right in John's past, he'd never let him marry me. Besides, Jim, a man would listen to you—even a man like John Halliday. Oh, I know this looks as though I have no pride. But when a woman's heart is breaking, she doesn't care about being proud. Jim, are you going to let John Halliday make me a laughingstock?"

Jim Ireland felt cold inside, a

man with the heart gone from him.

"Well, are you?" Jodie demanded.

He turned and gathered up the roan's reins. He swung to the saddle. Not looking at Jodie, he said: "He'll marry you, all right."

He didn't see the warmth, the radiance, come into her face. But he heard her say: "Jim, some day you'll meet a girl who'll care for you as I care for John Halliday, and then you'll be glad you did this for me. That's as certain as anything can be."

Jim looked at her, his face turned dark and almost ugly. "You know what folks say: 'Once an outlaw, always an outlaw. If it's in a man's blood, it stays there.'" He shook his head, full of his resentment. "If that goes for me, it sure must go for this John Halliday. If he made one wrong move, he'll make another. You think of that, Jodie?"

She came close, looked up at him with clear, shining eyes. "You don't believe that, Jim," she told him. "You've been fighting such a belief in other folks for years, trying to prove it wrong. You don't believe it of John Halliday. Prove that too, my friend."

Their eyes met, and they understood each other. And suddenly Jim Ireland knew that this lovely, clear-headed girl was right about everything—about the two of them, and about John Halliday. The dark look left his face.

"Jodie," he said, "go get into your wedding dress."

He rode slowly back to town, made his way along Liberty Street, and

everywhere people stared at him. He imagined he saw a scared look on the faces turned his way, and he actually saw a man run toward the town marshal's office. He dismounted before the bank building, tied the roan to the hitchrack. Crossing the board sidewalk, he entered the side passageway of the building and climbed the narrow stairs. He came to John Halliday's office door, shoved it open and stepped inside. It was the usual law office—a desk and chairs, law books on shelves. John Halliday's voice came from a back room: "Who's there?"

Jim crossed the office, pushed wide another door, stepped into the room that had been the lawyer's bachelor quarters. Halliday was packing his suitcase which lay on the bed. He looked up, startled surprise on his handsome face.

"Ireland!" he said hollowly.

Jim stepped inside. He took hold of the suitcase and dumped it helter-skelter to the floor. Hooking his thumbs in his gun belt, he said: "Halliday, it'd be better for you to marry Jodie Wayne and either pay blackmail or take your medicine than to have me gun for you."

John Halliday began to breathe in a laboring way, and his face was suddenly moist with sweat. "You've talked to Jodie, Ireland?"

"Yeah."

"She told you . . . everything?"

"Enough, lawyer."

Halliday sank onto a chair, a man burdened by trouble. "I'm running for Jodie's sake, not my own," he said heavily. "If I paid blackmail, I'd be bled white. Why, it might

even reach the point where Jodie would have to get money from her family. This man who wants money for his silence is a devil, Ireland—an out-and-out no-good. He'd never let me out of his clutches. Five years ago I needed money badly and I was fool enough to take a bribe while serving as prosecuting attorney at Ruscott. Only one man knows, but one is enough. I'm no man to take a gun and settle things that way. Why, I've never learned to handle a gun!" He shook his head, and he was a picture of genuine misery. "If I let him talk, he'll ruin my reputation. Big Sam Wayne will turn against me, and maybe against Jodie. I can't risk it, Ireland. I've got to clear out of this town!"

Jim slapped his holstered six-gun. It was a meaningful gesture. "You know me, Halliday," he said. "I'm one of the Irelands, and I can talk with a gun. You start dressing for the wedding. Me, I'm going to ride herd on you until you're Jodie's husband. You savvy, lawyer?"

John Halliday stared at him. "You mean it. You'd actually kill me. . . ."

"Start dressing, Halliday," Jim cut in. "Start dressing!"

It was a long wait, even after Halliday was dressed in his new blue suit. Jim leaned against the wall, his eyes never straying from the man, and he kept smoking one cigarette after another. He told himself that he should hate John Halliday for having won Jodie away from him, but he could not hate the man. Halliday might have made one mistake, but it was a safe bet that the rest of

his life was a clean slate. He was sincere in his feelings. He wasn't a man Jim Ireland could hate. Finally Halliday looked at his watch.

"It's nearly four," he said. "I must start for the church." He gave Jim an uncertain look. "You're coming along?"

Jim shook his head. "Not me. Tell me, Halliday, who is this hombre who aims to blackmail you? What's his name, what's he look like, and where is he hanging out?"

"His name is Stace Ruell," said Halliday. "He's a tinhorn gambler, shrewd and crooked. He's a dark, scar-faced man, and he was wearing a brown checked suit this morning when I saw him at the Star Hotel. He's got a hard-cased hombre with him who looks like a gunman. . . . You don't mean to talk with him, Ireland?"

"Me? Why should I? He's not blackmailing me. Let's get going."

They walked from John Halliday's place, and down to the street. The lawyer seemed nervous, but once they neared the church, he was joined and given moral support by the best man, Banker Len Travers. The church was full and overflowing, and there was a sizable crowd around the entrance. The crowd was staring at John Halliday and at Jim Ireland.

Near the side door, Halliday turned and gave Jim his hand. "I hope neither of us ever regrets this, Jim," he said simply.

"We won't," Jim said.

He stood there alone, then, waiting until he heard the sounds of the church pump organ playing the Wed-

ding March. Then he turned and strode to the street. He headed for the Star Hotel.

There were two men standing on the hotel porch, idly watching the church. The man in the gaudy brown suit must be Stace Ruell, Jim thought. The burly and roughly clad man beside him was certainly a hired gunman, the black-mailer's bodyguard.

It was an odd thing. Jim Ireland had never fired a gun in anger. He had never even drawn on a man. Now he was going to attempt to kill a man, just as he had killed rattlers out in Blue Basin. He was an Ireland, true, and the Irelands had been gun fighters as well as rustlers. But he, Jim Ireland, knew no gun-fighting tricks. He had no stomach for the ugly game.

He halted ten paces from the hotel porch, looking up at Stace Ruell and his bodyguard. The two men were eying him, uncertainly.

"Ruell, John Halliday is a friend of mine," Jim said. He stood spread-legged, right hand on gun butt. "You made a mistake in coming here to bleed him. My name is Ireland. Maybe you've heard of that name?"

Stace Ruell took a backward step, wariness if not fear in him. "Sarbo, take this loud mouth," he said swiftly. "Take him, and you can name your own price!"

Jim's eyes did not leave Ruell. "Sarbo, a dead man can't enjoy money," he remarked. "You'd be a fool to buck an Ireland in a gun fight."

Sarbo thought it over, and it was

evident that he knew of the Ireland clan's notorious reputation. He said thickly, "Count me out," and, turning his back, he walked toward the hotel door.

"Ireland, we can make a deal . . ." Ruell began but already his right hand was inside his coat. It came out gripping a derringer. The weapon blasted, and Jim Ireland felt the red-hot pain of a bullet wound in his left arm. But Jim drew and fired his six-gun, and, gun fighter or not, he killed Stace Ruell, the black-mailer, there on the porch of the Star Hotel.

A shout sounded along the street, and Jim turned and saw Marshal Pete Gregg running toward him with a six-gun in his hand. Jim dropped his own weapon, swung about and ran for his horse. Holding his wounded arm against his chest, he fought pain and shock and a growing weakness. His run faltered into a stumbling walk. People were yelling from over by the church and the old lawman was close on Jim's heels, shouting: "Halt, Ireland, you're under arrest!"

Jim reached his horse, managed to loosen the reins. He caught hold of the saddlehorn, tried to pull himself up. The shouting spooked the roan, and it bucked, dragging Jim a little way along the street. Finally Jim's hand slipped from the pommel, and he spilled to the dust. . . . The wedding party was coming from the church down the street.

Marshal Gregg helped Jim to his feet. "Should have locked you up long ago," he grumbled. "Why in tarnation did you kill that stranger?"

The crowd pushed close, and over by the church Jodie stood pale and shaken with her husband, John Halliday, and her father, Big Sam Wayne. Halliday too was pale, and his handsome face showed the stress of conflicting thoughts. After a moment Halliday left his bride. He did not heed Big Sam Wayne's call.

John Halliday pushed through the crowd toward Gregg. He spoke firmly. "Marshal, have this man's wound doctored, then lock him up if you must. I'm a lawyer, and I shall defend him in court—and free him." He looked around defiantly, at the crowd and at his wife, but most of all at Big Sam Wayne. And he seemed afraid of nothing at all, not even of the story he would reveal in court.

"Jim Ireland, is my friend," he said loudly. "I mean to see that he gets a fair trial!"

There was one fine quality about John Halliday: When he talked, his words rang with truth and people believed him. Through his pain, Jim Ireland felt the fine warmth that friendship can give a man and he knew that he had gained this day, Jodie Wayne's wedding day, much more than he had lost. And there were, for Jim Ireland, many more days to come. Days when he would not be an outcast, a pariah riding lonely trails.

GUNSMOKE IN SAWDUST CITY

by JAMES SHAFFER



*Pop Neighbors had put a sheriff's badge on Tobe Maynard
—now it was up to him to prove that star masked a renegade*

A WILD shout of acclaim swept over Sawdust City at the sight of the dust cloud moving toward the little town.

"Here come Tobe and Johnny—and they've got Jake Oberly's horses back!"

Pop Neighbors, standing on the porch of his general store, didn't join in the general whooping and holler-

ing. In fact, he'd seen the cloud of dust moving toward Sawdust City fully five minutes before anyone else, and had guessed what it was, but he hadn't said anything.

Someone pounded him on the back. "Knew Tobe'd bring 'em back!" the man yelled and ran on down the street to greet the sheriff and his young deputy, Johnny Ames.

He hadn't been surprised either, Pop thought dourly, to see Tobe Maynard and Johnny Ames riding into town with the horses. He would have been a lot more surprised to have seen the two of them return to Sawdust City without the horses. Everyone had been plenty excited yesterday when Jake Oberly had thundered into town yelling about how five men had stolen some of his prize horseflesh.

That is, everyone but Pop. Somehow, he'd known as he watched Tobe Maynard and Johnny Ames saddle up and hit the trail, that Tobe Maynard would be back in a day or so with those horses.

And sure enough, here was Tobe back again, big as life, and with every horse safe and sound. Pop frowned and tugged restlessly at the scraggly little goatee on his chin. Tobe Maynard did things with ease that other men would find hard to do. It was a little too pat.

He was still frowning as he watched the sheriff and his deputy haze the horses into the town corral, and saw the crowd close around them. Everyone began to move toward the Jumping Frog Saloon, and Pop tagged along. Wouldn't look right not to.

Tobe's big frame dominated the Jumping Frog. He was big, Tobe was; over six feet, and his body was well proportioned to his height. He had a bluff, hearty voice that dominated any gathering he was in.

"They was five of 'em, just like Oberly said," Tobe boomed between huge gulps of cool beer, "and pushing them horses fast, too." He

laughed. "Trying to git 'em out of my jurisdiction before I caught up with 'em, I guess." The crowd roared.

Pop shot a glance at young Johnny Ames. The deputy was almost as big as Tobe Maynard, but the clean, youthful lines of his body, and his almost boyish face, made him seem much smaller than his boss. Right now Johnny seemed pretty pre-occupied drawing circles on the bar with the wet bottom of his glass.

His reticence might be caused by his modesty. Pop thought—and then again he might have his orders to let big Tobe do all the talking. Tobe had a way of saying things in a manner that folks took for granted was the truth, and didn't press him for too many details.

Toby was rambling on, now, about the return of the horses, and Pop continued to watch Johnny. He half heard Tobe tell how they'd overtaken the horse thieves and started firing, and for a moment, he thought he saw a look of weary cynicism on Johnny's face. But it was gone in an instant, and he couldn't be sure.

Pop shrugged and started back to his store. Tobe was going into detail about how the thieves had started to put up a fight, and how he and Johnny had closed in on them. Then the thieves had suddenly turned yellow and fled, leaving the stolen horses.

Pop tugged at his goatee. No one had yet wondered why *five* men, with an opportunity to fort up and fight, had turned and fled against only *two* men. Bandits and horse thieves just

didn't do that. Not any of the bandits or owlhooters that Pop Neighbors had ever heard about.

He glanced sourly up the deserted street of Sawdust City. The whole town was gathered in the Jumping Frog, and only Pop saw a small band of men ride into town and dismount behind the jail. The men had almost disappeared before he saw them, and he couldn't be sure just how many there were. Four or five, he judged.

Then a few minutes later, Cass Harwood came walking down the street. Harwood was the town's only lawyer, a shrewd, capable man who'd already made a name for himself in the short six months he'd been in town. Cass disappeared into the Jumping Frog with the rest of the crowd.

Along about sundown, Jake Oberly rode into town, and whooped with joy at the sight of his horses. He celebrated by setting up drinks for the house. Somebody came over and dragged Pop out of his store to join in.

Jake Oberly lifted his glass. "Reckon we know who'll be our next sheriff, eh, boys?"

The crowd roared its approval, and those near enough pounded Tobe on the back. The big sheriff's face was flushed, and his teeth were flashing in a smile.

"Now, boys," he argued, "I was just brought in to fill an unexpired term. My job's jest temporary, till you can find a *good* man . . ."

The crowd hooted him down good-naturedly. Cass Harwood joined in the general laughter, then held his hand up for silence.

"I reckon you know we're not joking, Tobe. You cleaned this town out—and you're the man to keep it clean."

"Okay," Tobe laughed. "And I'll tell you what, Cass: I'll *dare* you to run on the same ticket with me—for mayor!"

Pop sickened a little then, at the way the crowd carried on. They whooped and hollered and pounded the two men on the back until both were gasping for breath. And when he could be heard, Cass said:

"Never took a dare yet, Tobe. It's a deal."

And the crowd was too preoccupied to notice what Pop Neighbors noticed. Tobe had said that he and Johnny had overtaken the thieves at Waller's Pass. There was fine red dust at Waller's Pass—a color dust you didn't find any other place. Cass Harwood hadn't been in the posse with Tobe to retrieve those horses at Waller's Pass.

But as the two men stood there together, Pop noticed that both had the same color dust on their clothes. A fine red dust.

As soon as he could leave unnoticed, Pop slipped out and went back to his store. He figured he'd get no more trade that day, so he started to close up. He was barring the back door when Timothy Regan came in for his daily supply of cigars. Regan was president of the Sawdust City bank.

"I see our sheriff did it again," Regan said, as he bit the end off his cigar. "Think the town ought to thank you. Most everybody's for-

gotten your part in that little deal."

Pop nodded absently. He wished *he* could forget his part in Tobe Maynard's being sheriff. But it stuck in his mind, and the vague worries he'd had recently, were getting bigger, and more concrete.

"Ye-ep," the banker went on reflectively, "I think crooks are beginning to avoid Maynard's bailiwick—and a good thing, too. With the drought we've had, a successful bank robbery would just about break most of the ranchers hereabouts."

Pop pricked his ears up. "Yeah?" he asked, suddenly interested. "Is it that bad?"

Regan nodded. "I've had to loan a lot of them money to tide 'em over."

"Umm," Pop muttered. "Cass Harwood . . . he still buying up all the mortgages he can?"

"Ye-ep," answered the banker. "Cass says he's got confidence in the soil—says all our wealth comes from the soil and he wants nothing but gilt-edged investments."

That knowledge left Pop more uneasy than ever. He'd been knowing for some time that Cass Harwood was buying up all the paper he could, and that he held first mortgages on a lot of the ranches nearby.

Pop was still turning these thoughts over in his mind that night, when he heard Johnny Ames' footsteps crunch on the gravel path in front of his house.

"Hi, Johnny," he said from the darkened shadows of the front porch. "Set awhile. Lucy's finishing up the supper dishes."

"Thanks, Pop," Johnny said, and

sat down on the top step. Neither spoke for a few minutes, and the silence seemed to build up like a wall.

Pop had that vague, uneasy feeling again. That shouldn't be, he thought. This happened almost every night. Johnny came by to see Lucy, and usually got there before Pop's daughter finished the supper dishes. The young deputy always sat on the top step until Lucy came out. But tonight . . . Pop squirmed in his chair.

They could hear Lucy in the house, humming as she went into her room to fix up a little. She'd be out on the porch in a few minutes, Pop thought. He cleared his throat.

"Celebration still going on?" he asked.

"Guess so," Johnny said disinterestedly. "I left early to wash up and put on a clean shirt."

"Notice you and Tobe didn't have no trouble picking up the trail after them horses." Pop tried to keep his voice natural but, in spite of himself, his tone was half-accusing. And Johnny sensed it.

"Shucks, a trail like that ain't hard to pick up and follow," Johnny said, with a show of irritation in his voice. Pop had a feeling that Lucy was hearing their conversation.

"No, guess not," he muttered. Then he blurted: "Guess them fellows didn't have much spunk, anyhow."

"How come?" Johnny was definitely riled now, and Pop wished with all his might that he could shut his big mouth, but it seemed as though the words just popped out before he could stop them.

"Oh, well, I mean there was five of 'em and only two of you—you and Tobe."

"What's wrong with that?" demanded Johnny.

"It don't sound . . . well, just right," Pop grunted, "that five men who had guts enough to steal some horses wouldn't have the guts to fight it out with just two men—"

"That sounds a lot like you was calling Tobe and me liars," Johnny said coldly.

"Aw, I didn't mean it thataway," Pop backed water.

"It sounded like it to me," Johnny said flatly, getting to his feet. "And it ain't the first time you've made remarks after me and Tobe got back from a job. Good night." He stalked down the path and out the gate.

Lucy came hurrying out as she heard him leave.

"Dad!" she burst out. "I heard it all. What right have you got to say such things to Johnny?" she demanded, half tearfully.

"Lemme tell you a thing or two." Pop started, but got no farther. Lucy choked back a sob and ran into the house. Dully, Pop listened as she went in her room and shut the door.

He cursed softly and worried the goatee with his fingers. Lordy, he'd done it now. He twisted a kink in his goatee, then jerked the kink out.

Just the same, he thought grimly. Johnny was almighty touchy about answering a few questions. And if everything was on the up and up, why should he fly off the handle when somebody asked him for a few details about the raid?

Pop stomped off to bed, but sleep wouldn't come. He lay there thinking about Tobe Maynard and Cass Harwood—and Johnny Ames.

He remembered the night almost a year ago when the citizens of Sawdust City had held a meeting. Sawdust City had been a riotous, lawless hell hole in those days.

"Not fit," somebody had said, "for decent womenfolk to be in—and not a fitten place to raise kids."

There had been holdups and killings, and the law was openly flouted and ignored. Vigilantes were needed, the townspeople had argued, and that meeting had been for the purpose of forming a vigilante committee.

It had been Pop Neighbors who had talked against forming the committees. Pop had seen a man shot down in the streets, and the memory of it was still raw in his mind. If the vigilantes were formed, it would mean an open fight. And at the thought of facing those flaming guns. Pop had turned cold all over. And the first thing he knew, he was arguing against it. It had been Pop Neighbors who had argued heatedly for getting a fast-shooting sheriff for Sawdust City to replace the one who had recently been killed. A fast-shooting sheriff, and no vigilante committee.

"A sheriff tough enough to tame this town would cost more'n we c'n pay," somebody had argued.

"I know a sheriff who wants to settle down in some town," Pop had replied. "I figure he'd take on the job cheap, then settle down here in Sawdust City."



That had been a deliberate lie, Pop thought. He hadn't known of a sheriff. But he had known of a man who wanted a quiet town where no one knew him—and where the law wouldn't bother him. Years ago Pop had lived in Texas. He'd known a wild bunch down there, and he knew of one or two who were still alive. Tobe Maynard was one of those. Tobe was still wanted down in Texas, and the last Pop had heard of him, he was hiding out in the wild country. Pop knew Tobe didn't like that. Tobe liked the bright lights of town.

Why not, Pop had reasoned with himself, get Tobe to do the job of cleaning up Sawdust City? Tobe's guns were fast—and he had the recklessness that such a job required. He'd draw a salary but his real payment would be immunity from the law and being near the city lights that he loved.

At Pop's insistence, the men of Sawdust City had decided to try the sheriff, and he'd written Tobe a long

letter, explaining the setup. Maynard had jumped at the idea.

"It'll be a dang good deal for me," Tobe had said, "especially till things blow over down Texas way. And I'll clean your town up, too."

"Understand," Pop had warned, "you're with the law here, not agin' it."

And Tobe had been as good as his word. For a few weeks, guns had flamed in Sawdust City, but when the smoke cleared away, Tobe was still there—and a lot of riffraff were not. The town thought the new sheriff was great, and Pop had forgotten his first worries about bringing Tobe to town. Everything, he thought, was working out just right. The town was being cleaned up, and not by a vigilante committee, either.

Pop had worried a little when Cass Harwood had showed up, but Cass and Tobe came over to see him. Cass had been the brains behind that bunch down in Texas. It was he who had done the thinking and planning—but was never on the scene of any crime.

"Tobe told me about getting a fresh start here in Sawdust City," Cass had said. "And that's what I want, too, Pop. So all I'm asking is that you give me the same break you gave Tobe—just keep quiet about what happened down in Texas."

Pop hadn't figured on things turning out that way. He'd figured on Tobe cleaning the town up, and moving on. But the two had argued with him about wanting to get a fresh start—on the right side of the law—and Pop let the matter drop.

Maybe I'm just an old fool, Pop

thought, as he stared up at the darkened ceiling, but dang it all, I brought Tobe Maynard here—and it would be up to me to stop anything. . . . He sighed and tried to go to sleep.

But the next morning the vague fears and worries were still there, and Pop left Lucy in charge of the store and walked down to the sheriff's office. Lucy was still mad about the way Pop had treated Johnny last night, and Pop was glad to get away.

He wasn't surprised at finding Cass Harwood in Tobe's office. Somehow, it was getting to seem natural that when you found Tobe, Cass wasn't far away. Tobe's bluff, hearty grin faded slightly at the look in Pop's eyes, and Cass' lean, shrewd face became a trifle more bleak.

"Never was one to mince words," Pop started in, "so I'm saying my say in a few words. Tobe, a lot of these 'recoveries' you've been making lately seem a little too easy. Like yesterday. Never heard of a sheriff and deppity scaring off five horse thieves with a few wild shots."

Cass laughed. "You're forgetting that Tobe has built up a rep—"

"That's just what I ain't forgetting," Pop cut in coldly. He was nervous and a little shaky, but grimly determined to have his say. "I'm just wondering if some of the holdups and rustling lately have been fakes—to help build up that rep."

"And what would that get me?" Tobe asked innocently.

"It would get you elected for being an honest sheriff," Pop ground

out, "and with Cass as mayor, you two would be setting pretty. The town would be yours, and not much anybody could do about it."

"You mean," Cass said carefully, "you think Tobe's building up a rep to make a big haul—clean the town?"

"I'm thinking that you and Tobe are too dang thick, and that there's something phony about all these holdups. Tobe's been getting the stolen goods back—but he ain't brought in the culprits!"

Tobe laughed sneeringly. "And what if that's the truth," he jeered. "What could you prove, you danged old fossil? Maybe I am building me up a rep in this town—you can't stop me now!"

Pop's hands were cold and clammy with sweat. He wasn't forgetting Tobe's gun speed. But if he faltered now or showed any sign of weakness . . .

"I could and would—if you try to pull anything," Pop told him quietly. "There're still people in Texas would like to know where you two are."

There was a dead silence in the sheriff's office. Cass' thin face was white and drawn; Tobe's features grew red with anger, then the color slowly drained away.

Outside, the sounds of Sawdust City filtered into the little room. Pop could hear a wagon rattling down the street, could hear the shrill yelp of kids at play. He breathed a little easier. He'd pulled the bluff. He sensed that they were going to back down and for that he breathed a fervent prayer. He heard two horsemen ride up to the back of the jail

building and saddle leather creaked as the riders dismounted.

"This must be the place," a deep, husky voice said. "But I'm still leery of meeting Toby Maynard in a jail—even if he is sheriff."

Pop was only half listening, and only half noticed that Cass got up quickly and walked toward the rear of the building. Tobe cleared his throat loudly.

"Okay, Pop," he said meekly. "You called the turn. A few of those rustling jobs were phony. Building up a rep for me. Cass drove Jake Oberly's horses off so's I could get 'em back. I . . . and Cass wanted to make a fresh start but we wasn't planning nothing crooked. We just wanted to be respected citizens again, that's all." He grinned, sickly like. "Ain't no harm in that, is there?"

"Guess not," Pop admitted grudgingly. "But just watch your step—that's all. I was responsible for bringing you two here and it'd be up to me to stop anything you tried. Now I've said my little piece, Tobe. That's all."

It was about noon when the two men entered the store. Pop was alone. He'd given Lucy five dollars to buy a new hat, hoping that would get her over her peevishness at the way he'd treated Johnny the night before. The two men were strangers, and Pop paid no particular attention to them as the tallest of the two, a big man, called him over.

But when the small, pint-sized gent spoke, it struck a chord of memory in Pop's mind. It was the same deep, husky voice he'd heard behind the jail. Pop got the sar-

dines, crackers and canned tomatoes they ordered, then watched them saunter across the street.

They reached the other side of the street, squatted, cowboy fashion, in the shade of a building. And Tobe Maynard walked by. For a moment, Pop was puzzled, knowing something was wrong, but not knowing just what. Then he tugged furiously at his goatee.

Tobe had passed the two men as if they were total strangers—yet they had ridden up behind the jail looking for him.

Cold, clammy sweat broke out on Pop. He watched Tobe walk on down the street and disappear into the Jumping Frog Saloon. His eyes shuttled back to the two men, and his pulse quickened.

The two were eating sardines—supposedly. But looking closely, Pop could see that their eyes were fastened on the bank. He tugged at his goatee, undecided as to what to do next.

The bank was two doors down the street, on the same side as Pop's store. Pop cursed under his breath, and on legs that were wobbling with excitement, started for the front door.

Then he saw that he was too late. The two men had gotten to their feet and were sauntering toward the bank. They would beat Pop there, unless he tried to run. And if he ran they would know something was wrong, and then guns would flame. Then Pop was scurrying through the store, toward his back door. He could slip out the back door, across the

back lot and into the back door of the bank. . . .

He reached the back door of the store and searched frantically for the key to the big padlock. Then a sob tore his throat. The key was hanging on a nail up front. He wheeled and ran toward the front—just as a loud yell and a single shot shattered the silence of the town.

Through his front windows, Pop could see the two men running out of the bank. Timothy Regan was right on their heels, a smoking gun in his fist. As Pop looked, the short man turned and fired, and Regan went down clutching his shoulder. The tall bandit was carrying a gunny sack, and the two men raced around the corner of the bank, and up the alley.

Pop grabbed the key and his six-gun and raced for the back of the store. They must have their horses around back. He could get the back door open and drop the two of them as they mounted. . . .

His mouth was dry as dust. This was what he'd dreaded; gun flame. The thundering smash of six-guns turned him cold inside, and he could almost feel the hot lead smashing into him with sickening impact.

As he fumbled with the lock, he could hear the men's excited curses as they caught their mounts and swung into the saddles. He got the key in the lock and twisted savagely. A six-gun blasted and a man yelled in mortal pain. The key turned and Pop jerked the door open.

A riderless horse squealed and bucked, and Pop saw that the tall

man—the one with the money—was on the ground. The short man was in the saddle.

"Damn you, Tobe, you double-crosser!" he screamed and snapped two shots as he spurred his horse savagely.

Tobe Maynard raced into view. He blasted at the retreating man, then ran to the tall man on the ground. Quick as a flash, Tobe snatched the gunny sack and flung it into a trash barrel. Then, hardly pausing, he raced up the alley after the bandit, firing as he ran.

Within seconds, there was a milling crowd there in the back yard around the fallen bank robber. Tobe Maynard came puffing back down the alley, punching spent loads from his gun.

"I got one of the sons!" he roared. "But the other one got away—and he grabbed the sack as he went."

"You taking a posse after him, Tobe?" The crowd was eager to ride.

"Posse, hell!" the big sheriff roared. "I'm taking the trail after him alone. I want the satisfaction of gitting him myself!"

Pop leaned weakly against the back door of his store. He tugged at his goatee for a moment, then pushed down into the crowd. He saw Cass Harwood's tall frame in the crowd, as the lawyer shoved his way toward the trash barrel. The whole town was milling and stomping around the body of the dead bandit.

A moment later, Pop reached the trash barrel. He was getting ready to yell out the news—and to yell out

his accusation of Tobe Maynard; to rid Sawdust City of its four-flushing sheriff—the sheriff, that he, Pop Neighbors was responsible for. He felt in the barrel.

The gunny sack was gone!

For a long moment Pop stood there. Then he stumbled and pushed his way back through the crowd. He went back into the store and sat down on a barrel.

He sat there, while the knowledge of what had happened seeped through him like a chill wind from the north. Tobe and Cass had planned that holdup; had planned to kill the bandits but keep the money. With the reputation Tobe Maynard had built up, the two could get away with it, and no one would suspect.

No one but Pop. He got up from the barrel.

"It's time," he muttered, half to himself, "to send a telegram to Texas."

He was putting his hat on, when Tobe Maynard and Cass Harwood came in the front door.

"Gimme some bacon, beans and coffee, Pop," Tobe said. "I'm taking the trail after that lousy . . ." His voice trailed off, as his eyes followed Cass Harwood's—toward the back door. It was still open.

"How long's that door been open, Neighbors?" Cass Harwood's voice was hardly more than a whisper.

Pop shrugged. "When all the crowd was out there," he muttered. "Just opened it to see that dead robber—"

"Seems as though I remember seeing you, Pop," Tobe said, and his voice was cold and raspy, "when I

came back down the alley. It *must* have been opened as *I went up the alley.*"

Pop's six-gun was still stuffed in the waistband of his trousers, where he'd shoved it when he ran for the back door. He felt its bulk now, pressing against his belly, and he felt the cold, clammy perspiration break out in the palms of his hands. He'd seen Tobe Maynard go for his gun. Tobe was hell on wheels. And Pop hadn't pulled a gun since. . . .

Suddenly Pop wanted to laugh. It was funny, funny as the devil. He'd brought these men to Sawdust City so that he, Pop Neighbors, wouldn't have to face gunfire. And in a few seconds, he would be facing the very guns *he* had brought to Sawdust City. It was funny. That vigilante committee he'd argued against would come in handy right now. But there was no vigilante committee—Pop had seen to that.

"I remember the door being open when I went over to the trash barrel," Cass Harwood said in a curiously flat voice.

Tobe was staring at Pop, but when he spoke, it was to Cass Harwood.

"I could say my gun went off accidentally—and Pop was in the way. With my rep 'round here, we could get away with it . . ."

Footsteps sounded at the back door. Pop didn't dare turn his head, but he felt the breath go out of him in a long sigh of relief. He'd have help. . . .

Then disappointment cut him like a knife, when the man who'd just entered spoke.

Johnny Ames said: "Kind o' slow taking the trail, aint'cha, Tobe?"

Pop braced himself for the shock of gunfire. Tobe had admitted that Jake Oberly's horses hadn't been rustled; Johnny had been with Tobe on that trip. Then Johnny must know . . . It would kill Lucy when she found out her Johnny was a crook. . . .

"I'll take one of you with me," Pop said. "And it's you I'm picking, Tobe—I was responsible for bringing you here—it's up to me to see Sawdust City rid of you."

"The game's over, Tobe," Cass said brittlely "We'll take the bank money and go."

Even as he was speaking, Cass and Tobe made their play. Pop's gnarled hand jerked for his gun, but he was too slow—way too slow . . .

Gunfire rocked the store. Pop tensed for the impact of hot lead ripping him, but it didn't come. Tobe Maynard was staggering backwards, as if being slugged by a giant, invisible hand. And then, as if from a great distance, Pop heard Johnny yelling:

"Get Cass, Pop! Take 'im!"

Then the gun was bucking in Pop's hand, and Cass was jerking back

just like Tobe. Pop took a slow step forward, still rolling the hammer back and letting 'er drop. . . .

Footsteps crunched on the gravel path leading up to Pop Neighbors' house.

"Hi, Johnny," Pop said from the shadows of the front porch. "Set awhile. Lucy's finishing up the supper dishes."

"Thanks, Pop," Johnny said. Then after a short silence: "Sorry I got sore-headed last night. You see, I knew something phony was going on. They'd been hinting about me throwing in with 'em . . ." His voice trailed off.

"There wasn't nothing phony about what happened in the store today," Pop said mildly. "Wasn't for you I'd be in boothill now."

"Aw, now, I wouldn't say that," Johnny protested. "You was sure doing all right . . ."

Lucy came through the door like a cyclone. "You come in the kitchen with me, Johnny Ames, and dry dishes," she scowled. "Leave you two alone five minues and you get your hackles up at each other . . ."

Pop rocked back in his chair and contentedly tugged at his goatee.

THE END

The enormous underground wealth of New Mexico has hardly been tapped and, according to the estimates of some geologists, the coal deposits in the northern part of the state are greater than those of all Pennsylvania. The most important coal-producing centers in New Mexico today are in Raton, in Colfax County, with Gallup, in McKinley County, ranking next.



MINES AND MINING

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

GHOST TOWNS and a desert mining district stretch out across Beaver County in western Utah. Though it has been an active prospecting section for the better part of a century, it is only within the last few years that tungsten ores have been discovered there.

Tungsten is an important, needed industrial metal. A minable deposit can be a valuable find for any mineral hunter, a mark well worth shooting at.

The newly discovered Beaver County tungsten deposits, together with the old ghost towns, lie on the edge of a barren, 80-mile stretch of desert between Milford, Utah, and Baker, Nevada. Smart motorists have always checked their gas, oil and water supplies before making the desolate run.

The tungsten activity is something comparatively new. But the remains of the ghost towns still afford proof that the section was formerly a bonanza mining district. In fact the Horn Silver Mine on a little hill a mile west of all that is left of Frisco was once Utah's richest silver producer.

At its height Frisco enjoyed a reputation as wild as that of any two-gun, helldorado mining camp in the

West. The town folded like a busted balloon when the multi-million-dollar Horn Silver Mine caved in.

The mine was later reopened by sinking a new shaft nearly 1,000 feet to tap the ore remaining below the cave-in. But Frisco was never the same. Its spectacular career went out with the crash that reputedly broke windows in Milford, 15 miles away.

Further out in country dotted with alkali flats, cactus and desert hills, a few scattered rock foundations mark Newhouse, another of Beaver County's ghost mining camps. Newhouse boomed about the turn of the 20th Century and lived perhaps five years before its ores ran out.

Generally speaking, that is the way this often down but never out mining region has rocked along since pioneer days. Up one decade, down the next. Throughout the years a few persistent prospectors hung on, claiming it was still good country, still minerally rich.

Even so it was not until the spring of 1940 that deposits of sheelite, the commercial ore of tungsten, were discovered in the area. Copper, zinc, lead and of course silver had already been discovered and mined there many years ago.

Once important tungsten ores were known to occur in the region, search for further deposits was intensified. And tungsten, overlooked by the pioneers, was found to be fairly widespread. Chances are, the earlier prospectors didn't even suspect its presence. It is only since the advent of the modern ultraviolet lamp as an adjunct to tungsten prospecting that the mineral has been readily detectable in the local ores. Use of the ultraviolet lamp to catch the telltale fluorescent glow of specks of sheelite in what otherwise might appear to be barren rock is a prospecting innovation that has already been discussed in these pages. Beaver County, Utah, is just one instance in which the system proved its usefulness.

The sheelite so far discovered and mined in this district occurs at scattered localities in the central and north-central parts of the county between Beaver Valley on the east and Wah Wah Valley on the west. All of the discoveries to date have been made within a 20-mile radius of Milford, present supply center for the region.

Milford itself is an accessible, pleasant town. It is a division point on the Union Pacific Railroad and the business hub for some irrigated farms in the immediate vicinity as well as an outfitting point for miners and the cattlemen of the surrounding ranges. The town is on the Beaver River, the stream the impounded

water of which provides irrigation for the adjacent farming sections.

A letter from Reader K. H., of Lincoln, Nebraska, brought up the subject of this interesting and completely Western mining region. K. H. hankers, he says, for some desert mining country, ghost towns that are off the beaten track and yet a section not too far away from a rail-head or some green-growing farm land. He's heard of Milford.

"What about that section?" his letter asked. "Dope of the kind of country it is will be much appreciated. Has any high-grade tungsten actually been mined from any of the new discoveries?"

We have already summarized the setup in Beaver County, Utah, about as far as space will allow. As for K. H.'s last question, some high-grade tungsten ore has been mined from some of the properties down there. Just how much, we frankly don't know. We have no late, that is immediately current, reports on this. Always a big factor in the commercial workability of a tungsten prospect is the market price of tungsten ores and concentrates.

It may be pertinent to add the first discoveries were made in the Rocky and San Francisco mountain ranges west of Milford, one of them out by the old ghost town of Frisco. Discoveries of tungsten have also been made in the Mineral Mountains east of Milford.

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

FOR generations our Western frontiers have been a challenge and a promise to pioneer settlers. Homesteading is an old American tradition. It provided the start for many, perhaps most of our rich Western agricultural communities.

Now after years of homesteading and with vast expanses of the most favorable tracts long since taken up, a new land opportunity is shaping up for present-day families with a firm desire to take root in the West. If current plans are carried through, newly irrigated land will be opened within a reasonably short time to farm settlement on a scale hitherto undreamed of.

Projects already authorized can provide approximately 80,000 new farms, averaging 70 acres each, on potentially fertile but now arid soil. An additional 20,000 new farms can be established in previously irrigated areas that have formerly been held back by the problem of inadequate water.

The Bureau of Reclamation of the Department of the Interior has charge of the development of the land and water resources of the West. Projects like the Grand Coulee Dam in Washington, Boulder Dam in Arizona, and many others

are under its jurisdiction. Recently the Bureau has prepared an inventory of 415 irrigation projects, including in the list those authorized and others under study. This inventory has been presented to Congress.

It is estimated that these projects, authorized and under study, will eventually create a total of 193,300 new farms in the West, extending over an area of roughly twenty-one-and-a-half million acres. That is a land area about three times the size of the State of Maryland. It should afford productive land a-plenty for the immediate future, and for Western farmland seekers for years to come. Obviously, the projects won't all be opened up at one time. Completion of many of the projects will still require years of planning and construction work.

Writing from Hamilton, Ohio, Reader T. L. is one of the many who have been asking us of late for information regarding settlement on, or obtaining land in, these new irrigated areas that will be brought into being by the Bureau of Reclamation. T. L. wants particularly to know if the land will be open to homesteading under regular homestead laws.

Some of the newly irrigated land will be on the public domain. Most

of it will not be. However, under the Columbia Basin Project Act of 1943, authority was given to purchase arid land in the Columbia Basin project for later resale to settlers when the development is actually under irrigation. The Reclamation law sets the maximum size of farms which may receive irrigation water from a Reclamation project at 160 acres.

Disposal of land tracts that are on the public domain and will come under the irrigation benefits of the various Reclamation projects will be governed by the homestead laws.

In addition, certain important "extra" qualifications will be required. For instance, applicants seeking farm land on newly irrigated public land areas must have a minimum of \$2,000 in cash, or in live-stock and farm equipment. Or they must have equivalent assets sufficient to develop the farm. They must be able to show they are in good health, and have had at least two years' experience in farming, preferably in irrigated agriculture.

The purpose behind these conditions is to insure, as far as is reasonably possible, the ultimate success of the settler in his undertaking, and to guard against inflationary land speculation or the taking up of holdings mainly for resale reasons.

All of the Bureau of Reclamation's projects are in the West. They are widely scattered throughout the

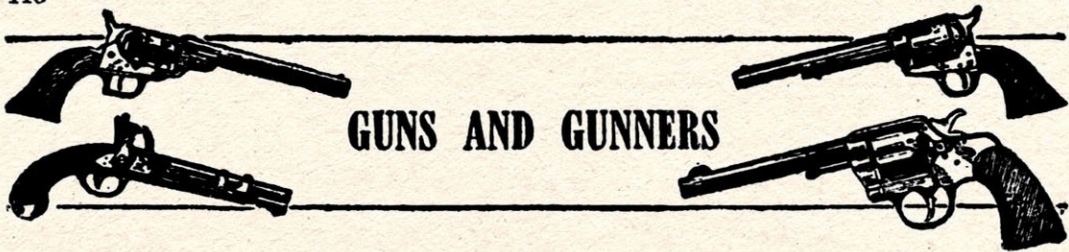
length and breadth of some of the finest Western country in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Montana, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. One of the largest developments, of course, will be the Columbia Basin project. It will eventually bring approximately one million acres of productive soil under irrigation.

While there is no need for frantic haste to get in on this Western land bonus that is being made possible through the magic of irrigation, neither is it too soon for persons sincerely interested in this project to begin laying the foundation of their plans.

Just remember that public land, any land acquired under the homestead laws, can't be obtained sight unseen on a mail-order basis. The prospective settler must visit the district himself and be personally familiar with the location and every aspect of the particular tract of land sought. He must make a sworn statement to this effect in his first formal application.

And here's a note for veterans. As each project of these Bureau of Reclamation irrigated land districts is opened up on the public domain, veterans have 90 days in which to file applications, and these will be acted upon before applications from non-veterans will be considered.

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.



By CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

SOMEWHERE IN AUSTRIA—I have been getting around a bit, looking over some former arms and ammunition plants. It's very interesting to see the way things are done here in Europe. Some plants have novel methods of manufacturing, others are quite old and produce slowly through obsolete methods.

After this war is all over and things start back to normal, life should be very interesting to gun bugs. There will be all kinds of foreign firearms—rifles, pistols, and shotguns—back in the States. But there is just one rub to the whole picture. Most of the boys who send guns home as souvenirs, fail to figure out what they can shoot in them. Guns may be sent home—ammunition may not.

Many thousands of rifles and weapons of all kinds will go home as souvenirs. Many thousands are already back in the States. There will be more to go. They will be truly souvenirs—which is what the army is permitting. They will not prevent a fellow from enjoying life with an American gun, nor will they hurt the manufacturer of American sporting firearms.

On the Continent there are many interesting weapons for which no ammunition will be available. Here are

a few of the sizes, all different, for which you will be unable to buy ammunition: 8 mm. Hungarian, 8 mm. Austrian, 6:5 mm. Italian, 7:35 mm. Italian, 8 mm. Italian Breda, 8 mm. Italian Mannlicher, 7.5 mm. French. 8 mm. French, 6.5 mm. Roumanian, 6.5 mm. Dutch, 8 mm. Danish, 6.5 mm. Norwegian, 7.65 Belgian. 7.9 Short German, 6.5 mm. Greek, and many others. But there is one bright side. We have the small list of cartridges for which there has long been a supply available—American made. This includes the British .303, the French 7.7 mm. (same thing), the German 7.92 mm. and a very few of the foreign sporting sizes in the Mannlicher-Schoenauer sizes.

In pistols and revolvers, some can be fed back in the States, some cannot. A popular rifle and pistol caliber is the European 5.6 mm., sometimes called the 5.5 mm. This little rimfire is our old friend, the .22, and most of these guns take the .22 Long Rifle cartridge. A few are built for the .22 Short. However, there is a 6 mm. himfire, both in rifle and pistol, which is no good. It will not use .22 ammunition, and has never been produced back in the States.

Another number, not found a great deal in most parts of Europe, but very popular in Bavaria and some

parts of Czechoslovakia and Austria, is the 4 mm. This little rimfire cartridge is only .17 caliber, and while I have not shot it, they tell me it is as accurate at 30 meters (33 yards) as the .22. It is intended only for indoor gallery shooting.

Many pistols and revolvers use ammunition for which there is no substitute. The French 8 mm. Lebel revolver is one. The Russian 7.62 revolver is another. But although the revolver is still used in Russia, several of their automatic pistols use a special 7.62 mm. cartridge, identical in size and shape to the 7.63 mm. German Mauser pistol cartridge. This Mauser ammunition was made in the U. S. A. and I have shot a great deal of the German ammunition in these Russian pistols—just a little heavier load than the Russians. Swiss revolvers also use a different cartridge—a 7.5 mm., not available in the States.

But a variety of weapons can be fed. It seems as though there are dozens of automatic pistols chambered for the 6.35 mm. and the 7.65 mm. Some handle the 9 mm. Browning Short, and some the 9 mm. Parabellum. Back in the United States you know those cartridges as the .25 Colt Automatic, .32 Colt Automatic, .380 Colt Automatic, and the 9 mm. Luger.

And of course there is the British .380 revolver, using the same cartridge as the .38 Smith & Wesson.

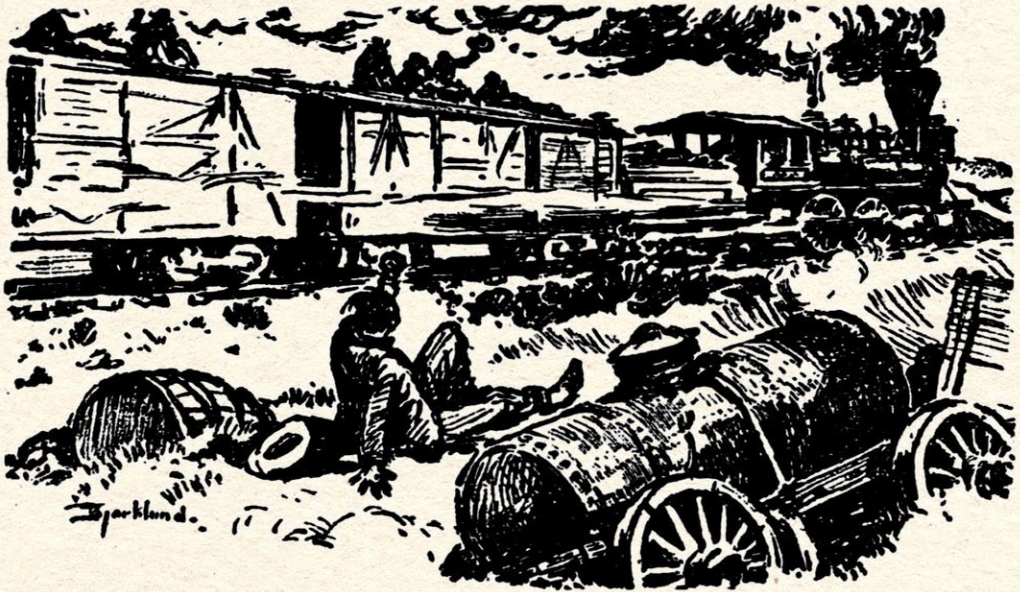
French pistols handle the 7.65 or .32 auto—except the latest model, marked 7.65 mm. L. This is a special long cartridge, new to Americans.

Just a word of warning. Most of this stuff is junk. We long ago heard about the skill of the European gunmaker. Perhaps. I have yet to see it in the average factory-made weapon. As far as German equipment is concerned, that country was hit hard, and most of the military guns they produced—particularly pistols—during 1943, 1944 and 1945 are dangerous. They were cheaply made, quickly produced, and with low-grade materials and worse workmanship, mostly slave labor. I know of many new guns, just from the factories, which have blown up in the hands of GI's. Better save the Lugers, the P-38s, and some of those other interesting relics, as just plain souvenirs, even though you can get that ammunition.

No, this isn't an idle statement. I've been in factories where these guns were made. I've seen how they were made, and what materials were used. This was part of my official work. And I know. Yes, I have a P-38 but I won't shoot it. It looks all right—but . . .

You will never be able to beat American guns. I've shot most of the foreign weapons—now what I want most of all is to come home and shoot some real guns again.

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.



by GIFF CHESHIRE

FREIGHTERS—

I

FOR nearly an hour an East Wheeler work train with a derailed ballast car had blocked the road crossing seven miles out of Owyhee. The train crew seemed in no great hurry to clear it again, Dave Masters thought. Swiveling in his saddle, he let his glance travel along the held-up S & H wagon train.

The broad flats beyond the Hilton switchbacks burned beneath a high sun that punished S & H teamsters and swampers. They had been blocked for half an hour. On the

short end of the long haul from Pineville, they were all bone-weary and caked with sweat and road dust.

Dave Masters was a patient man. But it looked as though the railroaders were stalling on purpose, and temper spilled into his thoughts. Jeff Ashton, the East Wheeler's job engineer, had left the derailed car and was walking back to the caboose. When the railroad man climbed into the caboose Dave nudged his horse and sent it sloping along the track.

Dave pitched from the saddle to the rear platform of the caboose. Ashton had heard the racket and



Would the loyalty he owed his own outfit force Dave Masters to side a lobo crew that was using treachery and sabotage to halt the iron horse?

LAY DOWN AND DIE!

stood framed in the door. He was a big man, big as Dave himself. He wore the laced boots and low-brimmed Stetson of an engineering man and his khaki shirt was salted with sweat. It was not the first time he and Dave Masters had met. There had been a little incident one night in Owyhee, over a girl. A black-eyed, black-haired slip of a girl—who was Jeff Ashton's sister.

Jeff Ashton was bringing a railroad to the East Wheeler country, and he seemed to despise the high-wheeled, lumbering rigs that used mule power instead of steam. Ap-

parently he also despised the men who ran them.

Dave clapped smoldering eyes upon the engineer. "How much longer you going to let my men fry their brains out, Ashton?"

"Fry their what out?" Ashton asked, grinning. "Funny, I thought you mentioned brains—in connection with mules and muleskinners."

Dave's eyes narrowed. "Uncouple your cars!" he commanded. "I can put enough mule power on the hind end to clear the crossing."

Ashton's jaw jutted. "When we have to call on mule power, we'll

turn the East Wheeler freight business back to the mules—and the muleskinners, Masters!”

Dave Masters believed in reasonable negotiation. When that failed, he believed in direct action. He took it, at that point. Ashton saw him bunching and stepped back a pace. Dave closed the gap. Bronze knuckles cracked like a blacksnake at the end of a powerful arm. Ashton's head snapped back. But he was a more supple man than Dave had reckoned. Steel-gray eyes frosted over the surprise and pain.

Ashton rebounded in a rush. Dave slammed bunched fists into his middle, found surprising solidness there. Dancing off, Ashton taunted him with a jeering grin. He exploded back and rocketed rights and lefts to Dave's tender zone. Dave felt pain surge up his nerves as he hammered the railroader off and riveted a set of knuckles on Ashton's jaw.

Abruptly the air quivered with the whistle of a locomotive. The long string of cars jerked suddenly, crashing the combatants to the floor. Ashton lurched to his feet and instinctively held out his hand to Dave. Masters was not used to trains, and the motion destroyed balance. Ashton helped him up and propelled him toward the back platform. There, surprisingly, he stuck out his hand.

“Nice having you, Masters! If you'd approached me politely, I could've told you we were set to roll! Stick your feet toward the locomotive when you light!”

Dave took the hand, still numbed beyond comprehension, then hit the ground rolling. Gravel frayed flesh

on elbows and knees. He lurched to his feet to see Jeff Ashton grinning from the platform as the work train gathered speed.

For some reason. Dave Masters grinned back.

Dave rolled his wagons into the S & H yard in Owyhee and reported to Olney Drew, the division head. Drew was a hard man, with a sharp face under graying hair. He had entered the S & H organization as a swamper in the days when a swamper really swamped to keep the wagons rolling through the mud slides and downed timbers of winter trails. He had grown bitter when the railroad started building up the East Wheeler Valley.

Drew took a look at Dave's battle marks and, when Dave told what had happened, grinned thinly.

“Beating up one of them is something,” he commented.

“I didn't beat Jeff Ashton,” Dave corrected, grinning sheepishly. “I don't know how it would've turned out if it had gone on.”

“You'll get a chance to see!” Drew declared emphatically. “In the end we're going to be wiped out. We know that. We can't whip 'em; they've got Eastern capital and government backing. But we can delay and discourage them. And we can turn people against 'em!”

Caution stirred in Dave. He noted the obliquely squinted eyes of the division superintendent. Hard, fighter's eyes, but there was more there. Something that repelled Dave. Maybe it was only Drew's animal cunning seeking expression in this

new situation. Though he took Olney Drew's orders and served him well, Dave did not like the man. He did not particularly like the S & H, though while he drew its pay he gave it his loyalty.

The S & H had laid its network in the plains and valleys and mountain passes through many selfish, hard-slugging expedients. The S & H had offended in this manner probably more than the other outfits, which was why it had once been supreme. War stalked the freight trails as naturally as bad weather and the perversities of freight wagons, mule flesh and mule drivers. Sometimes it was dirty war, and of such Olney Drew warned now. Dave Masters wanted none of that.

"You know I'll stand up to a man and punch until either he goes down or I do," he told Drew with a frown. "But he's got to pick the scrap. I don't stand for dirty work on my trains." He stood up. He had served his notice.

Drew's look was long and appraising. Temper scudded across his agate eyes. "I won't deny we've let you have your way a lot. It's dif-

ferent now. The S & H is fighting for its life. You've been an S & H man for five years. That mean anything to you?"

"It does," Dave admitted. Drew was hitting where it hurt. Dave Masters was loyal to his profession and his kind. He knew he should hate the railroads as the other freighters hated them. He should be concerned about his job and his future and be ready to fight to the finish. Yet in his heart he knew the railroads could serve the country better than the freighters. That was really what counted, not who got the business. All this conflicted with his natural freighter's instinct to live. "How you fixing to fight the East Wheeler?"

Drew grinned. He thought he had prevailed. Dave did not trouble, now, to correct the impression. Try as he would, he could not make up his mind with certainty where he stood.

"Like I say," Drew continued, "we can't keep them from building but we can make them hated. Sure, they mean faster service and better markets for the ranchers. But those things won't count so much when people begin to collect private grudges. Let a man's haystack or wheat field burn up from an engine spark and personally he'll hate the East Wheeler. Let some of his stock get killed! Let somebody get hurt in a wreck—"

Dave's eyes had widened. "You can't mean you're going in for that kind of stuff!"

"I do mean it. And you are—if you stay on the S & H payroll!"



Worry pressed heavily against Dave Masters as he left the freight yard. In the morning he would roll south with another S & H outfit, but until then he was his own man. He crossed the new railroad yard and headed for the Boston House. It was a sprawling, dingy hotel on the street fronting the river.

Cleaning up in his room, Dave thought of Lorna Ashton. He had met her at a dance put on to raise money for the town school. Lorna had come to the dance with Bike Sanders' wife. Alice Sanders had introduced Dave to the Eastern girl and they had danced. They had danced several times, and before the evening was over Dave Masters knew he was in love. The discovery had filled him with confusion, but he had screwed up enough courage to ask if he could walk Lorna back to the Owyhee Hotel, where she and her brother Jeff had rooms. Lorna had consented.

On that walk across town the incident happened that showed Dave Masters how he stood in Jeff Ashton's eyes. It was Saturday night, and the streets were filled with roistering riffraff. Dave picked the best streets, but he still had to take Lorna past a couple of saloons. They negotiated one safely, but as they passed the Golden Pheasant a handful of drunks on the sidewalk began to whistle at the girl. Dave tried to ignore it and hurry Lorna on. Then one of them made an insulting remark which he might not have meant for the girl's ears but which she couldn't help hearing.

It was too much for Dave. Cau-

tion evaporated before a blast of white-hot rage. He picked the biggest of the hooligans and floored him with a smash to the jaw. Then the others were swarming over him.

For several minutes it was a mad-dog pile, and Dave knew they were getting the best of him. He yelled to the girl to run on, but she stood transfixed. Dave went down on the sidewalk with fists, heels and toes pummeling him.

Abruptly he had realized he was being sided. A new figure had entered the fight, a lashing, swerving, charging figure. Dave scrambled to his feet, and in a few minutes it was all over.

Dave Masters had turned to Jeff Ashton with a friendly grin. The engineer nodded stiffly but his eyes remained cold. He apparently did not understand the situation and blamed Dave for exposing the girl to it.

"I was coming down to bring you home," Ashton told his sister. He nodded stiffly to Dave and, taking Lorna's arm, moved off with her.

Dave mused over the incident in the caboose of the work train. Jeff Ashton had fought him as readily as he had sided him. Yet at the conclusion he had thrust forth his hand. Something seemed to have been decided in that interrupted fight. Dave discovered suddenly that he liked Jeff Ashton. Perhaps Ashton had made a similar discovery.

II

The next morning Dave rolled off the Owyhee yard with a twelve-outfit

train on the long run to Pineville. For six miles out of Owyhee the wagon road snaked through the tedious Hilton cutbacks, then emerged abruptly into the vast wheatlands where it paralleled the new East Wheeler railroad. The mules settled to an easy plod on this stretch, while drivers and helpers slumped in the wagon seats.

Dave Masters jogged along beside the rumbling train on a black gelding, lost in thought that centered mostly around a dark-eyed girl he was leaving behind. The morning was serene, and Olney Drew's new war seemed far in the background. But it was closer than Dave dreamed.

A far-off whistle roused Dave and he hipped in the saddle to see an East Wheeler work train approaching in the distance. He scowled. A ten-team string was hard enough to handle under the best conditions. Though somewhat accustomed to the new clanking, steam-squirting monsters of the rails, they still deeply resented being come upon from the rear. Dave passed a warning to the drivers, who steadied their hands on the check lines.

The work train did not slow, which might have helped. As it thundered abreast, members of its crew waved and jeered. The mules began to dance, and the locomotive engineer chose to enliven the moment by reaching for his whistle.

Scores of jittery mules reared, skittered and jackknifed in their traces. Drivers rose on their footboards, cussing and belaying the creatures with cracking blacksnakes. A wagon jerked from line and piled up in the

ditch. That created the real panic. Mule strings pitched into squealing, pawing tangles, and wagons skewed off in all directions.

As the caboose of the work train pulled by, Dave saw Jeff Ashton, his mouth wide with laughter, lean out of the cupola window of the caboose. He caught Dave's baleful glare and lifted an insolent thumb to his nose. Any relenting Dave might have felt toward him evaporated with that gesture.

It took fifteen minutes for the drivers to get the strings calmed and straightened out. Harness had been kicked to shreds. Two wagons were overturned, their cargoes spilled high, wide and handsome. All this had to be righted, and it was a sweating, cussing outfit that went at the job.

The work was finished finally, and Dave was ready to swing up onto



the gelding when his nostrils caught the whiff of smoke. They were surrounded by ripe wheat, and Dave alerted instantly. Plunging around a wagon, he saw a man with a burning grass faggot bent there beside the wheat. It was Jud Evans, driver of No. 8 wagon. At Dave's yell Evans only grinned crookedly and tossed the burning faggot out into the field.

There was a strong breeze from the northwest. Fire caught in the wheat as if in paper. Dave lurched forward in a hopeless attempt to beat it out, but the fire was away and burning on a twenty-foot front by the time he reached the spot. Not another man on the train made any effort to move.

The fire surged, broadening its front, leaping and crackling like a merry demon. It swept across the four hundred feet to the railroad, and for a moment Dave thought the new grade might check it. But it was only a long moment until sparks racing forward on the wind had torched the far side. Beyond there wheat stretched to the horizon.

Striding back to the wagons, Dave seized Jud Evans and knocked him flat. The other teamsters stirred angrily.

Dave bore a bleak look against their stares. "I'm as riled as you are about them spooking the strings!" he rasped. "But torching that wheat was no way to get even with the railroad. You can't burn up steel rails, and the fire jumped the grade without even scorching the ties. Now you can see where it's running! It'll burn out everything

in that section. Likely it'll burn out other sections. You're not taking your spite against the railroad but against the people who own that wheat, and it'll be luck if some innocent person doesn't die!"

Jud Evans staggered to his feet. His eyes, like those of the others, were curiously insolent. "Like blazes it won't hurt the railroad!" Evans blared back. "When people get to figuring it was that East Wheeler work train that started that fire, it's going to hurt the railroad plenty!"

Dave felt his knees weaken. So that firing had been deliberate, ordered by Olney Drew as part of the new war. Dave turned again toward the fire, now racing on a mile-wide front, praying the heavy smoke it lifted would be sufficient to warn those in its path.

Dave brought his outfit back to Owyhee so that harness and wagons could be properly repaired before the long haul to Pineville was attempted. And Dave was not certain he would make that haul, or any other for the S & H. He made a full report to Olney Drew and noted the satisfaction in the division superintendent's eyes.

Drew had apparently expected trouble from Dave and had prepared for it. "Fixing to wag your jaw about how that fire got started. Masters?"

"Depends on how many people got burnt up in the fire. If anybody's killed, I'll see that manslaughter charges are filed against Jud Evans!"

The skin around Drew's eyes tight-

ened. "Do, and we'll make you out a liar by the clock! I had a little meeting with the boys, last night. They're worried about their jobs, and maybe I offered them war pay. We figured you'd probably kick over the traces. If you do, they'll stick together and swear you're lying!"

Dave did not hit Drew, as he wanted to do. He still did not know where he stood in this battle. He was furious with Jeff Ashton. Even if spooking the mules had been only the locomotive engineer's prank, Ashton had lent amused support. Dave walked off, silent and puzzled.

III

When the reports were in Dave learned the disaster had exceeded his worst fears. An area of ten square miles had burned, with many ranch sites, before the flames were checked by lack of further fuel. Worst of all, three ranchers were presumed to have lost their lives.

The town of Owyhee reacted violently. Its business depended much on the wheat lands, even without the outrage added by the loss of life. Carelessness with fire in the wheat country was a cardinal sin. Olney Drew's whispers grew to open charges. The East Wheeler outfit was responsible, and the blame centered particularly on Jeff Ashton.

The puzzled railroaders sensed the mounting fury and began to hole up down in the big roundhouse. Ashton's train, which had spooked the S & H mules, was caught on the far side of the burn for several hours before it could cross back through

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the miles of charred, still smoking stubble. This crew, also, kept to the roundhouse, hunting up lengths of pipe and steel rod for defensive weapons.

As he absorbed this bleakly, Dave Masters began to realize his own position. His rage against the East Wheeler outfit was great, yet on that side was the girl he wanted to marry. His rage against the S & H was even greater, but that way lay his natural loyalty. He could do much damage to whatever outfit he chose as far as future business in East Wheeler country went. But the way he felt, both outfits could go plumb to blazes.

The Boston House was the center of the mob spirit. Nursing a drink at a table in the corner of the tap-room, Dave saw that S & H employees were doing their best to whip up the frenzy. They found it easy. Dave began to pick up the pattern. They were attempting to organize an attack on the roundhouse. That would cover up a lot of damage to railroad equipment, and it probably would also get a lot more innocent people hurt. Dave knew he would have to make up his mind soon.

Dave emerged from thought to become aware that Jeff Ashton had entered the bar. Ashton's eyes sought him out, then the engineer came across the room toward him, contemptuous of the angry glares he drew from watchers.

Dave's short hair began to crawl. He half rose from the table. Ashton held up a placating hand. "I came to talk, Masters, not to fight. I hear the East Wheeler's being blamed for starting the wheat fire. Any fool

should know better. We haven't run an engine through that country without a spark guard yet."

"Why're you bringing this to me?" Dave asked, frowning.

"Because I've already talked to Olney Drew and got nowhere. You S & H men must've started that fire. Drew denies it. Big trouble's making, Masters. I figure you're the only decent man in the S & H outfit. I want the truth about that fire!"

Dave Masters surged to his feet. "You can't slick down my hackles that easy, railroader! You've fiddled your cocky tune and had your big laugh! You figure your railroad's bringing light to the heathen! But there's a side of the picture you're blind to! You throw your steel rails across a country already settled and trying to live by law and order. You figure yourself one smart hombre! But who do you think settled it for you? Who brought the law and order? The men you thumbed your nose at this morning!"

There was a murmur of approval from the onlookers, but Dave paid no attention. Jeff Ashton's eyes had turned cold as he took his long overdue lacing.

"Your thumbing your nose at me and your engineer spooking the strings I can let pass!" Dave resumed. "But I won't stand your thumbing your nose at *them*!"

Ashton saw what was coming, and after a perplexed split second he surged forward to meet Dave's charge. Time swept backward, and they resumed the battle from where

they had left off that day on the work train.

Dave Masters never had a very clear impression of the scrap afterward. He knew only that in Jeff Ashton he had taken on the toughest opponent he had ever mixed it with. Ashton took all he could send and returned it in kind. The crowd swept back into a ring that extended around the room. Dave's churning arms continually met flesh, and he saw the face before him grow bloody and battered. He knew he was absorbing all Ashton could deliver, but realized he could not beat the man.

Only dimly did he see the foot that snaked out to trip Ashton. The foul came from somebody in the crowd and, catching Ashton off balance, it sent him to the floor with a crash.

Dave churned to a halt. Panting, he whipped an angry gaze along the circle of watchers.

"That," he announced, "was a dirty piece of business!"

Olney Drew and Jud Evans had joined the onlookers. Sheriff Bybee had come in with them. Dave addressed his remark to them, for he had the feeling it had been Evans who had tripped Ashton. The scowl the sheriff directed at the S & H man confirmed this suspicion.

Drew was beaming, seeming to feel that Dave had cast lots against the railroad. Jeff Ashton staggered to his feet, still winded from his hard fall. The sheriff moved up to him.

"Ashton, a warrant's been sworn out for your arrest. The charge is manslaughter. It was the careless-

(Continued on page 130)

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(Continued from page 129)

ness of the outfit you're responsible for that set that wheat afire. And three men died."

Jeff Ashton's face went very grave and he shrugged helplessly. He kept his bleak gaze carefully averted from Dave.

Over the sheriff's shoulder, Dave caught sight of Olney Drew's satisfied expression. The man figured he had won his fight.

Dave Masters was seeing something clearly for the first time. The railroads were right for this country. The S & H had recognized only its own right to do business, without caring anything about its obligation to the community. It had fought progress by foul, roughshod, underhanded means.

"You can tear up your warrant, sheriff!" Dave's voice rang out. "And you can get another on my complaint. I bring the same manslaughter charge against Jud Evans and against Olney Drew as instigator. They tried to gag me. But they forgot something when they fixed to set that fire and pin it on the East Wheeler. You can check me by the burned stubble. That burn *crossed* the railroad tracks. Did any of you ever see an engine spark that could travel four hundred feet *upwind*?"

Olney Drew and Jud Evans exchanged stricken looks at it dawned on them that Dave Masters had more

than his word to support his charges. That vast blackened burn, which no man could erase, would surely convict them. Other S & H men were feeling the same emotions as they considered their own part in the affair. A few hard-cases among them moved up behind Drew, the black rage of frustration goading them to recklessness.

Jud Evans started the *mêlée* by charging Dave with slamming fists. With an upsurge of elation, Dave planted jolting knuckles to the man's jaw. After that they were swirling all around him. He grew aware presently that he had help. Jeff Ashton was siding him, and the sheriff had taken a hand and was laying right and left with his long gun-barrel. Other decent men in the crowd had also decided to take a part in the fight against Drew and his tough bunch.

Later, after they had helped Sheriff Bybee drag Olney Drew and Jud Evans out of the fracas and lock up their battered hulks in the town jail. Dave Masters grinned at Jeff Ashton.

"Got a job on that railroad you figure a muleskinner could handle?"

Ashton's return grin was quick and warm. "And how! It looks like you and I never will decide anything by battling each other. Dave! But, man, what a scrap we can put up when we go in together!"

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 71.

1. hemp 2. rough 3. pronto 4. venison 5. norther 6. craw 7. stake 8. deadfall 9. paint 10. blaze 11. hamstring 12. poncho 13. sign 14. afoot 15. plow

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