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STORY

MARCH 1946

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All Stories Complete



How Listerine Antiseptic can help to head off a Cold or lessen its severity

WHEN you feel a cold coming on, it's likely to be a sign that a virus has infected you and that millions of germs called the "secondary invaders" are threatening a mass invasion of your tissues through throat membranes.

That's the time to "baby" yourself a bit and get started at once with the Listerine Antiseptic gargle regularly. Here's why:

Kills "Secondary Invaders"

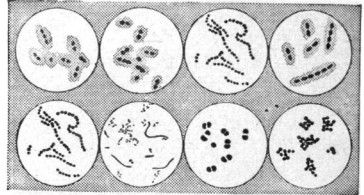
Listerine Antiseptic reaches way back on throat surfaces to kill millions of the "secondary invaders". . . the ugly germs, according to some authorities, that cause so much of the misery you know so well.

Often this prompt, delightful precaution may halt the mass invasion of these germs and nip a cold in the bud, so to speak.

Germs Reduced up to 96.7% in Tests

Fifteen minutes after a Listerine Antiseptic gargle, tests showed bacterial reductions on mouth and throat surfaces ranging up to 96.7%, and up to 80% one hour after a Listerine Antiseptic gargle.

"SECONDARY INVADERS"



TOP ROW, left to right: Pneumococcus Type III, Pneumococcus Type IV, Streptococcus Viridans, Friedlander's Bacillus. BOTTOM ROW, left to right: Streptococcus Hemolyticus, Bacillus Influenzae, Micrococcus Catarrhalis, Staphylococcus Aureus.

Fewer Colds in Tests

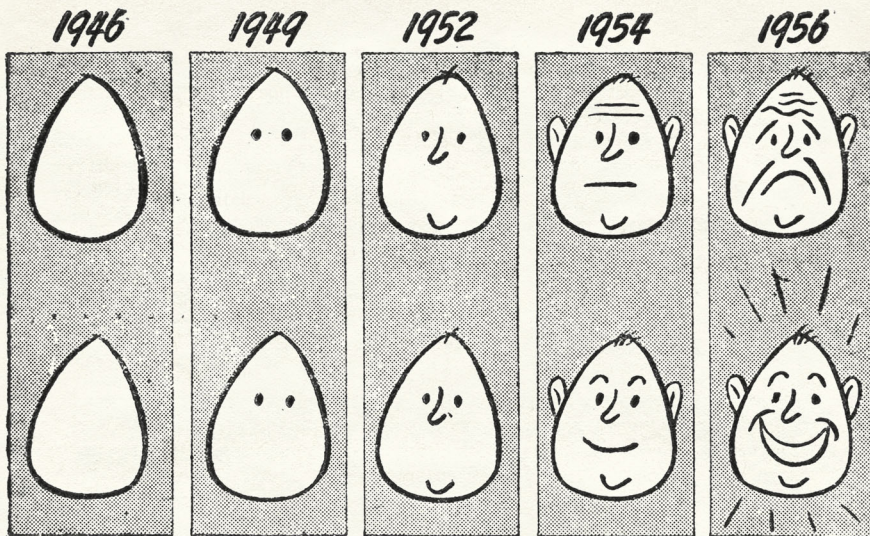
If your cold has already started, the Listerine gargle, taken early and often, may help reduce the severity of the infection.

Bear in mind Listerine's impressive record made in tests over twelve years: Those who gargled with Listerine Antiseptic twice a day had fewer colds and usually milder colds than those who did not gargle . . . and fewer sore throats.

So, when you feel a cold coming on, eat sparingly, keep warm, get plenty of rest, and gargle with Listerine Antiseptic. It may spare you a lot of trouble.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo.*

THE SAFE ANTISEPTIC
FOR ORAL HYGIENE



Two ways your face can grow in the next few years

SUPPOSE financial matters are constantly on your mind.

Suppose you know that there's practically no cash reserve between you and trouble.

It would be surprising if your face didn't show it.

But suppose that you're putting aside part of everything you earn . . . that those dollars you save are busy earning *extra* dollars for you . . . that you have a nest

egg and an emergency fund.

Naturally, your face will show *that*, too.

There's a simple and pretty accurate way to tell which way your face is going to go in the next few years:

If you are buying, regularly, and holding as many U. S. Savings Bonds as you can, you needn't worry.

Your face will be among the ones that wear a smile.

Buy all the Bonds you can... keep all the Bonds you buy!

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JOHN BURE

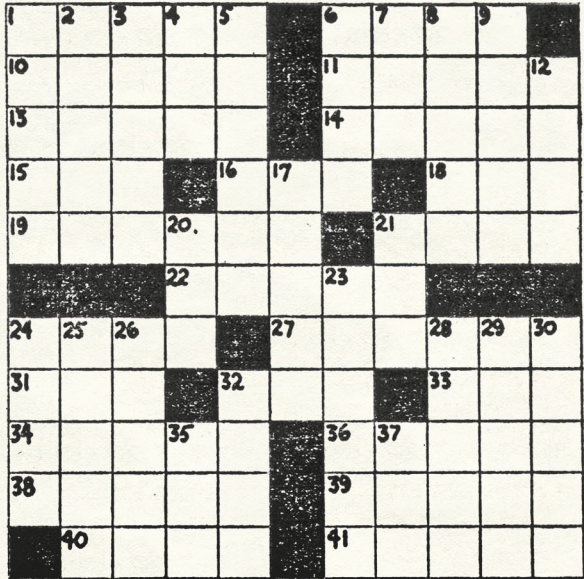
COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

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CROSSWORD

PUZZLE



ACROSS

1. Feed on the range
6. Animal's horny foot
10. Acid fruit
11. English nobility titles
13. One who is *non compos mentis*
14. Lingo
15. Among
16. Suffix indicating doctrine believer
18. Exist
19. Oration
21. Crest of a hill
22. Permission to go ashore
24. Fine buffalo leather
27. When the money comes in
31. Single person

32. Corral
33. A brew
34. Flinch
36. Plunges into
38. In the neighborhood
39. Conscious
40. Salamander
41. Plunders

DOWN

1. Lights: slang
2. Immerse again
3. Ammonia compound
4. Menagerie
5. Allure
6. Warmth
7. Rower's blade
8. Sonorous instrument

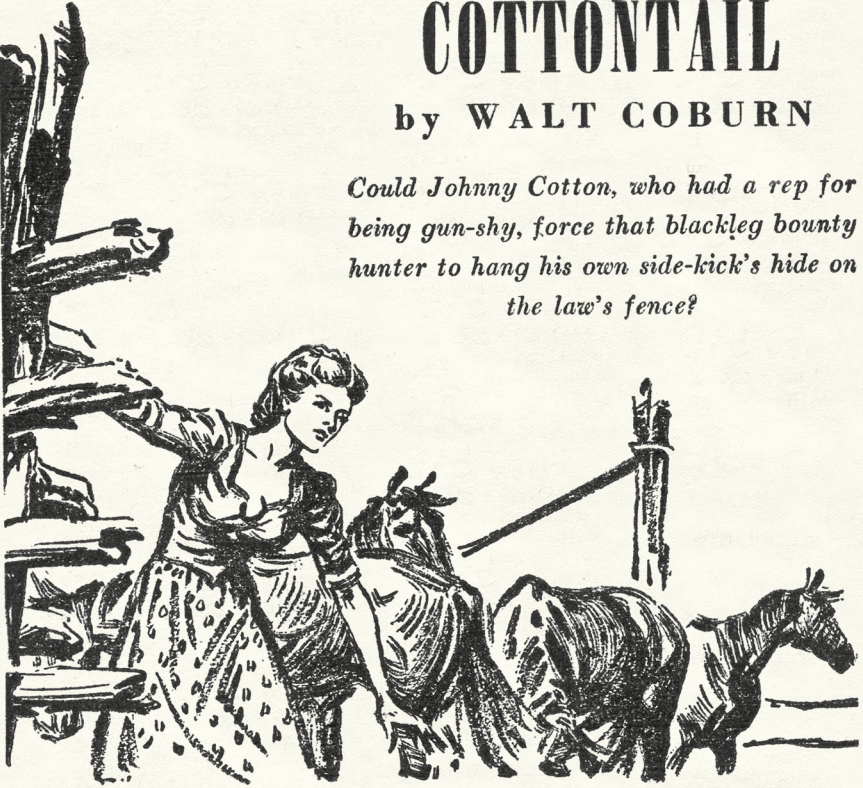
9. Vegetation of a region
12. Pace
17. Figure
20. Pixie
21. Answer to a code
23. Destructive scamp
24. Send the ball down the alley
25. Federation
26. Range boundary
28. City in the Philippines
29. Wide-awake
30. Affirmatives
32. Animal hide
35. Crow call
37. Island in the South Pacific

(The solution to this puzzle may be found on page 32)

COTTONTAIL

by WALT COBURN

Could Johnny Cotton, who had a rep for being gun-shy, force that blackleg bounty hunter to hang his own side-kick's hide on the law's fence?



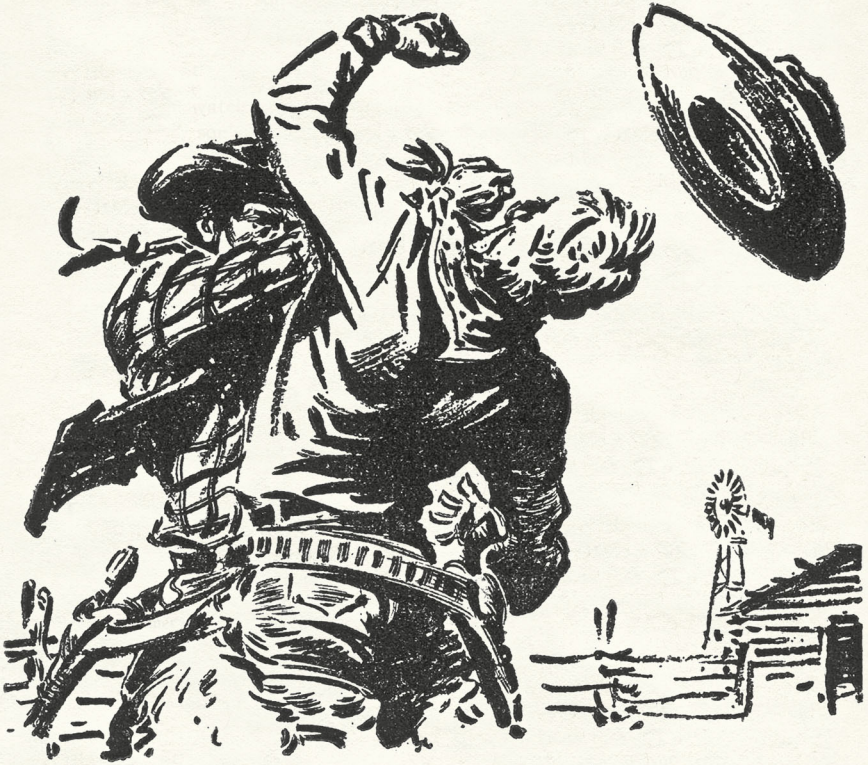
I

THERE were three thousand head of native Wyoming cattle in the trail herd that topped the skyline of the Bow and Arrow range south of the big Missouri River in Montana. A dozen or twenty different brands were represented and all the cattle were in the Cross road iron that was still too fresh to scab over on their hides. The hard-eyed crew all packed six-shooters and saddle guns, and the toughest of them all was the

scarred-faced, pale-eyed, black-haired Cass who was the trail boss.

Cass rode along the ridge a ways to let his herd spill down the long slant into the Moccasin Valley. Dry-camped the night before, the leaders smelled the water of Moccasin Creek and the swing and drag cattle fanned out. The cowhands, who knew their job, rode down ahead to keep the dry cattle from piling up along the creek. This was the end of the trail.

Cass hooked a long chaps-covered



leg across his rope-marked saddlehorn and rolled a cigarette. From under the low-pulled slanted brim of his hat he watched the approach of the lone rider who came from the direction of the Bow and Arrow home ranch at the upper end of the long, wide, fertile Moccasin Valley. Cass had coarse, straight black hair and the old scars on his lean hawk-nosed face showed through his two weeks growth of wiry black whiskers. One scar cut away a part of the heavy

eyebrow so that it gave him a sinister scowl even when his big white teeth bared in a grin.

The lone rider from the Bow and Arrow swung around the cattle. He had sighted the trail boss sitting his horse up on the ridge and was headed towards him. Cass never untracked his horse. Just waited. And when the rider came within gun range, Cass' right hand never got more than a few inches from his ivory-handled six-shooter. And it was not until

the man reined to a halt not a dozen feet away that Cass spoke.

"Long time no see you, Cotton." His voice matched the coldness of his pale-gray eyes.

Johnny Cotton was twenty-seven years old. Tow-headed, with puckered sky-blue eyes, a blunt nose and jaw and a wide hard-lipped mouth. He was of medium height, broad-shouldered, thick-chested, with lean belly and flanks and he sat down squarely in his saddle as though he was used to riding the rough string and had to be on balance constantly in case the bronc between his legs took a sudden notion to spook or pitch.

"I'd kind o' hoped," said Johnny quietly, "they'd hung you, Cass. Old Man Hank Roberts wasn't expectin' this drive of cattle till next week. He's in town."

"And Old Man Hank's only son Henry?"

Johnny did not answer. His puckered blue eyes were watching Cass' gun hand as he reached in his shirt pocket and brought out cigarette makings.

"Is on one of his wild drunks." Cass answered his own question. His eyes swept the fertile valley that was a cattleman's paradise. "Hank Roberts done himself proud," he continued in a flat-toned voice. "For a man that left Wyoming between sun-down and sunrise."

The cigarette paper broke in Johnny Cotton's short, hard-muscled hands, spilling the flaky tobacco. He had seen the glint in Cass' narrowed eyes—a greedy, possessive glint.

Then Cass looked at him and his big white teeth bared in a grin that pulled his flat lips back and the black whiskers moved across the dirty bone-white scar ridges.

"And how," he asked, "is the high-chinned little lady? I ain't seen that purty little wildcat Bedelia Roberts since the night I kissed her good-by down on Powder River. The night I risked my damned hide to git her and her old man and gutless drunken brother out o' Wyoming before they was killed. And she tried to claw my eyes out by way of thankin' a man. . . . Don't look so damned ringy, Cottontail. Or mebbys you feel lucky enough to make somethin' of it?"

Johnny shook his head. He could feel the blood pounding against his eardrums and he would have liked nothing better than to gut-shoot Cass. But he was not fool enough to make a gun play. Cass was a killer.

"There's nobody at the Bow and Arrow, Cass," he tried to make his voice sound hard and cold-toned, "to receive them cattle."

"I'm in no rush," Cass grinned. "The remuda kin stand a week's grazin' an' my outfit needs some rounsidin' under them cottonwoods along the crick. We got time to wait while Old Man Hank digs up the money to lay on the line fer these cattle. Don't let it fret you into a lather, Cottontail."

"Those ain't the cattle," Johnny told him, "Old Man Hank was expectin'. He contracted for a straight Bow and Arrow gatherment."

"All the Bow and Arrow cattle left in Wyoming," said Cass, "Old

Man Hank Roberts could winter and summer in a henyard. And what there is left of them Bow and Arrow remnants is scattered along Powder River like a shepherd's brains. Or didn't Hank Roberts know the wolves was on the prowl about the time he hightailed it from down yonder?" Cass unhooked his long leg in its fringed leather shotgun chaps and kicked his foot into the stirrup.

"If you're reppin' for the Bow and Arrow," he grinned flatly, "you kin take the news to Old Man Hank that Cass has stocked his Moccasin Valley."

"And what if Hank Roberts ain't in the market for ary stolen cattle, Cass?"

Cass shrugged his big-boned shoulders. His pale eyes caught the slanted rays of the early morning sun and it was like the reflection on shining steel.

"Them cattle is stayin' to put taller on their ribs. Me'n my men will pull out when somebody lays the cash on the barrelhead. We ain't in no hell of a rush to drift nowheres. Fact is, I don't know when I've seen a better range to locate on. Between me'n you and Bedelia there's times when that Wyoming climate gits shore unhealthy fer a man who don't want to die young. So long, Cottontail. Take the news to Hank Roberts."

Johnny reined his horse and rode back the way he had come. He heard Cass' short, ugly laugh. It was hard to take. But the only way he could stop that laugh was with a bullet.

Johnny Cotton knew he wasn't man enough to get that job done and he cursed himself for a coward.

There had never been any doubt in the mind and heart of Johnny Cotton. Cass had ramrodded that gang of night-riding cattle rustlers who had killed Johnny's father and older brother and had run off their little bunch of C Bar cattle.

Johnny had a notion that if he came out flat-footed and point-blank and put the question to Cass, that big tough renegade from the Hole in the Wall would admit it and would back the bragging admission with a hair-triggered blast of his white-handled gun. And Johnny would hear Cass' laugh in his ears as he died.

"If I had the fightin' guts of a cottontail rabbit. . . ." He cursed himself bitterly as he rode back to the Bow and Arrow Ranch.

"*Cottontail!*" He snarled the nickname Cass had hung on him. "And he makes me take it!"

II

Johnny had always carried with him the bitter thought that he should have died fighting back to back with his father, John Cotton, and his older brother Bob.

But about that time Johnny Cotton was hazing the Bow and Arrow remuda out of that range-war-torn Wyoming cattle country and across the Montana line to Moccasin Valley. And inside a bulging gunny sack wrapped in the yellow slicker tied on his saddle was all the money



Hank Roberts had drawn out of the bank and entrusted into his keeping.

"I'll be follerin' you, Johnny," Old Man Hank had said. "Bedelia and Henry and me will ketch up with you somewheres along the trail. But don't lose an hour of time. Keep that remuda movin' as hard as you kin crowd 'em. You keep a-driftin', regardless, till you reach Moccasin Valley."

Johnny had gotten the Bow and Arrow remuda out of Wyoming. Old Man Hank and his twenty-five-year-old son Henry and his nineteen-year-old-daughter Bedelia had not overtaken him until he had reached Moccasin Valley.

"We got held up," said Old Man Hank, "by the rustlers. I didn't give a damn much for myself, and Henry's a man and old enough by now to take his own part. But it was hell on Bedelia. I finally convinced 'em I wasn't packin' any money. After I'd stalled 'em off long enough to give you a long head start I talked Cass into lettin' us go. But I'm scared we ain't heard ner seen the last of that renegade ramrod. I had to make a dicker with him. Or rather, it was the other way around. Cass said he'd trail my Bow and Arrow cattle out o' Wyoming. Gather

'em and trail 'em and deliver 'em for ten dollars a head on my Moccasin Valley range."

And at daybreak this morning a trail herd had topped the skyline. Cass and his renegades had stolen cattle and trailed the herd here. Now they had turned the herd loose to scatter the length and breadth of Moccasin Valley.

Old Man Hank Roberts was nobody's coward. That little old cattleman was tough as a boot. But he had been sickened by the blood-spattered range war into which he had been drawn in spite of all and everything a cowman could do to remain neutral. He had seen the handwriting in the sky and had gotten out with what he could.

Johnny hadn't figured on staying in Montana. Hank Roberts had told him to write his own ticket, put his own price tag on the job of getting the Bow and Arrow remuda to Moccasin Valley. It was money John Cotton and his two sons needed to run their little two-bit nester spread. And so Johnny was all set to high-tail it back to Wyoming with the five thousand dollars Old Man Hank Roberts handed him out of that bulging gunny sack filled with folding money.

Then Old Man Hank had given Johnny the bad news. The rustlers had killed John Cotton and his older son, Bob. There was no sense, the grizzled cowman told Johnny Cotton, in going back to be shot down.

"Henry ain't worth his salt, Johnny, an' I got to have somebody I kin trust to ramrod my outfit. If Cass shows up, and the sign is

right, I'll help you kill him. But you won't stand a snowball's chance in hell if you go back gunnin' for Cass and his renegades on their own stompin' ground."

Well, Cass had showed up. Johnny Cotton had ridden out alone to meet the big scar-faced renegade from the Hole in the Wall. But he had lacked the guts to make it a gun fight.

Back in Wyoming John Cotton and his two boys had been among the small ranchers the big outfits had branded cattle rustlers and outlawed. But when Cass had made the rounds organizing the nesters and recruiting cowhands for his night-riding renegade outfit, John Cotton had refused to sign up. And he had flatly refused to let his sons Bob and Johnny go along with Cass and his Hole in the Wall renegades.

"I want no part of anything you're mixed up in, Cass. I come up the trail from Texas with Hank Roberts' Bow and Arrow trail herd. Hank staked me to what start I got in the cow business. If it comes to a showdown I'll be on Hank Roberts' side. Now take your stink off my ranch, Cass."

So the nesters and the rustlers from the Hole in the Wall marked down John Cotton and his two sons on their blacklist, branding them as traitors to their own nester tribe. They had accused the Cottons of being in the hired pay of the big cattle outfits who were said to be importing a trainload of tough gunslingers to wipe out the nesters.

Old Man Hank had wanted John Cotton to sell out or, if he couldn't

sell out, to ride away from his little outfit. There was plenty of room in Moccasin Valley, where Hank Roberts was going, for John Cotton and his two sons.

"You keep Johnny with you. Hank," John Cotton had said. "Me'n Bob will mebbysso foller you later."

Old Man Hank had done his cowman's best to salve the festering wound inside young Johnny Cotton's heart. Bedelia told Johnny he was only making himself miserable, eating out his heart about something that he could not have prevented and letting it mark him for life.

Henry Roberts had just put on that twisted grin and said it was all right by him for Johnny Cotton to ride back to Wyoming any time he felt like pulling out, that the Old Man had been mighty generous and five thousand dollars was enough to heal anything. Henry never made any effort to conceal his dislike for Johnny Cotton. Drunk or sober, and Henry was seldom cold sober, he blamed all their Bow and Arrow troubles on John Cotton and his two sons.

"Hell," said Henry, "I had it fixed with Cass to give the Bow and Arrow all the protection we could want. Cass would have built the Bow and Arrow up into the biggest cattle outfit in Wyoming. We'd brand enough sleeper-marked big calves every fall to pay runnin' expenses. Me'n Cass had it all figured out till you nester Cottons spoiled the batter.

"Why don't you saddle your private and ride away, Johnny? If it's marryin' my sister Bedelia and

her share of the Bow and Arrow you got in mind, forget it. She's too much high-priced thoroughbred for a two-bit common hand like—"

Johnny Cotton had lost his temper. He had given that sandy-haired, green-eyed, poker-playing, whiskey-drinking young cowman a mauling that had left Henry Roberts sprawled in the corral dust. And when Old Man Hank had showed up, Johnny had his private horse saddled and his tarp-covered bed loaded on his own pack horse.

"If anybody pulls out," Old Man Hank had jerked loose the diamond hitch on Johnny's pack horse, "it'll be Henry goin' down the road a-talkin' to hisself. You're ram-roddin' the Bow and Arrow till I fire you."

Bedelia had helped her brother to his feet and led him to the house to clean him up. She had paused only long enough to stare hard at the tow-headed Johnny. Her smoky gray eyes had black sparks in them.

"Sober," she had said, "Henry could lick you with one hand in his pocket. I thought there was some unwritten code about beating up a man who isn't in shape to defend himself."

That was no longer ago than yesterday. Henry Roberts had ridden back to the ranch after being gone all night. Half drunk and swaggering, he had brought the news that Cass was camped on the Musselshell with a big trail herd.

Washed off and dressed in a clean outfit of his tailored range dude clothes, Henry had told his father

that Cass was due tomorrow and wanted real money laid on the line for his cattle. Three thousand head at ten dollars per head.

The color had drained from Old Man Hank's leathery face. That was a lot of money to raise overnight. He had sunk all his ready cash into land and improvements.

"Hang and rattle till I get back with that much money, Johnny." Old Man Hank had saddled a fresh horse. "Keep out o' trouble. Stay clear of Henry till he sobers up. And don't lock horns with Cass. Saddle a horse, Bedelia. You're comin' to town with me."

But Bedelia had shaken her dark copper-colored head. "I'll keep Henry from doing anything that might complicate the mess. I'm capable of handling Cass if he shows up here at the ranch. If you need money, don't forget the fifty thousand Henry and I have in the bank. The money mother left us when she died."

But Old Man Hank Roberts was too almighty prideful to touch a dollar of that money and Bedelia knew it. And there was a crafty glitter in the slitted, bloodshot, battered eyes of her brother. Henry had a twisted grin on his face.

Henry was grinning like that now when Johnny rode up. Henry was about half drunk. He had a horse saddled and there was the neck of a quart bottle sticking out of the pocket of his long-haired white angora chaps.

"Cass run you back with your tail between your legs?" he leered.

"Draw your own conclusions, Henry."

Bedelia came out of the barn. She looked like a slim boy in her cowpuncher clothes. Her dark smoke-gray eyes looked at Johnny Cotton.

Johnny unsaddled his horse. He did not look around when he heard Henry ride away. Bedelia was watching him and it made him feel uneasy and, for some reason, he felt fighting mad. So Cass had kissed her, down in the Powder River badlands. Supposing she *had* clawed him; that made no difference. It was the first Johnny had heard about her being mauled around and kissed by that damned Cass. She'd never made a mention of it.

"Johnny."

"Uh?" Johnny slid his saddle from the sweaty back of the big bronc without looking around.

"Dad should be back by now if the bank would loan him that much money."

"Takes time." Johnny's voice was curt.

"Not that much time."

"Bankers are hard men to shave."

He started to lead his bronc into the barn. Bedelia stood in the doorway blocking the way. The color had drained from her tanned cheeks but she was still high-headed like a thoroughbred filly. The freckles showed across her short straight nose. Her black fringed eyes were dark and troubled.

"You still got your fifty thousand in the bank." Johnny spoke with hot-tempered bluntness.

Bedelia shook her head. "If I had

that much, or thirty thousand of it, I'd have gone to town after it. Something in Henry's eyes stopped me. When dad had pulled out, I tackled Henry. . . . That money our mother left us is gone. Every dollar of it. Henry drew it out. He won't say what he did with it."

"Ask the tinhorns in town. Or the bartenders."

"Dad paid Henry's poker debts and saloon bills and jail fines. . . . What kind of a herd is it that Cass trailed here from Wyoming, Johnny?"

"Mixed brands. What I saw. I didn't ride through 'em. No Bow and Arrow stuff, to speak of. It's a stolen herd in Cass' road iron."

"Is that road iron a Cross on the Right Ribs?"

"That's it."

Bedelia took a folded paper from her shirt pocket and handed it to Johnny Cotton. He unfolded it.

It was an official letter from the Cattlemen's Association, notifying Henry Roberts, Jr., that the brand, Cross on the Right Ribs, the earmarks a slit and swallowfork of the left and right ears had been registered in his name and the range was Moccasin Valley.

Johnny folded the paper slowly and handed it back to the girl, a scowl knitting his sun-bleached brows.

"I found it," said Bedelia, "in the corral. It must have fallen out of Henry's pocket when you were working him over. He doesn't know I've got it. What do you think it all adds up to, anyway, Johnny?"

"From where I look at it," said Johnny, "Henry has bought himself a fifty-thousand-dollar-stack of chips in the cattle-rustlin' game, with Cass dealin' 'em from a marked deck. This might be one scrape that Old Man Hank can't git Henry out of."

"Begging," said Bedelia, "doesn't come easy for me, Johnny . . ."

"Then don't tackle it. There's no need to. Hank Roberts pays me fightin' wages. It's time I thought about earnin' my pay."

III

Prideful. That was Johnny Cotton. Most real cowhands have such pride. They work eighteen, twenty, twenty-four hours out of a possible twenty-four-hour day and night. They furnish their own saddle and bed. They get forty dollars a month and grub for doing hard, dangerous work. And it's a part of their forty-a-month job to throw in loyalty to boot. A cowpuncher who won't fight for the outfit that's paying him wages is considered a sorry specimen.

But on the other hand that forty-a-month cowhand reserves the almighty right to his independence. He doesn't "Mister" or "Sir" his boss unless that boss has maybe a lot of gray hair or the "Mister" is hung on as a title of some sort. And between the Canadian line and the Mexican border there were many, many cowmen who wore the Stetson crown of Cattle King jack-deuce and whose cowhands called them by their first name or by some nickname.

Johnny Cotton, cowpuncher and bronc rider, had his share of that

independent pride. He was the equal of any man on earth. And Bedelia Roberts was a cattleman's daughter, the daughter of Old Man Hank Roberts. Ranch-born and ranch-raised, she knew what she had done to that tow-headed cowboy. And it was going to take a lot of cautious and sincere doing to mend what she had broken between them.

There had never been a time when Johnny Cotton had in any manner forgotten that she was the daughter of Old Man Hank. He called her Bedelia or shortened it sometimes to Delia. She had been a freckled youngster with red pigtail braids when Johnny Cotton, a shy, bald-faced kid, went to work wrangling horses for the Bow and Arrow. That was how long they had known each other. And since that first horse-wrangler job, Johnny Cotton had worked, off and on, all his life, for the Bow and Arrow. Bedelia had always been the daughter of Old Man Hank. Just as Henry was the son of Old Man Hank Roberts.

But since he could remember, Henry had hated Johnny's guts. Perhaps it was because Old Man Hank saw in Johnny all the cowpuncher qualities he had always hoped, and still hoped, to find in his own son. And the cowman was too blunt and outspoken about it.

Johnny and Henry were almost the same age. But Johnny Cotton had been a top cowhand and bronc handler when he was sixteen. While Henry went away to expensive schools and only came back to the ranch for summer vacations, Johnny Cotton was riding horseback through

the Wyoming snowdrifts to the little cow country school and did a man's work after school hours. There was too much of the town boy in Henry Roberts and too much of the old country boy in Johnny Cotton for them to become friends. And it griped Henry and hurt his young pride to see Johnny riding broncs or roping calves to drag to the branding fire while he, Henry, was helping hold the herd or tend the branding fire.

"That tow-headed young smart-aleck," Henry would slip the roundup cook a forbidden drink of booze to get his sympathy, "spends all his time tryin' to show me up. I'd like to get him in town just once. One of these times I'll beat that tow-headed rube up till Old Man Hank won't recognize him."

At the roundup camp or the bunkhouse Henry would get off his pool-room jokes on Johnny. Barbed, sharp-edged taunts that Johnny had to laugh off or pick up with his fists. And on account of his deep young loyalty to Old Man Hank, Johnny would laugh it off or walk away. That was how the Bow and Arrow and all that part of the Wyoming cow country got the notion that Johnny Cotton had a yellow streak down his back.

And by the time Johnny Cotton found out that Cass and his Hole in the Wall renegades had killed his father and brother, he was beginning to believe he did have a streak of yellow cowardice.

Then yesterday Henry had carried his insults too far and Johnny had

torn into him for the first time. Henry had not been too drunk to take care of himself, but he hadn't been expecting Johnny Cotton actually to show fight. And he had been caught off-balance by the tow-headed cow-puncher's sudden, savage, hammering attack. All the pent-up fury stored away and tamped down over the years had broken loose and nothing this side of hell could have stopped the pounding, hammering, battering fists of the husky, swift-moving Johnny. And then it was over and there was Henry down in the thick heavy dust of the horse corral.

Johnny never got a chance to feel elated about his victory. The warm glow of it was just beginning to heat his blood when Bedelia had taken it up for her brother.

Bedelia hadn't wasted too many words. But what she had said had hurt deeper than all and everything Henry had said during all the years. Coming from Bedelia, it was like being stabbed in the back by somebody Johnny had trusted to the absolute limit, and with Old Man Hank there, too. It was the first time Bedelia Roberts had ever let Johnny Cotton, cowhand, be made to feel that she was the Boss' daughter.



Besides that, Bedelia knew about all the dirt Johnny had taken during the years from her overbearing, waspish-tongued brother. And she was no longer a pig-tailed kid but a young woman, with a woman's way of knowing that on her account, as well as on account of Old Man Hank, Johnny Cotton had taken more from Henry Roberts than he would ever take from any man alive. And she must know that there never had been a time when that tow-headed young bronc rider wouldn't have crawled on his belly through the hot chunks of hell for her.

It wasn't until her half-drunken brother had dragged Bedelia's name into his talk that Johnny Cotton saw red. Bedelia had somehow wormed that out of Henry while she was learning about her brother's taking the fifty thousand dollars in their savings account.

Bedelia had to step aside to let Johnny lead his bronc into the barn. His face looked white and drawn under its coating of tan and powdering of dust. And there was something in the hard set of his blunt jaw and square-cornered mouth and in the clear bright blue of his puckered eyes that kept her at a distance.

There was a hard aching lump in Bedelia's throat. Her eyes felt as though somebody had thrown a handful of hot sand into them. She stood there watching while Johnny tied the bronc in an empty stall. If she said anything, no matter what it was, it would be the wrong thing.

Once, a long time ago when she was a kid and Johnny Cotton was

riding out his first string of Bow and Arrow broncs, Bedelia had sat on the pole corral and watched. A big line-backed buckskin three-year-old bronc had thrown the tow-headed young bronc twister. He had picked himself up out of the dust and caught the bronc and mounted again, only to be thrown once more.

Bedelia had sat there, so white her freckles stood out like warts, and stared wide-eyed while the bronc threw Johnny half a dozen times. Dust, sweat and blood had smeared his face and through its mask the face of Johnny Cotton had looked as it looked now. And then he had settled himself down in the saddle with both boots shoved to the heels in the rawhide-covered stirrups. Gripping the horsehair hackamore rope in his left hand, he had yanked his sweat-stained old hat down hard with his other hand. And for the first time he looked up at Bedelia and let her know he was aware of her being perched on the corral fence.

"Open the gate, Delia!" Johnny had called to her in a croaking voice.

"No, Johnny! No! He'll kill you if you ride 'im outside! He'll kill you!"

"Open the gate!"

Bedelia had climbed down and opened the gate. She had watched the big bronc pitch through the gateway and out across the sagebrush flat and then throw its head up and stampede. The bronc and the tow-headed kid had vanished in the distance and she had waited. And after a long time Johnny Cotton came riding back, his white teeth and blue

eyes showing in the mask of dried blood and sweat and dirt.

It was then that the flood of tears came to melt the hard, aching lump inside her kid heart.

The lump was there now. But the tears would not come because she blinked them back.

Bedelia had just about worshipped the tow-headed kid when he rode up on the broken dun.

"I'll break him gentle for you, Bedelia," Johnny had grinned at her that day. And he had kept his promise. That same line-backed buckskin gelding, old now for a cow horse but still sound as a dollar, stood in the next stall. Bedelia's pet.

She went into the stall with the old Zebra Dun and buried her face against the velvety muzzle.

"Oh, damn him!" she whispered fiercely. "Mule-brained towhead. He knows darn well . . . Oh, hang his darned, high-chinned, prideful, mule-headed, stubborn—"

"I'm lookin'"—the shadowy bulk of a man on horseback showed in the wide doorway of the barn—"for young Henry Roberts!"

IV

It was Johnny Cotton who came out of his stall first and strode quickly towards the rider who was peering over his horse's ears into the barn. There was a law badge pinned to his unbuttoned shabby vest.

The man was a stock detective named Jake Sprawls. He had been hired by the Cattlemen's Association

to stamp out cattle rustling and horse stealing. Sprawls had been imported, it was rumored, straight from Wyoming and he was rapidly building himself a tough rep.

Sprawls was a small-boned, weasened man with a hatchet face and a pair of slitted yellow eyes. His mouth was a lipless slit and his voice was never louder than a rasping whisper though it could carry as far as a shout.

"Henry," said Johnny Cotton, "ain't here, Sprawls."

"I heard somebody talkin'." Sprawls' clawlike hand was on his gun.

"Me." Bedelia stepped around the broad rump of the old Zebra Dun. "I'm Bedelia Roberts, Henry's sister. What can I do for you, mister?"

"Not a—nothin', lady." Sprawls' hand came away from his gun and gave a curt tug at the brim of his black Stetson. "I'll talk to Johnny Cotton—alone."

"Oh." The color left her face. Johnny cut her a sideways look and forced a lopsided grin.

"One of these times," said Johnny, "them practical jokes of Henry's will git him into trouble. Sprawls will stay for dinner, I reckon. Or anyhow long enough to slip his hull off that leg-weary horse he's forkin'. If I can't dig one of Henry's bottles out of a manger, you might have to soften his gizzard with a dram of Old Man Hank's good likker. Step down and rest your saddle, Sprawls."

Jake Sprawls' thin-lipped mouth twitched. "Save the royal welcome for the governor, Johnny. There

ain't enough likker stilled to melt my gizzard. But I'll stake myself to a fresh Bow and Arrow horse. I got a bench warrant for Henry Roberts."

It was the first time Johnny had ever put his arm around Bedelia. His hand gripped her shoulder.

"You could've saved that last speech, Sprawls."

"You could've saved your breath," said the stock detective, "tryin' to salve me. Where you got Roberts hid out?"

Johnny's grip on Bedelia's shoulder tightened. "Take it easy, Delia. The lawman wants to play hide and find." He tilted his head ever so slightly to cut a look up at the hayloft.

It worked. Jake Sprawls was off his horse, his six-shooter in his hand. Quick-moving as a gray tarantula, he was more than halfway up the ladder when Johnny shoved Bedelia back into the Dun's stall.

"Bareback, Delia," he whispered softly. "Cass' camp. Tell Henry to hole up in the badlands. I'll keep Sprawls on ice."

Sprawls had his head and shoulders above the level of the hayloft floor and they heard his hissing whisper.

"Crawl out o' that hay, Henry! With your hands up!"

Bedelia untied the Zebra Dun. Johnny had the bridle and saddle jerked off the stock detective's horse as she rode past him bareback. He sent Sprawls' horse off at a jump with a hard slap of the bridle reins across the rump. And he was turn-

ing loose his own bronc when Sprawls called down from the hayloft in his rasping whisper.

"What the hell goes on down there?"

"Might as well take yourself a sleep in the hay, Sprawls," called Johnny. "Looks like you're set afoot till somebody shows up a-horseback to wrangle the pasture. Kick around up there long enough and you'll locate one of Henry's bottles."

Sprawls cursed in his whispering voice as he looked out the hayloft door in time to see Bedelia Roberts barebacked on the old Zebra Dun, making Pony Express time. His six-shooter gripped in his hand, the range detective rasped something about setting her afoot.

"Shoot that old buckskin pony, Sprawls," said Johnny flatly, "And I'll have to kill me a bounty hunter."

Sprawls looked down through the ladder opening and into the muzzle of the six-shooter gripped in Johnny Cotton's right hand.

"Henry ain't up there, Sprawls," Johnny told him. "Matter of fact, you got the wrong name on that bench warrant. You ain't as smart as I always figgered you. Why don't you come on down and we'll make some real war medicine. A good wolf hound shouldn't git throwed off his chase by a mangy coyote whelp. The bounty on a curly wolf like Cass, for instance, should tally up into better'n tobacco money."

Sprawls came down the ladder, his yellow eyes glittering. Every stall in the big log barn was empty. The stock detective was afoot here at the Bow and Arrow Ranch.

"You bin talkin' about likker," said Sprawls, "till you got me in the notion."

Johnny nodded and grinned. He said he wouldn't have the gall to offer even a bounty hunter like Sprawls a drink of Henry's panther spit. But Old Man Hank had good likker at the house.

"You didn't see anything of Old Man Hank in town?" asked Johnny.

"He was in the bank," answered Sprawls. "Havin' a powwow with the bank boss. He didn't look too happy. He can't raise enough money in Montana to keep his son Henry out o' the pen. I let them Wyoming renegades fetch on their trail herd. It's a big un. I got a list of the irons. I'm in touch with the law in Wyoming. . . . What's the grin for, Cotton?"

"You bin about ten jumps ahead of the law," said Johnny Cotton, "ever since I first heard the name of Jake Sprawls. If it takes a rustler to ketch a rustler, you're the huckleberry for the job."

Johnny's gun was in his hand. And his eyes were as cold blue as ice.

"Take out that bench warrant you got for Henry Roberts, Sprawls. If you don't set a match to it before I finish countin' up to ten, I'm goin' to gut-shoot a bounty hunter. One . . . Two . . . Three . . ."

Johnny Cotton looked as though he meant every word he spoke. There was a tenseness in his voice. And Jake Sprawls took no chances. Pulling the bench warrant from his inside vest pocket, he struck a match.

And when the paper was burned to ashes, Johnny Cotton nodded.

"I ain't foolin' myself," said the tow-headed cowpuncher. "You'd kill Henry Roberts without it if you cut his sign. But it won't be so legal. And you got to watch your step, Sprawls. Because a man don't need too good a memory to think back to the time when there was a bounty on the hide of Jake Sprawls down in Wyoming. I'm tellin' you this to kind o' lay the foundation for a deal I'll make with you. So's we'll both know where we stand."

"You talk too much. Git down to cases."

"Directly. First, just one thing. I don't like Henry Roberts. But I'm not lettin' you murder him to build yourself a tough rep. I don't give a damn about Henry. But there ain't a thing on this man's earth I won't do for Old Man Hank."

"Or," Sprawls thin-lipped mouth twisted, "for Old Man Hank's purty red-headed daughter!"

The six-shooter in Johnny Cotton's hand flipped up, then the barrel came down in a short, swift, chopping blow. It caught Jake Sprawls along one ear and the side of his hatchet jaw. The range detective's bowed legs hinged at the knee joints and his head lagged over sideways and his yellow eyes rolled back in their sockets as he went down.

"Or for Old Man Hank's purty red-haired daughter," Johnny said softly to himself. "But that wasn't for you to say, you weasel-faced bushwhacker." He kicked the gun from Sprawls' hand. The gun the



range detective had drawn a fraction of a second too late.

Then Johnny Cotton squatted on his hunkers and rolled and lit a cigarette while his ice-blue puckered eyes studied the unconscious man on the dirt floor of the barn.

There was a trickle of blood coming from the range detective's ear. Sprawls looked dead. Supposing he was dead? That nickle-plated law badge glinted as though it was winking at Johnny Cotton. Kill a law officer, even a low-grade bounty hunter like Jake Sprawls, and the law hung you for it. Unless you rode off down the Outlaw Trail.

But there was that three thousand head of stolen cattle spilled on the Bow and Arrow Moccasin Valley range and they wore the fresh Cross brand registered in the name of Henry Roberts. That made Henry a cattle thief even if he hadn't warned his buckskin-gloved hands with a branding iron. Johnny Cotton was the Bow and Arrow ramrod and it looked as though he had a dead law officer in the Bow and Arrow barn. . . .

Johnny heard the thudding pound of shod hoofs. He looked up, then got to his feet with a lopsided grin

as Old Man Hank Roberts reined his sweat-marked horse to a halt.

Old Man Hank looked gray and old and whipped. But he stared at Sprawls and then at John Cotton and a slow, weary grin spread the mouth under the ragged drooping gray mustache. His gray green eyes squinted.

"You taken a chore off my hands, Johnny. . . . Where's Henry?"

Jake Sprawls groaned a little and moved. Johnny picked the range detective's gun up off the dirt floor of the barn and tossed it at him.

"Save you goin' for that sneak gun you pack somewheres," he said. "Or do you feel that lucky?"

Pain was pounding the inside of the range detective's skull. He sat up and got slowly to his feet, shoving the six-shooter into its holster.

"Me'n Jake Sprawls," Johnny told Hank Roberts. "was havin' a little war medicine powwow when he spoke out o' turn. I don't reckon he'll make the same mistake twice. He said he wanted a drink. Now he looks like he actually needs one. But business before pleasure."

"Spill it!" rasped Sprawls.

"If you got the guts to go after the tough hide of a cattle rustler named Cass," said Johnny flatly, "I'll go along to see you don't git the worst of it."

Sprawls' yellow eyes narrowed.

"Hold on, Johnny," said Old Man Hank, "don't you know this murderin'—"

Johnny kicked the ashes on the dirt floor. "Henry's bench warrant. Sprawls done changed his mind about Henry. . . . I know what I'm doin', Hank."

V

It must have seemed to Old Man Hank Roberts that no longer than overnight Johnny Cotton, the Cotton-tail, had changed into a warthog. But the grizzled cowman kept his thoughts to himself. He looked at the killer who hunted down men for the price on their heads and saw the cold sweat of the fear of death on Sprawls' hatchet face. And when Old Man Hank saw the eyes of Johnny Cotton he knew why Sprawls was afraid that the tow-headed bronc rider was going to kill him.

"You haven't got too much time, Sprawls," said Johnny Cotton, "to make up your mind." His voice matched the ice blue of his eyes.

"I'm goin' after Cass." The stock detective got to his feet. "But I'll go alone. I don't need your kind of help."

"Cass has an outfit of tough cowhands with him," said Johnny.

"I kin handle 'em."

"That's bitin' off a big hunk of raw meat, even for Jake Sprawls."

"I'll take care of Jake Sprawls."

The stock detective's teeth bared like fangs.

"Then play it lone-handed," grinned Johnny Cotton, "and it's dog eat dog. But you ain't goin' nowhere till Henry Roberts gits his head start."

Johnny poked around in the manger and found a partly filled quart bottle of whiskey. There was no label at all on the bottle. And the stuff inside was almost colorless.

"White mule moonshine." He shoved the bottle at Sprawls. "Rot-

gut Injun likker. Too rank for Henry. But it's the best you'll git, mister, at the Bow and Arrow. And you drink alone."

Old Man Hank put up his horse. Johnny's narrowed eyes never left the stock detective and the grin on the tow-headed Bow and Arrow ramrod's face was a taunting challenge as he watched Sprawls swallow the raw moonshine.

"I'm wonderin'," Johnny told Old Man Hank, "if that bravemaker will fire his guts to where he'll make a gun move." And he meant it.

It was about an hour later when Bedelia rode up bareback on the old Zebra Dun. Her healthy color looked faded and her eyes were dark with worry. She had picked up twenty or thirty head of saddle horses without wrangling the pasture and she hazed the loose horses into the corral. She nodded to Johnny as he closed the big pole gate.

Sprawls had his coiled catch rope in his hand. Johnny told him to dab his line on a big hammer-headed brown.

"Saddle that Cold Molasses geldin', Sprawls," said Johnny. "He fits the name. He'll pitch the first mile and sulk the rest of the way to Cass' camp. You'd save time by walkin' the distance. But it's the best you git."

Jake Sprawls looked sullen. But he roped the big brown. Cold Molasses ran on the rope and had to be choked down and eared to get the bridle on. There was a hump in his stout back when Sprawls jerked the cinch tight. Jake Sprawls had won

the bronc riding at Cheyenne a couple of times. It took a mighty rank bronc to throw him. He swung up into the saddle and let the big brown gelding buck it out of his system and they watched him travel out of sight at a slow jugheaded lope.

Johnny Cotton had his saddle rope coiled in his hand. So did Old Man Hank.

"We had all our trouble for nothing, Johnny." Bedelia smiled faintly. "My brother Henry laughed in my face." Then she gave Old Man Hank a quick hug and kiss and patted his stooped shoulders.

"How'd you make out at the bank, dad?"

"I didn't. And when I found out what kind of a herd Cass had trailed into Moccasin Valley, I'd 've give the bank back its money. I ain't buyin' stolen cattle. Not even to keep Henry out o' the pen. When a man gits my age he's too old to run. I hoped to git plumb away from that cattle war down in Wyoming. Away from men like Cass and Jake Sprawls. . . . I didn't travel far enough but I won't move on. This is the final show-down. The last payoff. . . . I'd like for you to ride away from it, Johnny. Take Bedelia with you. Go a long ways. . . ."

Johnny Cotton shook his head. "No kin do, sir."

Once in a long time Johnny would call the old cattleman "Sir." It gave a younger man's respect to the refusal he made to Old Man Hank.

"You was itchin' to kill Sprawls," said Old Man Hank. "You'd 've killed him if he had the guts to fill his hand with a gun. But at the last

you acted like you wanted him to make a getaway. Why?"

"We're stayin' here in Moccasin Valley," said Johnny. "But we'll never know real peace till we kill off a few blacklegs. Jake Sprawls either has to hang Cass' hide on the law fence or throw away his law badge. I forced his hand with you to witness it. He's got to play his hand out."

"Cass and Sprawls was pardners at the Hole in the Wall. That's what I tried to tell you."

"They're still pardners," said Johnny Cotton. "With you and me dead, Cass and Sprawls could claim Moccasin Valley. Stock Inspector Sprawls passed this herd across the Montana line. He could pass more trail herds like it. It's cattle rustlin' on a big scale. And them Wyoming outfits are too busy fightin' their range war to come this far to claim their cattle. . . . But as long as there's an honest cowman like Old Man Hank Roberts here in Moccasin Valley and as long as I'm ramroddin' his Bow and Arrow, they can't swing it.

"Jake Sprawls knew that when he rode away. Sprawls has to kill Cass or throw his law badge away and throw in with Cass to fight us. And either way Jake Sprawls jumps, he's got John Cotton's tow-headed Cotentail Johnny to kill. He knows that by now. So I checked all bets to Jake Sprawls. We'll watch for his next move. Is there any use tryin' to talk you into takin' Bedelia and pullin' out till the dust settles, Hank?"

"You'd be wastin' your breath, Johnny." Old Man Hank grinned

faintly. "You ain't mentioned Henry's name."

"No, sir."

"Henry," said Bedelia Roberts, "sold us out to Cass. Henry Roberts sold the Bow and Arrow down the river." Her arm was around her father's shoulders. Her voice sounded brittle.

"Johnny risked his life to give Henry his chance to pull out of their cattle-rustling game. I rode to Cass' camp and told Henry it was his one chance and probably his last chance to show his manhood. I spread the cards face up. Cards he never knew I held. I gave him his choice. He could fight for the Bow and Arrow and somehow we'd get him out of the cattle-rustling scrape he bought into with the money our mother left us. Henry Roberts just laughed in my face."

That wasn't all of it. But Bedelia stopped there. And now it was Old Man Hank who had his arm around his daughter's shoulders and his puckered eyes were gray-green like old ice.

"I don't know how long ago it was," said the grizzled cattleman slowly, "that Henry found out he wasn't my son. That we'd adopted him when he was a yearlin'. His name is Henry Roberts. His father was my half brother, Joe. Joe Roberts was an outlaw. He married a dance-hall woman. Joe was hung. His wife left her yearlin' boy at the Bow and Arrow Ranch one night and run off with some tinhorn gambler. He put her to work again in the dance hall. There was a smallpox plague and

she got it. It left her face pocked and when she found out her good looks was gone she killed herself.

"My wife and I adopted the boy Henry, raised him like our own son. Never told him different. Later our own baby Bedelia was born. Since my good wife died some years later I raised you both as best I knowed how.

"The Hole in the Wall gang remembered Bad Joe Roberts and they found out how his wife left hers and Joe's baby boy at the Bow and Arrow Ranch. When the sign was right, Cass told Henry the story. Cass bragged to me that he'd told Henry and that he'd make an outlaw out o' Henry Roberts if I didn't hire him to ramrod my Bow and Arrow outfit. Cass wanted the big Bow and Arrow. I told him to go to hell."

"Cass," said Bedelia, "wanted more than the Bow and Arrow outfit. He wanted Bedelia. And that was why you told him to go to hell. I've never told you or Johnny about the night Cass got us out of the Powder River badlands and across the Montana line. I had to fight Cass like a wildcat and Henry Roberts looked on grinning and never lifted a hand or gun to help me. Since I can remember I've been giving Henry money and helping him out of dirty scrapes. I even took his miserable whining part against Johnny . . . because Brother Henry was a weakling and a quitter.

"And today at Cass' camp that thing I thought up until now was my blood brother, tried to sell me to Cass like I was some high-priced filly. And I had to cut Cass loose

again when he tried to drag me off my horse. I've always hated myself for despising my brother Henry. I hated myself for feeling that way towards my own brother while all the time I wanted to be near Johnny. And Johnny was my big brother until I began to grow up. And then . . . then . . . All right, you darned Cottontail! I'm not ashamed of it. I'm proud of it. And if you make me stand here like a doggoned prideless hussy—"

Perhaps Old Man Hank gave his daughter a shove. Or more than likely Johnny reached out and grabbed her. Anyhow Johnny Cotton had Bedelia Roberts in his arms, holding her, and Old Man Hank turned and went into the corral with his saddle rope. Johnny kissed Bedelia clumsily and then her arms were around his neck and she kissed him long and hard, and rumbled his tow-colored hair. They were clinging to each other and grinning like a pair of kids when Old Man Hank led his horse out of the pole corral. The old cattleman's eyes were shining through ragged brows and there was a wide grin on his leathery face.

"I wish," he said, "Maw was alive to see it come true. Like we'd always planned it."

He told Bedelia to saddle a fast horse and ride to town. For her to send the sheriff out to the Bow and Arrow and for her to keep the sheriff's missus company till he got back home.

"Me'n Johnny," he said, "is goin' snake huntin'."

It was Bedelia who sighted Henry coming, his horse traveling at a run-

ning walk. He was swaying in his saddle as though he was drunk and his shirt was sodden with blood.

VI

There wasn't much life left in Henry Roberts. He had been shot through the belly by a steel-jacket .30-30 bullet. A soft-nosed .45 slug would have torn a bigger hole. But he had bled too much and it had taken all the nerve a man could have to make the ride. His teeth bared in a twisted grin as Johnny lifted him as gently as he could from the blood-smeared saddle.

"I rode back," he said when Johnny laid him on the ground and Bedelia pillowed his head with her buckskin jacket, "to clean my slate. Like the dyin' cowboy in the song, 'For I know I done wrong' I could use a drink."

Henry told them not to move him into the house. He wanted to die out under the sky with his boots on. And he wanted them to listen to what he had to tell them before he cashed in his chips.

"Stock Detective Jake Sprawls shot me. He had a bench warrant for my arrest, he said, and it read 'Dead or Alive.' He gut shot me but I managed to hang onto the saddlehorn when my horse spooked. The horse fetched me back home. . . ."

Old Man Hank squatted on his spurred boot heels and fed Henry a drink of whiskey. You could see the grief searing the cowman's puckered eyes. Henry noticed and told the grizzled cattle-

man not to feel that way about him.

"I never did anything for you, dad. I'm not worth it. . . . And Johnny . . . I was jealous of you, Cottontail. Hated your guts. Because you had what I didn't have—the guts of a cowpuncher. . . . You made Sprawls set fire to that bench warrant. But it had Cass' name on it. Sprawls saved mine . . . And that's where that glory hunter made his mistake. Killin' an innocent man. Because that trail herd, everything in the Cross brand that's registered in my name, is mine. Bought and paid for . . ." Henry grinned twistedly.

"I knew the time would come when Cass and Jake Sprawls would double-cross me. They talked me into registerin' the Cross brand. Cass put three thousand head of cattle in that iron. Stock Inspector Jake Sprawls passed the cattle when they crossed the Montana line. He had to list the different brands and tally the number of cattle in each iron. I got hold of a copy of his inspection report with its brands and tallies. Contacted the owners of those brands in Wyoming. Drove a hard deal. Cash on the barrelhead.

"That's where our fifty thousand dollars went, Bedelia. The bills of sale for the cattle in every brand are in the little locked steel box in my room. You can get the key out of my pocket when I'm dead. They're your cattle now, Delia. Call it yours and Johnny's wedding present. And I'm givin' Jake Sprawls' mangy hide to the Bow and Arrow to remember me by. Dad, you make the law hang Jake Sprawls for the murder of

Henry Roberts. . . . One last shot of booze. And I'll be on my way and So long . . ."

Henry took his last drink of whiskey. The grin was still on his face when he died.

They laid the dead body of Henry Roberts on his bunk and covered it with a sheet. Nobody put it into words but they knew that Henry had cleaned his slate like a man.

Bedelia rode on to town to have a bench warrant sworn out for Jake Sprawls, charging him with murder.

Old Man Hank Roberts and Johnny Cotton knew that the sheriff would be a little late. When they sighted a bunch of riders rimming out of Moccasin Valley they thought at first that Cass was leading his renegades into the badlands. Then they caught sight of Cass and Sprawls at camp and they knew that Cass had paid off his men and sent them high-tailing it back to the Hole in the Wall. Because that pair of killers wanted no renegades to witness and talk about what they had seen happen here in Moccasin Valley.

Cass and Sprawls were drinking raw whiskey from tin cups. They watched Old Man Hank Roberts and Johnny Cotton fetching the gun fight



to them. Jake Sprawls still wore his nickel-plated law badge. And when Old Man Hank and Johnny got close enough to watch, Sprawls lifted that side of his unbuttoned vest and spat on his law badge and polished it with the heel of his hand. His teeth were bared in a wolfish grin.

Old Man Hank carried his saddle carbine in the crook of his left arm. He whistled tunelessly through clenched teeth and his eyes looked like slivers of green glass.

"Lemme have Jake Sprawls, son," said Old Man Hank Roberts.

It was the first time the grizzled cattleman had ever called Johnny "Son" and it warmed the blood of Johnny Cotton like good whiskey.

"I've always bin scared to tackle Cass," Johnny admitted. "Up till now."

"I doubt if it was fear in you, Johnny. This is just the first time you got into the notion of doin' somethin' about it."

They kept riding on at a running walk, shortening the distance to the two killers who stood there in the open with their guns in their hands. And they were well inside six-shooter range and close enough to see the eyes of the two killers when Jake Sprawls called to them.

"I got bench warrants for both of you. Cattle rustlin'. Receivin' stolen cattle, here on your Moccasin Valley Bow and Arrow range. But if you're willin' to make the right kind of a deal with me and Cass, I'll burn them bench warrants. Like I set a match to Cass'.

"I served that un on Henry Roberts

and done the Bow and Arrow a mighty good turn. Henry was Bad Joe Roberts' son and a chip off the old renegade block and damn well you know it. String your bets with me and Cass and we'll build your Bow and Arrow up into the biggest cow outfit in Montana."

"You done talkin', Sprawls?" Old Man Hank's voice was deadly quiet as he reined his horse to a halt.

"I got you acrost the big barrel mister."

"Henry Roberts is dead," said Old Man Hank. "My daughter rode to town with Henry's bills of sale for every hoof of cattle in his Cross iron. You murdered the legal owner of these cattle Cass throwed onto the Bow and Arrow range. If you live that long, the Montana law will hang Jake Sprawls for that murder. Henry Roberts had to die to outwolf you two blackleg scoundrels. I aim to see that my adopted son didn't make a useless sacrifice. . . . You got anything to say to Cass, Johnny?"

Johnny Cotton nodded. "Did you kill my father and brother Bob, Cass?"

"You're damned right we killed John Cotton and his son, Bob. Me and Jake Sprawls done it with our own guns. Anything else you want to know, Cottontail?"

"That's all, Cass."

"Then what are we waitin' for?" snarled Cass. The gun in his hand spewed fire.

Johnny Cotton's six-shooter had been in his hand all the time he was talking. His nerves keyed-up to the tautness of fiddle strings, he was watching Cass' gun hand and he got

a split-second look at the killer's thumb pulling back the gun hammer.

Johnny was riding a bronc and he knew what that bronc would do at the sound of the first shot. And a man on a bucking horse can't shoot straight.

Cass was watching Johnny's gun. He might have been an edge too tipsy drunk to notice that Johnny Cotton's right boot was out of the stirrup. That only the toe of his left boot was pressing the other stirrup. Johnny's left hand was on the saddlehorn. And Cass never saw Johnny's right spur jab the bronc's flank just the fraction of a second before Cass pulled his gun trigger.

It happened in split-seconds. The startled bronc jumped. Pitched. Johnny Cotton let the bronc's first jump throw him. He felt the thudding, burning sting of Cass' .45 slug creasing his ribs, as he was in mid-air.

Cass and Sprawls stood side by side. The big pitching Bow and Arrow bronc was coming straight at them. It was almost on top of them when Johnny Cotton, with the ease of long bronc-riding practice, landed on both feet.

The gun in Jake Sprawls' hand went off with a terrific crashing roar as the stock detective jumped sideways in desperate haste to get out of the pitching bronc's way. Cass threw himself to one side and he rolled over once as the bronc pitched across him, big black hoofs kicking dirt, barely grazing Cass as he bucked over the man on the ground.

Cass flattened down on his belly.

His hat was off and his dank sweat-matted hair was down across his sweat-beaded forehead and one eye. The gun in his hand spat flame but the shot went wild. And Johnny's first bullet hit him just above the waistband of his overalls. Cass let out a snarling scream and kept on shooting.

Johnny stood on his widespread bowed legs, crouched a little, shooting from the level of his slanted cart-ridge belt. He wasn't missing a shot. His second bullet plowed a furrow along the heavy back muscles of Cass' shoulder and he felt the savage rip of Cass' next bullet tearing the saddle muscle of his thigh. It staggered Johnny off-balance and he missed his next shot. He saw the spewing flame of Cass' gun and fired at the black-whiskered scarred face.

The dying spasmodic jerk of his trigger finger fired Cass' notched ivory-handled gun for the last time. The bullet plowed a furrow in the dirt between Johnny Cotton's widespread legs. Then Cass' head rolled sideways and lagged forward on its spine-smashed neck and he lay dead in the dirt.

Johnny's slitted hard blue eyes had time now to look around. Cass was dead. As though it was in some wild nightmare, Johnny Cotton had heard the roaring crash of gunfire dinning in his ears. But he had eyes only for Cass because all these long months he had been scared of Cass and had lacked the guts to call for a showdown with the killer.

Cass had always called him "Cottontail." And a cottontail rabbit is



timid and harmless. And now Johnny had fired that dreaded question at Cass, and the outlaw had snarled back the answer Johnny Cotton had always known he would get. So he had had to kill Cass or get killed. And he had worked at that killing job with all the desperate speed and cunning and concentration he could muster. Now Cass was dead and Johnny Cotton could look around. . . .

His own bronc had bucked off a ways and then fouled the trailing horsehair hackamore rope in the brush. And there was Old Man Hank's saddled horse over near the bronc, bridle reins trailing. The two horses, still spooked, sought each other's company in their fear of the gunfire. And then Johnny saw Old Man Hank Robert's lying motionless on the ground, his hat lying near him and blood staining his thick gray hair.

Jake Sprawls was sitting up. There was blood on his shirt and he was using both hands to lift his six-shooter. His yellow teeth bared in a ghastly grin. The skin on his hatchet face was the color of moist gray putty and his slitted eyes were bloodshot and yellow as an animal's.

Johnny was looking into the muzzle of Sprawls' six-shooter, and then the sun caught the nickel-plated

badge on the stock detective's open vest and threw the reflection into Johnny's eyes. It was like a spark setting off a powder blast. Johnny didn't know his gun was cocked. He did not know how many cartridges he had left in his six-shooter. The glittering metal shone in his eyes. He fired at it and it flickered out. The gun in Jake Sprawls' two hands jerked, the long barrel tilted. Flame spewed from its black muzzle and Jake Sprawls' last shot was fired up at the cloudless blue Montana sky.

Johnny Cotton's gun hammer fell on an already exploded cartridge shell. The gun fight was over.

The echoes of it dinned in Johnny's ears. The smell of burnt gunpowder clogged his nostrils. He had the taste of it in his mouth and it was bitter and nauseating. He finally began to feel the pain crawling across his bullet-creased ribs. When he started over towards where Old Man Hank lay so motionless and dead-looking, his wounded leg gave way under him at the first step and he stumbled and went down and had to crawl the rest of the way on his hands and knees.

Then Old Man Hank rolled slowly over onto his side and the cowman lifted himself onto one elbow and his other hand felt of his blood-soaked gray head. His squinted green eyes saw Cass and Sprawls both dead and then he saw Johnny crawling towards him and a slow grin spread across his leathery face.

"I shot at Jake Sprawls and I swear I hit him in the guts. Then my light went out. First time I bin

bucked off in many a long year. . . . You take 'er easy there, Johnny. Directly I git this whirlin' cleared out o' my skull, I'll have a look at yuh. You're kind o' bloody. . . ."

Johnny grinned and kept on crawling. Old Man Hank had come to life again.

Sprawls' bullet had grazed the old cattleman's skull, tearing his hat off, parting his thick gray hair with a scalp rip. And that narrow escape from death left the only bullet mark on Old Man Hank Roberts' tough hide.

Old Man Hank cut away Johnny's shirt and undershirt and ripped his pants leg. His gnarled fingers worked fast and skillfully, getting the blood flow stopped, splashing good raw whiskey into the bullet wounds, using both their undershirts for bandages.

They were drinking strong black coffee spiked with whiskey when the sheriff got there.

With the sheriff came the doctor who said he always used this kind of an excuse to blow the town stink out of his clothes. And neither Old Man Hank or Johnny showed much surprise when they saw Bedelia with the posse of a dozen heavily armed men.

The sheriff's wife was used to being left alone, Bedelia explained, so she had come along for the horse-back ride.

Old Man Hank told the sheriff and his posse that there wasn't much sense in riding good horses down chasing after Cass' renegades. Let 'em ride on back to the Hole in the Wall where they'd come from. With Cass and Sprawls dead, they would have no desire to return to Moccasin Valley.

They tried to talk Johnny Cotton into riding a gentle horse home but he said the bronc that fetched him here and did his pitching best to help win the gun fight was horse enough to take him back to the ranch. And anyhow Bedelia would be riding alongside to ketch him if he fell off.

"Just locate a parson, sheriff," said Johnny Cotton, "when you take Cass and Sprawls to town in the bed wagon. Send him out to the Bow and Arrow Ranch. Bedelia and I have a job waitin' for him."

The sheriff said he would do that—with pleasure. He looked at the bullet-riddled Cass and Sprawls, then at Johnny Cotton and shook his head.

He wondered, he said, how come Johnny ever got a nickname like "Cottontail."

THE END



This brand tells you that its owner has been honorably discharged from the armed forces of World War II.

When Spade Sanders discovered how he stacked up in his home town, he realized he'd be wise to make only a

SIX-GUN STOP-OVER

by L. L. FOREMAN



THE Sandy Bob stage got Spade Sanders to Aravay before noon, and, because this was the end of his journey and he was glad of it, Spade Sanders spun a gold piece up to the driver for good luck. Aravay wasn't much of a town to look at. Spade gave all the main street a quick but careful regard as he stepped away from the coach, and he thought how small and dusty it looked against his



memory of it. A couple of livery hands began peeling the harness off the team while the driver climbed down. The stage wasn't due to pull out again till the afternoon, or till the northbound stage came in. It was ahead of schedule.

Spade Sanders carried his grip over to the Belle Fourche Hotel, and among his feelings was one of some surprise that the several pairs of eyes watching him held unmistakable recognition. Yet no greeting was given him, and the lack of it caused him to stiffen inside and brought hard coolness into his answering stare.

He passed an elderly, tired-faced man, going through the hotel door. The elderly man nodded. "Hi, Spade," he said.

"Hi, sheriff," Spade answered, and went on in. He hadn't seen Sheriff Orne in six years. Orne was still wearing his badge, was still sheriff. That might be bad, Spade thought, and was aware that Orne followed him into the hotel and up to the desk. Orne was a fool if he was considering digging out that old indictment and serving it.

Orne's experienced old eyes were thoughtful and inspecting. Spade guessed that the outward evidences of his prosperity were being weighed, and he grinned faintly as he signed the register. No doubt Orne was comparing this well-dressed, self-assured man with the wild and uncurried youngster who had quit Aravay six years ago after swapping shots with Tuller Durbin and wrecking the peace of the town.

Spade turned from the register and

in Orne's gaze he caught a shade of wonderment. He asked bluntly: "Well, sheriff, what's the verdict?" Waiting for the reply, he let his right hip stick out a little, let the bulge of his gun show on the tail of his fine broadcloth coat.

His soft shirt was of white linen, his black Stetson had cost a hundred dollars, and much expensive craft had gone into the making of his boots. And he knew how to wear such garb, although nobody with eyesight and discrimination ever mistook him for anything but what he was. He was Spade Sanders, owner of the glittering Spade Palace away up in Cuevo, and everybody knew each step of his climb to that high eminence had represented a triumph of sharp wits, chill nerve and blazing violence where needed. He was a tall man with a quiet voice, dangerously calm eyes, a hint of rakish elegance, and a history longer than its years.

He smiled down at Orne, who was short, and the sheriff said in his level way: "I can't recall ever seeing six years make so much difference in a feller."

Spade inclined his head. "I take that kindly." He only half meant it, but his mind flashed a picture for him and he saw himself as he had been—a resentful kid, shabby, raw and edgy in spirit because of battered pride. He had come a long way.

"Then again," Orne said without change of tone, "I wouldn't know how deep the difference really runs. I do know I ain't doin' any celebratin' because you've come back."

"Why not?"

"Well, you've made good, in a manner of speaking, and I figure you've come back to strut. When a man struts, he gen'rally makes enemies." The sheriff gazed past Spade's head. "You already got enemies. I don't mean up there in Cuebo. You tamed that town down enough to suit you, way we hear it. I mean here."

"Tuller Durbin?" Spade shrugged. "If there's trouble with him and his crowd, it won't start with me. I didn't come back for that. I came back for Fred. He needs a chance, and I can give it to him."

As far as they went, his words were honest. Fred was his younger brother, who had stayed home on the rundown Sanders ranch a couple of miles outside Aravay. Nevertheless, Orne looked unrelieved and said again: "I ain't glad you've come back. I don't know as Fred's glad, either. Your pa—ever since you sent him word you were coming, he's been acting proddy. You know what that means. He thinks this is a good time to open up his old grudge against Durbin. He thinks—"

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD PUZZLE

G	R	A	Z	E		H	O	O	F	
L	E	M	O	N		E	A	R	L	S
I	D	I	O	T		A	R	G	O	T
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W	I	N	C	E		D	I	V	E	S
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"I'll put him straight on that, don't worry," Spade broke in. "There'll be no trouble."

Having said all he wished to say to the sheriff, Spade picked up his grip to take it to his room. He had chosen to take a room in town, rather than go on out to the ranch, because Rona Lannice lived in town and it was at least as much on her account as on Fred's that he had come back to Aravay for this visit. Rona had been the last person he spoke to when quitting Aravay in a hurry six years ago. She had wished him good luck and there had been tears in her eyes. He dropped his grip and swung sharply about, as a rifle cracked a whip-lash report along the main street. The hotel clerk promptly took to the floor. The rhythmic sounds of horses and buckboard wheels, entering the street, broke into confusion while the rifle cracked once more. Then, like thunder following a snap of lightning, gunfire roared through the town.

"That," snarled Orne bitterly, jerking out his gun and heading for the door, "will be your pa—the rifle—shooting at the Durbin crowd to start the ball rolling! Damn you, Spade, you hadn't ought've come back! Stay where you are, now! You hear? Stay—"

"Out of my way!" Spade beat him to the door, shouldering him aside.

For him, there was a familiarity in the sight and sound of the street. It was remindful of Cuebo in the days before he tamed off its worst edge and gave it his own particular brand of law and order. It was re-

mindful of other towns, too, where he had played his part, in the days before he rose above the ordinary rank of gun fighter. There were the men, firing, swearing, shouting. The horses, filling the street with their mad plunging. A shattered feed-store window. A buckboard, half across the boardwalk, the slender shafts splintered and the matched team squealing and kicking in a tangle of harness. A man underneath the buckboard, shooting into the feed store.

It was a good buckboard, or had been up to a minute ago. It stood tipped at a slant, and the sun gleamed on the shiny side of it, and on that side was painted in gold the Wingfoot brand. It was Durbin's buckboard, and Durbin was the man who had taken cover beneath it. He and his crowd were centering all their fire upon the feed store. Nobody was doing any shooting inside there, and the rifle had quit, but there was more than one possible answer to that.

Spade walked a dozen steps, halted, and took aim. His gun was heavy-framed, with a long barrel, the front sight filed down to a nub. His first shot smashed a wheel spoke six inches in front of Durbin's mustache, and Durbin got out fast from under the buckboard. A Wingfoot man, pumping shots into the feed store, from his stand behind two Buffalo Head beer barrels across the street, abruptly let go his gun and stared at the place where he had last seen his thumb.

Sheriff Orne, who had a big voice for a little man when he wanted to

use it, was roaring at the Wingfoot crowd to let up, and cursing them and Spade impartially. It was Durbin himself, however, who sent out the command that got obedience.

"Cut it!" Durbin called. "They're not in there! Must have got out the back way, damn 'em!"

In the moment of quietness after his command, a pair of horses could be heard clattering through an alley. Orne stamped up to Durbin. "Get out of town and take your gun-jumpy riders with—"

"Don't talk that way to me!" Durbin rapped, and turned his back on the lawman. He had run the county so long that he could not recognize any authority as higher than himself. The Wingfoot had always had its own way, had always come out ahead of the law.

A Wingfoot rider, reining his horse under control, rocked abreast of Spade and the sheriff. Spade said: "I'll borrow that horse, you don't mind." He didn't tilt his gun, but the stilled calmness of his eyes was the essence of icy warning. He added gently: "I just know you don't mind."

The Wingfoot man's eyes flickered a swift recognition. "Don't I? Say what—" His voice choked. He tried to fall back on bold arrogance. It was not enough. He got slowly down off the saddle, and his face was twitching. "No, I guess I don't mind."

His voice was full and belligerent enough, ten seconds later. "Hey—that's Spade Sanders! On my horse! Damn it, didn't any o' you see him stick a gun at me and . . ."

Taking to the gap between the hotel and Friel's Emporium, Spade caught a glimpse of a girl in the doorway of the little millinery shop next to Friel's. She was a slim, brown-eyed girl. She was Rona Lannice.

He wished he could turn back and go to her, talk to her, see gladness come into those brown eyes at the sight of him. But that would have to wait. The shooting had started again and it was all for him. He gave his borrowed horse a cut with the reins, and went pounding through the gap into the alley.

The Sanders ranch had never amounted to much even in its best days. As boys, Spade and Fred had done most of the work of handling the scrubby little herd. Hugh Sanders, their father, was a man whose dreams and ambitions had gone smash after five years in the penitentiary. He had been convicted of stealing Wingfoot calves, on the sworn evidence of Tuller Durbin and half a dozen of his men.

There had been some fair-minded folks who, recalling that Hugh Sanders had won and married the girl Durbin had wanted, and knowing Durbin's long and unforgiving memory, privately questioned the worth of that sworn evidence. They might have helped Hugh Sanders when he came out of prison, but he wasn't the kind you could help easily. He was bitter, brooding. He replaced his spoiled dreams with the bottle, nursed his burning grudge against Durbin, and became known as an irresponsible soak who couldn't be

trusted. The name of Sanders didn't stand high around Aravay. To be known as the son of a drunken convict was not pleasant. It rotted the props of a boy's pride and healthy self-esteem, and made him do crazy-wild stunts in the attempt to balance it.

Riding up to the house, Spade glanced at a pair of sweat-streaked horses in the corral. So Fred had been in on the shooting, too, along with Hugh. It was high time to take Fred away from here, to give him a chance to do better elsewhere.

Spade got a brief impression that the place showed some improvement. It looked less of a boar's nest and more like a ranch. Then Fred was hailing him from the front door, emerging with hand outstretched, and Spade dropped from his horse and strode to him.

The Sanders had never been demonstrative. Theirs had been mostly a womanless boyhood. Their mother, the girl Hugh Sanders had won at such later cost, had died while still young.

They gripped hands.

"Howdy, Fred."

"Howdy, Spade. Good to see you."

They entered the house, closed the door, barred it. Hugh Sanders, sitting in the kitchen, rifle at his feet, grinned at Spade and gestured toward the bottle on the table.

"Happy homecomin', son!" He was unable to drop his sardonic front, even to the son he had not seen for six years. It had grown to be a part of his nature. And he was drunk.

Spade shook hands with him.

"You made it lively, if not happy," he remarked.

Hugh Sanders refilled his tin mug from the bottle. "Something I've wanted to do for a hell of a long time. Seemed like a good day to do it. Eh, Fred?"

"Sure," said Fred.

Spade nodded toward the window. "The Wingfoot crowd's on the way here, with all their chips stacked to play."

Hugh Sanders drained the mug, grinned again. "We can handle 'em, now you're here. Let 'em come! Eh, Fred?"

"Sure," said Fred.

Loyalty, Spade thought, could perhaps be carried too far. Even loyalty to your own father. He studied Fred's face. Fred, like the ranch, showed improvement. Considerably less of a gangling and uncertain kid. Considerably more like a man. He had steady eyes and a firm mouth. It was on Hugh Sanders that the signs of the downhill trend were stamped plainly.

"Somebody," Spade remarked, "got killed, I think, on that second shot. A Wingfoot man. He still lay in the street, last I saw. The

law will call it murder. If you had to do it, why didn't you aim for Durbin?"

"I ain't the shot I was," Hugh Sanders admitted. "That first shot was a clean miss, and—"

"The second shot was mine," Fred interrupted, and went to the window. "Here they come!"

"Show 'em some real shootin', Spade!" Hugh Sanders called thickly, picking up his rifle and weaving over to a side window. "Get Durbin for me—that's all I want from you!"

Spade snatched the rifle from him. "You're asking too damn much!" His tone was harsh. "I didn't come back to pitch into any two-bit fight of yours and get myself hooked on a murder charge! You and Fred opened this jackpot, taking it for granted I'd come in on it and play it out for you. You bet wrong! I'm closing the game! Fred, hand me your gun!"

Fred looked undecidedly at his father. Hugh Sanders, unarmed, his rifle in Spade's hands, stood and cursed his eldest son for a disloyal whelp. He lurched back to the table and the bottle, glowering and mum-



bling. Fred silently gave up his gun, his lips stiff and bloodless, and stared wooden-faced through the window at the string of riders filing warily into the yard.

Spade went to the door and took down the bar latch. He opened it a crack, saw Sheriff Orne among the riders, and threw it open wide. He tossed Fred's gun and the rifle out onto the porch and stepped out after them, calmly lighting a cigar.

"What can we do for you, Orne?" he inquired.

It was a move that was least expected. The Wingfoot riders eyed him watchfully and darted querying glances at Durbin for their cue. Durbin kept an expressionless face, but his sidelong look at Orne held black anger. The presence of the sheriff constituted an unwelcome restraint.

Orne dismounted and came walking over to the porch. He had more than enough sense to realize that his position here was weighty, that he alone stood between law and violence, that much depended upon his actions. His first words proved it. He said clearly: "I take it you and Hugh and Fred are surrendering to me, right?"

"Surrendering?" Spade echoed. "For what, Orne?"

It was Durbin who supplied the answer. "For killing a man of mine! And for the stealing of a horse!"

Spade didn't take his eyes off the sheriff. "You never used to go off half-cocked like this, Orne," he remarked kindly. "You know I didn't steal that horse. You heard me ask the fellow, politely, and you saw him loan it to me. Isn't that the truth?"

"Near it, I guess," returned Orne shortly. "But I'm not studying about any horse. It's the dead man I'm int'rested in. I expect to take in whoever killed him."

Spade nodded full agreement. "And more credit to you. But did anybody actually see who fired the shot? Nobody? Well, now, just because somebody gets bushwhacked from a feed store, is that any reason for busting up here with no warrant and twenty guns?"

"Two fresh-rode horses there in the corral, sheriff!" sang out a Wingfoot man.

"Yeah, I seen 'em." Orne picked the rifle up off the porch, examined it. "Two shots fired." He sniffed at the breech and the barrel. "Very recent, I'd say. Spade, I reckon—"

"You're dead right, Orne," said Spade. He drew on his cigar. He blew a perfect smoke ring and watched it disintegrate. "Fred and my pa just got back from combing a couple of calves out of the brush. Had to do some hard riding. They were coming in when I got here. Pa was fussing about getting his rifle wet while crossing Bullshoe Creek. I fired it a couple of times to clean out the barrel for him."

"That's a damned lie!" Durbin rapped, and his men raised a chorus of angry assent.

Sheriff Orne waited for the uproar to subside. "It's your own father and your own brother you're speaking for," he mentioned, and sighed. "I guess you'd swear to what you've said, huh?"

Spade nodded. "I guess I would,

Orne," he said soberly, quietly. His eyes were on a single rider coming up from the direction of town. The subtle difference that indicated the sex of a distant rider was as difficult to define as it was easy to detect. It was something about the rise and fall and sway of the body. This was a woman, or girl; that much he knew. It was Rona Lannice; that much he guessed.

Orne placed the rifle carefully back on the porch. He looked long into Spade's face, before tramping back to listen to the furious arguments and abuse of Durbin and his crowd.

Spade walked out to the gate, gambling on Orne's presence to stall off further trouble, and he was waiting there when Rona came riding up. He saw the taut anxiety in her eyes, in her drawn face and straightened lips, and he imputed it to a deep concern for his welfare.

She swept a glance over the men in the yard. They were shouting at Orne, who stubbornly shook his head and kept on insisting that he'd have to investigate and get hold of some evidence before making any arrest.

"Spade—I must talk to you!" Rona said in a whisper.

"Let's go round to the back of the house," he suggested. "A little more privacy there."

They sat on the rock wall of the open yard, back of the house. Spade took her hand and held it. "Don't worry about this," he told her. "I've stalled them off for a while. Long enough to get Fred out of it, anyway. I'll take him back to Cueblo with me when I go."

"You'll not!" Her voice was low

and fierce. Her words struck him like hurled stones. "I won't let you! You've done enough harm to him, just by coming here! Everything was going so well. Fred has worked hard since you've been gone. He's made this ranch over. People have learned to respect him and look up to him, because he had the courage to stay and fight his way up to decency, in spite of the bad name of his family—a father who's a drunkard, and a brother who's a notorious gunman and gambler!"

Spade's face was gray. "Rona!" he muttered.

Her voice went on relentlessly. "Fred has become all that I once hoped you might become, and more. I'm proud of him. We're engaged to be married. And now look what's happened. Your father would never have done what he did, if you'd stayed away. But with a homecoming son who's become an ace gunman, what else would you expect him to do? Fred tried to stop him. Bags Smith, who runs the feed store, saw some of it, but he can't talk of it without implicating Fred, and he won't do that. Fred, of course, couldn't desert his father. He had to stay with him and see it through, once it started."

Spade wet his dried lips. "I didn't come back to make trouble. On my oath." His world was reeling.

"Couldn't you foresee what would happen?" she asked him simply. "Or were you so blinded by the vision of yourself swaggering through the town, showing off your prosperity to folks who remembered you when you were poor? You've no need to do

that, Spade. We all know how you've changed. We all know you're the big man of a bad town, owner of a big, glittering saloon and gambling house and other things I wouldn't care to name. And we've heard all about how you got there. The fights and the gambling, and all the rest. Yes, Spade, we know how you've changed. No need to come back and show us."

The blood rushed into Spade's grayed face until his flush was dark and hot. He could see himself as he knew she was seeing him, a blatant upstart preening himself upon his success in having made good in a cynically ribald half-world where violence and trickery set the standards, and faults and vices were tools of profit for the strong hand with the skill to use them. Against that vision he could not see the self that he had built and carried in his mind, the self that was clever, confident, successful.

"Between your opinion of me and my own, I guess there's quite a wide —" he began, and never finished, for a rifle shot inside the house cut him off short.

During the few seconds he spent getting from the well to the house, a sudden hush hung over the front yard. Then a voice, shrill with rage, let out an oath, and at once hell exploded. Spade jerked open the back door and took one look inside the house.

"Get on your horse and get out of here!" he shouted to Rona, and went on in with his gun out and the hammer cocked.

High Sanders lay sprawled inside

the door, his rifle beside him. With his left hand he was reaching up and fumbling the bar into place. But the door was no barrier. Bullets were tearing holes in it. He twisted half around and grinned at Spade. The grin was a blurred and drunken grimace, almost amiable in its triumph. "I got him that time! I sure did. I sure couldn't miss that time, him standing up wavin' his arms and . . . and . . ."

His left arm fell, and his head drooped, and his satisfied sigh was the last sound he made.

Fred crawled over to him. Spade met him there. "He just walked out and picked up the rifle, and fired before I could get to him," Fred said. "Durbin's dead. They've gone crazy out there. What do we do, Spade? My gun's on the porch where you threw it."

Spade whipped a shot at a shadow looming up against a window. "The back way—try for the corral. Come on!"

He was first out the back door. His gun sliced around and roared, and a Wingfoot man at the corner of the house clutched a shoulder and whirled back out of sight. Rona was in the corral. She had her own horse, and was struggling to saddle in a frantic hurry one of the two horses there.

Spade slid down behind the rock wall of the well, rolled over, and fired into a group coming running around the house. He heard Fred breathing hard beside him, and he bore in mind that Fred had no gun. "Just one thing I'd like to know," he

said. "Who fired that second shot in town?"

"Pa," Fred answered. "No use lying about it now. You know I'd have hit Durbin, if I'd had the rifle and wanted to do it."

Spade hammered off three shots, thumbed shells from his belt, reloaded. "That's what I figured. Rona got that horse saddled yet? All right, make time, boy! Get a-going! And listen . . . don't go too far, or stay away too long. Come back in a month. You and Rona need that long for a honeymoon, anyway. It'll be blown over by then. Nobody's fool enough to think you did anything but stick by pa. Everybody knows you're okay. Go on, beat it! You shouldn't keep a lady waiting."

"And you?"

"Oh, hell, I'll make out. I've been in and out of a lot worse than this. This is an old maids' Sunday picnic, compared to Cuebo any Saturday night. One of us has got to linger a spell and cover for the other—and I happen to be the gent with the gun. So long. Give my love to Rona, happen I don't catch up with you."

Alone behind the low rock wall of the well, he smiled gently while chopping quick shots at moving figures huddling along the sides of the house. He could see himself again, the self that was imaged in his mind. The vision was clear and bright, and he liked it.

He heard Sheriff Orne shouting something to him. His shells were running low, so he called back:

"Come over here, Orne. So much noise going on I can't hear what you're saying."

Orne came walking past the house, very deliberately, very much the lawman, and crossed the open space of the yard to the well.

"I'm asking you again," he said tiredly. "Do I take it you're surrendering to me?"

"Surrendering?" Spade echoed. "For what, Orne?"

"Why, for . . . for—" The little sheriff put a hand to his brow. "Oh, hell, here we go again! Durbin's killed."

"So's my pa, rest his soul. That doesn't mean I shouldn't defend myself when a pack of wildies run me out of my house and shoot at me. This is the Sanders ranch, you know. You may have a legal right to come here, but I be damned if they have—unless, that is, you swore them in as your deputies or something. Did you?"

"No," admitted the sheriff resignedly.

"Then they're trespassing on private property, and I guess I'll have to ask you to clear them off. I'll appreciate the service."

"Yeah." The sheriff gazed after two riding specks in the distance. "I hope," he said, "they come back. You figure on stayin' here till they do?"

"No." Spade got to his feet, keeping his eyes on the Wingfoot men. "No, I'm leaving. I'd like for you to tend to my pa's funeral. I'm leaving today."

"That," the sheriff allowed, "will suit me."

The Sandy Bob stage was ready to pull out of Aravay when Spade tossed his grip into the boot. He took a last long look at the town, and he recalled Rona's remarks about coming back to swagger and show off prosperity. There had been an uncomfortable lump of truth in that. Well, that was what the Cuebo and the Spade Palace kind of life did to you. He had come grandly back to give Fred a big helping hand, and

to do some swaggering, and to dazzle the eyes of a certain girl. Instead, he had learned a few things, some of them about himself.

The driver of the stage, recognizing him as the passenger he had brought in that morning, leaned down from his seat. "Mister," he confided, "this stage ain't goin' back to Cuebo."

Spade spun another gold piece up to him for the information. "Neither am I," he said, and climbed into the coach.

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



Cliff M. Bisbee

whose folks homesteaded in the wild hills of California, learned the dark secrets of hunting, trapping and riding, along with his 3 Rs, in a little school attended by Indian children from a nearby reservation. He failed to profit by his sage wisdom once, he ruefully admits, when he foolishly rode his horse into a quicksand pool, an episode which almost wrote his "finis." A

job as mule-skinner (Cliff allows that nothing is more ornery than an ornery mule unless it's a string of 'em) made him turn his mind in other directions. Having a natural bent for outdoor life, he entered college to study forestry and become a ranger. This worthy plan was sidetracked, however when, as he explains it, "fortunately or otherwise the writing bug bit me—so here I am."

Bisbee is most at home in the desert and the mountains. His hobbies he says "are painting—I married into a family of artists and my wife's landscapes are tops—listening to folks talk, and trying to keep at least one foot ahead of my two small but lively daughters. I claim to be a student of philosophy, ancient and modern, but am seldom caught working at it." From which we gather that here's a mighty busy writing hombre whose hobbies we'd tally as provocative in any man's language.

This young author's latest story, *TWO KINDS OF BUZZARDS*, appears in our April issue which includes other exciting tales of the great outdoors by Walt Coburn, L. L. Foreman, Frank Richardson Pierce, Giff Cheshire and many other top-hand yarn-spinners of the Old West.

THE HILLS OF HOME

by

JOE RODRIGUEZ



You hear of far-off places where a lot of men'll go
 To try their hand at settin' on an easy chair an' blow.
 Some hanker for adventure in some foreign, mystic land.
 An' others dream of romance on a lazy, moonlit strand.
 Seems people just ain't happy 'less they go some other place
 That looks like greener pastures they can spread out on an' graze.

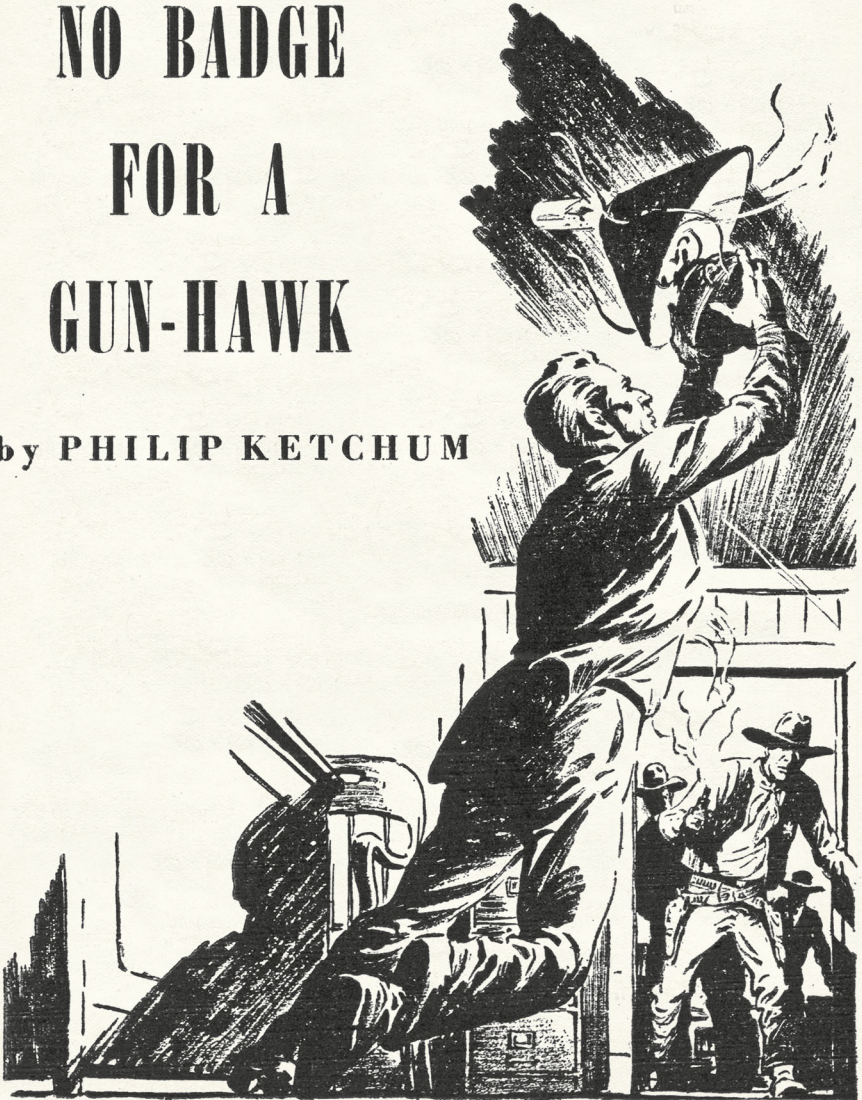
From sultry South Sea islands to the frozen old Yukon,
 To Singapore an' Shanghai, to these places they have gone;
 An' whether it's for roughin' it or just to lay around,
 It makes nary difference just so it's a brand-new ground.
 I've done my share of driftin' an', old partner, let me say,
 Just give me back the places that's familiar any day.

For there's some thrills a-plenty if you're used to ridin' hard.
 An' if it's peace you're wantin', why this here's a big backyard.
 Give me a cow a-bawlin' an' a-nickerin' old cow hoss,
 A battered old sombrero an' a good old rope to toss,
 Give me the hills of home an' for my peace, a shady tree,
 For this old West of ours is plenty good enough for me.

Joe Morrison couldn't brand Saffron's new deputy for the renegade he was because his own back trail made him bullet bait for the law

NO BADGE FOR A GUN-HAWK

by PHILIP KETCHUM



I

JOE MORRISON worked at his sluice on the bank of Bessemer Creek until it was almost dark. Then, turning back to his camp, he started his evening fire, set a tin of beans in it to warm, and brought water from the creek to make his coffee. All up and down the creek, now, he could see other fires, and in the quiet of this early evening he could catch the distant sounds of voices.

He was tired. Two weeks of steady work with a shovel hadn't yet hardened him to the point of not minding it, but he had a good spot here on the creek and in two weeks he had washed up as much gold as he could have made in a year on the range. Another month and he'd have a good stake. It was worth what it cost in back-breaking labor.

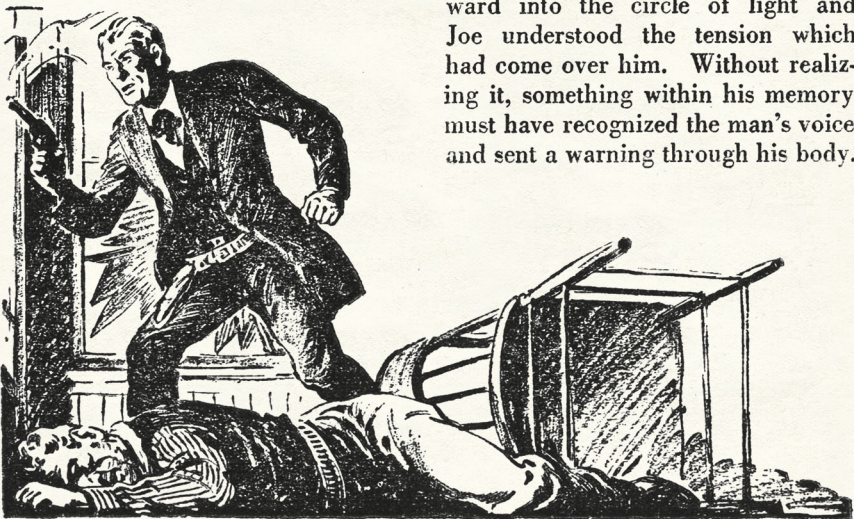
His coffee was boiling now and he lifted it from the fire and poured

a cup. The heated can of beans he opened expertly with a knife, having first wrapped the can in a strip of old blanketing. He ate the beans with some bread he had bought from the wife of one of the miners the night before and after a moment's hesitation, opened one of his last two tins of peaches.

Joe felt pretty good after the meal. He rolled a cigarette and smoked it slowly, thinking about walking up the creek to Saffron where a sprawling town had grown up almost overnight. He finally decided against the idea. The walk was two miles up and back, and there was little point in it.

"Howdy, Joe," said a voice from the shadows beyond the fire. "You look mighty well pleased with yourself."

Joe stiffened. He peered across the fire and into the shadows and at first couldn't see who had spoken to him. Then the man stepped forward into the circle of light and Joe understood the tension which had come over him. Without realizing it, something within his memory must have recognized the man's voice and sent a warning through his body.



The man standing now in the firelight was tall and slender and slightly stooped. His face was thin, angular, sharp-featured. Dark, mocking eyes looked into Joe's and on the man's tight lips was a faint, humorless smile.

"It's not been so long at that, has it, Joe?" said the man quietly.

Joe hoped that his face didn't show how he felt. "So it's you, Coburn," he answered. And then: "Where are the others?"

Jug Coburn laughed but it was a strange laugh. It sent a chill racing up and down Joe's back. Joe recalled having heard that same laugh once before. He had heard it while a man lay dying at Coburn's feet, a man who hadn't had a chance.

"Where are the others?" Coburn repeated. "Why, Joe, I reckon they're not so very far away. You can come out now, Red. You too, Bill."

There were sounds behind Joe Morrison and on either side as Red Huntley and Bill Daniels stepped into the circle of firelight. Huntley was as tall as Coburn but he was heavier and younger and had dark-red hair. Daniels was shorter and almost fat and wore his usual wide grin. They both greeted Joe in a friendly enough manner. And they weren't wearing guns but each man had a hand in his pocket.

Joe wasn't armed. A man didn't wear a gun while he dug up the bottom of a river and fed the sopping gravel into a sluice. Joe's gun was with his blankets in his lean-to, some half dozen steps away. Joe thought of his gun and wondered what good

it would have done him to have it. He finished his cigarette and tossed it into the fire.

"I thought maybe we ought to have a little talk, Joe," Coburn explained. "How about it?"

Joe shrugged. "Go ahead. Talk's free."

"We're going to be around here a little, Joe," Coburn went on. "Up and down the creek and maybe in Saffron. You might run into us. I don't know how good your memory is, but maybe it isn't any too good. Get the idea?"

Joe shrugged his shoulders. He hadn't come to his feet. He didn't get up now. He stared into the fire and made no other answer.

"Well, how about it?" Coburn asked sharply.

Joe glanced up. "I heard you, Coburn. Is that all you've got to say or is there more?"

"We ought to finish him right now," Huntley said under his breath. "He'll queer the whole deal."

Coburn shook his head. "No, he won't, Huntley. Joe's going to stick to mining and keep his mouth shut. They still want him in Texas as much as they want any of us. You haven't forgotten that, have you, Joe."

"I haven't forgotten anything," Joe answered flatly.

Coburn's eyes were like slate. He said: "Sure, Joe. Don't forget. Don't forget a thing, but don't talk, either. Just one wrong word and you're finished and that's a promise from Jug Coburn. And I always keep my promises fellow."

There wasn't a sound from the other two men. Joe kept his eyes on the fire. He still didn't get up. He was afraid to. If he got to his feet, he knew he would lunge across the fire at Coburn's throat. He couldn't have stopped himself and, just as though it had happened, he knew what the result would be. He wouldn't have any more chance than Spike had had.

"That's all, boys," Coburn said.

Daniels and Huntley backed away and then Coburn turned and marched off through the darkness.

Joe sucked in a long, slow breath. He got to his feet and mopped a hand across his face. He was perspiring. He stared into the darkness in the direction Coburn had taken and suddenly all the peace he had known here was gone. He could feel it breaking up. It was like a dam crumbling away and giving full freedom to a rushing torrent of water which boiled ahead with a terribly destructive fury. Joe had known such a feeling before. He knew what it could do to him.

After a time he turned back to the fire. He stomped it out, then went to his lean-to and got his gun. He made a swift examination of the weapon, slipped it into his pocket and started off toward the trail to Saffron.

II

Where Bessemer Creek widens and runs into the Cameron River, an old prospector panning the stream for gold had one evening turned up a nugget which weighed almost fifty

ounces and within an hour had panned more gold than he had ever dreamed of in his life. He had trekked out the next day for the nearest town and word of his discovery had started the usual rush to the new gold fields.

Within a few months Eastern and Western syndicates had bought up the richest claims and had set up huge placer-mining plants. But despite that, independent miners still worked both sides of the Bessemer and its three forks for a couple of miles upstream.

At the point of the junction of the Bessemer with Cameron River the town of Saffron had grown up. It was a typical boom town. There was nothing pretty or orderly about it. So far it had hardly any substantial buildings. Those who had come to Bessemer were too busy getting rich to worry about where they lived or under what circumstances they did business. Tents or shacks built out of anything, or wagon-bed houses were sufficient.

There was a main street but it wasn't straight, nor were many of the men who did business on it. There were three stores and two eating houses, both tent structures. There were half a dozen saloons, with beer at a dollar a mug, whiskey a dollar a shot, and with gambling games in each, one of which ran twenty-four hours a day.

There was a barber shop, and a stage station, for already a stage line was running from Saffron to Hollister, on the railroad. And there was a miners' court and some pretense at law and order by the sheriff from

Hollister. Thus far, however, everything was wide open in Saffron. Fights were the normal order of every evening and sudden death wasn't infrequent.

Some of the men of the town, in particular Arnold Fry, resident manager of the Consolidated Mining Company's holdings, had been talking, of late, of a town marshal and of the cleanup which would have to come. Joe had sat in on a few such discussions, but if anything had been done he hadn't heard of it.

Joe was thinking of this as he came to the head of the trail above Saffron and paused there for a moment. The night was star bright, and a full moon, climbing up from behind the hills, bathed the town in its mellow glow.

The trail Joe had been following struck through a bordering line of tent houses and came suddenly to Saffron's main street. There was a good deal of light here, streaming through open doors and unglassed open windows. A little way up the street and under the glow of a burning torch, Washaba Pete was haranguing a crowd of men. Washaba Pete was a white-bearded parson, a familiar sight in all boom towns.

The office of the Consolidated Mining Company was in a frame building, midway down the street. Seeing lights showing from its windows, Joe headed for the door. He pushed it open and stepped inside.

There were several men in the room whom he identified at once. Pat Crews, the tall, lanky sheriff from Hollister, grave and worried-

looking. Sam Randolph, a short, thick-bodied man, an independent miner like Joe himself; Eddie Grant, a sallow-checked lungy who ran one of the stores; Fred Webber, the manager of the Western Mining Company, a man of about forty, tall, balding, and never very friendly, and Arnold Fry, gray-haired, business-like, keen-eyed and unsmiling. It was Fry who got to his feet as Joe came in.

"Glad to see you, Morrison," Fry said. "Thought that door was locked, though. Maybe I'd better fix it."

"Meeting going on?" Joe asked. "Suppose I come back later."

Fry shook his head. "Nope. We're glad to have you."

He walked past Joe and locked the door. The others nodded, Randolph calling out a greeting and Pat Crews, the sheriff, joining in.

Joe took one of the extra chairs in the room and started rolling a cigarette. He had turned in here on impulse. He hadn't known what he meant to say to Fry. He didn't know what he meant to do. He didn't quite know how to face this thing.

Fry came back to his chair and sat down. "Joe, you're just in time," he said gravely. "We've been talking things over here. You know the problem. Last night a man was shot down in the street not ten steps from this door. Today the body of Luke Everett was discovered back in the hills, just a little ways off the road to Hollister. He'd been shot in the back and robbed. He was on his way out with his gold.

"It takes time to organize a town and set up a legal government,"

Fry continued. "We'll do that soon as we can, but until then we've got to do something else. We don't want to set up a vigilante committee unless we have to. Pat Crews will help us all he can but he's busy all over the county. He's got an idea, though, which I think is worth while. Tell Joe about it, Pat."

The sheriff leaned forward a little. "It's nothing much, Joe. It's just this. I've found a man I'm willing to appoint as my deputy. He'll make his headquarters here. He'll keep order and from what I know of him, he's a man who can really do the job."

"With his guns?" Joe asked bluntly.

"Yes, with his guns."

"I hear he's pretty good, Joe," Fry put in. "He's an old-time marshal. He was up this way looking for a man he's been after a long time. He really figures the man will show up here. While he's waiting around he'll do this job for us. He's a fellow from Texas."

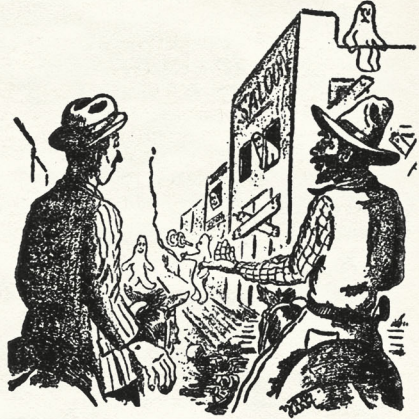
Joe caught his breath. A fellow from Texas. He hoped his face didn't show the surprise which was rocking through his body. "What's his name?" he demanded.

"Rasmussen," Crews answered. "Frank Rasmussen. Maybe you've heard of him."

Joe shook his head. The name didn't mean a thing to him. "What does he look like?"

"He's tall, thin, a little stooped. Maybe he's forty. He'll be here pretty soon and you'll meet him."

"I don't like it," Fry admitted.



"See, I told yuh it was just a ghost town."

"Hiring a man such as him. But the situation here calls for strong medicine. Maybe it's the thing to do."

"It's exactly the thing to do," declared Webber. "My company will bear half of the expense. All of it if necessary."

Joe stared at the floor. Tall, thin, a little stooped and about forty. A man from Texas. A man named Rasmussen. Or maybe a man named Jug Coburn who called himself Rasmussen. The description fit.

There was the sound of knocking at the door, two raps followed by three more in quick succession. Those in the room looked up. Arnold Fry got to his feet.

"That's him," Fry said, and started for the door.

Joe watched Fry open the door and then sat where he was and stared at the man who came in, stared at Jug Coburn. Coburn was wearing his guns belted around his waist

now and there was a wide smile on his face.

"We've been waiting for you, Rasmussen," said Fry.

Coburn nodded, and then he saw Joe Morrison. He stiffened and his hand dropped toward his gun and hung there.

"Oh, that's Joe Morrison," Fry explained. "You didn't meet him before. Joe, this is Frank Rasmussen."

Joe didn't say a word. He didn't even nod. He could imagine the sudden panic which must have gripped Coburn when the outlaw saw him and the indecision which troubled the man now.

"We're about ready to take you up on your proposition," Fry went on, apparently aware of nothing unusual. "The actual details are up to you and Pat Crews. Webber and I will supply the money, and of course all of us here and a good many more men will stand behind you."

"Everyone here?" Coburn asked bluntly.

"Why, of course," Fry answered.

Joe got to his feet. He shook his head. "I won't."

His words shocked everyone in the room. Joe could sense the surprise and bewilderment they must feel. Where this would lead he didn't know but it wasn't in him to sit here quietly and approve of a man like Coburn as deputy sheriff. He knew too well what kind of officer Coburn would make.

"Just what do you mean by that, Morrison?" Coburn asked, his voice harsh and incisive.

Joe looked the man straight in the eye. Here was the time to tell the story but he knew how ridiculous it would sound. He could make his accusations but he couldn't prove them. And just to make them would identify him to Pat Crews as a man still wanted by the State of Texas. In the trouble down there, Joe Morrison was the one who had carried the stigma of an outlaw. Coburn and his men had kept in the background.

"Well, what do you mean?" Coburn asked again. And now there was a sign of assurance in his attitude. He seemed almost to have guessed what Joe was thinking.

"Make anything of it you wish," Joe answered slowly. "Only don't count me a part of your crowd."

"I don't think I understand, Joe." Pat Crews frowned.

"Me either," said Randolph.

Joe shrugged but made no other answer.

"The plan still holds?" Coburn asked.

Arnold Fry nodded but there was a puzzled scowl on his face.

"Then I'll start right in," Coburn announced. "I don't like men who are against me. Morrison, you're under arrest."

Joe Morrison hadn't expected this but he knew he couldn't submit. Once in Coburn's hands he would never escape. He forced a grin to his face and even managed a short laugh.

"Aren't you sort of pushing things, Mr. Rasmussen?" he said. "Hadn't you better get sworn in first as a deputy and get a jail and maybe get

something more against me than that you don't like me?"

Coburn blinked. He looked quickly at Sheriff Crews, afraid, perhaps, that he had overplayed his hand. And Joe Morrison took advantage of that momentary indecision. He headed for the door, brushing right past Jug Coburn, not sure at all that he'd make it. But he did, and at the door he looked back.

"I'll be around, of course, if you really want me," he promised. "Good night, everyone."

There wasn't a sound from those in the room. Joe opened the door and stepped outside, and then he ducked quickly into the shadows at the side of the building. Red Huntley and Bill Daniels, he was sure, weren't far away. And if not right now, as soon as Coburn had talked to them, they would all be after him. He had left himself wide open.

III

There was a deep silence in the room after Joe Morrison had left. Then Coburn suddenly slapped his thigh and nodded.

"I place that fellow now," he stated. "Joe Morrison. Tiger Morrison, they called him in Texas. He and a fellow named Spike Harris had a spread in the Panhandle. They tried to stretch it out, started a range war. They just about took over a whole county, then, to top it off, they robbed a bank, got to quarreling over the loot and Tiger Morrison shot his partner and left the country. I saw him once before all the trouble but didn't place him right

away tonight. I reckon Sheriff Crews must have a dodger on him."

Pat Crews rubbed his jaw. "Maybe so. I've had lots of dodgers from Texas."

"I would never have believed it," muttered Fry.

"Neither would I," Randolph said. "You sure you're right, Rasmussen?"

"Positive," declared Coburn. "I reckon he's my first job, after all. A man like Tiger Morrison doesn't change. We don't want him in Saffron. I'll go out an' collar him."

"I'll go with you," Pat Crews offered. "I sort of liked Joe Morrison. I want to hear what he's got to say for himself."

Joe Morrison didn't know of this talk but, still hidden near the mining office, he saw the sheriff and Coburn step out into the street. They headed toward the nearest saloon and disappeared from sight. Joe waited. Coburn came out alone after a while and almost at once was joined by Red Huntley. Joe didn't see where Huntley had come from.

Huntley and Coburn talked together for just a moment, then Huntley hurried up the street. Sheriff Crews came out of the saloon and he and Coburn angled toward another saloon. Apparently they were making the rounds of any likely places where there might be trouble.

Joe circled back of the mining company office and came out to the street farther up town. He ran into Jake French, a miner whose claim was just below his.

"Hi, Joe," French said. "What

you been doing to get in trouble with the law?"

"In trouble?" Joe answered. "Why, nothing I know of."

French shrugged. "The sheriff's looking for you, anyhow. And he looks pretty upset about something. I saw him down the street a ways with his new deputy."

Joe's eyes narrowed. "Thanks, French," he said. "Maybe I'd better see what it's about."

"Need any help?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, just yell if you do."

Joe started down the street, his eyes searching the groups here and there. And then suddenly he stopped. From the shadows of the passageway between two of the buildings a voice had called his name, had given an order. The voice came to him again.

"Turn around, Morrison. And when you turn, reach for your gun. This is the payoff."

Joe's hand reached into his pocket and closed on his gun. He stood rigid. It was Red Huntley in the shadows, he was sure. Huntley would have a gun on him. Huntley would fire when he turned. The only reason he hadn't fired already was that he didn't want to have to explain a shot in the back. That had probably been Coburn's order. A shot in the back might not look so good.

"I said turn around, Morrison," Huntley called again. "Turn around or you won't even get that chance."

Joe sucked in a sharp breath. He started to turn, throwing his body suddenly sideways and to the ground.

A shot ripped from the shadows, the bullet searing his shoulder. Joe fired back. He heard a choked scream. He fired again, rolled over and, coming to his feet, fired a third time. There was no answering shot from Huntley.

The gun shots had startled those in the street and now several men were hurrying toward him. Joe moved into the passageway from which Huntley's shot had come. He almost stumbled over Huntley's body. The man was lying motionless on his face. How seriously he was hurt Joe didn't know.

"Cover the back way, Crews," Coburn shouted from the street. "That was Morrison. I caught a glimpse of him."

Coburn's voice didn't sound far away and Joe knew what to expect when Coburn got here. Coburn wouldn't want a prisoner. Joe hurried down the passageway. He turned right, away from the direction from which he expected Crews. A shot screamed over his head. Joe started running. Crews was already back here, already after him.

A dozen more paces and Joe swung to the left and began to weave his way through the clustered tent houses and shacks. Whether or not he had eluded Crews, he wasn't sure. He came to the fringing trees and angled through them toward the creek trail. After a while he slowed down to a walk. His shoulder pained him but it wasn't bleeding much. He had been lucky, luckier than he could expect to be again. From here on he had to play the

game more carefully. A game in which he didn't hold any cards at all.

At noon the next day the stage to Hollister was held up at a point about fifteen miles from Saffron. The driver, a guard and one passenger were killed. The only other passenger escaped without injury and on one of the stage horses made his way back to Saffron. He identified the leader of the outlaws as Joe Morrison and was positive in his identification. He said there were three other men but that he didn't know them. He couldn't describe them well, either.

This passenger gave his name as Markham. He was a short man, heavy, and with a grin which came to his lips in spite of the experience he said he had been through. Joe knew the man as Bill Daniels.

The new deputy sheriff apparently didn't know about the robbery and murder until he showed up in town late in the afternoon. He had been off in the hills, he reported, on the trail of this same Joe Morrison. Or at least on what he had thought was Morrison's trail.

Early that evening, Jug Coburn dropped in to see Arnold Fry. He paced back and forth across Fry's office, boasting about what he meant to do to Morrison when he caught him. While he was there the sound of shooting reached into the office. Coburn hurried to the door.

A crowd was gathering in front of the office of the Western Mining Company. Coburn hurried that way. When he got there he found Fred Webber dead on the floor, shot

through the back. The safe was open and empty. Coburn discovered a hat in the office, a hat quickly identified as having belonged to Joe Morrison. Joe had lost the hat when he stooped over Huntley's body the night before, but Coburn, who had found it, hadn't mentioned that to anyone.

IV

Joe had stopped at his camp for supplies after leaving Saffron and he had spent all the next day back in the hills. Night was his only friend and there was nothing to do but wait for the night to come. By night, he might be able to reach Coburn and Daniels. He could settle this only with them.

He was able to sleep some during the afternoon and at dusk he had a cold meal and headed for the town. He was in the fringe of trees, not far from the creek trail, when he heard the shooting in Fred Webber's office. He didn't guess, of course, what the shooting meant. He didn't know anything about the robbery of the stage that afternoon or the accusations against him.

For a while after the shooting Joe stayed where he was. When he moved in toward the town a meeting was being held on the street in front of Webber's office and Arnold Fry was talking about Joe Morrison. When Fry had finished Coburn took over and, on the spot, deputized every man within his hearing to bring in Morrison.

"Keep your guns handy," Coburn warned, "an' don't let him get the first shot or you're dead. "He's

somewhere around here, maybe right behind you now. He's a blood-crazy killer. There isn't a man in this town with an ounce of gold who's safe as long as he's alive."

Joe Morrison reached the main street just as the meeting was breaking up. He had come in close to the Consolidated Mining office and he stood there in the shadows of the building while maybe a score of men passed him, heading for the saloons farther up the street. Arnold Fry and Jug Coburn were among them and in front of the office these two men stopped.

"I don't like it, Rasmussen," Fry growled. "You gave every man in this town the right to use his gun. You've got them scared of a shadow. It wouldn't take much to turn them into a mob."

"Joe Morrison's no shadow," answered Coburn. "He's a cold-blooded killer."

"I suppose you're right, but I'm still worried."

"Working tonight?"

"For a while."

"If I were you I'd keep my gun handy, Fry."

Arnold Fry shrugged his shoulders and turned in to his office. Coburn walked on up the street.

Joe scowled. He didn't like what he had heard but he told himself it was just what he should have expected. Jug Coburn had apparently painted him as pretty bad. Now, all that Coburn needed was a shot at him. And a shot in the back would serve as well as any other.

Most of the crowd had moved

on up the street by now. Joe edged back along the building and glanced through the window. He caught his breath and stiffened. Fry was standing in his office with his hands held shoulder high. Bill Daniels was facing him, covering him with a gun. Daniels was talking but Joe couldn't hear the man's words.

Joe took a quick look over his shoulder. He couldn't see anyone in the street. He reached for his gun, hesitated for just a moment, then smashed in the glass. Daniels jerked toward the window, triggering his gun. Joe heard the scream of the man's shot past his head. He fired twice, saw Daniels take a step forward, then fold over slowly and pitch to the floor.

Fry had grabbed for a gun in his desk drawer. He half lifted it toward the window, staring wide-eyed at Joe Morrison.

"There were three of them, Fry," Joe said swiftly. "One tried a shot at me last night but I got him. This man is the second. The third is Jug Coburn. Here, he calls himself Frank Rasmussen."

Fry mopped a hand over his face. He didn't seem to understand what Joe was talking about. A shot from the street whistled past Joe's head. Joe swung that way and saw a man duck back out of sight. The man started shouting for help.

"I've got him cornered," he yelled. "I've got Morrison cornered!"

Joe grasped the window frame and climbed into the office. Here, he decided, was a good place to settle things. The shots and the shouting of the man outside would bring

others, among them Jug Coburn. This would give him a chance to meet Coburn face to face and right now that was all he wanted.

"Drop that gun, Morrison," Fry ordered suddenly. "Get your hands up."

Joe hadn't been paying much attention to Fry. He stared at him now, bewildered. He had undoubtedly just saved Fry's life but Fry's gun was pointed straight at him and the man's face was set in stern, grim lines.

"Drop that gun," Fry said again. "Get your hands up, Morrison."

Fry's finger was tightening on the trigger. Joe dropped his gun and lifted his hands shoulder high. There wasn't anything else to do.

"Don't you get it, Fry?" he said hoarsely. "This man I shot was working with Coburn. So was the man I shot last night. So was . . ."

"And what about those on the stage?" Fry demanded. "What about Fred Webber?"

"I don't know anything about those on the stage or Fred Webber. But I know Jug Coburn. He'll be here any minute now."

"So will Rasmussen," Fry answered.

"But Rasmussen is Jug Coburn," cried Joe. "He's not an officer. He never was. He's an outlaw from Texas."

"And what about you, Morrison. I heard they wanted you in Texas, too."

Joe stared hopelessly at the man. It could be explained. Everything could be explained but there wasn't

time. He could hear other voices outside. He could hear Coburn shouting orders, his voice sounding closer with every word. Joe's eyes made a quick search of the room. There was only one lamp. It was swinging from the ceiling, not more than a pace from where he stood. Joe glanced toward the door. Coburn was just outside, now. He was shouting to someone to cover the back door.

"Come on in, Rasmussen," Fry said quietly. "I've got him covered."

Every muscle in Joe's body grew tense. He watched the knob on the door, saw it turn, saw the door thrust suddenly inward and caught a glimpse of Coburn on the threshold. Coburn's gun was in his hand. It started to swing upwards and in that moment Joe lunged for the lamp.

He heard the crack of Fry's gun, saw the flash of flame from the muzzle of the gun Coburn was holding. Something stabbed him in the side but his stretching fingers clutched the lamp and tore it from the ceiling.

He hit the floor as darkness blotted out everything in the room and he started rolling toward the place where Daniels had fallen. A bullet ripped into the floor just beyond him. Another tugged at the shoulder of his coat. He reached the place where Daniels had fallen and felt along his body until he found Daniels' gun. Then he stared toward the door but Coburn wasn't in sight.

From just outside the door came the sound of Coburn's voice. "He's in there, men," Coburn was shouting. "He murdered Arnold Fry,

Let's fill this building with lead."

A bullet screamed through the doorway and several more splintered the walls.

Joe got to his knees. This, he knew, was only the beginning. In another moment every man in the street would be peppering this building with bullets. He wouldn't have a chance and neither would Fry. And Coburn? Why, Coburn would be left to ride his bloody train for as far as he could push it.

Pain from the wound in his side was beginning to stab through his body, but Joe managed to get to his feet. He headed straight for the door, tripped as he reached it and fell to the porch outside. He saw Coburn as he went down and imagined that he could see the startled look on the man's face. Coburn's gun swung toward him but at the same moment Joe lifted Daniels' gun and squeezed the trigger.

A scream tore from Coburn's throat. His gun slid from his fingers. He grabbed his stomach and started swaying from side to side. Then a sudden pain exploded in Joe's head and a thick darkness seemed to settle over everything.

The Saffron medico was a short, thick-bodied man who panned gold by day and did his doctoring at night. If someone needed him during the day it was just too bad. He did, however, after the Consolidated holdup, take a couple of days off to look after Joe Morrison. Arnold Fry insisted on it and probably paid the bill out of his own pocket.

"You should have seen him that night," the doctor said to Joe one evening. "He came out of that office almost on top of you, straddled your body and ordered everyone to stop shooting. They did, too. You could have heard Fry's voice two miles up the creek."

"So that's why I'm alive," Joe muttered.

"That and what I did for you, plus the fact that a man lying down is hard to hit and the fact that lots of folks in the street didn't see you dive through that door."

"I didn't hold up any stage," Joe told him.

"I guess they all know that now," said the doctor. "It was this Coburn, and he had inside help. Daniels. This man Daniels rode on the stage, shot the driver and guard through the back. Got the passenger, too. At least, that's what Coburn said."

Joe had never been able to get the doctor to talk much before. The medico had always insisted that his patient wasn't up to the strain. There were a lot of questions on Joe's mind.

"Who shot Fred Webber?" he demanded.

"Daniels, again. After that he went over to the Consolidated office and waited for Fry to show up. I reckon he and Coburn planned on getting everything they could and getting out. They meant to saddle you with the blame."

Joe nodded. "They did once before."

"Yep. That bank robbery in Texas."

"You know about that?"

"I said Coburn talked, didn't I? He was bad hit in the stomach. It was Fry's notion to tell him I couldn't do a thing for him unless he came clean. I couldn't have done anything for him, anyhow, but he talked. What about that Texas deal?"

Joe Morrison closed his eyes. "It was like this," he explained slowly. "A man named Spike Harris and I had a small spread. A big cattle company tried to gobble us up. We fought back. It wasn't a nice fight. We had a hard time getting help and we tied up with three men, Jug Coburn, Red Huntley and Bill Daniels. We put up a hell of a stiff battle, just about got our own way, then one night Coburn and his two pals staged a bank robbery. With a posse hot after them, Coburn headed for where Spike and I were to meet them on another matter. Coburn killed Spike, left some of the bank loot with him and carried me away, unconscious. I woke up with a charge of bank robbery and murder hanging over my head."

The doctor chuckled. "Well, that's all over now. Pat Crews sent a report of what happened here and Coburn's story to Texas. Now that's enough talk. You get to sleep."

Jot Morrison didn't argue. He closed his eyes and wondered if the old trouble was really all over and what it would be like to be free of worry again. He remembered his claim and wished he could get back to work on it. Another month or maybe two and he would have enough money to get a ranch some place and start all over again.

That thought alone was enough to bring a smile to his face. It would be nice to feel a horse between his legs, to get up in the morning in a place of his own, to hear the sound of cattle, to smell the smoke of a roundup campfire. Yes, it was worth all he had been through.

"What you grinning about?" asked the doctor.

"Tomorrow," Joe Morrison answered. "It's going to be nice tomorrow."

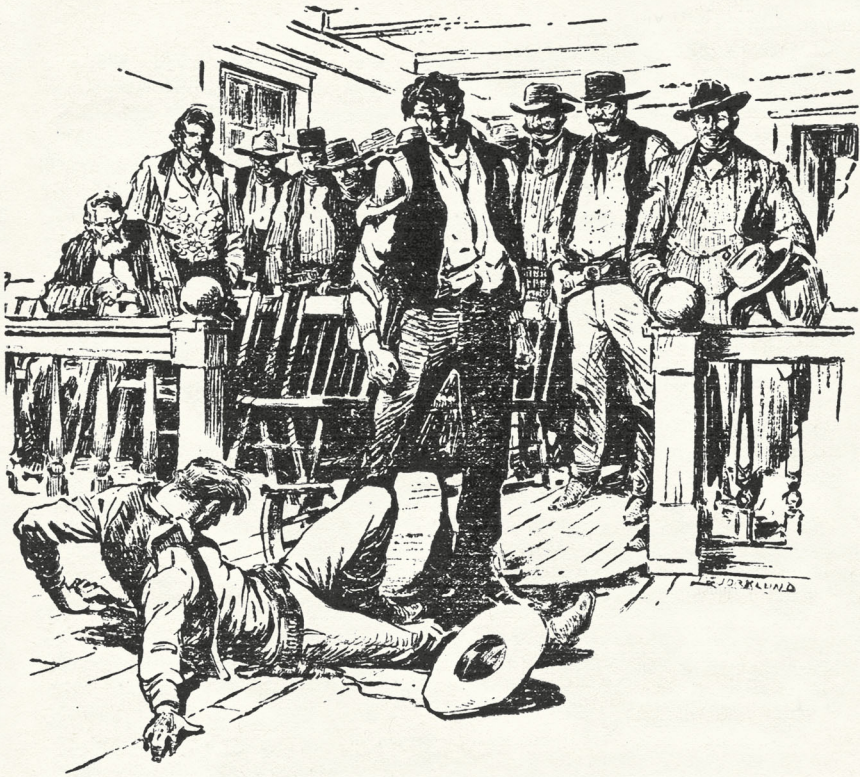
THE END



WELL GROUNDED

I asked an old-time cowboy for his secret of success. Now this is what he told me, an' it ain't far wrong, I guess: "Since man's a human hairpin, it is always wise, I've found. To try to keep the forked end a-pointin' towards the ground!"

S. OMAR BARKER



CALL A MAN THIEF

by JOSEPH CHADWICK

John Cordrey believed money alone could save his bank until he discovered he had other assets

NOTHING in John Cordrey's character fitted him for failure. His father had been a banker before him, and, as a boy, Cordrey had been apprenticed to the banking profession. By all standards of measure-

ment he should be, at thirty-eight, a success—a man of affluence and influence in his community. Instead, he faced ruin. And a whole town, an entire range country, were turning against him. Tomorrow

there would be a run on the Stockmen's Bank of Benton.

It was growing dark now, and the bank, with tellers and patrons gone, was as silent as a tomb. In his small office, John Cordrey paced to and fro through the gathering gloom, as tense as a caged animal. Sweat stood out on his forehead and his eyes had a haunted look. His mind, tortured by worry, found no way out. There was no way out, except a coward's.

In his desperation, he had even considered that. He had taken the gun from the drawer of his desk and weighed it in his hand. He had gone so far as to cock the weapon, trying to tell himself that it was escape. A lead pellet for his life, a cheap price. . . . But then his mind, his whole being, had revolted. A man had no more right to take his own life than he had the right to take that of his fellowman. He had put aside the Colt, a shudder running through him. There had to be another way, he had told himself.

"And I've got to find that way," he muttered aloud.

He had seen other men face failure; ranchers, farmers, merchants, mine owners. Almost all had managed to salvage something and to start over. But such men lost only what was theirs to lose. A banker lost what belonged—not to him, not to his bank—but to his depositors. One error of judgment, one wrong investment, and a banker harmed hundreds of people.

In his mind's eye, Cordrey could see the crowd that would be gathered before his bank in the morning.

They would be waiting for the doors to open, so that they could withdraw their savings. It would be a panic-stricken crowd. And what panic would lead to when the inadequate cash on hand ran out, Cordrey was afraid to guess.

Darkness finally came, and Cordrey, moving like a sleepwalker, reached for his hat and walked from his bank. He locked the street door after him, turned from the red-brick-fronted building, and moved heavily along Benton's main street. The townspeople were in their homes at their evening meal and, for the most part, the street was deserted. Cordrey was grateful for that, for in these past few days, during which the town of Benton had become aware that something was wrong, he had noticed how people stared at him. Stared at him with a question in their eyes, with suspicion. *Thief*, thought John Cordrey, when he had read their eyes.

Yet not one cent of the missing money had gone into his own pocket!

Cordrey was a bachelor. He had a comfortable room and took his meals at the Liberty House, the town's one hotel. Long habit led him there now. He mounted the steps and crossed the gallery, still moving like a man in a daze. He entered the lobby and habit led him to the dining room. He had no appetite, no hunger for food, but now, that he found himself there he could not back out. The dozen or so men at the long table were noting his arrival and talk died away. It was Cordrey's habit to greet the gather-

ing, but only one or two men returned his "Good-evening."

Cordrey hung his hat on a wall peg, then sat at a vacant place at the table. The other diners bent over their plates again.

Martha Ward, who had been operating the hotel since her husband's death nearly a year ago, came from the kitchen and, seeing Cordrey, said, over her shoulder: "Jenny, a plate for Mr. Cordrey."

The waitress came with plate, coffee cup and cutlery. Jenny was a buxom, pink-cheeked girl straight from a Kansas farm. Usually the men diners joshed her, but tonight they ignored her lush charms. Though she smiled at Cordrey, her blue eyes were wary and it was clear that even she knew about things. She placed dishes before him, then quickly took herself off. Across the room, Martha Ward lingered by the buffet and made a show of busying herself with the dishes there.

Filling his plate with steak and potatoes, Cordrey forced himself to eat. Every mouthful threatened to choke him. As he struggled with his meal, the other men finished and, one by one, rose to leave. Finally only one man was left, and he stood across the table from Cordrey.

Will Brandon was a rancher, not a townsman. Big of stature, big of voice and manner, he had dark good looks and carried himself with an air of self-assurance. Cordrey knew Brandon well, but they were not friendly. Under the best of conditions, the two men were barely civil. Each had hoped for some months now that attractive Martha Ward

would favor him. In this moment, however, Martha's presence was unimportant. There was something else in Will Brandon's eyes. Cordrey saw it, looking up, and he spoke dryly: "Have your say, Will."

"A thing I always have," said Brandon arrogantly. "I deposited four thousand dollars in your bank a month ago, Cordrey. Money I got for a herd of beef. It's money I sweated and froze for, over two years. Tomorrow morning I'm taking it out of your bank."

"Your privilege, Will."

"It had better be there when I come, Cordrey."

"My bank opens at nine sharp," said Cordrey.

Brandon swung away with that, striding from the dining room with jingling spurs. And he left John Cordrey shaken. Martha Ward came around the table toward him.

"Here's some apple pie, John. I made it myself." She smiled faintly. "So you know you'll like it. Eat it with your coffee, or my feelings will be hurt. Come now—eat up!"

She was a woman of thirty who had shouldered the burden of widowhood with courage and wisdom. Hers was no striking beauty but a matter of good features, a fine smile and expressive brown eyes. Martha Ward would grace any man's life, John Cordrey knew, but that man must win her with more than mere words. Will Brandon interested her, Cordrey knew, yet the rancher seemed to lack some quality that might have caused Martha to forget her widowhood. And on the other hand, she had also kept John Cor-

drey at arms-length. It was evident that if Martha Ward should again smile upon a man, it would be because he measured up to some high standard.

"Martha, it's dangerous for a woman to feed a man," Cordrey said, trying to put himself into a bantering mood. "It's said that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

"I feed so many men, John."

"Will Brandon comes often."

"He didn't come to town tonight just for a meal," said Martha. "John, there's talk all around town—disturbing talk. They say, the gossipers, that your bank will have to close its doors."

"Martha, let it go no farther . . . It's true."

"Oh, John! I'm so sorry."

"And I'm desperate," said Cordrey. "I'm at the end of my rope! I did what no careful banker would do; I invested too heavily in one place." He shook his head, as though unable to believe that he had made such a mistake. "But it seemed a sound investment. The railroad was to have been built through this country. Had it been, my investment would have been gilt-edged. This whole country would have boomed. But the railroad company went bankrupt for lack of capital, and now the stock the bank owns is practically worthless. Very little will be salvaged from the crash."

"Is there nothing you can do?" Martha asked.

Cordrey smiled wryly. "I might hire a horse at the Corral Livery

and ride as far as it will carry me."

"But you won't, John. You'll stay and face it."

Cordrey looked up from his apple pie. What he saw in Martha's eyes surprised him. He thought, "Why, she's made up her mind. She's chosen between Will and me. She'd marry me . . . But now it can't be!" He put down his fork, pushed aside his plate.

"Martha, you bake a mighty fine apple pie, but I can't eat tonight."

He rose and took down his hat and turned to leave the room. Martha's voice halted him. "John . . . wait!" When he turned, she came toward him and she was frowning.

"I wouldn't have believed you were a quitter," she told him. "Yet you are. You say there's nothing you can do, but that's not true."

"Not true, Martha?"

"Do you remember when Cal Yeager's store burned down last winter, John?" she asked. "You do, of course, for you helped fight the fire. You risked your life to help Cal save some of his stock from the blaze. And afterward, you organized a group of townspeople to help him rebuild. You even helped with the carpentry work, after banking hours."

"I remember, Martha," Cordrey said, puzzling over her meaning.

"And Cal Yeager remembers. The whole town, too," Martha went on, caught up by excitement. "Don't you see that now your bank is in as much danger as Cal's store was that night? John, if you'd only go to the people and tell them about your trouble. . . . Why, I'm sure

they'd help. This town is prosperous. The ranchers are making money now that beef prices are high. They could give you a hand, just as Cal Yeager was given a hand. Can't you go to them, John?"

"I wouldn't make a good beggar, Martha."

"Pride, John!" she rebuked him. "Swallow it. Beg, if you have to. But save your bank, and some day you'll be able to pay back your losses. There's to be a meeting at the town hall tonight; that's why Will Brandon is in town. He's called the meeting. John, Will Brandon wants to see you done in Benton. You know it, and you know why."

Cordrey nodded. "Because of you."

"Yes," said Martha. "Are you going to let him finish you off?" She stood close to him. "Are you, John?"

"Martha, I'll do what I can," he said, and turned away.

By eight o'clock an unusually large number of people were on Benton's main street. They stood in small knots talking urgently, and it seemed to John Cordrey, as he stepped out of the Liberty House, that an undercurrent of tension could be felt in the very atmosphere.

As he progressed along the street, he was aware that men fell silent and stared after him. It seemed to him that the town's feeling was hostility; he knew, if that were so, it was directed at him. He wondered what was growing in men's minds. Six months before, there had been such a gathering of townfolk and

ranchers as this. A hard-cased murderer had been caught and locked up. There had been lynch talk that night, and the town marshal had been forced to sneak his prisoner out of town for safekeeping.

The Town Hall, a white-painted frame building which was Benton's civic pride, was lighted. Its doors were closed, and a rancher—a man named Hanlon, who had money in the Stockmen's Bank—was on guard. Cordrey mounted the steps. When Hanlon would have barred his way, he said: "Friend, I'm going inside."

Something in his manner must have swayed Hanlon, for the rancher shrugged. "You'll not be welcome, banker," he warned.

Cordrey opened the door and stepped into the crowded, lamp-lighted hall. Only men were gathered there, for this was man business. There were, Cordrey judged, more than a hundred ranchers, farmers, merchants and freighters in the gathering. Will Brandon was on the platform, speaking explosively.

"If a man came with a gun to take our money," Brandon was shouting, and he held the crowd silent and spellbound, "we'd call him a bandit. So I say to you, my friends, that when a sharper sets himself up as a banker and gambles with our money—and loses it, by damn!—he's no better than a bandit without a gun!"

Cordrey started down the aisle that ran between the rows of seats and led straight to the speaker's platform.

"Brandon"—his voice was calm in contrast to the rancher's bellow—

"you may call me a fool, but I'll not stand for being called a thief!"

He was midway down the aisle now, and the crowd stared at him. Not one man present had expected to see him there. Up on the platform, Will Brandon, more quick-witted than the others, shouted: "You, sharper—clear out of here! This meeting doesn't want to hear from you!"

"I have something to say at this meeting, Brandon, and I mean to say it." Cordrey kept moving forward as he spoke. "You're trying to rouse this town against me, Brandon. You want to start a run on my bank. Maybe you can justify that. But you want more. You want to turn a mob on me. Maybe you want to hang me. That's like you, Brandon. You know only one way of

doing things—by violence. You'll have your way in the end, no doubt, but first I'm having my say!"

"I warned you to clear out, banker," said Brandon and he started down from the platform. "Now I'll put you out!"

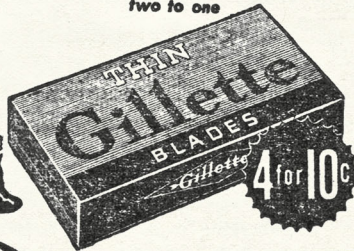
Men came noisily to their feet. Some mounted the benches the better to witness what was to come. Cordrey watched burly Will Brandon descend from the platform, knowing that his one chance had slipped through his fingers. As a banker, Cordrey had trained himself to a point where he was seldom swayed by his emotions. But now rage swept through him, and he said evenly: "Well, you asked for it!"

He flung aside his hat, pulled off his coat, and now Brandon was coming—rushing—along the aisle toward

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him. A big man, Brandon, but so was John Cordrey. When they met, bodies slamming together, it was a clash of two giants. The gaping crowd realized that this was to be more than a mere brawl. And men were suddenly hushed, awed.

Cordrey halted Brandon's first rush with shoulder and knee and a painful blow to the face. But Brandon got his great arms about the banker, in a bearlike hug, and lifted him up. He flung Cordrey bodily to the floor and would have jumped upon him with both feet had not Cordrey rolled clear and caught hold of the rancher at the knees.

Cordrey heaved upward, and Brandon sprawled over backward to land on the wooden floor with an ugly thud. A boot to the ribs, even to the face, was called for now. But Cordrey gave Brandon his chance. He let the rancher climb up. And Brandon came rushing again, his great strength unimpaired.

Terrific blows beat against Cordrey, drove him back, filled him with pain. His vision fogged, and he saw dimly the wild look of glee that spread over Brandon's heavy face. He had his moment's doubt, his panicky fear, then. But Brandon made his mistake in not finishing the fight with his battering punches. He grappled again, wrapping his arms about Cordrey, meaning to squeeze the breath and the strength out of him. Panic filled Cordrey with desperation, then with a wild strength. And with a sudden skill. He hit Brandon squarely between the eyes.

Half-blinded, the rancher grunted

with pain. He fell back, freeing Cordrey. He stood shaking his head, trying to clear his vision. Cordrey hit him again between the eyes, then again and again. Brandon roared wildly, put his shaggy head down and charged bull-fashion. Cordrey side-stepped and with a heavy blow hit Brandon at the base of the skull. The rancher fell to his knees. Cordrey hit him again, driving him to his face.

"Enough, Brandon?"

"Hell, no!" gasped Brandon, and got painfully to his feet.

He was wide open now, and Cordrey battered his face. Sweat and blood and pain made a grotesque mask of Will Brandon's face. He would not be knocked unconscious, yet he would take a beating. Cordrey finally drove him to his knees again, then stepped back.

"Will, there's no sense in this," he argued. "I mean to have my say."

And, surprisingly, Will Brandon said: "Have it, then."

John Cordrey ran the gauntlet of stares. The crowd was stunned, for Will Brandon had had a reputation for being a fighter. Walking to the platform on uncertain legs, for he too had taken a beating, Cordrey mounted and faced the gathering. His shirt hung in shreds. His face was cut and bleeding, and his left eye was swollen almost closed. The hall was quiet, hushed. Cordrey sought words.

"Friends, I stand before you, a man who needs a helping hand," he managed to say. "A banker is

only human, and it's said that to err is human. I bought heavily of stock issued by the projected Texas & Western Railroad. That was my mistake. I couldn't foresee that the railroad would not be built. Only ten cents on the dollar will be salvaged from that stock. Therefore, the Stockmen's Bank of Benton is close to disaster. Tomorrow, there'll be a run on the bank—people caught by panic withdrawing their money. . . .”

He paused for breath, and looked down at his unfriendly audience.

“If that happens, my bank, which is *your* bank, will close its doors within an hour,” Cordrey went on. “But if I were given time . . .”

A voice said: “How much time, Cordrey?”

It was Cal Yeager asking. Yeager, whose store had once burned down.

“The bank could make good its losses over a five-year period, Cal,” Cordrey told him. “If a run is averted and I'm able to keep open the doors. As I have said, I may be a fool but I'm no thief.”

“Cordrey, I never forgot what you did for me last winter,” Yeager said. “You got the whole town to help me. Now I'll stand by you. I have five thousand dollars in the bank at Tulare. Tomorrow I'll have it transferred to your bank. Will that help?”

John Cordrey smiled. “It will help, Cal. It will more than cover the amount Will Brandon will draw out in the morning.” Then, his smile fading, he added: “But it's not enough unless other people let their

money stay in the bank in a normal manner.”

There was talk among the crowd, some arguing to follow Cal Yeager's example, others against it. No one seemed to have noticed Will Brandon, who had made his way to the front of the crowd and stood, a battered figure in a torn shirt, listening to what Cordrey had to say. Now Brandon shoved forward to the platform and looked up at Cordrey, a rueful grin on his bruised lips.

“John, the trouble between us was a private matter,” he said. “I was fool enough to deal from the bottom of the deck because I held a losing hand. But I hope I'm an honest man, in the long run. My four thousand stays in your bank. Shall we shake on it?”

That swung the crowd. There was excited talk. It was the town's bank—their bank—as much as John Cordrey's, wasn't it? Benton couldn't do without a bank. They crowded about Cordrey, assuring him that they would stand by him. One man held his coat while he got into it; another handed him his hat.

Cordrey strode from the meeting hall with the air of a man in whose character there is no acceptance of failure. He walked along the main street of the town, his town, and the atmosphere seemed somehow charged with friendliness. He paused to look at the small red-brick building that was his bank, and it had a good, solid appearance. He went on toward the Liberty House, where, he knew, Martha would be waiting expectantly for him . . .

Matt Abbott could never meet his dad's standards in pounds and inches, yet when he came back to the Triangle range, he found himself face to face with the kind of chore that demanded a

MAN AND A HALF

by

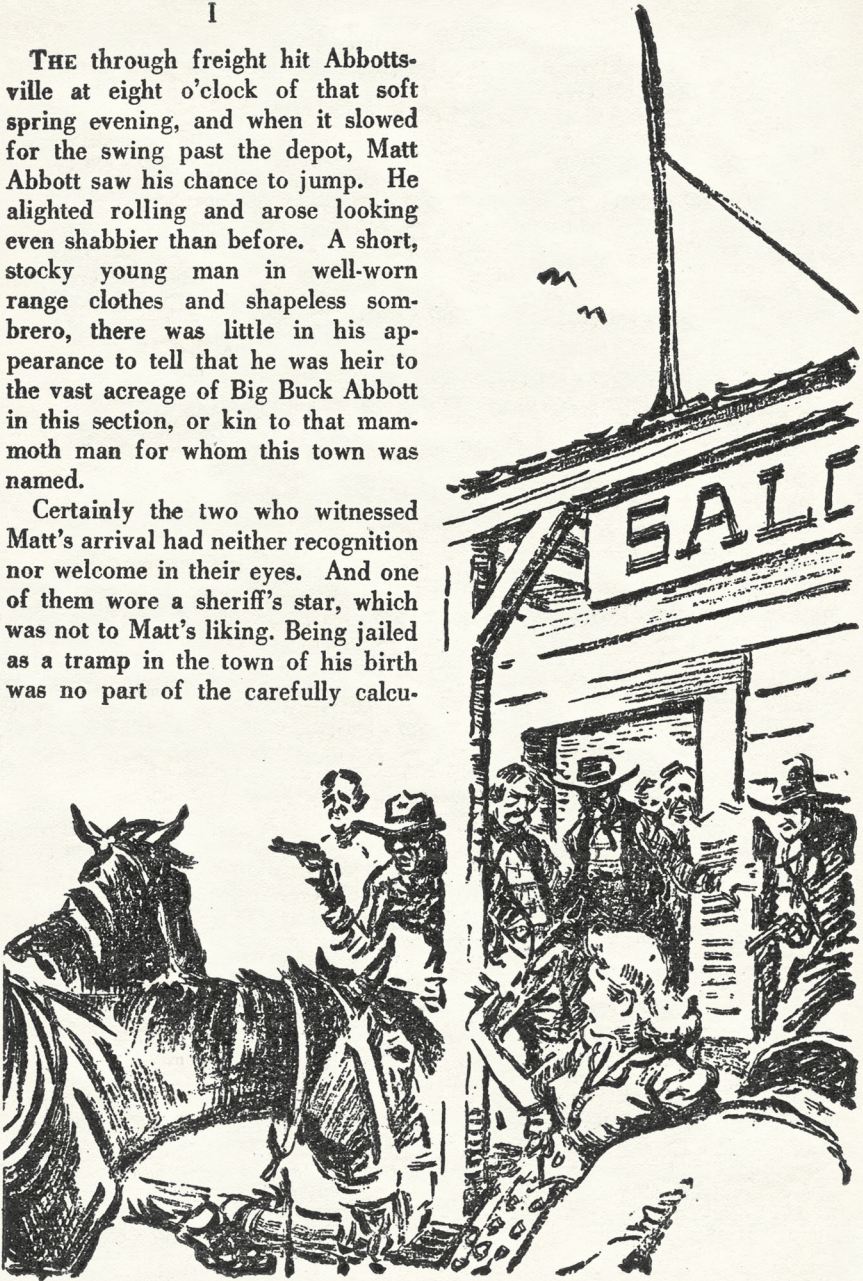
NORMAN A. FOX



I

THE through freight hit Abbotsville at eight o'clock of that soft spring evening, and when it slowed for the swing past the depot, Matt Abbott saw his chance to jump. He alighted rolling and arose looking even shabbier than before. A short, stocky young man in well-worn range clothes and shapeless sombrero, there was little in his appearance to tell that he was heir to the vast acreage of Big Buck Abbott in this section, or kin to that mammoth man for whom this town was named.

Certainly the two who witnessed Matt's arrival had neither recognition nor welcome in their eyes. And one of them wore a sheriff's star, which was not to Matt's liking. Being jailed as a tramp in the town of his birth was no part of the carefully calcu-



lated scheme that had fetched Matt Abbott home.

Ten years had passed since Matt had seen Abbottville, and those ten years, changing him from fourteen to twenty-four, had made little difference in Sheriff Bill Morts or Sig Lannigan, the saloon owner. Both of them tall, wide-shouldered men, they were still as inseparable as ever, it seemed. Lannigan wore black broadcloth as always, and Morts had a calfskin vest that Matt remembered from the yesterdays. Their mouths hard and their hands hanging low, they watched him brush the dirt from himself, and then Sheriff Morts said:

"Keep right on down the track, hobo. We don't cater to your kind in this town. Now, git! And I'll be watching until you're gone from sight."

This surprised Matt. He'd expected to be dragged off to jail, for in the old days Bill Morts had always liked to keep his cells filled. The county made a meal allotment based on the number of prisoners, and Morts, in the old days, had pocketed a nice profit by feeding his unwilling guests from restaurant scraps. But Morts was ordering him out of town instead, and that didn't fit Matt's scheme either.

"To blazes with you, tin badge!" he said and made his play.

Matt packed no gun. He'd wanted to make an inoffensive entry into Abbottville, so he'd come empty-handed, intending to get himself an iron later. Now he knew a moment of fleeting regret. But in the midst of that moment he was charging

Bill Morts, head down. Before the sheriff could reach his gun, Matt had rammed him hard in the midriff, and Morts went down with the breath whooshing out of him.

So far Matt had had the advantage of surprise; for obviously neither Morts nor Lannigan had expected anything but immediate obedience from an unarmed hobo. Now Lannigan, with a throaty curse, was grabbing for a gun, but Matt, coming out of his crouch, brought his fist up, and his knuckles caught Lannigan under the chin to send him backward and sprawling over Morts. Turning, Matt ran headlong for the corner of the depot, and he'd almost reached shelter when Lannigan's gun blossomed against the gathering dusk. Matt felt the fire lance along his side, but it didn't slow him. Panting, he rounded the corner to reach comparative safety.

Keeping the depot between himself and Lannigan's gun, Matt darted over to the town proper, slipped between two buildings and got to an alley behind Main Street. His side was sticky with blood, his heart pounded with exertion, but still he ran, getting beyond the business district, which was mostly saloons, and coming at last to the rear of a little cottage near the far outskirts. He'd prowled this town as a boy, and memory had served him well. For when he thundered on the cottage door, Doc McCall opened up for him.

"You've got blood on you," Doc said with no surprise. "Come inside."

He was a little man, McCall, bald

and pink-jowled and with shoulders stooped from carrying a range's woes for two-score years. Matt followed the doctor into a comfortable, lamp-lighted living room and, crossing to the window, hauled down the shade.

"Morts and Lannigan won't expect I'll dare show myself at a doctor's," he said. "But there's no use taking chances."

McCall's voice sharpened. "Say, just who are you, and what have you been up to?" he demanded.

Matt faced him across the lamp. "Don't you know me, Doc? Shucks, you brought me into this world—and got only half your fee for doing it."

It was the last that brought the light to McCall's eyes, but before the medico could speak, a blond-haired girl stood framed in the doorway.

"I know him," she announced. "Even with those whiskers. Welcome home, Matt!"

Matt grinned. "Hello, Cyn," he said. "You turned out to be an eye-ful of a woman."

"Matt!" exclaimed Doc McCall. "Matt Abbott! And you're wounded! A ruckus with the sheriff, did you say? Cynthia, my kit."

His daughter fetched his bag for him, and then, apparently used to such emergencies, went into the kitchen for hot water and towels. Doc cut Matt's shirt away, exposing the bloody furrow Lannigan's bullet had plowed. When Cynthia appeared with water, Doc methodically swabbed away.

"I wouldn't have known you," he

said as he worked. "Let's see, you must be five foot eight or nine now, and you'd tip the scales at about a hundred sixty, and none of it's fat. Yes, sir, you've grown up, boy."

Bitterness shadowed Matt's eyes. "But not enough to get you the rest of your fee."

Doc's face softened. "That's rankled you, eh, son?" he said. "It's been a joke to some, that story of how Big Buck Abbott looked at you the day you were born, then wrote me a check for half my fee, saying that since I'd brought him only half a man, I was to get only half my money. Yet you're big enough by most standards. The Abbotts happen to run six foot three and four. Your mother was small-boned and dark like you, Matt. And she was the only thing Big Buck ever really loved, her and his Triangle A Ranch. Her dying the day you were born, son, didn't lessen Buck's bitterness any."

Matt winced, and not from the sting of iodine. "But I've tried to be *his* kind of man," he said. "He sent me East for schooling when I was fourteen. I didn't come home for the summers. Instead I worked on ranches, aiming to show dad it didn't take height to handle a rope, a branding iron, or a gun. I've seen every State on the sunset side of the Mississippi, yet when dad decided to retire a year ago to go and squat in Helena, he put Chris Abbott, a shirt-tail cousin, in charge of the Triangle A here. Chris, it seems, measures up to the Abbott standards—in pounds and inches."

"You've seen your dad lately, son?"

"Not since I finished school, five years ago," answered Matt. "I'll go to him when he sends for me, or when I've proved myself man-size. I'm still working for a Bitter Root spread. I wouldn't even have known about Cousin Chris being in charge here if I hadn't swapped a letter with you once in a while, Doc."

"Your dad's more stubborn than hard," McCall told him. "He started out intending to dislike you. He likely changed his mind long ago, but it would take a miner's drill to get the truth out of him. Remember that, son."

Cynthia, across the room, had been a silent listener. Now she said: "If you've come here to make trouble for Chris Abbott, think twice, Matt. Chris has got as many faults as most of us, and one of them is a fondness for the pasteboards at Sig Lannigan's saloon. But you can't blame him for taking the Triangle managership when it was offered him."

"That's right," Doc said. "You haven't told us what fetched you here, Matt."

"Hassayampa Joe Harmon fetched me," Matt said.

Doc almost dropped the bandage he was fashioning. "*Harmon!*" he echoed. "What do you aim to do about Harmon?"

"Hassayampa was foreman of the Triangle all the time my dad was the big boss," Matt said. "Yampa taught me to ride before I could walk. He was more of a father to me than Big Buck ever was. If I owe anything to any man in the world, I

owe it to Hassayampa Joe. One of your letters said that Hassayampa quit when Chris Abbott took over. And your last letter said Yampa had gone bronc and had taken to rustling Triangle stock. That's what brought me here."

"You don't believe Hassayampa guilty?"

"Look," said Matt. "If I told you I'd seen a cow climb a tree to suck bird's eggs, you'd think I'd been tipping the jug. It isn't the nature of a cow to climb trees. And it isn't the nature of Hassayampa to turn outlaw. I can savvy him quitting in disgust when Cousin Chris took over. I can even savvy Yampa getting his nose wet and making some mighty noisy saloon talk about what he thought of the Triangle. But he wouldn't mean it. Yampa's a cowpoke, by grab, and a cowpoke stays loyal to his spread. I know Yampa, Doc!"

"When you get this basin moved, Cynthia, fetch Matt one of my shirts," McCall said quietly. "It should about fit him if he doesn't try buttoning the collar. His own is a mess."

Worming into the shirt, Matt said: "Can't you see it, Doc? Somebody else is doing the rustling and hanging it onto Hassayampa. And I've come here to find out who and tack his hide on the wall. The freight train fetched me in tonight; I figured it best not to show up as Matt Abbott; that might be a warning to whoever's using Yampa's name. I'd figured on seeing you and Cyn, anyway, and I'm counting on you

to keep quiet. Morts and Sig Lannigan were at the depot when I lighted. Morts ordered me out of town, not recognizing me, and we had a little ruckus. And Lannigan creased me with a bullet."

"Look, son," Doc said. "It's a mighty fine thing that fetched you here. But you're butting your head against a wall. Hassayampa's taken to doing more than rustling. He's gone completely bronc. Twice lately he's stopped the stage that comes down from Helena and meets the railroad here. He's worn a slicker and mask, but both times his dappled horse was recognized."

"Anybody might be using Yampa's horse!" Matt argued.

"Bill Morts nailed Yampa and put him in jail a couple of weeks ago," Doc went on. "Before the day of his trial, Hassayampa pried the bars out of his cell window. He would have stood a fair chance at a trial here, Matt; the old coot was well liked in the past. But he busted jail instead. Now don't try telling me it was because he saw the cards stacked. No Abbottsville jury would have branded him guilty on purely circumstantial evidence. Yampa knew that. He brought in his own verdict against himself when he skipped jail."

"I'll see Hassayampa holding up a stage before I believe it," Matt said stubbornly. "And even then I'll not be sure."

Doc shook his bald head. "Likely you won't have that chance, son. I told you Yampa stopped the stage twice. The second time was just the other night. And that time he threw

some lead. The stage driver is over at young Doc Benson's place, fighting for his life. Benson called me in on the case, and I'd say that the driver will be dead before another sunrise. See what that will mean. Matt? The whole range will be out beating the brush for Yampa now that he's got blood on his hands."

It was a stunning blow to Matt, this latest bit of information, for now he saw that the job he'd taken on was even bigger than it had seemed at first. Was there now a crack in the foundation of his faith in Hassayampa Joe Harmon? While Matt tried to collect his thoughts, a heavy step on the front porch took Cynthia to the window.

"Sheriff Morts!" she whispered after a quick peek behind the shade. "Lannigan must have known he wounded you, Matt, and Morts is making a check-up of the doctors! Dad, get Matt's old shirt out of sight! And you, Matt, use the back door!"

"Thanks," Matt whispered. "Thanks for everything . . ."

II

Outside, deep darkness had gathered over the town, and Matt Abbott kept to cover as he slipped down the alleyway behind the McCall cottage. He had escaped Sheriff Morts once again, and he knew that Doc and Cynthia would keep the lawman occupied long enough for him, Matt, to be well away. But he wished now that he'd had more time for talking.

Hassayampa Joe Harmon had

turned himself into an outlaw for sure. Hassayampa had kicked the lid sky high and let the merry blue blazes come bubbling out. That was the size of it; yet nothing was changed for Matt. He'd come here to square Yampa with the law, and he would. But as he strode aimlessly along, he wondered just where he'd cut sign on Hassayampa. He'd wanted to ask the McCalls a lot of questions about that, but Sheriff Morts had had to show up.

Saloon talk might give him some of the answers, and Sig Lannigan's Ace High was the biggest drinking place. Matt carefully weighed the risks. No danger of his being recognized as Big Buck Abbott's son, he decided. Not unless he ran into Chris, who'd seen him in recent years. Doc McCall hadn't known him, and neither had Bill Morts or Sig Lannigan, at the depot. Cynthia's recognition had probably been prompted by his words to her father. No, there wasn't much chance of a down-at-the-heels cowpoke being taken for Buck Abbott's heir.

The real risk, then, lay in being recognized as the hobo who'd assaulted the majesty of Abbottsville's law and laid his fist on Sig Lannigan as well. But only two men could recognize him in that role, and Matt could be careful to avoid Morts and Lannigan. And those two had probably pegged him as a hobo who'd gotten full of canned-heat courage, made a wild play and was now rabbiting it across the prairie.

So thinking, Matt made his decision, and it fetched him around to the boardwalks where he strode

along with a wary eye. The hitch-rails were crowded tonight, and that meant a lot of cowboys were in from outlying ranches. Some of the mounts before the Ace High bore his father's Triangle A brand, but Matt brushed boldly through the batwings.

The place was packed; stale tobacco smoke slowly eddied below the hanging lamps, and the talk of many men blended into a meaningless hum, while a seedy piano player tried to make his music heard above the noise. Sig Lannigan was here, a purple bruise on his pointed chin where Matt's fist had marked him. The Ace High owner, watching a three-sided poker game at one of the far tables, was too engrossed to give Matt much worry. But one of the players at that table was Christopher Abbott.

Though it was several years since he had seen him, Matt knew his distant kinsman instantly. Chris had the big body of the Abbotts, but his face, florid and bluffly handsome, held none of the strength of Big Buck's. Chris had his eyes on the cards and was apparently sweating out a series of poor hands, so Matt put down his first impulse to leave the place.

According to an old saying, the best place for a man to hide himself is in a crowd, and the crowd was here—spurred cowboys from the ranches, booted miners from the hills that lay between here and Helena, and a scattering of townspeople as well. Buying a drink, Matt moved to the far end of the bar and kept

his back to the crowded room. In this manner he placed himself within a long jump of the saloon's seldom used back door, and his strategy was foreplanned in case he found himself in a tight.

His first half hour was fruitless; he toyed with his drink so long that he wrung glances from the barkeep; whereupon Matt downed the stuff and ordered another drink, which he eventually dumped into the sawdust because he needed a clear head. Listening to the talk of those closest to him, he learned nothing of interest until a newcomer shouldered to the bar. This fellow had a quick drink, then announced: "Farny Shaw just cashed in his chips over at Doc Benson's. That little old stage driver is a gone gosling."

Out of the mutter of anger that arose, Matt heard somebody say: "We ought to get up a rope party and comb those Tularul Hills. Time was when I split my tobacco with Hassayampa Joe Harmon, but he's turned wolf for keeps."

There was more of this, and Matt, listening, had a vivid ghastly picture of Yampa kicking out his life at a rope's end. But at least he'd learned that Hassayampa haunted the Tularul Hills that lay to the north of the Triangle acreage, and that gave him a place to begin his hunt. He took a step away from the bar, noticing that Chris Abbott was still deeply intent upon his game and that Sig Lannigan was watching the play, and at that moment the rear door eased open and a boy slid stealthily into the barroom.

At least Matt judged that it was a boy, for it was a slight figure clad in Levis and shirt and with a sombrero as shapeless as his own. But there was a fullness to the bust that couldn't be concealed, even by an oversized shirt, and it hit Matt suddenly that this newcomer was a girl—a girl in disguise. She was glancing quickly to right and left, and now she edged toward the rear stairs that led upward to a series of rooms above. This maneuver put her, for a moment, in the full light of an overhanging lamp and now Matt was electrified to alert attention, for the girl was Cynthia McCall.

Matt went up the stairs after her. He didn't take time for a decision; he only knew that desperation alone could drive the girl into a place like the Ace High, and that meant she was risking trouble and might need help. The same sense of loyalty to an old friendship that had motivated her to give him warning that Bill Morts was on the McCall porch was now prompting him to follow her; and he reached the head of the stairs just as she vanished into Sig Lannigan's private office, closing the door behind her.

Pausing here, Matt glanced downstairs. Apparently nobody had noticed the two make the ascent. The barkeep was busy at his work, and Lannigan was still watching Chris Abbott's table.

Easing to the office door, Matt put his hand on the knob and took several seconds turning it. Then he quickly lunged into the room. There was a lot of fancy furniture here, and a massive desk centered the

room, a lamp burning brightly above it. Cynthia stood behind the desk, obviously arrested in the act of going through the drawers as Matt entered. Her hand fluttered to her throat as he closed the door, but recognition washed the fear from her eyes.

"You!" she murmured.

"Lucky it wasn't Sig Lannigan. What are you looking for?"

Her answer was irrelevant. "Sheriff Morrts wasn't looking for you to-night. He came to the cottage to get dad to come over to Doc Benson's. The stage driver was dying, and Benson wanted help."

"What are you looking for?" Matt insisted.

"These," she said reluctantly and pulled a sheaf of papers from the drawer. "That's the trouble with a man Lannigan's size; he gets careless. These are I.O.U.'s signed by Chris Abbott to take care of gambling debts he's run up here."

Back at the cottage Cynthia had mentioned that Chris had a fondness for the pasteboards in Sig Lannigan's place, and she'd asked Matt not to be too harsh if he had come to deal with his big cousin. All of that fitted, but it still left Matt astonished to find what had fetched Cynthia here. There was only one explanation that he could see, and he said thinly: "As I recall it, Chris always had a way with the ladies."

Anger put a high flush to Cynthia's face. She picked up a box of matches from the desk and struck one, lighting the papers which she held over the waste basket.

"Do you think I've lived all my

life in this town without learning that Sig Lannigan's wheels are fixed and his decks marked?" she asked as the papers quickly turned to ashes. "Chris is a newcomer here. Obviously he's gotten in deep. He just the same as admitted that to me when he came calling not long ago. I wanted to help him, yes. And this is the only way I could think of. Lannigan won't dare to try holding him to those I.O.U.'s now that they're destroyed. And perhaps Chris will have learned his lesson."

It came to Matt then that this was a brave, unselfish thing she was doing, and he knew that he was angry only because she was doing it for Chris. It wasn't Cynthia who had fetched Matt back to the town of his birth, yet he realized that the memory of her had been with him all of the years. And this made twice now that Chris Abbott had unwittingly beat him out.

But while he was thinking, part of him remained sentinel, and now he stiffened. "Someone climbing the stairs!" he whispered. "Quick! They'll have us trapped for sure if they're coming into this office!"

There was one window, to the rear of the room. Matt reached it in three long strides, hoisted the sash and had a look out. Below was the blackness of the alleyway, but there was a shed of sorts directly beneath the window. It was, Matt realized, a sort of housing covering the rear doorway of the saloon, but it was a mighty long drop to the roof of that shed. Cynthia was at his elbow, and he could hear voices just beyond

the office door—Sig Lannigan's, he judged, yes, and Sheriff Bill Morts'!

"Out you go!" Matt urged, and he got Cynthia over the sill and lowered her by her wrists as far as he could reach. He let go then; she dropped, to land catlike on the shed roof, and from there it was an easy jump to the ground. Matt had his own leg over the sill as the door opened, but he'd wasted a few seconds too many helping Cynthia get away.

Lannigan's eyes lifted from the rifled desk to Matt, the saloon owner's hand going to his gun. Morts, crowding behind Lannigan, made the same play, shouting: "Up with 'em, you!" It was obey or die, and when Matt turned, his hands hoisted, the sheriff's eyes widened.

"Our hobo friend again, eh?" he ejaculated. "A wild one, Sig. First he assaults an officer of the law, then he tries his hand at robbery. Better learn to lock your office when you leave it empty."

Lannigan's eyes narrowed. "Guess you'll have to take him to the jail, Bill," he said. "Search him when you get him there, and I'll have a look to see what's missing, meanwhile."

"Come along, you," Morts ordered with a flourish of his gun.

Again there was no choice but for Matt to obey. But bitterness scalded through him as he moved across the office and out of it under the sheriff's watchful eye. There'd be no scouring the Tularul Hills for Hassayampa Joe by Matt Abbott; not when he was going to be locked up in the town's calaboose. A fine start

he'd made on the mission that had fetched him here!

III

Abbottsville's jail stood midway of the street, a long, low structure situated where the town's business section ended and the residential section began. Prodded through the crowded Ace High and along the boardwalk by Sheriff Morts, Matt was marched into the sheriff's office to the front of the building, searched and then ushered into the cell corridor where he found all the cells vacant. This surprised Matt, just as it had surprised him to have Bill Morts order him out of town instead of jailing him when he'd first arrived.

"Looks like we caught you before you had time to fish anything of value out of Sig's desk, hobo," Morts said, locking Matt in a cell. "But that won't get you off any easier."

The sheriff left the building almost immediately and Matt began pacing his cell. He had to get out of here, and mighty soon, for very shortly the aroused range was going to start scouring the Tularuls with a hang rope, and he had to reach Hassayampa Joe Harmon first. That reminded him that Yampa had escaped from this same jail, but when Matt tested the bars of his window, he found them solidly set. Not a chance there.

He fell to wondering about Cynthia. She had made good her escape from the Ace High, and obviously neither Morts nor Lannigan had suspected that a second person had been in the saloon office. No, Cynthia

was in the clear, and, strangely, Matt Abbott drew satisfaction from the thought, feeling no rancor because it was Cyn and her activities on behalf of Chris Abbott that had gotten him into this jam. And thinking about Cynthia, he suddenly found her here, in the shadowy cell corridor, Morts' keys in her hand.

"Here," she said, thrusting the keys through the barred door to him. "Morts left them in his desk. Guess he didn't figure anybody would be apt to try freeing a nameless hobo. I don't know which one fits this cell. Try them until you find the right one, and I'll keep watch outside, meanwhile. If I whistle, you'll know Morts is coming back."

She was gone as silently as she'd come, and Matt blessed her name as he fumbled with the keys. The first three were of no use to him; the fourth opened the cell door. He hurried up the corridor, clutching the keys, and he had almost reached the sheriff's office when he tripped and went sprawling.

Picking himself up, he rubbed his bruised knees, and then felt to see what object had tripped him. A trap door was set here in the floor of the cell corridor, a trap door leading to a cellar beneath the building, and it was equipped with a hand ring set into a depression that made the ring flush with the floor. But a hasp and padlock had been added, keeping the trap door firmly locked, and it was this contrivance that had spilled Matt. Sheriff Morts had skirted the trap door when he'd herded Matt along this same corridor earlier that night.

"Fine place for a padlock!" Matt muttered angrily.

And then he was gripped by a great curiosity and a nebulous suspicion. He'd been in this jail as a boy. He'd come here with Big Buck Abbott when his father had business with the law. He'd seen this same trap door yawning open in those by-gone days, and he'd been told that it led to a dark cellar into which refractory prisoners were put for solitary confinement. With a boy's practicality, he'd wanted to know what kept such prisoners confined, since there was no lock on the door.

"Sheriff hauls out the ladder after he puts a man down there," his father had explained gruffly. "No lock needed since an hombre can't climb out."

But now there was a lock. Why? Was there a prisoner against whom extra precautions had to be taken? Matt felt along the key ring, felt until he found the only small key, and when he inserted it into the padlock, the device flew open. Hauling at the trap door, Matt peered down into the black depth.

"About time you were fetching supper!" a voice bellowed from below. "Ain't it enough, keeping a man penned up in the dark like he was a blasted gopher, without starving him, too!" There followed a long litany of profanity that was almost beautiful in its thoroughness. It bespoke a rough life and a lurid tongue, and a fine art developed through the years. There was only one man on this range who could cuss like that, Matt knew.

"*Hassayampa!*" Matt called joyfully.

"Eh? You ain't the sheriff?"

"Here, can you grab hold of my hand? It's me—Matt Abbott."

Fingers closed over fingers; Matt hauled hard, and the head and shoulders of Hassayampa Joe Harmon appeared dimly above the floor and then the oldster was in the corridor.

"Matt!" he cried, seeking the younger man's hand in the darkness and pumping it heartily. "You're a sight for sore eyes, even if I can hardly see you. Say, you filled out mighty nice. Here to side your old pard? Right?"

"Right," Matt answered. "Pure luck put me on the trail—pure luck and remembering that this trap door never used to be locked. A lot of things are clear now. You're supposed to have escaped from this jail."

"I ain't been doing those things they've tacked onto my name," Hassayampa protested. "I got considerably riled when Big Buck put your cousin Chris in as manager of the ranch, and I did some saloon talking, Matt, but I've never bothered the Triangle none. Somebody stoled that dappled hoss of mine and has been using it."

"They're still using it, and the sign says that the sheriff and probably that side-kick of his, Sig Lannigan, have been putting the owlhoot brand on you," Matt informed him. "They locked you up below, made it look like you'd escaped, and that really put you in a bad light. Then, with you under lock and key, they've kept

using your horse. You were slated to be a gone gosling, Yampa, or so I'd guess.

"Once this game played itself out, they likely aimed to take you out somewhere, put a bullet in you, and then come dragging your carcass home to prove they'd laid you by the heels. It was mighty slick figuring. Now I savvy why the sheriff's been keeping his jail empty. He didn't want anybody around who might hear you and start wondering if you made a ruckus down below."

Hassayampa growled deep in his throat. "Lead medicine 'll cure those two!"

"It won't be as simple as that," Matt said. "Once I take you out of here, you become just exactly what the town figures you to be—an escaped prisoner. We've got to lay a trap for that pair that will show up this scheme of theirs. But the first thing is to get out of this building."

Outside, Cynthia whistled softly, urgently.

"The sheriff!" Matt whispered, and flattened himself against the nearest cell door. "He's coming back! Quiet, Yampa!"

Grasping the key ring tighter, for it was the only weapon he had, Matt waited tensely. It would never do for the pair of them to be discovered now, and there wasn't time for Hassayampa to get back into the cellar and Matt into his cell, not when boots were slogging up the steps leading into the building.

The door that separated the cell corridor from the office was slightly

ajar, and Matt saw the light beyond brighten as someone turned up the lamp that had been left burning on the desk. Two men had entered, and one of them—Sig Lannigan—said:

"I wanted to get you out of the Ace High and away from Chris Abbott to do our talking, and this place is as good as any. What do you think of what Chris had to say?"

"You're sure Chris is right?" This from Bill Morts.

"He saw that hobo when you herded him through the Ace High," Lannigan observed. "He had a good look at him, and Chris and Matt Abbott are some sort of distant cousins. Sure, he's right if he says your hobo is Matt Abbott. At least he's so positive that he's considerably worried. Big Buck Abbott and his son never cared much for each other; Buck held it against the kid because Matt wasn't man-sized. But just the same, Chris is afraid that Big Buck has sent Matt here to check on him."

"Matt was pretty fond of Hassayampa Joe Harmon when Matt was a kid, Sig. Used to follow Yampa around like a shadow. Supposing Matt's here because he heard that Hassayampa was in trouble? Have you thought of that?"

Beside Matt, Hassayampa was stiffening with anger. Matt put a restraining hand upon Yampa's arm. Beyond the door, Lannigan was evidently doing some heavy thinking, for there was a moment of silence. Then:

"No, it's Chris that fetched Matt

Abbott here. He must have come in on a freight so's he could work undercover. But remember that we caught him in my office. Only one thing was missing from my desk, Bill. Those I.O.U.s I've held against Chris. I found some ashes and charred papers in my wastebasket. My guess is that Matt Abbott heard that Chris had been playing into our hands, and Matt came here to get Chris out of a tight. Matt likely has no reason to love Chris, but he's an Abbott, and he'd want to spike anything that might mean harm to the Triangle A."

The sheriff said, "All I know is that we've got Matt Abbott locked up, Hassayampa Harmon on ice, and Chris Abbott excited enough to kick over the apple cart. Things could shape to a showdown mighty fast. What's next?"

Another moment of silence. "It took a fixed deck to get Chris lined up with us at first, but he's just as crooked as we are," Lannigan said. "We've rustled Triangle A stock and hung the blame on Hassayampa, and that was Chris' own idea. But Chris is yellow, and he'd sell us out if it meant saving his own skin. Our chore is to get him in so deep we'll have him over a barrel for keeps. So far me and you have took turns riding Hassayampa's dappled horse and wearing a mask and slicker. But Chris is big enough to play the part, too. And tonight he's going to do it! We'll tell him it's time he took the same chances we've been taking. Do you see what I've got schemed, Bill? We'll head up into the Tularuls and stop that south-bound stagecoach that hits Abbotts-

ville tomorrow morning. And Chris will do the stopping."

"But when Chris sees who's aboard he'll turn to water."

"We'll be back in the bushes, out of sight but handy enough to give Chris some Dutch courage," Lannigan said. "When the stage is stopped, one of us will plant a bullet in the passenger. See what it will mean? Chris will be neck-deep in that killing, even if he doesn't throw the lead. And we'll have him where we want him from there on out."

"In fact, there'll be no further need of trading on Hassayampa's name, so we'll give old Yampa his needings and Abbottsville's brave sheriff will have the glory of putting an end to the outlaw scare. Matt Abbott can get shot trying to escape. How were we to know that the hobo who hit town was Big Buck's son? And that will make Chris the sole heir to the Triangle A."

"It's just about perfect," Morts decided. "This rustling and stage-coach stopping has been penny ante, but tonight's deal should put the real stake in our laps—the Triangle A." The lamplight dimmed beyond the doorway as the wick was turned down. "We'd better be hitting the trail fast if we're going to get up into the Tularuls in time to stop that stage. Chris will likely still be at the Ace High, and we can switch him over to Hassayampa's dappled horse on the way north."

The outer door opened as the two prepared to depart, and Morts said then: "Just one more thing, Sig. Are you plumb sure that Chris didn't

see that telegram or get any other kind of message?"

"Not a chance," Lannigan assured him. "Chris was deep in a game at my place the night that kid telegraph operator came in with the message. I took the wire and told the kid I'd deliver it to Chris between hands. That wire is still in my pocket. And if Chris had gotten any other kind of message, we'd have heard about it. He'd be a heap more worried than he is over finding Matt Abbott in town."

"Good!" Bill Morts said.

"No, Chris hasn't got the faintest notion that Big Buck Abbott is due here by tomorrow morning's stage to pay him a visit," Lannigan added as they closed the door behind them. "And Chris will be even more surprised when Big Buck steps out of that stage in the Tularuls to stop a bullet. The Triangle A is as good as ours, Bill."

IV

Many times since he'd returned to Abbottsville, Matt had wished that he'd fetched a gun along, but his need was never so acute as at this moment when Sheriff Bill Morts and Sig Lannigan made their departure from the jail building.

For now Matt knew the full extent of their devilish scheming, seeing the shape of it crystal clear, and he knew that he had to stop them. Big Buck Abbott was coming in on the stage that would be threading through the Tularul Hills tonight. Big Buck Abbott was slated to be bushwhacked, and when he died, Lannigan and Morts stood to take over the Triangle,

for they'd already enmeshed Chris Abbott in their net and would tangle him deeper before the sun rose. Then there was Hassayampa Joe Harmon who was to have been the scapegoat when the sign was right. Hassayampa would soon be safely out of this building, but another man stood in danger now—and that man was Matt Abbott's father.

Thus a last chore remained for Matt, and he went quickly to the sheriff's desk and began pawing through it in search of a gun. He didn't take time to think that he and his father had been estranged all of his life. He remembered instead that Doc McCall had argued that Buck Abbott had long ago given up his foolish dislike for his son but was too stubborn to admit it. And now that Matt stopped to reflect, he hadn't given Big Buck much of a chance in recent years to show where his heart lay. He'd kept out of the old man's life, and maybe Buck hadn't understood why that had been. Maybe that was why Buck had chosen Chris Abbott for the managership of the Triangle.

And so, with Big Buck Abbott's life in danger, Matt suddenly saw his father with greater clarity than ever before, but all the while his fingers were feverishly busy at the desk, and he finally found a drawer with guns that had probably been taken from drunken cowpokes who had never called for them. Helping himself to one and making sure it was loaded, Matt passed another to Hassayampa. Then they were hurrying out of the jail building, and Cynthia came from around a corner to dart toward them.

"Hassayampa!" she cried in astonished recognition.

"Yes," Matt said grimly. "He's been a prisoner all the time—down in the cellar. Morts only made it look like Joe had escaped. That should tell you all you need to know. There isn't much time for talking. Where can we find fast horses?"

"What is it?" Cynthia said. "Where are you going?"

But Matt had to remember that Chris Abbott would also be at the end of that trail, the man for whom Cynthia had dared to rob Sig Lannigan's office.

"I'm mighty beholden to you for the sheriff's keys," he told her. "But you can't ride this trail with me, girl. There'll be a bullet chore at the end of it."

"Hitchrails are crowded," Hassayampa observed. "We'll either have to turn hoss thief or lose a lot of time."

"That's right," Matt agreed and crossed over to the nearest saloon. Running a judicious eye over the racked saddlers, he picked one that looked long on speed and bottom and swung to the saddle just as Yampa, making a like choice, arose. Cynthia was at Matt's elbow, clamorous with questions, but now a knot of cowpokes had barged out of the saloon's batwings, and one sent up a wild shout.

"*Hassayampa Harmon!*" he cried. "Stealing a horse right here in town!"

Cynthia must have sensed what was coming, for she suddenly flung herself to one side. Matt was jerk-

ing at the tie rope and Hassayampa had already freed his mount. The two wheeled their stolen saddlers as the powder began to burn. Those cowpokes were sober enough to remember that the streets were thronged tonight, and that was the fugitives' salvation. With bullets pelting about them, they went roaring up the street until Matt angled between two buildings and up an inky alleyway. Hassayampa hard after him.

"Had a look at the Ace High's hitchrail as we passed it," Yampa shouted. "I know Lannigan's private saddler and Morts' and Chris Abbott's when I see 'em. None of 'em there. While we was hunting us guns and palavering with the girl, they made time."

"And we're going to have half the town at our heels," Matt said grimly. "You've had a murder pinned on you as of earlier tonight, old-timer. A stage driver who stopped owhoot lead. We'd better get for cover."

To the north of Abbottsville, a wooden bridge spanned a turbulent creek that cut from west to east, and as they neared it Matt spilled from his saddle and dragged his horse beneath the wooden span. Hassayampa followed his example and the two stood knee-deep in water, their hands tight over the horses' nostrils, and they were this way when the planking rumbled above them as irate townsmen took the trail.

"They'll find we've fooled them," Matt whispered. "But maybe they'll run themselves in circles before they do."

They waited a few more minutes

to make sure that a second posse wasn't following, and those minutes fired Matt with impatience for they were putting Sig Lannigan and Bill Morts and Chris Abbott that much farther ahead. But the trio would have to stop somewhere to get Hassayampa's dappled horse which they apparently kept hidden out in the broken country to the north. When Matt and Hassayampa finally came cautiously across the bridge, they found themselves unchallenged, and Matt pressed hard after that.

A moon was just beginning to show itself over the eastern hills, and it climbed steadily as the next few hours brought the massive Tularuls looming closer and closer. Somewhere in the vastness of the night were the three who were riding to do murder, and somewhere, too, was the posse that sought Hassayampa and Matt. Death ahead of them, and death to dog their heels; but always Matt was remembering that stagecoach that was wending down out of the north, the stagecoach and its passenger who was coming unsuspectingly to a gunsmoke rendezvous.

There was no knowing just where Chris Abbott, in the guise of Hassayampa Harmon, would strike at the stage. Finding the stage road, the fugitives could only parallel it, hoping to come upon the three they sought. But Matt, his mind racing ahead, saw the shape of a new plan.

"You remember this country better than I do, Yampa," he said. "The road circles down out of the hills, I know, but is there any way I can cut overland and meet the stage?"

I'd like to be aboard it when it's stopped."

Hassayampa pointed due north. "See yonder ridge that's humped like a hoss takin' the morning kinks out of hisself? Climb up that and drop down the other side, and you'll hit the road which has to make a wide circle to save itself that climb. But you'll have to go it alone, boy. This hoss has gone lame on me."

So 'intent had Matt been on the trail ahead that he hadn't noticed that Hassayampa had lately been hard put to keep up with him.

"You keep paralleling the road, old-timer," he said. "I'll take the short cut. Between us we'll maybe get our friends sewed up and vent that owlhoot brand they've put on you."

Then Matt was urging his mount up the ridge, climbing through timber that thinned as he made his ascent. Thankful for the full moonlight that now drenched the land, he reached the crest at long last to look down upon silvered pine tops below him. Now he began descending, and that was even riskier than climbing; but at last he came into the black chaos of the pine and through it to where the road ran silver bright in the moonlight.

No sign of the stage. Fearful that he'd planned in vain, Matt walked his horse, heading south along the road. If the stage were behind him, it would overtake him before long. If it were ahead, then the play was up to Hassayampa. So Matt reasoned, and was hard put to restrain himself from lifting the jaded mount to a gallop as anxiety ate at him.

And then, borne on the night breeze, came the jingle of harness chains, the creak of thoroughbraces, the drum beat of twenty-four hoofs.

Matt was sitting his saddle there in the moonlight when the stage rounded a bend, roaring down out of the north, and the driver hauled hard on the reins and reached for his shotgun at the same time. He was new, this driver, a man picked to replace the one who'd died in Abbottsville tonight from outlaw lead, and Matt said quickly:

"This is no holdup! You see no gun in my hand, do you? Let me aboard."

Without waiting for a reply, Matt came out of his saddle, leaving the horse to find its way back to Abbottsville, and ran to the coach to clamber inside. The utter lack of menace in his attitude must have reassured the driver, for the man sent the stage lurching forward with a crack of his whip.

There was only one lone passenger in this coach, and he filled a corner of a seat to fullness, for he was big, iron-gray Buck Abbott.

"Matt!" he exclaimed. "I thought it was you when I heard your voice, but I couldn't believe it. What in thunder are you doing here?"

"Clearing a man's name," Matt said. "This stage will be stopped mighty soon. The man who'll stop it will be about Hassayampa Joe Harmon's build, and he'll be riding Yampa's horse, but he won't be Yampa. Get your gun ready, dad. But no matter what happens, don't climb out of this stage!"



Big Buck snorted. "I don't know what fetched you here and put you on the track of the truth, but any idiot knows that Hassayampa Joe hasn't been behind the trouble on this range. That's what's bringing me down to the Triangle. Chris has been writing me a lot of crazy nonsense about Hassayampa going bronc."

"That makes us the only two people in the world who kept complete faith with Hassayampa Joe," Matt told his father.

"Son," Big Buck said, his voice softer, "it seems that there's a mighty lot that you and I have got to talk over. Maybe—"

But that was when the shot sounded, and the stage came to a bone-jolting stop; for a masked, slicker-clad figure, sitting the saddle of a dappled horse, had emerged from the bushes, a gun in his hand. And with the stage driver caught unawares and clawing at the sky, the masked man said: "You passengers—unload and empty your pockets."

Matt Abbott came out of the stage, but he came with his gun in his hand and blazing, and his bullets were aimed not at the masked man

but at the bushes behind the fellow, for that, Matt knew, was where the real menace lay. His fire raking the bushes, Matt saw big Sig Lannigan jack-in-the-box into view, a gun in his hand and a snarl on his face, and Lannigan's lead ripped along Matt's thigh, bringing him to one knee.

Beyond Lannigan, Sheriff Bill Morts was also exposing himself, shooting at the same time. But Matt concentrated on the Ace High owner, catching the man in his sights, and he saw Lannigan take a stumbling step forward and then sprawl in a heap. But now there was a roar of rage behind Matt, and Big Buck Abbott was spilling from the stage, a gun in his hand. And Chris Abbott, up there on the horse, took one startled look and wheeled Hassayampa's rearing, bullet-panicked mount, and began a fast gallop away.

Now the tide was completely turned. Big Buck was making his gun count, and Sheriff Bill Morts went down beneath the withering blast of it, but before he fell, the sheriff got a bullet into Matt, high in the shoulder. The stage driver, emboldened, had grasped his shotgun and was emptying it at the only target that was left. Chris Abbott, flinging up his slicker-clad arms, was blown from his saddle.

But now that there should have been silence there was a new tumult, for a score of horsemen came thundering along the road from the south, and in that group was Hassayampa Harmon, and townsmen from Abbottsville—those same men who'd taken Hassayampa and Matt's trail

—and Cynthia McCall was riding with them, too. When he saw her, Matt staggered toward Hassayampa, who was spilling from his saddle, and gasped: "Chris . . . up the road . . . dead. Quick, get that slicker and mask off him . . . make up some cock-and-bull story about him siding us . . . Cynthia mustn't know . . ."

Matt had meant it to be a whisper, intended only for Hassayampa, but his voice seemed to be a roar in his own ears. Then he felt Hassayampa's hands upon him, but that was the last he knew, for he was falling into a deep, swirling darkness. . . .

And so Matt Abbott found himself in bed in Doc McCall's cottage when he came to consciousness, reeking of medicine and stiff with bandages. There was bright sunlight in the room, and he had to be told how the posse that had caught up with Hassayampa Joe had had to listen to Yampa's story because Cynthia had ridden with the posse, and she was there to testify that Yampa had indeed been a prisoner in the Abbottsville jail's cellar at the very time others had ridden the oldster's horse.

It was Cynthia who told Matt these things, and because her tale admitted a full knowledge of all that had happened, Matt said: "Then you

know the truth about Chris. I wanted to keep that from you. But it was Chris' idea to frame Yampa in the first place. Chris reaped what he sowed."

"I know," she said and colored. "And I can see now what you were thinking. You were wrong, Matt. It was Big Buck Abbott I was trying to protect. You see, he's had a pride in his family, even in such remoté members as Chris Abbott. I didn't want Buck ever to find out that while Chris was big, he was pretty weak stuff—so weak that he let himself be trimmed at the Ace High. That's why I wanted those I.O.U.'s destroyed. But Buck knows the truth now, too, and it hasn't mattered so very much."

"Dad's here?" Matt questioned.

"Him and Hassayampa; they're both waiting to see you. And, Matt . . . Big Buck gave father a check this morning—a check for twice the amount he paid dad twenty-four years ago. Big Buck figures that he owes dad for delivering him a man and a half into the family. And there's the managership of the Triangle waiting for you, if you want it."

Matt smiled. "That would mean I'd be around a lot, Cyn."

She smiled, too, and colored again. "I'd like that fine, Matt," she said. "I'd like that just fine."

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!

EL COYOTE PLAYS PANNY-WEENKLE

by S. OMAR BARKER

Making a fool out of the High Shereef was child's play for El Coyote—but this time he had to make sure he had plenty of witnesses



THE girl's bare brown heels kicked urgently, trying in vain to make the gray burro hurry. As feminine adornment, the clothes she wore were nothing to brag about: a two-

piece suit, consisting of a pair of bibless overalls wash-faded to the sickly hue of skimmed milk, and a similarly faded checkerboard shirt, once red and black. Its tail was out,

showing irregular notches where pieces had been cut away for patches. A torn place over one shoulder revealed velvety skin as brown as a piñon nut.

Stretched out under a gnarled old apple tree, Mariano Luján heard the small thud of the burro's hoofs approaching and raised himself cautiously on one elbow to look. His caution did not concern the arrival of a visitor so much as his own touchy business of the moment. Using a couple of empty pepper cans whose slide openings he could easily shuttle open or closed with a push of his thumb, Mariano was engaged in the tricky job of catching live yellow jackets for future deviltry.

These vicious wasps with tiger-striped bodies often nest in the ground, buzzing in and out through a hole no bigger than a man's finger. By holding an open pepper can tight over the hole until he heard a buzz inside, Mariano had succeeded in catching quite a batch. He was transferring his latest prisoner to a larger can when the brown girl on the gray burro rode up.

Even through the ancient lady's veil over his head, Mariano saw how pretty she was. Sweetness and youth were in the round-chinned brown oval of her face, the brightness of her big black eyes, and the sheen of loose-tumbled black hair gleaming like a raven's wing in the sun. It had been a year or so since Mariano had last seen this particular second cousin once removed. In that time Carmelita Martínez had abruptly burgeoned from a brawling brown brat into a luscious but demure

brunette. That was the way with these Spanish girls—a wart one day, a woman the next. Well, at least she was still child enough to come to visit her old bachelor cousin a-straddle of a burro and without dressing up.

"Wait me there, *primita!*" he called out before she came too close. "So the bees don't stang you!"

But Carmelita seemed to be in a hurry. She slipped lightly off her burro and had started to crawl under the fence when a yellow jacket cruising in an angry circle made a tail-gun landing on the bare skin showing through her torn shirt.

"*Ay-yai-yai!*" she yelped shrilly. "Cousin Coyote, what's the big ideas makin' monkey with the bees' nest?"

The lean, leathery *vaquero* got up quickly and hurried over to the fence. He took the girl's arm and hustled her away. Once out of likely range of the yellow jackets, he untied the veil from around his face, revealing coffee-colored features as sharp as a coyote's. At the water trough he scooped up a dab of mud and daubed it on the girl's bee sting. His white teeth showed in a grin.

"She's gonna be some horses race in Rociada nex' week." He winked. "Maybe El Coyote turn loose a few yellow jackets an' make leetle fon, eh?"

But the girl did not smile. She gouged nervously at the soft mud around the water trough with a bare big toe and kept her head down. She spoke timidly, in a troubled voice.

"*Primo mio,*" she stammered, "I come to ask your advice."

"Aha!" chuckled Mariano. "Already you are in love, eh? On that I geeve advice queeck. If he is a man that ride good saddle and knows how to esteal a calf weethout getting ketched—marry heem!"

"This is not a joke, cousin," said the *muchacha* soberly. "It concerns Don Eufrazio Gallegos, the high shereef!"

"That *panzón!* Already he got a wife even more fat than heem—an' two t'ree dozen keeds!"

"Oh, he don't want to married me!" declared Carmelita. "But he make papa the offer that I go to work at his house in town and help take care the keeds. Five dollar a week, weeth rooms and board for free. Three times we tell him no. But today he's comin' weeth the beeg car, and I am afraid papa gonna tell him yes."

Mariano shrugged his slim shoulders.

"The high shereef is a peeg," he said thoughtfully, "but if he pay you good wages, whassamatta you won't went? If I got my esmart cousin livin' in shereef's house, sometimes you can geeve El Coyote informations that make more easy to twist heem the tail, eh?"

Carmelita's dark face flushed and she gazed even more intently at the bare big toe of one foot gouging mud up on the other. She shook her head vigorously.

"No, *primo!*" she protested earnestly. "That fat shereef is not a peeg! He is a wolf! Joost from the look on his eye, I got afraid he

tried to make love weeth me! Besides I will get homeseeck!"

Mariano laughed. "Last week you are a leetle small *niña* needin' the nose wipe. Now already you are afraid somebody gonna make eyes at you! In those cases, when the beeg *panzón* arrives, joost told him to go paddle his peppers!"

Carmelita's big eyes looked up appealingly. "But my papa say he got us where the hairs are too short—because of Nacio and the mules!"

"Mules? What mules are this?"

"The team of *machos* papa find on hees pasture the day behind yesterday! Papa theenk those are the mules of Shereef Gallegos. He theenk if I don't took those job, maybe the shereef want to put papa and Nacio to the jail for estealing them!"

"I don't know before that your papa got crazy!" said Mariano sternly. "For why he didn't joost turned the mules out weeth a kick on the tail?"

"Thass what papa want, but that Nacio—he's *muy bravo*. He say no, papa's horses are too poor this spreeng. For why we don't use this mules to cultivation the fields? If the shereef don't like, maybe next time he kept his *machos* at home. On addition to that, this mules got too many brands—maybe don't belongs to the shereef, anyhow! But today is coming the shereef an' I got scared!"

A foxy gleam come in Mariano's eye. "That Nacio Archuleta—you like heem too much, eh?"

Carmelita forgot her anxiety long enough to blush and giggle.

"As far as that concerns, he's my boy frand! Thass why I got scared they took him to jail!"

"Prima," Mariano grinned, patting her shoulder, "I theenk the beeg shereef tried to play you some treecks. But maybe he forgot you are a kinfolks of El Señor Coyote! Go home queeck now, an' tell Nacio and your papa to heetch up this mules for some work in the field. Don't tell somebody—but when the fat shereef comes, maybe he's gonna found some birds in the boosh!"

Carmelita's mother, Dona Pacífica Martínez, was short-sighted. When the big red automobile of Sheriff Eufracio Gallegos came bouncing in sight on the rough, crooked road up Cañada Encinosa, she was spreading diapers out to dry on the tops of a low scrub oak thicket a few yards from the house.

Don Eufracio, all fancied up in a red silk shirt, was alone in the car. He braked to a stop as if one inch more would have run it over a cliff, climbed out and came pudgy-waddling over to her, bowing and smiling like a bullfighter to a princess.

"Buenas tardes, estimada señora!" He swung his big sombrero low, and spoke in Spanish. "I kiss your hand!"

Dona Pacífica spread out another diaper without looking up, then pointed to a limp-tailed pig backed up against a nearby post scratching itself.

"There!" she said laconically. "If you want to kiss something, señor."

Except for a slight quiver of the

paunch, Don Eufracio ignored the insult.

"I am a very busy man, señora. But I do your daughter the honor of coming after her myself. Five dollars a week is very generous pay for an inexperienced *moza*. Is she ready to go?"

Doña Pacífica flipped another diaper onto a bush.

"Go, fat one," she said, "and teach your grandmother to suck eggs."

Don Eufracio's lard-layered middle quivered violently, his black mustache bristled, his face reddened and his piggy eyes glittered. He waved a pudgy arm toward the nearby field where a slim brown boy was drag-harrowing with a team of big strong mules, with an older man sitting on the ditch bank "helping him."

"Even though I am the high shereef, woman, I am a man of kind heart," he rumbled threateningly. "I do not wish to arrest the family of one of my wife's servants—a *muchacha simpática* like Señorita Carmelita—for stealing mules!"

This time Doña Pacífica turned to look at him. She smiled sweetly, despite three missing teeth.

"Mr. Sheriff," she said, "you are a fine, handsome, beautiful, important son of a pig. Go root with your own kind!"

With a grunt of rage, Don Eufracio waddled to her side and seized her by the arm.

"Woman," he began, "I am the high shereef! I will—"

He broke off suddenly, batting his piggy eyes. Though not a breath of

wind stirred, one of the diapers outspread on the low oak bushes was definitely moving around and around. As the startled sheriff stared, it suddenly changed direction and circled back the other way.

"*Válgame diós, woman!*" Don Eufracio gulped. "That bush! It moves!"

Doña Pacífica spat unconcernedly. "Oh, that's just my friend, the Devil," she said calmly. "Did you not know I am a witch? Look—I will tell him to stop! *Diablo mío, padre de mal, quédate quieto en el encinal!*"

Instantly the moving diaper stopped. The Sheriff's small eyes blinked, his mouth stood open. He backed away a couple of steps and looked uneasily toward his car. Officially he knew that witches no longer existed, but personally, as one of a traditionally superstitious people, he wasn't so sure. Maybe if Doña Pacífica had not giggled, he would have retreated to his car and driven away. But hers certainly wasn't a witchlike laugh.

The fat sheriff rested his hand on the gold-inlaid ivory butt of his six-shooter, and advanced cautiously.

Suddenly, from almost at his feet there came a sound like the yappy snarling of a pair of fighting coyotes, and in the instant that he stepped back, the slim, agile figure of Mariano Luján popped up in the scrub oak. Rising so suddenly, Mariano inadvertently came up with a damp diaper draped on the crown of his black hat.

"Hallo, shereef!" he grinned. "Whass those you tell about estealing mules?"

The quick scowl on Don Eufracio's face changed to guttural, derisive laughter: "Ho-ho! What doing the brave Señor Coyote weeth wet pants of baby on hees hat?"

With a half-sheepish look on his lean face, Mariano removed the diaper, spread it on a bush, and came on out.

The sheriff's bulging belt line continued to joggle up and down with gusty grunts of laughter: "The Devil, eh? Those treecks don't fooled the high shereef, *chivo!*"

"Look like you are too esmart for a poor *paisano*, Señor Shereef," acknowledged Mariano, a sickly sound of humility in his tone. "It



**TOPS FOR
QUALITY**

is a fine job you offer to my prima, Carmelita. But as you know, she is a girl of the country. In town she will get too homeseecks! You are so kind of the heart, Señor Shereef—we beg that your highly estimated wife find some other girl for a *moza de casa!*”

Sheriff Gallegos preened his mustache importantly. “In the county there are a hundred *muchachas* that like to took thees job. But Carmelita is the only one my wife theenk joost suitables.”

“If your wife want the real-forsure, most hootzy-tootzy housemaid in the county, shereef, for why you don’t took me?”

“*Zut!*” shrugged Don Eufracio in disgust. He turned to Doña Pacífica. “We make no more foolish talk! Where is the *moza?*”

“*Un momento,*” interposed El Coyote. “This are free country. You cannot take her if she don’t want to went!”

“Thass right, *chivo,*” the sheriff admitted. “But in those cases, I don’t accept no excuses concerning the steal of my mules!” He motioned toward the field where the slim boy, now followed along by a slim brown girl in her bare feet, continued to harrow the field while Papa Martínez still sat on the ditch bank. “I tell you my wife gonna poosh me the nose if I don’t brought her a *moza* to work in the house. Does that Carmelita gonna went, otherwise I arrest her papa—also that Nacio for estealin’ the *machos?*”

“You see, *primo,*” sighed Doña Pacífica. “He’s got us where the hairs ees too short!”

“*Mira, panzón,*” Mariano said, “This mules got many brands. How you gonna proof they are yours?”

“Moreover from being the son of a burro, *chivo,*” snorted the sheriff, “you are also a fool. Don’t you theenk I know my own mules when they see me?” With the stride of authority he pudgy-waddled out into the field. “*Oye, muchacho!*” he yelled at Nacio. “Drive the mules over here!”

“Come drive them yourself!” Nacio yelled back at him and went on harrowing.

Puffing and snorting, Sheriff Gallegos headed toward him across the plowed field. At his side Mariano Luján took a gleaming twenty-dollar gold piece from his pocket and tossed it from one hand to the other.

“If they are your mules, Honorable Shereef,” he suggested suavely, “you will know how to drive them. I joost bet you twenty bocks you cannot even drive them one time across the field weethout ronaway!”

Money was something that never failed to catch the eye of Don Eufracio Gallegos. At a motion from Mariano, Nacio stopped the team. The sheriff turned with a triumphant grin to Mariano.

“Twenty bocks, eh?” he chortled. “Geeve me those reins, *muchacho,*” he ordered. “I show you how to drive my own mules like somebody’s beezness!”

“They are hard of the mouth, shereef,” warned Nacio.

“You don’t told me! Look—I estand on the harrow like thees! I wrap those reins on half-way heetch

around my wreest like that! Then I drive the mules like—”

As Mariano stepped back quickly from close to the flank of the near mule, suddenly the placid-looking jackass kicked, snorted, took the bit in his teeth and tore out across the field. For the first two jumps his team mate held back, then one of the angry yellow jackets released from Mariano's pepper box found a tender spot in his flank too, and the race was on. With their hard tails wildly switching, both mules “took to the wild bunch” in a rising cloud of dust.

At the first lunge the paunchy sheriff jumped off the harrow. Then the harrow hit a rock, the baling-wire clevis broke and the harrow stopped. But not the Honorable High Shereef. The half hitch of reins around his wrist had jerked tight and he couldn't let go. Neither could his baloney-built legs keep up with the runaway's speed. His toe hit a clod and down he went. Nacio had been right about those mules having hard mouths. They dragged Don Eufrazio's two hundred odd pounds like so much tumbleweed. Dust fogged out at the bottoms of the sheriff's fancy pants as the dry clods fed in at his waist.

Nacio laughed. Doña Pacífica's every-other-tooth mouth spread in a grin of delight from ear to ear. Mariano raised his sharp chin and howled like a coyote, and even Papa Martínez, over on the ditch bank, turned his hitherto motionless head to watch.

But the brown girl looked sober and badly frightened.

Halfway across the field the sheriff finally jolted loose from the reins, but the mules didn't stop. Clearing the sagging wire gate like a pair of trained fox hunters, they took out down the road, headed for home, hell, or high water.

“Gee Creesmis!” sighed Carmelita. “Now he's gonna be mad weeth us!” Then suddenly she giggled. “Did you saw how those dust was smokin' out from hees pants, *primo?*”

Mariano picked up the sheriff's hat and dusted it off against his leg. His grin faded into a look of anxiety as he saw the fat sheriff with gun in hand stop to wait for them at the gate.

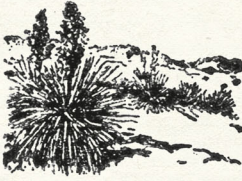
“Look like thees time El Coyote don't did so good!” He shrugged ruefully. “Lotsa fon but no fineesh! More better you all run hide in the booshes, while I go make face to the music!”

“No!” said Nacio. “Let the women run hide! I will poosh that fat nose!”

Carmelita linked her arm through his. “You see, *primo?*” she reminded Mariano. “Didn't I told you Nacio is *muy bravo!*”

“I will poosh heem the nose!” repeated Nacio. “If he put me to the jail, I will keeck down the walls! If he hang me, I will bost the rope!”

“No, *querido!*” protested Carmelita anxiously. “Before I let heem put you and my papa to jail, I will took the job. If he try to make love weeth me, I will keeck him the sheens! In the house of Gallegos I will make like she-wildcat till the



Señora will send me home! Already I am cause too much troubles to ever'body!"

She broke away suddenly and ran, her bare brown feet flashing over the clods, to where Sheriff Gallegos stood waiting. Nacio started to run after her, but Mariano grabbed his shirt tail.

"Take easy, *hijo!*" he advised. "The coyote pup don't can lick the bulldog weeth jomp down his throat!"

"That girl!" complained Doña Pacífica. "For why she didn't talked this way on the first place an' save all this worries to her papa?"

It didn't look to Mariano as if Papa Martínez, still sitting motionless on the grassy ditch bank, was particularly worried about anything, but he didn't mention it. Still restraining Nacio by the shirt tail, he approached the fat sheriff warily. After stopping to speak briefly to Don Eufracio, Carmelita had run on into the house. Now Doña Pacífica, in response to the squalling of a baby somewhere inside, jerked down the wire gate and hurried after her.

"Hallo, shereef," Mariano greeted him with what looked like great humility and considerable fear, handing him his hat. "Look like you

make monkey of El Señor Coyote thees time, eh?"

Don Eufracio jerked the sombrero out of his hand, but his angry grunt changed quickly to a smirk of triumph when he perceived Mariano's humble, frightened manner.

"The *muchacha* has went to pack her suitcase," he announced triumphantly. "She will make for my wife a very good *moza!*" He preened his dusty mustache. "*El chivo Coyote* make too smart for his breech, eh?"

Mariano grinned sheepishly. "Even the coyote sometime get hees tail tweested," he acknowledged with a shrug.

"*Mira, panzón!*" broke out Nacio belligerently, "I'm gonna poosh you the nose! I'm gonna—"

But once more Mariano's shirt tail grip restrained him.

Mariano tossed the gold double eagle in his free hand, but said nothing about collecting his bet.

"Come, honorable high shereef," he urged politely. "In the keetchen while you wait for *la muchacha* to got ready, you can wash the dust and I will make you some coffee!"

Don Eufracio's piggy eyes studied him a moment suspiciously, then his belly joggled with another triumphant chuckle. It was not every day that he had the smart Señor Coyote eating out of his hand.

Doña Pacífica was in the kitchen spooning bean soup into a fretful brown baby.

"For why you breeng a pig in my house, *primo?*" she complained without rising, but made no further pro-

test. Mariano dipped water into a hand basin for the sheriff to wash in. Nacio stood sullenly at the door. Mariano stirred up the fire, poured water in the black, big-mouthed coffeepot, already two inches deep in soggy grounds, and set it on the stove.

Then, while the sheriff bent noisily over the wash basin, Mariano picked up the lamp-filling funnel from the top of a kerosene can in the corner, pulled out a chair and sat down. He stuck the tin funnel inside the top of his belt in front, leaned back in the chair, tilted his head still farther back, and placed the gold coin he had been fiddling with carefully on his forehead.

Don Eufracio turned from preening his mustache before a cracked mirror to stare at him.

"By wheeskens of the burro, *chivo*," he grunted suspiciously, "what monkey's beezness are those?"

"Oh, joost a leetle game, shereef," said Mariano. "She's call by the name of panny-weenkle. Look!"

Mariano tilted his head slowly forward till the coin slid off. It clanked against the funnel at his belt, but did not drop in.

"*Caramba!* That time I mees heem!" he exclaimed. "Watch, shereef! Thees time more better!"

For the second time the coin slid off his forehead without dropping into the funnel. Don Eufracio's piggy eyes followed its golden glitter avidly. Mariano looked chagrined.

"Once more I try!" he said.

This time he managed to catch the double eagle in the funnel.

"One time out of three!" he bragged. "Thass putty good, *qué no?*"

"Bah!" grunted the fat officer. "I can do better than those myself!"

He shoved Mariano out of the chair, reached for the funnel and stuck it inside the top of his belt.

"Geeve me those dobble iggles!" he commanded.

Mariano looked reluctant.

"Thass putty hard treeck, shereef," he shrugged. "Twenty bocks I bet you, that you cannot do heem two times from three!"

"By wheeskens of the burro, I bet you feefy!" bellowed Don Eufracio. "Geeve mé the coin!"

With apparent reluctance Mariano handed it to him.

"Try heem once for free, joost for practice!" he urged.

With a disdainful grunt Don Eufracio tilted his head far back and carefully placed the coin on his forehead. At that instant Mariano reached for the coffeepot and quickly poured its brownish, lukewarm contents into the funnel.

For a fat man, Sheriff Gallegos stood up fast. For once he seemed unable to find words profane enough to express himself. His double-dumpling face reddened and puffed out like a teased horned toad. He stared down at the spreading wet splotch on his pants in something like horror.

From a nail on the wall Mariano reached down a diaper and held it out to him helpfully.

At that moment the door from another room creaked open, and there stood Carmelita, straw suitcase in hand. She did not see the funnel where it had rolled under the table. All she saw was the spreading wet splotch on the sheriff's trousers, and Mariano handing him a diaper.

"Shame to the high shereef!" cackled Doña Pacífica. "She's a-wet hees pants!"

Sheriff Gallegos looked at the pretty young girl in the doorway, gulped in dismay and tried to cover the damp area with his hands.

Suddenly Carmelita snickered. For a man of the high sheriff's pride and dignity that was the last straw. With a windy sound like the snort of a whipped range bull, he grabbed his hat and lunged out the kitchen door. Stopping only once to shake his fist at them, he hurried out to his car, stepped on the starter and roared away.

From the doorway a high, yapping

coyote howl of derision followed him.

Doña Pacífica wiped tears of mirth from her eyes with the hem of her skirt.

"The stray pig runs back to his pen!" he said.

"But he will come back!" said Carmelita fearfully.

Mariano shrugged. "I don't thought so," he grinned. "He got too much eshame that a purty girl laughs at hees wet pants! Anyhow by the time he get them dry, maybe you an' Nacio already got married!"

Shyly Nacio took the girl's hand.

"You are a good *primo, primo*," Carmelita said gratefully.

"Feedle-my-steecks!" grinned Mariano. "I am El Coyote! Come, Prima Pacífica!" He winked at the older woman. "More better you and me go to the papa. Maybe he like to played some panny-weenkle while waiting for that rabbit to come out hees hole!"

THE END



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



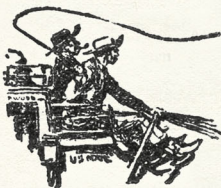
1. ilich
2. yenneche
3. regjig
4. chont
5. tersold

6. nopy
7. utocs
8. acolic
9. lowwil
10. ramlash

11. partrep
12. kerpo
13. velarg
14. yedtup
15. snad

RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING



To the stage drivers of the early days, expert reinsmen who wheeled their six-horse teams across the length and breadth of the West, their whips were the symbol of a proud profession. They regarded them much as a lawman does his badge. Yet only a few used the genuine six-horse whip. Its twenty-foot lash on a five-foot hickory stock was too cumbersome as well as generally unnecessary. Most drivers carried only a twelve-foot buckskin lash on the hickory stock, a whip too short to reach the leaders on a six-horse team but excellent for signaling the wheelers, which was its primary practical use.



Prospectors in the pioneer West perforce did their preliminary mining by frontier hand methods. Sinking a prospect shaft a depth of 8 feet was about all that could be conveniently handled, shoveling the rock and ore to the surface. However, by the use of a simply constructed, homemade windlass, using rope wound on a log drum and a rawhide bucket, two men could readily sink a shaft a hundred feet deep, hand-hoisting the blasted or broken rock and muck from the bottom of the hole.



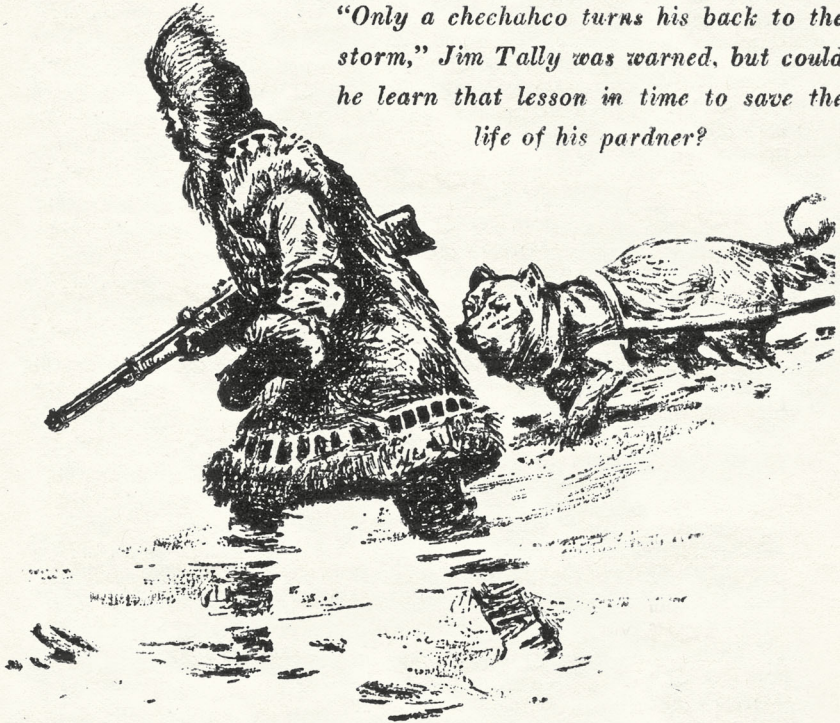
The winter storms that played havoc with cattle on the northern range were seldom so disastrous to their fore-runner on the plains, the buffalo. This was not due so much to the buffalo's superior resistance to cold and freezing weather as it was to his habits in a storm. Unlike cattle which drift before a storm, buffalo *faced* the wind. And they huddled in a compact mass with those on the rim fighting and jostling to get inside the outer ring of animals. The jostling, aggravated by the constant pressure of those inside trying to keep from being ejected from their preferred position, provided sufficient exercise to keep the buffalo warm—or at least to prevent their freezing while the blizzard raged.

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.

BLIZZARD SPAWN

by JOSEPH F. HOOK

"Only a chechahco turns his back to the storm," Jim Tally was warned, but could he learn that lesson in time to save the life of his pardner?



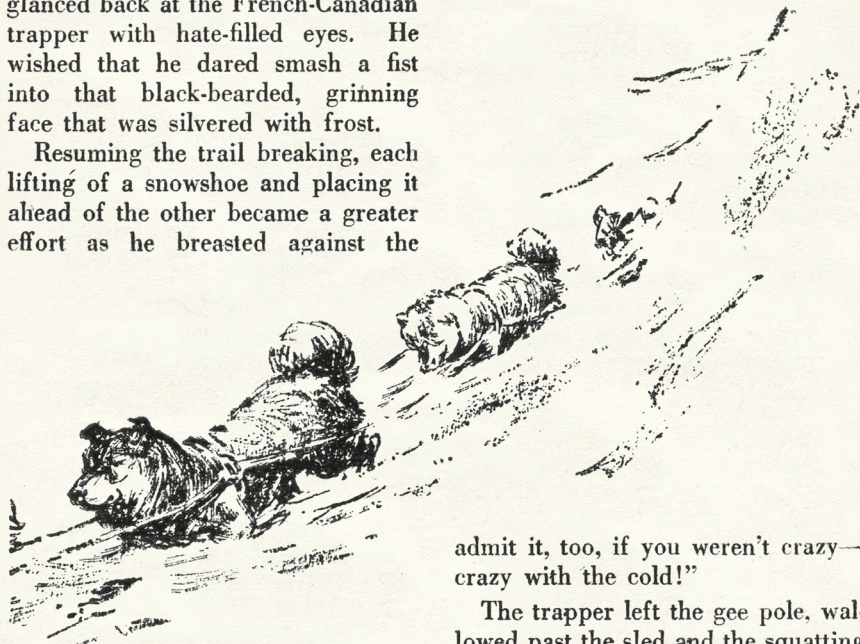
THE blizzard, whipping across the tundra from the Bering Straits, drilled through Jim Tally's parka to the very marrow of his bones. When he turned his head aside, in an effort to protect his face, raw from the constant peppering of ice pellets, he stumbled off the trail, wallowing along, waist deep in the snow.

The sled dogs lay down and whined, waiting for him to continue the arduous task of trail breaking.

"Well, Jeem, what are we waitin' for?" Francois Bacette bellowed from the sled's gee pole. "You want we should freeze to death, mebbe. No? But yes! Allons, enfant, and quit draggin' ze feet."

As Jim regained the trail he glanced back at the French-Canadian trapper with hate-filled eyes. He wished that he dared smash a fist into that black-bearded, grinning face that was silvered with frost.

Resuming the trail breaking, each lifting of a snowshoe and placing it ahead of the other became a greater effort as he breasted against the



thrust of the storm. The wind whipped the powdery snow from each shoe, pushed the leg back as it was lifted, making him stagger. Napoleon, the lead dog, kept close at Jim's heels, taking advantage of what little shelter the slow-moving legs afforded. Francois Bacette's long whip cracked, urging on the dogs. From the scattered patches of spruce came answering cracks as the sub-zero weather split limb crotches and exploded pitch pockets.

After a while young Jim stopped and turned his back to the storm so that it could not beat the words back in his throat.

"Bacette," he shouted. "I won't go ahead in this storm any longer. We're lost, I tell you—lost! You'd

admit it, too, if you weren't crazy— crazy with the cold!"

The trapper left the gee pole, wallowed past the sled and the squatting dogs, came toward Jim Tally with the long whip lash plowing a tiny furrow in the snow. Black eyes peeped out at the lad from under frosted, bushy eyebrows. Purple lips outlined a stubborn mouth. Bacette paused a foot away from Jim, leaning against the storm.

"Only ze chechahco turns his back to ze storm," the trapper taunted. "Ze storm, she is somet'ing to fight. not to run away from. What's ze mattair, Jeem? You afraid, mebbe? No?"

"Yes, I am afraid," the lad whimpered. "And I'm cold—frozen stiff! I want to rest. I—"

The dog whip cracked above his head. "You want I should beat ze fear out of you?" the trapper

shouted. "Mush on, chechahco, or—"

For a moment the two stood facing each other in the welter of stinging ice pellets, a green youth of eighteen, lean, lanky, fair complexioned, and a trapper of forty years' experience, powerful, stocky, with dark, weathered skin.

Then the fear of the storm lessened in the face of Jim's greater fear of this determined man before him. Sullenly, he turned and went on breaking trail, the dogs following. Francois Bacette grasped the gee pole grimly as the sled came alongside him. It was heavily loaded with trapping gear and the stiff carcasses of the trapped animals. The trapper, however, strained at the gee pole, shoving mightily to assist the tired dogs, swinging sled and load this way and that to avoid stumps, righting it by brute strength when a runner left the trail and sank deep in the snow.

Sometimes a verse from a voyageur song cut through the storm. Francois' voice made up in volume what it lacked in harmony. And how Jim Tally hated it! Hated it because it flung a challenge to the world, to the storm; a challenge to his, Jim's, fear. But the dog team liked it, seeming to draw fresh stamina from it and forcing Jim to faster effort.

Finally the trapper called a halt. With surprising tenderness, he plucked the hard-packed snow from between the dogs' toes until forced to resheath his numbed fingers in fur mittens. He kept up a running fire

of talk, and each animal whiningly replied while licking the hands that tended it.

At last Bacette straightened and looked at Jim. "I tak' the lead, now," he announced.

"No, no!" the youth protested. "I'm doing all right. I can keep it up a little while longer. You break trail too fast. My legs—they're killing me!"

"Back to the gee pole, Jeem." There was withering contempt in the trapper's voice. "If you can't keep up, ride. Let ze dogs do all the work, little one. Only a chechahco rides."

"You're . . . you're a cold-blooded brute, Francois."

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no." The trapper shrugged. "Mebbe you do not *comprend* Francois Bacette. At sixty below, I should stand and argue with you. . . . Mush, my dogs, mush!"

The team strained at the tugs. Jim Tally stepped off the trail, sinking to his knees. The sled was passing him. One swift glance ahead and he could barely make out the trapper's form through the welter of spume kicked up by the runners. A cry of terror escaped him as he lunged frantically for the gee pole, grasped it desperately and was dragged along.

Thoughts began racing through his numbed brain as he clung to the gee pole and forced his tired legs to function. Seward Peninsula! Last summer, his first in Alaska, it had looked good to him. Helping Francois Bacette work his placer claim on the Kuzitrin had been fun that had paid well in gold. And it had

been fun catching salmon and smoking them for winter food for the dog team.

Toward the close of the placer season, the French-Canadian had painted glowing pictures of the Peninsula in wintertime, the beauty of the snow, the coziness of his trapline cabins while storms beat impotently against them, and of the profits in furs.

But glowing pictures of Outside were passing before Jim's eyes. Outside meant Seattle, where he could show his friends the gold, tell of his experiences.

"I'll come back next spring, Francois," he had promised.

"Ah, but I shall need you in the wintair, Jeem. Two can do better than one. No? But yes. Besides, ze gold, she will all soon be spent in Seattle. And your mothair and sistair, Jeem . . . you mus' think of them too. Ah, ze women, how they love ze fur! We ketch fur coats for them, Jeem, coats worth hundreds of dollairs. So you will return to them with gold and furs. And they will kees and hug you, Jeem—mak' big noise over you."

"You win, Francois. I'll stick it out till spring," Jim had capitulated.

And the trapping had been fun, before the snow came. Then the world had suddenly changed overnight for Jim Tally, from verdant green to a blinding, limitless expanse of white; from life outdoors to the narrow confines of a cabin on the west shore of Imuruk Lake, Francois Bacette's trapping grounds.

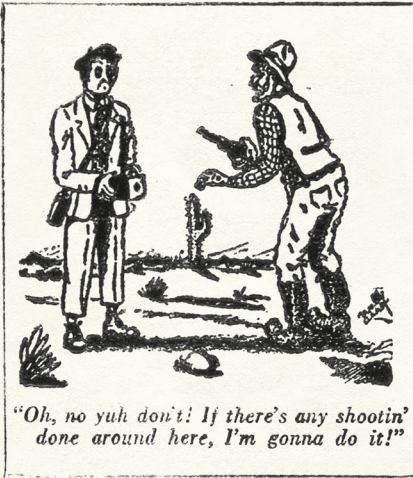
It had seemed to Jim that the snow would never stop falling. The enforced confinement irked him. All preparations for continued trapping throughout the winter had already been taken care of, leaving nothing else for Jim to do but wait for the snow to stop.

Foot after foot of it fell, creeping up the sides of the cabin, reaching the windows and blanketing them. And still it snowed, the leaden sky showing no promise of a break.

When at last the snow stopped, man and youth had tunneled to the surface with their snow shovels. Only the tip of the stove pipe protruded above the snow. Jim stood on the cabin roof, staring hopelessly. Here and there clumps of fir and spruce stood out like islands in an endless sea of white, of desolation, of profound silence.

Seward's Ice Box! Jim would not have traded one moment of carefree happiness in Seattle for the whole of it, gold or no gold, fur or no fur. At the same time he realized the utter impossibility of leaving that barren wasteland until navigation opened in the spring. And this was only October!

Fear had gripped Jim's heart. Fear of the endless snow, the silence, the biting cold and the banshee howling of the wind from across Lake Imuruk. And that fear had increased daily as they ran the trapline, from one cabin to the next, distances of twenty miles. Seldom a week passed without its blizzard, and always it caught them far from shelter. And at times the mercury fell so low that to run the trapline would have meant



fatally frosted lungs for man and beast.

And with the mounting dread of this forbidding country hatred came to Jim's heart. Hatred of the man who had talked him into staying.

Let the snow fall and the storms howl, and Francois Bacette howled voyageur songs just as often and just as raucously. A bout with a blizzard seemed to be his idea of a good time. Neither by word nor gesture did he deign to notice the change that had gradually possessed his young partner. Yet his sharp eyes read the terror in Jim's. On the trail, he was ever watchful of the youth, though stern and demanding the maximum of efficiency. His word was law, his experience the salvation of them both.

Napoleon, the lead dog, suddenly pricked up his ears and lunged forward, barking. The balance of the team took up the cry, straining at

their tugs. The stocky trapper stepped aside with a broad grin, and the sled shot past in a welter of white spume. Jim rode a runner, but the trapper caught the gee pole and yelled lustily.

"Ah, zat Napoleon, she some lead dog, no?" he shouted. "She savvy where he is all ze time. Nevair lost. We're home, Jeem!"

The team stopped, but their barking continued. Jim was barely able to make out the cabin through the veil of swirling snow. He reeled toward the door, but the stentorian voice of the trapper halted him in his tracks.

"Ze team, Jeem," Francois reminded. "Unharness and feed 'em. Always first, ze dogs."

"I'm frozen," Jim protested. "I can hardly put one foot—"

"Ze dogs, I say," the trapper bel-
lowed.

Jim clenched his mittened fists. He hesitated a moment, glaring at Francois who was unlashng the canvas-covered sled. Then he reeled back to the team. Wearily, he chained each dog to its post.

By that time, the amazing trapper had shoveled the snow from the cabin door, had unlocked it and started a fire. Back and forth he shuttled, while Jim fed the dogs their smoked salmon, packing the trapping gear from the sled to the lean-to, shouldering the trapped animals and piling them behind the stove to thaw out.

Jim flung himself on the bunk. The trapper watched him out of the corner of an eye while cooking the evening meal. The lad was sound asleep

when it was ready, and Francois had to shake him awake.

"She been one tough day, no?" the trapper grinned. "Zat storm, she fierce. Listen to him roar. But, perhaps, tomorrow, she let up."

"I'm sick and tired of it all," Jim complained. "I wish I'd never listened to you."

"You'll feel better in ze mornin', Jeem." Bacette speared a chunk of moose steak and put it on the lad's plate. "Eat, eat."

He poked more wood into the cherry-red stove, and soon the cabin grew warmer. Jim left the table, sat listlessly on the edge of his bunk. Every muscle in his body ached. Francois pushed the table aside, dragged the trapped animals from behind the stove, while the cabin filled with a rancid stench that almost nauseated the youth.

"Now we skin and flesh ze pelts," the trapper said, and began on a silver fox. Jim watched, anger welling up inside him. When the skin came free of the carcass, the trapper said: "Go to it, Jeem. Flesh it."

Jim stood up, fists doubled. The trapper rose, facing him, still holding the skinning knife.

"I'm sick of it all, I told you," Jim cried. "I'm getting out—going to quit you. I'll get to Nugget somehow—perhaps to Nome. I'm getting away from this solitude, getting away from the stink of blood and pelts and thawing animals!"

"Jeem," the trapper said quietly, "ze work, she mus' be done. Tomorrow ze animals will be froze stiff again. Zat is bad for ze fur—thawin' and freezin'."

"Stop it!" Jim shouted. "All you think about is furs, furs, furs! Stop staring at me like that or I'll—"

He leaped at Francois, striking wildly. The trapper dropped the skinning knife. His hand shot out, securing a hold on the front of Jim's shirt, and forced him back down on the bunk. Without a word, he turned to the pelt on the floor and started fleshing it.

Jim's head dropped between his hands. Sobs wracked his body. Then, suddenly, he was on his feet, pulling on his parka. He yanked the cabin door open, then slammed it behind him. The trapper made no move to stop him. A slow smile overspread his face and he shook his head sadly.

A gust of wind pinned Jim against the door. Swirling snow choked him. Night had fallen, a black, impenetrable shroud. Then that terrible fear gripped Jim's heart, drove him back, shaking, into the cabin.

He took off the parka and sat on the edge of the bunk. Francois did not even glance up from his work. When he started to skin another fox, Jim picked up the fleshing knife, and waited.

The trapper tossed him the pelt. Jim spread it out, started scraping off the fat. Gradually the knife strokes became slower and slower, and presently he pitched forward on his face, sound asleep. Francois, smiling, picked him up, gently laid him on the bunk and pulled the blankets over him.

The smell of breakfast filled the cabin when Jim awoke. He got out

of the bunk and flexed his muscles.

"How you feel, Jeem?" the trapper inquired.

"Pretty good. How's the weather?"

"Ze storm? She quit. You wash, and we eat, no? Today we get more pelts."

They loaded the sled with trapping gear and food. When the dogs were hitched to the sled, the trapper said: "I go into lean-to for more rabbit snares."

He had been gone only a few moments, when there came a strange rumbling sound and a startled cry. Jim dashed into the cabin and stood riveted on the threshold of the lean-to.

The trapper was bent back over the chopping block, both legs pinned beneath a tumbled pile of stove wood. Sweat beaded his forehead, and his bearded face was twisted in pain.

"What . . . what's happened, Francois?" Jim cried.

"Ze snares," gasped the trapper. "I . . . I step on ze wood to reach them. . . . Ze wood she fall. . . . My leg!"

Jim flew at the wood, tossing it aside. Francois pulled his left leg free, but the right remained inert, twisted.

"Can't you move it at all, Francois?" Jim asked anxiously. It was a shock to see this once powerful man stretched, helpless, on the floor.

"No, Jeem. She . . . she broke. Hand me a board for stretchin' fox pelts. I feex it."

Following the gasping trapper's instructions, Jim gently worked the board under the injured leg, bind-

ing it with heavy cord. Then he grasped the man under the arms, started pulling him toward the bunk in the cabin. The trapper helped, pushing with the heel of his good leg against the floor. Jim finally hoisted him into the bunk and covered him with blankets. Francois lay back against the pillow, sweat coursing down his cheeks, his breath coming in gasps.

"I'll go to Nugget for help, Francois," Jim said. "The storm's let up and I can make fast time with the dogs. This time tomorrow, I'll be back."

He was trying to talk down the fear creeping over him. With the trapper flat on his back, he felt the terror and loneliness of the Northland more than ever before. To hide it from the injured man, he carried wood from the lean-to and stacked it beside the bunk, where Francois could reach over and poke it in the stove. Then he placed food beside the bunk.

"That'll hold you till I bring help back," he told Francois.

He went outside and flung the trapping gear from the sled, and laid blankets on the floor of it. He was ready to start for Nugget when the trapper's voice reached him.

"Bring ze great Napoleon in to me, Jeem," the trapper begged.

The big husky rested its forepaws on the edge of the bunk, licking the trapper's sweat-smearred face while Bacette's huge, hairy hand patted its neck and stroked its ears.

"Napoleon," Francois said softly, "you hit ze trail for Nugget. You

savvy?" The husky whined, pawing at the man as if to entice him from the bunk. Francois turned his eyes to Jim. "This dog, Jeem, she got more sense than some men. He savvies ze trail to Nugget. Let him have his head, Jeem. Au 'voir."

Jim called to the husky and closed the cabin door. He dare not trust himself to say a last word to Francois, for there was a lump in his throat he could not swallow. He hitched up the husky, then climbed into the sled and wrapped the blankets around him.

"Nugget, Napoleon!" he shouted. "Mush!"

Away sped the team, spume curling up behind the steel runners. The light sled and Jim's weight was as nothing to these dogs, compared to the usual heavy loads of trapping gear and trapped animals. The air was clear, crisp, the silence oppressive. But Jim kept his thoughts on the man back in the cabin, who was depending on him and the dogs to bring speedy help.

Where the snow of yesterday had drifted across the trail, the going was tough. To make it easier for the dogs, Jim put on his snowshoes and went ahead, breaking trail. Napoleon followed for a short distance, then sat down and howled.

"All right, have it your own way," Jim said, remembering the trapper's warning. He got back into the sled, and the lead dog promptly veered away from the course Jim had taken.

The miles were racing back under the runners when Jim gripped the sides of the sled with mittened hands. The team had topped a rise and were

running down the other side. Down, down at breakneck speed, to emerge finally on the Kuzitrin River.

There were channels of glare ice and islands of drifted snow on its surface. Skilfully the great leader swung in and out among those high, white islands, the runners singing a song of speed that temporarily allayed Jim's fear. If this pace kept up they would be in Nugget before nightfall. Then the return trip. . . .

Something damp touched Jim's cheek. He glanced up at the darkening gray sky. Big, flat snowflakes were descending. His gaze turned to the spruce bordering the high bank. Their tips were bending ominously.

"The storm, again!" Jim gasped. "Come on, Napoleon! Stretch those tugs!"

The next moment the air was full of driving snow. Jim could no longer see the lead husky through the maelstrom of flakes. A runner struck the edge of a solid drift, almost upsetting the sled. The team's pace slackened to a crawl, then stopped.

Wondering what could have gone wrong now, Jim slipped into his snowshoes and fought his way to the leader. The husky was standing with head down and tongue lolling, the tugs tight, but the rest of the team was squatted on its haunches, refusing to move.

Jim thought of Francois, back there in the cabin, waiting for help. Perhaps the storm would last for days. Somehow, he must get the team on its feet, get it pulling in

unison. He returned to the sled and took out a smoked salmon. Tearing it up, he gave each dog a piece, retaining one in his mittened hand. Then he took his place alongside the leader.

"Mush, Napoleon!" he shouted hopefully.

Relieved of Jim's weight, the team moved forward at a steady pace. Somehow the great leader kept finding the windswept channels, avoiding the snow hummocks. The rest of the team ran with raised muzzles, sniffing the odor of the salmon in Jim's clenched fist, wafted back to their sensitive nostrils by the storm.

Once, when the blizzard lifted for a moment, Jim caught sight of the nearest bank. Now it was lower, the river wider.

"Can't be much further to Nugget," Jim thought. Nevertheless, he had to admit that he had no idea where he was. Doubts assailed him. Perhaps they were headed in the wrong direction, turned around by the storm. Perhaps this wasn't the Kuzitrin at all. Perhaps the trapper had put too much faith in the great lead dog's sagacity.

The team slowed. Suddenly Napoleon stopped, his fangs bared, hackles raised, growling. An apparition barred the way, the fur-lined parka hood partially obscuring his features. Other forms appeared silently out of the murk, joining the first.

"Where are you from, buddy, and where are you headed?" the first man asked.

"I'm from Imuruk Lake," Jim blurted out. "Going to Nugget for

help. My . . . my pardner busted a leg, back there in the cabin. Is this Nugget, mister?"

"No, Nugget's twenty mile down the river. This here's Jed Breen's freighting outfit. We was hauling freight into Omalik when this blizzard struck. So we holed up. Foller me and we'll take you to Jed."

They started off in single file, as silently as they had appeared. Jim followed in the tracks of the last man, and the tired team trotted behind. The outlines of a tent soon took shape in the storm.

A terrific chorus of barking greeted Jim's team from beyond the wall of swirling snow, where the freighter's dogs had been tied to spruce trees. Napoleon replied in kind, accepting their challenge despite his weariness.

The first man who had accosted young Jim led the way into the tent. Jed Breen, who was standing with his back to a portable stove, listened to Jim's story. But before he was half through, Jed's shouted orders brought several of his drivers hurrying into the tent.

"Unload one of them sleds!" Jed clipped. "Alaska Pete, you've got the fastest team in the country. Hook 'em to it. We gotta get this feller's pardner to the hospital in Nugget. Bill, you go with Pete. Mush!" Then to Jim: "Young feller, squat down beside the stove and tell me the rest of your story."

Sounds of hurried preparation for the trip penetrated into the tent. Men shouted, dogs snarled and barked, and packaged goods thudded

on the snow as the sled was unloaded.

Habit was now strong in Jim. "I've got to take care of my team first," he said, starting toward the tent flap.

"The boys have already beat you to it, Jim," the freighter boss said. "Set down."

"I'm not very cold," Jim said. "I'm . . . I'm just scared stiff!"

"Scared of what, feller?" Jed Breen demanded.

"I'm scared of the white wilderness, and of the storms, and of Francois Bacette when he's driving me on in the face of them. And now I'm scared that he won't be able to hit the trail again, singing and laughing at their desolation and fury."

"He'll hit the trail again," Jed assured him gently, "but it won't be

for some time to come. By the way, how old are you, Jim?"

"Eighteen."

"Listen, Jim. Alaska needs men like you. I need a man like you."

"A man, did you say?" Jim asked wonderingly.

"That's right, Jim. You're a man now. That trapper's priceless lessons have made you one. Instilled into you the sort of courage that makes a man a man—courage to carry on in spite of fear and danger. That's what I want my dog team drivers to do. You can work for me and earn money with Francois' dogs till he gets well. Then you two can hit the trapline trail again. What you say, Jim?"

Jim's cracked lips parted in a grin. "I'd sure like to give it a whirl," he assured the freighter.

THE END

SADDLE HORSE BOOM

THE saddle horse is here to stay. If anything, he is gaining in popularity. Out West where good saddle horses are still tradition, recent saddle horse sales have been making interesting livestock history. Top sale was a three-day auction held at Billings, Montana, in which 1,350 head of first-class saddle stock were disposed of.

The auctioneer's, "Going, going, gone! Sold to the gentleman in the gray Stetson!" was heard almost continuously from 9 a.m. 'til 10 at night on each of the three days. Allowing an hour daily for lunch and another for dinner, the figures in minutes per animal required to sell a horse show how spirited the sale really was. On an average, a horse was bid and bought in less than two minutes.

Best price at the sale, \$975, was brought by a seven-year-old Palomino stallion. Second price, \$960, was also paid for a Palomino. At another recent Montana sale a five-year-old Palomino brought \$1,000, and Palomino colts went at from \$75 to \$150 a head.

Commission men and brokers buying at the sales declared the "pleasure" trade was largely responsible for the present intense interest in saddle stock.

J. W.

*Why did the mysterious stranger called Beaumont
turn the famous doors of the Sedalia House into*

BATWINGS TO BOOTHILL

by CLINT MACLEOD



WHEN fat Sid Strang built his Sedalia House Saloon in the little settlement of Longhorn, he put in a pair of batwing doors and made his

famous brag. "Keep an eye on those doors," he told all and sundry. "Sooner or later every man in the world will pass through 'em." That

was stretching the long bow, but the world to Sid Strang was cattledom; and here in the lawless Nations his Sedalia House sat athwart the Texas Trail. Beef lumbering along the thundering miles to Dodge brought drovers to roister and drink Sid Strang's watered liquor and swell his coffers to bursting.

And so they came — long-riding lawmen and furtive-eyed outlaws, vociferous cattle buyers and silent men of the whang-leather breed. Courage and fear and avarice and ambition kept those doors creaking, and on a certain night they gave to the shoulders of the man called Beaumont.

He was something out of a picture book, this Beaumont. Tall and lean, he had the grace of youth, but his eyes were old and his face was grim. His clothes were broadcloth and of an expensive cut, and he wore a cape that was almost a cloak. Strang, who was spelling the bartender this night, half expected to see a retinue of servants trail Beaumont through the batwings, yet when he'd downed his first drink, the stranger said: "I'm looking for a job, mister. Have you got one?"

Strang, narrowing his heavy-lidded eyes, made a second calculation and asked: "Gambler?"

"I'm only passable with the pasteboards. But I can get music from yonder piano."

"Who are you, stranger, and where you from?"

To the impertinence of this questioning Beaumont returned a bleak stare. "The name is Beaumont. I hail from Texas."

"You remind me of someone, Beaumont," Strang said. "It's coming to me now. You favor the Weaver boys, Dallas and Amarillo. Kin to you?"

His face wooden, Beaumont answered: "I have no family."

"The Weavers were Texas ranchers," Strang persisted. "But I guess you're not their breed. They favored a certain kind of checkered shirt and garb that wouldn't tatter in the brush. No, you're not a Weaver. It takes all kinds of men to make Texas."

Now fat Sid Strang was needing a piano player, for the one he'd had had got caught in a crossfire when horse and rope men had settled sundry differences the hard way here in the Sedalia House this very week. And thus a bargain was made, and Beaumont became a part of the establishment and a seven-day wonder in the settlement. He moved the piano so that from the stool he could watch the batwings, and he turned out the kind of music that reached into men's feet and the kind that put a tightness in men's throats. Longhorn marveled at him, accepted him, and within the weeks became oblivious to him.

Strang, who lived in a pretentious cabin on the town's outskirts, gave his piano player one of the numerous cubicles of the Sedalia House for quarters. Off-shift Beaumont kept to his room or rode aimless circles on the horse that had fetched him to Longhorn. Slow to talk but quick to hear, he soon learned that muffled hoofs often beat to the saloon's back

door in the dark of the moon, and he knew then that all of Sid Strang's business was not conducted over the bar and the gaming tables. This was outlaw country, and a man fashioned his opportunities to fit the environment. So it was with Sid Strang.

But not Beaumont. Seemingly he had no interest other than the piano, no future beyond the constant eyeing of the Sedalia's doors. Until the night Marshal Joe Heflin came bargaining through those batwings, bringing with him the outlaw Clem Pardee.

A little man, Marshal Heflin had grown gray in a service where men usually died young. Beside Pardee the lawman looked insignificant, for Pardee, he-wolf of the Nations, was a big, blocky man, wild of mane and wild of eye. But the outlaw's holster was empty and Heflin's wasn't, and by this sign the scattering of patrons in the Sedalia House this night knew that the impossible had happened and that the wolf was feeling the bite of the trap.

Straight to the bar went Heflin, herding his prisoner before him, and to fat Sid Strang the marshal said: "I need a favor from you, friend." He spoke low, so low that only Strang should have heard him. But Beaumont had left his piano and moved to the bar, and he heard, though from the look of him he was engaged in nothing more important than contemplating his own reflection in the mirror.

"A favor?" queried Strang with no enthusiasm.

The marshal nodded toward Pardee. "I've chased this galoot from Texas to hell," he said. "To-

night he practically fell into my arms. But I aim to bag the rest of his owlhoot bunch, too—Corday and Mescalero and Kincade. The leaves have whispered where I'll find them, and I'm taking the trail as soon as I grain my horse and feed myself. But I've got to leave Pardee on ice meanwhile. There's no jail in Longhorn town, but you've got a big cellar, friend."

"And a trade that doesn't want to see me siding for or against the law," Strang countered, frowning.

"You're south of the Kansas line," reminded Heflin. "You're selling whiskey in federal territory that's been assigned by treaty to the Indians. I've closed my eyes to that so long as your trade has been white. A favor for a favor, friend."

Strang shrugged. "Take Pardee through yonder door, into the back rooms," he said. "I'll follow you shortly."

Beaumont watched them vanish through the door; he heard certain sounds and interpreted them, and when Heflin re-appeared alone and stalked out through the batwings, Beaumont knew that Clem Pardee was now beneath the trapdoor giving into the big cellar, and it was his guess that a barrel of whiskey had been rolled on top of that trapdoor. But Sid Strang was catching his eye, and Strang was beckoning to him. When Beaumont crossed over, Strang said: "You've done some riding since you came here. Do you know the place they call Cimarron Crossing?"

Beaumont nodded.

"Here," said Strang and passed a note to the piano player. "You're the only man handy to send tonight. Ride with this to the Crossing, and ride fast. You'll find three men camped there. Deliver this to them."

"Yes," Beaumont said and he observed the high tension in Strang. "Anything else?"

"This chore is between you and me," Strang told him. "Don't mess it up. There are better jobs here than playing the piano."

"Sure," Beaumont said.

Ten minutes later he was in a saddle with the lights of Longhorn falling behind him until crowding timber smothered them from sight. It was then that Beaumont spread open the note that Strang had given him to deliver, and matchlight supplied a glimpse of the message. It read:

Marshal Heflin fetched Pardee in tonight and he's on his way to round you boys up. Pardee is here in the Sedalia but I can't let him go right away. Not until I'm sure that Heflin's been salted down. Maybe Heflin suspects that your outfit has been getting grub and supplies from me and hiding your loot here. Maybe he's testing me to see if I'll fall into a trap by letting Clem go free. Maybe not. *But get Heflin tonight and get him good!*

For a full minute Beaumont sat his saddle, thinking about that message. Then he took paper and pencil from a pocket and began framing a note of his own, studying the unschooled fist of Sid Strang by matchlight and littering the ground with burned stubs before his own missive was

finished. When he had it in his pocket, he rode on again.

Soon he was skirting the Cimarron, and he came to the place called the Crossing with sufficient fanfare so that the three were awaiting him with drawn guns. But when they saw his high outline, and the branch-filtered moonlight touched his face, one said: "It's Strang's piano player! Now what fetches him?"

Here were three men cast in a common mould, alike in viciousness and in appearance, bearded and dirty and gaunt. But one, Jake Corday, he of the buck teeth and the big nose, bore the stamp of leadership and to him Beaumont tendered the note he'd prepared. The others crowded Corday's shoulders while the man thumbed a match to life.

"What does it say?" they demanded.

"Heflin's got Clem," Corday announced. "But the dang fool has jailed him at Strang's place. Strang says for us to lay low and stay here for a couple of days. He'll turn Clem loose when the sign's right."

"Any answer?" asked Beaumont.

Corday waved him away. "Tell Strang we'll do as he says."

Wheeling his horse, Beaumont hit the back trail. Once again he skirted the Cimarron, but this time, after following the stream for a discreet distance, he pulled off into the shadows that banked beside the trail and sat his saddle, waiting patiently. The minutes piled upon themselves; he would have liked a smoke but he put his mind against the need. It was not long until a horse and rider

bulked on the trail, moving with remarkable silence. Beaumont called then: "Howdy."

"Who is it?" Marshal Joe Heflin demanded, and Beaumont knew that a gun was trained on him.

"It doesn't matter," said Beaumont. "I just wanted to tell you that you'd better pile out of that saddle and go Injun fashion from here on out. Your birds are below—ready and waiting to have their tails salted."

Heflin, jogging nearer, peered hard. "I've seen you before!" he decided. "In Strang's place. Tonight. Gambler?"

Beaumont shrugged. "In my own fashion," he said.

"What's your stake in *this* game?"

"The answer to a question," Beaumont told him. "You've heard of the Weaver boys. They were bushwhacked here in the Nations when they were heading back to Texas with money they'd got for selling a herd at Dodge a season ago. That was a closed case until some owlhoot boys made whiskey talk at Doan's Crossing a few months back. Clem Pardee and his bunch were the gang that killed the Weavers, Heflin. But you'd maybe know which one of them pulled the trigger."

"Clem Pardee," Heflin said.

Beaumont nodded. "I thought so," he said and touched his heels to the horse. "I'm obliged. Good hunting, marshal. Watch out for watered whiskey and a man who casts a wide shadow."

"Strang? I've had my ideas about him. With enough rope he'll hang himself if he's guilty. But say, who are you and what are you up to?"

"I've told you where you'll find Corday and Mescalero and Kincade," Beaumont said. "And I've told you that bagging them will be a safe job if you go cautiously from here on. You're not looking a gift horse in the mouth, marshal?"

Joe Heflin held silent. He was old in his game and the years had brought him both wisdom and a sense of fatality. "The trail's open for you," he said at last. "I think we'll meet again."

Thus these two parted, Heflin heading on toward Cimarron Crossing and a cinch capture that a forged note and one man's guile had made possible; Beaumont aiming his mount for Longhorn. He rode into the settlement an hour after midnight, and he swung from his saddle before the Sedalia House. The saloon was dim and silent now, but fat Sid Strang waited in the big bar-room, and he said eagerly: "You got through O. K.?"

"I saw Heflin on my way back," Beaumont reported. "He asked questions, but he learned nothing from me."

"Good!" said Strang and gave a wheezy sigh. "I had to trust you tonight, Beaumont. I see I made no mistake. There'll be better things for you here. Lock up after me; I'm going to my cabin."

"Sure," Beaumont said. "And I've some practicing to do—some new music I want to try out before a crowd hears it. Good night."

But after he'd locked the outer front door behind Strang, he unlocked it again, and when he came

into the barroom he moved the one lamp that was burning to the bar, and by this means the piano was left in the shadows. Fingering the keyboard, he played softly, and in this manner he let an hour pass. Then, helping himself to a couple of guns from beneath the bar, he went into the back room, tugged at the whiskey barrel that had been rolled onto the trap door leading into the cellar, hoisted that door and called softly: "Pardee?"

Something stirred in the thick darkness below. Mounting a ladder, Clem Pardee clambered into the room. "Strang?" the outlaw queried. "No, you haven't Sid's voice. Who is it?"

"This way," said Beaumont and thrust Pardee through another doorway into the darkness behind the building. Thumbing a match and cupping it carefully, Beaumont said: "I'm Strang's piano player. He told me to let you out."

"Got a spare gun?"

"Here," said Beaumont and passed a weapon to him. "You'll need it. Heflin's ridden out, but the Weaver kid is in town."

They were standing elbow to elbow, and Beaumont could feel Clem Pardee stiffen.

"The Weaver kid?" Pardee questioned.

"The young one," Beaumont went on. "He loped in tonight, just before closing time, and he's still in the saloon. Bought a private bottle and he's been making me play his favorite tunes for him. Strang told me to stay till the kid drinks himself under the table and to humor him mean-

while. You remember Amarillo and Dallas Weaver, Pardee. The kid isn't the kind to be crossed. Didn't you know he's been following you?"

"The leaves whispered that someone was on the trail," Pardee said. "Someone besides that blasted Marshal Heflin. I'm going back into that saloon, professor. I've notched two Weavers on my gun; tonight I'll notch a third."

"And he'll split your skull with a bullet the minute you step through a door. He knows you, Pardee. But Strang's figured out the play for you."

"I'm listening," Pardee said. "Strang's got a head for scheming."

"Go around to the front of the Sedalia," Beaumont told him. "Hunker there and listen for my piano. I'll play till the kid drinks himself into a big sleep. When my piano goes quiet, you'll know the sign is right to come after him with the cards stacked your way. Do you understand me?"

"Like shooting a cow at a river crossing!" Pardee chuckled. "I'll be listening."

"And I'll be hurrying," Beaumont said. "He'll be out looking for me in a minute if I don't."

But still, when the darkness had swallowed Pardee, the man called Beaumont did not go directly to his piano but instead tarried briefly in the little cubicle that was his quarters. When he fingered the keyboard once again, he drew upon memory for old tunes, nameless tunes, the songs a father had once sung to three sons who'd been named for different

Texas towns, and while he played, a constant refrain ran through his mind.

He's out there in the darkness. He's waiting for his cue to come stalking through those batwings, and when he comes he'll die and I'll have made it up to you, Dallas, and to you, Amarillo. But I couldn't let it be too easy for him. I've got to keep him waiting. . . .

It was ghostly and it was theatrical, this sitting here playing to an audience that didn't exist, this waiting while another man out yonder grew more taut with the passing minutes. It was a cat-and-mouse game with a vengeance, and it pleased the soul of the man called Beaumont until suddenly he realized that he was not alone in this shadowy room. A man—no, two men—had entered by the back door.

One of the men was fat Sid Strang who stood there, bulking indistinctly in the shadows, and by his side was the other man—one with buck teeth and a big nose—Jake Corday. And Strang said softly then: "Marshal Joe Heflin bagged three boys at Cimarron Crossing tonight, Beaumont, but one of them got away. Jake, here. He's showed me the note you delivered to him, mister. It ain't the one I sent you with!"

Beaumont let his fingers fall away from the keyboard, and he came to his feet—actions that were instinctive. He knew now that the fat was in the fire and here was a showdown—but not as he'd planned it. The odds stood two-to-one, and even as he sized up the situation he was clammy with the thought that he'd

inadvertently signaled Clem Pardee when he'd stopped his music. Two men stood before him and another was now on his way. In another second those batwings would be creaking and the man called Beaumont would be caught in a crossfire when the guns began to speak.

But standing thus he was in the fringe of the lamplight. The long cape had fallen from his shoulders, and for the first time since his appearance in the settlement he stood dressed in something besides black broadcloth. And because he was wearing a certain distinctive kind of checkered shirt and garb that wouldn't tatter in the brush, Jake Corday sucked in a long breath and said shrilly: "I know him now! He's one of the Weaver boys!"

Marshal Heflin had doubtless stripped Corday of his gun, but Corday must have gotten another from Sid Strang since coming to Longhorn. He clawed for that gun now and fired wildly, but Beaumont was dancing away and a gun was speaking in his own hand. He got Corday with his first shot and heard the man go thrashing in a tangle of chairs and gaming tables. Then he was simultaneously aware of two things: Sid Strang had faded away into a shadowy corner, and Clem Pardee was barging in through the batwings, a gun in his hand.

"Those shots!" Pardee bellowed. "Where is he, professor?"

"*There!*" Beaumont cried as gun flame lashed from the corner where Strang stood.

Pardee's gun spoke then, spoke

once; the lamp shuddered and Strang sighed a soft and wheezy sigh and pitched forward on his face. But at the same time Pardee was seeing something that hadn't penetrated to his consciousness before; he was seeing the checkered shirt that Beaumont wore, and he was understanding how he'd been tricked, for he roared, "Damn you!" and fired at Beaumont.

Pardee's bullet grazed the hard flesh armoring Beaumont's ribs, and he felt the warm ooze of blood. Numbed by shock, the weight of his gun became gargantuan, but he hoisted it and fired with cool and calculating precision. Clem Pardee got his feet tangled in the bar railing and fell with the heaviness of an axed tree.

Now there was nothing; no targets to trigger at, no bullets to dodge—nothing but the swirling powder smoke and the sprawled dead men and his own hurt to slow Beaumont. He made a pad and tie from his undershirt, got it into place and lurched outside to where he'd left his horse. But by then most of the settlement was here, aroused by the gunshots, and somebody was busily lighting lamps so a glow splashed out upon Longhorn's crooked street.

It was in the midst of all this that Marshal Joe Heflin came riding up, bringing two bound prisoners with him, and when the tale was told by excited men, Heflin looked at Beaumont who sat astride his horse, and the marshal said: "I had a bunch we'd meet again, and things are be-

ginning to make sense now. I remember that there was a younger Weaver — Beaumont Weaver. His brothers wanted to make a fine gentleman out of him and they spent cattle money to give him schooling in music and painting and things like that. But why didn't you leave this deal as it was, Weaver? I had Pardee on ice, and I was fixed to fetch in the other three, though Corday got away on me and I lost time looking for him. You weren't schooled in the gun game. You could have played it safe."

"I came to Longhorn looking for them," Beaumont Weaver said simply. "I heard it told that all the world came through Sid Strang's doors and I wanted a way to keep my eye on those doors. Yes, you had them on ice, marshal. But you might not have got back to Texas with four prisoners. Now you've got only two to handle. That's fair enough—two for your kind of law, two for mine. And Sid Strang who supplied outlaws like them will do so no more. It's finished. *Adios!*"

He raised his hand in a parting salute, and that was the picture of himself he was to leave for this trail-side settlement to remember—a man on a horse with a gun at his belt . . . a man with the blood of brave fighting upon him . . . a man who'd settled his own account in his own way.

How had Sid Strang once put it? It took all kinds of men to make Texas. . . .



MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

PLACER gold prospectors are used to overcoming obstacles. Solving problems is part of their makeup. Years back, when some of these intrepid yellow metal seekers found gold in the desert sands and the nearest water a mile away—straight down—they were only temporarily stymied. They evolved a system of gold recovery known as dry washing.

Quite a few gold-mining-minded readers planning desert prospecting trips have asked us about dry washing recently. Some of them are a bit skeptical of the results that can be obtained. Others are perhaps a trifle over-optimistic.

Placer gold recovery by dry methods is for desert country. To be successful, the gold-bearing sands must be absolutely dry. And dry washing works best when the values are in relatively large particles—coarse gold.

There is no set design for a small-scale dry washer. In most any desert placer camp a wide variety of washers of all shapes and sizes can be found, most of them products of the ingenuity of the individual owner. Before the war in addition to the homemade machines a number of portable, small, hand-operated machines were also manufactured and

sold commercially. Larger ones were power operated.

Virtually all the practical dry washers operate on the same principle. They are dry jigs of various types designed to subject a thin layer of screened sand or gravel to intermittent blasts of air.

The most common machine consists of a hopper, or screen-bottomed feed box through which the material to be treated falls onto a slanting cloth tray beneath which is a bellows. The tray is fitted with cross riffles from a half to three quarter inches high.

Action of the bellows forces intermittent blasts of air up through the cloth. This lifts up and blows away the lighter sand. At the same time it allows the heavier gold particles to sift out and settle in front of the riffles. Material of less specific gravity than gold, but too large or too heavy to be blown into the air by the blasts from the bellows is jiggled, that is shaken, over the riffles and gradually works down and out of the tray at the lower end of the machine.

In the hand-operated units both movements, jiggling and pumping of the bellows, are generally hooked up to a single crank shaft fitted with a wheel having a handle on it.

For best results, sand or gravel to be dry-washed should first be rough-screened and thoroughly sun-dried. Material even only slightly damp will clog the washer and stick on the cloth tray. Clayey or cemented stuff should be broken to powdery dust before running it through a dry washer.

It takes two men to run a hand-operated dry washer at top capacity. One man feeds the material into the hopper. The second turns the crank that motivates the jig and bellows. Not the least important part of the first man's job is to keep an eagle eye on the gravel screening through the hopper for any stray bonanza size nugget that might show up. Big nuggets are too large to pass through the hopper screen. More than once careless operators have been known to toss a nest egg nugget out on the tailing pile along with the worthless stones and pebbles caught by the hopper screen.

The safe rule is to scan all such stones carefully before emptying the hopper of accumulated coarse waste material.

Whenever the riffles in the tray appear to be loaded with concentrates—gold particles and black sands—the tray should be removed and its contents transferred to a gold pan for further cleaning by dry blowing. Or the contents may be put into a special container for safe storage until a final cleanup can be made.

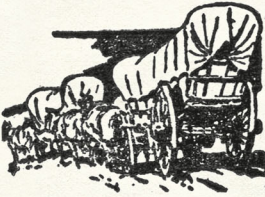
Fine gold is hard to recover in a dry washer. It is apt to be carried down the apron with the waste and be lost. A little mercury behind the riffles may prevent some of this loss.

Dry washer capacities vary with the machine and the skill and experience of the men operating it. For the average hand machine, working under more or less ideal conditions, from two cubic yards of gravel upwards can be "washed" in an eight hour day.

With most any standard type of dry washer disappointments in operating results are more likely to be caused by the condition of the material being handled—dampness, gold too fine to be readily savable, etc.—than because the machine itself is at fault. Under the specific conditions for which they are designed dry washers work satisfactorily, saving gold values up to within about fifteen percent less than the recovery possible if the same material were handled by wet methods.

Dry washers are not intended to compete with rockers and sluice boxes in the ordinary run of small scale gold placer mining. They are a specialty, providing a workable method of gold recovery in situations where no water is available. And thanks to dry washers, a lot of virgin gold has been recovered from desert placers. Gold that otherwise might still be lying buried in the endless sand.

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

AN important feature in the farmland future of the Pacific Northwest is the thousands of acres of brush and cutover timber land that can be cleared for agricultural purposes. In a sense it is pioneer country. The ground must be stumped out before it can be used for farm crops. Once cleared, the soil is rich.

Clearing land has never been an easy task. Aware of this, Reader H. K., of Bloomfield, New Jersey, interested in pioneering his own cutover farm in the West has sent in a bad pun but a good question. "Stump land has me stumped on one count," he wrote. "How do you get the stumps out?"

H. K., there are several methods. Old-timers were forced to resort to such things as charpitting, forced draft burners, powder and the donkey engine. Modern machinery has come to the aid of the present-day generation of pioneers and that mechanical jack of all trades, the bulldozer, has been doing a bang-up job of wholesale stump clearing during recent years. It has already brought uncounted acres of potential farm land into production on a great number of former cutover timber tracts all through the Pacific North-

west—in Washington, in Oregon and in northern Idaho. Thousands more are likely to be cleared the same way in the near future.

When the bulldozer, which is simply a powerful caterpillar type tractor with a heavy, broad steel blade mounted in front, first showed up in the Northwest, it was used primarily on construction and logging jobs. Its use for stump clearing was a more or less accidental development. There were slack periods, and contractors with idle bulldozers on their hands began to look about for new tasks for their behemoths.

Stump clearing loomed up as an innovation to fill in the idle gaps. In a short while it grew into a regular bulldozer operation. Improvements were made in handling the stumps and new bulldozer techniques were acquired.

The trend towards bulldozing out stumps is pretty well indicated by the fact that in the cutover timber country of western Washington it is estimated all but about 5 percent of the land clearing being done today is being done by this method. And the bulldozer is doing a pretty

similar job in much of the rest of the Pacific Northwest.

General practice, and the most economical, is for the farmer himself to surface clear the land. He can remove the logs and brush. The larger stumps are then cracked and loosened with powder. After that the bulldozer is called in to push them out and pile them up.

In spite of the popularity of bulldozers they are not necessary to stump clearing. Older methods can still be used. And they'll get the job done. Charpitting will remove stumps. It is old-fashioned and the system requires patience and practice before a man can become expert at it. But it clears the land.

Charpitting has one thing that is certainly in its favor. The bigger the stump, the better it works. To start charpitting, a handy pile of kindling is gathered and one or more fires are built against a stump. When the fires are going good and the stump base has had a chance to ignite, sod is placed over the fires. This creates a condition similar to a charcoal pit.

After about an hour more dirt is added. Then with the smothered fire still smouldering away, fresh dirt is thrown around the stump twice a day—first thing in the morning and at night—until the stump has burned through. This usually takes from two to four weeks.

Charpitted stumps burn off just

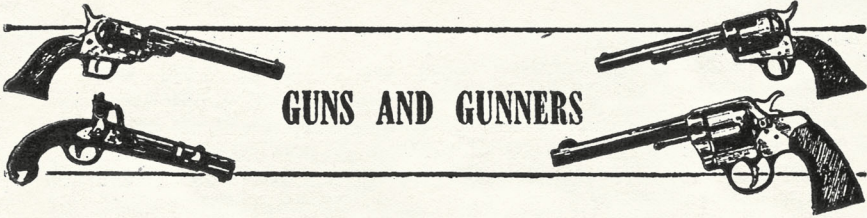
above the ground. And the heat created dries out the soil so that in a good job the roots continue to burn clear down to ashes.

Building and tending the fires in clearing stumps by the charpitting method is work. But once the fires are well underway and the charpits started, the only attention they require is the morning and evening trips to pile a little more dirt around the stumps, and perhaps check progress. And a good charpitter can have a lot of stumps burning at the same time.

In favor of the charpitting method is the fact that no actual cash outlay is required. Moreover with the fires started, charpitting goes on while the farmer can go about his other tasks and even at night while he sleeps. And though charpitting is slower than the more modern bulldozer, it will clear a sizable acreage in time.

By one method or another thousands of acres of logged-off land are being cleared annually throughout the timber regions of the Pacific Northwest. Most of this is land that was formerly unproductive, land waiting today's pioneer in a part of the West that is grand to live in. And often while they are being cleared, these potential farm lands afford second-growth timber sufficient for building the settler's own log cabin, his first barns and other needed buildings.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.



GUNS AND GUNNERS

BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

An easy way to keep your Guns & Gunners Departments is to use a loose-leaf notebook available at any stationery store. Paste the inside edge to a strip of paper and punch to fit the book rings. Don't forget to date your departments.

SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE—In a previous department I told you about the ammunition for the 9 mm. German pistols and promised to tell you what was the matter with the pistols.

The German army had a weapon known as the Luger. Lots of you boys have been shooting it these past two generations. Let's look it over.

Back in the early 1890's an American named Borchardt had a clever idea for a pistol. American gun-makers were premature and called it a failure. So Borchardt took a trip back to Germany and sold the idea to the *Deutsche Waffen und Munitions Fabriken*. Thus was born the first really practical automatic pistol. The Borchardt had a short life. It had too many faults, so it was improved by and became known as the Luger.

Then the German High Command commenced to think highly of this invention. It did not matter that Borchardt of America had designed

it. Georg Leuger, of the DWM plant, took out the bugs after they had developed and it became German. The first cartridge was the 7.65 mm. Luger, a short, bottle-neck number. Later came the 9 mm. or present popular caliber.

The Luger was adopted by the German navy in 1904 and by the army in 1908. But the Wehrmacht ruled, and the gun became known as the Pistole 08. It was used in both calibers in the First World War, but only the 9 mm. was standard. By 1922 the 7.65 mm. or .30 caliber had disappeared. It never was any good.

The Leuger pistol, popularly known as the Luger, and known in Germany as the Pistole 08, has been manufactured in a variety of models. There have been long barrels, short barrels, fixed sights, adjustable sights, detachable stocks, and what have you. There have been modifications consisting of the substitution of coil springs for flat springs—but

the Luger lives on basically unchanged. Some have been made with grip safeties, some without.

One great development was the "snail" magazine containing 32 rounds. It was excellent, except that you needed a special loader to get the cartridges in the magazine—and, anyway, what do you need that many cartridges for?

The real rub is that over here in a couple of old countries, a couple of new GIs have said that they think that the Luger is a good gun. That it is better than the U.S.A. .45 Pistol; better than what we have to offer back home. Which is just plain ridiculous.

Did you know that Paul Von Mauser, who once owned rights to the Luger, tried to get the U.S. government to take on his weapon? Did you know that he submitted them to tests to determine a pistol for the Army back in 1905 and 1906, and again in 1908 and 1909? Probably not. See the "Annual Reports of the Chief of Ordnance," those years. You will find that for the last test, Mauser even built Lugers—100 of them—for the .45 pistol cartridge. *In not one test did the Luger pass.*

So much about this great German invention.

Second pistol on the line is the Pistole 38, now known as the P-38. This is a commercial gun, developed

by the firm of Karl Walther of Zellamehlis, back in 1935. A few of these were sold on the American market about that time, and, frankly, it is a good gun—or was!

In the first place, when you have an automatic pistol, you have trouble. Karl Walther designed the first real development in automatic pistols in a couple or three generations—a *double-action*. "Hammerless" pistols usually contain an inside or concealed hammer—they are never safe. Walther designed an outside hammer which *was* safe. The uncocked pistol could be fired for the first shot by a long pull of the trigger. Thus it became known as a "double-action" automatic.

The Germany of the past war needed guns. So the Walther was adopted as the Pistole 38, or P-38.

Over here we know that Germany produced weapons by using mostly slave labor. In 1943, those Czechs, Poles, Belgians, Russians, and others went to town. They raised hell with German guns. The tide was turning and executions failed to stop sabotage. Bombs made quality steel scarce, but production went on. I remember Major Fred Hartmann, in charge of small arms experimental work at the Hillerslaben Proving Ground, saying: "We didn't care if the guns blew up."

Thus, junk is junk—whether it's a Luger or a Pistole 38.

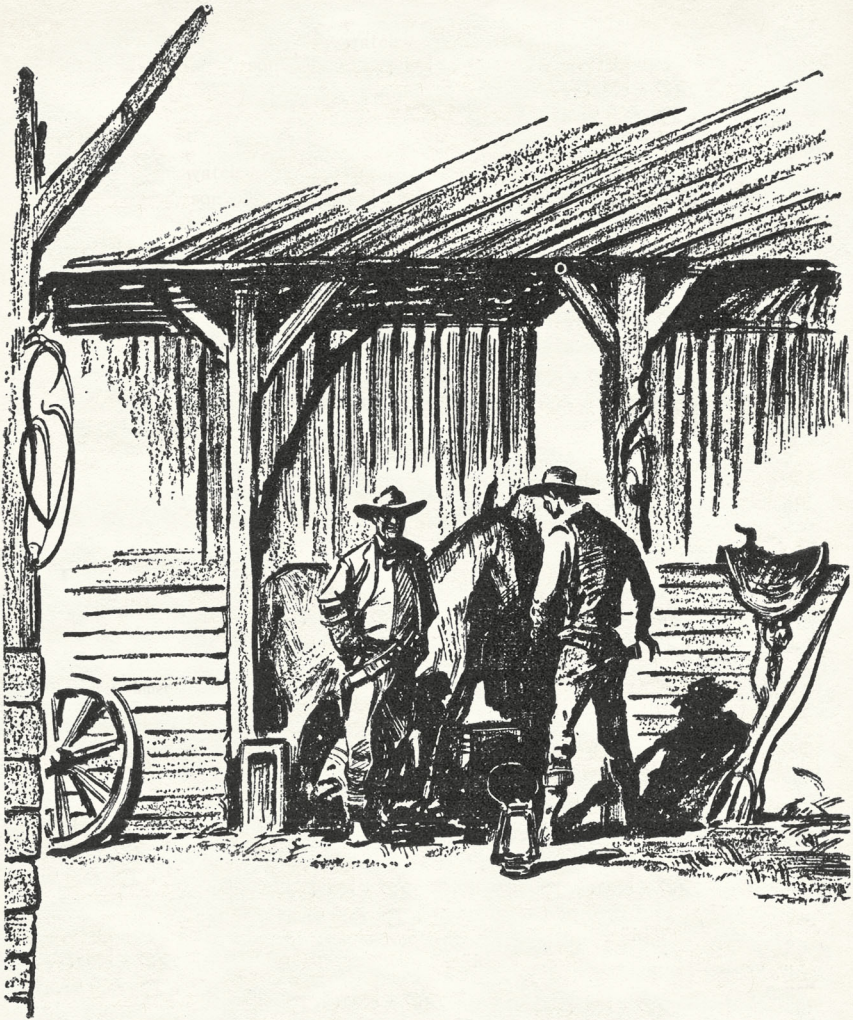
Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. He will continue to answer all letters from readers. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.

GUNSMOKE PRESCRIPTION

by WILLIAM J. GLYNN

When the long-awaited showdown with Ad Justin came, Doc Jeremy had to force himself to forget that his skilled hands were trained to cure, not kill





I

DOC JEREMY moved out from the dark shadows of Sweetwater's livery barn, a tall, lean-muscled man in his middle twenties. He had alert eyes, as dark and deep-set above his high-boned cheeks as a Brulé Sioux's—and as wary. His face and hands

were leather-brown from sun and wind, and his lips were a thin, tightly drawn line above his square jaw.

He was watching Sanders' trail hands, shooting and hollering themselves into town to celebrate the end of their long drive up from Texas. A smile creased Doc's smooth face,

tipped down the point of his high-bridged nose, as he recalled the times he'd done the same—with a mile-wide thirst and a pocket of silver that burned clear to the hide.

But Doc Jeremy's smile was brief. He pulled his black Stetson down over his dark hair and laid a hard-eyed stare on the four riders trailing in some fifty feet behind the Texas punchers. The broad sweep of Doc's shoulders flattened against the side of the barn and his hands strayed to his slim, gunless thighs. The folks in Sweetwater seeing him at the moment might have thought "Doc" a strange handle for this silent, stony-faced man in faded Levis and scuffed half boots.

And, then, maybe they wouldn't care, for when Doc Jeremy took hold on a sick horse or critter, that animal was as good as cured. Doc didn't even have a vet's certificate; he had earned his title the hard way, by experience—with his sure, quick hands and his instinctive savvy of anything that walked on four legs.

Doc was suddenly graven; as still as the dry, sage-laden air whispering in from the endless miles of sun-scorched Kansas prairie. Keen interest flashed behind his eyes. When Lark Reed and his hard-case crew pulled into a trail town, trouble wasn't far behind, and with Doc, trouble was like an old dull-tooth lobo following a poor little wind-belly calf—always there; behind a rise maybe, but there!

So there was no fear or surprise in Doc's lean frame, rather a tense gathering of the forces within him

that had made survival possible for a frontier orphan.

Nor was there any sign of fear or hesitation in the four grimy, granite-faced riders pulling off Main Street to head down the sleepy, dust-laden cross lane that ended at the livery barn.

Lark Reed rode point on his owl-hoots, a heavy, bull-chested man, slouching in the battered hull on his big, blaze-faced bay. His cold green eyes flashed over the shacks and weed-grown lots on the cross street, and came to rest on Doc Jeremy. Pursing his thick lips, Reed whistled the three quick notes of the meadow-lark and called out hoarsely to Flash Marcus and the two Dillingham boys behind him.

They pulled up, setting their horses back on their haunches in a flurry of dust. Doc bit back the angry reprimand on his tongue, lifting his eyes from the bloody, spur-marked flanks of the sweat-streaked horses to glare at the outlaws. Doc didn't like to see horseflesh abused.

"By Satan, if it ain't Doc Jeremy!" Lark Reed said with a sneer of triumph. "I heard down trail you was runnin' a livery for somebody up thisaway, an' I was gettin' ready to comb the coulees. But here you be, big as life an' ice-jawed as ever."

The big outlaw turned to his men. "Didn't I tell you fellers? You stick with me an' luck trails along like a little ol' dogie lookin' fer its maw." His heavy laugh boomed out and a big grin spread his stubbled face. But his hard little eyes were like

slivers of green bottle glass as they stabbed at Doc's pitchfork leaning against the corral fence and the pile of last night's stall bedding heaped near the barn door and steaming in the late summer heat.

"You weren't foolin', Doc—givin' out that you was lookin' fer a wage job, huh?" Lark asked. "If you'd throwed in with me when I asked you, you'd been rollin' in clover 'stead of changin' beds in a hoss hotel."

"I wasn't fooling," Doc said on a flat note, "and if you're bringing any of your long-loop plans with you, just count me out as always. I got me a job with horses, and I draw the line at skunks. Which includes your stink kittens," Doc added, with a snort of contempt and a long-armed sweep toward the three men spilling from their saddles and pegging up close beside Lark.

They made a rugged picture, those four tough, unshaven, dirty-looking hombres. Winchester heeled up from the saddle boots on the bronses and .45 Colts sagged their hips. Lark Reed leaned up against the pole corral, studying Doc. The outlaw was a huge man, six feet three or four in his runover boots. His leather chaps were born and brush-scarred, the frayed wings fanning out beneath the twin six-guns strapped low on his massive legs.

"Don't need to get proddy about it," Lark told Doc with a careless shrug. "You picked your sign to follow an' that's that. But you ain't a-goin' to turn down what I'm offerin' now."

"Yeah, Doc," Flash Marcus said,

"we got somethin' good, an' it's right down your alley." Marcus was a lean-shanked, lantern-jawed waddy. He put on an oily smile and let his little yellow eyes seep furtively into the dark livery barn and down the scattered row of paint-peeled buildings on the cross street. "Tell him, Lark, before that nosey town marshal smells the wind."

Nick and Oliver Dillingham both grinned at Doc, fanned out to watch the sun-drenched boardwalks. They were brothers, had the same straw-colored hair and chill eyes pinched in close to their short, flat noses.

"Go ahead, Lark," Nick said. "Tell him. There won't be nobody buttin' in." He patted the six-gun on his hip and wheeled around to face Main Street.

Oliver started into the barn with his Winchester.

"Nobody in there," snapped Doc. "I'm runnin' this thing, lone hand, for Alf Gunderson, the real estate agent."

Lark spoke out abruptly. "What'd you say if I was to produce the feller that killed your folks, Doc?"

"I'd say you were lying." Hot blood burned under Doc's cheeks.

"Well, that's where you'd be wrong, Doc. An' I'll jest skip that insult fer now. But I'm tellin' you I found him—mile an' a half north of town. Him an' his trail crew is camped on the creek. They're goin' to drive Tex Sanders' linebacks north to his big layout up on the Niobrara in Dakota." Lark's smile was an ugly thing. "It's Adam Justin, Doc. Adam Justin!"

Doc Jeremy's fingers clenched into his palms and the color suddenly washed out of his face. His body was tense. The cold hate he'd carried for twenty-odd years was in his voice.

"You're sure?"

"Hell, yes, I'm sure," Reed laughed, watching Doc as he would watch a lobo in a trap. "Ad Justin, ringy an' meauer'n a sullud bull. He ain't been seen in this country since he killed your folks. That's why you never cut his sign. But he's here now an' he's payin' off Sanders tonight, down to the Cattlemen's Hotel, seven o'clock. My little bird," Lark said, twisting his lips and letting out his whistle, "told me."

"Your little bird don't ever go to roost, does he, Lark?" Doc said. "And where do you come in? What's your cut for telling me something I would have found out anyway—if it's really Adam Justin?"

Lark blinked his shiny little eyes. "Ad Justin's payin' twenty thousand fer that herd, Doc. Twenty thousand in cold cash. *That's* where I come in. An' here's the lay: Ad's got a sick hoss, his best cuttin' hoss. He thinks a heap of him, so Sanders said. I'm goin' to mosey over to Justin's dally-man camp an' smell around. I'll let drop that you're the best an' only hoss doctor in these parts. I'll tell Justin I'm goin' to send you over fer a look-see. Now, you get that hoss. Tell Justin anythin' you like, but get that hoss and bring him here to this barn. Let Ad know he can see his hoss here at seven o'clock or before—that you'll tell him what's wrong. Me an' the

boys'll be bushed here in the barn. When you whistle, we brace Justin, take his dinero which he'll have in his saddlebags. Then you plug Justin an' later me an' the boys here and three more fellers I got planted with Sanders will run off them line-backs an' hit out fer the Nations. I got a buyer down there an' no questions asked. That way we both get what we're after. You can throw in with us, or stay put here an' keep your trap shut!"

"You're a polecat," Doc said thinly.

"Sure. The smartest one ever come out o' the woods. But I didn't shoot your ma, then plug your old man so's he'd die slow an' leave you a orphan, Doc. You been lookin' fer Adam Justin since you was a little ol' windbelly."

Doc nodded his head. "But I ain't taking his money or drygulchin' a man. Not even Adam Justin. I'll do my own killing in my own way."

"An' stretch hemp, you damn fool," Reed shot at him. "An' don't forget Justin shot your ma—so yore dad, Pete Jeremy, said—then killed Pete, filled his gut with lead. You lettin' that pass?"

Fire leaped to Doc's eyes. "Leave my folks out of this!"

"Well, that's what you told me, Doc," Reed said in an injured tone. "I'm givin' you your chance out o' the goodness of my heart."

Harsh laughter ripped from Doc's mouth. "That's good—you *giving* me a chance. You're trying to get me to pull your iron out of the fire."

Doc whipped out the makings and rolled a smoke. He wasn't thinking

of Reed; he was remembering the long, lonely years, knocked around like a young broomtail, battered from catch wing to trap corral. Not one person had ever given a hoot whether he lived or died. He didn't remember his father. He'd been too young and Pete Jeremy had died a month after the ruckus with Justin. Pete had been too far gone to tell the southbound cowman he'd left his four-year-old son with very much, except that Adam Justin was the man behind the raw deal.

When he got old enough, Doc had run off on his own, looking for Justin. But no one knew anything about the man. He'd made a trip to Dodge City with a herd and that was the end of the trail. Adam Justin had simply dropped out of things, which was not a strange happening in the West of that time.

Somehow, Doc had never hankered to hear the owls hoot. He had been tempted a time or two, especially the winter he had holed up in the Nations with Lark Reed and his gang and had seen how easily they made their money. Maybe the thought of what Adam Justin had done to his family had kept him straight. Anyhow he'd drifted on, searching.

He was staring at big Lark Reed now, thinking of all the misery that had been his and suddenly his eyes narrowed and his lips tightened over his teeth. This was a natural. He couldn't back down on all he stood for now. But he'd take care of Justin in his own way—face to face. He'd make Adam Justin beg!

It wasn't hard for an old-hand road agent like Lark Reed to know

what was going on in the young hostler's mind. He said:

"You ain't backin' out, Doc. You ain't lettin' a lowdown mother killer get off scot-free. You got more guts than that!"

II

Doc Jeremy nodded, grimly watched the outlaws climb on their horses and ride toward the edge of Sweetwater. Inside the little livery office and bunkroom, he dug into his warsack and brought out an old long-barreled .38 Navy Colt six-shooter. He wiped off the grease with a piece of cloth and inspected the load. It was an old-type cap-and-ball that he had altered with firing pin and ejecting mechanism to take cartridge loads. The blue had worn off some, but it was still in good shape, with ivory grips inlaid in a fancy silver flower design. It was the one thing old Pete Jeremy had left his son—the one thing in all the world Doc hadn't had to earn or fight for. With its seven-and-a-half-inch barrel it carried its shots like a rifle and Doc could hit a two-bit piece at thirty yards with it.

Doc slid the gun into the worn old holster and belted it around his hips. It felt heavy, a cold dead weight dragging at him as he saddled a big Roman-nosed dun and vaulted aboard.

He didn't leave town directly. Following Lark Reed's directions, he was allowing an hour or so for the outlaw to mosey over to Justin's camp and set the trap. Doc headed for the center of town. His talk with the outlaws had left a bad taste in his

mouth, shaken him up more than he realized, and now that the time had come for action—to face the man who had killed his parents—he was strangely hesitant. It was one thing to hate a man like Adam Justin, to carry that marrow-burning emotion around inside your heart day after day, telling yourself what you'd do when the time came. It was one thing—that. And another to know, suddenly, that the long trail had come to an end.

Doc stopped off at the Silver Spoon and wedged into the crowd at the bar. He had paid for and downed his drink and was turning to leave when he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder.

He turned around, the smouldering fire of his brooding thoughts in back of the flat gaze he laid on Sweetwater's lawman.

"Just wanted a word, Doc," Marshal Jim Turner said.

"Drink, Jim?" Doc offered.

The marshal shook his head, bit off the end of a fresh cigar and shoved it into his mouth. "Thanks. Ain't got time." He puffed quick clouds from the stogie. "Lark Reed an' his wild bunch come in today," the lawman said, laying a shrewd glance on the young hostler. His bony frame was lax in easy pose, his weathered face stern, watchful.

Doc remembered a cougar he had seen one time, up in the Bitter Roots in Montana, crouched on a rock overlooking a deer run. Jim Turner looked like that.

"They was seen down to your

livery barn, Doc, talkin' to you—an' they didn't leave their hosses."

"Yeah," Doc said. There was nothing in his face now.

"Them hounds wouldn't be figgerin' on somethin', would they?"

Doc's face was a mask. "That's your job, ain't it, Jim?"

"Could be yours. You're makin' wages an' a livin' in this town—if you're plannin' on stayin'," Turner said it slowly, letting his words sink in. "I ain't got nothing' on you, Doc," he added, "but a feller can't ride more'n one trail at a time, an' I happen to know you holed up with them hoots one winter down in the Territory."

For an instant Doc's eyes grew wide.

"Yeah, I knowed that when you first hit Sweetwater, Doc," Turner said calmly. "But I figgered you was square, an' I sort o' admire the way you can doctor critters."

Doc felt a cold lump gathering in his chest. This old lawman was the salt of the earth and Doc didn't blame him for keeping an eye peeled. An orphan, without friends or kin, could easily get a shady rep, especially when he packed a cannon-barreled six-shooter most of the time, and always seemed to be looking for someone. But a man had his work cut out. Justin had to pay, and it wouldn't be the first time, Doc was thinking, that the marshal would know disappointment in his judgment of a man.

The lawman was turning away. "Just keep it in mind, Doc," he said. "If you hear anythin' I oughta know, I'll be along the street somewheres."

He was at the slatted doors now. "By the way, you're the best hostler an' vet I ever had runnin' my livery barn. I'm raisin' your pay come Saturday."

Startled, Doc spilled the glass by his elbow. The fat barkeep was staring at him, mopping the bar.

"What's the matter, Doc," he wheezed, "you look like you seen a ghost?"

"Jim Turner owns the livery barn, Fat?"

"Shore, Doc. Alf Gunderson handles the runnin' of it but Jim owns it. Didn't you know that?"

Doc shook his head, felt the need of a drink and had it and another until the thoughts of Turner left his mind. The raw whiskey fed the flame of his hate, and again, as it had happened many times in the past, he was standing up in front of a big, tough cattleman named Adam Justin. He was calling his hand, whipping out his Colt and pulling the trigger.

III

Adam Justin wasn't in camp when Doc arrived, but the ramrod met him and told him to light and cool his saddle.

"Justin an' the boys went on up to town," he told Doc. "Yep, we sure got us a sick hoss. Feller came by a while ago, said he knew of a young jasper was better'n any vet—said he'd send him out. I reckon that's you."

Doc nodded and got down, grimaced and silent. He followed the lean-shanked old waddy to the rope corral holding the northern outfit's

cavvy. The sick gelding, a roan, was picketed off to one side, near the hooligan wagon. His head was down and weaving, his sides distended. In good shape, he would be a fine-looking animal, Doc knew—not too long in the back, deep-chested and slim-legged. But he was a sick horse, no doubt of that.

Doc ran his hand down over the roan's withers to his swollen sides, to the underline. The horse kept turning his head as though to search for the pain. When Doc led him around in a circle, he kicked at his bloated stomach and pawed the sod, stamping his forefeet.

"I figgered it was colic," the ramrod said.

"Wind colic," Doc said. "First I thought mebber he had the spasm colic, but he'd raise a lot more hell than he's doing. He's hurtin' all the time, steady. I think I better get him into a stall in town so I can give him a good drenching and keep him warm. It'll run into inflammation, mebber perforation in another day. Then it would be a case of tappin' with a trocar—or shootin'."

"Ad said if you was to stick a trocar into that hoss, you'd have to answer to him," the ramrod warned.

The cowman was looking Doc over as he spoke. His pale eyes rested for a moment on the big six-gun swinging at Doc's hip. His lips under the wide mustache tightened into a thin line. Doc looked more like a gunman than a horse doctor. If it wasn't for those gentle hands soothing the roan . . .

"Hate to walk him back to town,"

said Doc, "but I don't reckon it can be helped."

"I . . . I was just a-wonderin'," the waddy said, still eying the six on Doc's hip, "'stead of packin' a syringe, you're heavy with Colt hardware. I'm responsible for ol' Red there, an'—"

The bleakness came back into Doc's face as he tied the roan's lead rope to his saddlehorn and stepped up into his hull. "Sometimes a man has to shoot a horse—or a varmint," he told the cowman, "and this time it'll be a varmint. You tell your boss to come in to the livery barn around seven tonight."

Sunset found Doc leading the sick horse into Sweetwater. The trip had been hard on the roan and he was barely on his feet when they got to the barn. He tried to lie down when Doc backed him into a front stall. But Doc had treated plenty of colic. He kept up a running line of soothing talk, his "bedside manner," old Jim Turner called it, and the horse quieted down. The grimness was gone from Doc's face now, and for the moment his hate for Adam Justin was forgotten.

Pity burned in his eyes and his hands were as gentle as a woman's as he ran a loop around the roan's upper jaw and tied the rope overhead to a loft joist.

"Easy, old boy," he said. "Another minute and I'll have that sore old belly of yours purring like a kitten." In the barn office, he found his long-necked quart bottle, got out his Jamaica ginger and mixed a cup into a quart of sun-warmed water

from the trough outside. He added saleratus and a half ounce of gentian to the mixture to counteract the bloat. With his sure, capable hands it was no trick to insert the bottle in the gelding's mouth and slowly pour in the dose.

Doc was pitching clean hay into the stall for bedding when he heard stealthy movement at the door.

Lark Reed and his three men came into the barn, slowly circling about the lantern light near the roan's stall. A gloating smile spread Lark's mouth and the point of his tongue darted out to wet his thick lips.

"By dang," he chuckled, "in another half hour we'll be settin' purty. I run into that Ad Justin feller down to the saloon just now an' I told him his hoss was near dead, fer him to hurry down here an' take a look."

Doc threw a blanket over the roan's back and stepped out into the lantern light. All the pity he felt for the sick horse was gone from his face and his eyes were smoldering coals in their deep sockets.

"If you told Justin that, you're a liar, Reed," he said. "This gelding is sick, sure, but he'll pull through with care."

The two men eyed each other for a full minute. Doc spat into the hay. He didn't like the deal, and suddenly he wished he hadn't agreed to Reed's wild plan for murder and robbery.

"I had to get him down here, didn't I?" Lark blustered.

Nick Dillingham wheeled around in the doorway, came pegging toward Lark. "Justin's comin'," he announced.

Lark started toward the dark stalls

in the rear of the barn, spun around to stare hard-eyed at the tall hostler. "Remember, Doc," he said silkily, "we want that dinero. It's your job to blast Justin. If you don't . . ." The outlaw placed a big hand on his six-gun. "There's enough stake to this hand to make it worth our while to plug both Justin an' you, too. We'll blast you into little chunks, savvy? An' leave that lantern where it is," he added as Doc made a reach for it.

Doc watched the outlaws settle down in the far stalls. They were like great dark bats, throwing eerie shadows on the walls. All was quiet and dark. Doc saw the gleam of a gun barrel and knew Reed's killers would keep him in their sights every second. A chill feeling gripped him. It was too late to back out now, even if he wanted to.

IV

The moon rode high over the sprawling trail town, throwing a yellow light into the street. Waiting at the barn door, Doc watched the tall old cowman get down from his horse and come toward him. Doc's flat stare took in the grizzled hair, the man's craggy jaw and long beak nose over the gray mustache. On his hip, slung low and handy was a Colt .45. The trace of a smile tugged at the corners of Justin's straight-line mouth and his hooded eyes peered out at Doc from under bushy brows.

"Reckon you're the vet I was told about," Justin said, stopping in the doorway. He was a few inches

shorter than Doc, but he had the same spare, rider's frame and easy way of handling himself.

"That's me," Doc said coldly, and jerked a thumb toward the inside of the barn. "Got your red horse in a stall. You Adam Justin?"

The oldster tensed slightly. "Adam Justin of the Cross J," he said.

"You're sure? That ain't just a name you took?" Doc asked.

All expression left Justin's bony face. Men didn't go around asking questions like that unless they were looking for trouble. "Yes," he said briefly. His eyes were almost hidden in his leathery face. "I want to see that roan hoss of mine, an' if you've bungled the job, by damn I'll—"

Pulling out the makings, Doc fashioned a brown-paper cigarette. "Your cuttin' horse is all right," he clipped out, licking the smoke into shape and scratching a sulphur match.

Justin was watching him, keen-eyed, alert.

"Reckon you'll know me next time, old man?" Doc asked. His voice was harsh with insult.

Justin stiffened. His eyes had dropped to the six-shooter on Doc's thigh. "What's your handle, kid?" There was a strange urgency in the question.

Doc's right hand dropped carelessly toward the long-barreled .38. "They call me Doc," he said, "Doc Jeremy."

Lark Reed's three notes floated from the depths of the barn. Doc thought he heard a slight stir back there and a cold chill ran down into his boots. This wasn't going to be

easy, picking a fight with Adam Justin. In spite of the hate smoking in him, ready to flame up in an instant, he had to admit he liked the oldster's looks. In another time and place, Ad Justin would be a man to ride the river with. Cowman and rancher from the toes of his boots to his Stetson, Justin looked as honest as they came.

But it couldn't be so. His eyes were not seeing straight, Doc told himself. This lean cowman had killed his mother and father in cold blood, had taken their herd. Resolve tightened his lips. Suddenly he spun around and started into the barn. Over his shoulder, he called:

"You can see your horse before—" He broke off. His gun was a heavy weight on his hip and his feet dragged strangely. All the spirit had gone out of him and in its place was a deadly calm.

Justin followed, stopped in the circle of lantern light by the roan's stall. "He's quit his groanin'," he said, running his hands over the gelding. "An' by golly, you got rid of the swellin'. Fer a maverick vet you got what it takes, young feller. Thought sure I'd lose poor old Red."

Doc's eyes softened a bit, watching the old cowman run his hands over the gelding. Adam Justin loved that horse. You could see it the way he slapped him on the flank and crooned soft cuss words into the sharp-pointed ears.

Doc's thoughts were in a turmoil. He felt kin with anyone who loved an animal. And yet . . .

Lark Reed's whistle came again,

close, soft, like the sleepy chirpings of a bird disturbed in the night. Doc heard it—and he heard the scrape of a boot back there in the dark somewhere. Now was the time. Pull out that old Navy Colt and blast this old-timer to hell!

Ad Justin came out of the stall, a grin on his face. "Young feller, I reckon I was some short with you out there, askin' for your name. I was some took back lookin' at you. Reminded me of a little old slick-ear I knowed once. Now—name your price. You sure saved Red an' nothin' is too good for an hombre can do a trick like that." Justin had a big wallet bulging with greenbacks in his hand.

"I don't want anything . . . more from you," Doc said.

"Why, I ain't give you nothin' youngster," Justin expostulated mildly. "But I will. I can offer you a job helpin' me trail a herd of linebacks up to my outfit on the Niobrara River. I'm buyin' Tex Sanders' herd tonight, payin' off up to the hotel in a little while. I got me a bunch of hossflesh up on my ranch that'll make you open your eyes, too. Sure could use a man with your savvy. From the looks of them saddle-bent legs of yours, I reckon you wouldn't mind takin' on a rough string to gentle, either."

Doc was about to whistle an answer to Lark Reed's call.

"An' say, young feller," Justin went on, "I'd sure admire takin' a look at that six-shooter you got there."

Doc's eyes narrowed. Sure, he'd let Justin look at the .38. He'd give

him five slugs in the guts, like Justin done for Pete Jeremy!

"Because," Justin continued, "I had me a gun once, just like that'n. Same kind of silver filigree on the stock. Old cap-an'-ball it was. Lost it back quite some years on the trail up from Texas. Boys on my spread gave 'er to me one fall." There was a strange huskiness in the old cowman's voice and his lined face had smoothed out. "Dang skunk came into camp one night when me an' the boys was celebratin' the beef sale. Dodge City was the town where it happened."

Doc backed out of the circle of lantern light. He could feel Lark Reed's green eyes on his back. Those hoots wouldn't wait much longer.

"Yep, Dodge City," Justin continued. "Tom Smith was law-roddin' that hinge of hell then. Well, this here skunk was one of Billy Brooks' gang, I reckon. Anyhow, while I was in town, he come out to the holdin' grounds where we was camped an' took my three-year-old boy right out o' the tent—from my wife's arms. Next day I get a message that I could get little Mike back if'n I'd fork over the money I got from the beef sale. Never did get the boy back, but I sure shot hell out o' the jasper back of that steal. He winged me an' that's when I lost the six-shooter. His name was Pete Jerry, or somethin' like that. Never did know for sure."

Doc's eyes were as hard as flint. "Pete Jeremy—that was his name. He was my father."

"Your father?" Ad Justin's breathing struck a snag. "Why . . . son, that skunk hadn't been out o' the pen over a month when he throwed in with the Brooks gang. Tom Smith knew that much about him. He'd spent ten years in jail an' he wasn't over twenty-five when I shot him." Justin was talking fast, his eyes burning into Doc's face. "That dang road agent didn't have no family—no kid!"

Doc's hand trembled on his six-gun. A choking cry ripped from his lips.

"Mike!" Justin cried out. "Mike boy, I found you." The old cowpoke was suddenly crying like a kid, the tears rolling down his cheeks.

Doc heard the hammer click behind him and whipped around, drawing his six-gun in a flash of swift movement. The .38 roared, joined with the gun thunder that came from the rear of the barn. He heard a gasp behind him—the slap of lead striking flesh.

Then the four outlaws were closing in, crouching, their guns blazing in their fists. Horses screamed in the bedlam of sound.

"You two-faced son!" Lark Reed shouted. "Get 'em, boys, cut 'em down, the both of them Injun-eyed buzzards!"

Doc snapped a shot at the lantern and the barn was dark as pitch. Red powder flame blossomed and something hit Doc in the shoulder, threw him to the floor. Another slug tore through his shirt to rip along his ribs. He gasped with the shock and hurt that flooded through him and set

his teeth. He had no regard for his own hide now. It was old Adam Justin, his father, that he was thinking of.

Doc rolled over, facing the outlaws, and rested his six-shooter on the hard-packed floor. Like shooting at two-bit pieces, he targeted the blazing gun flashes.

Lark Reed's savage shouting choked off and there was a thud as the big outlaw's body hit the floor. Flash Marcus grunted as Doc's lead found him, fell across Doc's prone body.

After that Doc's gun got too heavy to hold and slipped from his hand. A blast of gunpowder beside him brought his head up, and in the flare he saw old Ad Justin crouching against an upright, his gun in his hand, spewing death into the barn.

Then it was over. Doc heard the pound of swiftly approaching horses and running men, heard their wild shouting and saw the yellow spots of light from lanterns bobbing through the smoke-filled barn. They were crowding around him. The sharp bite of burned gunpowder filled his lungs and he thought he was going to be sick until old Ad Justin cleared a path through the crowding Sweet-water men and let the town medico in close.

Later, in the livery barn's office, Adam Justin was sitting beside Doc's

bunk. He had a bandage on his forearm. Marshal Jim Turner stood in the doorway, blocking out the curious.

"Reckon I lost me a holster," he said, winking at old Adam.

"Mike, boy," Adam said, his voice husky with the emotion that gripped him. "I should've knowed you was my son the minute I laid eyes on you, but it's been a long time . . . a dang long time."

Doc was staring at his father, seeing the same chin, the same beak nose and deep-set eyes. "A long time," he agreed.

"But we're goin' home now, to see a little old gray-haired lady that's goin' to be happy enough to bust," Adam told him. "Home, boy, home to your ma and the best spread east of the badlands. Buff grass, boy, green on the stem as far as you kin see. All yours."

Doc was smiling now. His shoulder and ribs didn't hurt too much if he was careful how he moved. He felt different, somehow. The old cold hate that had carried him on was gone. His grim manhunt was over and a warm glow flooded through him, sunshine. He'd found happiness—and his family. He stuck out his hand, and gripped his father's.

"You bet, dad. Red an' me'll both be headin' home with you."

THE END

Answers to puzzle on page 92.

1. chili 2. Cheyenne 3. jigger 4. notch 5. oldster 6. pony 7. scout 8. calico 9. willow
10. marshal 11. trapper 12. poker 13. gravel 14. deputy 15. sand

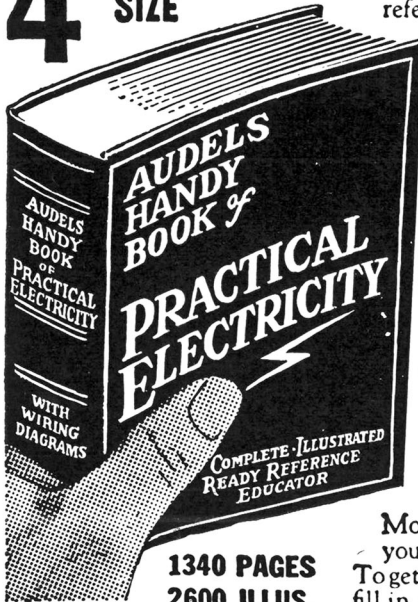
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