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JUNE 1946

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The "Bottle Bacillus"
(Pityrosporum Ovale)

"Sure, I may look silly. But I'd rather be silly than sorry . . . sorry about picking up a case of infectious dandruff. When a big dermatologist says wearing a night-cap is a swell precaution against germs, that's good enough for me."

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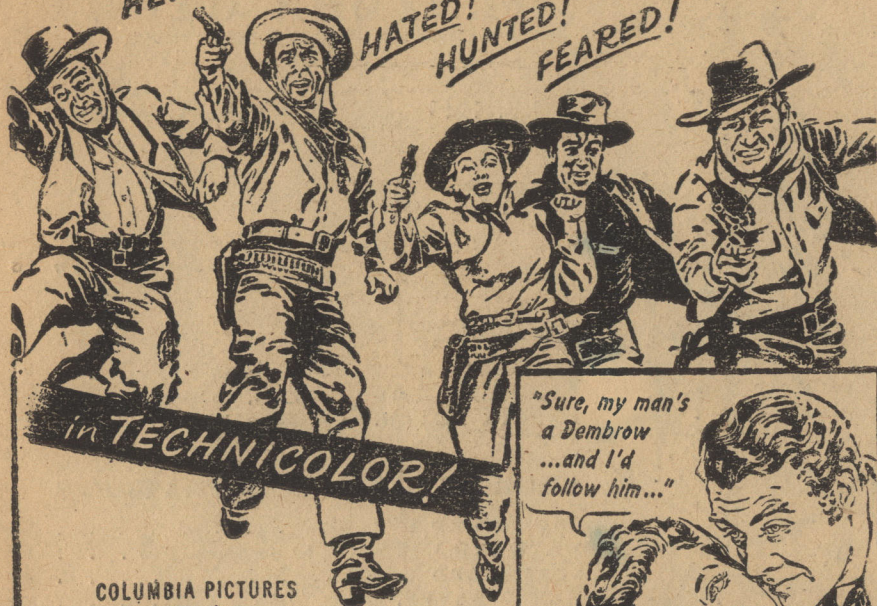
Infectious Dandruff? LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC—Quick!

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HATED!

HUNTED!

FEARED!



in **TECHNICOLOR!**

"Sure, my man's
a Dembrow
...and I'd
follow him..."



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STREET & SMITH'S
WESTERN STORY

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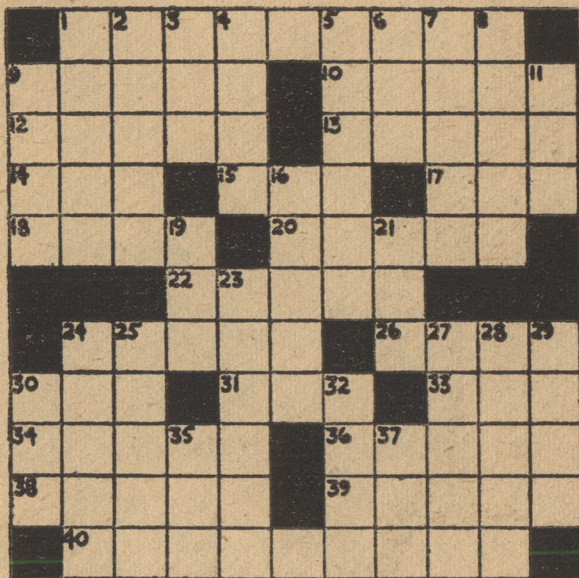
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CROSSWORD PUZZLE



ACROSS

1. Halter used for breaking a horse
9. Convict
10. Conscious of
12. Silly
13. Railroad station
14. Play division
15. Mass
17. Girl's name
18. Swarm
20. Author of "The Cloister and the Hearth"
22. Beside
24. A fact
26. Reverberate
30. Feminine possessive
31. Tree cutter

33. Gallop
34. Unmoving
36. Ascended
38. Eater
39. Cuts off
40. Stray dogies

DOWN

1. From here
2. Winged
3. Study
4. Was acquainted with
5. Infuriate
6. Be indebted to
7. Speedy
8. Eat away
9. Decree
11. Greek E
16. Appetizing smell
19. Small rug
21. Lose youth
23. Sheen
24. Material used in overalls
25. Field of contest
27. Earthenware jar
28. Rinds
29. Single bills
30. Secreted
32. Dry watercourse in the Orient
35. Clergyman's title; abbr.
37. Fabled bird

(The solution to this puzzle may be found on page 98)

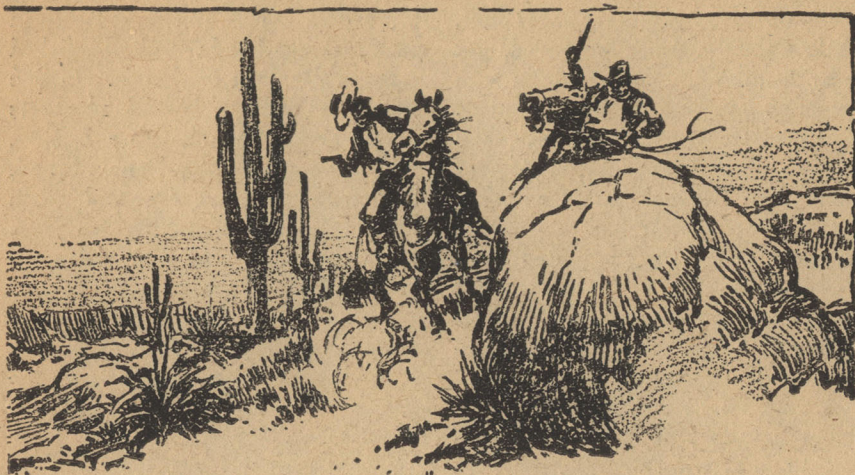


I

THE Border Jumpers had struck again. Struck at night like a wolf pack, slashing, hamstringing, crippling and killing. Then, as suddenly as they had appeared out of the moonlight, they scattered and vanished. After the thunder and crash of the stampeded cattle dimmed and

rattled into the distance on all sides, there was a grim silence that was broken by the bawling of crippled cattle left behind on the bed ground, and the stifled moan or dying prayer of a Mexican vaquero.

Miguel Nesbitt rode along with the grizzled old Cabezon who had once been major-domo there at the old Juaregi Grant in Sonora, Mexico.



To open the trail for his Cross L herd, Wiry Nesbitt needed a gun that talked the smoky language of

THE SAN MARCOS BORDER JUMPERS

by WALT COBURN

That was back in the days when Miguel's mother, who had been a Juaregi, was a little girl and when Don Ramon, Miguel's grandfather and last heir to the vast Juaregi Grant, had been *Jefe* of Sonora. Back in the days before Pancho Villa and before the fabulous Red Mike Nesbitt, Montana outlaw on the dodge in Mexico, had married Juan-

ita Juaregi. And when the rebels had come, Red Mike, Don Ramon and this same grizzled and scarred Cabezon had fought, back to back, until their cartridges were used up. When the battle was over Don Ramon was dead and the fabulous Red Mike Nesbitt was bullet-riddled and dying. Then the great Red Mike had made his final bid. He had made a lone

stand behind the thick, bullet-pocked adobe walls, making every shot count, while Cabezon, badly wounded, got away in the night into Arizona with the small boy, and the boy's mother.

Miguel Nesbitt had no more than a vague and beautiful memory of his mother. She had died of a broken heart and Cabezon had raised the only son of the legendary Red Mike Nesbitt according to his own lights that were a strange blending of savage fighting brutality and a warm-hearted devotion.

A man must learn to use weapons, Cabezon taught young Miguel Nesbitt, to fight with. And there were times when a man had need to pray to the *Señor Dios*.

"So I will teach you how to ride a horse and handle cattle, and how to fight with a gun or a knife or the fists and the feet. While at the school at the Old Pueblo of Tucson, the padres and the nuns will teach you how to pray. The rest of it, like the making of love, is something you will no doubt learn of your own accord and soon enough, no?" And a bright spark of gay light would glitter in the wicked black eyes of the old Cabezon who in his day had been something of a caballero.

Somehow, when the revolutions had fought themselves out, Cabezon had managed to salvage something of the old Juaregi Grant: The old headquarters ranch that was called the Palo Alto Ranch, its adobe buildings, its mesquite corrals, the old, old shade trees, the precious water of the Palo Alto River that never had gone dry. Cabezon had moved

down there with a small remuda of top saddle horses and stout Mexican pack mules and had recruited a picked crew of Mexican cowhands. In due time the badly scattered remnants of cattle left in the Cross L iron, which was the old Don Ramon brand, had been rounded up, and when Miguel Nesbitt was twenty-one years old Cabezon turned over the outfit to him.

"I have taught you all I know, Miguel. Is all yours now. I am old. I have a desire to sit back in the shade with my tobacco and my dreams. . . ."

There was no cattle market in Mexico. But Arizona cattle buyers would pay a fair price for Mexican cattle delivered at the border, inspected and passed by the Sanitary Board there. The nearest inspection station was at the little adobe town of San Marcos.

After a ten-day trail drive they had camped on good feed and water last night, a day's cattle drive from San Marcos. The San Marcos Peaks had looked like black cardboard carved out and stood against the star-filled sky. While Cabezon was asleep at camp young Miguel Nesbitt had ridden out when third guard was called at midnight. And he had been halfway between camp and the bedded herd when the Border Jumpers struck.

"They came from all sides," he told Cabezon now at daybreak as they rode together across the grim sign left in the wake of the stampede. "There was no stoppin' 'em. No way of tellin' how many there was or what they looked like. Hell

busted loose! Guns opened up from all sides and those wild cattle spooked. The ground shook like it was an earthquake. I didn't even know they'd killed three of the four men on guard till it was all over and they'd gone in the night. It was my first stampede, Cabezon. . . ."

Miguel Nesbitt had his father's gray-green eyes. They were blood-shot now, and cold as old ice in the crimson dawn. His hair was as black as his mother's had been, but coarser of texture and wiry like the wiry red hair of Red Mike Nesbitt. Freckles sprinkled his short nose and a week's dusty stubble of wiry black whiskers covered his blunt jaw. He had wide shoulders and a thick chest and he stood no higher than five feet seven in his shop-made boots. Right now he was fighting mad, but inside he was sick. His eyes were bleak when he leaned from his saddle to watch them wrap the bullet-riddled dead bodies of three of the Mexican cowhands in their serapes for burial.

One of the night raiders had been killed. Even in death, the man looked tough.

"String his dead carcass from the limb of that hackberry tree," Miguel told his cowhands. "Leave it hanging for the buzzards . . . for anybody who rides past here to see. . . . That dirty *cabron!*"

Young Miguel Nesbitt had not yet recovered from the brutal shock of it. Bitterly, and too late now, he recalled the prophetic words old Cabezon had spoken a month ago when Miguel had said they would take a trail herd to San Marcos.

"We will never reach San Marcos with a trail herd. The wolves of the border will hamstring us, I warn you."

"You advise against it, Cabezon?"

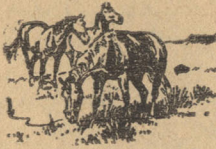
"I am but an old crow, son. Listen not too well to the croaking of an old bird whose black feathers are too molted and rusty to make a shine in the sun. The market for cattle is there, my son, at San Marcos. But the trail across the border must be opened first with a gun. The Border Jumpers are waiting for us. This saves them the work of a roundup. . . . This herd we will lose. Perhaps the second. *Quien sabe?* Who can say how long it will take to make the trail across the border safe? You are twenty-one years old. You are the son of Red Mike Nesbitt. Who am I to stop you?"

Not for anything would old Cabezon have said more or lifted a hand to halt the trail drive.

Now, in a blood-red sunrise, the white-haired major-domo was wooden-faced. A cigarette made of native tobacco rolled in a bleached cornhusk was smoking lazily to stain the drooping white mustache. His opaque black eyes glittered wickedly, while he waited for young Miguel Nesbitt to make his own further decision.

It came even more quickly and more surely than old Cabezon had hoped for.

"Take what men we've left, Cabezon. Round up that scattered trail herd. When you've got 'em gathered, hold 'em here on feed and water. Day-herd 'em; night-guard 'em. If you need more men, hire 'em."



"Ay. And you, Miguel?"

"I'm goin' to San Marcos. Alone."

Old Cabezon might have made a protest. But he saw the look in the gray-green eyes. And there was a flat-lipped grin on young Miguel Nesbitt's black-whiskered face. If those whiskers had been red, it would have been the grin of the legendary Red Mike Nesbitt, outlaw. Those were the same hard gray-green eyes of Red Mike; this was the same quiet voice that, one night so long ago, had told Cabezon adios.

"Take good care of the wife I love, Cabezon," Red Mike had said. "Raise the son who is branded with my name. When the time comes, pass along to him the names of two renegades who might outlive me tonight. The names of two men who are hidin' out yonder behind that ragtag rebel outfit. Adios now, my good friend. Tell Juanita to pray. The boy will have need of God's help from here on."

Red Mike Nesbitt had spoken the two names. Even as Cabezon voiced them now. Quietly, with a deadly bitterness.

"Go alone then, Miguel. At San Marcos or beyond, are two men. They are the ones who are behind the Border Jumpers. One of these

is named Rafe Jeffers. His brand is the Diamond Cross. The other is Dutch Brandt. He brands the Triangle Dot."

"I know the brands," said Miguel. "The Triangle Dot leans against the border. The Diamond Cross joins it on the north. I've heard of Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt. They've built up their herds from the stolen Mexican cattle. What else do I need to know about these two cattlemen, Cabezon?"

"They began as gun runners and they were promised the Juaregi Grant for the help they gave Pancho Villa. They led a bunch of renegades attached to the rebel cavalry. They tried to outdo even the Yaquis on their raids. They stole cattle and horses; they murdered old men and children; they raped women and burned out ranches. They were with the rebels who killed Don Ramon and Red Mike Nesbitt at the Palo Alto Ranch. In the end, in payment for their renegade assistance to the rebels, they got what they still call a Mexican stand-off. Their guts are still poisoned with the bitterness and hatred. Locate Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt. They should not be too difficult to find.

"When you reach San Marcos, reveal your identity to no one," continued Cabezon. "Guard your tongue. Listen with your ears. Do nothing to antagonize those two hombres. Use another name. Play it as you play poker, your cards close to your belly. Fit yourself into things at San Marcos. There is the possibility that they have bought off the law there. Be so guided. Suspicious

and wary of all men, all women. Especially any girl who might be beautiful to look at or easy to make love to . . .

"When you have learned all there is to be found out about everything, get on your horse and ride back here. And there will be two of us to fight them at the showdown. I claim that right, young Miguel. I ran from Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt once. I have waited this long, and as patiently as I knew how, for this showdown that is to come. They killed Red Mike Nesbitt and he was your father. They also killed Don Ramon who was like my own father to me. Now, adios, young Miguel. *Vaya Con Dios*. God ride with you."

II

With that advice, young Miguel Nesbitt rode away alone that night after dark. He rode a horse that wore no man's brand. The ivory-handled six-shooter that had belonged to the great Red Mike was in an old holster and his cartridge belt was filled.

He packed a saddle gun and a running iron in a homemade scabbard on his saddle. There was a thick roll of folding money in his pocket, and he sat his horse with a sort of saddle swagger when he rode down the wide dusty street of the little adobe cow town on the Mexican border. Bold, wary, reckless, young, he looked like what he wanted them to think he was: A drifting cowpuncher who had money in his pocket and was traveling light. He might be on the dodge.

More than a few pairs of hard cold eyes watched him ride boldly down the moonlit street. They watched him ride the length of the street to stable his horse at the feed and livery barn and they waited for him to show up at one of the two saloons.

There was the Maverick Saloon and Gambling House on one side of the wide street. On the other side was the Cantina, a rambling adobe built around a patio where there was a Mexican stringed orchestra playing and a percentage girl singing a *ranchero* song in a voice as clear and sweet-toned as a silver bell.

Miguel Nesbitt was hungry for music and laughter, for black-fringed dark eyes and the smile of soft red lips. He knew he was being watched as he walked up the moonlit street. And he could feel cold stares from across the street as he kicked the dust from his boots and hitched up his sagging cartridge belt and shouldered through the short swinging half doors of the Cantina.

He blinked his eyes to focus in the lamplight that was thick with tobacco smoke. The men and girls at the bar stared at him with open curiosity, the men with their hands on their guns, as he walked to the bar. From the candlelit patio came the music of the Mexican guitars and fiddle and the song of the girl.

"Everybody drink"—Miguel Nesbitt made his invitation without more than a hint of swagger—"with me. My friends call me Wiry. Ask me for no other name."

As he spoke he grinned flatly at the man standing next to him at the bar. There was a law badge pinned

to the man's flannel shirt. He was tall, lean and tow-headed, and from under sun-bleached brows a pair of cold pale blue eyes stared at Miguel.

The man rubbed the heel of his left hand across the law badge. His faint smile matched Miguel's.

"I'm Ben Hayes. Town marshal. I always give strangers the same bit of advice I'm givin' you. Take it easy, Wiry."

Miguel Nesbitt had always been proud of his mother's Mexican blood. But when they nicknamed him Wiry at school in Tucson, he liked it because it made him feel more like a Yanqui. It sounded good to hear it again.

"I'll be polite," he promised. "So polite I tip my hat to men."

But he was not looking at Town Marshal Ben Hayes when he said it. He was leaning a little forward and grinning into a pair of black-fringed amber eyes that belonged to a tawny-haired girl in man's cowpuncher pants and short denim brush jacket. There was a Stetson hat tilted back on her head, a bold look of frank appraisal in her eyes. And she was smiling faintly when Miguel lifted his hat. She was no percentage girl. She belonged out on the range and she wore those cowpuncher clothes as though she worked in them.

She leaned a little forward across the bar, a drink in her hand, to look past the tall law officer who was no longer grinning.

"I'd die on the vine an old maid"—her voice had a husky sound—"before Ben Hayes would introduce me to any man. I'm Tracy Jeffers. If

you'll ask me to dance, I'll give this badge polisher something to sull about."

Wiry met the challenge in her eyes. He pulled a handful of crumpled banknotes from his pocket, found a twenty dollar bill, balled it and flipped it at the Mexican bartender. Then he stepped back and around the tall law officer and bowed stiffly, hat in his hand, to the girl.

"Put it thataway, ma'am," he said, "and you force me to take the risk of bein' thrown into the local calaboose. Even the devil in hell hates a coward."

Tracy Jeffers' tawny hair was the color of old burnished gold but her eyebrows were black, almost heavy for a girl. A faint flush deepened the tanned color of her smooth skin. Tracy Jeffers had beauty and knew it.

She put down her untouched drink and took Wiry's arm. The grip of her slim hand was strong. Her fingers tightened around the hard bulge of his upper arm as though she was feeling of his muscle. It sent a queer feeling through him. He was making an enemy of Ben Hayes and that tall, cold-eyed man was the law here at San Marcos. Miguel Nesbitt could not get off to a worse start, according to the advice of old Cabezon.

"Watch your step, Wiry." He spoke it aloud as he let Tracy steer him out of the crowded, smoky bar-room into the fresh air and candle-light of the tiled patio.

She was almost as tall as he was and their eyes were about on a level when her head turned. Her shoulder was against him, her laugh husky.

"And that goes double," Wiry heard her saying, "for you, Tracy."

Then she wrinkled her short nose. "I'm prideful," she said. "I hate to be thrown at a man. My Uncle Rafe can be almighty crude about it. I'm glad you came along, Wiry. Sometimes the look in Ben Hayes' cold blue eyes gives me the shivers, as though somebody just walked across my grave. Ben Hayes doesn't own me . . . yet."

"But he'd like to."

"So would Dutch Brandt's son and heir, Pete. Maybe I should go back and tell Ben Hayes to step across the street and he and the spurring Pete could lick their wounds in company. I had to quirt Pete off most of the way to town. He's like that when he's half drunk. Pawing . . . Ugh!"

She led Wiry to a table for two in a corner where the candles in paper bags sent flickering lights into the dark shadows. Wiry seated her in a chair and sat down across the table.

"Don't mind me, Wiry." Tracy reached her hand across the small table and took hold of his. "I'm not in the habit of telling my troubles to strangers. But I was about to throw that drink of cheap Mexican wine into the pale eyes of the law when you breezed in. It was a chance I couldn't let myself miss to pay off that badge polisher for something. . . . First Pete Brandt, then Ben Hayes. It looked as though I was in for a dismal evening. My first night in town in weeks. . . . You'll never know how good you

looked to me when you came in to what I like to call my rescue." She squeezed his hand and leaned across the table. The look in her amber eyes made him flush. She laughed softly and let go, her skin glowing in the candlelight.

"I'm flirting with you, Wiry, like some cheap percentage girl. I won't do it again. I don't know just why, but I want you to like me."

Her smile was fading slowly and she was looking straight into his eyes as though she was searching for something she hoped to find. Something in his eyes that would give her the confidence to put all her trust in him. The way a man looks at another man to size him up before he takes him in on some deal that calls for honesty and loyalty.

Wiry understood it as he met her disconcerting scrutiny with a level look that in turn probed the girl's eyes. He felt flattered by it. Somehow it put him at ease and he picked up the hand Tracy had taken away.

"I want you to like me, Tracy. It'd make me proud to be your friend. There's nothin' cheap about you. You're different from any girl I ever met."

"How many girls have you met in your life?" Tracy smiled, putting them back again on a bantering, safer ground. It wasn't that she distrusted him. But rather as if she was satisfied with what she had read in his eyes and perhaps would, when the sign was right, make more of it.

"Not too many," he admitted. "But I'm still young." He let go her hand.

Tracy reached up and took the

sack of tobacco and book of cigarette papers from the pocket of his blue flannel shirt. She rolled and lit a cigarette and handed it to him, then shoved the tobacco and papers back into his pocket. It was a strange gesture to make and it was sort of intimate and they smiled easily into each other's eyes. Wiry had never seen a girl roll and light a cigarette. Done by anyone but Tracy Jeffers it would have seemed cheap and vulgar.

"Sometimes on night guard," she said, "I smoke. Women will smoke some day and once men get over the shock of it, they won't mind. It's like my wearing cowpuncher clothes. It might make me look tough. But I can't make a hand in skirts and a side saddle. With Uncle Rafe getting old and stove-up, ramrodding the Diamond Cross is my job. . . . I'm talking when I should be listening."

Wiry was thinking the same thing, wondering why she was telling so much to a rank stranger. He cut her a quick look and got a little shock of surprise. Tracy Jeffers was staring past him at somebody else. Some of the color had gone from her skin and her amber eyes were narrowed to slivers of yellow light. Then her lips barely moved.

"Don't look around, Wiry. Just get up and move your chair around here next to mine. Do it so it will look as though you want to sit closer to the gal that's been flirting with you. . . . Didn't anybody ever tell you always to sit with your back to the wall when you're a stranger in a strange land?"

Wiry never looked around. Forcing a grin, he shifted his chair around next to Tracy's and felt the chair back against the high solid adobe wall of the patio. Tracy Jeffers' hand was in his again. It was cold now. He looked up casually in the direction where she had stared.

One of the men standing in the open doorway to the barroom was a huge bulk. He stood well over six feet in his boots and had a large, solid paunch that bulged up into a tremendous chest. Heavy shoulders threatened the seams of his white shirt and his red bull neck was a straight line up to a bullet head that was covered with close-cropped bristles that were white and stiff as boar's bristles. A Kaiser Wilhelm mustache twisted upwards at the ends. The eyes that looked out of the beefy-red, jowled face were small, pale-gray and merciless. He wore a pair of silver-handled six-shooters in a double shoulder harness that put the gun butts forward under each huge arm.

"Dutch Brandt"—Tracy's voice was hardly audible—"and his son, Pete."

Pete Brandt was big, heavy-boned and solid. His hair, the color of new straw, was curly, almost kinky. He had a heavy jaw and pale eyes that were bloodshot.

Dutch Brandt and his son were both staring at Wiry. As Wiry looked up, Dutch made a gesture with a big puffy-looking hand and turned back into the crowded barroom.

"Make some kind of a pass at me, Wiry," Tracy whispered. "It's the

only kind of sign language that Pete Brandt savvies. Act like you meant it."

Wiry's face flushed as he put his arm around Tracy's shoulders and pulled her against him. He felt her shudder a little. Then her shoulder was warm against his and she tilted her head. Her red lips had a frozen smile and there was a strange look in her amber eyes, like fear, when Wiry pulled her closer and bent down and kissed her. For a short moment her mouth was pressed against his and he felt the quivering intake of her breath like a stifled sob. Then she was pushing him away with both hands. Her laugh was brittle as she slapped him hard across the face.

"You work too fast, cowboy."

Wiry heard the jingle of big Chihuahua spurs, a thick, snarling voice. Pete Brandt's big rawboned bulk loomed up in front of him. Wiry came up out of his chair with a twisting jump. It was a small, home-made chair, strong, its seat and back made of laced rawhide. Wiry swung it up and over and down across the side of Pete Brandt's head and face with one swift unbroken movement that came from practice.

Pete's head was knocked sideways. Blood spurted from his nose and his pale eyes were glazed and pain-blinded for a moment. There was a six-shooter in his big hand but he never got to use it. Wiry lifted the chair again in a back-handed swing and it crashed and splintered as it came down on Pete's kinky yellow head. Pete's legs buckled at the knees and he fell over forward across

the table, upsetting it with a heavy crash and knocking out the lighted candle stuck in sand inside the big paper bag where it had been on the table.

There had been a dozen or twenty such lighted candles in the patio. Wiry heard a brittle voice that he thought belonged to Tracy.

"Pronto!"

The candles went out. As if the one shrill word had blown them all out to plunge the open patio into darkness.

But the lamplight still showed inside the barroom. Dutch Brandt's huge bulk silhouetted against its smoky yellow light. He had a silver-handled six-shooter in each hand.

"You'll never get a better chance, Wiry." Tracy's husky whisper sounded close to Wiry in the darkness. "It's an easy gut shot."

A cold shiver ran along Wiry Nesbitt's spine. For the fraction of a second he was tempted to shoot. His ivory-handled six-shooter was in his hand. His back was against the wall as he crouched there, Pete Brandt's big hulk motionless at his feet.

Suddenly he recalled old Cabezon's warning. It came a little late but not too late to keep him from killing Dutch Brandt.

"Not thataway, lady." His voice was flat-toned.

"Then let's get out of here."

He had not noticed the small heavy wooden gate behind them until Tracy opened it and shoved him through and shut it behind them. They stood outside the patio wall half hidden in the black shadows.

"Reach for the moon!" Town Marshal Ben Hayes' toneless voice sounded from somewhere. "I warned you to take it easy, stranger."

"Mebby you'd better give it up, Wiry," Tracy said quietly. "That glory hunter plays for keeps."

III

Wiry Miguel Nesbitt cursed himself silently for a lame-brained idiot, a sucker and worse. He stood on widespread legs, hands lifted to the level of his wide shoulders, and let the lean, tall Ben Hayes walk around behind him to take his gun. The niece of Rafe Jeffers had, in the course of a very short time, managed to get him into a mess.

Then something happened behind his back. He heard a muffled, thudding sound, felt Ben Hayes lurch against him as though he was drunk and stumbling on his legs. Wiry whirled. He saw the town marshal's right arm lifted, the six-shooter barrel clubbing down at his head. Wiry ducked and whirled and his hands came down, doubled into hard fists as he crouched and drove them, one-two, into Ben Hayes' lean belly.

The tough town marshal of San Marcos grunted and doubled up, his wind driven out by the short, vicious jabs. Then pulling his gun, Wiry clubbed the law officer across the head with the barrel. Hayes fell over sideways and lay there motionless in the black shadow.

Wiry was breathing heavily now, his gun gripped in his hand.

"We'd better be on our way, pardner." Tracy's voice sounded behind

him. "This wears out your welcome in San Marcos."

"What happened?"

"Ben has a neat little trick when he steps in behind a man to pull his gun fangs. He bends a gun barrel across his prisoner's head. Saves the wear and tear on the handcuffs, he claims. I kicked him in the shins. Let's postpone the talk till we get on our way home."

Inside the patio there was a lot of confusion. Dutch Brandt's guttural voice lifted to a bull bellow; lights going on; a percentage girl's high-pitched laugh, shrill with hysteria.

Tracy had hold of Wiry's arm. Her tawny hair was tumbled and she had her hat in her hand.

"I fanned Ben with it when I kicked him in the shins." Her amber eyes glowed like shining stars. Her mouth was red and warm when she pulled Wiry's head close and kissed him hard.

"Now will you come along peaceful?" Her laugh was unsteady.

Wiry went along. They followed the black shadow of the wall out to a patch of heavy brush. Two saddled horses were tied there.

"Ben Hayes rides a long stirrup." Tracy motioned to one of the saddled horses as she untied the other. "We'll pull up after we've left the town behind a few miles and you can shorten 'em."

Both horses wore the Diamond Cross brand. Tracy rode her own saddle. They went several miles in silence, traveling at a long lope. Then they pulled up and Wiry dismounted and unlaced one stirrup while Tracy shortened the other.

"Up about three holes," he said.

Tracy laughed softly. She said if there was anything that would make a man mad it was to have somebody shorten the stirrup leathers. Providing, she added, that Ben Hayes was still alive to bellyache about anything on this earth.

They mounted and rode on at a trot. Tracy said it served Ben Hayes right for adding up his own tally.

"He had our fresh horses saddled and waiting," she explained. "For what he called our honeymoon ride. And what do you think that badge polisher was giving me for our wedding present, Wiry?"

Wiry shook his head. He said he never was good at guessing.

"The Brandts. Dutch and Pete. Their big hides hung on the Diamond Cross fence. Of course Ben meant to pick up the bounty money Uncle Rafe Jeffers has put on the Brandt hides. And that adds up to somewhere in five figures. You'd be picking it up if you did a good job on Pete, then gut-shot big Dutch."

"I don't want that kind of money, Tracy."

"I know. You've got a bankroll. And even if you were broke, you still wouldn't hire out for fighting wages. So I shanghai'd you."

"Is that what you did?"

"Isn't that what you've been thinking while we left the lights of San Marcos behind?"

Wiry grinned crookedly and nodded. He said he'd been trying to figure it out but had given it up.

"I guess I'll have to check the bet back to you, lady."

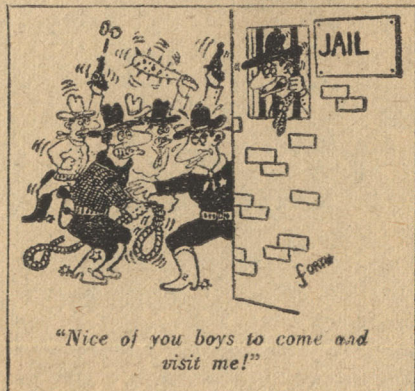
Tracy Jeffers shook her head.

"I'm no lady. There's too much wildcat in me. I'm asking you no embarrassing questions. But when you rode into town, Ben Hayes watched you too closely. And Pete Brandt was across the street at the Maverick looking you and your horse over. And there were others sizing you up.

"I met Pete Brandt on my way to town," Tracy explained. "Pete came from below the Mexican line. His horse was leg-weary and he looked as though he'd been on the prowl. He had a bottle of tequila he'd nibbled at and he brags when he's half drunk. He said something about a trail herd from the old Palo Alto Ranch. Dropped a few broad hints I could take any way I liked. And he tried to paw me as we rode along. There's a contract of marriage between Pete Brandt and Tracy Jeffers. Drawn up years ago by Dutch Brandt and Uncle Rafe Jeffers. . . . Or would you know about it already?"

"No." Wiry's voice was curt.

He looked at her sharply.



Tracy cut him a sidelong look and bit her lower lip. Her husky voice went on.

"When I got to town I gave Pete the slip. And then I ran into Town Marshal Ben Hayes. Ben was in the patio at the Cantina wolfing a sundown supper as though he hadn't eaten in a week. He needed a shave and a change of clothes. I had a cup of coffee at his table. I told Ben why I'd come to town. Uncle Rafe Jeffers had sent him a message. I was to tell Ben Hayes that Rafe Jeffers had doubled the bounty on the Brandts and thrown his niece Tracy in for boot."

Wiry turned sideways in his saddle. Tracy's red-lipped smile looked more grim than inviting in the moonlight.

"The Brandts have put a bounty on the tough hide of Rafe Jeffers," she went on. "It's a standing reward. More or less of an open secret. Uncle Rafe was doubling it. Tossing the orphaned daughter of his dead brother Bob Jeffers into the jackpot for boot. That's what happens when thieves fall out. And Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt are a pair of grand larceny pardners. Now don't tell me *that's* news!"

"I know about Rafe Jeffers," said Wiry Miguel Nesbitt slowly, "and Dutch Brandt."

"I'll get on with it, then," smiled Tracy. "Ben Hayes finished supper, then left me to get himself cleaned up. He said he'd seen Pete Brandt ride into town. Dutch Brandt was already there. Ben Hayes is no braggart. He kills first, then says little or nothing about it. But he

told me that this was our wedding night. He'd get his chores done first. Then when he'd killed Dutch Brandt and Pete, we'd ride on to the Diamond Cross Ranch for Uncle Rafe's blessing and the reward money. Pick up a parson on the way.

"I was with Ben Hayes when you rode into town," Tracy went on. "I watched him when he was looking you over. When you'd ridden on past, I asked him who you were. He gave me one of his rare smiles. You've never seen a lobo wolf smile. Neither have I. But if a wolf smiled, he'd look like Ben Hayes. Then he told the bartender to open a bottle of champagne for me. That cheap, vile-tasting Mexican champagne. . . . That was the drink I had in my hand when you came into the Cantina. Ben Hayes had just asked me a question when you came in. Do you know what he asked me, Wiry?"

"I give up," said Wiry slowly, "without tryin'."

"Did you ever hear of Red Mike Nesbitt?"

"Uh?" Wiry grunted like he'd been kicked in the belly.

Tracy smiled faintly. Her amber eyes narrowed a little.

"That," she said quietly, "is the question Ben Hayes, Town Marshal of San Marcos and hired killer from the Diamond Cross and Triangle, asked me. Just before you came into the Cantina."

Wiry's heavy black brows were pulled together in a scowl. They must have ridden a mile or more in silence before he turned his head and looked at her and grinned. It

was a flat-lipped sort of grin, a little lopsided.

"You win, lady."

"I told you before, Wiry, 'Wild-cat' is the name for Tracy Jeffers."

"Red Mike Nesbitt was my father."

"My father," said the girl, matching his quiet tone, "was Bob Jeffers. Half brother of Rafe Jeffers. Nobody ever heard of him because he never amounted to much. Poor but honest. He had a little cow outfit, a wife, a kid daughter. Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt pinned a law badge on him. The same badge Ben Hayes now wears. My father was Town Marshal at San Marcos when my mother died. Her death hit him hard and he reached for the bottle. But drunk or sober, they couldn't use him and his law badge to hide behind. So somebody killed him. And Uncle Rafe Jeffers adopted me. Since I can remember, I've made a hand around a cow outfit. I was fifteen when Uncle Rafe adopted me. I could make a hand on a ranch or on a roundup. And when I showed some promise of not being too ugly to catch a man's eye, Uncle Rafe Jeffers saw where I'd come in handy. Hence the contract of marriage he and Dutch Brandt drew up. And later on, Uncle Rafe let Ben Hayes get notions. . . . You'll enjoy meeting my Uncle Rafe Jeffers."

Tracy Jeffers' husky voice had become almost harsh. Then she laughed.

Wiry reined his horse so close that their tapaderos locked. He reached out and took her hand that was

doubled into a tight fist. He held it, prying open her fingers. She stared straight ahead, her amber eyes unblinking and glittering in the moonlight and that frozen smile twisting her red-lipped mouth.

"Listen, Tracy," Wiry's voice was tense, unsteady, "a long time ago, you said you wanted me to like you. . . . It's gone fu'ther than that—"

"Stop it, Wiry. Don't . . . don't be decent to me. Don't you understand? I . . . used you. I wanted you to kill Ben Hayes. . . . I ribbed that ruckus you got into with Pete Brandt, hoping you'd kill him. I tried to get you to kill Dutch Brandt. I'm taking you now to the Diamond Cross Ranch to kill Rafe Jeffers. That's the way I'm treating the only decent man I ever met in my life . . ."

Tracy Jeffers pulled up. Without looking at him she pointed to a dim trail that twisted down through the broken hills towards Mexico.

"That's your trail back to your Palo Alto Ranch. Take it. Go back there where you came from. Stay there. In a few hours they'll have the trail blocked with a bushwhacker trap but right now it's still open. Take it. Forget tonight. Forget me. I'm all right. The idea of marrying Pete Brandt or Ben Hayes never scared me. I've been schooled for it, groomed for it, like a prize filly. Some day I'll own the Diamond Cross and the Triangle. I'm doing all right for myself. Anyhow, Pete Brandt and Ben Hayes are white men. You're half Mexican, aren't you, Wiry? Your mother was a Juaregi . . ."

Wiry's tanned face whitened a little. He let go of her hand that was again knotting into a tight fist. She kept looking straight ahead. Her face was drained of color and her eyes were glinting yellow in the moonlight.

"My mother," Wiry said tonelessly, "was a Mexican. Her name was Juanita Juaregi. She was the most beautiful woman on earth. And she had the heart of a saint. I've always bin almighty proud that I have her blood in my veins. Right now, tonight, I thank the *Señor Dios* for my mother."

He wasn't looking at Tracy so he did not see the tears that welled to her eyes to melt the hard yellow glitter. She had reined her horse and headed away from him to take the trail northward to the Diamond Cross Ranch. Wiry started to take the trail into Mexico when he heard the sound of shod hoofs somewhere in the night. The sound came from the north, from along the trail that led from the Diamond Cross Ranch.

Tracy heard it and reined her horse around. The sob she had been choking back was torn from her aching throat. She whirled her horse around and her horse and Wiry's nearly collided.

"Behind the brush!" Her voice was a harsh whisper. "Pronto! Please, God! Don't let them kill you, Wiry!"

Tears wet her cheeks as she slid a .30-30 saddle gun from its scabbard.

Wiry yanked the carbine from the saddle scabbard under his leg. His eyes were as gray green as ice. Teeth bared in a grin, he looked at the girl.

His grin spread when he heard her whisper.

"What I said about your mother, Wiry . . . forgive me if you can. I said it to hurt you. To send you away. My own mother was Mexican. She knew your mother. . . . That's Uncle Rafe Jeffers coming. We'll hide here till he gets past. Then take me to Mexico. To your Palo Alto Ranch. And let me go on alone from there . . ."

Wiry crowded his horse closer. He leaned from his saddle and kissed Tracy, feeling her lips quiver.

Then he whirled his horse and rode from behind the thick manzanita brush and high boulders, to meet the lone rider who came down the trail.

Horse and rider were still a hundred yards away, coming at a long trot. There was a clearing, like a small park, where the trail forked. The lone rider was in the broad middle of it when Wiry spurred his horse out from behind the manzanita thicket. He reined up sharply, and the white moonlight glinted on the blued steel of the saddle gun that slid into sight.

But before either Wiry or Jeffers had time to lift a gun, a carbine cracked and a .30-30 bullet ripped the high, dented crown of Jeffers' black Stetson hat. The lone rider ducked instinctively.

"*Alto! Alto ahí!*" The barked challenge cracked through the gun echo.

Wiry Nesbitt stiffened, his saddle carbine half raised. A slow grin spread across his tanned face.

"Cabezon!" he called softly.

"*Alto ahí!* You will halt there, *Señor Cabron!*" The deep-toned voice of old Cabezon sounded like the tolling of a death bell. "Or by the soul of Don Ramon, you shall die. I am Cabezon and I have waited too long for this. Yonder on horseback is the son of Red Mike Nesbitt. He has the debt of his father to pay off."

It was spoken partly in the Yankee language, some of it in Cabezon's native Mexican tongue, but all of it was grim and final. And the old Mexican in his worn charro clothes, rode out of the brush and granite boulders that flanked the trail from Mexico.

Wiry Nesbitt rode on at a running walk to get his first good look at Rafe Jeffers.

IV

The owner of the Diamond Cross rode a long stirrup. Tall, rawboned, gaunt, gray, he sat stiff-backed in the saddle, his leathery face with its big jutting hawk beak shadowed under the low-pulled brim of his big black hat, so that his eyes glittered like slits of pale light from a blackish gray mask of hate. His big teeth bared in a wolfish snarl, he spat a stream of tobacco juice at the ground and lifted both arms above the level of his gaunt shoulders. The short-barreled saddle carbine was gripped in one big bony hand. If there was a yellow streak of fear in Rafe Jeffers, he did not let it show now as his slitted eyes stared at death.

"Watch him, Wiry!" called Tracy

from behind the brush. "Uncle Rafe is treacherous!"

Rafe Jeffers heard her and his wolfish grin spread. Wiry and Cabezon rode at him from opposite sides, their guns covering him.

When they reined up they were close enough for Wiry Nesbitt to get a good look at Rafe Jeffers. He looked as though he was poisoned inside with bitterness and hatred and the poison seeped rankly out through his pores. His head was thrust forward on a long corded unwashed neck, and the neck was set between his bony shoulders like the head of a black buzzard. A cross between wolf and buzzard.

"Git it over with, then," he snarled like a trapped wolf.

"That would let you off too easy." Cabezon's black eyes glinted wickedly in the shadow of his sombrero. "*Ladron!* Thief! *Cabron!* Too easy. . . . I have waited too long for this, to let it be done too quickly. Is a custom somewhere to give a condemned man one request and to grant it. So I make that request for you and allow you to work it out for yourself. . . . You would like to see your compadre Dutch Brandt die first, no?"

Rafe Jeffers' slitted eyes glittered evilly. "Lemme kill that big pot-gutted double-crosser and you kin do what you damned want with me."

Cabezon reined his horse back, motioning for Wiry to do likewise.

"Ride on, then, *ladron*. We will be following not too far behind. The meeting is already being arranged between Dutch Brandt and Rafe Jeffers. These two who were the



compadres in many crimes until their greed poisoned their blood and they placed wolf bounty on each other's hides. . . . You will know the meeting place when you get there. It is the same place where you have met before to divide stolen things. Where Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt always have met to divide the stolen things and to brag about the murder of brave men and children and women. It is at that same place tonight that Dutch Brandt and Rafe Jeffers will meet together for the last time to collect in person, with guns, the bounty you have placed on your wolf hides. Ride on your way to death, *cabron*."

Rafe Jeffers lowered his long arms. He shoved his carbine back into its saddle scabbard and for a long moment Wiry stared into the most merciless pair of eyes he had ever seen in the head of a man. Wolf eyes, pale, cold, cunning, yellowish gray-green. Then Jeffers turned his head to look at old Cabezon.

"In your own language," said Jeffers, "that name Cabezon means Stubborn. You was well named. . . . But don't reach to rake in the jackpot till the chips is all down. I hope to meet you in hell, Cabezon. So long."

Rafe Jeffers touched his horse with

the spurs and rode on. When he reached the manzanita thicket he reined up. The guns of Wiry Nesbitt and old Cabezon covered him and he dropped his bridle reins over the saddlehorn and lifted both empty hands to the level of his shoulders.

"So you throwed in with the enemy." His voice grated harshly as he spoke to Tracy Jeffers.

"I've thrown in with the only decent man I've ever known," his niece answered. "If I thought there was a chance of your doing him any harm, I'd kill you now. If there's anything on this earth or beyond it that you hold in your black heart, you'd better swear by it right now that you'll never harm Wiry Miguel Nesbitt. Because my gun sights are lined on you, Uncle Rafe. I'm going to kill you."

Rafe Jeffers sat ramrod stiff in his saddle. "Hold your fire, young un. I taken a look at Red Mike Nesbitt's whelp. By Satan, you got yourself a man who'll do to take along. You're well mated. . . . There's nothin' on earth or in hell that Rafe Jeffers holds to. But I never yet broke my word to man or woman. You got it now. I'll never point a gun at Miguel Nesbitt. . . . When I'm dead, bury my carcass in a grave at the Diamond Cross Ranch. The rest of the ranch is yourn. I've stole the Triangle Dot from Dutch Brandt with a runnin' iron. That's yourn. I'll gutshoot big Dutch to clinch the deal. If young Wiry Miguel Nesbitt is a true son of Red Mike Nesbitt, he'll take care of Pete Brandt and Ben Hayes. If he ain't man enough to

git the job done, then he ain't no fit mate for Wildcat Tracy Jeffers. But I'll gamble on it enough right now to wish you both luck. You'll need it on this hidebound earth. So long, Tracy."

"So long, Uncle Rafe." Tracy let the hammer of her gun down.

Rafe Jeffers rode on alone. To his rendezvous with death.

Old Cabezon swept off his sombrero and bowed across the wide flat silver-crusted horn of his Mexican saddle. His bushy hair was silvery in the moonlight.

"Señorita!" A smile softened his handsome face that was like something carved from old mahogany.

"It is a long time, señorita," he said in his deep, soft-toned voice, "since last I saw you. You were very small. You were frightened and you cried. Then I picked you up and you crowed and your eyes were stars. . . . The eyes have not changed.

"Your house, the house of your father and mother," he went on, "gave shelter one stormy night to a young mother and her small son and a wounded Mexican. We had come a long distance and the way had been dangerous and the long miles many times that long because we carried a heavy burden of grief.

"Your house gave us shelter and safety. Your mama fed us. She bandaged my wounds. And while we slept, your father gave us his protection and the protection of the law whose badge he wore. Bob Jeffers was a brave man, unafraid and honest to his law badge. Before we moved on, the mother of Miguel Nesbitt took from around

her neck a fine small chain of gold to which was attached a small gold cross. She placed it around the neck of the small child called Tracy. . . ."

Tracy Jeffers reached inside her flannel blouse. Smiling, she held the gold cross that hung from a thin gold chain around her neck.

Cabezón nodded. His smile faded. "That was why Dutch Brandt, with the cold-blooded permission of his compadre, Rafe Jeffers, murdered Bob Jeffers."

"For that act of decency," Tracy nodded. "For other things that stood for all my father was." And she let Wiry take her hand and hold it.

Cabezón smiled. Then the old Mexican said it was time for them to ride on. He went ahead to let them follow.

V

Tracy Jeffers refused gently but very firmly to ride on to the Diamond Cross Ranch, or to San Marcos. She knew the location of the place where Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt were in the habit of meeting. She said that she could guide them there by a shorter route than Rafe Jeffers was taking.

"Wiry asked me to marry him," she explained, smiling at Cabezon, "I took him up on it. My place is with him or somewhere near him. If he gets killed, I don't want to live any longer than it will take to kill whoever killed the man I love. Surely, Cabezon, you understand enough about a woman's love to know how I feel. The years have whitened your hair, perhaps, but they have

not dimmed the sparkle in the eyes of a great caballero. Please!"

"You can't win, Cabezon," said Wiry. "She's bound to be underfoot."

"Was I underfoot when I got you out of the patio at the Cantina? Or when I kicked Ben Hayes in the shins and slapped him across the eyes with my hat?"

Wiry shifted uneasily in his saddle under the eyes of old Cabezon.

"Perhaps I should tell Cabezon all about it," smiled Tracy. "How I snared you into all that town mischief."

Old Cabezon smiled grimly. He said already he knew about it from men he had sent to follow Wiry to San Marcos.

"I was there myself," he admitted. "I saw you ride out of town. I waited long enough to watch Dutch Brandt and his son Pete and that Ben Hayes drinking together at the Maverick Saloon. I heard them talk together, their voices loud with drink. Nobody pays attention to an old Mexican in the corner sleeping off the jag of a *borrochon*. That is how I know they plan to meet at daybreak at that meeting place. It is where their Border Jumpers have corraled the Cross L cattle they stampeded, then gathered again and trailed through the gap in the border below San Marcos—."

"They got our trail herd, Cabezon?" Wiry broke in.

"Ay. More than half. Perhaps two-thirds of the cattle were easily rounded up when they'd run themselves leg-weary. I knew by the sign. So when you had ridden away

from camp I took what few men I needed and cold-trailed you to San Marcos. Let the Border Jumpers do our work of trailing the Cross L herd across the Border to the hidden corrals beyond the gap in the border. Tomorrow, the next day, the cattle will be inspected and the duty paid. And sold perhaps to the Diamond Cross."

"*Como no?*" smiled Tracy. "Why not?"

Wiry grinned uncertainly. Tracy winked at old Cabezon who winked back at her, a twinkle in his wicked black eyes.

"Uncle Rafe was on his way to the hidden corrals tonight, Wiry," she told him. "That's where they always meet to brand stolen cattle and dicker for their rustlers' share. Dutch Brandt always takes his son Pete to back his play. Uncle Rafe has Ben Hayes along. And he takes me with him to sort of balance the scales." She turned to old Cabezon. "They got the cattle through the gap, then?"

"There was nobody to stop them," said Cabezon.

"But things got kind o' jangled up, there in town," said Wiry. "Me showin' up; you and me pullin' out together. . . . The ruckus at the Cantina . . ."

"With a fair-to-middling-sized cattle drive corraled," said Tracy Jeffers, "Dutch Brandt will take Pete and he'll be there to represent his Triangle Dot interests. Rafe Jeffers was on his way there when he got stopped. He'll be there. So will Ben Hayes. Cattle rustlers are like that. That Cross L drive is worth

money that's better than small change."

Tracy led the way now, riding in the lead. She followed no trail but she was never lost. This rough country was her back yard, she said. And when the first gray of dawn streaked the sky, she reined up. From a distance came the sound of bawling cattle, the Cross L trail herd being corralled.

"This is where I bush up," said Tracy. "You and Cabezon go on alone from here. I promised you I wouldn't be underfoot."

Wiry nodded. He looked at Cabezon. The old Mexican pinched out the coal of a cornhusk cigarette.

"You heard the talk between me and Uncle Rafe," said Tracy quietly. "Perhaps he meant it. But most mebby he lied. This much you can gamble on: Before Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt start shooting at each other, they'll gang up on Cabezon. Uncle Rafe promised not to take a shot at you, Wiry, but I'm willing to bet he'll make a deal with Ben Hayes for Ben to kill you. Or he might decide to check it to Pete, or to both Ben and Pete.

"Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt have always been pardners in everything. Double-crossing each other is a part of it. They even put a bounty on each other's hides. That's how they play it. Rough and treacherous and no holds barred. Nobody has ever tried for the big bounty they put on each other's scalps, and lived to brag about it. More than a few tough gun-slingers got killed trying for it. If any man killed either Rafe

Jeffers or Dutch Brandt, he'd never live to collect a dollar bounty. He'd get paid off in bullets. Ben Hayes knows that. He knew it last night when he told me he'd kill Dutch and Pete Brandt. That's why he was going to hold me in bondage of some kind until Uncle Rafe laid the money on the barrel head or until he'd killed Uncle Rafe. . . . That's the way Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt weed out men who might turn traitor to either outfit. I've heard Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt laugh about it when they were drunk.

"So right now, with Cabezon and the son of Red Mike Nesbitt showing up for a threat, Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt will fight back to back. So will Ben Hayes and Pete Brandt. You have four men to kill down yonder at the hidden corrals."

Old Cabezon chuckled softly, his black eyes wicked as sin. He nodded his grizzled head.

"That is the way it should be," he said. "That is how I figured it would be when I let Rafe Jeffers ride away alive. Not to kill Dutch Brandt, but to warn him that Cabezon is coming to pay off the debt of Don Ramon, that the son of Red Mike Nesbitt is now of age and has his dead father's gun in his hand. As for this son of Dutch Brandt and this killer Ben Hayes, they shall be taken care of. Four of them. So you will hold that small gold cross in your hand and say a prayer, then, for this man you love. And the *Señor Dios* will even the odds that are against us."

It was getting light enough to make out the vague shape of the

several huge corrals and the long branding chute that were made of twisted mesquite, over ten feet high and linked together by gates. Beyond the corrals was a small adobe cabin, perhaps two hundred yards from the cattle corrals. And on the other side of the cabin was a horse corral. Tracy pointed them out. The big corrals were filled with Mexican cattle that bawled and milled around or sulked in their tracks and hooked sluggishly at other steers that crowded them.

The cattle had been corraled and left there while the Border Jumper tough cowhands had ridden on to the Triangle Dot Ranch to eat and change horses, Tracy said. They would wait at the Brandt ranch nearby for further orders. Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt always kept their hired hands at a far distance when they held one of these meetings. What the Border Jumpers didn't hear or see, they couldn't tell about later.

Tracy pointed to the adobe cabin. "They'll ride up and leave their horses at the corral, then go into the adobe cabin for their powwow. They haven't gotten here yet. If you'd slip down there now and be in the cabin when they rode up. . . ." She left it unfinished, with a shrug.

That would be the simplest way and the most deadly. But even when she suggested it, Tracy knew it was too much of a bushwhacker way to suit Wiry Nesbitt. Old Cabezon might favor it because he was wise and experienced. He was nodding grim approval, his black eyes glinting like live sparks. But Wiry shook

his head. He shifted his weight to his left stirrup and slid the carbine from its saddle scabbard under his right leg.

"I'd like to take 'em on," he said, "yonder in the open."

"That was the way his father, the great Red Mike, fought his enemies," Cabezon told Tracy. "It is his way, too. Nothing, not even his love for you, can change him."

Tracy smiled gamely. "I would not want to change my man in any way, Cabezon." She leaned from her saddle and kissed Wiry. His arm went around her and he held her for a moment.

In his right hand Wiry gripped a saddle gun. Tracy's hand held her cross.

Then Cabezon pointed with his saddle carbine. They sat their horses behind the heavy brush and rocks on the hill above the corrals and adobe cabin and watched four men on horseback take shape out of a gray dawn.

Ben Hayes and Pete Brandt rode a short distance ahead. Behind them came Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt, riding side by side.

Sounds carry with a startling clarity in the high dry air of the Arizona mountains. Rafe Jeffers was lifting his voice to make himself heard above the bawling of penned cattle. But he had no need to talk that loudly. To Wiry Nesbitt, Cabezon and Tracy Jeffers it sounded like a challenge.

"Old Cabezon and young Nesbitt will be showin' up here directly," the rasping voice of Rafe Jeffers sounded plainly. "Me'n you will take on that

damned old Cabezon, Dutch—fer old times' sake. It'll be up to your Pete and to Ben Hayes to shoot it out with young Wiry Nesbitt. That son of Red Mike's has already trimmed Pete and Ben. I'll gamble my Diamond Cross outfit agin' your Triangle Dot, Dutch, that Wiry Nesbitt picks up the marbles."

"That's a bet!" Dutch Brandt's guttural voice rumbled.

"Then"—there was a snarl now in the voice of Rafe Jeffers—"I'll fight you fer the big jackpot, Dutch. Winner take all, the devil takes the loser."

"I'll call that bet, too," roared Dutch.

All four riders were out in the broad middle of the open clearing now. Rafe Jeffers must have known, or had made a cunning guess, that Cabezon and Wiry were already somewhere within sight and hearing, that Tracy had fetched them here by the short-cut trail, because he lifted his old black hat and held it above his head as if in grim salute. Then he jammed it back on his head and yanked out his saddle gun.

Wiry and Cabezon looked at each other. Then Wiry grinned at Tracy. "So long, Tracy."

"So long, Wiry . . . Cabezon. God protect you." She lifted the gold cross on its chain, kissed it and smiled.

Old Cabezon and Wiry Nesbitt rode out from behind the brush and boulders and into plain sight. They rode down the slope of the hill, their saddle guns ready, their horses traveling at a running walk.

About three hundred yards below, the four riders reined up; their

saddle carbines glinting dully in the gray dawn that was streaked in the east by smears that looked like fresh blood.

VI

Slowly, yet all too swiftly, the horses of Wiry Nesbitt and old Cabezon closed the gap, shortened the gun range. While up on the hill hidden by the brush and giant boulders, Tracy Jeffers kissed the gold cross with a prayer and put it away. Then, sliding the .30-30 saddle gun from her scabbard, she raised the rear sight to the three-hundred-yard notch and waited.

It was big Pete Brandt whose nerve broke. Half drunk, but not drunk enough to stand the strain of waiting, he lifted his saddle carbine to his shoulder and lined his sights.

Up on the hill a .30-30 cracked. The bullet whined above Pete Brandt's head. He flinched and pulled the trigger. His shot went wild.

Then, almost at the same moment, the other three guns went into action. Old Cabezon's saddle carbine spat streaks of fire so fast that their echoes blended. He shot big Dutch Brandt in the middle of his huge paunch where it bulged out over the saddlehorn. Dutch gave a guttural, grunt-



ing snarl and shot at Cabezon. The bullet went a little high to rip the high crown of the silver-crusted sombrero. Cabezon's teeth bared.

The old Mexican's second shot hit Rafe Jeffers in the shoulder, the bone-shattering thud of it twisting the lanky Rafe sideways just as he pulled his gun trigger. His shot creased Cabezon's lean ribs, tearing a rip in his old shabby leather charro jacket. Cabezon's horse, gun-broken to stand under fire, was stopped in his tracks now. And the old major-domo from the Juaregi Grant was paying off the debt of Don Ramon with a gun that never missed.

It was Wiry Nesbitt's first gun battle and he felt the glow of it the way a man feels a slug of raw whiskey burning inside his throat and belly and into his guts and through his veins. He stood high in his stirrups and lifted his horse to a run and charged down the slope, his saddle gun spewing fire. It was a wild, reckless, headlong charge. Bullets whined past him and above his head and he jerked his gun lever and pulled the trigger of his saddle gun with each jump of his horse. He shot at Ben Hayes first, then at big Pete Brandt, his running horse taking him to them, into the hail of bullets.

Then Wiry's saddle gun was empty. He gritted his teeth as a bullet ripped the top of his left shoulder. There was no time to reload. Every split second counted in a gun fight. His horse was running wide open down a steep slant. He had twenty or thirty yards to cover to get him within distance where he could use a six-shooter with accuracy. But

it was his best bet. He'd played the damned fool with his spectacular charge and a bullet in the guts would be the payoff unless a miracle happened to him. Tossing away his smoking saddle carbine he jerked the old long-barreled ivory-handled six-shooter that had belonged to Red Mike Nesbitt. And he bent low across the neck of his running horse, teeth gritted, eyes puckered to steel slits.

Cabezon had his gun hand full. Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt were both on the ground now. Either they had been shot loose from their saddles or they had dismounted, wounded, to make a better stand. And the old Mexican sat his horse and swapped shots with the two men he had sworn to kill. He had .30-30 cartridges in an open bag made from an old boot top and slung from the horn of his saddle. He kept dipping into the bag and shoving fresh cartridges into his carbine.

Cabezon felt hardly any pain from the bullet crease along his ribs or the deeper rip in his lean thigh. It did not matter if he died now; he had killed Rafe Jeffers and Dutch Brandt. To be sure, neither of those two tough hombres was yet dead. But they were dying. Dying slow. Dying hard. Pain spoiled their aim so that their bullets no longer struck old Cabezon. And he was not wasting a shot. Each .30-30 bullet was hitting its mark, tearing through muscle, smashing and splintering bone. This was how old Cabezon had planned and dreamed out the way he would kill Dutch Brandt and Rafe Jeffers, taking as many bullets as possible to

do a slow, painful, torturous job of revenge. A debt of Don Ramon to be paid off.

Cabezon had no thought to give Wiry Nesbitt right now. The son of Red Mike had had his years of careful and painstaking training. Let him profit by it. If he chose to throw away his chances in one locoed charge against tough odds, then that was to the sorrow of young Miguel Nesbitt. It was no concern right now of old Cabezon who had dedicated this moment to the memory of old Don Ramon. A man can do no more than one thing at a time and do it well, as a thing like this must be done. . . .

"*Por Don Ramon. . .*" Like a chant, it came with each shot old Cabezon fired. "*Por Don Ramon. . .*" His saddle carbine would crack and Dutch Brandt's huge bulk would quiver with the shock and pain of a bullet. Or Rafe Jeffers would snarl curses through tobacco slobber.

Wiry Nesbitt gripped his ivory-handled six-shooter and raked his running horse with the spurs. He'd played the damned fool, played his string out. Who the hell did he think he was—some legendary hombre with a bullet-proof hide and a charmed life? They'd killed Red Mike, hadn't they? They were killing Red Mike's son Miguel. . . .

Then Wiry heard it. Tracy's war whoop, shrill and piercing as a sharp-pointed blade.

"Get 'em, Wiry! Ride 'em down! Remember Red Mike! I love you, Wiry! You can't lose me now! *Por*

Dios, Miguel! Vaya con Dios, my love!"

From up on the hill behind the brush and boulders the .30-30 saddle gun of Tracy Jeffers cracked again and again, punctuating each shrill yell.

Her shots were not hitting either Pete Brandt or Ben Hayes. But they were coming so close that the whining bullets seemed to graze their hides. They kept ducking and twisting but each time they lined their gun sights on the running target of Wiry Nesbitt, a bullet from Tracy Jeffers' saddle gun would whine so close, their aim was jerked wild.

Tracy might be shooting to kill. She might be just holding them off till Wiry got within six-shooter range. He had no time to ponder it. No time to think anything. He heard her yell, heard her gun crack. He saw Pete Brandt and Ben Hayes flinch and duck under her withering gunfire. And then he straightened up in his saddle and his throat was torn by the wild cowboy yelp he let go.

Wiry was within a hundred feet of them now. The long-barreled six-shooter in his hand thumbed back to full cock. He looked into the barrel of Ben Hayes' gun when he pulled the trigger, and he saw the law officer's gun jerk high in the air as it exploded. Then he shot Ben Hayes again. The bullet hit Hayes in the belly and doubled him up and the wolfish snarl on his face twisted with a ghastly grimace of mortal pain.

Pete Brandt was on Wiry's left. Reining his horse to the left as

though he was cutting cattle, Wiry shot at Pete. As the bullet ripped through the hard muscle and deep into Pete's body, Pete fired point-blank at Wiry and the bullet clipped Wiry's ear. Wiry thumbed his gun hammer and pulled the trigger. He saw a round hole dent Pete Brandt's beefy mottled face just below the cheek bone. Pete toppled over sideways and forward and fell with a heavy dull crash.

Ben Hayes and Pete Brandt were dead, there on the ground, when Wiry Miguel Nesbitt rode clear of the two spooked horses that were pitching and running away with empty saddles, the stirrups flapping.

Dutch Brandt and Rafe Jeffers lay dead, almost side by side. Old Cabezon rode over slowly to where the two renegades lay. He stared down at them with wicked black eyes, a faint smile on his dark face.

Tracy came down off the hill at a lope, shoving her saddle carbine back into its scabbard.

Wiry's face looked gray in the dawn and his grin was flat-lipped. Blood from a couple of flesh wounds stained his clothes. He had lost his hat and his wiry black hair was sweat-matted.

"I'm all right," he told Tracy.

They rode over to where old Cabezon sat his horse. He looked up. There was a faint smile on his face and his opaque black eyes glittered.

"Por Don Ramon."

The blood came out with the words. Wiry leaned from his saddle and caught the old Mexican as Cabezon swayed in his saddle. But the old

man was dead when Wiry lifted him in his arms and dismounted.

Tracy swung from her saddle. They laid Cabezon on the ground and covered his face with the faded old serape. The old Mexican seemed happier in death than he had been the past years alive. He had lived only to avenge Don Ramon Juaregi and now that that was done, Cabezon had smiled his "Adios" and gone.

Tracy bathed and bandaged the shallow bullet rips in Wiry's hide. They unsaddled and turned loose the horses of the dead men, then opened the corral gates and let out the gaunt, slobbering, sore-footed Cross L Mexican cattle, tallying them as they shuffled and hooked their way out to water and feed.

"Seven hundred and eighty-five head," Wiry called out.

"I make it eighty-three." Tracy untied the seven tally knots she had made in her bridle reins. "If we never have to split a bigger difference than that, we'll live happy ever after."

The cattle were watered and scattered to graze when a bunch of heavily armed men on horseback rode up: A sheriff, a couple of Border Patrol men, three Arizona Rangers with their captain. A few of their men were blood-spattered and bandaged. They had wiped out the Border Jumpers. Not a prisoner had been taken.

The men seemed to know Tracy. They eyed the bullet-riddled dead bodies of Dutch Brandt, Rafe Jeffers, Pete Brandt and Ben Hayes. The sheriff unpinned the law badge from Ben Hayes' blood-sodden shirt and handed it to Tracy.

"It's Bob Jeffers' badge, Tracy. Keep it."

The Ranger captain looked down at old Cabezon's dead body. "Cabezon. God never made many of 'em like that old caballero. . . . You kept your word, old amigo. Rest easy. You done earned it."

Cabezon had tipped off the Rangers and the law had wiped out the Border Jumpers to the last renegade. Cabezon's Mexicans were camped at San Marcos with the Cross L remuda, waiting for orders from Wiry.

The two Brandts, Rafe Jeffers and Ben Hayes would be buried here where they had died with their boots on. The Mexicans would take Cabezon back to the Palo Alto Ranch, Wiry said, to bury the faithful old major-domo beside the grave of Don Ramon.

Tracy and Wiry gave the cattle tally to the law. And the law was giving Tracy Jeffers the Triangle Dot and Diamond Cross outfits. The Juaregi Grant joined the Triangle Dot at the border, so Wiry Nesbitt could fetch his Cross L cattle up through the inspection station at San Marcos. He would have no need to point his trail herd with a gun. There

was one more rustler hole, the Ranger captain said, in the Mexican fence, that was plugged for keeps.

The whole party saddled fresh horses from the Triangle Dot remuda and headed for San Marcos. The grizzled sheriff and Ranger captain rode ahead, letting Wiry Nesbitt and Tracy Jeffers drop behind their dust.

Tracy asked Wiry to describe the old Palo Alto Ranch and he did—the old adobe buildings, the old, old shade trees along the river, the corals, the fruit trees in the patio where birds drank from a tinkling fountain and nested in the fruit trees and sang from daybreak until dusk. There was an old church there where the visiting padre came once a month. Then the Mexicans gathered for a fiesta and the brown-frocked padre baptized babies and married those in love and said a Mass for the dead. He would be there to bury old Cabezon, Wiry said. Everything about Palo Alto was aged and peaceful and steeped in traditions.

"Take me there," Tracy said softly. "The padre will marry us. Keep me there, Miguel. Forever and always."

"Forever and always, Tracy," Wiry repeated after her. "Amen."

THE END



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WAYWARD WITNESS

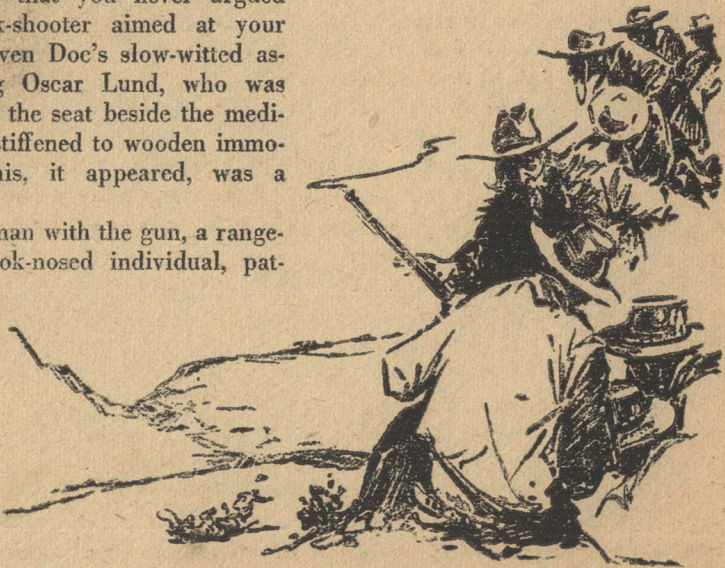
by NORMAN A. FOX

THE man with the gun meant business. He came rearing out of the brush that flanked the wagon road winding down into Bunchgrass, and Doc Comanche, that veteran pitchman, hauled hard on the lines and brought his sway-backed old Conestoga to an abrupt stop. There wasn't much choice.

Twenty years of roaming the West and dispensing New & Improved Indian Medicine to its far-flung citizenry had brought Comanche a harvest of wisdom—and the choicest kernel was that you never argued with a six-shooter aimed at your brisket. Even Doc's slow-witted assistant, big Oscar Lund, who was perched on the seat beside the medicine man, stiffened to wooden immobility. This, it appeared, was a stick-up.

But the man with the gun, a range-garbed, hook-nosed individual, pat-

How far would Doc Comanche stick his neck out to save an innocent man from the hang noose?



ently in need of both a shave and a bath, said: "Just turn that rig around, stranger, and head it some place else! You ain't going into Bunchgrass!"

Comanche frowned. There were days when a man swerved aside from trouble, and days when a man welcomed it, and it had been a long, hot ride to Bunchgrass. Being run out of a town was not exactly a new experience, but usually the populace sampled his medicine before urging him on his way. Here, then, was an insult to his dignity and a definite threat to any potential profits which might accrue in Bunchgrass. So Comanche came to a high stand, a fine figure in his fringed buckskin suit, his creamy sombrero tilted at an angle above his shoulder-length silvery hair, and his skimpy goatee bristling with anger. He was sorry that the pearl-handled six-shooters he sometimes wore were stowed in the wagon, but he had a whip in his hand, and he sent it singing.

He was something of an artist with that whip, was Comanche. The leather curled unerringly about Hook-nose's wrist, the gun exploded, but the bullet whistled high. Oscar Lund was off the wagon in the same instant, and swarming over the man. By the time Comanche had leaped nimbly to the ground, big Oscar was pulling himself from a recumbent form.

"No fight in him," Oscar said scornfully. "He should eat more spuds, huh, Doc?"

Comanche made a quick examination. Hook-nose was in for a lengthy siesta, but it appeared that no last-

ing harm had been done the man. Climbing to the wagon seat, Comanche gestured for Oscar to do likewise, and the Conestoga rumbled along. Already Comanche was regretting his action; one town was good as another, and he'd made an enemy before reaching Bunchgrass. But mingled with his regret was a consuming curiosity.

A stranger here, he'd been ordered away from the town. He wanted to know the whys and wherefores pertaining to this queer bit of business, but he brought the Conestoga into Bunchgrass' false-fronted main street without finding any reasonable answer. Once into the environs of the cow town, though, he smelled trouble. A dangerous tension held the place, manifesting itself in the tight-lipped faces of lounging townsmen who might normally be expected to greet a stranger with at least a display of interest.

"A town with something on its chest, Oscar," Doc observed. "I think we'll do well, sir, to make our business here brief."

But that was not to be. They had no more than tooled the Conestoga into the wagon yard adjacent to the livery stable when a man, long of face and long of body, approached them—a man with a ball-pointed star upon his vest.

"I saw you drive in, stranger," he said. "We've got a chore for you in this town. Court's in session right now, and we need a man for jury service." His glance strayed from the sharp features of Comanche to the bovine face of Oscar Lund, and back

again. "You'll do, buckskin man. I'm Lee Croydon, deputy sheriff and chief witness in the case of the people versus Phil Brady. It's a murder case."

"And I, sir, as you may have gathered from the legend painted on the canvas of this Conestoga, am Doctor Comanche, adopted kinsman of the tribe whose name I bear. I am flattered, sir, by your offer, but surely you can find someone more qualified to sit as a peer. I am a simple soul, a stranger on this range, and . . ."

"All the more reason why you'll do," Croydon interjected. "I'll tell you this much, mister: We've got two factions in this section. There's Clem Bassett, our biggest rancher, and those who tolerate him out of fear, and there're others, little ranchers, who are tired of Bassett's ways. Phil Brady, the accused, is the head of the little fellers, and he's on trial for murdering a cattle buyer named Ramsey Horne. Some claim that Brady's being framed because he's getting into Clem Bassett's hair. Me, I dunno. But Judge Vorhees is a square-shootin' gent who's making sure that nobody who knows Bassett or Brady gets on the jury. So far we've collected a whiskey drummer, three freighters, five saddle bums and a couple of other strangers. You'll make the twelfth. Guilty or innocent, Brady gets an unprejudiced trial."

Now Comanche could understand the tension that held this town, and he could also understand that it didn't behoove him to sit with a jury whose members were going to acquire

enemies, no matter what verdict was rendered. He opened his mouth to frame a fresh protest, but Lee Croydon tapped his badge.

"I wasn't really asking," Croydon said pointedly.

Comanche sighed in surrender. "Oscar, take care of the horses and wait here for me. Maybe it won't be long."

Oscar nodded obediently, and Comanche matched Croydon's long stride as the deputy marched him to a frame courthouse and into a large room that buzzed with the talk of the hundred spectators who crowded the seats.

To the front were the lawyers, the prosecuting attorney, a big bald-headed man, and the attorney for the defense, a little man, also bald of head, and upon the bench sat huge Judge Vorhees, with a face chipped out of granite.

Phil Brady, sitting shackled to a deputy, proved to be a young fellow, and Comanche felt a quick twinge of sympathy as he saw the bleak, bowed shoulders of the accused. This he shook aside; he couldn't let his feelings involve him. But the man who really held Comanche's eye sat in the front row of the spectator's section, a blocky, arrogant man with a sense of his own importance etched in every line of his beefy face. Comanche sensed instantly that this was Clem Bassett.

Routine questions were put to Comanche as to his qualifications, and if Doc's answers were somewhat extravagant, they were also honest, and he found himself perched with eleven

others in the jury's stand. A gavel rapped smartly, and the trial was underway.

The ensuing procedure was nothing to keep a man awake, the trial lacked the dramatics which might have appealed to Comanche's sense of showmanship, and the afternoon was long and hot.

Clem Bassett, called to the witness stand, testified that he had summoned a certain Ramsey Horne, cattle buyer, to the Bassett Bar-B Ranch and had expected the man on a certain day. Horne had never reached the Bar-B ranchhouse, but had died almost at its doorstep, shot down in a little basin whose acreage belonged to Bassett.

Both lawyers made an issue of having the basin carefully described, mentioning the rimrock cliffs that frowned down upon it, and the stream that cut across its lush floor, and the clump of cottonwoods standing nearest the stream. Comanche's interest quickened a little; he remembered that basin. The road into Bunchgrass had brought him through it, and he'd watered his crowbait team at that very stream this morning.

Lee Croydon took the stand next, and a buzz of anticipation necessitated the use of the judge's gavel. Yes, Croydon had been up on the rimrock the day of the murder. Why? Clem Bassett had reported the loss of some stock, and Croydon had been looking for rustler sign. And what had the deputy seen? A man riding toward the Bar-B Ranch buildings at the far and open end of the

basin. This man had later proved to be Ramsey Horne. And then? Someone had come spurting out of the clump of cottonwoods and accosted Horne. There'd been a gun shot, and Horne had pitched from his saddle.

Croydon had worked a six-shooter himself then, from the rimrock, but the distance had been great, and the killer had fed steel to his cayuse and fled, without having time to help himself to the money Horne had carried. Could Croydon identify the killer? Well, he could shore tell that the feller was wearing a slicker. Was this the slicker?

Comanche's interest quickened again. The prosecuting attorney was holding up a slicker, a faded, worn slicker, not unlike a hundred others that might be found on any range—except that it had a rearing stallion painted in black upon its back. Again the courtroom buzzed, and Comanche knew that many had recognized that slicker.

Yes, that was the garment. Croydon had recognized the black blob of the painting, and after he'd ridden down into the basin and seen that Horne was dead, he'd proceeded to Phil Brady's ranch and arrested that young man—reluctantly, he admitted. But all Bunchgrass range knew that Phil Brady owned such a slicker, and there'd been no choice.

Lee Croydon had told a straight and honest story, Comanche decided. Next the town banker came to the stand and testified that Brady had approached him for a loan a week before the killing and had been refused. The banker was long-winded,

and Comanche fell to counting heads in the courtroom and estimating what the profit would be if twenty-five percent of those present bought a family-size bottle of New & Improved Indian Medicine and the others contented themselves with the ordinary size. And in the midst of his arithmetic, he suddenly stiffened as a man came quietly down the aisle and leaned and whispered a few words in Clem Bassett's ear.

You didn't forget a face like Hook-nose's, especially when you'd first seen it over the barrel of a leveled six-shooter!

Hook-nose had finished his enforced siesta up there on the hilltop overlooking Bunchgrass, and now he was here. Bassett raised his eyes and gave Comanche a long, studied glance. Then there were more whispered words, and Hook-nose went hurrying up the aisle.

And suddenly the obvious was apparent to Comanche, and he knew now why Hook-nose had been posted by the roadside to keep strangers out of Bunchgrass, and because he knew, this trial took on a new complexion. Judge Vorhees had had deputies in search of strangers so that an unprejudiced jury might decide Phil Brady's fate.

Clem Bassett, though, had had a different idea. Bassett had wanted at least one man of his own on that jury, so the cattleman had sent Hook-nose to see that no outsider entered town while the jury was being rounded out. That didn't prove that Bassett had framed Phil Brady, but Comanche's suspicion soared high.

None of which actually concerned Comanche. A stranger who claimed no town as his own, a wanderer who slept beneath the stars and had a wagon for a home, he'd been forced by circumstances into an affair that boded ill for a youngster he'd never seen before. He could shrug the matter aside, eschewing the petty differences of an alien people, but the seed of discontent was sprouting, and suddenly he saw to the core of his concern.

He was Doc Comanche, rootless as a tumbleweed, and yet because he belonged to no town, he belonged to all towns. He lived by the bounty of the rangeland's people, he prospered with their prosperity and shared their setbacks, though indirectly, and that made him a fellow citizen. And so he saw that he couldn't overlook the obvious, couldn't permit Phil Brady to be framed, if such was the case. Not and walk with honor among men.

But where was the means to blow a hole through the scheming of big Clem Bassett?

A juryman at Comanche's elbow had come to his feet.

"There's one thing I ain't got clear in my mind," this man said. "The deputy feller testified that the distance was too great from the rimrock to drop the killer with a six-gun, yet from that same distance the deputy could see the slicker clear enough to be sure it was Brady's. Me, I'd like to see that rimrock basin. Seems the whole case hinges on whether recognition could be accurate from that distance."

Instantly the prosecuting attorney

was waving a hand. "Your honor!" he cried. "I suggest that the court be removed to the scene of the crime. We'll let the jury stand on the rimrock while somebody dons the slicker, which is our chief exhibit, and posts himself at the spot where Croydon saw the killer. That will settle it!"

Vorhees glanced toward the window. "Too late in the day," he rumbled. "Court recessed until tomorrow at nine. We'll head out to Rimrock Basin then."

And thus it was decided. The jury was herded from its box by sharp-eyed deputies and taken across the street to a restaurant where Comanche, always one to enjoy a free meal, stuffed himself. He wondered how big Oscar was faring and wished he could sneak a slab of pie to his assistant. But from the restaurant, the jury was moved to a hotel, where the twelve men were assigned to separate rooms on the upper floor, and Comanche knew that he was virtually a prisoner, held in this manner so that, as a jurymen, he would have no opportunity to communicate with any outsider.

None of which fitted into a plan that had been slowly shaping within his agile brain. The door leading into the hallway was unlocked, but a deputy sheriff was posted beyond it. There was a second door, leading to an adjoining room, but it refused to budge. The window looked down upon a blatant and busy street, with no chance of a man descending unseen to the ground.

Comanche stretched himself upon the bed, and he was this way, an

hour later, when he suddenly realized that a key was turning in the lock of the door that led out of the adjoining room.

Comanche was on his feet when Clem Bassett stepped into the room. The big cattleman smiled as he closed the door and put his back to it.

"Happens I own a slice of this hotel, so I never have any trouble finding my way around in it," Bassett explained casually.

Comanche donned dignity. "Will you explain, sir, the meaning of this unseemly intrusion?"

"I'll make it short and sweet," Bassett agreed. "One of my boys made a friendly suggestion to you today, but that stupid ox who travels with you knocked him unconscious. Very well. You came into Bunchgrass in spite of our warning, and you've got onto the jury—which is just what we didn't want. Another half hour and Vorhees would have had to choose a townsman, and he'd have chosen one who'd think my way; I'd have seen to that. But it's too late now."

"Meaning?" queried Comanche.

"Meaning that you'd better not make *two* mistakes in a row, medicine man. I've had Phil Brady tangling my twine for quite a spell. I'm getting rid of him the legal way. So you'd better make the fanciest spiel of your life when that jury goes out for its verdict. I'd have had Brady bushwhacked long ago, but he's got friends, so I've played safe. I won't have to be so particular about you. Savvy what I mean? *If the jury brings in a not-guilty*



verdict, you'll never leave this town alive!"

"But the evidence isn't all in," Comanche protested. "Supposing the defense pulls a surprise that upsets the case? Maybe the judge will instruct us to bring in a not-guilty verdict."

"That'll be a horse of another color," Bassett said. "I can't sway the judge, but I can leave *you* something to think about."

Then he was gone, and the key grated in that connecting door again, and Comanche, left alone, faced the certainty that Clem Bassett was framing Phil Brady to the gallows. The king cattleman had as much as admitted it. And now the path that Doc Comanche proposed to tread had grown more dangerous, for he himself was personally involved. An hour before, he had wanted to save Phil Brady for decency's sake; now he was faced with the ironic proposition that the saving of Phil Brady would be the sealing of his own doom. A not-guilty verdict might be the triumph of justice, but that same verdict would leave Doc Comanche prey to the threat of Clem Bassett—the threat that still seemed to echo in the room.

Here, indeed, was a fine kettle of

fish. But Comanche had seen his way, and he cautiously approached the door leading into the hallway and opened it an inch. The deputy was yonder, seated in a chair tilted against the wall, but he was snoring lustily, his sombrero down over his nose. Cat-footing into the hallway, Comanche headed toward the rear of the building. Here a covered stairs led to a dark and littered alleyway, and then he was sprinting toward the wagon yard where he'd left big Oscar and the Conestoga.

It was easy to distinguish the canvas-topped wagon, and he found Oscar asleep beneath the tilts. Comanche's hand on the big fellow's shoulder brought Oscar awake, and Comanche said quickly: "Get a lantern to burning, Oscar. Then find me that old slicker of yours and the paint and brush we used to letter the outside of the wagon. Hurry, sir!"

"We leaving, huh, Doc?" Oscar asked hopefully.

"Later, Oscar. First we must trip up an unmitigated scoundrel."

The lantern aglow and Oscar's old slicker in his hands, Comanche cleared a space on the floor of the wagon and stretched the slicker before him. Then, with paint and brush, he began outlining a rearing stallion upon the back of the slicker, drawing upon memory and making it as much like the one he'd seen in court today as possible. He was no great shakes as an artist, and the mare had never been born that had brought forth such a monstrosity as the animal that shaped beneath his

brush, but it would pass—at a distance. The job completed, Comanche sighed.

“Now listen very carefully, Oscar,” he implored. “Remember where we watered the team this morning?”

Oscar nodded.

“When the paint has dried, roll up the slicker. Tomorrow morning, early, rent a horse from the livery stable, take the slicker with you and head out to that basin. Do you understand, sir? When you get there, hide in the clump of cottonwoods and don the slicker. Then keep an eye on the rimrock. Soon people will be there—a lot of people. When you see them, spur out of the cottonwoods and race across the basin. Then get under cover, remove the slicker, and circle back to town. Are you sure that you can remember all that?”

It had been said that big Oscar Lund couldn't pour sand out of a boot if the instructions were written on the heel, but now the giant nodded slowly. “I reckon, Doc.”

“A man's life depends upon it,” Doc said. “Maybe two men's—and the other one, sir, is *me*. A judge and jury will be watching your little performance, Oscar. When they see you with that slicker, they're going to realize that there are at least *two* such slickers in this Bunchgrass country. And they're also going to realize that the entire case against Phil Brady is based on circumstantial evidence, and that they can't hang a man for owning a painted slicker when they can see with their own eyes that another such

slicker exists. The judge, sir, will have no course but to instruct the jury to return a not-guilty verdict. You see, Oscar, you'll be a sort of unofficial witness.”

Oscar's face knotted in a puzzled frown. “I reckon you know best, huh, Doc?” he said.

Comanche sighed again. Then he slipped from the wagon and made his way back to the hotel and up the rear stairway. The deputy still snored in his chair, his pitch unchanged, his tune monotonous. It had been, Doc reflected, a fair night's work. . . .

They came out of Bunchgrass and across the dew-drenched miles to the rimrock overlooking Clem Bassett's acreage. They came in buggies and buckboards and on saddle horses. There was Judge Vorhees, and the two opposing attorneys, and the twelve jurymen, and the witnesses, and the accused, Phil Brady, riding with his hands shackled. Also there was a horde of spectators, among them Hook-nose, who rode at the side of Clem Bassett and carried a rifle in a saddle scabbard.

The crowd came afoot the last half mile, working their way through the timber that thronged to the rim, and then Deputy Sheriff Lee Croydon said: “Here, judge, this is just about the spot I was standing when I saw the shooting.”

Below them spread a lush basin, cut by a brawling stream and dotted by intermittent clumps of trees, and, to the north, at the open end of the basin, they could see smoke lift from Bassett's Bar-B ranchhouse.

Vorhees, who'd sat his saddle well on the ride out here, eyed the panorama thoughtfully. "Who fetched the exhibit?" he asked.

"Here it is, sir."

"Croydon, will you pull on this slicker?" the judge asked. "Then take the trail down into the basin. Move to the exact spot where you saw the killer stop Horne. Raise your hand in signal when you get there. Then we'll see whether the slicker can be recognized."

Croydon nodded and took the extended slicker. The crowd had suddenly fallen silent, held by the suspense of the moment, but no man among them was as tense as Doc Comanche—nor showed it as little.

Now was the time, and Comanche's eyes were riveted on the clump of cottonwoods nearest the stream and in the center of the basin. But nothing stirred there. He knew then that he shouldn't have trusted Oscar with a job as important as this one, yet there'd been no one else upon whom he could rely. Phil Brady had friends, many of them, for the man was the leader of the smaller ranchers and therefore the thorn in Clem Bassett's side. But Doc Comanche hadn't known who those friends might be.

No, he'd had no choice but to enlist slow-witted Oscar in a scheme that might have gotten both Comanche and Phil Brady out of their respective troubles, and Oscar had failed him. But suddenly a rider was darting from that clump of cottonwoods, a rider wearing a slicker, and even from this distance Comanche recognized the broad

shoulders of Oscar Lund. And even from this distance all of the group could see a black blob of paint in the shape of a rearing stallion decorating the back of the slicker.

A cry went up—a great throaty cry of astonishment—but out of it, too, came understanding, for someone cried: "There's the killer! Thunderation, folks, don't you savvy? Somebody else has a slicker just like Phil's!"

But there were those whose reaction was not elation—and among them were Clem Bassett, Hook-nose and others who rode Bar-B horses. Hook-nose was dragging his rifle from its scabbard and bringing it to his shoulder, and it spoke once, and Oscar seemed to waver in his saddle, far down there on the basin's floor. Again the rifle spoke. And then Doc Comanche was elbowing men aside as he hurled himself toward Hook-nose, not caring now if he exposed himself by his concern, not caring about anything but getting that rifle away from Bassett's man before it snuffed the life from big Oscar.

He reached Hook-nose and grasped the rifle by its barrel and tore it from the man's hands and flung it aside. But a roar was going up from the crowd again, and out of it coherent words percolated to Comanche. "Look, the horse is down! And the jigger with the slicker is pinned under it! Let's have a squint at him!"

They went spilling down the trail that led to the basin's floor, and Doc Comanche was caught up in the tide and swept along. Down below, Os-

car lay stretched upon the ground, one foot caught under the livery stable mount that had been felled by Hook-nose's rifle. Men came swarming across the basin's floor, and the fleetest, reaching Oscar first, freed him and brought him to a stand, but they kept a tight hold on him. And then as Oscar was surrounded by a shouting group, Clem Bassett made himself heard above the rest.

"It's the medicine man's assistant!" Bassett cried. "I know. I was standing in front of the courthouse when the two of them drove in yesterday. Judge, this big ox couldn't possibly have been the killer. He wasn't in the country at the time. Don't you see? The medicine man must have framed up this show to help out Brady. Don't ask me why. But it's obvious that he wanted the court to think that there were two such slickers in the country."

Vorhees spun upon Comanche, anger blazing in his eyes. "This assistant of yours hasn't brains enough to have dreamed this up himself. Anybody can see that. I don't know why you wanted to fool the court, but tampering with justice this way will cost you a few years in Deer Lodge pen!"

And Comanche knew then that he'd lost, and his only satisfaction in this moment was that Oscar Lund had apparently been unharmed by the fall. But Doc's little scheme had been blown sky-high, and Phil Brady would go to the gallows, and Doc, himself, would go to jail.

"You're right about big Oscar,"

Comanche told the judge. "There's no trickery in him. I prepared the slicker and put him up to this. Just remember that, sir."

"I gummed things up, huh, Doc?" Big Oscar said.

Comanche laid an affectionate hand on the giant's shoulder. "You did the best you could."

"I'm sorry I forgot the slicker, Doc," Oscar went on. "After you painted it so nice, top. I remembered everything else, Doc. Getting the horse and coming out here and hiding in the cottonwoods till people showed up on the rim. But I just plumb forgot, Doc."

"*What?*" Comanche shouted. "What are you saying, Oscar? You didn't forget the slicker. You've got it on, sir!"

"It ain't the same one, Doc. I plumb forgot to fetch it. So I went over to that ranchhouse to get me one. Nobody home but the cook, and I slapped him to sleep, Doc. Had to look all over for a slicker, but I finally found one hid under a bunk out in the bunkhouse. And it had a hoss painted on it, too!"

"You found *this* slicker at a ranch?"

"That one down there, Doc," Oscar said and pointed toward the distant lift of smoke from Bassett's Bar-B.

Hook-nose was the one who made the mistake of trying for a six-shooter, but the crowd was too thick, and he didn't even get it into his hand. Then both he and Clem Bassett were being seized by a half dozen men, and other Bar-B riders were suddenly deciding that discre-

tion was the better part of allegiance, and that was that. . . .

After the excitement of the morning, the judge's chambers in Bunchgrass seemed peaceful and quiet, even though the judge and Deputy Lee Croydon and Phil Brady and Doc Comanche had been doing a lot of talking. The four had retreated here, and big Oscar was with them, and when all the tale had been told, the judge tried hard not to smile.

"I'm still not sure but what you've got that prison sentence coming to you, Doc," Vorhees said. "But you seem to have saved an innocent man from the gallows, and that's what counts with me. With Bassett and that hook-nosed hand of his locked up, each of them is accusing the other of being the one who wore the slicker and killed Ramsey Horne. Looks like I'll have to send both of them to the pen to be sure I've got the right one. That was an air-tight frame-up Bassett and his man made. They knew Brady needed money,

because he'd tried to borrow from the bank. Then they got Ramsey Horne to the right place by sending for him on a cattle deal, and they got Croydon in the right place to be a witness, yet they made sure he'd be too far away to see clearly, or to intercede. That was simple enough; they tolled him to the rimrock that same day to look for rustlers. All they had to do then was prepare a slicker like Brady's and let Croydon jump to natural conclusions. But they made their mistake when they hid the slicker in the bunkhouse instead of destroying it."

"And now Bassett's shadow has been lifted from this range, and little fellers will stand a chance," Brady declared. "His crew hit the grit an hour ago. Doc Comanche, you've made friends here."

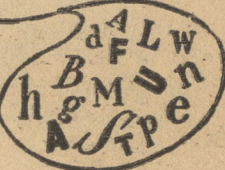
"We shall see," Comanche said. "Come, Oscar. We must get our stand set up and make our pitch. You, sir, seem to be a man who did the smart thing by being stupid."

Big Oscar beamed. "I reckon you know best, huh, Doc?"

THE END



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



1. kercils
2. elbats
3. inep
4. whak
5. hernut

6. pacm
7. uckch
8. soruge
9. erokeech
10. milprig

11. knat
12. cared
13. low
14. choonc
15. velosh

RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING



No one can deny the glamour of the cowboy's outdoor life. But many of the chores, such as bog-pulling, were plain hard work. In the spring, mud holes on the range often caused serious losses, unless bog riders were on the job to snake out the mired animals before they floundered to death. Usually men rode bog in pairs. One rider remained on solid footing and gave the free end of his lass rope to his partner. It was the latter's job to wade out, sometimes waist deep, into the soft mud and fasten the rope around the thrashing beast, as a rule around the animal's horns. When he gave the signal, the cowboy on the bank pulled with his horse, dragging the helplessly bogged animal to freedom and safety.



The spark-proof, skin teepee of the Plains Indians was an ideally adapted shelter for the prairie country. Its conical shape and the strong bracing provided by the nine-to-twelve poles required for the teepee's framework made it remarkably resistant to the high winds that sweep the western plains. The skin covering permitted a small open fire to be built inside for warmth during cold weather. The smoke, curling upward emerged from the hole at the tip of the cone; air spaces around the base permitted fresh air to enter and afforded a natural draft. But properly erecting a teepee was a tricky and complicated business—a job invariably delegated to the squaws.



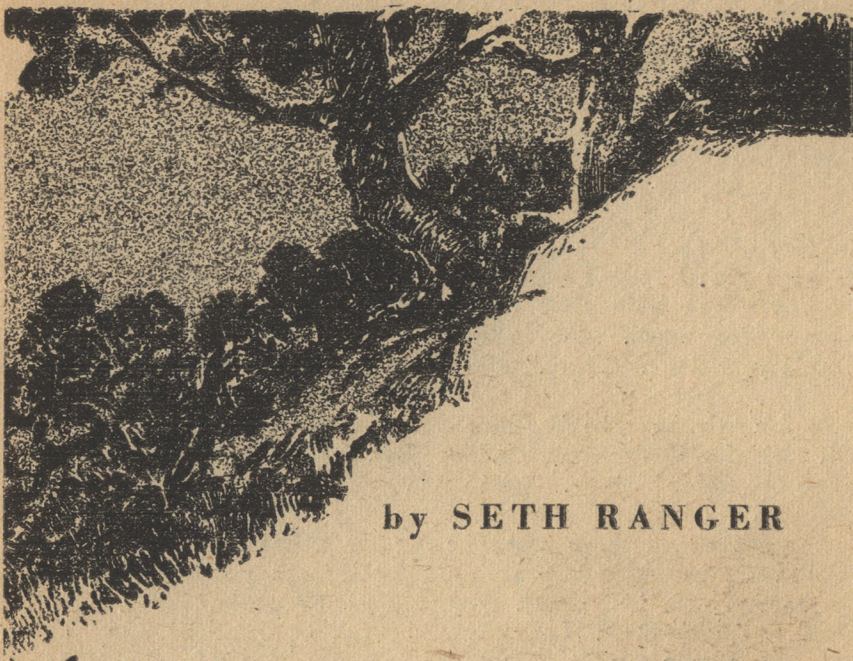
Many hazards beset train crews and passengers in the early days of railroad travel across the newly laid ribbons of steel that spanned the West. Huge, slowly moving herds of buffaloes sometimes blocked the tracks for hours at a time. There was the risk of Indian raids, or ties across the rails forcing an unscheduled stop and the subsequent holdup by a gang of mounted bandits. Most feared of all, however, was a prairie fire. Such fires forced many an iron horse to pit its speed against an onrushing, wind-fanned blanket of grass-fed flames.

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.



Ron Dale was just trading one kind of trouble for another when he tackled the oyster pirates who preyed on a

TIDE-FLAT BUCKAROO



by SETH RANGER

I

THE pounding of hoofs had brought Ron Dale to his cabin door and he stood watching curiously as Joe Ellery, a cowpuncher from a neighboring spread, reined his horse to a stop.

"Bad news for you, I'm afraid, Ron." Joe announced regretfully. "Brad Barton, the lawyer down at Coulee City, asked me to come by and tell you your Uncle Al has passed away. Drowned, Burton said."

The tobacco Ron had been rolling into a cigarette sifted away unnoticed. Ron's face was troubled. "Uncle Al, eh? My last relative. Well, there weren't many of us to

begin with, and those few never did see eye to eye with each other."

"Quarreled, eh?"

"No, Joe," Ron answered. "We got along fine, but we were all interested in different things. My dad was a grading contractor. Uncle Ed was a miner. I like ranching, and Uncle Al was crazy about the sea."

"It looks like you'll get some experience with the sea," predicted Joe. "It seems your uncle left you an oyster ranch or whatever it is they grow oysters on. Barton wants to see you pronto."

"I'm sure sorry to hear about Uncle Al," Ron said. "Wonder how it happened?" His face was sober as he built another cigarette. He was a big, rangy man whose normal

weight should have been around two hundred pounds. But right now he was thin and gaunt, and he looked as if he hadn't had a good night's sleep in months. He appeared much older than his twenty-four years. "Thanks, Joe, for dropping in," he said at last.

"No trouble at all," Joe answered. "I hope you don't find tough luck hanging around waiting for you at your oyster ranch. You've had more'n your share. S'long."

As Joe rode along, he found himself reviewing Ron's recent life. It was a depressing business. Ron had bought a rundown ranch and had just about settled down when he learned that there were debts against the spread. He had almost gone broke paying them off. Later there had been rustler trouble. He had cleaned out the rustlers but it had cost Ron time and money.

Then a newcomer on the range had played politics and leased the Green Spot, grazing land until then used by the previous owner of Ron's Slash D.

A bitter court fight followed and Ron won, but the days in court had delayed him in driving his cattle to winter range. He had lost cattle in a Snow Pass blizzard and had had to postpone his mortgage and tax payments. The bank and the county were prodding him to do something about it.

Ron was convinced his range-grabbing neighbor was behind most of his trouble. The man had passed up the ranch as worthless. It was only after Ron had made something

of the place that he realized its potential value.

"What Ron needs," Joe mused, "is ten or fifteen thousand dollars to give him a breathing spell. I hope he can sell the oyster ranch. But chances are, he'll be stuck with it, the way his luck is running these days. It wouldn't surprise me if bad luck made him into a tide flat buckaroo. What a deal for a fine man!"

Brad Barton was a range lawyer who was a good judge of men, horses, whiskey and women. He knew his law. His clients were given his best, which was tops, and they paid according to their ability.

Ron waited several minutes while the old lawyer read over some papers. At last Barton looked up.

"Howdy, Ron," he said. "Your uncle left everything to you. I don't know a blasted thing about oysters, except that I like to eat them, so I can't tell you what this estate is worth. But I do know there're no outstanding obligations against the property."

"What caused my uncle's death?" Ron asked. "He was feeling fine the last time he wrote me nearly a year ago."

"Cattle have ranges, and oysters have beds," Barton said. "Your uncle was working on one of his beds, the tide came in and trapped him, according to the report."

"Why do you say, 'according to the report'?"

"Because it doesn't stand to reason that a man who had spent a lifetime around the water would let

himself get caught by an incoming tide," the lawyer answered.

"Desert rats die of thirst," Don reminded. "They get careless once too often."

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Barton. "Familiarity does breed contempt."

"What's the next move in this business?" Ron asked.

"You'd better take these papers I've prepared, light out for Canoe Point on Puget Sound and check over your property. When you've determined its value, sell out, pay off your debts here and take a rest for awhile. Your uncle would approve if he were alive," Barton said. "He believed a man should engage in a business that he likes. He was disappointed when you didn't go into the oyster business with him a couple of years ago. He was beginning to feel his age somewhat, and wanted to train his probable heir to take over. But he never held it against you."

"They don't come any better than Uncle Al," declared Ron.

"I suppose the oyster business is like anything else," the lawyer continued. "There are successful people in it and failures. And, of course, there must be oyster rustlers. Oyster pirates, I believe they're called. If I were you I believe I'd quietly appear at Canoe Point, looking for a job. I'd get an idea on values. Otherwise, the oyster crooks will treat you the same way cattle rustlers would treat an oyster man who had inherited a cattle ranch."

"And I learned a few of the tricks in the cattle business the hard way,"

Ron observed grimly. "I'll hire someone to keep an eye on my ranch, then head for Canoe Point."

II

The stage came to an abrupt stop and the driver yelled: "Canoe Point." Ron Dale, dressed in rough working clothes, and carrying a battered suitcase that he had picked up at a secondhand store, jumped to the ground. A moment later the stage disappeared around a curve in the highway.

Ron could see the blue waters of Puget Sound through a fringe of second-growth fir trees. The original stand of timber had been logged forty years ago. The general store looked at least half a century old. Beyond, a new wharf jutted into the water. Beside it, the barnacle-covered piling stubs of the original wharf were visible. The tide was out, and there was the smell of exposed flats, stranded seaweed and salt water.

Ron walked over to the general store. The proprietor looked him over with interest and Ron asked: "Any jobs around here?"

A breathless girl had arrived in time to hear the query. "Yes," she answered, while a man at the counter turned and announced: "You can go to work for me."

"I spoke first," the girl gasped. She was blond, very pretty, and her face was pink with the exertion of running. She sat down weakly on a sack of sugar and looked at Ron. "Well, do I get you?" she asked.

"If you're an experienced oyster

man," the big fellow at the counter said, "I'll pay you top wages and a bonus."

"I'll pay you top wages," the girl offered, "but I can't afford a bonus." She turned to the man and spoke angrily. "And darned well you know it, Jeff Trask."

It was evident to Ron that the two were rivals in the oyster business. The man had ignored the girl from the first. Now he looked at Ron with blue eyes that were as cold as melting ice, and awaited an answer.

"I don't know a thing about oysters except that they're good to eat," Ron told the man. "I'm looking for a job. How many men have you got?"

"Seven, and we can use a couple more," Trask answered.

"And how many have you?" Ron asked the girl.

"If you're looking for a soft job," the girl retorted, "I'm not interested in you at any price. When I first saw you I thought you were an answer to a prayer. And I'm not fooling—I have been praying."

"How many men have you?" repeated Ron.

"None," the girl admitted. "Jeff Trask hired the last one away from me. I could use three men. We're the Canoe Point Oyster Company. A small concern doing business on a shoestring."

"You've hired a man," Ron told her, "at top wages."

"But no bonus."

"No bonus," agreed Ron.

Jeff Trask's study was long and searching. An odd light came into his eyes as he studied Ron shrewdly.

"Mister," he drawled, "if you're making a play for a pretty girl, you're barking up the wrong tree. Ann Jessup isn't the romantic kind. My offer is still open—top wages and a bonus."

"Trouble is, Mr. Trask," Ron told him, "it's too damned attractive. There might be some hidden obligations. A bonus depends on too many things."

"Pick up your bag and come along," the girl said. She seemed nervous, as if she feared Trask might take her new employee by main strength.

A narrow path, worn deep in the sod, followed the bank above the beach. It went around gnarled trees, across ravines and on to a cottage built some seventy feet above the beach sands. A stairway led to the sand. Ron saw a boathouse and several heavy skiffs on the beach directly below them. A small wharf extended from the high water mark, but it was evident it could be used only at high tide.

The tide went out a quarter mile at this point. Up at the head of the bay, vast areas of tide flats were exposed. A seal lifted a glistening black head above water, looked over the situation and disappeared.

"This will be your quarters, Mr. Dale," the girl said, stopping before a small cottage.

Ron looked at her sharply. "What makes you think my name is Dale?" he asked. "I'm Ray Sanders."

"I think we can be honest with each other," said Ann. "My dad and I knew Allen Dale very well in a

business way. He only mentioned his heirs once, and that time he said, 'There's only one other left—a long-legged cowpuncher named Ron Dale. I wish I could get him interested in the oyster business, but I can't.' Well, Allen Dale was drowned, and his lawyer came down to investigate. We made an offer, believing the heir wasn't interested. Trask made an offer, too, then withdrew it."

"Go on," urged Ron. "This is interesting."

"There isn't much more to tell," the girl said. "A man who is dressed like a laborer steps from the stage. We need help and I race like mad, knowing Trask will offer you a job. I'm hurrying and breathless, but I notice that you walk as if your feet hurt you, as if you were really used to high-heel boots. Low heels change the muscle set-up of your foot, and you walk awkwardly until nature readjusts things. Besides you have the brick-burn color of a range rider."

"What else?" Ron asked. This girl's logic was winning him.

"The thought comes that you're Allen Dale's heir, Ron Dale, and that you want to work in the oyster beds until you pick up enough practical knowledge to handle the Dale beds—that you want to get the lay of the land generally," Ann concluded. "And I'm glad because we need a good man on our side."

"You win," Ron told her cheerfully. "I wouldn't get far trying to cover up around you. You've called the turn. But what about Trask? There's no love lost between



"But you told me to practise on a calf!"

you. Has *he* spotted me as Dale's heir?"

"I'm wondering about that," the girl answered thoughtfully. "He accepted you at face value at first, then his eyes took on a strange expression, as if he sensed you were different from the men who come along looking for work. Whatever his conclusion, he'll keep it to himself."

"As far as the public is concerned," Ron said, "I'm Ray Sanders. Maybe I can fool some of the others. Roughly, what are my oyster beds worth?"

"If we had the money, we'd give you twenty-five thousand dollars for the land, buildings, boats and wharf," Ann replied. "We might even up the price to thirty thousand. Trask might pay you five thousand."

"Five thousand!" Ron yelled. "Why the difference?"

"Oh, Trask has clever little ways of discouraging people from keeping odds and ends that take his fancy,"

explained the girl. "Things happen, and eventually you come around to his viewpoint."

"Do you know of anyone who'll pay me twenty-five thousand?" Ron asked.

"No," she answered, "I don't. Probable buyers would be afraid to stack up against Trask. And if I did know of someone, I'd be strongly tempted not to tell you. You see, Mr. Dale, dad is rather old for the rough-and-tumble things that can happen on the oyster beds on a dark, blustery night, or when fog creeps over the tide flats. You seem to be made for it, and we need you here." She smiled, then was serious. "I was joking, of course. If I knew of anyone who would buy you out, I'd tell you, naturally."

Ron lit a cigarette, puffed thoughtfully and gazed over the exposed flats. If he closed his eyes, the flats became a range stocked with cattle. When he opened them again, they were flats and the tide was crawling over them once more.

"You can see your beef grazing on your range," Ann said thoughtfully. "You know that you're raising food for a nation. Good red meat is right before your eyes. But here . . . well, we're raising food, too. Part of the time it's covered by water. Our 'beef' feeds at high tide. The tide goes out, and when it comes in, it brings more food for our 'beef' from an evidently limitless supply. Like your range, some areas supply better food than others. And, like your range, men of the Trask type covet the best grazing land."

Ron liked the sensible way Ann presented the picture—in his own range language. "You have it on us," he said. "No tide brings our beef fresh grass twice a day. Who has the best grazing land around here?"

"Again, using your range talk," Ann said, "the smallest and best spreads in the Canoe Point country are owned by Buck Jessup and Ron Dale. Trask, who owns the biggest spread in these parts, needs the Jessup and Dale range to fatten his beef for market. In this instance, it's oysters of a high quality."

"Why?" he asked. "A tide is a tide flat and water is water, isn't it?"

"Oh, no," she answered quickly, "the food in the water, and the water temperature are most important. An oyster has his own ideas about where he lives. Well, I've given you an outline. There's hot water for a bath in your cottage. We have dinner at six o'clock. Then you'd better rest up, because there's an extreme low tide tonight at two o'clock, and there's work to be done."

The dinner was good, but Ron enjoyed the sleep more. He was dreaming of paying off debts and buying up a lot of young beef with twenty-five thousand dollars when Buck Jessup awakened him. He yawned and blinked, then abruptly realized where he was.

"Weather's changed," Jessup said. "Here's hip boots, slicker and sou'wester. Ann's taking a lunch and bottles of hot coffee down to the boat. Stop in the kitchen as you go by and pour yourself some from

the pot on the stove. I'm going down and get out the boat gear. Don't slip on the stairs or you'll get a bad fall."

Ron dressed quickly, jammed the sou'wester onto his head and stepped outside. The stars were gone and rain rattled like shot against his slicker. He heard the wash of a small surf breaking across the tide flats. Somewhere a night water bird cried eerily.

"A hell of a time for a man to be out," Ron thought, then grinned at the thought of the raw nights he had spent on the range.

He wasn't unfamiliar with water. He could swim, row a boat and drive a canoe in the white water thundering through the range country canyons. But roping and riding were more in his line.

"Ann anchored the boat well out last night," Jessup explained. "It saves dragging it over the beach at low tide which is bad for the boat and a man's constitution." He pointed to a lantern. "That's Ann. I used to wish that she was a boy. A man in my kind of work needs a son. But I'm glad she's a girl, now."

"Amen, brother!" Ron put more feeling into the comment than he realized.

Jessup's pipe glowed hard as he felt the impact of this stranger's enthusiasm for his daughter. "She's all business, Dale," the old man said after a moment's silence. "Ain't the marrying kind, I guess." The warmth had gone from his voice. He was putting Ron in his place.

"Some of these days the right man will come along, then she'll be the

marrying kind," Ron predicted as Ann's swinging lantern came hurrying to them.

Again the pipe glowed hard, then Jessup removed it from his mouth and pointed to several scattered lights. "Those are Trask men over there," he said. "He's got his full force working tonight. The tide isn't all the way out yet, which means he's harvesting the shallow-water oysters. They aren't always the best by a long shot." Then he pointed to other groups of lights, identifying them as small operators. "The black stretch of beach is yours and ours," he concluded.

They pushed the boat a short distance down a depression filled with salt and fresh water and climbed aboard. Ann joined them and seated herself in the stern. The men picked up the oars and began rowing.

III

With the tide out, Ron got a clear picture of the set-up. Canoe Point and most of the buildings were located just off the highway. The oyster beds were on the opposite side of Oyster Inlet. At low water a long, narrow sand bar paralleling the beach was visible. A narrow channel separated the bar from the oyster bed beach. This was known to local people as Oyster Island.

Except for a few scattered cabins and boat houses, the beach was deserted. The land beyond was heavily timbered with second-growth firs. The choicest oysters grew along the channel and were harvested only at extreme low water. They brought

the highest prices in the smart restaurants.

Jeff Trask owned only several very poor bits of land at the lower end of the island. These bits, except at very extreme low water, were actually small islands an acre or two in area.

"We own most of Oyster Island, don't we?" asked Ron.

"That's right," Ann answered as they landed.

"Where're the sacks, Ann?" Jessup asked his daughter.

"Why, I'm sure that I put them into the boat last night, dad."

"Guess you forgot, though that isn't like you," Jessup said. "I'll row back to the boathouse and get 'em. You two can start picking up oysters. Pile 'em up and we'll sack 'em in a hurry."

They helped him shove off, then crossed over the island, Ann leading the way and complaining over her forgetfulness. "Imagine—leaving the sacks behind, of all things! Dad works too hard. Now I add extra rowing to his load."

She stopped when they felt the crunch of shells under their feet. The channel was dry except for a few scattered puddles. The oysters lay in patches for the spat was subject to whims of the tide and where the current was strongest, there was less chance of the spat attaching itself to shells and rocks.

"We don't have a chance to work here often," Ann said. "We'll make the most of it. Or perhaps you'd rather go on to your own property and size up your crop? It'll be

some time before the extreme low tides come again."

"Plenty of time for checking over my property," Ron answered. "Let's get to work on your crop. Show me what you want picked up and I'll do my best not to grade too low."

They went to the low water point and began throwing the oysters to higher ground. "Ugly critters," Ron said, "covered with barnacles sometimes. Half the time they look like just another rock. But I'll bet they taste swell."

"I'll fry you enough to make you sick tomorrow," Ann promised. "We're really cleaning up."

It was some time later that she suddenly straightened up and exclaimed: "The tide is coming in. Wonder where dad is?" She hurried to the top of the island and gazed intently into the velvet black of the night. There was no bobbing light to indicate an approaching boat. She listened for the sound of oars, but the splatter of rain against her slicker and the wash of water along the beach muffled other sounds. She could see the light they had left burning in their cottage and the lights at Canoe Point, but none along the beach.

"Are you worried?" Ron asked.

"I'm beginning to worry a little," admitted Ann. "Dad may have gone on to the store for a new supply, though; our stock was running low."

Ron began to ask himself what would happen if Jessup failed to return? Water was already boiling through the channel, helped in this instance by a stiff wind. Ron continued to pick up oysters and throw

them to higher ground. Later the tide eddied around the first pile they had gathered.

"Had I better shift them?" Ron asked.

"No, they'll be there tomorrow," she replied. "I'm worried about dad. He wouldn't leave us this long, I'm sure."

"What's the answer? How much water will there be on the highest point of this island at full tide? And can we stand the chill until the tide goes out again? I don't know much about this kind of a situation."

She didn't answer for several minutes. Her eyes followed the beach line, searching for a bobbing light that would indicate an approaching boat.

"We've got to swim the channel," she said suddenly. "We just can't gamble any longer. Something has happened to dad. Something happened to your uncle, too. It's nothing that can be proved, but my convictions go deep. Stay here and give me a minute's start, then strip off, wrap your clothes in a bundle and strap them across your shoulders. Leave the hip boots, slicker and sou'wester here. Weight 'em down with rocks so they won't be washed away. We'll pick 'em up tomorrow."

She ran to the water's edge, shed her clothing and plunged in. Her figure was vaguely white against the black night, then it became lost as she waded into the channel. Ron ran to the spot where she had left her rubber clothing, and left his own beside it. A moment later he felt the chill of the water working up his

body. When he was waist deep he began swimming, guided partly by a light on the shore, and occasionally by the flash of Ann's arm as she took a stroke.

He was still fighting the current when Ann ran up the beach and disappeared into the woods. Ron crawled out and pulled on his clothes over a drenched skin. He was shaking with the cold, but presently his flesh began to tingle and the shaking stopped. He heard Ann calling, and when he located her she was trying to launch a skiff. He dragged it to the water.

"Another couple of hundred yards and I might not have made it to the beach," he said as he began rowing.

"It was a close shave," she admitted. "Head for home. I'm sure something happened to dad." Her voice was tight with worry. Guided by the cottage light, Ron crossed the inlet.

Their oyster boat, partly filled with water that had splashed into it, was drifting along with the incoming tide. Ron hauled it out. Ann quickly noted details.

"Dad landed and put the oars under the thwarts so that they'd be safe while he went for sacks," she said. "The anchor is aboard, so he didn't dig it into the sand to hold the boat—proof he didn't expect to be gone long. I'll be back. I want a light to examine tracks before the tide comes in." Then she was running toward the stairs.

She came back with a lantern and as Ron joined her, she said: "There're dad's tracks. I recognize the sole pattern. See, he started for

the stairs. Then someone joined him."

"Two sets of boot prints," Ron said. "A pair of husky lads met him."

Ann caught her breath sharply. "Something happened here. They . . . dragged him . . ."

Twin furrows made by boot heels were visible in the sand. Ron followed them on the run. "Here he is," he shouted.

Jessup's body lay with the feet in the water, and each small wave came to his shoulders before it surged back into the inlet. Ron dropped to his knees and made a quick examination. "He's alive. Someone struck him on the head with a rock or club." He picked up Jessup who was moaning slightly and carried him to the stairs, then rested a moment and carried him up to the cottage.

At any other time, Ann would have been amazed. Her father weighed nearly two hundred pounds and his clothes were drenched, which added to the burden. Ron was gasping for breath, but he had climbed the seventy steps without resting.

"We'd better get him to a hospital," he said. "He'll have to be taken there anyway, and we'll only waste time sending for a doctor. If you can do the driving, I'll stay here. Unless you want me to go along."

"Will you gain anything by staying here?"

"Yes. I want to study his attacker's footprints before the tide washes them out," Ron explained.

"I'll drive him to the hospital, then," decided Ann.

"Another thing," Ron added as he began removing Jessup's sodden clothing. "Whoever did this figured we'd be caught by the incoming tide and drowned. Keep out of sight if possible, and let them think that's just what happened. If oyster thieves are like cattle rustlers, they'll overplay their hand. We'll keep things at the cottage exactly as we left them—the front window light burning. And we'll be careful not to turn on other lights or to build fires. This place is certain to be watched."

"I'll follow orders to the letter," Ann promised. "I'll stay with dad until he regains consciousness, and when I return it'll be after dark."

As soon as Ann had driven away in the Jessup station wagon, Ron caught up a shovel and raced down to the beach. He carefully worked the blade under a footprint. The sand broke in two places, but the sole pattern was clear enough. He carried it to the cottage and picked up three more before the incoming tide washed away the remaining evidence of the attack.

Sitting down in the kitchen, he weighed the various angles of the situation over a much-needed cigarette. Ann was smart. He knew that she would make no attempt to inform him of her father's condition. If Jessup died, which was likely, she would hold off investigation as long as possible and give him a chance to play out his hand. If the old man's condition improved, she would appear some night without warning, ready to help Ron solve the problem.

"If they only branded oysters as they brand beef," he mused, "a man might maneuver the oyster rustlers into a jackpot. But how're you going to brand an oyster? I might scratch brands on their shells, but the rustlers would spot the scratches." He was silent until he finished his cigarette. Then he jumped up suddenly, laughing. "It's a fool idea. But, shucks, most ideas are foolish until they work. And if this one did work, what a hole ace it would be."

And with that observation he went to bed.

IV

Ron awakened in late afternoon and ate some cold food rather than start a fire. As soon as darkness settled, he went down to the boat house. A search unearthed several copper sheets used to tack over leaky areas in an old boat's hull. He grinned broadly at this discovery. He checked on the tide and dragged the boat to the water.

"I must remember to return it to the same spot," he reflected. "If it's shifted, someone will notice and get suspicious." He worked an hour on the copper sheets, then heated water to the boiling point and carried a milk can of it down to the boat. He shoved off and rowed out to the big bar, approaching through the channel. The oysters that he and Ann had gathered lay in heaps. The tide had hardly disturbed them.

"Now for a little branding," Ron muttered. "Got to work fast. The oyster rustlers—I should say pirates, I suppose—may show up tonight."

The job was almost finished when he heard the sound of oars. "I've filled seven sacks," he growled, "and here they come. I'm down wind, so I'll hear them before they hear me."

He had kept the boat in the water. Now he pushed it up the channel to a point beyond the oyster beds. He stranded it, then dug the anchor into the sand. The pirates, he reasoned, were after the high-quality oysters that were within reach only during the extreme low-water periods. Common sense urged Ron to make a clean getaway while he had the chance. The wind would carry the boat down the channel until it was safe to start rowing. On the other hand, if he remained, it was probable that he could identify one or more of the men.

Ron was convinced that Trask was making a play for all of the beds in the region. It was the familiar story of a big rancher absorbing the little fellows. He remembered a water-logged piling that had stranded on the bar. The lower end was covered with barnacles, which anchored it. The upper end floated at high water. Ann had warned him against running into it and damaging the boat. Ron crouched and made his way to it. The fat was in the fire, now. There was no retreat.

Several boats landed. Someone instinctively started to light a pipe and a man bellowed: "No lights, blast it!"

Ron recognized Trask's voice. It was a temptation to work his way closer and he yielded when the men went to work. As long as he kept

the piling behind him, he concluded his figure would merge with it. He lay sprawled in the cold sea grass and muck and waited.

Some of the men were nervous. "Say, ain't that a man up there?" one who had been called Hank asked.

"Hell, no, it's that piling. You've seen it a hundred times," Trask snapped. "Get to work. I'll do the watching. Take everything. We'll cull the oysters later, and dump the rejected stuff on our own beds. Some time, we'll sell 'em to the dealers and make 'em like it."

"Hey, Trask!" a man yelled about a half hour later. "Here're some sacked oysters. The Jessup girl and Ron Dale must have had some sacks. I guess we didn't get all of them."

"So Trask spotted me, too," Ron muttered. "I guess the stamp of the range must stick out all over. That explains why he moved so fast." He crouched and waited for Trask's next order.

"Dump the oysters into our boats," Trask shouted. "Jessup's name might be on the sacks. Put a couple of heavy stones into each and toss them into deep water."

"That ain't no log up there; it's a man," a now familiar voice complained. "I don't see why we take chances like this, Trask." There was a whine that stamped the man as a weakling and probable coward.

"If the body has white whiskers," another voice taunted, "it's probably Old Man Dale's or Jessup's."

"Shut up, Jud," Trask rasped. "Hank's nervous enough without putting ideas into his mind. Hank,

if you weren't the best oyster man in this part of the country, I wouldn't put up with you five minutes. Now get this through your thick head: Estates are appraised. When the appraisers look over the Jessup and Dale estates, they'll check on the oysters. The less oysters, the lower will be the appraised value, and the better the deal we can make with the heirs. We thought we had the Dale estate tied up. Who'd have dreamed a damned cattleman would show up and take a hand in the deal? I supposed he'd sell for what we offered him."

"That's just it," Hank whined, "even you figger wrong, Trask."

"Shut up. You'll be hearing voices next," Trask said harshly. "Dale's dead, the Jessups are dead, and Ron Dale is dead. What's there to worry about? And they all died because they were careless and let their boats drift away." He waited a moment. "Is that clear?" His voice was sharp and threatening.

"Yes, sir," Hank muttered.

Ron decided that he had crowded his luck to the limit. He squirmed back to the piling, crawled around the larger end, then continued crawling until he was confident that his movements would not be outlined against lights ashore. The boat was afloat. He waded out, climbed aboard and drifted with the wind for about fifteen minutes. Then he rowed to the beach, and left the boat, taking care to anchor it at the exact point it had been the night Jessup had been struck down.

He changed clothes and headed toward Canoe Point. The Trask

wharf and buildings were about a quarter mile from the general store. Ron made his way to a point immediately above, sat down on a convenient log and waited.

The heavily loaded boats came to the wharf and there was considerable activity. The oysters were shifted to an area where high tide would cover them and keep them fresh. Ron heard Trask say: "We'll cull tomorrow. This has been a big night's work. And there are bigger ones ahead. Tomorrow night we'll work on the Dale beds."

Hank had a complaint: "Our luck will run out some of these nights. Mark my word."

"You're in this too deep to back out now," Trask warned.

Ron's eyes followed Hank's vague figure to one of the cabins along the bank. The man entered and closed the door behind him. His boots dropped heavily, then there was silence. Evidently Hank slept with his clothes on. Ron made his way to the cabin and sat down again. When snores came from the various buildings, he crawled to a point under Hank's window.

"Hank," he whispered. "Hank."

The man's heavy breathing stopped. He turned, and was evidently listening. Ron was protected by brush that grew to the cabin. He was gambling on discovery, but he felt there were strong odds that Hank's superstitious streak and nervousness might be turned to his advantage.

"Hank! This is Old Man Dale."

Ron heard the bunk springs squeak violently. "You were right, Hank,

that was my body you saw on the bar tonight," he whispered. "Why didn't you come, Hank? I was so cold and my clothes were soaked."

Ron waited. He had an idea a lusty struggle between superstition and common sense was taking place in Hank.

"But the others aren't dead, Hank," he continued finally. "Jessup, Ann and young Dale will show up, Hank. They'll show up."

Sometimes Ron's whisper was strong, sometimes faint. He heard Hank mutter: "Am I really hearin' old Dale's voice, or do I just think I hear it? Can't hear a thing now. Dale, are you there?" Ron didn't answer, and presently Hank growled: "What I need is a stiff drink."

"And I'd like to join you," Ron thought, "but the old shades of night are fading fast." He left the spot quietly, put on his boots some distance from the cabin, and headed home.

Ron slept throughout the day. He got up at sundown, and about two hours later Ann arrived. Ron gave her a quick, searching look and knew that her news was good.

"Dad's regained consciousness," Ann reported, "but he doesn't remember a thing. He was astonished to find himself in a hospital. He'll be there quite awhile, too."

While she was talking, she had given Ron a swift check-up. His thin face, weary eyes and tired attitude told her that he had been driving himself as usual. She hesitated to ask what had happened during her brief absence, but finally said

hesitantly: "Are we supposed to be dead, Ron?"

He gave her a detailed report of everything that had happened, then asked: "Do you know a good lawyer?"

"Yes, but he's too expensive for me to hire," Ann replied. "There's Tim Ziegler, however. He's just out of law school and has almost no practice, but he is smart and quick-witted."

"His fees will be low, so let's gamble on him," Ron suggested. "A quick-witted young fellow makes up in enthusiasm what he lacks in experience. Tell Tim to offer a hundred dollars' reward to the first three people who will submit evidence that oysters have been stolen from your beds."

"Shouldn't the prosecuting attorney handle that?" asked Ann.

"He'll come into the picture later," Ron told her. "I'm working two angles." He yawned.

"You're just about as tired as a man can get," Ann said sympathetically.

"I haven't felt rested in months," he admitted, "but it seems to me that when the chips are down a man finds strength somewhere. Let's go out and see what's doing on Oyster Island?"

"No," she said decisively, "you go back to bed. I'll keep an eye on things. I've an idea Hank's superstitious nature may work on him until he checks up on whether we're alive or not. There's nothing humorous about this affair. I'm sure your uncle was murdered, and we narrowly escaped a similar death. But

Hank's consternation when he realizes we're alive should brighten the day."

"Yes, but what of Trask's consternation?" Ron asked. Then he returned to his cottage and was sound asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow.

When he awakened it was midday and he felt drunk with sleep, but as soon as he got his eyes open, he noticed a note under the door. He picked it up and read:

Ron:

Five A.M. I'm leaving before honest folks are abroad, to see Tim Ziegler. I'll be back tonight. Take it easy.

Ann.

Ron risked detection and made a quick shift to Ann's quarters. He found some cold food and ate it, sitting well back from the windows as he watched activities on the channel. The tide was out, and portions of Oyster Island were visible. Through binoculars he noticed that Trask had a crew gathering oysters on the exposed flats across the inlet. At the distance, Ron couldn't identify the men, but one was obviously drunk, because he staggered aimlessly about. Ron put down the binoculars and grinned. Trask was evidently having quite a time keeping Hank sober.

V

About an hour later Ron fell asleep in a chair, and when he awakened it was dark and Ann was shaking him.

"All I want to do is sleep," he

said apologetically. "It's worse than a drug." He washed his face in cold water.

"You've been going on your nerve at the ranch for months," Ann said, "then you walk into this mess. I offered the reward, and hired Tim, but I don't know what we'll use for money, what with dad's hospital bill jumping by leaps and bounds. I—"

Her words ended in a gurgle as Ron clapped his hand across her mouth. "I saw a shadow pass between the window and the light across the inlet," he whispered. "Someone's prowling."

"Hank?" she asked as he removed his hand.

"I hope so," he replied.

The shadow approached, and Ron recognized Hank. The man carried a gun in his right hand and was obviously a walking drunk. "Gotta find out," he was muttering. "Can't stand it any longer. Old Man Dale's ghost said they was alive. Trask, who ain't no ghost, says they're dead. Gotta find out. Gotta look for signs of their livin' here." He fumbled with the back door and entered the kitchen.

Ron's hand shot out and grabbed the weapon from Hank's hand. "Pull down the kitchen shades, Ann," he ordered. "Then turn on a light." A moment later he pretended amazement. "Oh, it's you, Hank. I thought it was a burglar. Sit down. Been hitting the bottle too hard, eh? And now you're trying to find your way home."

Hank's face, flushed with liquor a moment before, was ashen. "So you two *are* alive. Like Old Man

Dale's ghost said." The man was shaking violently.

Ron pounded home an advantage made possible by superstition and too much liquor. "I didn't believe in ghosts, either . . . once," he said. "And I'm not sure that I do now. But I've heard a voice, or maybe it wasn't a voice. Maybe it was something registering words."

"A sort of whisper that kind o' fades away and comes back, like the wind moanin' over the tide flats?" Hank asked eagerly.

"That's it," Ron said. "And who are we to say yes or no to the question of voices trying to tell us something?"

The sweat began pouring from Hank's face. "Yeah, who are we?" he agreed in a hushed voice. "And Buck Jessup is alive?"

"Yes." Ron saw relief in the man's face. Again he pounded home his advantage. Hank could have been a cattle-rustling gang weakling; this air could have carried the odor of pine trees instead of salt water. Outlaws were the same wherever you found them. Ron's confidence increased.

"You'll never stand trial for Jessup's death," he told Hank.

"You didn't really hit him. It was Trask who struck the blow."

"How'd you know that I was along?" Hank asked thickly.

"I know plenty," Ron told him. "You left footprints in the sand. I shoveled up samples. Now clear up two things: Didn't Trask steal the oyster sacks from the boat to lure Jessup or me back so that he could get a crack at us? Ann Jessup was

sure that she put them into the boat and she's not the forgetful kind."

"Trask stole 'em, figgerin' one of you'd come back. Buck come."

"Who killed Old Man Dale?"

"He wasn't killed with a gun nor nothin' like that. They stole his boat, like they done you and the girl. He drowned and his body washed up at Rocky Point," Hank answered. "I wasn't in on that. I never go in on them kind of deals. Scared of gettin' caught. I'm . . . Shhh! Do you hear somethin'?"

Neither Ron nor Ann had heard anything, but Hank's nervous ears had caught the sucking sound of rubber boots in the muck around the back yard water hydrant. The door opened violently and Trask bel-lowed: "Hank, you damned fool! Turn out those lights . . ." Then he saw Ron and Ann. He hurled himself into the darkness, firing at Hank as the back door closed. The big fellow dropped to the floor.

"Here's Hank's gun," Ann cried as Ron ran for the front door.

"I don't trust strange guns," Ron shot back. His own holstered gun was on the table where he had left it when he moved in that morning. He yanked it clear and continued on out the front door, sensing that Trask would wait momentarily near the back door.

At first he didn't hear a sound, then the soft pad of moving feet came to his ears. Trask had pulled off his boots to muffle footfalls and give him greater speed. Ron pulled off his own boots and followed. He

reasoned that this would be a finish fight. Trask knew Hank was a weakling and had probably concluded that the man had talked. There was no doubt of Trask's astonishment when he found Ron and Ann alive, but the cowman had never seen anyone react from surprise so swiftly. "Wonder if he's smart with a gun?" Ron mused.

Within two minutes he realized that Trask was too smart to expose his position by firing. Ron sensed that Trask's game was to draw his pursuer close enough to make sure the first shot would turn the trick, or else to make a stand in ground of his own choosing. Occasionally branches snapped as the man, bent low, crashed into them.

Trask stopped suddenly and Ron fired at the sound, then crouched. Instantly Trask fired at the flash. The bullet droned about two feet over Ron's head. He blazed at Trask's flash, then jumped to the right. Again Trask fired and shifted his position. It was becoming a running fight. A root tripped Ron and sent him sprawling. He heard his gun tumble into a brush-choked hole and knew that from now on it was a hand-to-hand fight. Trask cleared the rim of the bank and sent rocks rolling down the steep slope. He was crouching, waiting for Ron's figure to appear against the star-lit sky.

Ron pulled off his coat, shoved a stick through the sleeves to give it the suggestion of arms and shoulders, then tossed it against a small tree growing on the brink of the bank. Trask fired twice and Ron

dived headlong at the spot. He struck Trask with a staggering impact, and the two began rolling down the slope.

"Figured you'd make sure of me with your last two shots, didn't you?" Ron panted. "Makes us even! Lost my own gun a ways back." He drove his fist into Trask's stomach, then the brush gave way and they started rolling. They hit another clump of brush and Trask was on top, but Ron started them rolling again. He felt sick as Trask's knee caught him in the stomach, but groped and found the man's throat. He hung on, taking a beating from Trask's knees during the brief moments when the brush stopped them. They ended up against a tree and Ron banged the man's head against the trunk.

"Don't . . . kill me," Trask groaned.

"No chance," Ron panted. "I need you alive. The State can hang you when I'm through with you." He banged Trask's head against the trunk once more and felt him grow limp.

Reaction came, and Ron fought to retain his own consciousness. He heard Ann's voice, then saw a lantern bobbing like a firefly along the bank's rim.

"Ron! Ron!" There was alarm and distress in Ann's tone. She had heard the shots and was almost sick with apprehension. "Stay with him, Ron. I'm coming."

"Down here," Ron gasped. "Be careful, don't break your neck."

"You're a fine one to worry over

broken necks," Ann said, almost crying in relief. Then she was beside him—a thoughtful young person in an emergency, he decided, because she had brought along enough rope to tie up a prisoner. "We'll stay here," she added when Trask was well secured. "People are coming from every direction. Shots carry a long way on a night like this."

"How's Hank?"

"I didn't wait to find out," Ann told him.

Trask regained consciousness a moment later, but he didn't speak until his head was clear. "There's time to make a deal, Dale," he said hurriedly. "What do you want to forget this whole business?"

"Why should a man who holds four aces want to make a deal?" countered Ron.

"Because my men heard the shots and they'll be coming in droves," Trask retorted. "They'll take charge . . . sudden."

"And if oyster pirates are like cattle rustlers, and I believe they are," Ron told him, "they'll see quite a bunch of honest folks gathering, and they'll hightail it out of here."

Ann's lantern was the point on which all converged. There was a scattering of Trask men at first, but they remained in the shadows, and finally stole quietly away. A deputy sheriff put in an appearance.

"Arrest Trask for Allen Dale's murder," Ron told him. "Also Ann Jessup is bringing a civil action against him to recover damages for stealing her oysters—"

"I never stole an oyster in my life," Trask shouted.

"Someone had better follow us to Jossup's," Ron continued. "We've got to get Hank to the hospital—or the morgue." He began climbing the bank, and Ann followed.

They found Hank badly, though not fatally, wounded. But the fear of death was on him and he was in a mood to talk to everyone. It was three o'clock in the morning before the last person had left and Ann and Ron were alone.

"You look as if a puff of wind would knock you over, Ron," Ann said. "Where do you get your strength when you need it?"

"You'll never know how small a margin I had when the fight with Trask ended," he said. "It was a toss-up." He sighed. "I was never so dead tired and weak."

"It's nothing that plenty of rest and good food won't cure," she declared. "And I'm going to see that you get both. They're long overdue."

"I was thinking," Ron said reflectively, "that a man might run a cattle ranch in the summer, and oyster beds in the winter. The years that beef is cheap, the oysters might keep things going. And when the oyster market is down, beef might be up. And I was thinking that what I need is your cooking for the rest of my life."

"We'll go into that later," she said,

trying to be businesslike, but smiling in spite of herself. "Anyway, a girl can't be married when her dad is in the hospital. He's needed to walk down the middle aisle with her and to give her away. In the meantime, what makes you so confident that we can recover damages from Trask because he stole our oysters? How're you going to prove it?"

"Because," Ron answered, "some of the oysters Trask swiped from you contained little strips of sheet copper on which I had written, 'Stolen From Jessup.' And about tomorrow folks who bought oysters from Trask will be showing up to claim the hundred dollars' reward you offered. That'll be all the proof any court needs. Chances are, Trask's lawyer will be around to make a settlement. And it will include hospital bills and damages for putting your father into the hospital. The total should keep the wolf away from the door until you can get your oyster business going full blast."

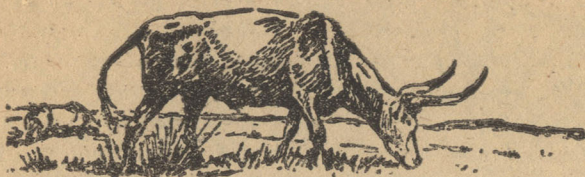
"And a little to spare," she agreed. She got up and started to walk out of the room.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "Where are you going?"

"To the kitchen," Ann answered. "The business of putting a little flesh onto that big, bony frame of yours starts right now. I've got to get you back in shape. The oyster business needs you—and so do I."

THE END





COWBOY MAKER

by S. OMAR BARKER

*To the longhorn's paw and beller there was never any bluff
It made a cowpoke what he was and proved he had the stuff!*

PLENTY has been written about the old-time cowboy, not so much about the animal responsible for his existence. I don't mean that bland ol' bossy that the farmer sets his milk pail under. What I refer to is the horn-wearing article of the old-time range—the crude, cranky, cross-grained, grass-cropping critter whose handling created the cowboy. She carried a tail at one end and a snort at the other. The hairy-hided beef, bone and gristle that took shape between them was likely to be ornery, omnifarious and organized for action.

If she had been a gentle Jessie of the cow pen instead of an untamed terror from Texas, I'm afraid our

tough, high-hearted, romantic breed of hired-men-on-horseback might never have turned out to be much more than bovine "shepherders."

When the old-timer said "cows," he meant cattle in general. Even today a man whose ranch pastures only steers is said to be in "the cow business."

This cow that made the cowboy was a descendant of mixed-blooded Spanish cattle. She came in any color of hair you could name: yellow, dun, strawberry roan, blue roan, speckled, brindled, mousy black, black with brown back and belly, and a wide variety of sun-faded reds. White patches showed up *ad lib.*, but the rich red white-faced cattle called



Herefords came onto the range later.

Nicknames that trail drivers gave their lead steers or that cow hunters applied to some ol' wildy that always got away, usually derived from their colors. Ol' Blue, the steer that led many a Charles Goodnight herd up the trail to the shipping pens, was of that peculiar mixed hair known as blue roan. Names like Lineback (light or dark stripe along the back), Gateado (Spanish for brindled), Grullo (mousy gray), Cherry and Frosty were common. When I was a kid pa had an old black Texas cow we called Spain because of a white splotch on her hip shaped like a map of that country of her ancestors.

This original range cow was long-legged, long-coupled, tall and lank, even when fat. Her shoulder blades beveled up high and narrow—"sharp enough to split a hailstone." Viewed sideways, she might look like a heap of beef, but from the rear her hams showed skimpy and her ribs anything but round. The only wide part about her besides her horns was the bony bracket of her high hips. She stood higher in front than the rear, but her long sway back made her look lofty at both ends.

The graceful, tapering curves of

the horns on longhorn cattle were as varied as the colors of their hides. Ridgy wrinkles ringing the base denoted the animal's age. For steers a spread of six feet was common, with nine feet an approximate record. Cows' horns grew a little shorter, while those of bulls were shorter still. Lacking the double curve and twist of the steer's horn, theirs were thick at the butt, tapering into polished points as sharp as a bodkin.

That they were deadly weapons is evidenced by the fact that the longhorn bull was the only animal of the range that ever dared dispute the right of way with a grizzly bear and sometimes made it stick.

In 1846 Colonel Philip St. George Cooke's Mormon Battalion of U.S. troops en route to California had the bad luck to run into a bunch of wild black bulls in southern Arizona. Before rifle fire could drive them off, several mules were killed, wagons upset and a number of soldiers injured.

Longhorn cows were fighters, too. They had to be for the breed to survive. At the approach of wolves, cows with calves did not run for cover. They formed a circle, heads out, with their calves in the middle, and many an overbold lobo limped away to die with a horn hole through him. Given a cliff wall for backing, a lone longhorn mother could often fight off three or four of the big gray killers by herself.

If she was caught alone out on the flats, however, two wolves could get the job done if they knew their business—and they did. While one feinted a frontal attack, the other would slip to the rear and with one

leaping slash cut the main tendon of a hind leg. Thus "hamstrung" so she could not stand, the cow could not prevent the wolves from pulling down her calf at leisure.

Even then the lobos had to be wary, for at the first bellow of battle, every other longhorn within hearing was likely to come at a high-tailed run to join the fight. Even bulls and steers responded promptly to any bellow of distress and "came on the prod."

The old-time range cow may have been no beauty, but as a wise and militant mother she was hard to beat. She knew how to hide her newborn calf so that even the sharpest-eyed cowboy might ride within a few yards of it and not see it. Meantime she would try to lead him away by showing a lot of anxiety in some other direction. When I was a young un looking after pa's cattle in the timbered New Mexico mountains, we used to take a dog along. If we could make him yelp or bark anywhere near the calf, then the old cow would give up her play-acting and rush to protect her baby.

You hear a heap about day nurseries nowadays, but the range cow thought of it first. Except when first born, she habitually left her calf for hours, along with a dozen or so others, in the care of another cow while she went to graze or to water. Then in turn she would take charge of the nursery while other ma cows took their spell of freedom.

But no matter how hungry or thirsty she might be, the smell of wolf, bear or panther, or the "beller" that signaled danger would bring

her back in a hurry. Just how the "critters" decided whose turn it was to mind the babies nobody knows except the cows. This day-nursery plan is practiced pretty much the same by modern range Herefords, except that now most cattlemen have their ranges equipped with windmills and tanks so that cows don't have so far to go for water.

Where those long-shanked longhorns could get by with watering twice a week, often traveling twenty miles to get it, modern range cattle water out at least once a day. Only on the driest of ranges do they have to travel more than three miles. If it's handy, a cow will drink around fifty gallons a day, but those old *Tejano* cattle often lived for weeks on only the moisture in yucca blossoms and cactus buttons.

When she did water out, however, the range cow sure managed to enjoy it. She liked to wade in belly deep to drink. After she came out she liked to hang around in shallow water or mud, listening to the pleasant gurgle in her guts and stomping flies for awhile before taking a few final swigs and heading back to grass.

Sure-enough thirst, like cattle often suffered on the dry drive from the Conchos to Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos, was a terrible thing. One of its first effects was to make cattle blind. In such a situation, those longhorns could smell water up to fifteen miles away—even a shower of rain—and once they did there was no holding them.

Crafty old wild longhorns changed watering places frequently to avoid being located by roundup riders.

Hence comes the cowboy saying that "a man who changes waterin' places too often ain't honest."

This old-time range cow was as tough alive as the rawhide made from her peeling when dead. Of Joe Evans tells about one that a cowboy tied up to a tree in the Black Range, then forgot where he'd left her. She was twenty-five days without grass or water, yet still alive when finally found. In early Texas when longhorns were hunted for their hides and tallow, two cow hunters put twenty shots into one old black cow before they downed her.

It would take a book thick enough for a boy to sit on and swing his feet, to tell all about the cow, and I don't aim to write it here. But one other item just can't be passed up: her sense of smell.

When a cow lost track of her calf in a roundup, she went around bawling for it, and when she got an answer that sounded like it might be her young un, she went to it. But before she really claimed the calf she had to smell it. It may be hard for you and me to believe that no two calves smell alike, but the cow's nose knows.

Hauling newborn calves in the wagon on a trail drive until they

were strong enough to travel, cowboys put sacks or canvas between them to keep from getting the smells mixed up. If they didn't, when they put the calves back with their mammas some suspicious old mother might get a whiff of the wrong smell on her calf and refuse to claim it.

Let a cowboy carry a calf away on his saddle, and without any clue except whatever scent might linger in the air, that calf's mother could take up his trail hours later and follow it.

Colonel Jack Potter tells about an old lead steer named Sid Boykin that saved a herd from death and disaster by thirst, by smelling an unknown lake of water seven miles away and leading them to it.

Range cattle could smell a norther coming long before a man could sight its first ominous haze, and if there were cedar brakes or canyons anywhere near, they headed toward them for shelter. They could smell a wolf, a bear, a panther or a man, if the wind was right, long before he came close enough to identify by sight. And the weird, spooky "beller" of longhorns when they smelled blood was a terrifying sound with the fear of death in it.

A heap more could be said about this old-time bovine of the open ranges. In mountain country she laid out trails whose grade would do credit to a civil engineer. The few old cowboys who ever milked her claim she never gave more than half a tomato can of milk at one juicing, and kicked like a bay steer.

She wasn't built to lie on her back or belly, so she regularly got up and



changed sides on the bed ground sometime during the night. She knew every bush and stone on her home range, and if allowed to, liked to "born her calf" in the same cove or hollow every year.

She had an amazing sense of direction and locality, and seemed to know the way back home from anywhere. One of Goodnight's old cows came alone back to her home range across a hundred miles of waterless *jornada* east of the Pecos. Old Sancho, a brush-country steer, came

home alone to south Texas from Wyoming, not an inch less than 1500 miles, arriving with his hoofs worn off right up to the hair.

Tough, that's what they were. Wild, smart and tough. To round up, brand and put such critters up the trail away from the home range they knew and loved, required tough men with tough horse meat under their saddles, and tough ideas in their heads.

Give the old range cow her due of credit: she *made* the cowboy.

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY



Ralph Yergen

not only ramrods the Oregon ranch on which he was born but a successful writing career—so he sure "makes a hand." During the fishing season, however, the type-writer just hasn't the lure of those big Deschutes River rainbow trout! But however disastrous the fishing and hunting seasons are to producing manuscripts, Yergen seems to have compromised and given his ever-growing audience plenty of thrilling entertainment.

"One of my most unforgettable experiences," he writes, "was a week spent as

guest of the forest ranger in the old lookout cabin perched atop the jagged 11,000 foot summit of Mt. Hood, when the worst summer storm ever known out here came over the mountain. I can still hear that li'l ol' cabin creaking and swaying on its taut cables and the wild shriek of the wind; still see the age-old glaciers, the sunsets and the tiny lights of far-off plains and valley homes winking in the murky dusk. Quite a contrast to my one and only week in New York—which for a big town is tops, but what does any city have to compare with the mountains and prairies and quiet hidden valleys in this land of mine?" To which, we venture to say, all Western fans will give a hearty "Amen." Yergen enjoys writing about the lesser known events which helped make Western history and about folks who get fun out of living. And isn't that what we're all looking for?

Don't miss this young author's GUN-WOLF, KILL NO MORE! a heart-warming romance of the old Southwest, coming in our July issue with other tales of pioneer days by Walt Coburn, Norman A. Fox, L. P. Holmes, James Shaffer—as well as many other outstanding features.

LET THE SIX-GUNS HOWL

by
ROD PATTERSON

I

It was strange that Dave Sharon should think of Ed Toomey again after so many years—Toomey, the shy and gentle man who had stood up to rustler guns to prove to himself that he wasn't afraid of fear; the man whose bragging concerned such simplicities as the wind and bottom of a cutting horse, or the weight of tallow on a yearling steer, but never his own peculiar brand of bravery.

Dave Sharon had been orphaned by that ruckus at the homestead ranch, for his father, Big John, had died fighting at Toomey's side defending the spread Dave inherited and had run these fifteen years. Although he revered his father's memory, Dave had made a hero of Ed Toomey, his father's foreman; had struggled desperately to impose the



stalwart Texan's code upon himself.

This admiration he had for the man, long since drifted to other parts, had been one of the vital forces of his life, but the more or less quiet uneventfulness of the intervening years had pushed it back into his subconscious. Dave certainly wasn't

With only a button to side him, Dave Toomey had to choose between the death threat of a raging blizzard and the snarling guns of Hack Trumbo's hellions



thinking about Ed Toomey that afternoon in late November as he rode home from jury duty at the trial of Mal Losee in Big Bend City; but every step his big roan took brought him closer to Toomey as well as to a half-forgotten boyhood fear.

He had no real intimation of this

old buried fear as he sat his high-cantled saddle with his coat collar pushed up against the icy wind that slashed down off the high peaks. In fact, he wasn't paying much attention to anything, not even to the

horse which had been bred in this early Montana country and therefore knew its own way well enough. His muscular, stocky body functioned mechanically to ease the roan; and his darkly pleasant face with its steady light blue eyes and prominent cheek bones wore a thoroughly pre-occupied expression.

He was thinking rather absently about the outlaw, Losee, who had been taken off the Butte train after a shooting fracas in which a deputy marshal had been wounded. The trial had been prompt and merciless, and Losee had been committed to the pen at Hassayampa for five years. Dave recalled the outlaw's violent outburst as he was being led away by his guard. Losee had gripped the rail of the prisoner's box with both hands, his thin, scarred face twisted out of shape by bitterness and rage.

"Jest wait till Hack Trumbo hears about this," Losee had snarled at the twelve cattlemen grouped beyond the raw pine rail. "You'll burn in hell, the bunch of you!" His black eyes had burned with hatred and resentment, and his gaze had seemed to linger longest on Dave's still face. Dave had shivered involuntarily. It wasn't that he actually feared Hack Trumbo, but it was reported that the outlaw leader and two of his men who had made their getaway from the train were now holed up in the nearby hills, and therefore in a position to avenge the jailing of Mal Losee with comparative impunity.

The involuntary shiver which had accompanied Losee's threat came back as Dave rode down the timber

trail toward the home ranch on Cow Creek Flats. Then, abruptly, his horse stopped, almost pitching him over its head. Dave clawed his way back into the saddle, peering intently between the animal's erect ears. A rider had just emerged from the close-ranked pines beside the trail and now stood facing him in the shadows, not fifty feet away. Dave's mind had been so occupied with thoughts of Hack Trumbo that for a brief and startled moment he believed he was staring at the outlaw or at one of his men. The hair on the back of his neck stirred, and he snapped alert, automatically bracing himself against the shock of a quick-fired shot. It didn't come; and then he saw that it wasn't a man who faced him, but a boy.

Not speaking, Dave moved the roan forward slowly. Now he saw that the boy appeared to be ten or twelve years old and very emaciated. His face was pitifully thin, his pale eyes sunk deep in hollows made by cheek bones which seemed almost sharp enough to penetrate the hard-stretched skin. He was all arms and legs, dressed in clothing too large for him, and his big feet protruded like paddles at his pony's sides.

Dave held the roan with one hand on the reins. "Hullo there, bub," he said quietly, and grinned. He had a disarming grin that puckered his blue eyes and crinkled his flat, tanned cheeks. "Goin' my way?"

The boy sat his tired calico, held by a kind of indifference that approached outright apathy. He stared at Dave, neither friendly nor unfriendly, and Dave's curiosity was

at once aroused. For no boy of twelve would be on this remote trail unless he was lost, and lost boys, like lost dogs, are usually pathetically glad to see anyone.

Then the boy spoke. "I'm lookin' for a spread called Sun Ranch and a man name of Dave Sharon," he said in a completely lackluster voice. "I . . . guess I missed the trail." He seemed to sway in his saddle and made a delayed grab at the horn. The next moment Dave saw him slide sideways and fall slackly to the trail. He lay where he fell, with his head pillowed on his left arm like a boy who is tired and wants to go to sleep.

Dave got off his roan and walked forward, kneeling and running his square strong fingers over the boy's thin shoulders and shaking him gently. Then the lad opened his eyes. There was no fear in them, though—only a weariness, a wondering.

"I'm Lige Toomey," he said simply, and that was all.

Dave covered his look of shock deliberately. "Well, bub," he murmured, "I'm Dave Sharon. But what in time are you doin' in this neck of the woods? I thought Ed Toomey was . . ." He narrowed his gaze on the boy's stiff face. "You must be Ed Toomey's son."

The boy tried to sit up, but Dave had to help him. Lige felt through his pockets, a worried expression growing in his pale eyes. "I had a letter from pop somewheres. He said to give it to you. Oh, here it is," he said with relief, and handed Dave a soiled and wrinkled envelope.

"Pop gimme it afore he . . . died." This with a catch in his voice.

Dave straightened up with the letter gripped in his hand. All his memories of Ed Toomey came back as on a tide, bringing a sense of protest, a poignant sense of loss. "I didn't know Ed was dead," he said in a hollow voice.

"They shot him. It was over a month ago," Lige said somberly. "Him and me was ranchin' it down towards Doubletree . . ."

"They shot him?" Dave said sharply. "Who's they?"

Lige shook his head. His brownish hair grew thickly over his collar and curled up around his ears. "I was out fixin' a fence, and when I rode in pop was lyin' in the yard."

Dave helped him stand up, supported him steadily. "You're tuckered, Lige," he said gravely. "I'll help you back on your horse."

"I ain't tired," the boy denied. "Jest kind of hungry. Ain't et nuthin' but a few berries the last few days." He pulled firmly away from Dave and mounted his calico after a couple of tries.

Dave watched him, troubled, puzzled. Then he tucked the letter in his coat pocket, went over and swung into the saddle and put the roan up beside the boy's pony. They rode on down the trail together, neither speaking. Lige was staring straight ahead, the look of apathy on his bone-lean face again.

And now, after hearing the boy's brief telling of his father's death, Dave felt that something fine, something very necessary to him, had gone permanently out of his life.

Somehow it was hard for him to realize that Ed Toomey was actually dead, for Toomey had seemed invincible. Confused by this new emotion he now had, Dave rode on in taciturn silence, all his thoughts turned morosely inward on the past.

II

Sun Ranch lay in the deep, narrow little valley of Cow Creek, an isolated pocket in a wilderness where pines grew tall and green, where some of the mountain peaks ran up five thousand feet or more against a sky in which gray cloud masses went scudding before a wintry wind. The pole corrals and log-walled house and barns squatted in a mountain meadow where the wind whooped lustily. Today the sharp clean smell of snow was in the air. A storm was in the making on yonder peaks.

In the past two weeks, working alone, Dave had rounded up his sizable herd of white-faced steers which he had held all summer on Wild-horse Mesa, then moved the cattle down close to the ranch. The herd was now thrown out on the stretch of meadows south of the log buildings where they would remain throughout the winter months, sheltered from the weather by the mountains that rose tier on tier at every hand.

Dave and Lige rode into the enclosure between the pole corrals and the house in the drab gray light of late afternoon. They dismounted, leaving the horses and walking up toward the house together.

"You need some grub under your

belt, son," Dave said. "I'll take care of the horses afterwards."

Later, over heaped plates of beans and side meat, while Lige unashamedly wolfed his food, Dave drew the trail-stained letter from his coat behind the woodshed door and tore it open. Seated opposite the boy in the warm-smelling kitchen, he read:

Dear Dave:

This is my boy Lige, born three years after I left Cow Creek. He's on his own, or will be time you read this. I got a hunch I ain't goin' to live long. I just heard Hack Trumbo and his bunch are out of prison and on the prod again. Hack swore when they put him away he'd square accounts with me. Maybe you was too young to remember but one of those rustlers your dad and me killed that night was Hack's kid brother. This is a real feud fight, Dave, and you may be next yourself. Take care, and do the same for Lige.

As ever,

Ed Toomey.

Dave sat motionless and still at the table in the kitchen where the fire snapped and crackled in the old woodstove. His blue eyes were fixed staringly on Toomey's almost illegible scrawl. The impact of what he had just read came home to him with all its implications. Strangely enough, he had not connected the name of Hack Trumbo with the gun fight at the ranch fifteen years ago, although the details of that catastrophe were still very vivid in his mind. He had been young—not much older than Lige was now—when it had occurred, and the swift ferocity of the scene he had witnessed

had left his brain stunned for days afterward.

But now there was a picture in his mind—the picture of the ranch yard at sundown on that momentous day. He was seeing the new log house, the freshly peeled pole corral, the towering mountains that rose behind the house. And he was seeing his father and Ed Toomey, stripped to the waist, as they washed up at the cast-iron water trough. The magnificently molded bodies of both men gleamed red in the setting sun, and their lusty laughter was a mighty sound in the ears of the boy who sat on the chopping block near the woodhouse door and whittled carefully at a branch of pine.

Then, all that silence, all that peace was broken by the massed clatter of hoofs in the twilight and by the quick staccato reports of guns fired haphazardly. Out of the shadows that rimmed the yard a party of riders appeared, whipping up along the corrals, a confusion of dusty, grim-faced figures forking their horses recklessly. Guns winked brightly against the chaparral; bullets sprayed the yard, and small aimless geysers of dust danced over the hard-packed ground.

Dave obeyed his first impulse to take cover from that hail of lead. He dropped his knife and threw himself back through the woodhouse doorway where he crouched, white-lipped, terrified, while the ranch yard boiled with horsemen, and the steady round claps of gunfire broke loudly between the house and the corrals and ran on out to the flats and echoed

against the mountainside. Bullets clipped the house, and Dave shrank back, then dared to look again.

Fascinated beyond all reason, he saw Big John and his foreman out there, impossibly surviving the wicked cross-fire of all those guns, their own revolvers adding to the uproar. He saw the black, weaving shapes in the yard; he heard a horse scream and go down with an earth-shaking jar, hurling its rider to the dust; and that rider rolled on and on and did not ride again. Then the blackness of the rustlers' shapes grew vaguer as they turned behind the house to try an approach from the other side. Then all those men were streaming back, and the blinking flashes of the guns looked like crimson blossoms against the night.

Dave saw Big John lurch to his feet behind the water trough, saw him fire his heavy weapon, reload and fire again; he saw Ed Toomey working the trigger of his pistol where he stood at Big John's side, firing with a deliberate and stubborn care. Then Big John went down like a tree cut suddenly from its roots. One moment he was standing there, burly, defiant; the next he was draped over the edge of the water trough, his head submerged. Ed Toomey took time to pull him down from the trough, then went on firing, a big and somehow legendary figure in the flame-shot gloom.

Dave had this memory of Ed Toomey after all the years; and he had a dread of roaring guns, although, till now, he had not been consciously aware of it. At the moment of reading Toomey's last letter,

with the pale eyes of Toomey's son upon him, Dave Sharon came to the full knowledge of this old fear, though he tried desperately to shake it off. Thinking of the loyalty of the boy's father, of the loneliness of the boy himself, feeling his own sense of loss, Dave experienced a moment in which Ed Toomey's spirit seemed to hover above this room in which they sat. It was a violently disturbing thought.

"Lige . . ." Dave said, then stopped, at a loss to express in words what lay so strongly in his heart.

The boy raised his head, swiping at his mouth with the sleeve of his threadbare cotton shirt. His gray eyes were suddenly attentive, questioning, although it struck Dave that Lige was looking beyond him, through him even, as if he had expected the familiar syllables of another voice, not Dave's.

"Lige," Dave made another try, "I'm downright glad you've come."

The boy answered in his quiet voice. Though his eyes remained aloof, his manner was more friendly than before. "I didn't wanta leave pop, but he made me. I hid in the timber that first night, and when I went back in the mornin' I heard the shootin'. I found him lyin' in the yard—dead. With his gun still in his hand. I—wish't I knowed who killed him."

A tense uneasiness took hold of Dave. He said flatly: "The ones that killed your father killed mine—fifteen years ago. Didn't Ed ever tell you about it?"

"No."

"The boss of that bunch is a man

called Trumbo—Hack Trumbo," Dave went on grimly. "He and his outfit are holed up in this part of the country right now, and *we* may have to fight 'em yet."

The expression on Lige's thin face changed almost imperceptibly; his eyes darkened visibly and his mouth pulled tight. "I hope he comes here," he said in the same soft tone, "because then I won't have to go lookin' for *him*."

Dave stared, shocked by those words spoken so softly by a mere child, yet uttered from the depths of a violent and bitter hate. There was suddenly a kind of suffocating silence to the air in the kitchen, and that oppressive quality was not caused entirely by the proximity of the storm or by the intense heat of the stove. All sound ceased in the house and in the yard outside.

Dave rose stiffly. "You can have the room at the end of the hall. I'm goin' down and take care of the horses. There's a blue norther blowin' up."

Lige got up and moved across the kitchen toward the hall door. His thoughts troubled, Dave drew on his coat and walked to the front door. His touch on the latch seemed to be the signal that brought a howling bedlam of wind down upon the house. A quick, buffeting blast shook the windows and made the overhead timbers groan as from a weight. Paused with his hand on the latch, Dave listened, his uneasiness increasing. And now the first needle-sharp flakes of snow rattled

against the window panes with a sound like hard-thrown sand.

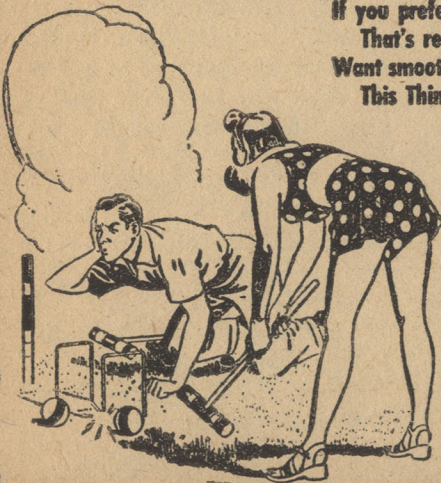
He opened the door, sliding through and closing it behind him. The wind nailed him against the logs as he turned the corner, and made him lower his head to get his breath. Crystals of sleet and snow stung his cheeks and clattered against the house; and for a moment all he could see before him was a woolly, streaming wall of white, solid, opaque, blinding. It was bad enough at this stage of the storm for a man to venture into the open, but in another hour or so it would be something no living thing could stand up against. Dave drew a deep breath and made a run for the corrals, a hundred feet away, invisible even now in the swirling wind and snow. He found the horses, heads hanging

low, tails turned to the gale, their saddles already coated with thin ice.

While he stripped off the saddles and stabled the horses, the gale built up to a steady, drumming roar, and when he returned to the house the wind was a solid weight pushing behind him. In the kitchen again, he stood a moment, gasping, while snow melted and dripped from his eyebrows and his jaw. He was standing this way, holding the door with his shoulders, when he heard the hoofs come into the yard in back of him.

His first thought was of Hack Trumbo, his first impulse to spring across the room for his gun-belt which hung in its accustomed place on a peg beside the stove. Then he eased open the door and peered outside. Three horsemen showed to him; then two others bulged out of

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the storm. A muffled voice yelled: "Sharon—open up!"

With a surge of quick relief Dave identified that voice as belonging to Matt Berryman, sheriff of Butte County, whom he had seen at Big Bend City only a few hours before. Dave stepped into the yard. The sheriff saw him and cupped a hand to his mouth.

"Mal Losee broke jail at four o'clock. Trumbo and two others got him out. They killed Andy Ames and hit for the hills. We trailed 'em far as Cholo Pass."

"Hack Trumbo?" Dave said it rather stupidly, but the wind took his voice and hurled it away and the sheriff did not hear him.

"We're headin' home fast," Berryman called. "It's hell on the Flats already. We'll be back when it blows over."

III

Dave watched the posse fade back into the murk. The news that Berryman had dropped so casually turned him faintly sick with apprehension, but, as he closed and barred the kitchen door behind him, that sensation seemed to melt away, and a slow rage began to burn in him, rage at the rank carelessness that had permitted Trumbo and his cronies to ride unhindered into Big Bend and then escape with Mal Losee. The hate he had felt for Hack Trumbo upon hearing about the murder of Ed Toomey had been a more or less abstract emotion, for real hatred was alien to him; but now the rage he felt was no longer abstract; and it was intensified by Lige Toomey's recent

words and by the report the sheriff had brought.

Dave clenched his fists, his eyes narrowed and hard, his mouth a wire-thin line across the saddle-leather toughness of his face. Suddenly he knew he wanted to find Hack Trumbo, wanted to kill the outlaw as Trumbo had killed Big John and Ed Toomey. For one brief moment he considered saddling his roan and trying to pick up Trumbo's trail where the sheriff's posse had lost it—at Cholo Pass. But he abandoned the thought instantly, for it would be worse than foolhardy to venture out in this storm. Trumbo, too, would be compelled to take shelter. Later would be time enough. Under this determination something very like fear lurked, but in his rage Dave had worked himself past the point of seeing it.

Lige's footsteps coming down the hallway from his room drew Dave's glance. He stiffened his face against any expression as the boy appeared.

"Who was that rode in?" Lige asked, an intense look in his pale-gray eyes.

"Some friends of mine," Dave told him casually. "You want to give me a hand closin' things? This blow may last a while."

"Sure," said Lige.

Dave saw the loneliness in the boy's eyes, the need he had for feeling wanted. A man had to remember the way a boy felt when he was twelve.

"Help's hard to get," Dave said smilingly. "Lucky for me you came."

Working together then, they

stuffed burlap and old rags in the cracks and crannies around the doors and windows against the thinly sifting snow. Outside, the roar of the storm built up steadily and the whole house seemed to tremble under each succeeding gust of wind. After a bit Dave left the boy sitting with his sock feet propped up in the open oven door while he went into the woodhouse to bring in fuel for the night. He made three trips, and was gathering up split pine for the fourth when he heard the fast-arriving clatter of more hoofs in the front yard. He let the armload of wood fall where he stood, listening, every sense alert and straining.

He heard the outside kitchen door bang open, then the low and murmurous growl of men's voices. He caught one voice that said: "Put on that coffee, kid. We're damn near froze."

Dave moved swiftly to the woodshed door and stood against it, one ear glued to the rough panel. Lige was speaking now. "You'll have to wait a minute. I'll go and call—"

"Never mind callin' anybuddy," the gruff voice answered. "Jest put that coffee on."

Dave eased the door open a crack, a dryness in his throat, the prickle of tension running up and down his spine like crawling ants. Certain things he saw with a quick eye: four men stood in the low-ceilinged kitchen facing him where he stood unseen behind the woodshed door. The first speaker was a stocky, heavy-featured man of middle age, tough-looking, with the hard and furtive

eyes of a quick-witted fighter. He was standing in the center of the room confronting Lige who was backed up to the hot wood stove, defiance in every line of his gangling frame.

The three other riders, bulking behind and slightly to the left of their leader were dressed like the speaker, in heavy coats and pulled-down hats, their gun belts hooked outside their coats and drawn in tight. Their faces, shaded by the dripping brims of their hats, held the stamp of wary men, rough-looking, sullen, merciless. And as Dave stared with mounting uneasiness, one of the three moved into the lamplight a little way and took off his hat shaking water from it with slaps against his saddle-whitened knee. Dave's breath caught in his throat, for he was seeing the scarred jaw, the black resentful eyes of Mal Losee, the outlaw who had escaped that afternoon from the Big Bend City jail!

He stood motionless, unable to move, not daring to move. Then he heard Mal Losee say: "Look Trumbo, we can't leave the hosses out there . . ." He didn't hear the rest of it; and now his gaze was focused on the big man who stood so menacingly in front of Lige Toomey, the man Losee had spoken to. So this was Hack Trumbo? Suddenly, Dave was remembering that awful hour so long ago that it seemed a dream, when his father and Ed Toomey had fought this man with their indomitable courage and their guns and Big John Sharon had died for it. And now Ed Toomey was dead, murdered by this hard-eyed

man Dave saw through the crack in the door.

Dave could never remember, afterward, just what emotion he felt at that moment. One instant was held by a kind of breathless silence, when even the roar of the storm had stopped, then he, Dave, was moving slowly, deliberately, into the kitchen. Both Trumbo and Losee turned their heads and stared as he stopped a yard or two from the woodhouse door. The two other outlaws near the front door let their hands fall suggestively toward the holsters on their belts. Dave received the impact of all those staring, curious eyes and said: "Leave the kid alone. What do you want?"

Hack Trumbo eyed him truculently. "What place is this?" the outlaw demanded. "We lost our way and saw your lights."

Dave took his time about answering. While he stood there, silently returning Trumbo's insolent stare, he felt Mal Losee's eyes upon him and expected at any moment to hear a cry of recognition. But the black-eyed outlaw betrayed no outward sign that he remembered the man who had sat on the jury that had condemned him to prison that afternoon.

"What's the matter, fella?" Trumbo demanded in a harsher, louder tone. "You deaf, or something?"

Dave slowly shook his head. And he knew now that Hack Trumbo had not yet identified the house in which he stood, that he could not have discovered that this was Sun Ranch, the spread he and his crew had raided

fifteen years ago, whose owner he had killed in senseless ferocity. And Dave realized that the storm, the gale, the blinding sheets of snow and ice had temporarily obscured all landmarks nearby, had altered the appearance of the house itself and the stretch of flats on which it stood.

Dave had this knowledge during the short moment of silence that followed Trumbo's blunt demand. Now the outlaw gave an affronted snarl. "Is this Cow Creek Flats we're on?" Dave's gaze tightened, and he drew his breath and deliberately lied. "You're ten miles north of Cow Creek Flats. Must've missed the fork at Cholo Pass."

It was Mal Losee who blurted out: "How'd you savvy we came through Cholo Pass?"

"I don't know." Sensing his blunder, Dave hastily tried to cover it with an offhand answer. "Only Big Bend City's down that way, and I figured you'd come from there."

Losee was not satisfied. He moved a step closer and said, with puzzled, intent stare: "Friend, ain't we met somewheres before? I've seen your face—"

"I guess not," Dave answered with more calmness than he felt. "I hardly ever go no place away from here."

Trumbo thrust his voice impatiently into the breach. "What's your name, mister?"

"I didn't say." Dave turned his back on the four men and moved deliberately toward the stove. Outwardly he was cool and unalarmed, though his heart pounded erratically

and was, he feared, almost loud enough for all to hear. He pulled the coffeepot across the stove lids with a clatter and set it above the heat. "Sorry we ain't got room to put you up," he said, not looking around, "but there's a stove in the bunkhouse and you can—"

Trumbo laughed. "Never mind the bunkhouse, fella. We like it fine right here."

Boots scraped the floor as the outlaws shifted across the room. Chairs were pulled back and placed around the table. Dave heard all this and, out of the edge of his eyes, saw Lige Toomey standing against the wall on his left, a certain stolidness on his starved-down face not often seen on the face of a boy of twelve. Dave had the impression that Lige, though undisturbed by the presence of the strangers here, was covering his interest with deliberately lowered eyelids.

Dave fiddled with the dampers in the stovepipe, feeling an impulse to reach out and take his gun belt down from its high wall peg. He waited, however, listening, tension pulling every muscle of his body tight. He turned finally and said, in a steady voice: "The boy'll pour the coffee. I got to go down and tend to the stock before it gets too thick outside."

The four outlaws were now seated at the table, having stripped off their coats which lay in a heap on the leather lounge nearby. Their gun belts hung on the backs of their chairs, and this Dave noted with a sinking feeling inside of him. He thought of his own weapon, so sel-



dom used, and again felt the impulse to turn and grab for it. He fought this inclination down again, saying in the same slow steady tone: "You want me to put your animals in the stable while I'm out?"

Trumbo considered a moment, frowning, uncertain, trying to read Dave's inmost thoughts with his pale, hard eyes. "No," he said at last. "Let the boy take care of it. You better stay here where I c'n keep an eye on you."

Dave stiffened inwardly. "You can't send the kid outside alone the way it's snowin' now," he said in tight-voiced rage. "It's two hundred feet to the barn, and—"

"He'll make it," Trumbo said, waving the argument away high-handedly. He put his gaze on Lige standing motionless against the wall.

"Go ahead, kid. Our critters are right outside."

Dave started to protest, then saw the change come over the boy's thin face, and stopped the words before he had uttered them. The expression of apathy had slipped away from Lige as though wiped off by an unseen hand. Now, suddenly, his gray eyes opened wide and they held a streaky, eager look. He said to Dave, "You stay here, Dave. I'll take care of it."

Dave swallowed hard. He opened his mouth a couple of times in a baffled way, then bit down on his lips and clenched his hands and stared. Sweat zigzagged down his spine and little dancing glints of anger showed in his narrowed eyes.

Now, as if hurled down from the mountain tops, the full force of the storm broke over the flats outside. It was like a tremendous blow delivered at the house. The log walls seemed to give a little before the roaring impact of the gale. The screams of a dozen banshees filled the air. A fragment of sheet metal tore loose from the roof of the kitchen ell and crashed in the yard outside. Snow slashed at the windows with a sound like rolling surf.

IV

Dave watched Lige as he took his coat down from a peg near the front door. They all watched him as he shrugged into it, jerked his hat down around his ears, and reached for the door. The moment the latch was turned, the gale whipped the door out of the boy's hand and slammed it

hard against the wall. A great wall of wind and snow gushed in through the opening, smothering the room and extinguishing the lamp at once.

Blackness clapped on the room like a lid. Dave acted simultaneously with the winking out of the lamp. He wheeled and dove back toward the stove and his gun belt on the peg. Boots—not his own—raked the floor, and he collided suddenly with a solid shape and was at once thrust backward by a pair of hands. Caught flat-footed, he stood there in the darkness, holding his breath, ready for the blow he half expected. It did not come. Then the lamp wick flickered and the door was slammed, and light spilled into the corners of the room.

Dave saw the man who had blocked his move. Hack Trumbo. With an agility surprising in one of his blocky build, the outlaw had sprung from his chair when the lamp went out. Now he faced Dave, a sneer on his broad-boned face, a sardonic grin on his mouth. "Had it doped that way," he said. His gun was in his hand and he waggled the barrel for emphasis. "Git back, mister, and don't try any more of those fancy tricks on me!"

Dave retreated, hands pushed up and palms out. He came against the wall, a yard from the wide-open woodhouse door, and stopped, a wooden emptiness on his face.

Trumbo went back to the table and sat down, placing his gun on the red-checked cloth in front of him. One of his men came back after closing the door and dropped into his chair. All of them were staring at

Dave with their suspicious eyes. Dave's cheeks were flat, his eyes expressionless. He stayed where he was, against the wall.

He saw Mal Losee slowly put his hands on the table, saw him lean a little over it. Eyes tight, mouth grim, the outlaw breathed: "By grabs, *now* I remember you!"

Dave remained a stiff and silent shape against the wall, taking the concerted impact of all those stares, seeing the hard intensity in Trumbo's orbs, the look of gradual recognition in Mal Losee's.

There was this tense moment of silence, in which the booming echo of the storm was the only sound, then Dave saw Hack Trumbo's hand go out and lift with a sheet of paper gripped in it. Dave felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. For suddenly he knew what that paper was. It was the letter—Ed Toomey's letter—which he had carelessly left on the table after reading it an hour ago. Now Trumbo was reading it. His thin lips moved and there was a secretive, menacing expression on his face.

Dave could never remember the start of his rush for the woodhouse doorway. One moment was held by a kind of taut and brooding silence in which Mal Losee was slowly rising to his feet and Trumbo was staring at the letter in his hand; the next filled the kitchen with pandemonium. A gun appeared in Losee's hand; then Dave reached the woodhouse door. He had one swift impression of a loud outcry immediately followed by the crash of a pistol shot.

There was a blow, like a mighty hand to which his own weight was nothing, that struck him in the left shoulder, staggering him, hurling him headlong through the open door.

He hit the woodshed floor on his hands and knees, breath jarred out of his lungs. For the briefest of intervals he stayed that way, on his hands and knees, then his mind cleared, and he hurled himself up and toward the woodshed's outside door. He broke into the yard, staggering, gasping, floundering. It was like a sudden dive into a boiling, icy stream. He could neither see nor breathe in that tremendous torrent of wind and snow.

He had to brace his body against the storm's relentless push, had to cover his mouth and nose with his hands to breathe. After a moment of waiting, of trying to orient himself, feeling the warm trickle of blood down his left arm and the numbness of his shoulder, he moved farther into the dooryard, putting the temporary protection of distance between himself and the occupants of the house.

The wind had the cut of steel to it, was almost like the sensation of extreme heat on his face and on his hands. There was, so far, no depth of snow on the ground, but the earth was frozen, and the gale whipped the snow up in great, ragged sprays and threw it about him in such a solid, blinding whirl that he could see but little, could make out only the faintest of outlines behind him to indicate the nearness of the low log house.

Now, moving slowly in what he thought must be the general direc-

tion of the barns, with shelter and finding Lige Toomey his urgent and immediate concern, he lost sight of the house altogether, and the thick mass of snow and sleet drove against him with terrific force. In a few minutes he was compelled to stop and turn his back. It was, he guessed, not much over two hundred feet to the barns, but at the moment it might as well have been two hundred miles for all he could see in this driving murk of wind and snow. Realizing that only blind luck would bring him to his goal, he cupped his hands to his mouth and bellowed: "Lige—Lige!" The gale made it sound like the merest of whispers, and of course no answer came.

He was in his shirt sleeves, and the biting viciousness of the wind struck through the thin layer of wool as though it was tissue paper. He knew he could not survive in this cold for more than a half hour. Either he had to find the boy and the barns or fight his way back to the house. He didn't want to think about that alternative now. It would mean almost certain death under Trumbo's guns, because Trumbo now knew he, Dave, was the son of Big John Sharon.

And so Dave stumbled on, with his arms folded tightly across his chest while the cold crept over his body and turned him numb. After twenty or thirty feet of this aimless wandering, he halted again, then tried another tack, still failing to see any familiar object—not even the line of pole corrals he knew must be in the vicinity. He had the sudden, alarming illusion of being afloat in

the overwhelming wind, and drifting like chaff before it.

He had stumbled but a few yards in this new direction when he heard the muffled echo of a voice. "Dave!" It was Lige Toomey's voice he heard, and it came from straight upwind of him and the sound of it broke feebly against his ears, then fled on by: one clear, high call of distress.

He changed his course accordingly. A moment later he caught a fleeting glimpse of a shadow in front of him and lunged forward. He almost fell over the half-crouched figure of the boy. He clawed out and pulled the lad toward him, yelling: "Are you all right?"

Lige clung to him. "I made the barn," he shouted. "Got lost on the way back . . ." The gale took the rest of it and threw it away. Dave bent his head closer, caught the choked-out words: "I got a gun—pop's gun. Had it in my saddlebag, and—"

In spite of the punishing cold, Dave felt a surge of jubilation. Clinging to each other now in their mutual need, they stood a moment, bending with the gale. Then Dave felt the handle of the gun thrust against his ribs. He took the gun from the boy, shoved it beneath his belt, and turned in what he thought was the right quarter for the house. They had covered twenty or thirty feet, buffeted unmercifully, before he knew he was wrong. Rough, uneven ground underfoot told him they had strayed to the edge of the ranch yard, and must be at least a hundred feet from the house itself.

Panic-stricken, Dave stood still. Now he could not be sure which side of the yard they were on; and so he had to make another hazardous guess. He chose what he considered the correct bearing and, pushing Lige before him, struggled on again. Suddenly they both struck an object suspended across their path, an object which cut them across the waist and halted them. Dave thought at first they had stumbled against a barbed-wire fence. Then the object moved; and his numbed and stiffened hands reached down and touched a tight-drawn rope. The rope, obviously anchored to something solid at one end, was being pulled in a wide circle by someone at the outer end, someone far out on their left, and invisible beyond the swirl of wind and snow.

Instantly Dave had a picture in his mind of what had occurred at the house following his headlong departure. At least one of the outlaws had found the long coil of rope which hung behind the woodhouse door. Whoever it was—whether one or more men—had shrewdly fastened one end of the rope to the house and had walked deliberately into the storm holding the other end, thereby insuring his own safe return to the house if he failed to reach the barn.

V

Working as swiftly as he could with his frost-bitten hands, Dave found his knife and severed the rope while Lige Toomey gripped it tight, whereupon Dave hurled the loose half far out into the storm. Then he

seized the end which was anchored to the house and advanced, hand over hand, with the boy pressing close in back of him.

The log walls of the house loomed suddenly in front of them. The next moment found them huddled in the lee of it, out of the wind for the present, gasping for breath, dead-beat, half frozen from the intense cold. Dave dropped the rope which had been fastened to a spike beside the kitchen door, then slid to the window and tried to peer inside. He could see nothing but a dull, yellowish glow through the frost which rimmed the glass inside. He came back to the door, feeling Lige's eyes on him questioningly, doubtfully.

Fumblingly, he pulled the revolver the boy had given him—Ed Toomey's old hogleg—and notched the hammer back with a thumb which had no feeling whatever. The cold had penetrated to the very marrow of his bones; he was completely numb in every joint. And yet, despite this slowly creeping lethargy, he now experienced a sudden feeling of self-assurance, a certainty he had never felt before. Even the nameless fear he had possessed throughout the years seemed only an anemic memory. And he realized that in the past his own nerves had tricked him into something very like cowardice, that therefore he had been defeated even before the pinch of action summoned him. And he had, until this moment, permitted the killer of Big John and Ed Toomey to attain the aspect of a shadowy beast, a legendary figure in his mind. Now the thought that stabbed him was his

failure to act sooner, when he had had the advantage of full surprise. For now he had no way of telling what odds confronted him in the house, or whether or not the outlaws would be on guard against his return.

He felt Lige's thin body pressing close to him, felt the lack of confidence the boy must have in him; and shame burned him with its searing flame as he sensed this vague distrust. Then he pulled his shoulders back, fumbled at the latch and kicked the door inward with his boot. He crossed the sill in a kind of staggering rush, and brought up short, the gun lifted on the room.

Standing thus, with his back to the open door, with the gale gusting about him, he saw Hack Trumbo seated at the table alone, with his back to the door. And he saw Mal Losee on the left, half-crouched against the wall near the open wood-house door, his mouth drawn back in a savage grimace. Both men had been caught off-guard; but Losee's gun was in his hand, was coming slowly up.

Then Trumbo swung about in his chair, going for his holstered weapon suddenly. Then he froze in this position, his face turned toward Dave, a look of shocked chagrin contorting his ruddy face. But it was Losee Dave watched with his narrowed eyes. There was a cold and deadly shine in the wiry outlaw's dead-black orbs. Dave's gun inched up a notch. He dared not risk looking behind him now, but he sensed that Lige was not standing in

back of him. Losee's pistol was held straight out in front of him. The arrival of the bullet awaited only the final pressure of a half-crooked finger. The impulse to throw himself aside trembled along Dave's nerves, but he resisted it grimly; he knew he had to freeze his body where it was, for fear Lige might suddenly appear behind him in the door and take Losee's inevitable shot.

In the breathless interval of silence that followed then, Mal Losee stood as though his boots were rooted to the floor; and Trumbo cautiously began to draw his gun. The wood-house door, wide open on its hinges, was a yard from the spot where Losee stood. And now, as Dave braced himself against the shock of lead, the opening of that door was filled startlingly by the gangling drawn-up form of Lige Toomey. The boy had come in through the woodshed's outer door and he had clearly timed his appearance to give Dave the diversion he had to have to make his first shot good.

Hack Trumbo saw the boy and snapped, "Mal, watch out!" Losee turned his head the fraction of an inch. Dave fired at the same instant and the gun in Losee's hand exploded thunderously within the room's four walls. Dave saw the flash of it and smelled the smoke and felt the bullet graze his cheek. Then Losee fumbled and dropped his gun. Clapping both hands to his middle, he bent forward slowly, toppled face down to the floor and did not stir a muscle after that.

Hack Trumbo had lurched to his feet beyond the table. His gun swept up and there was a maddened

brightness in his eyes. Dave realized the deadliness of that pause between Losee's shot and Trumbo's first; and he twitched his body backward and to one side, taking snap aim and firing as he leaped. Trumbo's gun never spoke. He took a quick step backward as if to turn and walk away. His face went blank; then he went down out of sight behind the table as if a rope around his feet had jerked him flat, and he was falling as he went. Dave stood there, a dazed look on his face, and he had one eerie thought: *Ed Toomey fired that shot—not me!*

Dave and Lige sat huddled around the stove, keeping their silent vigil throughout that howling night. Dave held his own gun in his lap, Lige held his father's; but the two outlaws who had used the rope to penetrate the storm did not return. The blizzard raged on Cow Creek Flats during those lonely, dragging hours, but with the first faint streaks of a lead-gray dawn, the gale died down and finally quit.

At five o'clock, after cups of steaming coffee, the two grim-faced watchers by the fire rose, donned their coats and left the house, passing through the woodhouse where the stiffened bodies of Trumbo and Losee lay. Ten minutes later, plodding in a wide circle through snow that squealed under their crunching boots, they found the frozen corpses of the two outlaws. Both men had fallen not a hundred feet from the house, and there had died. But their boot tracks told a

grim story of their, desperate attempts to find shelter after Dave and Lige had cut the rope and had left them helpless in the storm.

Back in the house again, warming their hands above the glowing stove, Dave and Lige faced each other as sunlight sparkled on the window-panes.

"We'll wait till nine," Dave said. "If the posse don't get here by then, we'll saddle up and hit for town. Okay?"

Lige nodded. The expression on his thin long face had changed during the hours of waiting for the dawn; his eyes had lost entirely their look of questioning and remoteness. Dave grinned and the boy smiled back.

"I guess your dad—and maybe mine—would like the way we handled it," Dave said.

The grin stayed on Lige's face and puckered it. "Yes," he replied, "I reckon they'd be satisfied."

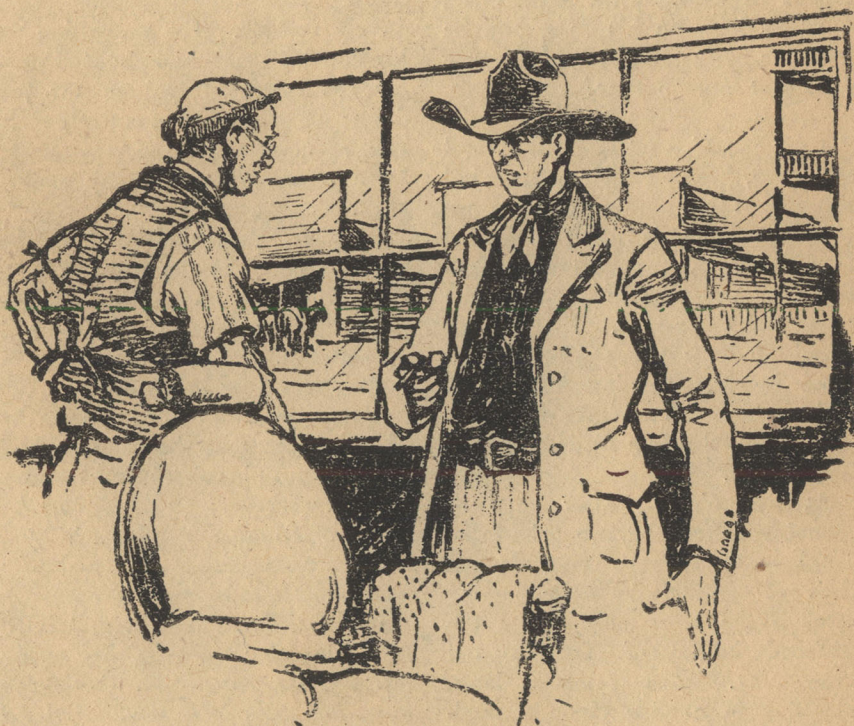
Dave knew then that he was worthy of Big John, that the code he had built upon the heroism of Ed Toomey was safe forever; and a feeling of peace, of triumph, was born in him. He kept on looking at Lige, and their eyes held steady and unwavering. *He knows, Dave thought gratefully. He's sure now. Maybe, before, he could feel I was afraid. But that's over, and now he'll stay. And Ed Toomey knows it, too—and dad.*

He held a hand out suddenly, and Lige accepted it without embarrassment. It was a clean, strong grip; and the sense of triumph came over Dave Sharon more keenly than ever.

BAY RUM FOR A BUZZARD

by HAPSBURG LIEBE

It didn't take much savvy for a keen-witted old cowman to smell out the trail Purty Lellman left when he took that dinero



YOUNG Lellman had only himself to blame. Except for one thing, that is. His given name, Purdy, was too easily changed to Purty. At that, he wouldn't have heard the nickname

half so much if it hadn't fitted him to a T. A worshiper of dress, he indulged himself lavishly. Tan broadcloth coat and trousers, shirt of purple silk, maroon silken necker-

chief, fifty dollars' worth of John B. hat, russet Spanish boots that had cost even more than the Stetson—this was just one of his showy ensembles.

Known as the hottest sport in San Rosario, Purdy never worked at anything. With a well-to-do uncle who had no other living relatives, work wasn't necessary.

But old Ashby Lellman was beginning to cast a wary eye upon the doings of his nephew. He had a better chance to observe those doings now that he'd sold his big cattle ranch and moved to town for the purpose of spending his sunset days in peace and lazy ease.

Grizzled Joe Calloway looked through the dusty window of his barber shop to see Purdy Lellman reining up outside on a fine dappled bay horse fitted out with silver-studded saddle, bridle, and martingale. Dismounting, Purdy flung the round-plaited rein down and hurried in.

"Mornin', Purty," said Joe Calloway, frowning. "What'll it be this time?"

"Morning, Joke Alloway," said young Lellman. He had made up the pun on Joe's name and thought it was smart. "Why ask foolish questions? Don't you shave me every day?"

He got into the chair. While he made and applied the lather, Joe's gaze wandered through the doorway and settled upon a little group of men on the veranda of the sun-blasted hotel across the street. Old Ashby Lellman was in the group. A thin rail of a man, he was dressed

almost shabbily. Horny of hand and leathery-faced, he'd worked for every dollar he had, knew exactly how it had come.

"Nickel for your thoughts," Purdy said to the barber.

"You can have 'em for nothin'," Joe told him, and began shaving. "I was jest thinkin' about you, Purty. Thinkin' about you tryin' to borry five thousand dollars, to be paid back after your uncle dies and leaves you what he's got. Reminds me of a buzzard settin' in a tree waitin' for an ole hoss to kick his last."

"Who told you I tried to borrow money that way?" flared Purdy through the lather.

"The man you tried to borry it from," old Joe answered coolly.

Purdy reddened. "Uncle Ash ain't likely to pass on very soon."

"You sure would cut a swathe with his money," Calloway reflected. "Inside of a year you'd either be broke or dead, or both."

Young Lellman was pretty worried now. At last it came out: "Joe, you reckon the man I tried to borrow that money from will talk about it to Uncle Ash?"

"No, he won't. He's not the man to make trouble between kinfolks. And I ain't neither, Purty."

Purdy Lellman looked relieved. Calloway finished the little task and Lellman passed caressing fingers over his chin.

"Bay rum on my hair, Joe," he ordered.

Again the barber frowned. "Reckon you know that old Ash pa'ticklar hates bay rum, on account he thinks it's sissyfied. Anyhow, no-

body else in San Rosario uses it—I've had this one bottle six years. If I was you, Purty, I'd pass it up."

"Bay rum on my hair, Joe. You heard me the first time."

"Quarter extry," Calloway told him. He was a little mad.

"Used to be only ten cents," Purdy said. "Look, Joe, my uncle only lets me have two hundred a month, and I've got to be economical."

"Remember that the next time you git into a poker game," advised Joe. "I want to give you some plumb good advice, Purty. Fust thing you know, old Ash is goin' to cut your income down to two cents, or less, if you don't straighten up. I know Ash Lellman better'n you do. Me and him rid cow trails together, back when we was young bucks. Me and him—"

"I'm in a hurry, Joe."

The grizzled barber had no more to say. That is, not until Purdy had paid him and gone out to his fine horse. Then Calloway muttered:

"Buzzard settin' in a tree, waitin' for an ole hoss to kick his last."

Purdy was too wise to do his gambling in San Rosario under the very nose of his uncle. For this diversion he rode down to Dos Palmas on the border, a dozen miles away. Ordinarily, he played a cautious game, cheating only when he knew it to be safe. But there were times when this was not enough in Dos Palmas.

On this particular evening the gamblers whipsawed him, took his last cent before nine o'clock, and called him a piker. Never had the gambling fever gripped Purdy quite

so hard. He tried to borrow and couldn't. In desperation he rode a streak back to San Rosario. It was close to eleven o'clock and most of the town had gone to bed. Purdy was unable to find anybody who would lend him money.

There was nothing to do now but turn his horse in at the liveryman's and call it a night. Then a thought stopped him. Ashby Lellman kept his money—the sixteen thousand, more or less, that had come from the sale of his cow outfit—in his own iron safe, the San Rosario bank being small and shaky. Old Ashby was forgetful; there'd been times when he'd left the safe door open. If it just *happened* that the safe door was open now . . .

Purdy realized fully the enormity of the thing he contemplated. But he was desperate. The Dos Palmas gamblers had called him a piker. He'd show them!

Taking off his boots, he left them outside the back door. He knew the house well, and stepped on no creaking floor board, walked into no chair, made no sound at all in the thick darkness. The safe was in the little living room, and the door was closed and locked, Purdy stood there before it, frozen with disappointment, hardly daring to breathe. Listening, he heard the light snoring of old Ashby in the next room.

The oldster alway carried a hundred dollars, or so in his wallet. Purdy eased himself into old Ashby's room, careful not to make the slightest sound, and eased back with the fat wallet in his hand. They'd call it the work of a sneak thief, of

course, he told himself, but they would never know who the sneak thief was.

Purdy rode back to Dos Palmas at a gallop. The cards ran well for him. But they ran better for the gamblers, and in less than an hour and a half Purdy had lost the hundred and fifty dollars that had been in Ashby Lellman's wallet. . . .

A little before daybreak he stole into his bedroom, which was next to his uncle's, and turned in. He slept heavily and the sun had crossed its zenith by the time he woke. The house seemed strangely still. Hastily Purdy got up and dressed, and went to the kitchen. The woman who kept house and prepared meals for the Lellmans was not there.

Ashby wasn't around, either. Something was wrong.

Purdy Lellman hurried to the little business section of San Rosario. In the heat of the day, not many people were on the street. He saw nobody at all on the hotel veranda, the loafers' glory of San Rosario. The barber shop seemed the most likely place to find out what he wanted to know.

Old Joe Calloway sat in the big chair. He appeared to be half asleep but he wasn't. As soon as he saw Purdy, he drawled:

"You've come to the right place, Purdy."

Young Lellman bristled. "For what?"

"Information," said old Joe. He sat up and spat tobacco juice at the

brass cuspidor. "Well, fust off, your Uncle Ash sold that house you and him's been livin' in, furniture and all, before the middle o' the mornin' for spot cash. Then he took that money and what he got when he sold his spread and lit out, Purty. He's a long time gone by now."

Purdy blinked, gaped. "W-where to?"

"I cain't be certain," Calloway answered. "He told me he had a notion to go to 'Frisco and paint the town a screamin' red. Idea was, if anybody had a hell-roarin' big time on his money, it'd be hisself. Then he said he had a notion to go to Montana or Texas or some place and buy him a cow outfit where *you* couldn't find him—and if you did find him, Purty, he'd likely set the dogs on you, on account he hates a thief even more'n he hates sissyfied things like bay rum!"

"Thief?" muttered Purdy Lellman, with a sick look on his face. "What you mean—thief?"

"His wallet, which you stole," Joe Calloway explained. He seemed to be enjoying himself. "He woke up when you come into his room, Purty, but he didn't let on. How did he know it was you, there in the dark? He smelt bay rum!"

His downcast face a poor match for his flamboyant outfit, Purdy went slouching out of the barber shop. Joe Calloway watched him go, grinning.

"Bay rum for a buzzard," he said, and his tone indicated his contempt.

DEPUTY DEATH

by M. HOWARD LANE

While Renegade's terrorized citizens waited helplessly for their new lawman, he kept his deputy badge hidden until he could expose the sinister Boothill Bunch





I

THE transformation was nearly complete. In the hand mirror he held Claude Hardesty could watch the deft fingers of the barber trimming his flaxen hair, cutting it close above his ears. His heavy mustache was already gone, and it was a little hard for Claude to recognize the face looking back at him from the mirror.

The deep-socketed gray eyes were his, all right, but losing the mustache

seemed to make his nose longer, and his lips looked even wider and more unsmiling than usual. And yet at the same time Claude could see that he appeared years younger. It was like stepping backward through time and recapturing a youthfulness that the years inexorably sapped from a man. And as soon as his hair was blackened with the dye the barber had brought along, the transformation would be accomplished.

Claude Hardesty studied himself

and was grimly pleased. One last gold camp had to be tamed. One last killing avenged, and then would come the peace of quiet living.

"A man's luck won't hold forever." He muttered the words absently, and in the mirror he saw the barber's coyote-shaped face push forward.

"What's that, friend?" the man asked eagerly.

"Nothing," Claude said.

"Nothin'?" the barber complained, his voice slightly querulous. "Dang it, friend, I've shorn some funny customers in my time, and filled some queer requests, but I ain't never tackled a chore like this before!" He was warming to his subject, for, like most barbers, he was curious about his clients. "Yes, sir, friend"—he was trying hard to wheedle information from this uncommunicative stranger—"when the clerk downstairs come steppin' around the corner to my shop and told me they was a feller here who wanted a shave, haircut and a dye job, my fust notion was that some Prescott tinhorn was tryin' to change his looks so's he could sneak out o' town without gittin' what might be comin' to him. But you ain't no tinhorn and you ain't no gamblin' man—"

"I'm a gambling man," Claude cut in flatly. "I gamble with death." The minute the words had left his lips he was sorry he'd spoken them, but the barber's garrulous gabbing had stung him into making some rejoinder. He relapsed into silence, and the barber was silent, too, for a moment, trying to make what he could of the stranger's remark.

When it added up to nothing he took a little different track. "It's a cryin' shame, friend, to slap black dye over a fine head of yaller hair like yourn. But mebbe you're changing it so's the ladies will leave yuh alone!"

"I'm changing it," Claude said deliberately, "just to make hombies like you ask questions. Now get on with the job. I don't aim to sit here all day."

It was enough to quiet the barber. The man's Adams apple moved up and down his scrawny throat. The stranger sitting in the uncomfortable hotel chair was big enough to break him across his knee like a dry stick, and his temper seemed bad. The barber didn't like unsociable men. "I'll git the straight of things yit," he thought maliciously. "Mebbe there'll be more to this than shows now. And jist mebbe I'll be able to turn me a dollar. One thing sure, this yaller-headed cuss ain't changin' his looks jest for his health!"

Finally the transformation was completed, and Hardesty studied his reflection in the mirror with something close to awe. It was almost like dying and being born again. The Claude Hardesty he had known for thirty-eight years had vanished with a few clean strokes of a razor, and the deft application of some hair dye.

That night the Prescott *Courier* recorded the death of Claude Hardesty, and there were men from California to the Missouri who would draw a deep breath when the

dispatch reached other papers throughout the West.

In his room at the Merchant's Hotel, Hardesty clipped the article, and his wide lips were still unsmiling as he walked to the room's small clothes closet and brought out his grip. Twin black gun belts, and twin black Colts lay on top of folded shirts inside the bag, and on top of the belts and guns was an envelope bearing a Prescott postmark.

Claude walked back to the bed with it. Settling down on the spread, he opened the envelope and brought out a letter, and another clipping from the *Courier*. He opened the letter first and read:

Dear Claude:

Shuck that star you're wearing and come running. I've struck it rich down on the Agua Fria at a camp called Renegade, sixty miles south of Prescott.

Dick.

Hardesty sucked a deep breath into his lungs, and his long gunman's fingers picked up the clipping that had been in the envelope. It bore a dateline two weeks old. He'd read it in Yuma in a newspaper that had come by stage.

RENEGADE DEATH TOLL MOUNTS

The gold diggings at Renegade are continuing to produce some incredible production figures.

But the gold isn't doing many of its finders much good. Renegade is living up to its name. The Boothill Bunch, as citizens have taken to calling them, are reaping their harvest secondhand. A man with

gold in his poke is hardly safe night or day. A Vigilance Committee has been organized but so far has been unable to cope with the outlaws who are the virtual rulers of the camp.

Sheriff Moss Trotter has authorized us to say that as soon as the right man can be hired, he will send a deputy to the camp to protect the interests of decent citizens.

Renegade has its man for breakfast almost every morning. The latest individual to run afoul of the Boothill Bunch was Richard Hardesty, young brother of the famous man-hunter, Claude Hardesty. His death is to be regretted, but if it should be enough to bring a man of Claude Hardesty's proven ability to serve as deputy sheriff for that region, Richard Hardesty will not have died in vain.

Claude folded the clipping carefully and put it and the letter back in the envelope. He picked up the clipping he'd just cut out from the *Courier*, and for the first time the thin edge of a smile bent his iron-calm lips.

The headlines screamed:

FAMOUS MAN HUNTER SLAIN

Claude Hardesty, one of the best known lawmen from the Mississippi River to San Francisco's Golden Gate, is dead, according to Sheriff Moss Trotter who found the body soon after he returned from a tour of the Agua Fria diggings.

Shot in the back, Hardesty, who had agreed to serve as Trotter's deputy in Renegade, was apparently recognized by one of the Boothill Bunch as he rode the Haysayampa Trail from Prescott. The famed lawman for the past fifteen

years had been the nemesis of outlaws throughout the West, cleaning up more than a dozen wild gold camps and cow towns.

Claude finished the article and the smile deepened on his lips. "Done me right proud," he said half aloud.

And a wizened barber sitting in his own chair scanned the same article in the *Courier* and rubbed his stubbly chin. "I wonder what sort of a lookin' gent that Hardesty was," he asked himself, and then he climbed to his feet. "Wouldn't do no harm to find out," he muttered. "There's likely more'n one gent here in town who has run up agin' him."

Knuckles rapping on the door turned Claude from the closet, and he murmured an invitation to enter. His eyes turned faintly quizzical as Moss Trotter opened the door and entered the room.

The sheriff was stocky, with a mane of gray hair roaching back from his high forehead. His eyes were blue as Arizona sky, and his complexion was the hue of soaped saddle leather.

Claude had written Trotter from Yuma, and received an immediate reply to come on along. They'd talked briefly when the stage had gotten in at dawn and Claude had suggested changing his appearance.

"There'll be some in that Boot-hill Bunch who'd know me on sight if I walked in there cold," he told Trotter now. "And if they're organized they'd gulch me sure sooner or

later, or else disband and lay low until I get tired of lookin' for their kingpin. But if it was talked about that I was dead, that outfit might get bolder and make a slip we could pin on 'em."

The sheriff nodded enthusiastically. "I've handled the newspaper," he said. "When it's all over we'll see the true story is printed."

"No," Claude told him and the bitterness that had been welling up inside him for years had taken possession of his voice. "I'm starting on my last manhunt, Moss. Ever since he's been old enough to do it, my brother Dick worked hard tryin' to get me out of this business. Both of us figured my luck couldn't hold forever. Well, it looks like Dick's ran out first, but I know he'll be a happy hombre wherever he is if I carry out the plans we'd made.

"The name I use won't matter much. Mebbe if it ain't Hardesty there'll be fewer bad men comin' around to see if they can beat me to the draw. I'm going to Renegade, Moss"—Claude's curiously light eyes fastened soberly on the lawman—"to find Dick's killer. When he's paid off in lead my gun trail ends!"

II

The sheriff was silent for a moment, digesting Hardesty's words, and then he nodded as his eyes traveled the length of the roving lawman's six-foot body and settled on his rough-hewn face.

"The ghosts get to pesterin' a man," he said finally. "Killin's no

pleasure, but some of us 'ave got to do it. Renegade's a tough camp in more ways than one. By day you may be pannin' gold right alongside one of the Boothill Bunch, and never know it. At night yuh may be sittin' in a stud game with another one. Purty soon a feller gets to thinking that somebody is watching him all the time, and it starts to dig under your skin like a pesky tick. Down there, right now, that camp is like an open keg of powder. Set a spark to it, and friends will start gut-shootin' each other, and you'll have a free-for-all fight that'll turn the Agua Fria red.

"That's what Todd Marsh and his Vigilance Committee is tryin' to prevent," Trotter went on, "and it's jest what the kingpin of that Boothill Bunch is tryin' to promote. If honest men start shootin' each other, then outlaws will danged soon end up with the whole camp in their hands, and there won't be one scrap of evidence we can hang on any of 'em. Hardesty"—the sheriff's voice had been growing more serious as he explained the situation—"it looks to me like the Boothill Bunch is plannin' the biggest wholesale steal that's ever been pulled in Arizona. They're takin' gold out o' the Agua Fria by the bucketful, and what's been stole already ain't a drop in said bucket to the oro still waitin' to be washed. But we need that gold in the hands of honest men! The kingpin of the Boothill Bunch wants the lion's share for himself, of course, and he'll git it, unless you're able to single him out."

Listening closely to the other's

summary, Claude felt the old excitement of the hunt start to warm his blood like a slug of good whiskey. "The boss of the Boothill Bunch," he said thoughtfully, "is like the keystone in an arch. Knock it out, and the whole danged thing falls."

"Yes," agreed the sheriff. "Nail him, and his organization will go with him, and you'll have the man who killed your brother or ordered him killed. But let 'em get one notion that you're Claude Hardesty, and you won't live twenty-four hours!"

Claude shrugged. "Deputy Death," he said simply, "is the man ridin' to Renegade. Not Claude Hardesty."

And in the Castanet Saloon a coyote-faced barber had learned about all he needed to know. He'd found out that Claude Hardesty was a lean six-footer, "with the purtiest yaller hair and mustache you ever did see. . . ."

"There'll be them in Renegade," his own thoughts ran, "who'll pay a purty penny to learn he's got black hair and a clean lip. Likely they'll even arrange a reception committee to meet him along the Hassayamapa Trail. Why, that thar obituary in the *Courier* was just a mite previous, that's all!"

This high country was beautiful in the midmorning sunlight, Claude thought as he rode the Hassayamapa Trail south toward Renegade. There was peace here amidst the rolling pine-topped hills. This was the kind of country where a man could settle down on a little ranch of his own,

and forget hostile towns where a lawman dared not turn his back to a window. That had been his plan and Dick's.

The thought brought a burning anger into him, and then grimly he forced his mind away from his brother. He had learned down the gunsmoke years that the man with the cool head and steady hand was the one who won battles. His hand rose involuntarily to stroke a mustache that wasn't there, and then he pulled his fingers down irritably. That habitual gesture alone could tear aside the curtain of a man's disguise if the right eyes saw the move. He looked down once more at the rough jeans and flat-heeled miner's boots he was wearing. The pants were sloppy, the boots clumsy. His shirt was a violent red, and Sheriff Moss Trotter, who had provided these clothes, had even made him substitute an old slouch hat for the gray Stetson he ordinarily wore.

"Folks won't notice your guns," Trotter had said grimly when they parted the night before. "Ain't a man down there wearin' less than one. Look in on Todd Marsh when you hit town. He runs the only general store they got, and he'll likely invite you to join his Vigilance Committee. Won't do no harm to let him know you're wearin' a star inside your boot."

"And it won't do any good," Claude had told him flatly. "When I walk into a camp lookin' for somebody, I don't even trust myself!"

He'd noticed small bunches of antelope and deer grazing through the parklike openness of the wooded

hills that rose on either side of the Hassayampa Trail, and in most cases they hadn't done more than throw up their heads and look him over as he jogged past them. But now his eyes that were always alert saw three antelope come racing from a stand of timber a good quarter mile on along the trail, and the sight drew his darkened brows together. He watched the animals bunch, and turn to stare back the way they had come, and then once more they started their idle grazing.

Something had startled them, Claude realized, and he halted the brown mare the sheriff had loaned him and studied the clump of timber ahead. It appeared no different from any of the other stands marking the hills.

"If it was a hunter," Claude thought, "he'd have dropped his pick long before this, unless just maybe said hunter is lookin' for bigger game than antelope."

Claude studied the hills on either side. There was no chance to swing off and approach that stand of timber without being observed, and then the realization struck him that he could be seen even here.

Casually, as though it was his reason for halting, Claude drew papers and tobacco from his shirt pocket and fashioned a cigarette. He fumbled in first one pocket and then the other for a match, and his hands eased the Colts that snugged his thighs.

He started forward again, drawing the smoke luxuriously into his lungs. It might be his last ciga-

rette, he knew grimly. The stand of timber came slowly nearer. Claude kept studying it from beneath the brim of his slouch hat, and it seemed to him that all the peace was suddenly gone from these hills.

There were those who claimed the roving lawman was gifted with second sight, that he could sense danger before it came, and Claude had never denied the accusation, for there'd been times when he'd almost believed the same thing. The sensation was like a sharp cool breeze passing over him. He felt it now and his heels bored suddenly into the mare's flanks. Ducking forward along the animal's neck, he plunged toward the timber.

He heard a startled curse from the shadows beneath the trees and the wild clang of a rifle. There were two of them. One was trying to swing a shotgun to bear on him. Claude shot him first, and the feel of the Colt bucking against his palm was a wicked, remembered comfort. The rifleman sent a second bullet slanting up at him, and Claude felt its breath pass his cheek. Again he let the .44 talk for him, and dispassionately watched its lead blow the drygulcher backward. Automatically he tipped up the long barrel of his Colt and blew the smoke from its muzzle.

Both of the men were dead. The laxness of their bodies was enough to tell him that. Without dismounting, Claude looked down on them.

"Two Boothill boys bound for boothill," he hummed softly.

"Which is right where they belong!"

Three hours later, as the sun skidded toward the horizon, Claude halted the mare on the last rise of the Hassayampa Trail above Renegade, but for the space of a few minutes he paid no attention to the gold camp. Dick Hardesty had died down there, and two of the Boothill Bunch had already paid for his death, but that was not the important thing.

"Why were those two hombres waiting to 'gulch me?" Claude asked himself. It was a question that had kept repeating itself like a grim, repetitious melody as he drew nearer to Renegade. It was like a noose drawing slowly tighter about his throat, and there was only one conclusion he could draw. Somewhere along the line there'd been a slip. The Boothill Bunch knew that Claude Hardesty was coming to the Agua Fria.

It narrowed time. It put a premium on each hour. Claude's eyes touched the squalid assortment of hastily built adobes and frame shanties and tent houses down there below, and he knew that death would be a shadow stalking him from the moment he entered the camp. A wise man would turn back the way he had come.

"So I guess I'm not smart," Claude muttered. His sober gaze settled on the silver line of the Agua Fria cutting the length of the valley and he knew why he was going on with the mission that had brought him this far.

He could see men, looking about

the size of ants, busy along its banks. In weeks past his brother had been among those men. Now Dick was buried like many another in Renegade's graveyard. And those other prospectors who had died had brothers and mothers and wives. They were here with their own hopes of washing the gold to build themselves a future. They were the hard-working, nameless men who built a State, and they were the ones the gunmaster had served for more years than he wanted to remember. Most of them would stay nameless to him as they had in other towns, but when he was finished there would be the satisfaction of knowing a job had been well done.

Some had to kill so that others could live.

III

A short while later Claude rode down Renegade's single slanting street. There were other men, garbed as he was, moving along the

thoroughfare. Some in the throng were Boothill boys, he thought, the rest were prospectors as Dick had been, and it seemed a little odd to have none of them recognize him. In past camps he had entered men had known him on sight, for his mustache and hair had marked him. Now people glanced at him idly as they would at any other strange prospector entering Renegade to try his luck.

But there were men in this town, Claude knew grimly, who would know him. The two who were dead were proof of that. Others would strike at him again, but, tall in the saddle and somehow aloof, he rode the street, searching for the general store.

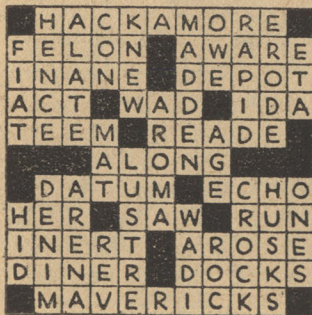
Todd Marsh was the first man he wanted to see. A prospector had to buy supplies before sinking his pick into any of the washes that bordered the Agua Fria or seamed the face of Antelope Peak directly across the river that flowed past the yonder edge of town.

There were probably a dozen business houses along the street, and most of them were saloons. Then ahead he saw a long adobe that had a dirty banner stretched above the door, advertising Marsh's Miners' Supplies and General Store.

Claude swung down, noting the loungers resting in chairs Marsh had placed along the front wall of his establishment. This was the late hour of afternoon when men came in from their claims to drink and gossip.

"Marsh," he thought, "should hear just about everything."

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD PUZZLE



Inside the store, lamps were already lit against the encroaching dusk. There were a couple of aproned clerks at the counter, and one tall man in white shirt and black trousers who was obviously Marsh. Tall and austere, he reminded Claude more of a churchman than storekeeper. Marsh's interests, Claude realized, would be served better if Renegade were a law-abiding camp, and he could understand the man's reason for heading the Vigilance Committee that had been organized.

Idling until he could get Marsh to wait on him personally, Claude tramped to the counter. "I'm Tim O'Leary," he said, "and I need a bait of grub afore takin' off in the morning to see if I can locate me a claim. Got a wife and two kids in Yuma who're sure hopin' I strike it rich," he added.

A smile turned Marsh's lips, and he extended a bony, powerful hand. "Glad to make your acquaintance," he said heartily. "We need family men like you here in Renegade. As for your chances, they're good as the rest. Everybody is making money. The thing we lack most," he continued, "is law and order. Sheriff Moss Trotter has promised us a deputy, but we haven't seen the man yet. As it stands now, we have a Vigilance Committee, but it isn't enough to curb the lawlessness." His dark eyes scanned the guns on Hardesty's hips. "However, I see you're well heeled, so I guess you'll be able to take care of yourself."

"I'll try," Claude murmured.

Marsh nodded. "You're the kind

we like to have with the Vigilantes," he said emphatically. "Tonight we have our regular weekly meeting in front of Penn Adams' Paydirt Saloon down the street. If you're a mind, listen in on the doin's."

"I'll do that," Claude answered, and he went on to give a grocery order that would carry him for a few days. His plan of action, as he and Sheriff Moss Trotter had formulated it, was simply to mingle with the prospectors up and down the Agua Fria while he continued the pretense of searching for a claim. Prospectors liked to talk, and trained ears could sometimes pick clues from casual remarks that others would not catch.

Mounted again, he rode the mare to the big corral that was the best Renegade could boast in the way of a livery. Afterwards, he started back uptown.

At the Call House, Renegade's makeshift hotel, he had supper. A heaping plate of potatoes and a smoking antelope steak came promptly from the kitchen. Claude studied the meat, and his faint smile broke the straight line of his lips. He lifted his fork in silent salute to the steak, and he knew of three antelopes that he hoped would never fall before a hunter's rifle.

A huge bonfire of pine boughs and logs was blazing in front of the Paydirt when he left the hotel, and he could see the shadowy shapes of men gathering about it. The saloon was a log-and-frame building and it was the only structure in town with a roofed porch that

lifted above street level. Pine knot torches and lanterns lighted the porch, and as he drew nearer the throng he saw that a poker table had been placed outside the swinging doors. Todd Marsh, wearing a long, funereal black coat over his white shirt, presided at the table with a bung starter to serve for a gavel. He was flanked by a pair of men who evidently made up his executive committee.

When the crowd seemed complete, Marsh rose to his feet, and banged on the table for order. Looking over the throng, Claude decided there were a good two hundred men circling the bonfire. Every prospector, he guessed, that could get in from the diggings was here. And it was also safe to presume that every Boothill Boy was also here!

"No wonder they haven't got anywhere," he thought. "You can't make plans to clean up a camp when the hombres you're trying to get rid of can listen in."

"Gents," Todd Marsh boomed, and he had to start the ceremonies with a little joke, "this meetin' will now come to order. I can't very well add ladies, God bless 'em, because we ain't got any to bless yet. But we will have when our Law and Order Committee makes things safe enough for you fellers to bring in your wives and families. And I'm right glad to report that we seem to be makin' progress. We ain't had a killin' reported for nigh a week now—"

The sound of drumming hoofs came from the end of the Hassayampa Trail where it met the street,

and Marsh swung his leonine head in that direction. Like everyone else, Claude glanced to see who might be coming, and then he made out the shadowy shape of a horseman racing toward the Paydirt. The rider drew up with a flourish and flung himself down from his blowing mount.

Half staggering with hurry, he pushed through the aisle that opened for him and reached the porch.

"Marsh," he yelled loudly, "Marsh, the killin's have started ag'in! Comin' thisaway from Prescott, I follered buzzard sign to some timber alongside the 'Yampa Trail. Pete Grogan and Spike Manners was a-layin' there dead. One shot through the heart, t'other through the head. Pore devils were probably jest out huntin' some meat, when they got bushwhacked!"

"They'd been out hunting some meat, all right," Claude thought grimly.

A stir ran through the crowd. This Grogan and Manners were evidently well known men. Men no one here had suspected. It was an example of how carefully the Boothill Bunch covered their tracks.

"Those murders must be avenged!" Marsh thundered. "They—"

A hoarse cry some fifteen feet to Hardesty's left interrupted the storekeeper. "Here's your killer," the yell went up. "I've caught the cuss red-handed!"

Claude swung at the words, and his long legs carried him with cat-like speed toward the source of the disturbance. Two men were grap-

pling with a third. Their victim was a tall, young fellow. His hair glowed like gilt in the light of the bonfire, and for the space of a second Claude got his second shock. The youth resembled Dick! Surprise had evidently held him motionless for a moment, but as Claude drove closer, he saw the young fellow twist and kick out at one of his captors. The crowd was turning and surging toward the struggling trio.

Somewhere a voice howled like a lobo: "Hang the skunk! It'll show the Boothill Bunch we mean business!"

Claude reached for his Colts, and his pale eyes were blazing slits of fury. He burned the faces of the two men holding the youth into his memory. One was big, red-bearded. The other was hook-nosed, gray stubble covering his sagging jowls. They were Boothill Boys, no question about it, and for some reason of their own they wanted to make this lad a scapegoat.

Claude reached the struggling trio and his lips twisted savagely. Speed and force alone would save the youth, he realized. He'd watched the workings of mobs before this, and once tempers were inflamed no man could reason with them. His arms moved, right and left. Slashing blurs of blued steel, the barrels of his Colts struck the Boothill pair. They sagged like pole-axed steers, and Claude caught the youth's arm.

"Stick with me and think fast," he said softly. "We've got to clear

you pronto, or both of us will hang!"

Yells beat in upon them like the roar of a high wind through trees. Deliberately Claude tipped the muzzle of one Colt toward the sky and triggered. The roar of the weapon caught the crowd's attention. Glittering-eyed, he stood there, tall enough to tower above most of them.

His voice rang coldly. "Clear a path. There's not going to be any hanging here until this hombre has a chance to talk for himself!"

Calmer heads in the throng nodded. "Yeah, he oughta get that," someone muttered.

There was a force in Claude Hardesty that overrode the opposition of the crowd. He looked a little incongruous in the sloppy clothes that garbed him, but the black Colts in his hands were filled with sudden death, and the realization seemed to strike the prospectors that he wouldn't hesitate to use them.

Men started pushing back, opening an aisle to the saloon porch. "Step along," Claude said softly, "and I sure hope you've got a story that'll hold up."

The boy's eyes were gray. They held a steady, grim fire. "I have," he murmured. "One that'll blow some of this bunch sky high!"

Side by side, two tall men, they stepped toward the porch, and Claude knew that he had won the first round. Mob anger would not hang this youth now if he could even come close to proving his whereabouts for the day. The

Boothill boss, Claude realized grimly, had sent that lone rider out to see why the drygulching duo had failed to return. And this meeting tonight had been a made-to-order occasion for announcing the death of the pair. An opportunity that couldn't be wasted to rid themselves of a youth who might know too much about their activities. Here was the kind of break that came to a lawman once in awhile.

"If I live long enough to see it through," Claude thought bleakly, and he looked at the lighted porch above them, knowing that he'd make a mighty fine target for a gunster stationed beyond the ring of firelight.

IV

Todd Marsh's long, bony face was cold and austere as a prophet's as he looked at the roving lawman.

"O'Leary," he said grimly, "you're cutting a mighty wide swath for a newcomer to our community!"

Claude's darkened brows lifted almost ironically. "I ain't ever been one to like jackleg justice," he told the storekeeper coolly. "Let the boy talk. But before you do, it might be a good idea to bring up that pair I buffaloeed, and hear what made 'em think this feller was guilty of the shootin'. A bucket of water ought to bring 'em around."

"Penn"—Todd Marsh glanced at one of his committeemen—"see what you can do to wake up Red Slaughter and Benson."

Penn Adams, it would be, Claude guessed, and his hooded eyes took in the Paydirt's owner as he stood up from the chair where he had been sitting. Garbed in sober gray and immaculate linen, Adams was a short, stocky man. A long cheroot smouldered in the corner of his small mouth. He nodded briefly, and started down the steps.

"Gents"—Marsh's voice boomed out over the crowd again—"we're all going to stay right here until we get the straight of things if it takes us all night. You can figure you're members of a law-and-order jury that's puttin' young Ned Brandon here on trial. And I don't want airy one of yuh to forget that his own partner, Dick Hardesty, is hardly cold in his grave. Mebbe Brandon will want to do some explainin' on that score, too."

Dick's partner! Marsh's voice seemed to fade as Claude looked with new eyes at the youth standing quietly beside him, and he could feel his pulse quicken. Ned Brandon could tell him of Dick when they were out of this, he thought, might even bring back in some small measure the warmth that had gone from his heart at news of his brother's death. But there would be time enough to think about that later. Right now he was going to need all the strategy at his command to gain freedom for Brandon with Todd Marsh already trying to build up a case against him. That knowledge brought a sudden question. Why was Marsh so anxious to influence the crowd? Why did he want to see Dick Hardesty's

partner swing from the limb of a tree?

"And that's somethin' else we'll be looking into," Claude promised himself.

Penn Adams ushered a staggering pair toward the porch. Slaughter and Benson were holding their heads, and groaning in unison at every step. Claude watched them draw nearer, and he was grimly amused.

They looked at him out of baleful eyes as they reached out and clutched at the table to steady themselves, and Claude gave them his thin smile. Then his eyes passed to the storekeeper.

"If you're going to handle the prosecution, Mr. Marsh," he said smoothly. "I'll take over the defense."

A frown furrowed the storekeeper's brow momentarily. "You sound like you might have had some lawyer experience, O'Leary," he growled.

Claude shrugged. "I've listened in on a few trials," he drawled. "Sometimes when I was on the wrong end of 'em!"

His words brought a little laughter from the crowd, and he realized that with the mob spirit downed, the majority were wanting only fair play.

"They're your witnesses then, O'Leary," Marsh said sourly.

Nodding, Claude again eyed the pair Penn Adams had brought to the porch. "Slaughter," he addressed the hulking red-beard in ringing tones that would carry to all the listening ears, "let's hear why

you got the notion so sudden that Ned killed those two fellers out on the Hassayampa Trail."

"My head aches so durned much I can't think straight," Slaughter mumbled. "But I guess it was jest the way he acted that give me the idee. He sort o' made like he was goin' to grab his cutter and shoot Eph before he could tell us his news. I made a grab for him, figgerin' Eph shore must've had somethin' important to say."

"Would you have had any foreknowledge of the news Eph was bringing?" Claude asked.

"I dunno what them big words mean," Slaughter complained. "'Course I didn't know Grogan and Manners were goin' to git kilt."

"But you knew they were going out along the Hassayampa Trail?" Claude probed.

Slaughter's head dipped forward on his chest. "I dunno nothin'," he said truculently, "and I ain't got anything more to say. You an' Brandon can both go to hell, fer as I'm concerned!"

Claude glanced out of the corner of his eye at the youth and he saw that Brandon's Colt slanted down his left thigh. He couldn't remember on which side of Ned the red-beard had been standing, and if he was in doubt himself, he guessed that none of the crowd would remember the position of either Slaughter or Benson.

"Mr. Slaughter," he said coolly, addressing the crowd, "tells us that he saw Ned make a grab for his Colt. Gentlemen, I doubt if that

was possible, because he was standing to Brandon's right, and you can all see that Ned's gun is on his left hip. Slaughter could not have seen Ned drop his left hand! Mr. Marsh, your witness!"

A hum that had approval in it lifted from the crowd, and the storekeeper growled. "I got nothin' to ask him. Slaughter's word is good enough for me."

Claude's eyes clashed with Slaughter's paunchy, beard-stubbed companion. "Mr. Benson," he said smoothly, "tell us what made you suspicious?"

"The kid looked skeered," muttered Benson, "so I played a hunch, figgerin' if he was guilty we'd make him confess."

"And if he wasn't," Claude rasped, "you'd hang him anyway! That might satisfy some of you, but I believe the majority here want justice! So far neither of you have proved a thing. Ned"—Claude swung his gaze to Brandon—"tell these men how you spent your day." And he was praying as he voiced the invitation that the youth's story would stand the light of cross-examination.

Ned Brandon took a step forward, and for a moment he stood silent. The crowd grew tensely quiet, and Claude could hear his own soft breathing as he waited.

"I'll tell you what I've been doing for the past two weeks and better," he said, and his voice throbbed with tension. "I've been spendin' my time trying to track down the gent who killed Dick Hardesty!"

The words swept out over the crowd like a bright, invisible banner. They seemed to ring with mighty force, and re-echo back from the buildings on the opposite side of the street.

Claude watched the crowd stir. A sigh seemed to sweep their ranks and he hit them again with words, like a fighter driving in for the knock-out blow.

"And that search did not take you out along the Hassayampa Trail today, Ned?"

"My horse has been laid up in Sam Pike's corral for the last ten days," Brandon said, "and Sam'll tell you I ain't borrowed or rented a bronc during that time. I sure and certain didn't walk out that trail and kill those hombres. Mr. Marsh here can also tell you that I was in his store during the middle of the morning, and again this afternoon. I can name you a half dozen other gents who saw me around town different times of the day."

"I doubt if that will be necessary," Claude put in smoothly. He had one urge now, a desire to get this youth to some place where they could talk alone. Whatever facts Ned had learned were important enough to have made him bait for the Boothill Bunch, and this was no place to discuss them.

"Mr. Marsh." He turned to the storekeeper, and Marsh's mouth was working like a fish trying to suck air out of water. Brandon's statement seemed to have hit him hard. "Mr. Marsh," Claude repeated, "do you recall seeing Ned Brandon in your store at any time today?"

"Why, why yes, now that you mention it, I do," Marsh said lamely. "Dunno just how the kid could have been two places at once, so I guess there ain't much more to say, except we're all pretty riled up, and apt to do things hasty. Natcherly we want to see justice done. I guess we kind o' owe you a vote of thanks, O'Leary, for keepin' a steady head, and I'll apologize to you, Brandon, for the rest. All I'm askin' is that if you get any lead on the gut-shootin' devils who murdered your partner that you bring the information to me. Our Law and Order Committee will handle the rest, all legal-like."

"That's fair enough." Claude nodded, but the thought was running through his mind that Marsh seemed mighty anxious to have the whole incident forgotten.

"Ned"—Claude laid his hand on the young fellow's arm—"let's get down from this porch. Personally, I feel like a fish in a bowl, standin' up here with everybody lookin' at me."

A laugh, which he had hoped to draw, rippled through the crowd, and Claude stepped quickly down to mingle with the other men. Hand on Brandon's elbow, he edged the prospector toward the rim of the throng, and he was wondering why no one had tried to gun him down from the darkness. It had been a made-to-order opportunity for the Boothill Bunch, and there was only one conclusion he could draw: Something had kept the unknown kingpin of the organization from

getting such orders to his hirelings.

"And that could mean a lot of things," Claude said under his breath.

"What did you say?" Brandon spoke for the first time since they'd left the porch.

They were in the darkness now at the edge of the crowd, and men were once more turning their attention to Marsh who was cautioning them sonorously to be ever watchful ". . . of even your closest neighbor. . . ."

Claude snorted, and he steered Brandon down the street. "I said that Marsh is a fool for putting out that kind of talk. He'll have this camp shootin' at their own shadows before long."

Brandon's blue eyes had been studying Hardesty carefully. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "Dick used to tell me about a brother he had who was quite some hombre. A big, blond feller who had helped a whole lot of camps chase out the toughs. A feller who'd likely have stepped in same as you done tonight. Only your hair is black—"

"So are my guns," Claude said dryly. "And you can chalk a couple more dead outlaws to their credit. It wouldn't have been quite right to let that bunch hang you for somethin' I done myself!"

"You?" Brandon's fingers gripped the roving lawman's arm like steel clamps. "Why, then, you . . . you must be . . ."

"Dick's brother," Claude told him softly.

"But your hair—and you ain't

wearin' a mustache like Dick said."

"Moss Trotter and I fixed it in Prescott so's folks wouldn't recognize me down here," Claude explained, a little ruefully, "but I guess we sort o' wasted the barber's time. Somehow the word that I was comin' got here first, and Grogan and Manners were waiting to bush-whack me. The boss of the Boot-hill Bunch knows who I am, and he can probably also guess that I'm carryin' a law badge in my boot."

"But how could he know? You sure look different than Dick described you."

Their walk had carried them almost down to Pike's Corral where Hardesty had stabled the mare. His plan was to rent a mount for Brandon and ride out with him to the claim Ned and Dick had staked. Once there, Ned could give him whatever information he'd gathered.

He answered the young prospector abstractedly, for his eyes were on the figure of a man outlined by the small fire the night hostler kept going in front of the corral's make-shift adobe office.

"When I find out who brought word to the Boothill kingpin that I was comin' to Renegade, I'll have the hombre who can lead me to him. I—"

Claude broke his talk. The man talking to the hostler was gesticulating, and saying in an excited, whining voice: "But I tell yuh, I got to get back to Prescott afore morning. You say my horse is lame?"

"Lame because yuh rode the legs off him, mister," the hostler said,

"and I ain't lettin' you have one of Sam's broncs to treat the same!"

Claude recognized the set of the man's shoulders. He remembered a whining voice saying: "Dang it, friend, I've shorn some funny customers in my time and filled some queer requests, but I ain't never tackled a chore like this before. . . ."

The sound of their boots grew audible to the pair at the fire, and Claude saw the Prescott barber turn. The man's coyote face twisted in sudden terror. He whirled from the fire, arms flapping, and the darkness swallowed his running figure.

Claude jumped after him, and he kept his voice grimly calm. "Come along, Ned," he invited. "Stretch your legs. That scared rabbit is going to lead us right to the gent we want to see most!"

V

The barber had gained a ten-yard start on them. His legs were carrying him back toward the heart of town behind the row of buildings lining this side of the street.

Claude made no effort to narrow the gap between them. He wanted to see where the barber would lead, for the terror that was in him would shatter the man's reasoning powers. He'd seen it happen before. Animal instinct was guiding the barber now, making him seek safety in some place that was already familiar to him.

They were nearing the back end of Todd Marsh's long General Store now, and Claude saw the barber

waver, throw a wild glance back across his shoulder, then dive toward the store's rear door. He jerked it open, and Claude hurled himself forward with a sudden burst of speed. If the barber found a hiding place in the dark storeroom, searching him out would be like trying to drive a rat from his hole.

"Maybe the cuss was just smart enough to think of Marsh's place, at that," he thought, and he realized that he could not condemn the storekeeper as a hasty mob had tried to condemn Ned Brandon.

The barber had failed to pull the door shut after him. The opening yawned like a wide, black mouth ready to gulp all comers.

"Take it low," Claude cautioned Brandon, "and if you spot that feller, don't shoot to kill. We want him alive, and talkative!"

Colts in his hands, Claude went through the doorway in a crouching run. A gun roared in front of him, muzzle flame outlining briefly the shape of the barber's body. Claude heard the sickening strike of lead behind him and Brandon's gasp of pain. The youth's forward-falling body hit him in the small of the back as the barber's gun flamed a second time.

Off balance, and falling himself, Claude snapped a single shot at the Prescott man, and he caught the barber's stricken oath. As he struck the floor and rolled catlike to gain his feet again, he heard the sobbing rattle of a man's last breath leaving his lungs, and he knew without even striking a light that he'd done the one thing he hadn't wanted to do.

He'd killed the coyote-faced Prescott barber.

A door the length of the storeroom away from him flung open, and a lamp's yellow flame patched the darkness with light. Todd Marsh stood in the doorway, holding the lamp above his head. In a half crouch beside him, Claude recognized the stocky gray-clad shape of the Paydirt's owner, Penn Adams. A stubby nickel-plated Colt was canted in his right hand. Lamplight glittered along its barrel.

"Who's there?" Marsh boomed. "Speak up, damn it!"

"O'Leary," Claude said, and he knew that he was trapped himself. He had no story, save the truth, that would excuse his shooting the barber.

"O'Leary?" Todd Marsh thundered, and he came thumping forward along the pine-floored runway between the bales and crates of supplies that filled the storeroom. Adams stalked beside him, a gray ghost, as silent and quick on his feet as a puma.

Claude felt Brandon at his elbow, and he turned to give the youth a single, quick glance. Ned's face was twisted with pain, and he stood a little crookedly.

"Slug creased my leg," he explained. "It ain't much. I can still hobble."

"Rip a hunk off your shirt tail and tie it up," Claude directed. "We'll get a doc to look at it *my pronto*."

Todd Marsh towered a good two inches taller than the lawman, and his black eyes were blazing as he

looked from the dead barber to Hardesty.

"You won't be going anywhere pronto, O'Leary," he threatened, "unless you do some fast talking. You're swinging a wide loop in this town, and as chairman of the Vigilance Committee, I demand an explanation!"

"Do you now?" Claude drawled, and he lifted the right leg of his pants. When he straightened, something glittered in his hand. He watched Marsh's austere face as he opened his palm, but the man's bony visage remained blank as a gambler's.

"There's some," he said softly, "that have called me Deputy Death."

"Others," said Penn Adams smoothly, "who know you as Claude Hardesty. Congratulations on the get-up. I'm one who'd never have recognized you!"

Claude turned his hooded eyes to the saloonman. "Then you're not a Boothill man," he said coolly. "They know I'm here, and why. This gent did the work on me in Prescott, and likely put two and two together after reading the newspaper story Moss Trotter put in the *Courier*."

"I read that story last night"—Adams nodded—"and was mighty sorry to hear of your death."

Claude prodded the dead man with his toe. "This one brought the word that I was coming. The two Boothill Boys who were shot out on the Hassayampa Trail fell to my guns. They were waiting to bushwhack me. That's how I knew word had beat me here. We spotted this hombre down

at Pike's Corral, and he headed back this way. I wanted him alive. There are ways to make men talk."

"And ways to quiet them," Adams murmured. "Hardesty, we'll keep your identity to ourselves. You won't want everyone knowing you're here."

"No," Claude said.

"What do you plan next, Mr. Hardesty?" asked Marsh.

Claude studied the storekeeper. "After we get Ned patched up, he and I are riding to his shack. If Dick's blankets are still there, I'll sleep in 'em for luck!"

"His bunk's made up, just like he left it," Ned Brandon put in.

"Good," Claude said. "Good. I sleep like a danged rock once I hit a bed. Gents," he added, "you'll be doin' me a favor if you can take care of this carcass."

"Three more graves to dig." Todd Marsh shook his gray head soberly. "Our boothill will be crowded if it gets many more recruits."

With the furrow in his leg bandaged, Ned Brandon was waiting for Claude in front of the doctor's small house when he rode back from Pike's Corral. Wincing, the prospector swung into leather, and glanced at his big companion.

A little diffidently he offered a suggestion as Claude turned and headed the mare toward the Agua Fria. "Mr. Hardesty, wouldn't it maybe be a little safer if you stayed here at the Call House? Drygulchers couldn't sneak up on you in the dark so easy. Our shack ain't much and it's right down in the bottom of a

gulch, where anybody aimin' to put a slug in you could sneak up without our knowin' it. Particularly claimin' to sleep the way you do."

Claude chuckled, and his eyes were amused as he looked at the earnest youth. "Son," he said gently, "I haven't had both eyes shut at the same time for years, and tonight I aim to keep both of 'em open!"

On their ride up the Agua Fria to the gulch where they'd staked a claim, Ned Brandon talked of Dick, of how they'd met in Prescott, taken a liking to each other, and teamed up for this venture.

"And mebbe when we're done here," Claude suggested, as Brandon led the way into one of the innumerable gulches that seamed the flank of Antelope Peak, "you'd like to ride along with me. This is my last man-hunt, son. I've smelled gun smoke too long. From here on out, I'm going to prod cows 'stead of tin-horns!"

He busied himself with blankets and saddle and a few lengths of mesquite limbs once they were inside the rude frame shanty the two young prospectors had erected, and Ned Brandon watched with startled eyes.

"Five thousand of the ten we've dug from this wash was Dick's," he explained. "I figure the Boothill hombres who shot him on his way home from town that night thought he was carrying a full poke. But Dick never carried more than a smidgin of dust at one time—"

"You got that dust handy?" Claude's sharp query cut him short.

Brandon hesitated for a moment.

Then he tramped to the corner back of their small stove, and after a little work lifted a board from the floor. Out of the hole beneath it, he brought a fat buckskin bag, and laid it on the table in the center of the room, as Hardesty straightened from the bunk that had been his brother's.

"It's all here," Brandon said simply.

Claude untied the drawstring and let some of the bright dust spill on the table. He lowered the wick of the lamp they'd been using, and set it close to the gold.

"Boothill bait," he murmured, and his eyes moved toward the window holes cut in either end wall above the single bunks. The blankets on the beds were humped as though men were sleeping beneath them.

"You think . . ." Brandon began.

"I think," Claude said, and his eyes were sudden slits, "that Todd Marsh and Adams were stuck on the Paydirt porch tonight and couldn't pass the word to have me shot after their men brought word that I'd got through the bushwhack trap they'd laid for me. I think that barber headed for Marsh's storeroom because he'd been in it before. This ain't the first camp where the outlaw kingpin has been your most law-abiding citizen on the surface. It takes brains to run a bunch like the Boothill Boys, and I think Marsh has got 'em—"

"More than you, friend," a voice purred from the window hole directly facing him. "You miscalculated the time you'd waste while

Brandon's wound was being banded. We were here ahead of you, amigo, just waiting for you to lay out gold bait to bring us into your trap. Now . . ."

Claude's hands swept hipward as a rifle barrel came through the window. "Short guns," he cut in, "are handier at close range."

His lead blasted the pale square of Marsh's face backward from the aperture before the rifle spoke once, and then he felt a bullet rip through his right shoulder from behind. The force of the slug turned him like a top, staggered him, and lead intended for his back whipped close enough past his face for him to feel its breath.

Claude jerked up his left Colt and the gun seemed heavy. Heavier than it ever had before, and then his finger was squeezing the trigger, firing at the silhouetted shape of Adams' head beyond the other window. The man had one arm through the hole, and Claude watched his nickeled Colt slowly slide from fingers death had relaxed.

Claude straightened from his half crouch, and automatically tilted the muzzle of his gun to blow the smoke from it. Through the mist, he looked at Ned Brandon still over by the stove. The battle had started and finished too soon for the youth to bring his own gun into play.

"Jumpin' catfish!" Brandon wiped at his face with a shaky hand. "I never knew things could happen so fast!"

"When Death is dealing the cards," Claude told him gently, "he don't waste much time. And I don't, either. As soon as the sawbones can patch me up, a feller named O'Leary is ridin' out of Renegade. Claude Hardesty is dead; the *Courier* says so."

"You're not riding alone," Ned Brandon's eyes were shining with an odd light. "I got a hunch Dick would like to see me ride with you."

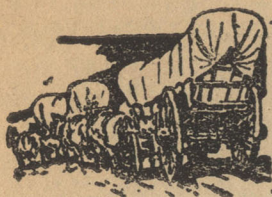
"Funny," Claude murmured, and his smile lost its crooked twist, "that two gents like you and me could get the same hunch!"

THE END

SHUT THAT GATE!

*It ain't no use complainin' if some feller steals your wife,
For on that romance rancho that is knowed as married life,
It ain't the loop you ketch her with that holds your little pal—
More likely it's how good an' strong you build the home corral!*

S. OMAR BARKER



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

NOT only as a tip for you post-war vacationers but for those who "want to get away from it all," no other outdoor living provides the permanent comforts of a log cabin. A sturdy, storm-proof cabin is a real home in the backwoods where a man can be monarch of all he surveys.

There are all types of cabins, from elaborate, professionally built lodges with all the streamlined comforts of a modern hotel down to the trapper's homemade log hut. The former are fine, if you can afford them or like that sort of city fooforaw in the woods. The trapper probably gets more solid enjoyment out of the simple structure which he probably built himself out of the materials at hand.

Writing from Saginaw, Michigan, W. Y. has asked us for a few general pointers, "on the type of log cabin a fellow handy with tools can build for himself in the woods." He wants to know how big it should be, what type logs to use, whether the bark should be left on or not, and other generally important considerations. "I intend to buy my own few acres of woodland," his letter concluded. "It is on the edge

of a fish-filled lake, and the timber on it will be wholly mine."

Fine, W. Y., but for a starter, first choose the site of your future cabin carefully. Set it where the ground is dry, the drainage good, and where the outlook from your cabin door will be all that any nature lover could desire. Most likely that will mean close to the lake. But keep it clear of any beach, and high enough to avoid high water.

Except where it is necessary to cut down trees to make a clearing, don't take your timber from wood right at the cabin site. Snake your logs out to the cabin location from trees further back in the woods. Leaving the trees standing near the cabin enhances the natural setting of your home. The trees also provide shade and a certain amount of storm shelter.

The simplest backwoods cabin is the trapper's hut. It is small, about 10 x 12 ft., and 6 ft. high from floor to eaves. Though it is primarily a one-man cabin, there is room in it for two built-in bunks, a sheet-iron heating and cooking stove, table, chair and essential shelves.

Such cabins are usually built with a gabled roof to allow more interior

height, and for better rain and snow protection. The roof may be built of poles, birch bark and moss, or scooped-out slabs laid overlapping fashion, one slab round side down, the next round side up. If the cabin is situated in a place where boards and other building material can be brought in, regular composition roofing, shingles over a roof-board base may be laid.

As a rule, no floor other than the hard-packed earth is used in a cabin of this type. It is built primarily for northwoods, cold-country use, in semi-dugout fashion with the sills resting directly on the ground and the floor about 2 ft. below the ground level. Entrance is a step down by means of a door not much more than 4 ft. high. Trappers' huts are compact, cosy and snug even when deep snows reach clear to the eaves.

The size of any log cabin depends on how many persons intend to occupy it, what it will be used for and to a large extent on the size of timber available, or that can be readily handled on the spot.

Heavy logs for the main wall that are too much for a single man to lift into place can usually be rolled into position up inclined skids as the wall height increases.

Some old-timers build log cabins solid, then saw out and face door and window openings. A saving both in wood and time can be made if these

openings are planned for in advance and the logs laid and cut accordingly.

Log cabins, being built generally from the timber at hand, are usually made of spruce, fir, hemlock or balsam. Norway pine is excellent. These woods are lighter and easier to handle and work than the hardwoods.

Don't attempt to use logs that are too thick and cumbersome. It's not necessary. Logs, say 10 inches through at the butt with a taper that makes them not less than 6 inches through at the small end, are plenty big enough. Even smaller sizes may be used, if need be. Cut them 3 ft. longer than the inside dimensions of your cabin to allow sufficient wood at each end for jointing. In laying the logs, round notch the under side only. Logs notched on the upper side as well may make a neater fit, but the upper notches tend to collect water and moisture that promotes decay of the wood.

Logs with the bark on may have a more rustic appearance, but peeled logs are more serviceable. From the practical standpoint, bark left on harbors insects and wood borers, shortening the life of the logs.

Large cabins, or those for which a wood floor is planned, should have the sills laid on foundation piers. Wood posts driven tightly 4 or 5 ft. into the ground make solid piers. Where the ground is hard and firm or stony, large stones may be used for the foundation supports.

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.



MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

GOLD MINING and gold prospecting are on the march again out West. Old-timers and newcomers alike are pushing into the mountains or fanning across the desert sands of the Southwest. Some are reopening old mines, or resuming work on previously located prospects, abandoned during the war years. Others are seeking new finds in new places, or overlooked deposits in the old, established mining areas. Gold is still a valuable metal.

Gold prospecting is hard, outdoor work. But for men who like to work alone or with a partner, and are accustomed to solitude, there is a fascination about it that is difficult to explain—and hard to beat. Not all prospectors get rich. Only a small percentage of them ever make bonanza discoveries.

On the other hand, though I have heard of prospectors being on short rations temporarily, I don't believe I ever heard of one starving to death. Most of them manage to get by. And some of them do better than average.

For those who run into a lean season there is generally something they can do to piece out a grubstake for another try. They may be in country where they can trap during the winter. In established mining dis-

tricts often they can work in larger mines, or for some other small-scale prospector who happens to need help in working out his claim. Some do assessment work for other claim holders in the neighborhood.

If a fellow really wants to prospect and doesn't mind roughing it or taking the bad along with the good, he can.

And what about the chances of finding a worthwhile gold deposit? That's the question Reader S.M., of Fargo, North Dakota, asked us recently. "Especially lucky finds," he added.

Luck, chance, fate—call it what you will—has always played a part in finding bonanza mineral deposits. It always will. Some discoveries have been made by men who were not prospectors or by amateurs with little knowledge of the game. Fate picks her own favorites.

On the other hand, the great majority of the mines in the West's rich mining areas, whether gold or other valuable metals, have been discovered by qualified prospectors who were looking hard for them at the time. In fact many ore bodies that later proved fortune-making were located by experienced prospectors after literally hundreds of untrained

men had already passed up, or over that particular section.

The modern gold prospector in the West seeking anything other than a simple small-scale gold-placer proposition should remember that serious prospecting began in the Western States in the 1850's, shortly after the discovery of the fabulously rich placer deposits of the '49ers in California. That was nearly a hundred years ago. Prospecting has been going on in the West ever since.

Most of the important, easy-to-mine placer goldfields of the West were found by early prospectors. The important lode gold discoveries, as well as other metal deposits, generally speaking came along later and in some cases have lasted up to modern times. Such discoveries are being made now and then even today. Where or when the next one will crop up is anybody's guess.

Before the war a rich gold lode discovery was made near Mojave, California, that was in the million-dollar class. Another promising new gold mine was located in Antelope Valley, in Los Angeles County, California. Other important discoveries were made in Nevada, Idaho and several more of the Western mining States. It is not likely that these represent the last of the new gold deposits that will ever be found in the West.

The greater part of the country in the big mining regions of the West

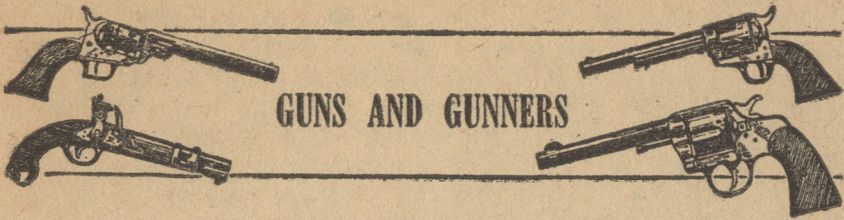
has of course been pretty well gone over by the earlier prospectors. Yet such men were not infallible. Experience has proved that sometimes they overlooked good bets. It may have been that under pioneer conditions of transportation and mining and metallurgical knowledge such deposits were not readily workable at the time. They might be workable today.

In other cases good deposits, by some quirk of fate and for no apparent reason, were passed up altogether. Succeeding generations of prospectors have already found some of these deposits, and mined them profitably.

It may be harder to locate new good gold deposits, but that is simply a challenge to the modern gold hunter. It means he will have to get out into the hard-to-reach places, the deep desert and the more inaccessible mountain canyons. And he will have to use his head as well as his legs in figuring out where it is best to look.

One thing is certain. In spite of the truth in the old saying that "Gold is where you find it," the chances of finding gold in paying quantities are greatly increased if the hunt is carried on in areas geologically favorable for the occurrence of the metal. The mining regions, therefore, in which gold is known to occur are better for prospecting in than those that have never produced the metal.

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.



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

THIS month a few choice ideas from the mailbag are handed along for your consideration.

With all of these foreign souvenir weapons, one group of shooters wants to know why most foreign nations use the metric system in measuring the caliber of a weapon. The answer is simple—they use the metric system for everything. It's about time that we adopted something simple too. Look at our mix-up:

A mile is 5,280 feet or 1,760 yards. A yard is three feet or 36 inches. A foot is 12 inches. From that point on, we add to the confusion by using both fractional parts and decimal fractions. Thus, one-half, one-quarter, one-eighth, one-sixteenth, and so on. Decimal fractions, used for all exact precision work run in tenths, hundredths, thousandths, etc.

The metric system is very simple. A kilometer is 1,000 meters (two kilometers are approximately $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles). A meter is the nearest equivalent to our "yard" although it is actually over 39 inches. Further translated, a meter is 1.0936111-plus yards or 3.2808333-plus feet. It never works out. But the straight metric system is simple decimals. The small unit is millimeters. One

millimeter is .0937 inch. But forget the U. S. equivalent. Starting with millimeters, or mm., ten mm. equals 1 centimeter, or cm. Ten cm. equals one decimeter, a term rarely used—they just say "10 cm." Ten decimeters or 100 cm., or 1,000 mm. equals a meter.

Translating a few common calibers into inches reveals this: 6.35 mm. is .25 inch, or caliber. 7 mm. is .276 caliber, 7.92 mm. is .312 caliber, 8 mm. is .314 caliber, 9 mm. is .354 caliber. The nearest thing to our .30 caliber, which is actually .308 inch, is 7.8 mm.

Another reader wants to know what foreign cartridges are made in the United States. The 6.35 mm. pistol cartridge is the .25 Colt automatic. The 7.65 mm. pocket pistol is the .32 Colt Automatic. The 7.62 mm. Russian pistol (not revolver) and the 7.63 mm. Mauser is known here as the 7.63 mm. or .30 Mauser. The 7.65 mm. Luger is known by that name and also as the .30 Luger. The 9 mm. Kurz, 9 mm. Browning Short, and 9 mm. Corto (Italian) is our .380 Colt Automatic. And the 9 mm. Parabellum is known here by that name and also as the 9 mm. Luger, for which it was originally designed.

In the revolver series, the .320 is the .32 Smith and Wesson in some guns, and .32 short Colt in others. Try the S & W first; if it will not enter the chamber, try the Colt. The .380 is usually the .38 Short Colt on the Continent, but the British .380 is the .38 S & W (not the .38 Special).

In rifle sizes, the 6.5 mm. Mannlicher-Schoenauer is just that. The 7.62 mm. Russian, 8 mm. French Lebel, and 8 mm. Mannlicher-Schoenauer are sold under their own names. The 7.92 mm. German military or sporting is the 8 mm. Mauser. The .303 British and 7.7 mm. French (same cartridge) are sold as the .303 British.

One chap has some cartridges that look like our service .30-06, only they are head-stamped ".300 Z." They are our cartridges. England had millions made here before Lend Lease. They called it .300 caliber. The "Z" means nitrocellulose powder—the British standard is Cordite, but some of their own ammunition is loaded with nitrocellulose and, when so made, is marked "Z."

Another one of the boys, collecting cartridges, wants to know about markings. German cartridges he has are marked "S" which means brass case. "St" and "St plus sign" are steel cases, the former the original steel, the latter the new type out about 1942 and having the same interior shape as the brass case. "P 151 7 37" means that the cases were

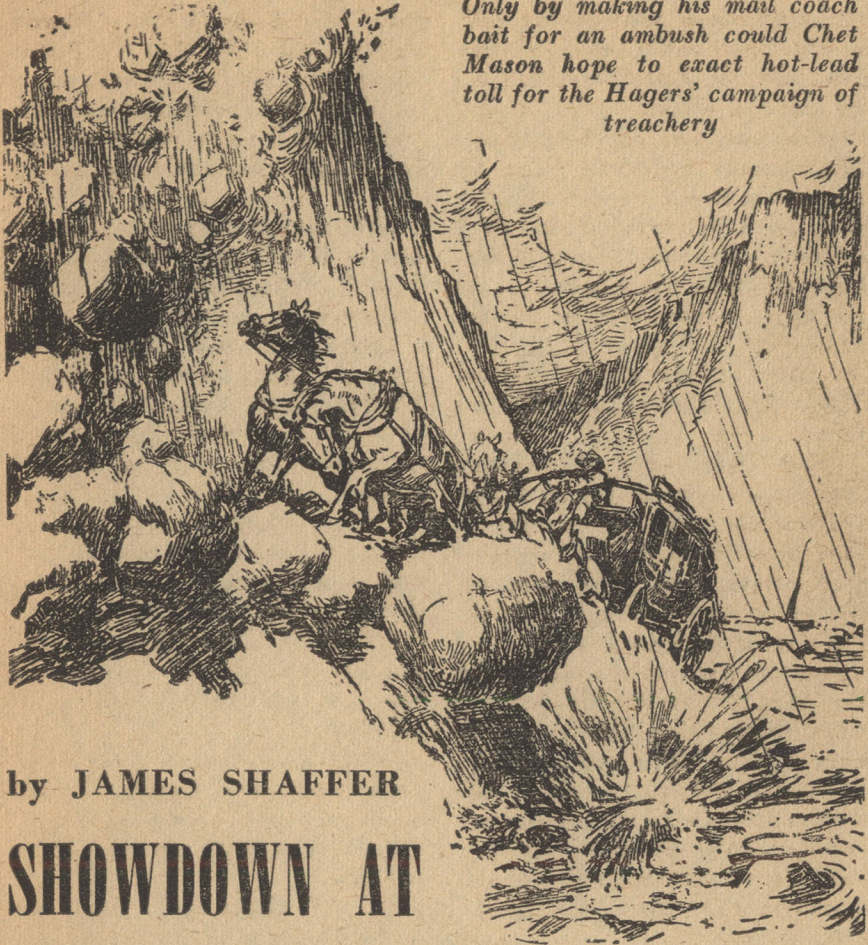
made—loaded—by RWS of Nurnberg, brass lot 7 of 1937. The P 151 was the old code. During the early part of the war it was changed to "dnf." Thus headmarkings include the code of the case manufacturer, the lot of raw material, and the year of manufacture. Many war plants made cases only and they were loaded elsewhere. The code on a box or carton tells the story.

Another chap writes: "I have some Japanese cartridges that look like the .303 British. They will fit in my British rifle. The case is head-stamped with what looks like a small 'y' the figures 7.7, and 2-III. There is a light purple band around the primer, and the nose is flat on the tip of the bullet, almost an eighth-inch in diameter." Warning! That load is *poison!* The bullet is high explosive, dangerous to handle, carry or shoot. If you have any, drop them into the nearest deep water, permanently.

Many letters are received from former GI's who indicate that they learned to shoot in the army and would like to get into serious target shooting, either large caliber or smallbore (.22). That is simple. Write the National Rifle Association, 1600 Rhode Island Avenue, Washington, D. C., asking for the address of the nearest shooting club. If there is none handy, and you have enough friends to organize your own, they will send you full information.

Captain Sharpe is back after more than three years in the Army and your letters concerning firearms will receive his prompt attention. 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.

Only by making his mail coach bait for an ambush could Chet Mason hope to exact hot-lead toll for the Hagers' campaign of treachery



by JAMES SHAFFER

SHOWDOWN AT GUNSIGHT PASS

"I TELL you," Chet Mason insisted, "somebody's trying to break this stage line even before it gets underway. That's why we're late getting started." His young, good-natured face was sober and his eyes wore a worried look.

"What proof do you have of that?" Jacob Travis asked. He adjusted his glasses and stared at Chet.

Chet remembered the momentary glimpse he'd gotten of horse and rider the night someone had tried

to set the stage office on fire. He could swear to the brand on that horse, but he knew the rider had an iron-clad alibi.

"No proof," he said. "Just things. Men quitting their jobs when we needed 'em most. Or slowing down work on a job so's it'd cost twice as much. Supplies coming in late. One pack train was scattered in the mountains. Haven't found all the mules yet."

"Whom do you suspect?" asked Travis in his precise Eastern accent.

Jacob Travis was the Eastern transportation expert that the Branscombe Stage Lines had brought out here to see that the line operated on a paying basis. His neat town clothes contrasted sharply with the dusty range garb Chet wore.

Chet glanced out the window of the stage office. Up the street a ways, he saw Buck Hager rack his horse at the hitching post and swagger into the Mountain Saloon. He started to tell Jacobs of Hager's desire to buy stock in the stage line, and of his anger and veiled threats when he was refused. Then he shrugged.

"Don't know," he muttered. "Things like that are hard to prove."

Travis adjusted his glasses and shuffled the papers on the desk in front of him. "We'll have to start operating within a week if we're going to get the government mail contract. And we'll have to operate on schedule to keep the government franchise."

Chet nodded. "We're ready to

start," he said, "except for the horses, and I've already made arrangements to buy them."

"Yeah—and spend twice as much of the stage line's money as you have to," a heavy voice broke in.

Both men whirled around at the sudden interruption. Buck Hager loomed in the doorway, his coarse features set in a mocking grin.

"What was that?" Travis asked sharply. He glanced quickly at Chet, and Chet felt a hot flush spread over his face. Buck Hager strolled insolently into the office and sprawled into a chair.

"Heard Branscombe had to send a man up here to untangle the mess and git the stage line running," he drawled. "My name's Buck Hager."

"Mine is Jacob Travis," the Easterner said politely. "Now what was this you were saying about horses?"

"Hager's sore because I won't buy the horses we need from him," Chet explained levelly. "But I'd already contracted to buy them from someone else."

"Yeah," Hager said, "and pay double the price of my horses. Of course"—he winked broadly at Travis—"when you're sweet on a gal, you kind o' lose your business sense and are willing to pay her old man anything he asks."

"You're a liar, Hager," Chet said flatly. He watched for reaction from the burly rancher, but Hager only grinned good-naturedly. "The price John King is asking is a fair price for the horses. You know what the sale of those horses means

to him. That's why you're trying to cut his throat."

"Just a minute," Travis cut in quickly. He turned to Hager. "Do I understand that you're willing to sell us horses at a lower price than Mason here has offered someone else?"

"That's right," Hager told him. "John King is asking twelve hundred dollars for the horses you'll need. I'm willing to sell you the same number of horses—and just as good—for six hundred."

"And you'll deliberately lose money on the deal," Chet broke in, "because you know that King'll go broke unless he gets some cash—and you want to break him."

"Is that any business of the Branscombe Stage Lines?" Buck sneered.

"It certainly is not!" Travis agreed positively. "We're not paying out company money to keep some rancher from going broke."

"I'm willing to take a loss on my horses to see that Mountville has a stage line," Hager said. "Help the town grow."

"A very commendable attitude. Shows you're public-spirited, Mr. Hager," Travis declared genially. "Bring your horses in. We'll buy them."

"I'll have 'em here, Mr. Travis," Hager promised. "You're a nice gent to do business with," he added, with a grin at Chet.

When he had gone, Travis stared thoughtfully at Chet. "I'm beginning to see why you had trouble getting the stage line operating," he said in a pointedly sarcastic tone.

"I know what you're thinking," Chet answered. "But you ought to learn the set-up in this country. You made a mistake buying Hager's horses."

Travis laughed. "That's ridiculous."

Chet shook his head. "Folks that go into business 'round these parts have a way of going broke unless the Hager brothers have an interest in their outfits. Buck Hager and his younger brother, Doss, have run plenty of people out of business—just like they're breaking John King."

"We're saving the stage line six hundred dollars," Travis reminded him acidly.

"And that's what worries me," retorted Chet. "Buck Hager tried to buy some stock in this line. He went on the prod and made threat talk when he couldn't." He leaned forward. "I got a hunch Hager's playing a deep game; planning to break this line and take it over, like he's done a lot of other things 'round here."

"You've bungled the job of getting this line started," Travis commented irritably, "and you're trying to find someone to place the blame on. That's why you're accusing Hager of causing your troubles. If you're doubting my authority—"

"Harley Branscombe wrote me you were coming," Chet replied. "And I know you're in full charge. But I'm telling you, you're fooling with a sidewinder when you play with Buck Hager."

He stomped out and went around

to the stable in back of the office. Saddling his private horse, he mounted and headed for John King's ranch.

His thoughts were bitter. Six years ago he'd quit punching cows and had started driving a stage. But his ambition had gone farther than just driving and he'd learned the business inside and out.

Then he'd heard that Harley Branscombe was opening a line from Leesburg, the railhead, back into the mountains to Mountville. He'd applied for a job as superintendent.

"I've heard of your rep," Branscombe told him. "And I'll give you a chance. You'll open the terminal station at Mountville. We're going after the government mail contract, which means we'll have to run right on schedule and not miss a trip for the first sixty days. Think you can handle it?"

Chet had thought so, but it hadn't turned out that way. Unexpected delays and unseen obstacles had bogged him down. Someone had tried to set the stage office on fire one night. Chet caught a glimpse of the man—Doss Hager. But before he could get proof, Doss had rigged up an iron-clad alibi. Other things had happened to slow down the work. Even at that, Chet had been ready to start his first run on schedule.

But Branscombe had become nervous. He wanted the line to operate a couple of weeks before they started carrying mail, and when Chet hadn't been able to do that, Branscombe had sent Jacob Travis

up to get things straightened out.

Now, Chet thought glumly, Travis was doing business with Buck Hager.

Chet swung into the Crown Ranch, and saw John King working down at the corrals. He rode that way and dismounted.

"Been looking for you," the rancher said. He dug into his pocket. "I found one of the mules out o' that pack train that was scattered. Buzzards had worked on him, but under the bones, I found this." He held out his hand. It was a copper-jacket .41 caliber slug.

"Doss Hager is the only gent that packs such a gun," King went on. "And he orders them copper-jacket bullets from Denver. Guess that's plenty proof that the Hagers scattered that pack train."

Chet dropped the slug into his shirt pocket. "Got bad news for you," he said. "About the horses."

The rancher's face fell. He looked across the ranch that had been his home for many years. "Hager wrote Branscombe, huh?"

"No. Branscombe sent a man up. Hager saw him and priced the horses to him." He told King about Travis' arrival, and how Hager had closed the deal for the horses over Chet's protest.

King was silent. Then: "Hager's bought my note at the bank. It's due soon—"

"Why don't you write the army? They might buy your horses for remounts," Chet suggested. "Meantime, I'll see if I can't contract to buy all the hay and feed the Branscombe line needs from you."

"Thanks," King said. "That'd help."

Chet went up to the house to see Elsie, and told her the news. The girl tried to laugh away his troubles.

"Dad'll pull through all right, and once the stage gets operating, things will straighten themselves out. Branscombe knows you can handle things. He's probably just nervous getting the line started."

"Wish I thought so," Chet admitted gloomily. His eyes narrowed, and his hand involuntarily dropped to his Colt. "I think I know a way to settle all the line's troubles."

"Chet! Not that. You stay clear of those Hagers. They've killed three or four men to get what they want, and they'd not give anyone a fair chance."

Back in town, Chet found that Travis had gone out to the Hager ranch to take over delivery of the horses. He stabled his own horse and walked over to the Mountain Saloon. Doss Hager was draped over the bar.

Doss was the younger of the Hager brothers. He was slightly smaller than Buck, being about Chet's size. His face was narrow, and a sly, cunning look stamped his features. Chet ordered a beer.

"Well, well," Doss said loudly, to no one in particular. "I hear that deal where a young fellow was buying hisself a gal fell through."

Chet set his untouched beer back on the bar.

"The gal had a high price, and this feller had to overpay her old

man for some horses, to meet the price tag," Doss went on.

"You know I ain't taking that, Doss," Chet said.

Doss' hand dropped to his gun butt. "You'll take anything I got a notion—"

Chet swung from the hip. A fierce surge of joy rushed through him, as his fist sank into Doss' stomach. The younger Hager gasped and doubled up. Chet flipped Doss' gun out and flung it away.

"Damn you!" Doss snarled and rushed. All the pent-up hatred and frustration burst like a dam inside Chet. It transformed his arms and fists into driving pistons of punishment.

He sidestepped Doss' rush and flung a quick right to the other man's chin. Doss grunted and bored in. Chet sank three fast blows into Doss' stomach, then followed his man as he retreated, throwing merciless blows into Hager's face and stomach.

Blood began to spurt from Doss' nose, and one eye was swelling and turning black. He lunged wildly, and Chet helped the eye along with a solid left planted square on the first bruise. Doss staggered back against the bar. He spat blood through puffed lips and began to curse Chet in a low, steady monotone.

Then suddenly he flung himself toward the gun laying on the floor. Chet leaped and swung as Doss bent down. The blow straightened the man up and staggered him back from the gun.

Doss went berserk then. He

snatched a bottle and flung it at Chet. Chet laughed as he dodged the bottle and closed in. Doss retreated and Chet pursued him relentlessly. Doss snatched a chair and tried to crash it on Chet's head, but Doss couldn't see very well. One eye was closed and blood was pouring over the other one from a cut on his forehead.

Doss kicked a table over in front of Chet. Chet leaped the table, wrenched a chair from Doss and flung it—then closed in.

Presently Chet went over to the bar and got his beer. He crossed over to Doss and poured some beer over Doss' face. It stung the cuts and bruises on his face, and brought him to a sitting position, sputtering.

"You still want to carry on the conversation you started when I walked in?" Chet growled. "Answer yes or no!" He drew back the beer mug, still half full.

"No," Doss muttered.

Chet picked up his hat and started out. Doss got unsteadily to his feet.

"Nobody ever licked a Hager and got away with it," he mumbled through puffed lips.

"That's probably because there was always another Hager around to get in a few dirty licks," Chet observed.

"Talking mighty high now," growled Doss. "Wait'll—"

Chet crossed the saloon in swift, angry strides. "You had enough, or ain't you?" he growled.

"Nough," Doss muttered, and the saloon was quiet as Chet left it that

time. The crowd respectfully made a path for him to the door.

Jacob Travis' untanned face was pink with suppressed anger. "You're a blundering fool, Mason!" he declared.

"What now?" demanded Chet.

"As if you didn't know?" Travis said angrily. "Brawling with young Doss Hager last night, and beating him up like that."

"He asked for it," Chet said coldly. "And the reason for the first is none of your business!"

"It's the stage line's business," Travis retorted. "Buck Hager agreed yesterday afternoon to furnish us all the hay and feed we need—way below the market price. But after this business, I don't know whether he will or not."

Chet cursed. So Hager had thought of that angle, too! John King's last hope of saving his ranch was to supply the stage line with hay and feed until he could sell his horses. And now Hager had cut off that hope, too.

"Don't worry," he reassured Travis sarcastically. "Hager'll go through with the deal."

"I hope so," Travis said, "but I'm going to get you out of town for a few days. I want you to take a road crew out and work on the road through Gunsight Pass. There's a lot of work to be done there."

Chet shrugged and accepted the assignment silently. He loaded a chuck wagon with supplies, hired a crew and left for Gunsight Pass. Improving the road through the pass had been one of the jobs he hadn't

been able to complete before Travis' arrival, due to men quitting.

The road was built on a ledge twenty feet above Gunsight Creek, that wound its tortuous way through the mile-long pass. Rocky cliffs reared abruptly on each side of the road, and huge boulders frequently broke loose during rains and rolled down onto the road, making it dangerous as well as blocking the road. The stage line had been forced to do a lot of work on the road, to make it safe for its vehicles.

Chet put in back-breaking days in the pass with his crew. They scaled the frowning cliffs and sought out unstable boulders. These they pried loose, and rolled down the cliff, then cleared them off the road. At the end of four days, Chet felt positive that there were no more boulders above the road that could be dislodged by heavy rains.

When Chet got back to town, Harley Branscombe was there. The heavy-jowled owner of the stage line called Chet in and waved him into a chair. Branscombe's face was grave.

"Looks like we're gonna have to change our set-up, Mason."

"Yeah?" Chet murmured.

Branscombe frowned and studied the end of his cigar, then cast a quick glance at Travis.

"The superintendent of a stage line has got to be . . . well, he's got to be a business-man and get along with folks," Branscombe explained.

Chet laughed harshly. "You mean because I had a run-in with the Hagers." He leaned over the desk.

"Listen, Branscombe, have you heard about Hager's brag that he'll own the stage line some day? No? Well, that's his brag, and he's broken other people in this country and taken over their businesses."

"But that's no reason for spending twelve hundred dollars instead of six hundred," Jacob Travis put in.

"You don't understand this country," Chet reminded him. "John King has been fighting the Hagers, and with that horse money, he could've kept on fighting them. I wanted it that way, so's I'd have a strong man to call on in case the Hagers started trouble with the stage line."

"But you have no proof that the Hagers are trying to cause the line trouble," Branscombe told him.

"Nothing that would stand up in court," Chet admitted wearily. He told of the attempt to fire the stage office, and the momentary glimpse he'd gotten of the rider, Doss Hager. He told them of the pack train that had been lost in the mountains, and tossed the copper-jacket slug on the desk. "It's pretty weak, but it's enough to convince me that the Hagers are after our scalp."

"I'm afraid it's too weak," said Branscombe. "For the time being, Travis will have charge of things. But I'm keeping you on the payroll as driver."

Chet opened his mouth to tell Branscombe what he could do with his driver's job, but before he could speak, the door opened and John King stepped inside.

"Wondering if you needed a stage driver—or a hostler," John King

asked the stage line owner. Chet felt anger and shame roll up in him, at the sight of old John King asking for a job.

"That's what I mean," Chet declared, pointing at King. "Until Hager started his dirty work, this man was a prosperous rancher. Branscombe, I'm asking you to let me handle this end of the line. I know how to deal with men like Hager."

Branscombe didn't answer him. "Glad to know you," the stage line owner told King. "Uh . . . sorry about your . . . uh . . . loss."

"Ain't blaming nobody," King said "But I need a job."

"We can use you and we're glad to get a good man," Branscombe assured him. "Chet, we'll let things ride like I said. Travis running things and you driving."

Chet started to retort, but King grabbed his arm and led him outside.

"Dammit, I sure am sorry, John," Chet groaned. "I tried to—"

"Shucks, son, I been down and out before—and I'm a long way from being licked. That's why I took this job."

"How's that?"

"Hager's planning on breaking this line, I'll bet plenty on it. And when he starts his dirty work, I'll be right here to catch him." King's eyes were frosty. "Hager's got my ranch—that's true. But that don't mean he's keeping it!"

But four days later Chet was forced to admit that he was puzzled.

"You've made the first round trip," Jacob Travis said a little scornfully, "and nothing happened. Looks like

your prediction about the Hagers was wrong."

"One trip don't make a stage line," pointed out King.

"We haven't even started carrying the mail yet," Chet put in. "If we lost a couple of sacks of mail—" His voice trailed off. "Have you changed your mind about putting on a shotgun guard, Travis?"

"No shotgun guard!" Travis said firmly. "It would be only another expense to the line. We've got to watch every penny until we get the government mail contract."

"You didn't mention to Hager how shaky our finances were, did you?" Chet asked anxiously.

"Good heavens!" Travis expostulated. "What difference does it make if Hager knows? Your suspicions of Hager are entirely unfounded, Mason."

And, Chet had to admit, it looked as if they were. A week later they carried the first mail out of Mountville, and the trip was without incident.

And, to top it all, one of their horses broke a leg and had to be shot. Buck Hager came forward and generously replaced the horse, telling Travis to pay for it when the stage line was able. The Easterner was loud in his praise of Hager and bitter in his denunciation of Chet for suspecting the burly rancher of designs on the stage line.

"But we still got a month to go before we prove on our government mail contract," King told Chet. "And the line's running mighty short of money. If anything happened, it could wipe us out."

The two of them were in the barn. Chet looked glumly out the door at the steady downpour of rain, and dragged out his slicker.

"Slow going today," he observed. "Glad I did that work out in Gunsight Pass. A rain like this used to bring down a ton of rock on that road." He climbed up on the seat and settled himself for a cold, wet trip to Leesburg.

The rain increased and Gunsight Creek was a raging torrent when Chet forded it five miles out of town. A few miles farther on, the creek entered the narrow walls of Gunsight Pass. Long before he reached the pass, or could even see it through the rain, Chet could hear the sullen roar of the swollen creek as it raced through the narrow, frowning cliffs of the pass.

The roar grew louder as he entered the pass. The walls began to close in around him. He slowed the team to a walk, watching ahead intently to see if the creek had flooded the road at any spot.

Suddenly a sullen roar shook the narrow canyon, drowning out the noise of Gunsight Creek. The horses squealed in terror, and lunged ahead. Chet sawed on the reins, but the animals were hard to stop, and the stage lurched around a narrow bend in the road.

Then the horses stopped of their own accord. A huge cloud of dust hung across the pass. The rain was rapidly clearing the dust away, and Chet was able to see what had caused the roar.

"Landslide!"

Not an ordinary one either, Chet swore. Hundreds of tons of dirt and rock had broken loose from the cliffs above and piled up in the narrow pass. A mound of rock and dirt almost thirty feet high blocked the road.

He stared at it for a long time, then was suddenly jerked back to the present by the nervous pawing of the horses. He saw the cause of their nervousness and was galvanized into action.

The landslide had dammed Gunsight Creek, and already the water was backing up and was an inch deep on the road. The next few minutes brought cold sweat out on his forehead, as he strove to turn the stage around. He had little room to spare on either side of the road, and he was on and off the seat like a jack-in-the-box. He unhitched the two lead horses and hooked them to the back of the stage. Then he hopped from one team to the other, leading them, turning them and dragging the stage around.

It took twenty minutes of grueling work to get the heavy Concord turned around, and the water was lapping at his boot tops by the time he climbed onto the seat again and started back to Mountville. Jacob Travis and John King hurried out of the stage office as he pulled up.

"What happened?" King asked. "Was Gunsight Creek too high to ford?"

"You can't let a little high water stop you," Jacob Travis yelled. "We've got to haul the mail on schedule! That government contract—"

Chet stomped into the office and

shook the rain water off his slicker and hat. He turned to John King.

"Seen either of the Hagers in town today?"

"Nope," King answered promptly. "Ain't seen 'em in a day or two."

"Hager, Hager! That's all I hear!" yelled Travis. "I suppose you're trying to blame your turning back on Hager!"

"There's a landslide in Gunsight Pass," Chet explained curtly. "It'll take weeks and plenty of dynamite to clear the road again—just like it took plenty of dynamite to block the road." He turned to King. "That's why you ain't seen the Hagers in town lately. They've been out there planting that dynamite."

"There you go again—accusing the Hagers of your troubles," Travis snapped. "What proof—"

"I went all over those bluffs at Gunsight Pass," Chet said coldly, "and I know there was no danger of a landslide. I heard the dynamite go off!"

"I still think you're mistaken," Travis said, but the Easterner was visibly shaken. He sat down and ran a shaky hand over his forehead. "We've got to get the mail through or lose that contract. There must be other roads or trails to Leesburg."

"There're two," Chet told him. "One over Gunsight Mountain—above the pass. It's not much more than a horse trail. Be dangerous to take a stage over it."

"And the other one," said King, "is over the ranch I used to own. It makes the trip twice as long. When Gunsight Creek leaves the pass it turns south and passes through my

old ranch. It's a sizable stream by then, and you have to ferry across it. I had an old flat-bottomed boat that you could use as a ferry."

Travis laughed in relief. "Well, our problem is solved. We'll use the road across your ranch."

Neither Chet nor John King said a word, just stared silently at Travis. The Easterner flushed.

"Well?" he demanded angrily.

"The Hagers own King's ranch, now," Chet said. "And ain't you forgetting that I'm not on terms with the Hagers?"

"You're taking orders from me!" Travis jerked out nervously.

"Not on that, I ain't," declared Chet. "If the stage crosses Hager land and uses their ferry, you're going with me!"

"We'll settle this once and for all," Travis said angrily. "Let's go."

They put fresh horses on the stage, and Chet drove them hard to make up lost time. The rain continued to slant down in unending torrents, as they passed the old King home. A few more miles, and they could see the willows bordering the banks of Gunsight Creek. Chet noticed without much surprise that a small shack had been built on the creek's bank. As the stage rolled to a stop, the door opened and Buck Hager stood in the doorway. Chet could see Doss inside.

"I see you've rigged up a ferry," Travis said cheerfully, as he and Chet stepped inside the shack. Doss glared at Chet, and half raised in his chair, but Buck Hager grunted an order and the younger brother subsided with a sullen shrug.

"It is indeed fortunate for us that you have," Travis chattered on. "A landslide has blocked Gunsight Pass, and we'll have to use this road to Leesburg."

"Allus knew that pass was treacherous," Buck commented.

"Then it's all settled," Travis said. "Mason, you better get the stage across right away. You're already late."

"Of course we can't run the ferry for nothing," Doss said to Travis.

"Didn't expect you to," Travis said cheerfully. "We'll gladly pay your toll."

"How much is the toll?" Chet asked softly.

Buck tried to keep his face straight, but he couldn't hide the look of cunning satisfaction.

"One hundred dollars a trip," he answered promptly.

"A h-hundred dollars!" gasped Travis. Then he laughed, a little shakily. "Let's not joke. We're serious, and the stage is already late."

"They're not joking." Chet spoke through tight lips.

"Damn right we ain't," Buck said coarsely. "A hundred dollars each trip. You run two stages a day. That's two hundred dollars a day. Take it or leave it."

"It wouldn't take the stage line long to go broke—at those prices," Chet remarked.

"Not go broke," Buck Hager said with a short laugh. "I'd be willing to advance the line money to keep operating—"

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"Until you own controlling interest," Chet finished for him.

"And the first person we'll fire and run out o' the country—" Doss started to sneer, but Chet cut him off.

"The stage line isn't yours yet, Doss," he reminded. Then he strode to the door. "Come on, Travis—or do you want to stay here and talk your good friend Hager into cutting his price?"

Buck's booming laugh followed them out to the rain-drenched stage, and for a moment, Chet felt a twinge of pity for Travis as the Easterner crawled dejectedly onto the seat beside him.

"It's a rank holdup," Travis said, not looking at Chet. "But he won't get away with it. We'll get the law."

"Something tells me Hager hasn't overlooked that possibility, either," Chet murmured. And he was right.

Chet stopped the stage in front of the office and went inside to tell King what had happened. Jacob Travis hurried down the street to the sheriff's office. He was back in five minutes, shoulders drooping.

"He's out of town," he said, slumping into a chair. "Some of Hager's riders came in this morning. Said they'd had cattle stolen, and the sheriff rode out of town with them."

Chet nodded. "Hager's men will lead the sheriff on a two-weeks wild goose chase," he grunted. "By that time—" His voice trailed off, as a small boy came in the office.

"Buck Hager's up at the saloon," the boy told Travis. "Said he wanted to see you."

Travis hesitated a moment, then

put on his slicker and followed the boy out. Chet's eyes narrowed thoughtfully and he went outside to help John King with the horses. They talked in low tones, and a few minutes later, Travis came back down the street.

"Don't unhitch the horses," he told them. "We're going to use the ferry, after all."

"There's something fishy here," King said suspiciously. "Buck Hager ain't the man to give in."

"I'm in charge here," Travis snapped. His manner had changed since his trip up to see Buck Hager. "Mason, get that stage rolling!"

"Okay," Chet said mildly. "I'll need another man in weather like this; I'm taking King with me. Get aboard, John." Travis shrugged and entered the stage office.

"What the devil's happened?" demanded King. "Buck Hager ain't come down on his price—"

"You got your six-gun on under that slicker?" Chet asked. "Okay—check your loads. There's a couple of rifles in the box under my feet. Git 'em. We ain't taking this stage over the ferry—we're taking it over Gunsight Mountain!"

"D'you think that Travis sold out to Hager?" King asked.

"We'll soon know," Chet said grimly. He turned the stage around, then yelled at Travis in the office. The Easterner opened the door. "We ain't paying Buck Hager's toll," Chet told him. "We're taking the stage over Gunsight Mountain!" He sent his whip whistling over the horses, and the stage lurched into motion. King twisted around to watch.

"Yep," he reported. "Travis is running up to the saloon. Now he and Buck Hager are out on the sidewalk, watching us. They got their heads together—now, they're running up to the stage office." The rancher fumbled in the box at their feet and brought out two rifles.

The road over Gunsight Mountain was nothing more than a wide trail. The stage was lurching and groaning up the steep ascent when pursuit overtook them. A rifle cracked behind them and a slug thudded into the woodwork of the stage. King whirled and drove two rifle shots at the three riders behind them, shadowy indistinct figures in the driving rain.

"We ain't got a prayer," King said bitterly. "Their horses are fresher than ours, and they'll overtake us inside of another half mile."

"Look at the mist hanging down on top of the mountain," Chet told him. "Only a couple hundred yards to go and we'll be in." He sent the long blacksnake whistling over his straining horses' heads. "Hold 'em off till we git into the fog."

King twisted and emptied his rifle at their pursuers. Gunfire promptly answered his shots, and slugs whined uncomfortably close to the two men on the lurching seat of the stage. Chet urged his horses on, and a few moments later, the stage entered the low-hanging fog.

Chet jerked the rifle from King and passed the reins over.

"Keep going!" he ordered and jumped. He hit the ground, rolling in the wet brush, then stumbled to

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his feet. He could hear horses laboring up the trail, only a few yards away, and he sent a shot crashing down trail that would pass over the riders' heads.

"Hold up, Hager!" he yelled. "This is as far as you go."

The horses stopped, and he could hear the low mutter of voices. He cocked his ear to hear better, then yelled:

"Doss, if you're trying to edge off the trail and ride around me—don't!" He sent a carefully placed shot at a sound in the brush. It brought a loud curse from Doss, and a quick shot from Buck Hager that whined close by.

"Looks like we're stopped," Travis said with a quaver in his voice. "Oh, hell, what difference does it make—I just want to get out of here."

"You're in this to the finish, now," growled Buck. "And we ain't stopped by a jugful. Doss, go back down the trail—and *then* cut 'way around Mr. Smart-aleck up there—I'll keep him holed up till you catch the stage. Look out! The mist is lifting!"

A sudden capricious gust of wind had rolled the mist aside for a moment, and the trail was clearly visible. Chet flung himself flat on his face, just as Buck's gun roared. He slammed a shot in return, and saw Buck sag in the saddle. Doss thumbed two quick shots with his six-gun, then wheeled his horse down

trail, as Chet's slug took his hat off.

Chet sprang to his feet and raced down the trail after Doss. Travis' horse reared and bucked in the excitement, and the Easterner lost his seat, landing heavily in the brush.

Chet raced down the trail until he came to a clear patch.

"Doss!" he yelled. The younger Hager looked back; saw that the brush no longer hid him, and leaped both his six-guns at Chet, when a rifle slug took him in the middle. . . .

The eastbound train was ready to pull out. Jacob Travis nervously shook hands with Chet Mason and Dave Branscombe, and hurriedly got aboard.

"With the two Hagers dead," Branscombe explained to Chet, "I couldn't see no use in prosecuting Travis."

Chet grinned faintly. "His only crime was letting Buck Hager out-smart him."

"The Whiting Lines and the Branscombe Lines are consolidating," Branscombe continued. "We need a general superintendent . . ."

But Chet wasn't paying a whole lot of attention. He wanted to go over to the furniture store and take a look around. Elsie had told him to pick himself out an easy chair.

After a hard day's work and a big home-cooked meal—there was nothing like a big easy chair. . . .

THE END

Answers to Scrambled Words on page 42.

1. slicker 2. stable 3. pine 4. hawk 5. hunter 6. camp 7. chuck 8. grouse 9. Cherokee 10. pilgrim 11. tank 12. cedar 13. owl 14. concho 15. shovel

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